

MINOR ALTERATIONS

PAM DIXON meets Charles Ware
car dealer extraordinary

trying to smarten up worn woodwork with a quick coat of varnish which soon lets any rot come through again. He says that with experience you can even help to date a Traveller by looking at the wood, the presence or absence of lamination in one section, even the occurrence of knots in the timber.

The Morris Minor Centre is on a busy main road on the city outskirts, housed appropriately in a 19th century building which is ripe for sympathetic restoration. Appropriately because that was how Charles Ware made his money in the 60s and early 70s. He's trained at the Slade and taught art, but he began to feel that an art teacher wasn't really of much use. You can, he says, teach a few rudimentary things only. He bought a little house in Islington and did it up.

"People like the way I'd done it

up and I got vaguely into the building trade." He left teaching and became a full time builder, running his own small firm and doing most of the carpentry himself. They did small, high quality jobs and he got a fair insight into how money can be wasted on developments and conversions.

restoration

"I found that most architects are fairly lunatic," he says dispassionately. "They suggest things which are really quite unnecessary. I remember a kitchen and bathroom which cost £25,000. There were about 50 architect's drawings. The kitchen ended up with so many gadgets that there wasn't room to cut up a bit of garlic."

Applying the same waste of resources, he gradually moved into property,

buying houses, converting them into flats and selling.

"There were three of us - I was the chippy - running around in an old van. But I was always involved in restoration. With the good flats we always made sure that at least one room in each flat was an original room. Georgian or Victorian or whatever. We did some nice, very thorough jobs. That sort of work is expensive, but in the late 60s and early 70s people had the money and I did become enormously successful."

His involvement with Bath began about 1970. He'd bought a house there while teaching at the Bath Academy of Art and still used part of it for weekends. He realised that lots of Bath's beautiful streets seemed to be disappearing and felt that he must do something about it. By now he knew how the world works.

"Money is the thing that talks, particularly to councils and so on. Being interested isn't enough. The business was doing very well. I had the resources and so I got involved with buying stuff down here."

"We're talking in the office. There's no noticeable job demarcation - anyone who's near the phone takes the calls. There's a girls' calendar on the wall, and the phone calls are about second-hand prices, spares and delivery dates just like any other car outfit, but Charles Ware is talking

about architecture.

"The quality down here is quite different - better than the Nash terraces. It's 18th century Palladian, rare stuff." He says that he got a bit into Bath because it's a nice place. That meant involvement with the Preservation Trust, the Theatre Royal, helping community groups. Time moved swiftly. He was now running two businesses, one in Bath and one in London.

"It was an interesting experience," he says reflectively. "To be catapulted from being normally poor into being pretty rich. I suppose that if I'd sold up and cleared out in 1973 I'd have been worth about a million."

His lifestyle, he says, was never all that fantastic, but he came up against all sorts of conflicting ideologies.

"There was probably an element of guilt in this thing about money. My dad was a teacher, he was a pre-war pacifist, socialist, vegetarian. And there I was, involved with property, which of course became a dirty word in the 70s. But I felt that if you give good value and if your surplus money is recycled into useful activities then it's a reasonable way to do things. It makes using the money more interesting, but it's probably not the way to keep it."

Then the world changed. The property crash, general recession, the three day week. Everything came to a stop. He was still building, still had his programme. With two offices and a payroll of around 25 people, Charles Ware sold nothing at all for 18 months. He watched the cash flow gradually crumple. In March 1975 he went bankrupt.

"It's a weird business. They came into the house. They took everything away, virtually. At the end, I was doing a bit of car trading to pay the central heating bill, and they took away a couple of old Ford Cortinas and £100 out of my pocket and gave me back ten quid for the weekend."

paid off

But it's said without bitterness, and he adds, "When you go bankrupt your responsibility for that great load is taken off you. I think it's a very human thing and very much better than the old days when you were bunged in prison and couldn't get out. What I owed was monolithic sums of interest to banks and a lot of money to the revenue on personal tax. When I was going down I paid off all the tradesmen and debts to the small people. I thought, at least I've looked after that."

He was on social security for six weeks. He didn't like it, but he had a young family to think of.

"I thought at least it was the right use of the welfare state. If you're right down on your arse at least you

know that the kids are going to be fed."

Someone lent him a damp basement flat and a couple of people lent him £200 each. He was offered jobs in property, but he'd never liked going back to things and he'd always been his own boss.

"I thought, motor cars are the answer, really. I started going to auctions and buying little cars. I had a small yard and generally about four cars."

I remark that it sounds risky.

"Generally they were all right, because I applied my eye - at the Slade you had a very strong drawing course where you had to learn to draw things correctly and to observe. If you apply that to something like a car, you're talking about detailing, what the structure's like. The reason I made money in property is that I could see a terrible crumbling house and know exactly what it would look like when it was done up. You can apply these principles to anything."

"What I did have to learn was a bit about the internal combustion engine - for 15 years I'd always had a car that worked and was serviced for me. When you're in the motor trade you're looking at a Vauxhall Viva one minute, a Mini the next, and then an old Ford Anglia. You've got to decide which of these old dogs are structurally sound and work. You gradually build up detailed experience."

It didn't take him long to realise that big, shiny cars dropped quickly in value if anything went wrong.

"I tended to go for the economical cars - in a sense from my own experience, having seen the money just vanish - but also I thought that the only cars which were going to be important to people in the next few years are the ones which do 30-40 to the gallon and are cheap to maintain. I then found that among all the old bangers that I bought, if I had a Morris Minor it always started in the morning."

This impressed any prospective buyer, especially on a cold day.

"I thought I'd like to specialise in these a bit. They're nice friendly little cars."

He was intrigued, too, by the history of the Minor - a car designed in the 40s which was still running in the 70s with only small changes in the design. Production finally stopped in 1971. It's a car which people actually like, and what's more, says Charles Ware, it's something completely classless.

First move was to make sure of the availability of good stocks, both of cars and of spare parts. Spares are still in production because the demand has remained high, and there are plenty of Morris Minors around, too - they were used by everyone from the army and the police to the gas boards, apart from thousands of private buyers.

"But it all seemed a bit mad at the start," he says. "I used to go to the auctions and the other motor traders who knew about my previous incarnation used to wonder what I was doing poking around under old Morris Minors. I've found that



motor traders don't like looking under cars - they usually wear quite nice trousers - but I used to take a sort of prayer mat with me. If you look under a car you can see what it's really like."

He was drawn to the notion of dealing in a running "antique" which wouldn't be hit by obsolescence because it's no longer in the second-hand guides. The idea of specialising attracted him, too, because he realised that it was impossible to make an accurate judgement on any one of the 400 or so types of car which might turn up at an auction.

"You can't know enough about it. We are still learning about the Morris. You end up being able to cost your car within three to four per cent if you specialise sufficiently, so that you know by taking it round the block whether it's possible or not. You get a feel for it. Once this happens you get unrivalled specialist knowledge. It's like old buildings - I knew when I went into a house whether it was going to be trouble or not."

low return

From this groundwork came the Morris Minor Centre. It's been going as a business for two years and is just beginning to make a small profit. It has a mechanical workshop, body shop, and wood fitting and finishing shop. Finished cars go out at the rate of about five a week, and although the selling prices appear high the amount of work done means a low return on capital. Over 30 hours goes into each car on the mechanical side alone, without counting the paintwork and finishing.

"Until you arrive at your actual standard," says Charles Ware,

"you're in the process of investing time and experience finding out what really does need to be done in order to arrive at a product which is consistent."

He intends to stick to turning out a small number of cars, and foresees that the chief expansion of the business will be into the spare service which he will be setting up shortly. Morris Minor owners should then be able to get maintenance packages and all spares by post, rather than have to make endless phone calls or sit around in dealers' offices as we've all had to do waiting for an elusive hose or fan belt or whatever.

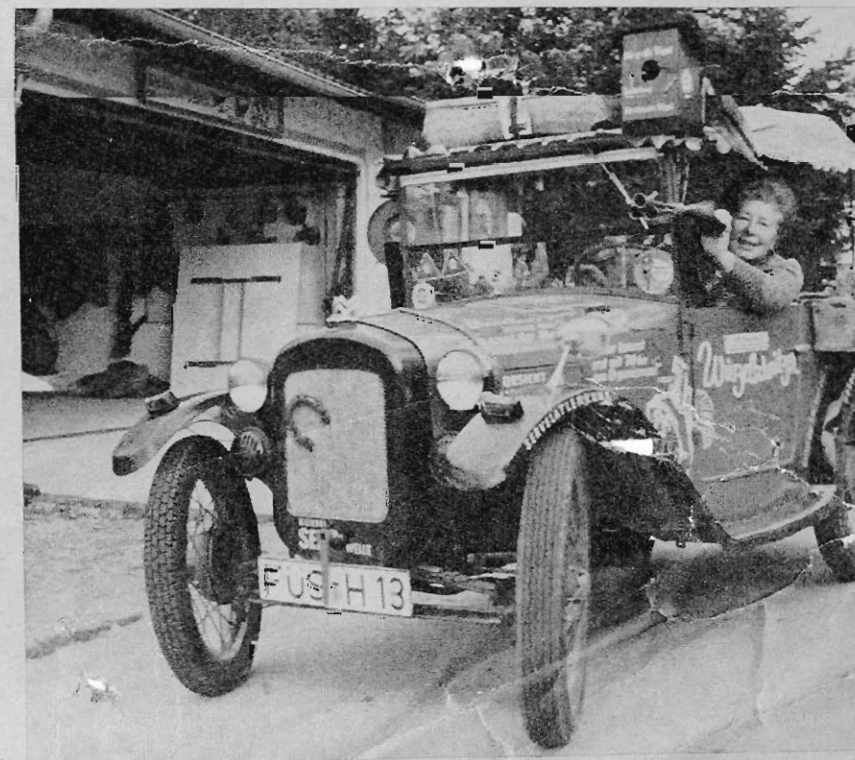
He makes it sound a logical progression, but his flair comes from an unusual mixture of abilities. The artist and conservationist can be hard headed when it comes to costs, percentages and profit margins.

"I suppose I'm not a bad dealer," he says. "I've had maybe a few duff cars, but I was never out for very much."

I remark on the handsome portico in front of the building, and he describes his plans for restoring the 19th century facade into a showroom and building a modern workshop at the back. Then a passing motorist stops to enquire about the cars, the external phone starts ringing, and I make myself scarce while Charles Ware starts talking about Morris Minors all over again.

For more details send SAE to the Morris Minor Centre, Avon House, Lower Bristol Road, Bath, Avon BA2 7ES. (Tel: Bath 215449)

An AA spokesman recommends that anyone buying a reconditioned/second-hand car should take a technical expert with them. Most dealers do very good jobs on the cars but it's better to be on the safe side. And do please remember that however beautiful the object you desire looks, you are still buying a second-hand car.



"The things that crop up on a long journey!"

Flower boxes and bird cages are among some of the paraphernalia on this 1928 Austin seen in Frankfurt, West Germany