

# WEEKEND MOTORING

## A major rebirth for Minor

A car of the past is a model for the future. Peter Davis reports on joint-venture partners who share a commitment to sustainable growth.

**"T**HESE cars are incredibly durable. They are highly suitable for the rugged roads in this country and the people who own them are very loyal to them. I even used one as my wedding car," Anura Thenuwara, manager of the Durable Car Company Ltd in Sri Lanka, said. He was talking about the Morris Minor and the ambitious joint venture between England and Sri Lanka. The project is not simply a re-birth of a classic and very practical motor car. It is also an experiment in conservation, appropriate manufacturing technologies and Third World development issues.

The humble Morris Minor first rolled off the British post-war production lines in 1947. The story of the Morris is a story of sheer ingenuity and vision. William Morris (later Lord Nuffield) saw the need for a "family car" that would "sweep the world after World War II." The designer to heed his call was Alec Issigonis (later Sir Alec), a Turkish refugee to England who began by sweeping the garage floors at William Morris whilst tinkering his way to a position as a top mechanic.

In 1971, 24 years and two million Morris Minors later, the production ceased. New and cheaper technologies, coupled with corporate amalgamations, generated a demand for more sophisticated vehicles.

But in that short time the Morris Minor had successfully penetrated many markets around the world as it became Britain's answer to the Volkswagen.

Sri Lanka embraced the Minor with almost evangelical enthusiasm. The cars were imported by the colonial tea planters. They proved to be an ideal mode of transport along the narrow and often-steep roads that knit their way through the up-country plantations. The cars also became popular as taxis in the capital city of Colombo.

Now, as the Japanese car companies become global conglomerates and strengthen their grip on Third World markets, the Morris Minor is fighting back. In April this year,

after months of tests, the Durable Car Company began manufacturing panels for the Morris Minor. At this early stage the panels are all scheduled for export as spare parts to Britain where there are an estimated 100,000 Morris Minors still in action.

The plan is to eventually manufacture the entire car in Sri Lanka, not just for export, but also for domestic consumption.

In Sri Lanka there are said to be 20,000 Minors on the roads. And with much publicity surrounding the joint venture, the Durable Car Company has been inundated with calls from owners of defunct Morris Minors who want to resurrect their once-cherished vehicle.

Charles Ware of the Morris Minor Centre at Bath in Britain, and Dhanpala Samarasekara of Galle in Sri Lanka are the key players in the joint venture. As entrepreneurs both are committed to a philosophy of appropriate and sustainable technology and growth. Mr Samarasekara retired in 1977 from many years in the Sri Lankan Diplomatic service where he served in India and the UK.

**S**INCE HIS retirement he has devoted his time to the family tea plantation and to his study of conservation issues and Buddhism (on which he has published a number of books). He owns an island on a lake which he has converted into a sanctuary for organic vegetables and rare Sri Lankan plants.

Charles Ware originated in Scotland, received a Steiner education and studied art at the renowned Malvern School before serving in the British infantry during the troubled times in Cyprus. After a spell as an art teacher, Mr Ware developed his passion for conservation of Georgian architecture. He became an activist in the movement to save Bath from the hammers of the developers.

In 1975, after investing considerable amounts in Georgian properties, Mr Ware was declared bankrupt. He attributes his demise to the collapse of the secondary banking system and the UK property market. While deciding "what to do next" he began dealing in the



A Sri Lankan worker hand-sprays a Morris Minor panel.

"banger" end of the car market with a company called "Economy Motors". It was then that he identified the Morris Minor as worthy of conservation. "It's a future classic in both looks and function" he wrote.

This year marks the 15th anniversary of the Morris Minor Centre in Bath. Mr Ware claims that the car has an "evergreen appeal", and he has been quick to cash in on the cry of many Morris Minor owners that "they want their car to go on forever".

One of the main problems that had to be overcome was rust in the body. Many Morris Minors were being scrapped because of owners believed the cost of eradicating rust to be too high. In 1982, Charles Ware published a book called *Du-*

*rable Car Ownership*. In it he demonstrated the economic sense in cutting out and replacing the structural panels that form the backbone of the car.

Once the rationale of durability had been proven the next task was to look at mechanical improvements. Changes were made to the brakes, suspension was installed and a range of safety devices applied to bring the car up to the performance and safety standards expected in modern motoring.

The decision to set up in Sri Lanka was made after Mr Samarasekara, on reading about Mr Wares' business, visited him in Bath. The two men discovered that they shared a commitment to the "gentle ways" of manufacturing that don't rely simply on the blatant

exploitation of resources for maximum profit.

Mr Ware could have chosen the path of many western entrepreneurs by establishing his business in one of the numerous free trade zones in Asia. He could have enjoyed generous tax shelters, cheap labour and state-of-the-art technology and infrastructure. But he claims that this would not be in keeping with the philosophy behind his venture. "Sri Lanka's most important resource is its people who have one of the highest literacy rates in Asia. Our project recognises this and is designed to maximise the part they play in the production process. We are introducing exceptionally labour-intensive systems to make proper use of these manual skills."

Of course the labour is still cheap compared to what Mr Ware would have to pay in Britain. But according to the manager of the Durable Car Company in Sri Lanka, the 30 employees earn above-average wages. They also enjoy other benefits such as a health insurance scheme, paid holidays, on-the-job training and promotional opportunities.

**T**HE FACTORY certainly doesn't look like any of the sweat shops of Asia. Mr Ware admits that the venture is an ambitious one. The first stage of manufacturing panels is now well established. He expects the second stage to be operational within 12 months. Within four years the project expects to be employing 1000 local people and in five or six years Mr Ware hopes to be producing a new durable car and a small commercial vehicle based on the "evergreen" design of the Morris Minor.

In Australia there are an estimated 10,000 Morris Minors still travelling the roads. For a few years in the late 1950s a version of the Morris Minor was actually manufactured in Australia. Morris Minor clubs abound in every Australian state. The Melbourne club boasts just over 900 members and is one of the largest.

A mint condition Morris Minor in Australia will cost around \$5000. In Sri Lanka it is possible to buy one for around \$2000. At those prices, and with its demonstrated reliability, it could well be the car to target to the emerging free market economies of Eastern Europe.

Peter Davis travelled to Sri Lanka as a guest of Air Lanka and the Ceylon Tourist Board.