



**Charles Ware, founder of the Morris Minor Centre in Bath, whose joint venture in Sri Lanka - The Durable Car Company of Sri Lanka - began manufacturing Morris Minor components, largely by hand, when its new factory opened in the Southern Province of the island on 20th April 1991. Charlie is seen above with his own restored and up-dated Morris - The Mighty WAH!**

# MORRIS MINOR

**The Morris Minor Centre in Bath celebrates its fifteenth anniversary this year with the announcement that it is involved in a joint venture in Sri Lanka that has set up a factory producing Morris Minor components and, eventually, a new durable car. Charlie Ware looks back on the story of the Centre and the impact it has had on the survival of the Morris Minor**



**T**he Morris Minor Centre was started as a long term venture fifteen years ago, in 1976. At that time even the most optimistic members of the company would not have predicted that fifteen years later there would still be such a strong demand for Morris Minors that today we can be confident that they will be alive and active as reliable and durable alternatives to the modern cars well into the twenty-first century.

The principal reasons for the Minor's 'evergreen' appeal are first, the genius of its designer, Sir Alec Issigonis, whose friendly, very original motor car was well ahead of its time in engineering terms and has proven itself over the last forty years: second the quite remarkable brand loyalty of its users who understand the car's basic virtues better than anyone: third, the complete life support system available for its structural and mechanical maintenance which gives owners confidence to use their car fully on a daily basis in the knowledge that wherever they are, they won't lack spare parts: and fourth, the availability of retrofit improvement packages that keep the car up-to-date in its safety, performance and impact on the environment.

Without this total support system there would now be very few Minors left in daily use in the United Kingdom. On the occasion of our fifteenth birthday, we hope we will be forgiven for emphasising the radical contribution to the car's past and its future survival that the Morris Minor Centre in Bath has made.

In 1976, when we set up the business, the Morris Minor had been out of production for just five years and all normal mechanical maintenance parts and some body components were available off the shelf. Nevertheless the need for a specialist service was growing so as to ensure that there was no gap after the stock pile of new parts ran out and production tools were broken up.

After a year, the Centre was becoming well known around the world and quite frankly we were amazed by the enormous media attention our tiny business attracted, even more so by the positive response of Morris Minor owners.

In 1977, after an appearance on BBC TV's 'Pebble Mill at One', our switchboard was jammed and we received thousands of letters, many of them simply saying: "Thank God you exist and thank God we've found you." This confirmed our view that Morris Minors were more than just useful cars and we set about building a comprehensive parts inventory and mail order catalogue to meet the demand.

At first we only bought and sold Minors, but within two years we had a substantial restoration department as well.

#### At work in the restoration workshops



The late Seventies were the years when the classic car movement took off and specialist magazines like 'Classic Car' and 'Practical Classics' gathered huge readerships. A substantial number of motorists became bored with the largely uniform appearance of new cars and looked for more individual ones to use on a practical daily basis.

British Leyland Heritage, a subsidiary of the car manufacturers, was also building up a network of approved suppliers and restorers charged with helping to keep 'out of production' British Classics on the road. Our efforts in reviving the Morris Minor were rewarded when we became the first company in our field to be officially approved. (In the mid Eighties, however, we had to resign because Heritage could not technically approve our serious involvement with major improvements to the Minor, as the Heritage charter only covering the manufacture of replica/original parts.)

At this time the most frequent remark from typical Morris owners was 'I want my Morris to go on for ever.' They really meant it. This concentrated our efforts on developing a comprehensive range of structural replacement panels to deal with the most important aspects of restoring old cars, namely, solving the internal rust problems that afflict all pressed steel cars in damp climates like the British Isles.

This was a crucial contribution to the survival of the Minor. The cost of rebuilding



Restoring the woodwork on a Traveller

the chassis and lower body shell is, unfortunately, quite expensive and cannot be said to contribute to the appearance of a car, simply to its survival. It compares with dry rot in a house, but a house is a long term asset and so the high cost of eradication is considered an investment to protect use and value.

In the case of all but the most valuable old cars the eradication of rust was not seen as an economic option and Morris Minors were no exception. The scrapping rate accelerated as chassis rust inevitably increased through old age. MoT welding bills compounded each year and the sad owners gave up and regretfully allowed their old friends to go to the crusher. By 1980 the youngest Minor was over ten years old and the oldest over thirty; it looked as if the scrapping rate would become severe unless owners could be convinced that the cost of getting rid of the rust made economic sense.

Our solution to the problem was 'the durable car' programme. If a Morris Minor is considered as a durable asset like a house, it makes very good economic sense to cut out and replace - at once or to a staged programme - the structural panels which form the backbone of the car. If this logic is applied to all aspects of reconstruction and maintenance, the owner of a durable car saves at least one third of the overall annual motoring costs incurred by the owner of a modern financially depreciating car. Our book, published in 1982, Durable Car Ownership, has sold many thousands of copies and is used by owners of all types of classic cars and taken as bible by many of the forty Morris Minor specialists who have sprung up around the countryside in our wake.

Having established a clear rationale for 'durable car' ownership, we then tackled the development of a comprehensive range of mechanical improvements to keep pace with modern braking and handling. The Morris Minor had had no suspension improvements during its long production run and the standard drum brakes were last up-rated in the early 1960's. While the car was safe enough when driven carefully we needed to keep up with 'Eurocars'.

In 1985 we introduced our 'Series 3 specifications for the Eighties and Nineties' which, although not as sophisticated as our modern cars, do offer similar safety and performance and include disc brakes, up-rated suspension, larger and more powerful engine, five speed gear box and so on. We continue our research and development work to tackle other old fashioned aspects of the Minor which need improvement if the car is to be legally viable and desirable in the next century.

Fortunately, for all the cosmetic changes, the basic function of motor cars changes

very slowly. I am confident that one day, like the proverbial tortoise, we will pass the fast moving high-tech hare, the modern car industry, and will create a durable ecologically desirable new car firmly based on the Morris Minor - a car that meets the demands of sustainable growth which is the challenge of the Twenty First Century".

On 20th April 1991, Charlie Ware was in Sri Lanka when the new factory of The Durable Car Company of Sri Lanka was opened in Batadua, in the deep south of the island by the Chief Minister of the Southern Province.

The first stage of the factory will employ about fifty people. This number will rise to around two hundred and fifty when the second stage is operational in about a year. As part of the second stage, the Sri Lanka Government is funding a residential block to house about thirty apprentices and a training workshop, complete with a wide range of useful equipment. The third and fourth stages will become operational as the product range increases and within four years the factory will be employing about one thousand local people.

In five or six years Charles Ware hopes that the factory will be producing a new Durable Car and small commercial vehicles, based on the evergreen design of the Morris Minor. This will allow Sri Lanka to develop its own appropriate labour intensive car industry, eventually making it self sufficient in an important area of its transport system, thereby cutting down its need to spend hard earned currency on imported short life modern disposable vehicles.

Essentially a 'green' factory, about ninety percent of the manufacturing operations use the natural energy of people, so the amount of fossil based energy consumed by the factory is exceptionally low and there are no large power driven machines emitting noxious fumes into the atmosphere.

The wide variety of parts made in Sri Lanka will be exported to all countries that have working Morris Minors in daily use. The United Kingdom, where around eighty thousand are registered, will initially be the principal export market for highly finished components. At the same time the local markets of south East Asia will be developed, including, of course, Sri Lanka which has about twenty thousand Morris Minor taxis.

More than one hundred thousand active Minors are estimated to be on the roads in Asia alone. Parts of Africa still use them and New Zealand and Australia have modest numbers. It was a car that was widely exported all over the world during the fifties and sixties as the sun set on the British Empire. It is regarded in many of these countries as one of the few worthwhile legacies of their colonial past. ■