

SPARE PARTS

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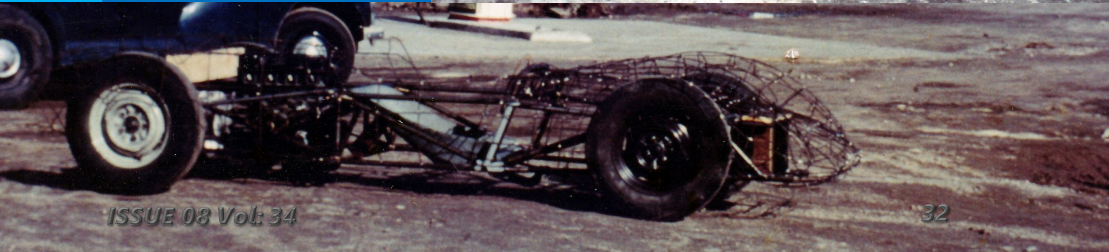
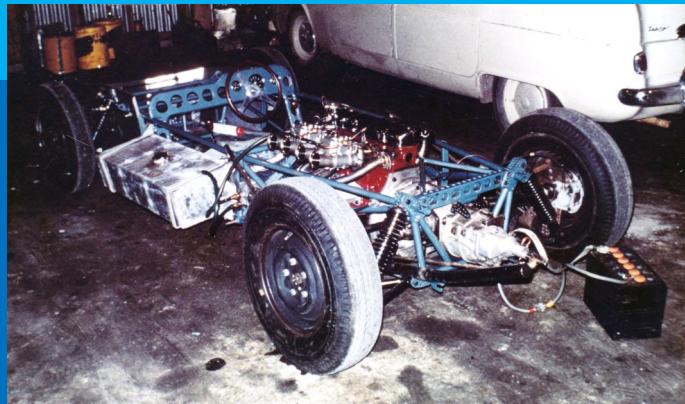
No.1 CAR FOUND IN A SHED

BY PATRICK HARLOW, ROSS BAKER AND NIGEL RUSSELL

INTRODUCTION BY PATRICK HARLOW...

It has been said that old race cars never die, bits of them keep turning up in other cars decades after the car's last race. Back in the '50s and '60s, a race car's career would end when it had been superseded by more modern and faster vehicles. At which point it no longer had value and was often sold off as scrap. Some of these cars develop a legend that is talked about many years after the car has raced its last race. From the mid-80s onwards people who had heard these stories started hunting these cars out. The legends of the cars and their drivers had grown with the telling giving them a value they never had before. Imagine discovering at the back of your father's old shed, sitting under a tarp, an original McLaren race car that had been bought as scrap and had never got around to pulling it apart. These are called barn finds.

The Mk 1 Heron under construction in 1962. It had a spaceframe chassis and an aluminium body formed over the wireframe shown below. It was powered by a 1.5-litre Cortina engine, VW transmission and lightened Triumph Vitesse front suspension.



On rare occasions, people seek out these cars, with a strong desire to rebuild/restore them to their former glory. It can be a long process trying to find as many of the original parts which have been scattered over the years, but that is part of the fun and most exhilarating process of car restoration. Finding the original chassis is the jewel in the crown and the ultimate place to start.

In recent years Heron cars, a marque that had faded into the mists of time, has been getting a bit of media attention. A legend has begun to grow around this unique Kiwi marque as modern motoring enthusiasts begin to take notice of them. Virtually all the Heron cars from the '80s forward can be accounted for but Ross Baker, the creator of the Heron Marque, built his first Heron in 1962.

At the old Levin racing track.

Pics Credit: Ross Baker

It was simply called the Heron Mk1, most of which was built from scratch by Ross. The main component that Ross did not build was the body. The body was inspired by the Lotus 23 of the day, although it resembles the Lotus, no panel is the same. The body was hand-beaten aluminium and built by Eddie Jones a well-known Rotorua panel beater. Ross provided Eddie with a wireframe of the body he wanted and Eddie built a body to fit it.

At its first outing, the Heron Mk1 won its first race by a considerable margin. Unfortunately, it then had problems with head gaskets blowing. The only way to solve this was by taking the Cosworth head off and refitting the original one.

The car continued to be successful, with podium finishes, at all of its future race events until the 1963 Grand Prix when it was running second, behind the Lycoming in the open sports car race. The Lycoming is another famous New Zealand race car. It was going well until the clutch slave cylinder piston on the Heron jammed, right on a hairpin bend. Ross was forced to retire. A highlight of this inglorious end was that he had the opportunity to talk to the racing legend Graham Hill. Having seen the car, Graham took a great interest in the Heron and the two had a long talk about building cars.

One very lucky escape with this car



was very early on when Ross took it for a quick test drive through a forest on the way to Taupo. It was 6.00am, all was quiet and since there were no traffic cops around, Ross decided to take the Mk1 for a short run, just to warm it up. However, once he had started down the road he gave in to temptation and decided that a more fun way to warm it up would be with his foot flat on the floor. He was doing about 120 mph when the catch on the left-hand side of the rear body came undone. As it opened to the rear, the wind caught it and flipped it up suddenly, causing it to act as a big air brake, which slewed the car to the left. Fortunately, the force of the air ripped the rear of the body off, giving control back to Ross and what was left of the body. At the time, Ross had the front wheels on full opposite lock to combat

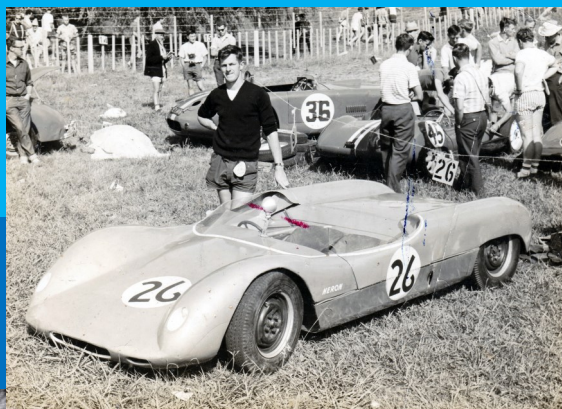


the sideways slew. The resulting effect was the car started spinning. It did three perfect rotations straight down the middle of the road before coming to a

Right: Ross with the Heron Mk1 at the 1962 Pukekohe Grand Prix.

Below: At Pukekohe again in 1965 being driven by Peter Akeroyd.

Pics Credit: Ross Baker



While he was a good driver, he and the car did not suit each other, so he sold it on to Barron Robertson (owned it from 1966-69). Barron souped it up by installing the newly released Ford Lotus twin-cam engine and had a lot of success driving it. Barron would later sell it to

stop against a marker post. How it did not flip at this speed he will never know.

Gary Deakin (1970-71) in the South Island and Ross lost track of it.

At the end of the 1963 season, Ross sold the car to Peter Akeroyd, but Peter had very little success with it.

Ross moved on to building more race cars under the Heron banner. Over the next couple of decades, he built Herons MkII through MK IV before he turned his hand to producing a road-legal supercar called the Heron MJ1. The Mk1 became just a footnote in his history. By the end of the '80s, the only Herons being made were golf carts. The Heron marque became a legend in waiting.



Above: The car as it looked when bought by Baron Robertson.

Right: As it looked after Baron had modified and crashed it a couple of times.

Pics Credit: Bruce Ellwood



ROSS BAKER CONTINUES THE STORY...

In 1990 I was rung by Warren Steel in Taupo to say he thought the old chassis lying out the back of his workshop was the Heron Mk1. This was hard to believe as the last I had heard of the Mk1 was when it was racing a Ruapuna Park in Christchurch sometime around 1975. By this time, it had been fitted with a Lotus twin-cam motor, Hewland transmission, and at some stage, possibly in its last year of racing, had been fitted with a new Can-Am style fibreglass body by then owner, Gary Love. Before this, the Heron had been crashed damaging the original aluminium body.

Naturally, I was curious, but as I was living in Rotorua at the time it was not too long a drive to Taupo. Sure enough, when I arrived there, I was amazed to discover that it was the original Heron Mk1 chassis, albeit in a very sad state of repair. The front of the chassis was as I remembered it but at some stage, the rear chassis had been cut off from behind the driver's seat. Warren had brought the Heron for the Lotus Engine and Hewland gearbox which he fitted into the Rhubarb 5 sports racing car he was having constructed. The Pederson built Gemco



Above: The Heron Mk 1 as found by Ross Baker in 1990.

Pic Credit: Ross Baker

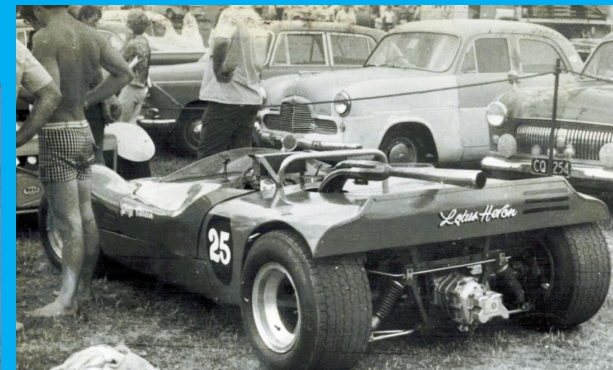
body had gone to Jamie Aislabie for the SID Mk 3 sports racing car he was building.

By this stage in my life, I had progressed to an age where I was old enough to be nostalgic, hence I picked up the chassis and took it back to my home workshop in Rotorua. Although I had only owned it a short time the car's racing career had spanned thirteen years of continuous racing, with over 150 documented races. Although the chassis had seen better days I thought I could use what was there to recreate the car as it was in 1962.

Not being one to throw things out,

Left: As it looked when it was owned by Gary Deakin.

Pic Credit: Nigel Russell





Left: Ross starts to repair and rebuild the chassis.

Pic Credit: Ross Baker

started to come in and the chassis was temporarily stored on the mezzanine floor above the office. This was in 1992 and I was sure that I would get back to it at some stage in the future.

In the '90s Heron Developments was now a small business that I ran out of a large shed in my backyard with one employee, Chris Cooke, who had been with Heron Developments since the early years. It was here that we produced the golf carts, electric utility vehicles and the Heron PC80.

In 2000, I decided to retire so I sold my house in Rotorua and moved to Alexandra Headland on the Sunshine Coast of Australia, to be closer to my daughter and her husband.

Completely forgetting the repaired chassis still stored above the office.

Then at the start of 2022, I received an email from Bruce Ellwood. I had first met Bruce in the early '80s when he wanted some advice on a kit car he was building called the Mararn, a McLaren M6GT replica. At the time I was just starting to build the Heron MJ1. On hearing about it Bruce was so enthusiastic that he moved to Rotorua so that he could be a part of the project and we became good friends. With the demise of the MJ1, we went our separate ways but kept in touch over the years.

Bruce said he had a friend, Nigel Russell in Auckland who had heard about the Heron Mk1 chassis that I had picked up from Taupo in 1990 and was interested in rebuilding the whole car to its original specs. Bruce also told me Nigel had the chassis of the Mistral I

not only did I have the original chassis, but safely stashed away in a box somewhere were all the original drawings. it would not be too hard to rebuild the missing rear chassis to its original specs, The original rear of the chassis I constructed had been removed by Baron Robertson in fitting the Lotus and Hewland decades earlier.

Going through the old invoices I found the name of the company I had bought the Reynolds tubing (one inch (25mm) and three-quarter inch (19 mm) bicycle tubing), that the original chassis was built from, and possibly the original box of Weldwell's Fluxicote Bronze rod that I had used to make the original chassis.

My first task was to repair the chassis. Rusty tubes were cut out and new ones brazed in place. As so often happens other work commitments

Right: The final location of Heron Developments looked a bit derelict in 2017. Ross was amazed to see the Mk1 chassis still above his old office.

Pic Credit: Patrick Harlow



built in 1960 and wanted to rebuild it as well. It would be great to see these two cars on the racetrack again, they have very interesting stories to tell.

Fortunately, I was able to bring him up to date with the Mk1 chassis and told him that I had stored it on top of my office in 1992. On my last visit to New Zealand in 2017, I had gone to look at my old house with Patrick Harlow. The old workshop was still there but the years had not been kind to it. As there was nobody home in the house and finding the shed door unlocked we peeked inside. The chassis was still where I had put it, but as I now living in Australia and no longer had any legal right to it, I left it where it was.

Bruce told Nigel about the chassis, and he was very interested to see what condition it was in after 30 years of storage or 60 years since the original car had been built. The people who had bought the house off us still owned it, so I wrote a letter for Nigel to take to the current owner asking if Nigel could see the chassis if it was still there, and if so, could he purchase it.

NIGEL RUSSEL TAKES UP THE STORY FROM HERE...

One car that had always taken my fancy was the Ross Baker built Heron Mk 1 sports racing car. The car had similarities in its looks to the Lotus 23

but the subtle differences in the fuller and higher front wheel guards of the Heron made it a far better-looking car in my eyes. I was aware that Ross had recovered the Heron's chassis and that it was still on the premises in Rotorua.

For some time now I have been interested in Historic racing cars, having saved, restored and raced a few Formula Juniors over the years along with saving from the melting pots a few other single-seaters. and had always had a hankering to track Ross down and see if he would allow me to complete the stalled Heron restoration.

When I came aware of a dismantled 'clubman's' style racing car that was - unless it could find a home - to be destined for the scrap metal yard, In short, I acquired another project that I didn't need but would endeavour to find a home for. On sighting the chassis I could see it had originally been a Mistral sports car, and that had been modified by the addition of upper and lower chassis rails outboard of the original ladder frame Mistral chassis, so as to accommodate an aluminium Lotus style Mk6 body.

The name Cactus VI remained on the bodywork. Posting a query on the Facebook group "Old New Zealand Motor racing" I soon had a response from motorsport historian and archivist John Climo. John has spent over 20

Left: Mistral under construction by Ross.
Pic Credit: Ross Baker



years creating a database of a huge number of New Zealand race cars and their results offered up the name of the Cactus VI constructor, one Dave Bilbrough from the Wairarapa. Bilbrough a pharmacist, club racing enthusiast and part-time historian on Wairarapa stately homes had passed away a number of years ago. Wairarapa archives were found to hold his research and records and were very helpful in providing all the information and photos relating to Bilbrough's motor racing activities. Amongst the photos were many of the Mistral, and the Heron Mk1 when raced by Ross Baker. The photos including the construction of the Mistral and Heron Mk1 and had obviously come from Ross. A build sheet for the Cactus MkVI had a final entry "Ross Baker wants to buy 1975." Knowing that the first car that Ross had built had been a 1959 Mistral, and with the numerous Ross Baker photos, I surmised that the Cactus VI

had started life as the Mistral that Ross had constructed in 1960, and that for nostalgic reasons had wished to purchase back from Bilbrough.

Bruce Elwood who had worked for Ross contacted him on my behalf with Ross confirming that the Mistral had indeed been the car that he had first constructed and competed in. Over the course of many emails, the subject of the Heron Mk1 still being in Rotorua was broached. Ross had left the chassis above the office when he had moved to the Sunshine Coast some twenty years earlier. He was unsure if it would be still there as he had on-sold the property when he moved and had not been in touch with Carolyn, the purchaser for many years. Address in hand, a search on Google maps showed the

Below: Mistral racing at the Tarawera Hill climb with Ross Baker at the wheel.
Pic Credit: Ross Baker



Right: Mk 1 Heron chassis as discovered by Nigel in 2022.
Pic Credit: Nigel Russell



sheds to still be there and a title search revealed the same owner after twenty years. Armed with a letter of introduction from Ross I called in on the address in Morea outside of Rotorua, and Carolyn opened the door. She was unaware of any chassis in the shed and with the local men's shed having cleaned out the sheds just two years back, she doubted that there would be anything there. I was thinking my trip would be in vain, however, Carolyn invited me to still take a look in the shed.

The door with Heron Cars emblem still adorning it was opened with trepidation, to find a largely empty shed. At first, second and third glances, no chassis was evident on the top of the office roof, and it wasn't until standing on the far opposite side of the large shed that a glimpse of what looked like metal tubes was seen. The chassis had been tucked away well back under the eaves of the roof that it wasn't easy to see. Along with the chassis were some of the original aluminium interior panelling, a full-length aluminium undertray and the two aluminium water pipes.

The retrieved chassis is in the shed and parts are being gathered for the rebuild. Ross had thought that he had the original plans for the Heron Mk1, chassis or that they may be in the MOTAT Heron archives however we have been unable to find these. So there is some research now called for rebuilding the rear end removed and rebuilt by Baron Robertson during his ownership when he converted the Heron to twin cam and Hewland transmission in around 1967. The plan is

to restore the car back to the earlier 1962 configuration with Ford 1500 and VW transmission.

After many years of competitive and very successful history, the Heron's last race was in the two-litre sports car Championship race at Manfield on 13th April 1975, the first and only race with Bill David at the wheel. Not long after David's from Taupo parted out the car. The Gemco style body which it now ran after the original went into the SID Mk2. A year or so before the original body had been damaged in racing and replaced.

If anyone is aware of any surviving parts from the Heron Mk1 maybe, I would appreciate any leads to try and reunite with the car and help with the rebuild.

