

Charles Ware

Businessman who ran a Morris Minor restoration centre in Bath that became a mecca for enthusiasts around the world

When Viscount Linley purchased a split screen 1954 Morris Minor black convertible, it was driven to Kensington Palace by Charlie Ware, for whom the restoration of these cars had become as much a way of life as a means of earning a living. He had not known, however, that Diana, Princess of Wales was also an ardent enthusiast.

As Ware parked in front of the palace, the princess skipped down the steps, without any shoes, got into the passenger seat, stroked the leather trim and exclaimed, "What a beautiful car. Is this for David?" A story concerning the princess taking the wheel and giving her two young sons a drive is thought to be apocryphal. However, the appeal of restored Morris Minors to any number of famous people who purchased them from Ware's restoration centre in the West Country was unquestionably true.

He founded the Morris Minor Centre beneath a railway arch in Bath in 1976 on the principle that, given a plentiful supply of parts and some skilled labour, there was no reason why a "classic car" could not be a durable product. The Morris, with its curved wings and bonnet, had been a popular postwar family car: Ware appreciated that there was a sentimental attachment to it at a time when production was markedly diminishing. "People who own Morris Minors don't treat them like they would a modern car," he once said. "They treat them as they would a member of the family. They pamper them. They give



Ware with a 1967 convertible Morris Minor on the Royal Crescent in Bath

them all they need to stay in good condition. They even give them names."

He rescued numerous models from scrapyards and garages before fully restoring them. The centre, which moved to Bristol, attracted owners and enthusiasts from all over the world. In 2004 he estimated there were still about 65,000 Morris Minors on British roads.

Ware had already come to prominence restoring property in the 1960s in Islington and Camden, in London, where he and others saved hundreds of Victorian terraces from demolition. He then turned his attention to Bath and its "sacking" by the city's council and

planners who appeared to have no concept of its heritage. Providing the finance for a consortium of forward-thinking architects, he ensured that Kingsmead Square in the heart of the city would be preserved.

Ware bought the Cleveland Hotel in Pulteney Street and on one occasion threw a weekend festival party for artists and hippies, who rewarded his generosity by stealing his records. He also acted as guarantor and the provider of a van for a little-known group called Roxy Music — whom he thought would never make the grade. They returned the favour by playing a benefit

concert when Ware took over the Bath Theatre Royal as one of the first unsubsidised theatres in the country. His vision was to create a hub of cafés and artists' studios. "At one time, it seemed as if everybody in Bath had worked for him," his son, Zac, said.

Charles Fabian Ware was born in Edinburgh, the son of artists who were conscientious objectors during the Second World War. Educated at a Rudolf Steiner School, then at Frensham Heights in Surrey — he could choose his own curriculum — and at the Slade School of Art, he did National Service in Cyprus, where he was instructed to "do something useful" such as painting the scoreboard on the army's cricket ground. His grandfather was Major General Fabian Ware, who founded the War Graves Commission.

At the Slade, he met his first wife, Helen Robinson; they were married in 1960 and had a son, Daniel, who lectures at Oxford Brookes University, but the relationship did not last. When teaching art at Corsham College in the mid-1960s — a contemporary was the abstract painter Howard Hodgkin — Ware met Veronica "Bunny" Sheppard, and they were married in 1967. They had two boys: Zac, who inherited the Morris Minor Centre and plays electric guitar with the Proclaimers, and Barnaby, who is a gardener. Once again, the marriage was dissolved and, in 1995, he married Helena Harding, who survives him; the couple had a

daughter, Miriam, who is a musician.

Ware was declared bankrupt in 1975 after the property market crashed. His love of parties and friendship with Roxy Music — Bryan Ferry called him "the band's great benefactor" — earned him the label of "Champagne Charlie" in the *News of the World*. However, his finances recovered after he founded the Morris Minor Centre.

He also created of the Durable Car Company in Sri Lanka where low-cost panels for Morris Minors were hand-made and shipped to Bath in crates. "I went to Sri Lanka on holiday to look at

He helped to set up a centre for making Morris Minor parts in Sri Lanka

Morris Minors, because there are about 20,000 of them still in use on the island," he said. "I met this chap who was keen to start a business." Soon it employed 60 people.

He claimed he never wished to be a millionaire again. "Money puts a ju-ju on everything — business, friendship, even the way people react in the street." Of the enduring appeal of the Morris Minor, he was far more positive. "It is a strange, magical car."

Charles Ware, restorer, was born on November 8, 1935. He died on July 4, 2015, aged 79