

BOB WALLACE: LAMBORGHINI'S KIWI CONNECTION

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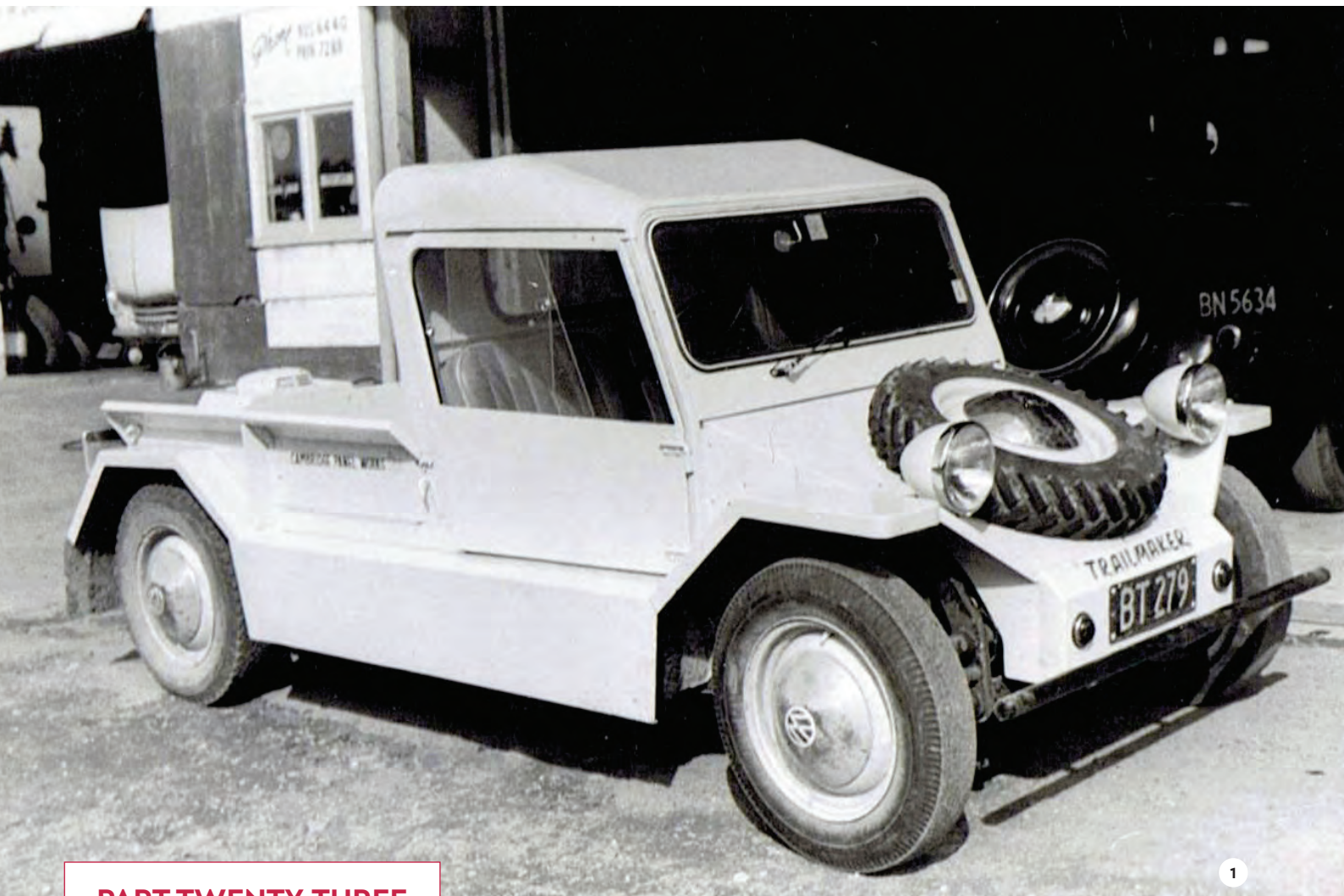
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## PART TWENTY-THREE

# UTILITY VEHICLES III

*Patrick tracks down more Kiwi-designed and built utility vehicles including, of course, the iconic Trekka.*

Words and Photos: **PATRICK HARLOW**

Until a few years ago it was a common belief that the Trekka was New Zealand's only native production vehicle. Hopefully, readers of this magazine are now safe in the knowledge that the last 23 issues have dispelled this myth.

Being a locally designed and produced vehicle, of course the Trekka is in the mix but this month it's accompanied by details of two other manufacturers who were building similar vehicles around the same time using VW Beetle mechanicals rather than Skoda.

### TRAILMAKER (1965 TO 1971)

During the 1960s demand was high for a cheap farm utility vehicle. Four-wheel drives were expensive and there was a gap in the market for a simple yet lightweight utility vehicle. It was a gap that Johnny Simpson and Don Hooker intended to fill when they started to build the Trailmaker, a vehicle based on the Volkswagen Beetle.

Starting in 1965, early Trailmaker bodies were built at their Cook Street premises in Cambridge. It was a robust vehicle made

from 18-gauge high-quality steel folded on an 8-foot metal folder. The simple steel body was designed to be spotwelded straight onto an unmodified VW floor pan that provided the simple but rugged front and rear suspension, the steering, engine and the fuel tank.

In the beginning, it was just a simple sideline activity for Cambridge Panel Works Ltd. Owning a panel shop meant John and Don could fabricate the bodywork in-house as well as giving them plentiful access to relatively late-model written-off Volkswagens.

The Trailmaker was available as a basic two-seater with a 1.5 square metre pick-up tray and a removable folding Everflex soft top. The tray was reputed to be big enough to transport six sheep. Various options were available including a stock crate, drop side (for ease of loading sheep), cab hardtop and, unique to the Trailmaker, raised chevron pattern tyres. These tyres were specially manufactured by Motorways Retreads in Hamilton, using a standard car tyre case with a tractor tyre tread bonded to it, giving it a go-anywhere capability. The first two hardtops were built out of steel



but then Johnny and Don decided to have a mould made and subsequent hardtops were produced using fibreglass.

By 1968 their panel-beating workshop couldn't cope with the day-to-day demand for panel and paint repairs as well as building Trailmakers. Consequently, they purchased a disused dairy factory at Roto-o-Rangi and set up a very professional production line, investing in new spot welders, guillotines, folders, rollers etc.

When an order came in to provide 21 left-hand drive vehicles for New Caledonia, it proved to be a very simple task to convert the vehicle to left-hand drive albeit using brand-new LHD parts imported by the Volkswagen distributor. These vehicles had to be modified to seat four people and had a full-length soft-top roof. Much to Johnny's dismay the export vehicles were sold as the Kiwi-A-Go.

When a buyer ordered his Trailmaker they didn't get a choice of donor VW Beetle – they got whichever car that happened to have rolled into the factory. Consequently, depending on his luck, the Trailmaker could be delivered with a 1200cc (27kW/36bhp), a 1200cc (30kW/40bhp), a 1300cc, or a 1500cc (40kW/53bhp) engine and possibly one or two late-model Trailmakers may have had 1600cc engines from written-off Kombis. However, customers didn't mind, as the engines were all thoroughly checked and rebuilt if necessary, and all had an equally capable off-road ability. In those days, the places a vehicle could get to were more important than the number of tree stumps they could pull out.

Being a small company most of its sales were either by word of mouth or by John and Don travelling around New Zealand to agricultural field days where they would demonstrate the vehicle. At £450 the Trailmaker was about half the price of the Trekka. During one such demonstration, it caused some amusement when it was paired against and completely outperformed, a new Land Rover. The Land Rover only made it halfway around the hillside track. The light, nimble and tractable Trailmaker, however, had no difficulty completing the course.

A total of 108 Trailmakers were produced. At some stage, discussions were held with a nationwide grocery chain to sell kit set Trailmakers through their stores, but it went no further. The vast majority were sold fully assembled from the factory. By 1971 with the advent of the Beach Buggy and other VW special off-roaders, donor vehicles were becoming harder to source. The decision was made to call it a day and in 1972 the Roto-o-Rangi factory was sold, complete with all the plant and several VW body shells in various states of disassembly.



1. The Trailmaker shows off its simply, folded steel bodywork (Photo Daniel Simpson); 2. Trailmaker line-up (Photo Daniel Simpson); 3. Trailmaker with its specially built off-road tyre fitted to its bonnet (Photo Daniel Simpson); 4. The Trailmaker caught the public's attention wherever it was parked (Photo Daniel Simpson).





## TREKKA (1966 TO 1973)

The Trekka ranks as New Zealand's most successful production four-wheeled utility vehicle with a production run of 2,500. It's doubtful that this record will ever be broken. Of these, just under 200 were exported to Australia, Fiji, and Indonesia making it our most successful exported vehicle. The Saker SVS, however, remains our most successful international vehicle, having been manufactured and sold in at least four countries. (See Part 1 of this series in *NZ Classic Driver* Sep/Oct 2021).

There was nothing exceptionally good or special about the Trekka other than the simple fact it was the right vehicle for a government tax niche that opened in the automotive market for a short period in New Zealand's history. With its Skoda 440 Octavia drivetrain, it did what it was supposed to do. The Skoda drivetrain came about because the vehicle creator, Phil Andrews, owned the Skoda franchise and knew them to be a tough, rugged and reliable car for the time.

Phil first mooted the idea of building a farm utility vehicle using Skoda mechanicals during a visit to Czechoslovakia in 1961. He believed he could build a cheaper vehicle than the Land Rover, albeit without four-wheel drive. All other components were to be made in New Zealand. Phil approached the government to gain the necessary import licenses using the argument that the vehicle would have more than half of its content produced locally. The government readily agreed, and Phil set about designing the vehicle.

Design work started in 1964 and continued through 1965, Phil was heavily involved in the production and development of prototype models. The first prototype was an open Jeep-styled vehicle. A handbrake type of arrangement was designed that gave the vehicle a sort of limited-slip diff as the handbrake was used to lock the wheel that was spinning thus transferring drive to the wheel that had the better traction. This

prototype was sent to Massey University in Palmerston North for further trials.

Once the kinks were sorted out, the next step was full production. Not surprisingly, it requires a considerable investment of time, cash and energy to tool up for a vehicle and produce a thousand units per year. Phil was an ideas man and a problem solver, but the stress of the financial overheads were starting to affect his health, and his doctor had already

advised him to ease up. Fortunately, Noel Turner approached him late in 1965 and offered to take the Skoda franchise and the Trekka off him. It was a big weight off Phil's shoulders. He continued as an advisor for another few months until they had a final pre-production prototype.

The prototype looked like a scaled-down Land Rover. The body was lengthened to give more space, and an initial idea of a

# TREKKA

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**TREKKA** is the first vehicle of its kind in the world! TREKKA is equally at home on grass, slush, snow, sand, rough construction sites as on smooth city pavements. TREKKA brings to farmers, timbermen, tradesmen, contractors, construction companies, local bodies and back-country-seeking sportsmen, a viable, go-most-anywhere vehicle at a realistic price.

**THIS IS WHAT TREKKA IS!** TREKKA is a rugged, all-steel welded, fully-independent-chassis utility with mechanical components proved over millions of miles. TREKKA has over 20 square feet payload area, half ton payload including driver, full width tailgate.

TREKKA will go most anywhere: a rugged 47 BHP motor, 4 speed gearbox, low ratio differential and independent suspension on all 4 wheels takes rough tracks, no tracks, slopes, slush. (If you're really difficult terrain TREKKA's optional extra "Balanced Traction" diff. puts crampions on TREKKA!)

**THIS IS WHAT TREKKA ISN'T!** TREKKA is not a 4-wheel-drive vehicle though you'll find this difficult to believe. True, 4-wheel-drive will take you to odd places. TREKKA won't but you'll pay an extra 2500 for those few yards.

**"BALANCED TRACTION" DIFFERENTIAL.** For mountain goat country, TREKKA has a limited slip differential as an optional extra. Previously found only on racing cars, limited slip differential makes one wheel spin virtually impossible. As soon as spin starts a cone takes up the thrust and transfers the drive equally to both rear wheels to give balanced traction regardless of ground conditions under either wheel.

**THESE ARE YOUR OPTIONS.** TREKKA is available as an open wagon, canvas cab, or detachable full canvas canopy. Adjustable seats and five lockers are standard. Optional extras include upholstered rear seats, towbar, "Balanced Traction" differential.

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folding windscreen was dropped in favour of a permanent upright one. Another early idea had been to follow Land Rover's example and make the body panels from aluminium, but the company wanted to stick with a material they knew which was steel. The firm H J Ryan in Mt Roskill, Auckland agreed to make the body. Ryans at the time were pressing out all manner of goods including lawnmower bodies. This was the first time a New Zealand steel body would be fitted to a New Zealand mass production vehicle and called for previously unheard-of volumes of rolled sheet steel to be imported into the country. A proper mud grip tyre to fit the 15-inch Skoda wheels was not in production at that time, so local tyre maker Reid Rubber produced a homegrown tyre using a mould designed and manufactured locally.

The day of the Trekka had come, with the first vehicle rolling off the line early in December of 1966. At £899 it sold for less than the Morris 1100 car and had a local New Zealand content exceeding 80 percent compared to other mass production cars which were around 23-28 percent. The high percentage of local content ensured the vehicle enjoyed multiple tax advantages not given to other car assembly companies such as Ford and GM. It was sold as a low-cost commercial vehicle that could be purchased with a very minimal deposit. Later versions could be purchased with simple rear bench seats making it a very crude station wagon. The nearest competition, the Land-Rover was selling for around £1,500. The Land Rover was superior in almost every detail but for many buyers, the Trekka did all they needed. With its independent saloon car suspension and light weight, it functioned admirably as a town and country vehicle.

Early vehicles were sold with a simple canvas top, but this was later upgraded with the option of a fibreglass roof. They came in three basic forms – a station wagon, a van, and a pickup/ute which was known just as the 'cab chassis unit'. The station wagon had a rear seat and was a passenger-friendly Trekka, with a fibreglass canopy extending the length of the vehicle.

By the end of the 1960s, changes in import tariffs and the relaxing of government restrictions meant that Trekka's price advantage was steadily being eroded. Similar Japanese vehicles were starting to enter the New Zealand market. By the end of 1969, Trekka's share of the light commercial market had slumped from over 16 percent in its first year of production to just over nine percent. In 1971 production ceased and only two hundred vehicles were produced that year – however, stockpiled Trekkas would continue to be sold until 1973.



1. The first Phil Andrews-built Trekka prototype being driven by Noel Turner (Photo Todd Niall); 2. Trekkas on the wharf bound for Australia; 3. Early Trekka advertising from Andrew Motors; 4. Practical Trekka ute; 5. The Trekka's no-nonsense dashboard; 6. Trekka badge; 7a and 7b. Stationwagon Trekka was more people friendly.





## TERRA (1967 TO 1976)

Despite the Trailmaker and the Trekka going on sale a few months earlier, just a few kilometres further south in Rotorua, Morris Turner Motors started to produce a farm utility vehicle which they called the Terra.

Earle Morris (Mossy) worked as the service manager for VW/Rover in Rotorua. At the time it was very hard to import Land Rover and other farm utility vehicles into the country unless you had overseas funds and farmers needed a go-anywhere vehicle for moving stock and bales of hay around their farm or into town. Earle had been involved with VWs for some years and was fully aware of the vehicle's off-road capabilities and how easy they were to strip down.


In his spare time, Earle built the first Terra at his home. The primary goal was to build a cheap virtually indestructible farm vehicle that could be serviced almost anywhere. The Terra was based on the plentiful and simple Volkswagen Beetle which, whilst being two-wheel drive, had its engine installed over the back wheels and that weight placement gave it improved tractability over conventional front-engine rear-wheel-drive configurations.

Starting with the VW floor pan a simple, sturdy steel body was built on top of it. Earle's boss Rob McGregor saw it and decided to build more of them at Rob McGregor Motors. Initially, twelve cars were built, and demand was such that Earle along with fellow employee Fred Turner decided to go into business. An old wrecker's yard across the road from Rob McGregor Motors was purchased and renamed Morris Turner Motors.

Although second-hand Beetles were bought

cheaply as donor vehicles, by the time they left the factory, every single part had either been replaced with a brand-new part or had been fully reconditioned. The utility vehicles were even sold with a six-month warranty. Sales were better than expected, it was not long before they needed to build a new and bigger factory on Fergusson Place in Rotorua. Earle and Fred showed the Terra off at agricultural shows around the country and almost always came back with several orders. During the 1970s there were six full-time staff involved in building the vehicle. Most of the vehicles were two-seaters but if customers so desired there was an option of a four-seater. The cars were very distinctive with their sloping bonnets but differed from the Trailmaker as the Terra had a vertically front-mounted spare tyre. Most Terra's used the traditional air-cooled VW engine; however, some owners opted for a factory-fitted brand-new Ford V4 Transit engine or a Renault motor.

Towards the end of production, the Ford and Renault motors became standard options as they had more torque to get up steeper hills than their German counterparts. Because of the extra weight of the Ford motor better rear suspension was needed, so a three-leaf transverse spring was designed, which worked very well and was also an option on the other models for carrying extra weight.

Terra production came to an end sometime in 1974 or 1975 after approximately 450 vehicles had been built – but not due to a lack of orders. Rather it was the news that the government was shortly to introduce a new sales tax which would add 20 percent to the price of the vehicle. In the opinion of the government, the Terra was classified as a new vehicle and therefore subject to the new tax. The extra tax on the selling price would've whittled down the cost advantage the Terra had over the Land Rover. 



1. Ford V4-engined Terra tackling Mt Tarawera (Photo E Morris); 2. The Terra was very much at home off the beaten track (Photo E Morris); 3. The Terra was able to tackle the roughest country (Photo E Morris); 4. Side profile shows of the Terra's simply design (Photo E Morris); 5. Terra showing remarkable stability even on steep slopes (Photo E Morris).