

# The Minor miracle worker

**I**n Sri Lanka on Saturday, the minister for the Southern Province opens a new factory in Batadua near the port of Galle. It aims to employ 1 000 workers and is to get a state-funded residential block for 30 apprentices and a fully-equipped training workshop. It will make parts for Morris Minors.

The factory has been set up by the Durable Car Company of Sri Lanka. This is a joint venture between a retired Sri Lankan diplomat who is a former anti-British activist, Buddhist, tea plantation owner, children's book author, and guardian of an organic vegetable sanctuary — and Charles Ware.

For Ware, at 55, the factory represents another milestone along a colourful journey through life. The Edinburgh-born polymath today heads a £2 million-turnover business employing 40 people buying, restoring, and selling old Morris Minors — a car that went out of production 20 years ago.

Ware gives out a glossy, printed book recording every newspaper clipping and magazine article about himself and his business. It runs to 80 pages. Yet it only begins in 1976 with Ware at 41 setting up his Morris Minor Centre in a run-down house in Bath. His earlier life as national serviceman, art lecturer, builder, rock impresario, property speculator, and bankrupt millionaire is merely hinted at. 'Champagne Charlie' Ware is no ordinary businessman.

The Batadua factory is the culmination of a philosophy that has been forming in Ware's mind since he founded his firm 15 years ago. With his partner in Sri Lanka, Dhanapala Samarasekara, Ware believes the Durable Car Company will become the start of a thriving, highly labour-intensive car industry in Sri Lanka. One day, he hopes, it will make the country self-sufficient in cheap, durable and easy-to-repair transport. The ultimate aim of the factory is to produce a new long-lasting car and a range of small commercial vehicles based on the design of the Morris Minor.

According to Ware, modern Western and Japanese car plants are too capital-intensive for poor countries such as Sri Lanka and do little to benefit their economies. Besides, their products are too expensive for the average citizen and too complex and costly to repair. Typically, he says, what happens in the Third World is that automation machinery, designed to use as little labour as possible, is imported and plonked down in a tax-free industrial zone. The cars it makes are then exported while the factory pays no taxes



*Former art lecturer, property speculator, and long-time Morris Minor aficionado Charles Ware tells John Dunn how the car is central to his plans for the economic regeneration of Sri Lanka*

or import duty on expensive raw materials.

'This kind of inward investment takes a long time to benefit the country as a whole,' says Ware, 'and wages have to be kept down to attract firms. But the impact on employment, particularly in rural areas, is minimal.'

Ware believes Sri Lanka's most important resource is people. 'So we are investing in people, not automation. The Durable Car Company will introduce exceptionally labour-intensive systems to use and develop people's skills. The commercial benefit is that we don't have to invest vast sums of money in advanced machine tools. As a result, we can pay our workforce good wages and yet make well-finished products that can be sold competitively around the world.'

Sri Lanka will benefit from employment and tax receipts and from the wages flowing back into the community, says Ware.

Initially, the factory will make replacement Minor body panels, all done by hand, without a power-press in sight.

Ware, sitting in jeans and a worn pullover

in a remarkably littered and decrepit office overlooking his repair yard in Bath, points to a Morris Minor wing stuck in one corner. 'That was made in Sri Lanka by a man sitting cross-legged on the ground using nothing more than a hammer and an RSJ (rolled-steel joist) as an anvil,' he says. It was made in five sections spot-welded together and in its fully-finished form took about 14 man-hours to make. The equivalent, still made in the UK by Rover, takes under one man-hour but costs £90.

Ware says his new factory will start exporting fully-finished wings and other replacement panels to the UK where there are still 80 000 registered Morris Minors. But the bulk of production will be in the form of low-cost, semi-finished panels for Sri Lanka's estimated 20 000 old Morris Minor taxis and for export to South East Asian countries where there are reckoned to be 100 000 Minors.

Ware has always had a passion for 'conservation' and for rescuing and making good what he calls 'durable designs'. Born in 1935 and educated at various 'progressive schools', he studied art until National Service as a second lieutenant in Cyprus. He rejoined civilian life to study art at the Slade in London, becoming a lecturer there.

But in the middle of the property boom in the mid-1960s, Ware left to set up a company to restore old buildings in London. With a weekend house in Bath he got involved in the preservation of the city's Georgian buildings. He bought up, restored and redeveloped a host of old buildings. At one time 'Champagne Charlie', as the papers called him, owned a fair chunk of Bath, including a house in the Royal Crescent, the Theatre Royal, and a 100-acre estate outside town. Long hair, wild parties, rock stars, and fat American cars were the order of the day.

Then the secondary banking crisis hit. Loans were called in and Ware went spectacularly bankrupt to the tune of almost £400 000. Moving into a condemned basement in Bath he contemplated his future. But not for long. With a colleague, he was soon buying and selling 'bangers'. Eventually, realising that with then 100 000 Morris Minors left in the UK, there was money to be made repairing and selling them, he launched the Morris Minor Centre.

Today he has plenty of competition and a recession to fight. But somehow the man who now gets his greatest peace from gardening and driving a 1966 straight-six walnut and blue leather Mercedes 300SE coupé, looks as durable as his famous Moggies. **E**