

REMEMBER THE VOLKSWAGEN BEETLE? HILLMAN HUNTER? AND THE BELOVED MORRIS MINOR — SOMEWHERE IN THE WORLD THEY STILL SURVIVE

Those old cars that just refuse to die

by ANTHONY LEWIS

MOTERING CORRESPONDENT

THEY are the cars that most of us will have consigned to the scrapheap of nostalgia.

But somewhere in the world, from India to Africa and South America, they are still being built.

The Mexicans have never stopped making the Volkswagen Beetle, yet it was given the heave-ho by VW in Germany in 1978. This year Beetle production restarted in Brazil.

In Morocco and the Central African Republic, they still build the Peugeot 504 some 15 years after it was replaced in

Europe. The 504 and Paykans, which we know as the Hillman Hunter of the Seventies and Eighties, were also in full swing in Iran until war intervened. There are some 1.5 million Hunters on Iran's roads; the last ones were built in the UK in 1986.

Citroen's endearing, and enduring, 2CV continued to be built in Portugal for more than two years after production had stopped in Paris.

And of course that great hero of the Second World War, the Willys Jeep, is still around in various guises. Chrysler make it as the Wrangler and in India it's a Mahindra.

India also lays claim to the Morris

Oxford — it's still alive and well as the aptly named Ambassador.

Just off the Indian coast the people of Sri Lanka are busy turning out parts for that other stalwart of the Morris empire, the Minor.

Morris Minors are a major force in the world of cars that refuse to die. Charlie Ware who launched the Morris Minor Centre in Bath in 1976, reckons there are some 80,000 still on the roads in Britain

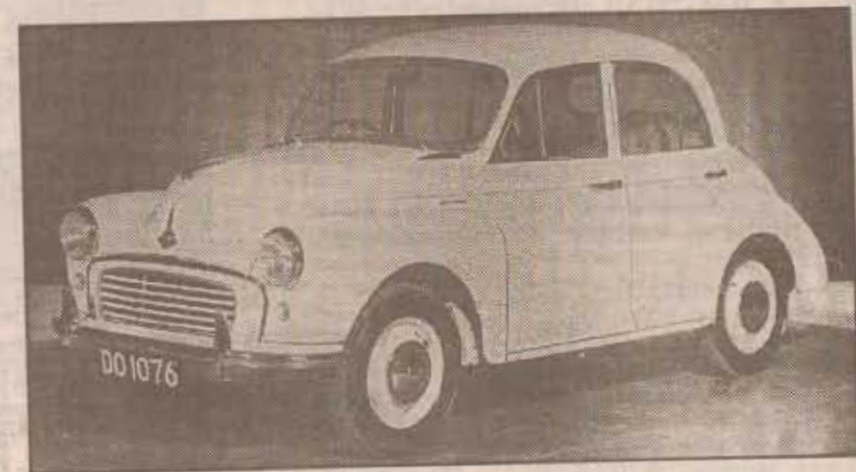
and at least 100,000 in India, Malaysia and Singapore.

His dream, announced two years ago and slowly becoming reality, is to start building new Minors again by 1995, using the factory in Sri Lanka.

The last Minor was built in Britain in 1971 after a production life that spanned almost a quarter of a century and at about the same time that Charles Ware was grabbing headlines as property restorer and re-developer 'Champagne Charlie' — he owned Bath's Theatre Royal and a sprawling country estate north of the city. His empire collapsed along with the property market in the mid-70s.

But that same philosophy of restore and rebuild is applied to cars. Charlie likens a car to an old house. So long as the outside is sound you can put in central heating to replace open fires and all manner of modern electrical gadgets to improve it.

So a thoroughly modern Minor might have anti-lock brakes, and at least disc brakes, a more powerful engine, even a diesel — and once the demand is there, catalytic converters to clean up the exhaust emissions. (An enthusiast in Germany has built a Minor



● The Hillman Hunter, left, soldiers on in Iran while, top right, the VW Beetle is still made in South America, and Morris Minors, far right, have just never gone away

'cat' but it would cost about £1,000 at the moment).

Not bad for a car that at its launch was described by William Morris, later Lord Nuffield, as looking like a poached egg. He refused to have anything to do with the Minor until production had passed the million mark.

Charlie Ware estimates that there is demand now for 2,000 new Minors a year. The factory in Sri Lanka — it's called The Durable Car Company — is currently producing 70 per cent of all body parts and

they are being used for restoration work.

The recession has put the timetable back for producing the complete durable car, but Charlie is still optimistic and delighted at the quality of the parts coming out of the island.

"We are investing in people, not automation. We're not exploiting the labour force but expanding it and giving them an alternative to artefacts and tourist trinkets." Pay rates for the Durable Car Company workers are about 15 per cent higher than general in Sri Lanka.

He is scornful, and almost incredulous, of the modern trend to build a car in as few hours as possible using as few people. He'd rather have 10,000 Sri Lankans build a new Minor in 1,000 hours than 1,000 workers build a Euro-box in 20 hours.

"By investing in people we don't have to tie up vast sums of money in advanced machine tools because a large pool of intelligent people is available to design, form, jig and finish well-made products that can be sold around the world at competitive prices."

Charlie Ware has seen 35-year-old Minors with 400,000 miles on the clock still going strong. Once production gets underway in Sri Lanka, his dream of the everlasting car comes a stage nearer.

But of course it is just possible that the Chinese might have the same idea. They're putting Citroen ZXs together from knockdown kits, slowly producing more and more parts themselves.

They call the ZX the Fukang — and who knows, long after Citroen replace the model, Fukangs will no doubt still be alive and well in Beijing.