

‘With electronic fuel injection and a catalytic converter there is no reason why the Morris shouldn’t go on for another 50 years’

Minor miracle keeps rolling along



Notebook

THESE is a “P” in the month and sales of new cars are booming. A bright red, spanking-new motor shot out of the BMW showroom on Bath’s Lower Bristol Road last Thursday, August 1, in a cloud of tyre-rubber. Its executive owner seemed ecstatic with his new registration. But past the Mitsubishi franchise the scene changed to something much more agreeable.

A flock of Morris Minors nestled under a railway embankment. A fashionably dressed woman in dark glasses was eyeing a pretty white convertible.

Two older customers were bowling off into the rolling countryside, test-driving a gondola-black saloon made when Winston Churchill was Prime Minister. It would be a 20th-birthday present for their student son.

On the forecourt a retired colonel with a charming Celia Johnson wife dithered over a rebuilt Morris Traveller with its half-timbered wooden frame, looking as cosy as a Cotswold cottage. “Let’s have it,” he said. She was in raptures. You can buy the past here, and it works.

New-car day at the Morris Minor Centre had a resonance all its own. They are remaking motor cars for the millennium here out of the debris of the mid-century. Between 1948 and 1971 more than a million were made in Cowley, Oxford. They were buzzy, slow and loveable. Now for £8,000 you can buy a Morris Minor that outpaces an MGB. For £12,500 you can buy one looking as if it has just come off a factory production line.

They make chassis parts by hand on an old tea plantation in Sri Lanka, where thousands of Minors imported from Britain still chug on as taxis under the tropical palms.

Charles Ware, the 59-year-old founder of the splendid Bath enterprise, has a dream that brand-new cars could be built on the island. Though he was on holiday in France last week, he normally spends much of his time touring Britain in a BMW (better than a Minor for long distances, it was explained) with a trailer on tow, finding Morris in barns and scrapyards as the feed-stock for the rebuild business.

Mr Ware has an exotic story. He was a property developer and pop-star manager who went bust in the 1970s. He started a “budget car” business — offering loveable crocks for new punters. “Only Morris Minors would start in the morning.” He knew he was on to some-



Traveller 2000 Morris Minor Centre mechanic Jon Brooks delights in test-driving remanufactured versions of the quintessential Sixties British car around the quaint streets of Bath Photograph: John Robertson

thing — and the business has blossomed.

Our “P-Reg” Minor, driven in head-turning pomp to Bath’s Royal Crescent — was a chimera. It was a total rebuild of a 1960s car destined for a customer in Jersey — but looked showroom fresh. Inside it had the promising smell of new vinyl. “Can you still buy them?” asked a woman bound for a date with a P-Reg Mégane at a Renault garage. “I would love one of those.” Soon she may be in luck.

“Charlie Ware thinks that if you want something badly enough, it can be done,” said Tim Brennan, 42, deputy managing director, who has been with the company since it was founded 20 years ago. “We gasped when he said he was going to set up a business in Sri Lanka — and said

it was completely mad. But he was right — they can bash metal brilliantly and make low runs of bespoke components that would be completely uneconomic for a British engineering company.”

The telex chattered to Mr Dhanapala Samaraskara, manager of the Durable Car Company in Galle, Sri Lanka — set up in 1991 as a joint venture with the Bath business. Two dozen front floorpans were required next month. They would be delivered on time, and more Morris Minors would be reborn.

In a scene repeated all over the country last week, the car salesman was nudging customers towards signing a cheque — but in Mr Brennan’s office above the restoration shop, the deal-closing technique was unconven-



In the season of P-registration plate fever, Christy Campbell meets the men making Morris Minors for the millennium

“We don’t want the car to go too fast,” said Mr Davies-Gay, a retired teacher from Wales, “and we’re in no real rush to take delivery.” He was buying a car for his son, a 1954 four-door Series II saloon.

The Archbishop of Canterbury used to venture out of Lambeth Palace in an identical car. Why should a young man want to potter round like Donald Coggan on an episcopal visit, waving his semaphore indicators — when the same money would buy a C-Reg bird-puller? “He loves classic cars,” said his father. “When I was a student I had a Rover 12. We had lots of fun in that.”

It was like a consultation with a Harley Street doctor. “I recommend fitting disc brakes and a power servo — and an alternator to power the halogen headlights and a new Japanese radio,” said the salesman. “How about Kenwood speakers in the front kicker plates: we strongly recommend those.” The options clocked up. The deposit cheque was signed. Done for £4,455.

In the yard outside the trimming bay there was something more exotic. Ian Mitchell, 57, engineering manager, showed me a “Series III” — a Morris Minor reworked to hold its own in the fast lane. “This is the car that British Leyland

should have built 25 years ago: they killed the Minor in 1971 and built the Marina instead.”

The self-taught engineer who “productionised” the car said: “There is a magic moment when it does 110 mph.” You can go to Bath and order one with beefed-up brakes, a go-fast Metro-derived engine and a five-speed Toyota Corolla gearbox. It handles beautifully and goes like the clappers — still with that after-buzz exhaust note which heralds the imminent arrival of a district nurse.

“Above a hundred miles an hour, wind-noise, exhaust, everything goes quiet — you feel like you’re flying. I know I used to test it on the way home,” said Mr Mitchell.

HE HAS a vision — a Series IV: “The braking is already state-of-the-art — we could put a Rover-built K-series engine into it — with electronically controlled fuel injection and a catalytic converter. It would be as economical, fuel-efficient and fast as any other car on offer. There is no reason why the Minor shouldn’t go on for another 50 years.”

There are 35,000 Minors registered with the DVLA in Britain, with plenty more sitting in fields and garages.

Customers have come back over two decades to keep their Minors fettled. The company should run and run.

But the go-faster rebuild business is where purists get difficult. Don’t muck about with Minors, they say, because you are trampling on a dream. The smiley-faced car is still part of the British landscape. Yet its story is of a great British failure.

The car was launched in 1948, at the Amsterdam Motor Show, along with the Jaguar XK120 and the Land Rover in the heroic, export-or-die days of British post-war reconstruction. But the beastly Volkswagen Beetle lay in the ruins of Wolfsburg to be reborn, under blundering British political patronage, as the true world car of the century — 20 million built to the Minor’s 1-2 mil-

lion. The Beetle is still built by the bucket-load in Mexico with an engine that runs on sugar-cane alcohol.

British troops based in Belize still drive them across the border, load them on to Hercules transports and fly them to Britain to find eager customers. The Volkswagen remains triumphant. In Bath they sell about four top-of-the-range rebuilt Morris Minor Series IIIs a month. The Germans won.

Once there was a stigma attached to buying a foreign car. Only the daring would buy a Renault Dauphine or a Borgward Isabella. But the Morris Minor’s designer, the Smyrna-born Alec Issigonis, injected a true note of global engineering excellence into the Morris Minor. The car conquered the old empire, but not the world. His boss,

Lord Nuffield, said it looked like a “poached egg”.

As a young reporter who drove a Morris Minor (a 1949 convertible bought for £50), I sought out Sir Alec in his suburban home in Edgbaston on the 50th anniversary of the launch — and a decade before his death at 81. He was brilliant and grumpy. “Modern cars are ghastly,” he said — “designed by committee. I designed the Minor all by myself.”

His retirement present from British Leyland was a giant Meccano set and a small development budget. He built a steam-powered Mini in his garage with a rubber-band continuously variable transmission. “It will go backwards at 100mph,” he told me. The management declined to put it into production.