

# stuff

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JOHN NICHOLSON/  
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Back in the '80s, Alex McDonald's son Stuart decided after leaving school that he wanted to design cars. So he went to the GM plant in Trentham, and asked if they had any jobs like that.

The GM person said if Stuart wanted to design cars, he should probably work for his dad, as Alex McDonald was one of the only people designing and building their own line of commercial cars in New Zealand.

In fact, his Almac kitset cars have been around for 25 years, coming out of his factory in Trentham, and they've been sold around New Zealand and overseas.

Not that he's out to rival Toyota or Ford - Alex McDonald is just happy supplying cars he's designed, to people who are happy to build them themselves.

He's had a number of hits, and the odd miss with the models he's created.

Creating a kit car involves taking a donor car such as a Ford Cortina (which was the basis for his Sabre sports car), or a Mazda MX5, which provides the suspension, wiring and engine for the latest design, the ClubSprint XL. Almac then provides the chassis, the body, and the build manual. From then it's up to the buyer to put it all together - with as much help as they need from Mr McDonald.

He says anybody who wants to put together their own car is automatically, and probably manually as well, a special breed - someone who wants a project they can be proud of.

"It's an achievement to build something."

Mr McDonald was born in Gateshead, England, in 1937 and brought up in Newcastle upon Tyne. He was always a practical kid. He bought a chassis after he left school and planned to do something with it but his dad died and the family moved into a flat without a garage so it had to go.



His next attempt was in 1960 when he bought a kit car at a show in London.

"It was pretty basic - just an outer shell - and you had to do everything yourself like make the inner guards . . . you name it, it had to be done."

It was all made from fibreglass which was a bit of a wonder material at the time.

"It had just been developed in the 1950s and people were making quite nice car bodies which either fitted the Austin 7 or Ford 10 chassis."

Professionally he trained as an engineer at Vickers-Armstrongs armaments manufacturer where he did his apprenticeship as a fitter and turner, then trained at night school to go into the drawing office, eventually becoming a mechanical engineer.

He first met Diana, who became his wife, at a dance. Her dad worked at Dunlop in Upper Hutt and was posted to England to look at the company's operations there. Diana went with him and when her dad returned, she stayed on, meeting Alex at the aforementioned dance.

He says it was an experience with his homebuilt car that probably showed she was the woman for him.

They were driving in the Yorkshire Dales in his car when the suspension broke and the car "ploughed into the road".

"She just sat on the fence for three or four hours while I went to a local village and saw the guy who fixed the local tractors. I found something like the bottom ball joint that almost matched, fixed it and we got home.

"I think that was one of the reasons we ended up getting married, because any other girl would've said 'this is enough'."

They married in England and moved to Upper Hutt in 1967 where, funnily enough, Mr McDonald landed a job at Dunlops, in Upper Hutt, where he did a few jobs, ending up in the drawing office.

Working there was good training when it came to designing his cars, Mr McDonald says.

One of the big things with kit cars is working out how to take the body of the donor car apart and then reassemble all the suspension, wiring, the chassis, body and the engine.

At his time at Dunlops the company was importing second-hand factory equipment and adapting it to the local conditions. He says it was good for the imagination to work out where everything would go and how it fitted together.

In 1971 he started up Almac Plastics at a factory in Nicolaus St, in Upper Hutt, creating products with fibreglass. He was self-taught in its use but he says he'd done a lot of fibreglassing with his cars, including making a hard top for an MG Midget that he brought out with him.

Some of his early big sellers were fish ponds and planters and through the years he's made consoles for Te Papa, props for TV commercials, and panels for the National Library in Molesworth St.

His first attempt at making a kit car was one based on a Volkswagen that he started in the mid 70s, but he never finished it.

He says there is a huge amount of work that goes into developing a car, and at the time it was more important to put food on the table for the family.

But the itch was there, and he came up with the idea for the Cobra in the 1980s. It was based on the classic British 1950s sports car and with help from some photos, and a die-cast metal model, he created a popular version of the original.

"Graham Berry, who was known for his hot rods and drag cars, came up and wanted one so we did a deal where he made the steel work and I did the fibreglass work."

They got one ready for the 1984 Hot Rod Show in Masterton, which created a bit of a buzz. About 16 kits sold in the first year, nine the second, and then it took off.

"We've sold about 250 of them now, averaging about 10 a year."

The last year sales have been slow, probably a combination of a poor economy and a saturated market for the style of car.

He says even with a number of the cars being sold overseas, in a population of four million people there's a limited market for people who want a Cobra-styled car, and who also want to assemble it themselves. Plus all up the cost of a Cobra is about \$50,000-\$60,000, due to some exotic bits required including an engine from a Corvette.

Another of his cars that is now on the roads is the Almac Sabre, which is more of a modern sports car, and was based on a Ford Cortina donor car.

The first one was on the road by 1994 but the sales of it were derailed by the opening up of car imports.

"That was when the Japanese invasion started and you could buy quite good cars quite cheaply."

For people who wanted a cheapish sports car, an imported Mazda MX5 undercut the kits.

"The whole of the motor industry changed then . . . we sold about 16 altogether."

Undeterred, Mr McDonald carried on. His latest product is the ClubSprint XL which is based on the Lotus 7. A bit ironically, he used the MX5 as the donor car for it.

"We use all the mechanicals from it while we make the chassis, the brackets and the panels so its basically just a bolt- together kit."

Eight of the XLs have been sold, with three already on the road. And while the XL is designed to be made "by anyone who can hold a spanner" in about 300-400 hours, Mr McDonald says there are a few limiting factors in building a car at home.

"The main one is probably budget. Then there's the need for the room to do it, and then they need the family's backing."

He says it's particularly useful to have an understanding partner who doesn't mind

their spouse spending evenings and weekends under, over and inside a car taking shape inside the garage.

Cost-wise, the XL costs about \$25,000, which includes the donor MX5. (The MX5 was greatly modified after 2005 which means the later models can't be used.) How old the donor car is will affect the final price, but he says the performance of the XL is much better than the MX5. That's mainly due to being about two thirds of the weight. Top speed is still about 180kmh, he says, but the acceleration is a lot more.

Almac is still building other products in fibreglass as well as turning out the kit cars. Mainly because it's not a great way to get rich.

"From an accountant's point of view you're wasting your time," he says.

"From my point of view it's a hobby, and developing it has been the hobby side."

But it's no mean feat in New Zealand to get your name on the badge of your own line of cars.

One of Mr McDonald's customers was in New Plymouth in his car when a bloke wandered over to have a look at the car.

He had a look at the badge on it. "Is it a genuine Almac?"

That makes Mr McDonald laugh. A lot.

For more information go to:

[almac.co.nz](http://almac.co.nz)