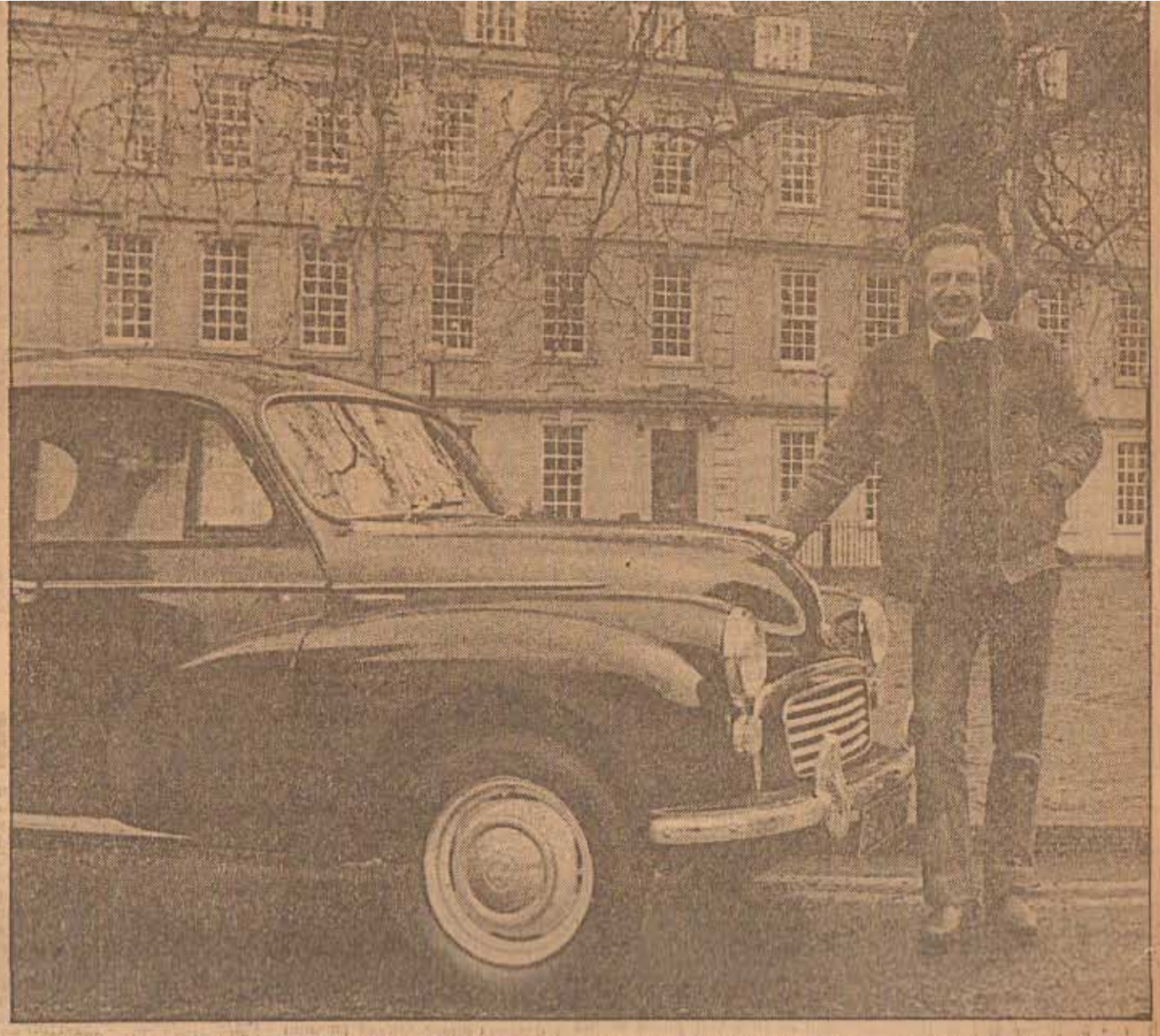
# Who wants to be a millionaire?

Champagne Charlie they called him in the swinging sixties, when he made a fairly eccentric million out of property (previous experience, nil). Then he lost it all, and with it most of his friends. Today he's apparently doing nicely out of Morris Minors (previous experience, also nil), though he describes himself as moderately skint, and determined to stay that way. Charles Ware is addicted to telling the tale of the Minors — but now, for the first time, he talks to Susan Thomas about the millions.



SHOULD you be tempted to make 1984 the year of your first million, don't bother. It's not worth it. Charles Ware, the ex-millionaire, can vouch for the fact that money corrupts and that the best things in life are, well, almost free.

Mr Ware is something of a celebrity. Some time between the end of the sixties and the start of the eighties, Champagne Charlie (title courtesy News of the World), one time artist, teacher, property developer, bankrupt, and now champion of the Morris Minor, slipped into place in the moth-eaten tapestry of West Country folk lore. Ask anyone.

*'If a house falls down when you thump it, it's structurally unsound.'*

"Charlie Ware?" said the taxi driver, as we swooshed through the streets of downtown, industrial Bath. "Made a fortune buying old houses and selling them to his rich friends. Last it all though. Now he's into Marises."

The locals view him with amused interest. "At it again," they say gleefully. "Finds these ol' cars in a vield, buys 'em up fer £50, takes them back to that Maris Minor Zentre, paintz them 'n zells them fer £1,000. Yew gaht to admire 'im for it."

How then does Mr Ware take being lumped in with Carver Doone and Uncle Tom Cobley? Philosophically! So long as he never makes another million, he doesn't care. "Money," he says wryly, "puts a ju-ju on everything — business, friendship, even the way people react in the street, and everyone wants something."

Charles Ware is slim, greying, slightly trendy, vaguely Lord Lichfield. He has the supreme confidence of a master craftsman or a cabinet minister, and the chipped knuckles of a brickie. He has seen it all — respectable poverty, unseemly wealth, and bankruptcy. Now he finds a certain satisfaction in being "moderately skint all the time."

We sat in his warm, scruffy office above the workshop, studied the maps showing the geographical distribution of all known Morris Minors, and listened to the fearful sound of cars in intensive care. And between rolling the thinnest cigarettes I have ever seen, he told me about the life and times of Charlie Ware and why he never wants to be rich again.

Actually he would have preferred to talk about Minors, the Driveable Durables, to be bought on a mortgage, steam cleaned twice yearly, treated for dry rot and bracket fungus and guaranteed to run forever at half the cost of yer average thin-tin gadabout. I had some difficulty steering him away from the subject. If you want to know about that or his plan to create 15,000 jobs and revolutionise the British car industry, you will have to read his book.

His parents were artists, he said, part of the Back to Nature movement which swept Europe in the Thirties. When war came his father, a pacifist, was directed into forestry. "We lived on agricultural wages and nettle soup and I went to a Rudolph Steiner school (harmony, the education of the whole being, and noncompetitiveness) an experience which left me with a feeling that everything in Life has Meaning and Purpose.

"After that, as you may imagine, National Service was a pretty surreal experience. A bit like finding yourself in the middle of an Evelyn Waugh novel with all those majors. I'd been to an independent school, you see, but hadn't played rugby, was incapable of drilling, and came out 58th of the 60 in our intake. I caused them considerable anguish."

He does a nice line in accents. "'Look hyah' they'd say, 'wart did your father do in the war?' When I told them he was a CO they were delighted. 'Jollay good, jollay good; they'd say, very encouraged. 'Well now ... emh, you're an artist ... errgh go and, emh, paint the crecket score board.'"

When the two years were up, he returned to London, the Slade and Art. But those were the Swinging Sixties. Friends were buying up Highbury and Islington like tomorrow might bring a recession and Charlie, with his artist's eye, total lack of experience, and his little hammer — "If it falls down when you thump it, it's structurally unsound" — was called in to advise, plan, and, finally, supervise the tasty refurbs.

"Suddenly I was in Property — one of the most singularly evil activities of the sixties. It started because I couldn't stand the council pulling down good simple artisan's houses — full of good simple artisans — and putting up rubbish. It was a complex moral thing because, of course, the artisans couldn't afford restored houses. But I felt the Conservation was the most important thing."

At the end of the decade he moved to Bath, started saving the Palladian beauties of that city, and became a millionaire. It was fun while it lasted.

What was it like, I asked, to own ocean going yachts, fast cars, and villas in exotic places? He looked a bit miffed. He wasn't that sort of millionaire, he said, but a hippy, with long hair and a taste for the arts.

"Owned the Theatre Royal for a while," he said, thoughtfully gazing out of the window (was he regretting past glories or analysing the timbre of the percussion in the body shop?). "Helped Roxy Music get started, brought in Joe Loss and the Ballet Rambert — Art for the People — that sort of thing."

Then there was this country estate. "There's something very primitive about owning acres and acres of land and trees . . . there was a walled garden too, all overgrown, but in a few months it was full of vegetables — organic of course — in neat rows like a child's story book. Mr MacGregor's garden." This time there was no doubt about the wist.

He never actually lived in the house, though — it just filled up with hippies.

His friends enjoyed his wealth with him. They crashed out all over the place, got loans to start up street theatre but got lost in the A to Z, borrowed expensive cine equipment to make socially responsible documentaries and forgot to return it, and offered ephemeral love and half-baked philosophy in return. "When the property market collapsed in 1975, most of them disappeared, along with everything else."

In retrospect he doesn't regret it. "Having tasted wealth I don't ever want to try it again," he said, rolling another pin slim fag. "There is an element to being rich that changes everything. Maybe if you're born with a silver spoon in your mouth, you don't notice. I did.

"For instance you meet someone, start talking, and get on wonderfully. 'This is great,' you think, and then you find they want something. Everybody wants to know you. I used to get invited to establishment dinner parties with Lord Lieutenants and Police Chiefs. I didn't go. Life might have been easier if I had."

As the other property boys crept back into the wainscot, Champagne Charlie hit rock bottom. He filed his own bankruptcy petition, paid off the small creditors, and looked for ways to start again. Few rich friends stood by him. Eventually he borrowed £500 and began the rounds of the car auctions with his hammer.

*'I beat hell out of the car, and if it doesn't fall apart, it's a fair bet.'*

"Dealers never go under a car," he explained. "They reckon they can tell the value of the thing from looking at it. I reckon they're frightened of getting their sheepskin jackets dirty.

"Knowing nothing about cars, I had to apply the principles I learnt in the building trade, beat hell out of it and if it doesn't fall apart it's a fair bet. It was often embarrassing.

"Everybody knew me. There I'd be, flat on my back, belting the underside of some old Mini and the auctioneer would announce — 'and over here we have Champagne Charlie with his hammer'."

It was the sixties all over again — the Conservation game. For Charlie had discovered the Morris Minor and realised that the car marts were full of investment snips — classic designs, structurally sound but in need of refurbishment. With 140,000 ageing MM's on the road, who knows how many stashed in back bedrooms, and a well established Morris Minor cult, it had to be a winner. The turnover for 1982 was £1.5 millions.

But is he in danger of being rich again? Definitely not. "Property is destructive. Once I owned a great many things — now I own nothing. I rent a cottage and I've still got an overdraft. We should reread Marx. He had a lot of interesting things to say about property. He created a valuable social and economic model."

He is attracted to politics, though not the politics of the Left. "It is consensus which is the most exciting area ... that's the pendulum point from which everyone else defines their position. It's not a soft centre at all but the place where the systems grind together. That's where it's all happening.

"I'd like to use economics ... help create a system which gives the average person what he wants, doing away with all the waste of energy and resources caused by the swings of the political pendulum." It sounds great and yet he is unsure. "I do worry, desperately, about being corrupted by politics."

A most reasonable anxiety. Even one who has escaped corruption as a property developer and second hand car salesman might be hard put to survive the moral minefields of politics.

*The book: Durable Car Ownership — A New Approach to low cost Motoring, published by the Morris Minor Centre, Avon House, Lower Bristol Road, Bath — £2.99.*