



# RIDE THE WIND

We are the first magazine that's driven the Hulme – New Zealand's entry into the global supercar market. Is it fast? Is it what ...

**STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALLAN DICK**

**I**t seems a lifetime ago – and it probably was – when Jock Freemantle came to see me, making me take a vow of secrecy over what he was about to reveal. Break the vow and I would be fed rat poison, have my tongue pulled out with rusty pliers, forced to wear Bermuda shorts and, worst of all have to watch the Australian version of Top Gear twenty-four hours a day until the rat poison kicked in.

I had first known Jock back in the early 1970s when, freshly arrived from Fort Augustus at the eastern end of Loch Ness in Bonnie Scotland, he used one of the first BMW 2002s to arrive in the country for some energetic race and rally work.

He also owned the A-Line Lodge in Queenstown that featured accommodation in a series of distinctive A-frame chalets designed by Brink Mini racer and renowned architect Murray Cockburn.

Jock later sold the BMW to the late Lindsay Neilson at Fairmonted Motor Court in Dunedin and Lindsay offered me a drive in it. That was a long time ago but I remember being impressed by the sheer driving pleasure, however I was surprised that such a car had black rubber mats. You just remember such things.

Jock dropped below my radar after that until he resurfaced again in the late 1980s having moved to Auckland and he wanted to form a sort of 'Refugees from the South' networking group.

I don't think that really went anywhere, but we bumped into one another infrequently over the next decade or so.

Which brings us to the meeting where he swore me to silence.

Initially, I thought that what Jock suggested was a pure dream – that New Zealand build a supercar.

I've been writing about motorcars a long, long time and from that has spun off some knowledge and history of the motor industry in New Zealand. And that's a history that is littered with failed attempts to build a "New Zealand car" – that stretches right back to the late 1890s.

At the height of import restrictions and overseas funds in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were several attempts in a short period of time when hopefuls launched ambitious plans that went nowhere fast. A

New Zealand designed and built car would have short-circuited waiting lists that never ended and rank profiteering that bordered on criminal.

But there was a brief shooting star of success – the Trekka. The most successful New Zealand designed and built "car" ever.

**AGAINST THAT BACKGROUND, WHEN JOCK OUTLINED HIS PLAN FOR NEW ZEALAND TO BUILD A SUPERCAR I WAS FRANKLY, SCEPTICAL**

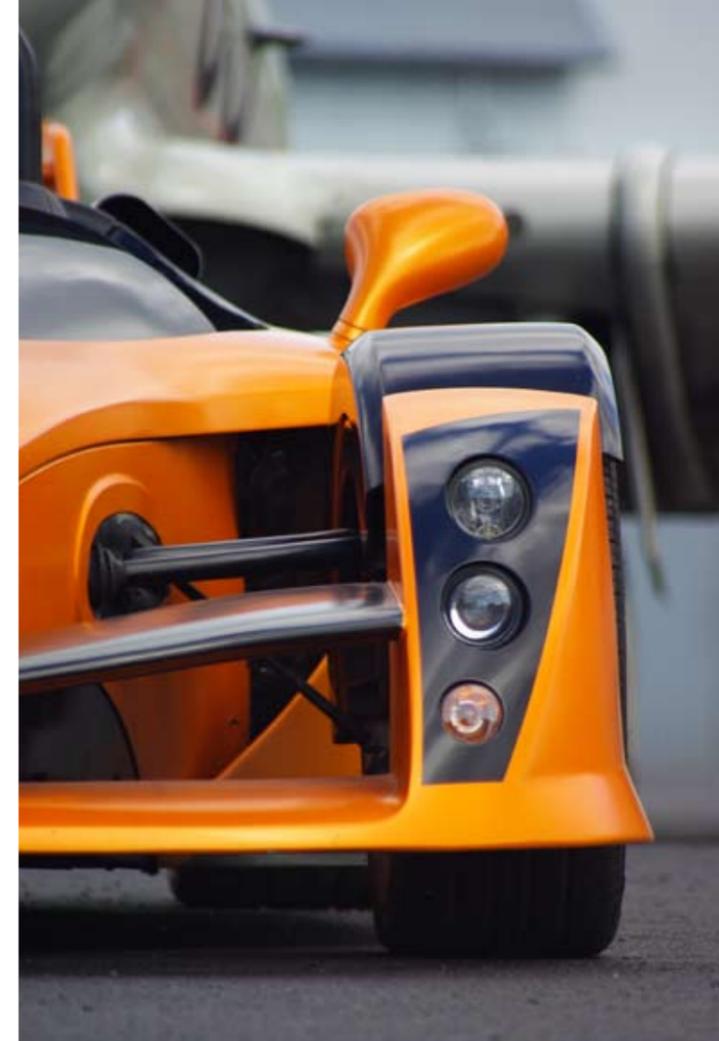
But it only really came into being because the Skoda importers, Motor Holdings, somehow ended up with an oversupply of engines, gearboxes and diffs for the superseded Octavia model.

Against that background, when Jock outlined his plan for New Zealand to build a supercar I was frankly, sceptical.

If nothing, Jock has consummate belief in both himself and what he is doing. "Failure" is a word that doesn't exist for Jock – where most of us would be afraid to ask for something out of fear of being told "no" and feeling a failure, Jock has no such qualms. He's bulletproof.



**THE MOVE TO BUILD AN OPEN-TOP VERSION FIRST, INSTEAD OF THE CLOSED COUPE, HASN'T MEANT THE CAR IS ANY LESS DRAMATIC LOOKING. ON THE ROAD IT LOOKS SENSATIONAL**



Designer Tony Parker was inspired by Formula One and that's obvious from the shape of the Hulme





Jock Freemantle dresses for the occasion – hat, gloves, goggles. Driving position is totally adjustable as befits a performance car

I told Jock, as politely as possible, he was dreaming.

Jock responded that a supercar was a different state of affairs to a production car for the masses and that we had already shown that we were world leaders in other technologies such as yachting and so, designing and building a supercar should come naturally to a nation with such a proud motorsport heritage as New Zealand.

The bugger had me. Nothing more to do but give him my support – and a cheque for \$500 as one of the initial investors.

Over the next few months Jock worked with impressive speed, pulling together a network of supporters and experts – including Professor Tony Parker, one of New Zealand's leading industrial designers.

Apart from the \$500, I also chipped in with the name. Jock had a long and involved name that seemed to include words like “New Zealand”, “Kiwi”, “Streamliner” and “Gee Whizz”. I suggested that Hulme might be in order as Denis Hulme was our only Formula One World Champion and underwhelmingly honoured in a land of the oval football.

Jock checked with Hulme's widow Greeta, who gave her approval and Hulme became the name.

Parker's initial design called for an enclosed GT-type coupe, but as it became obvious that there was going to be no single major backer who was going to bankroll the operation, it was decided to build an open topped version as a prototype, simply because it would be cheaper.

### HIS ENTHUSIASM HAS ALSO ALLOWED HIM TO ENLIST THE HELP OF KEY PEOPLE WHO HAVE HELPED WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CAR

The fact that such a prototype now exists is a credit to the monumental stickability of Freemantle's faith in the project.

Jock's enthusiasm and belief in the project wasn't shared by anyone with the sort of bank balance needed to get the project on the road and so progress very much became a hand-to-mouth affair and progress continued according to the money and components supply.

Getting the Hulme into production has been very much Jock's consuming passion. His house has been sold to help finance the car and he has persuaded thousands of small(ish) investors to put some money into the Hulme. The money has trickled in, but his enthusiasm has never faltered.



His enthusiasm has also allowed him to enlist the help of key people who have helped with the development of the car.

Not only is there now a working, driveable prototype, but it, and the earlier concept, have travelled the world, taking the Hulme to a vast global audience.

The minimalist approach of building an open-topped prototype has resulted in a revised model line-up. The open-top car will be the first production version and it's called the Hulme CanAm. This will be aimed at the enthusiast who is looking for massive performance from a car that can be used either for road work, or track use.

It will be supplemented by the Hulme CanAm Spyder which will have more luxurious trim and creature comforts including a full windscreen with wipers.

Top of the line will be Hulme F1 which will be the closed coupe similar to the original concept.

Over the year, the prototype Hulme CanAm has undergone extensive track and road testing, mainly in the hands of motorsport legend Ken Smith with suspension tuning from Peter van Bruegel who has an impressive history of developing cars for race and rally work and who was involved with Nissan New Zealand's touring car efforts in the 1990s.

So, what's it like to drive? Thought you'd never ask!

I'm the first from the media who's been allowed to drive the Hulme – others have been in the passenger's seat, but nobody else who likes to call themselves a journalist has been allowed to actually drive the car. And Jock Freemantle is nervous.

On a hot, humid, sticky Auckland Sunday afternoon we head out of town, Jock driving and me in the passenger's seat.

First surprise; how easy it is to get in. The sill is wide, but while I have never worn a tight skirt in my life I feel I could still slip into the comfortable, tight-fitting bucket seat wearing one. Access is easy, aided by the centre bar which divides the interior giving a decisive twin-cockpit feel and also adding strength to the prototype's space-frame chassis. Production versions will be based on a carbon-fibre tub.

While he dresses as though for a moon mission – hat, gloves, sunglasses and industrial goggles, Jock offers me “eye protection” – another pair of industrial goggles.

I decline, saying I will wear my sunglasses bought from a BP station somewhere once for \$29.95. Jock needs the gloves, the hat, the neck cover and the gloves because he has the fair skin of a Scot and burns easily – and the sun is beating down. Relentlessly.

I decide I need the tan.

Over on his side of the car, Jock goes through a routine of switching on the power steering, the ignition and then thumbing a small black button.

The LS7 Corvette lump fires easily and settles into a delicious, steady, idle sounding exactly as a V8 should.

But I'm surprised by how quiet and sophisticated it is. It is deep and warm-sounding, rather than loud and blasting.

Initially the car was to have used a smaller capacity V8 engine from a BMW M5, but some things were in a state of flux early in the design and a change in engine was one of those.

The Italian outfit Cima supplied the transmission – this is a six-speed manual gearbox transaxle as used by Ascari, Pagani, Koeneigsegg and other low volume performance car makers.

Jock reverses out of the drive and we head out into the Auckland suburban traffic, heading for open roads. We've not gone far before I have my second surprise; how taut the car feels – even from the passenger's seat.

**IT RIPS FROM STANDSTILL TO 100KM/H IN 3.9 SECONDS AND DEMOLISHES THE STANDING QUARTER IN 11.5 SECONDS**

The suspension is firm and the car low, but even at relatively slow speed on roads that have been pounded by heavy trucks and millions of cars, the ride is good and there's not a rattle or squeak from the admittedly minimal bodywork.

The Hulme is fitted with height adjustable suspension to cope with speed humps, gutter crossings and the like. There's a button on the console that raises the nose by about 3.5 centimetres and with this extra ground clearance Jock attacks speedhumps with surprising vigour.

On the road, with the suspension back to "drive" setting, one word comes to mind – integrity. This car feels professionally built.

You sit low and little additions to the cowls directly in front of you direct the windstream just over your eyes, but ruffle your hair. The cockpit is quiet enough for a car with no weather protection or windscreen and you can talk to each other easily at 100km/h.

Over my right shoulder I hear the "Swusshhh" of the engine air intake as Jock opens the throttle.

As the traffic thins out, Jock unleashes some of the Hulme's 500 plus horsepower – the burble of the exhaust turns into a bellow and the car is launched at the horizon like an Exocet missile. But there are no misguided heroics – the last thing Jock needs is a speeding ticket.

But, while he keeps the speed (almost) legal, he shows off a bit by taking corners that carry an advisory "55" at almost double that speed.

He just turns the small, fat steering wheel and the Hulme takes the corner with no body roll at all – just an impressive build-up of G-forces.

At a traffic roundabout some more skiting – this time the Hulme is like a dog chasing its tail. The turning circle is so tight the nose almost touches the back end!

Jock's heading for Maraetai, but I short-circuit him with a request to head for the Warbirds hangar at Ardmore.

After a short photography session, it's my turn to drive and Jock's nervousness increases.

It's not that I have a reputation for crashing, it's just that Jock has pretty much all of his life wrapped up in this orange and black car and he doesn't want it damaged.

But I've been here before, so I tune him out and just get on with the driving. The clutch is firm, but the take-up is smooth and progressive and with so much torque you'd have to be an absolute dummy to stall it.

Cockpit is minimalist – but production versions will get plenty of goodies



The name Hulme is in honour of New Zealand's only Formula One World Champion who has been sadly underrecognised in New Zealand – the orange colour reflects the "papaya" chosen by Bruce McLaren as the first "official" colour of the McLaren Team

Actually, it's the torque that makes the Hulme such an undemanding car to drive. The steering is light and accurate and everything good I felt from the passenger's seat, is magnified from the driver's seat.

With a steering wheel to hold onto, the ride feels even better than before and the car drives with a very light and nimble feel that belies the noise of the big V8 – a noise that is variously a muted burble or a furious bellow according to what your right foot is doing with the accelerator pedal.

Jock doesn't talk any sort of performance figures – but when you know that when you blend a 500+ horsepower, 7.0 litre aluminium lump into a featherweight car you are going to get PERFORMANCE.

**I WAS IMPRESSED MORE BY THE HULME THAN I HAD EXPECTED TO BE. I'VE DRIVEN PLENTY OF OTHER ONE-OFF CARS. INEVITABLY THEY HAVE BEEN COMPROMISED IN EVERY WAY**

In its natural home, the LS7 propels the Chevrolet Corvette to a top speed of over 320km/h, it rips from standstill to 100km/h in 3.9 seconds and demolishes the standing quarter in 11.5 seconds.

That's not just PERFORMANCE – it's fearsome.

The Hulme is lighter, so it's fair to expect that the acceleration figures will be shortened measurably.

Certainly the couple of times when I made sure the coast was clear front and back and gave the Hulme a bootful, my eyes started to water!

We arrived back at the Freemantle house after a 90 minute drive in the car not feeling in the slightest battered and bruised, nor buffeted nearly to death by a tiresome windstorm. In fact, if Jock had said those immortal words from Goodbye Pork Pie – "let's take her to Invercargill" – we'd have been out over the Bombays before he could have changed his mind.

I was impressed more by the Hulme than I had expected to be. I've driven plenty of other one-off cars. Inevitably they have been compromised in every way. They rode like a concrete block, the gearchange was difficult, the steering was lumpy, wouldn't idle, impossible to get off the line cleanly, had more rattles than a nursery, or you had to have the flexibility of a Rubic Cube to get into the cockpit.

But the Hulme experience was almost seamless. There are some finishing off touches, including fitting new radiators to cure a tendency to overheat in sustained traffic, but this is already a well-sorted car that's very close to taking to the market.

The fact that the project has reached this stage is due only to one thing – the total belief in "it can be done" by Jock Freemantle. He has literally climbed a mountain against impossible odds.

It's a sensational looking piece of car – I like it better in F1 closed coupe form, but as a weapon for road or track use by someone who can afford such luxuries – and there are plenty of people in that category – the Hulme CanAm has plenty of potential. □

