

# SPARE PARTS

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# THE HOUSE OF HERON

## The last finished Heron MJ1

BY DOREEN HUMPHRIES



**R**ecently I was contacted by Patrick Harlow who was looking for some background material for a story he was writing. I am now at a stage in my life when I can look back at the things I have accomplished. It was a stage when I decided to write my life story for my family to read.

Patrick had heard of my involvement with the yellow Heron MJ1 now owned by Alan Wichman. He thought the part I played in it would be useful background material for him. What follows is an extract from the story that I have passed on to my family. It covers a twelve-year period when I was a financial

accountant and built a two-seater sports car for relaxation. I was in my '50s at the time.

### FIRST SIGHTING

We first sighted the Heron fibreglass body in October 1990, under a pile of moulds and dust in Paul McDiarmid's Rotorua Fibreglass workshop. Paul was a long-time friend of ours and we used to pop in and see him when we were down his way. Paul was the brains behind the fibreglass body that Ross Baker had designed. Once Ross had made the wooden plugs for the original Heron, Paul manufactured the moulds and he and Ross worked out the best way to manufacture the unique fibreglass monocoque car. We had to clear out the multiple fibreglass moulds to get near the body.

Doreen with the Heron MJ1 she built in 2000.



The body was towed from Rotorua to Whangarei by our friend Paul McDiarmid, of Rotorua Fibreglass, in his '37 Buick. His workshop made all the MJ1 bodies.

I think on this particular trip to Rotorua we were on a Vintage Car Club rally. In addition to myself and my husband Cliff, was our son Martin. We were probably in our blue '37 Buick Sedan. Paul had a similar black Buick. Over the time we had known Paul we had heard all about the highs and lows of manufacturing the Heron sports car and its demise in 1986.

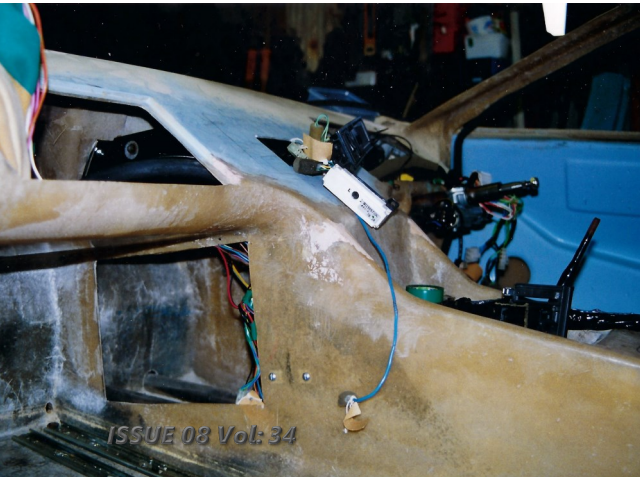
The Heron MJ1 body at the back of Paul's workshop was the first body to be built after Summit had decided to stop manufacturing the Heron and Ross Baker had bought the rights of the car back. At one stage Ross, Paul and a few others were considering putting the MJ1 back into production with a more modern Ford Telstar/Mazda 626 drivetrain, but other than this body nothing more became of it.



Martin was very taken with the Heron body, and we started investigating existing Heron cars. We went and saw people who had bought factory-built driveable cars previously. After thinking about it for some time, Martin decided to buy the body and build the car. We had all the tools necessary at home, in Whangarei, so that wouldn't be a problem. This car was destined to be the first MJ 1 to be built outside the Rotorua factory and the last to be registered as a road-legal car. The body was purchased in November 1991.

Ross and Paul had already converted a couple of Fiat-powered MJ1s to take 1987 Telstar/626 2-litre drivetrains so all the modifications required to the body had already been done, such as engine mounts. The first task for Martin was to find a low-mileage donor car with rear damage. A task that took over 12 months, but by the end of which Martin had been able to buy a top

Starting work on all the wiring needed to install the LED electronic instrument cluster.



Because the Mazda drivetrain was wider than the original Skoda transaxle the crossmember had to be widened.

-of-the-range Ford Telstar that came with a hi-tech digital instrument panel. In the meantime, Martin was transferred to Auckland for his job at Telecom.

This placed him in a quandary. "What am I going to do?" he said, "I won't be able to work on it in Auckland. I've already paid for it and the Telstar is on its way here."

**MY NEW PROJECT**

After a bit of discussion, I heard myself saying, "I think I would like to build it. I like mechanical things and you, Cliff, spend all your free time restoring vintage cars. At least building this from scratch won't be so oily and messy." Consequently, I bought the car from Martin.

Our friend Kel Doel, a retired mechanic, who had been helping Cliff restore the Buick Coupe, which started as a 'basket case', said, "Not a bad idea, and I would be here if you need any help."

When the Ford Telstar arrived, Martin was already in Auckland. I set about stripping everything out of it that I thought I would need — engine, rear suspension,

One of the many brackets that needed to be made for it.

wheels, wiring loom, dash, door and window mechanisms, etc.

The ravaged Telstar body was then picked up by the wreckers. Everything I had saved was put in our 3-car garage.

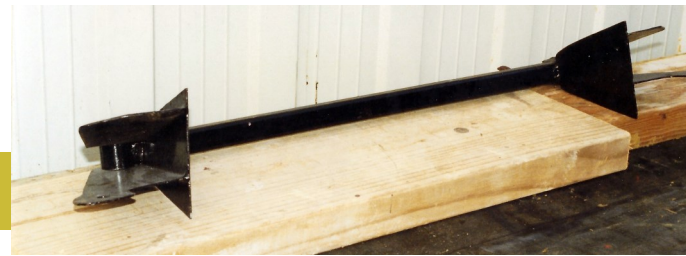
Cliff and I went to Rotorua and organised delivery of the Heron body with Paul. When it arrived it had to stay outside on the lawn. Now my work began.

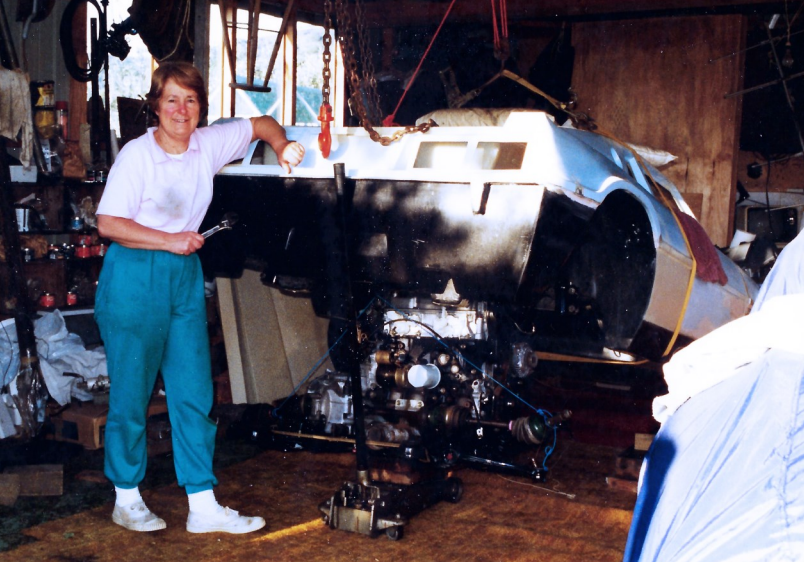
The first job was to drill big holes to mount the rear shock absorbers. The Heron doesn't have a donor chassis. Instead, the steel mechanical drive-train bits are attached to the body in areas that have a stainless-steel mesh incorporated into the original fibreglass layup.

From then on, I spent most weekends on my project. I had to find a Skoda front suspension which had to be made wider, and a Skoda steering box.

It took nine years to build the car, (I had a full-time job). Two years were spent on the electronic wiring loom alone, making it shorter and cutting out all the wiring going to luxury unneeded components.

Cliff said that I built the car, and that is true, but it still couldn't have been done without his support (along with





Getting ready to fit the Mazda engine.

the numerous brackets he made to mount things on).

During the build, the car was inspected by a certifier who drove up from Auckland to Whangarei three times. The car flew through these with only a couple of small things needing to be changed. It was a great day in 2002 after passing its certification I drove it to the local LTNZ station for its final check and VIN inspection. The examiner put it up on the hoist, checked a couple of things, and then said, "I don't need to look any further underneath as everything is so tidy." I felt elated. It got its VIN in July 2002.

I used the Heron to go to work every day in Whangarei until we sold

Mazda engine in place. It should be noted that the original Fiat powered MJ1s had a north-south engine configuration.



the beach house. It was then put into storage along with our furniture as the apartment we had bought in the Nautilus Apartments in Orewa wasn't ready to move into. Eventually, when we did move in, I used the Heron again as my daily driver to

go to my work in Constellation Drive each day.

It was always a draw card. On a Friday after work, I would do the weekly shopping in the Tikipunga Butchery and Countdown. One Friday as I went back to the car with a trolley full of shopping a man followed me with his shopping.

"I'm curious as to how you are going to get all that shopping in your car," he said. I showed the small boot behind the engine bay at the rear of the car that fitted several bags of groceries (nothing cold though), then I popped the front bonnet and showed him where I put



In 2021 Doreen was reunited with the car that she had built. The car is now owned by Alan Wichman who is the car's fourth owner.

another couple of bags on either side of the spare wheel. The rest went where the passenger's feet would go.

"Well, I would never have believed it," was the final comment.

That little sports car was my transport for many years. When we moved from Orewa to the Gold Coast, Australia in 2009, the car was sold to a Roy Savage in Wellington who was going to put the car in his private museum.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY

The Heron MJ 1 was designed by Ross Baker of Rotorua and was first shown at the 1983 Auckland Motor Show. They had 350 interested people look at it with 30 deposits paid. The last factory production car was finished in July 1985. The body is fibreglass monocoque construction with bonded stainless-steel mesh to strengthen it, therefore there is no separate chassis, and no steel to rust.

The first cars had 1.6-litre engines, while the production cars had 2-litre Fiat twin cam engines with Skoda gearboxes and steering. The last three, including my one, had 2-litre Ford/Mazda engines. Mine was the only one with electronic fuel injection.

#### FAST FORWARD TO 2021

Life moved on and about two years ago I was contacted by the current owner, Alan Wichman. He was keen to find out the history behind the car I had built and I was happy to share with him my experiences of building it. He also suggested we meet at the Brits & Euro Revival Car Show being held later in Auckland. Amazingly the car still looked the same as when I had sold it, except they had changed the wheels. I still prefer the old ones as they looked solid and gave the very small car some bulk.

Quite a few people were looking at it, many of whom took a lot of convincing that I had built it. Would they have asked a man that? I will make sure I go to next year's show.



