

ROADSIDE RELICS: SPLENDOUR IN THE GRASS

# New Zealand Classic Car

## SHOW PONY

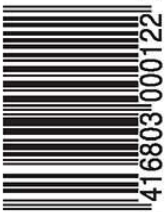
LEGENDARY SHELBY



NEW ZEALAND CLASSIC CAR OCTOBER 2022 ISSUE 382

SHELBY COBRA GT350 • EXCALIBUR PHAETON • HX HOLDEN UTE • THE SL • HERON • JAGUAR MK II RACE CAR

ISSUE 382 \$11.99  
OCTOBER 2022 INCL. GST  
themotorhood.com



partside:media

**EXCALIBUR**  
STAR-SPANGLY  
BANNER CAR

**THE SL**  
MADE IN  
NEW ZEALAND

**HOLDEN HX UTE**  
WORKHORSE  
TO SHOW PONY



**NINE LIVES: JAGUAR MK II SALOON'S LONG RACING LEGACY**



# The house of Heron

Our columnist, Patrick, has written the definitive history of the Heron and its inspirational designer and builder, Ross Baker, so when he got the chance to see a flock of them he was soon on a flight of his own

By Patrick Harlow

The Heron MJ1 was manufactured as a turnkey vehicle in Rotorua during the mid '80s. During its production time, 25 cars were manufactured. The factory closed in 1986.

After missing out on an earlier Heron as a 19-year-old, businessman Alan Wichman was determined he would not miss out again when he saw another in a car yard in 1987. Alan was not really a car guy at the time. He enjoyed driving but that was as far as it went until he saw his first Heron MJ1. What caught his eye was that it was bright yellow, low slung, and looked sensational. The next day he took his wife, Bernadette, to see it and they drove it home that afternoon.

Alan knew he had bought something pretty special. His car was the second Heron MJ1 produced by Ross Baker, with the help of Chris Cooke and Pete Guilford. Pete became the car's first builder/owner before he gave it to his wife as a birthday present.

After Alan purchased Heron number two, his company-provided car was parked, and the MJ1 became his daily driver to and from work. On the weekends the family would go out in the car. Their one-year-old son, Chad, got the best view as he got to sit on the centre console.

Being a prototype, Alan's car had a Fiat 1.6-litre engine. The production cars, built by Summit Engineering and Heron Developments, got the bigger 2-litre Fiat engines. After owning the



Alan with car #2 in 1990 one year before it went to the South Island



Heron #2 — one-year-old Chad gets the best seat in the house in 1990



EVERY KIWI DESERVES A RELIABLE GARAGE DOOR



Opposite: Starting at the bottom Heron #2, middle left Targa Heron #26, top yellow Heron#25, middle Heron #3, left Heron MJ 2+2, and MJ 2+2 moulds 14

car for a while, Alan met its designer, Ross Baker, and asked about upgrading the Fiat drivetrain to a Mazda 626/Ford Telstar unit. Ross said it was doable but would take a while. Alan's car became one of two Heron MJ1s that were factory upgraded to the more reliable Mazda engine/gearbox, but it took two years to complete.

During this time Alan decided that he could not survive without a Heron, so he bought another one. It was Heron number four. This also became his daily driver, and it was regularly driven from Hamilton to Rotorua to check on the progress of car number two. When the conversion was finished, Alan couldn't bear to part with car four.

However, in the early '90s, Alan's work started taking him to the US for months at a time. Unable to justify owning two Herons, he sold number two. Number four was loaned to a relative, who suffered the embarrassment of having it stolen in early 2000.

In 2017, Alan sold his business in the States and, as far as he was concerned, his sports car days were behind him. His now-adult sons thought differently, as they had fond memories of being driven around in a Heron MJ1.

Tom and Taylor Wichman managed to track down Alan's original Heron number two in the South Island and convinced its owner to sell it. Tom, Taylor, and Bernadette secretly arranged for Tom to fly to the South Island, rent a truck, and bring it back. Unfortunately, the owner had decided to pull the car apart and do a complete restoration. Once the car was apart, however, it had never been fully rebuilt. Despite the car's state of disrepair, Tom knew that it was repairable but it would take a while. Once back in Hamilton, the car was hidden in a garage until Alan's birthday.

It was a birthday that Alan will always remember.

Once again, he decided that he needed a Heron to drive while the



Modifying car #2 for Mazda running gear at Heron Developments



Heron MJ 2+2 moulds as they look today

other was being restored so he bought Heron number 25 off Mike Boyce in Hastings. That would not be his last purchase. In the shed behind Alan's house are four Herons, including the moulds used to manufacture the Heron MJ 2+2. Only two bodies were ever pulled from the moulds. One is registered and road legal, and is owned by Roy Hoare. The Heron MJ 2+2 was designed to be the replacement car for the MJ1, but production stopped before any cars were built. All Alan's cars will eventually be restored and road registered. Not shown is the stolen Heron number four, which was located recently in a farm paddock. It has still to be picked up. ■

### ALAN'S CARS IN PRODUCTION ORDER:

1983 Heron MJ1 (No. 2) — a prototype: Fiat engine was upgraded to 2-litre Mazda FE3 Twin Cam EFI; awaiting restoration.

1985 Heron MJ1 (No. 3) — a prototype: Fiat engine was upgraded to 2-litre Subaru; awaiting restoration.

2001 Heron MJ1 (No. 25) — last car to be road registered: powered by a 2-litre Mazda 626 8V SOHC EFI; Alan's daily driver.

Heron MJ1 (No. 26) — sold originally as parts and still not finished: the only factory car with a Targa roof; powered by a Honda 2-litre K20 VTEC engine; will eventually be fully road legal.

Heron MJ 2+2 — prototype body: Will eventually be fully road legal.

Not shown in the pictures:

1984 Heron MJ1 (No. 4) — stolen prototype: powered by a Fiat 1600 twin cam. Once it is retrieved, it will be restored along with the others.

WWW.GARADOR.CO.NZ  
0800 427 236

