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A major attraction
Morris Minors come to Bristol

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Charlie Ware the wheel of a restored Morris Minor 1000 at his Morris Minor Centre

Pictures by Nigel Tailby

A driving passion

It was 1976 and Bath property tycoon Charlie Ware's empire had crumbled. After years of tireless work restoring dilapidated buildings back to their original Georgian prime, Charlie had grafted his way up to Millionaire's Row.

His personal portfolio boasted a house in the Royal Crescent. He even owned the Georgian city's Theatre Royal. But it took just one banking crash to wipe out all his investments.

While lesser men would have held their hands up and called it a day, Charlie picked himself up, brushed himself down, and looked for his next challenge.

"I had been a multi-millionaire before I lost everything in that banking crisis," he says. "But I had always had a passion for restoration — I was championing restoration before it was trendy,

After going bankrupt in the Seventies, Charlie Ware picked himself up and created Bath's famous Morris Minor Centre which, after 30 years, has now moved to Bristol. **David Clensy** talks to the owner about why its all happened

when they were still knocking Georgian terraces down in Bath. I'd never been in it for the money alone.

"So I'd lost it all in a moment, but I wasn't going to let that stop me restoring things. I didn't have the collateral to invest in another property, but I had enough to buy a few old Morris Minors.

"I remember looking at the cars, which were

already classics, and thinking, these need preserving as much as the buildings do. The Morris was already becoming an icon. They'd finished production five years earlier and I felt, even then, that we'd never see their like again."

The rest has become as much a part of Bath's history as the Roman baths or the Georgian Circus. The Charles Ware Morris Minor Centre

reached iconic status itself during its 30 years in the city.

Morris Minor owners visited from all around the world to get hold of much-needed parts, arrange refits for their pride and joy or simply to quiz Charlie and his 15 employees about their beloved motors.

But earlier this year, Charlie took the decision to pack the entire outfit into the back of a few Morris Explorers and relocate to an industrial estate in Brislington.

"It was a difficult decision," the 71-year-old says. "But we were running out of space at our Bath premises, and the cost of land in Bath made it impossible to expand. Coming over to Bristol means we can afford much more space so we can work on more cars.

"We'd almost become a tourist attraction in

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Charlie Ware in his showroom

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I didn't have the collateral to invest in property, but I had enough to buy a few old Morris Minors



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Bath. Morris Minor fans who were visiting the city would come along just to look at the cars.

"We don't get that in Brislington, but customers who are serious about buying a Morris or who want work done on their car are perfectly happy to drive a few miles down the road. And, of course, we have lots of customers in Bristol who are delighted that we're now on their doorstep.

"So far, since the move, business seems to be good."

Stepping into the new showroom is a surreal experience. For a petrolhead or a lover of iconic design, it's as close as you can get to stepping back in time.

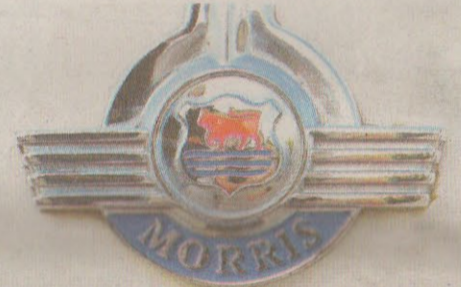
You're met with the sight of rows of gleaming Morris Minors smiling at you, looking much as they must have done when they were new off the production line back in the Fifties.

With their polished bottle-nosed bonnets and wide-eyed innocent-looking head lamps, they remain one of the most endearing motor cars on the road.

"People love them," Charlie says. "They've become a part of the British landscape. We have customers who have owned the same car for 40 years. They've never driven another car and couldn't imagine life without their Morris.

"They become part of the family. When I go to somebody's house to buy their Morris from them, I feel more like a vet than a motor dealer. 'You will take care of him?' they say, or 'you will find him a good home?'

"And you can be sure every Morris Minor



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owner has named their car. It really is like part of the family. Even when they bring their car in for us to work on, they make me feel like a consultant surgeon talking to the next of kin before a major op."

The Morris Minor was the first major creation of designer Sir Alec Issigonis, who later went on to world acclaim as the creator of another great British icon, the Mini.

Ahead of its 1948 launch, Morris had the working name of the Mosquito — an altogether too racy moniker for the gentle-spirited little motor, which was unveiled finally as the simple Morris Minor.

"The thing about the Morris Minor is that it was built to last," Charlie says as he leads the way into the workshop and points out a 1948 Minor currently being rebuilt by his team.

"Compared with modern cars, you might say it was over-engineered.

"Today's cars are built with designed obsolescence in mind. Companies want to ensure you'll be buying a new vehicle from them a few years down the line.

"These days it's just accepted that car owners lose a couple of thousand pounds in depreciation every year. But not with the Morris Minor — they hardly ever lose their value."

That's why people like the owners of the 1948 classic in Charlie's workshop are happy to pay £28,000 to have their pride and joy almost completely rebuilt for a new century.

"That's an exceptional rebuild," he says. "Most people just bring their car in every few years to have bits and pieces seen to. But we can, in effect, build a brand new Morris Minor from spare parts.

"We can also improve upon the original, by adding modern adaptations that make it more economical. It can be compared with installing a central heating system into an old house — improving on what's already a brilliant design.

"For those with a more modest budget, we always have plenty of solid, working Morris Minors for around a couple of grand."

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Outside Charles Ware's Morris Minor Centre

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Panel beater
Mike Perrier

Some 'Minor' facts

- The revolutionary Morris Minor was launched at the Earls Court Motor Show on September 20, 1948.
- Early Morris Minors had a painted section in the centre of the bumpers to cover the widening of the production car from the prototypes.
- In 1961, the Morris Minor became the first British car to sell more than one million units. To commemorate this event, a limited edition of 350 two-door saloons were produced with distinctive lilac paintwork and a white interior.
- Van versions of the Morris 1000 were popular with the Post Office, and some of these had front wings made of rubber, in order to cope with the unforgiving busy situations in which they worked.
- John Surtees, the 1964 Formula One world champion, had an embarrassing driving moment when he ran out of petrol, halfway through his driving test, in his mother's Morris Minor. The examiner had to push him to the crest of a hill so he could coast down, then run around the corner to get some petrol. Amazingly, he still passed.

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Charlie sources parts from all over the world, with everything from Morris 1000 engines to the familiar ash wood estate frames of the Explorer class cars being crafted by confirmed experts in their trades.

"The body work for example is all handmade by skilled workers in Sri Lanka," Charlie says.

"There's a practicality to maintaining the one car throughout your life. In modern terminology, you could say it's a very green way to live. We call it durable car ownership — think of all the

waste being saved compared to people who discard half a dozen cars during the course of their lifetime."

"So despite the sentimental attachments owners have to their cars, Charlie believes owning a Morris is not simply an exercise in nostalgia, but a sensible choice.

"They're still good simple cars," he says. "They were ahead of their time. The suspension feels like something you'd get in a modern car, and the room you get in the back of an Explorer

is amazing — this was a car that was years ahead of any other estate. And it's not just older people driving them. We get a lot of customers buying Morris Minors as their first car after they've passed their driving test. I've no doubt that many of those 17-year-olds could still be driving their Morris Minors in another 60 years."

● Charles Ware's Morris Minor Centre, 20 Clothier Road, Brislington, Bristol; or log on to www.morrisminor.org.uk

