

Driving down memory lane in a clapped-out HQ

In 1987, a new car cost just under half the price of a tidy house in Hamilton. Most young people drove "old dingers". Wintec journalism student Anthony Kelly was one of them, but he says it wasn't all bad.

AH, 1987. I was there, settling into working life and getting around in my not-so-trusty HQ Holden. Cars back then were solid. My old Kingswood just kept going, even though it was a pile of rust held together with bog and grey primer. The gear linkage had a habit of popping out at traffic lights and I had to train my girlfriend to leap out, open the bonnet and bash it back into place with a spanner. No wonder I had the car longer than the girl.

Cars were expensive. The asking price for a new Ford Falcon, Toyota Corolla or Mitsubishi Sigma was more than \$30,000. A Nissan Sunny or Honda City cost just under \$20,000. Those prices might not seem too bad, but in 1987, \$70,000 would buy a pretty nice Hamilton house.

"New cars were a real stretch," recalls Hamilton car salesman Bernie Krippner. He was selling cars then too, and driving a Sigma GSR Turbo. "People were buying plenty, though."

Second-hand vehicles weren't much cheaper. Used imports were entering the market but a late model still cost about \$20,000. Even tidy five-to-10-year-old cars cost \$5000 to \$15,000 - out of the reach of young fellas like me, still unsure what the term "savings habit" meant. Many had to settle for rusty, generation-old Zephyrs and Morris Minors.

In 1987, the public was getting fed up. "New Zealanders pay prices little short of outrageous by world standards for cars," thundered a February Waikato Times editorial. "The main reason for this is the hefty rake-off the Government takes."

And the rake-off was indeed hefty. In June the Waikato Times quoted Mitsubishi as saying that scrapping the non-GST taxes and duties on a \$23,000 car would lower the window price to \$16,500.

But Kiwis are ingenious and many found a way to beat the system. Amendments to used car import rules in 1986 exempted the general public from the taxes and duties imposed on licensed car dealers. Kiwis found they could travel overseas and bring back a used car as "baggage". The savings covered the cost of the trip. The practice became so popular that travel agents organised "car tour" packages.

The Government soon clamped down on the practice but not before a lot of people had made a lot of money, and thousands of Japanese cars had been driven off boats on to New Zealand roads. The change spelled the end of an era for the old Escorts, Vivas and Minis.

"Imports changed the whole industry," says Krippner. "Prices came right down. Older cars which needed working on all the time became virtually worthless



PICTURE: Wintec student Nick Eggleston

JUST LIKE OLD TIMES: Anthony Kelly, a denim jacket and a Holden Kingswood. The jacket is his. The Kingswood is Ebbett Holden's.

Kiwi wallets weren't the only things to benefit from the shift to later-model imported cars - Kiwi bodies did too. The new cars had strange features like inertia seatbelts, impact bars and crush zones. Suddenly there was a chance you might actually survive an accident. From 1987 to 1995 the road toll almost halved from 795 to 405.

Police Inspector Leo Tooman was a senior traffic officer in 1987. He remembers chasing the bad guys in a black and white Mitsubishi V3000, which he describes as "a bloody good car".

He attributes today's lower road toll to safer vehicles, better road engineering and crash analysis and vastly improved at-accident medical care.

"We used to have far more head-on crashes," he says, "And we used to just chuck injured people into ambulances. A lot of them would die on the way to hospital. These days we start their treatment at the scene."

A change in the drink-driving culture also helped. In the 1980s, drink-driving was more common and more acceptable. But Transport Ministry blitzes were increasing and newspapers were full of Don't Drink and Drive ads and debate about how to reduce drink-driving. The message was starting to sink in.

"Drinking and driving was starting to die out," says Krippner. "There was still a 'work hard, play hard' attitude - but attitudes were definitely changing."

These days that message is everywhere. There are Students-Against-Drink-Driving groups and pub courtesy vans, and drink-drivers are pilloried. When I was young, my mates and I used to think nothing of downing lager and jumping behind the wheel. But I don't even drink now, let alone drive afterwards.

Mind you, I'm getting old - approaching 40 in a Mitsubishi Lancer. It has air conditioning and electric

overnight."

Case in point: my HQ. When it finally coughed to the side of the road and refused to continue, I asked my mate if he wanted it for parts. I settled for a dozen beers.

windows. It's safe and economical. And it never breaks down. But it's boring. I miss my old HQ.