



■ DRIVING FORCE: Charlie Ware with his 'Moggies'

PICTURES: Kevin Bates

Minors in a major league

As the shine on the P-reg motors still catches the eye, business is booming at a Bath business specialising in one of Britain's most famous cars. Chronicle correspondent Pip Larkham reports

CHARLIE Ware was seriously down on his luck.

Once one of the most comfortably-off people in Bath, Charlie was living in a condemned basement and drawing benefit.

But he was not a man to stay down for long.

Within months he was laying the foundations for a world-famous business simply by following a big passion for a little car — the Morris Minor.

Charlie is the proud owner of Charlie Ware's Morris Minor Centre which is currently sited at Avon House in Lower Bristol Road.

The centre was set up by Charlie in 1976 after the bottom fell out of the property market and his world leaving him penniless with huge debts.

It was then that he drifted into the world of second hand car auctions. Renovations had always been his forte and he was renowned for breathing new life into many of the Georgian buildings in the city's Kingsmead Square.

The idea of buying car parts and restoring old vehicles to their prime condition was therefore not a huge leap of imagination. Charlie says he was always 'hands on' and loved to re-do and re-build.

It was in his nature and still is.

He said: "In the mid-70s, I was involved with saving old buildings. I've always been interested in the idea that you don't junk things that are old. You re-use them, conserve them."

There is clearly something special about the Morris Minor. Structurally strong and

simple with an individual, yet basic, design, they're classic cars for normal people who simply want to get from A to B, says Charlie. "Morris Minor owners often keep their cars for 40 years or more. They are in love with the classic and familiar design and they never fail to start in the cold, damp or the snow."

That reliability of the car — which was in production from 1948 to 1971 — has been the key to success in the centre's development.

Charlie built his firm on the instincts of

"It was then I began to advise taxi drivers on the maintenance of their vehicles."

By 1990 Charlie and Samara had put their heads together to become partners in an overseas business venture.

A factory was soon opened in Sri Lanka, building components and parts by hand for around 20,000 Morris Minor taxis. Even today, the factory employs about 60 people.

In this country, too, Bath's Morris Minor Centre soon became a major attraction. Charlie explains: "When we began we

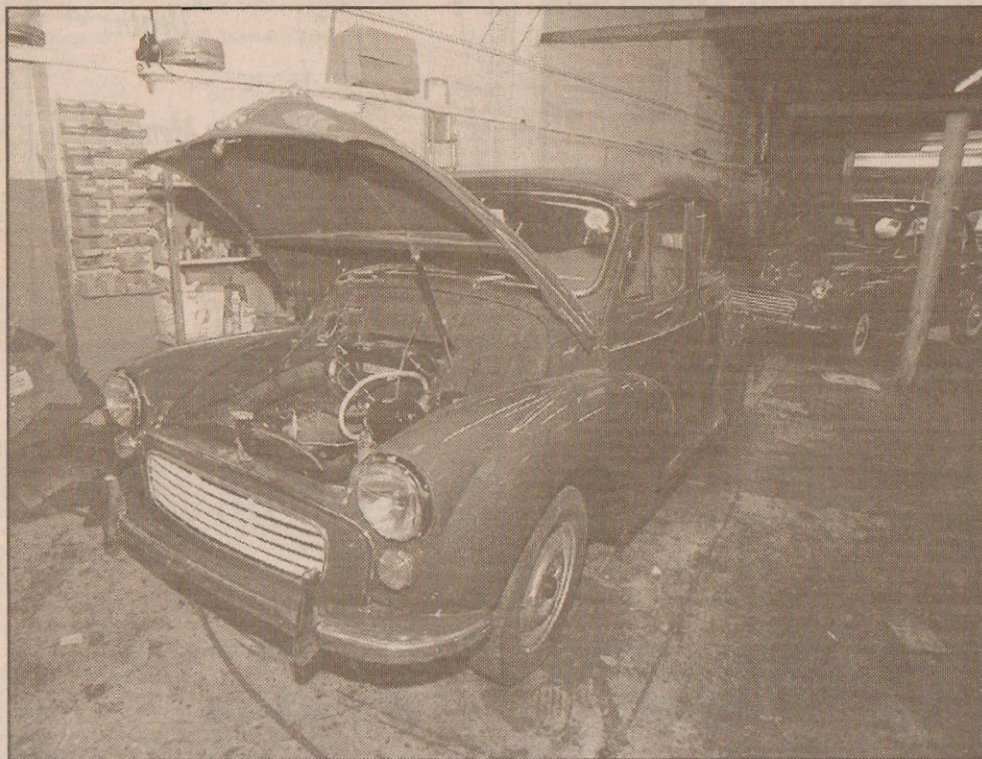
He said: "I remember taking five cars up to the studios at Pebble Mill and after the show, their switchboard was jammed. Added to that I received about five or six thousand letters from people who were saying things like: 'Thank God, you're here! Where have you been?'"

It seemed the country was waiting for Charlie Ware and his passion for the Morris. Publicity became increasingly extensive, with articles in more than 32 British publications, 44 radio and TV appearances, plus media coverage from all over the globe. Everyone from The Sun to Blue Peter was interested in the Morris Minor love affair.

Was Charlie surprised? The entrepreneur smiles, reclines in his chair and gazes at the Morris cars outside his office window.

"Yes," he muses. "I never expected the amount of publicity or the fact that the business would last over 20 years."

His business has just been granted permission to move from its Avon House



■ TICKING AWAY NICELY: Charlie's business has been going for over 20 years

both his head and his heart — and the belief that these cars would never let you down.

Word of his enterprise soon spread around the world and in 1987 Charlie received a call from a Samara Sekara in Sri Lanka.

He explained: "He'd read an article in The Guardian about the centre and at the time Morris Minors were the main make of taxis that were used in the country.

were the first centre of its kind. Now there are about 60 or 70 in this country which proves there's a real demand for this kind of business. It really does have a life of its own."

Demand was something Charlie became abundantly aware of following his first television appearance on BBC's Pebble Mill at One.

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base to new premises in Charlton Buildings, off the Lower Bristol Road.

Charlie plans to renovate and restore numbers six to eight of the derelict Georgian buildings which have been empty for over six years.

"We've always rented offices before but we're now thinking it would be better to buy. I know the Georgian buildings well and I'm a great believer in conservation.

"You don't have to pull things down. These buildings are unique — just like the Morris Minor. No-one wants them left to ruin."

He's also had to change the name of the firm by inserting his own in front of the previous company title after an approach from Rover officials keen to protect their historic car marques.

So with new name and new premises, the success story enters a new chapter and its 21st birthday celebrations next April couldn't have been timed more perfectly.

Charlie said: "The future of this place just goes on and on, it doesn't seem to stop."