

A Minor transplant

John Langley looks at plans to breathe new life into one of Britain's best-loved, sturdiest small cars — in Sri Lanka

A BODY transplant is being developed for the car that refuses to die: the Morris Minor.

While Mr Graham Day and his new masters at British Aerospace were confirming plans to close the Cowley plant where the Minor was born 40 years ago, moves were already under way to manufacture new body parts for the first British car to reach a million sales.

The eventual aim is to build up completely new body shells for rusty Minors, on the lines of the successful rescue of the MGB by the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust.

Production of small items of trim has already started in the unlikely setting of Sri Lanka, where an estimated 45,000 Minors — in various stages of decay — are still in daily use. The old four-door models are particularly popular as taxis. Thousands more are running in India and Pakistan.

Mr Charles Ware, proprietor of the Morris Minor Centre in Bath, predicts that the Minor reborn will become the national car of Sri Lanka.

"At the moment, the owners cannot afford to buy parts imported from Britain.

"They can make them much more cheaply locally. They are expert craftsmen — the items they are already producing for us are beautifully made."

Mr Ware went out to Sri Lanka earlier this year to advise local businessmen on the project and will be returning in the autumn. "It is a very labour-intensive business and it should have a considerable impact on long-term employment.

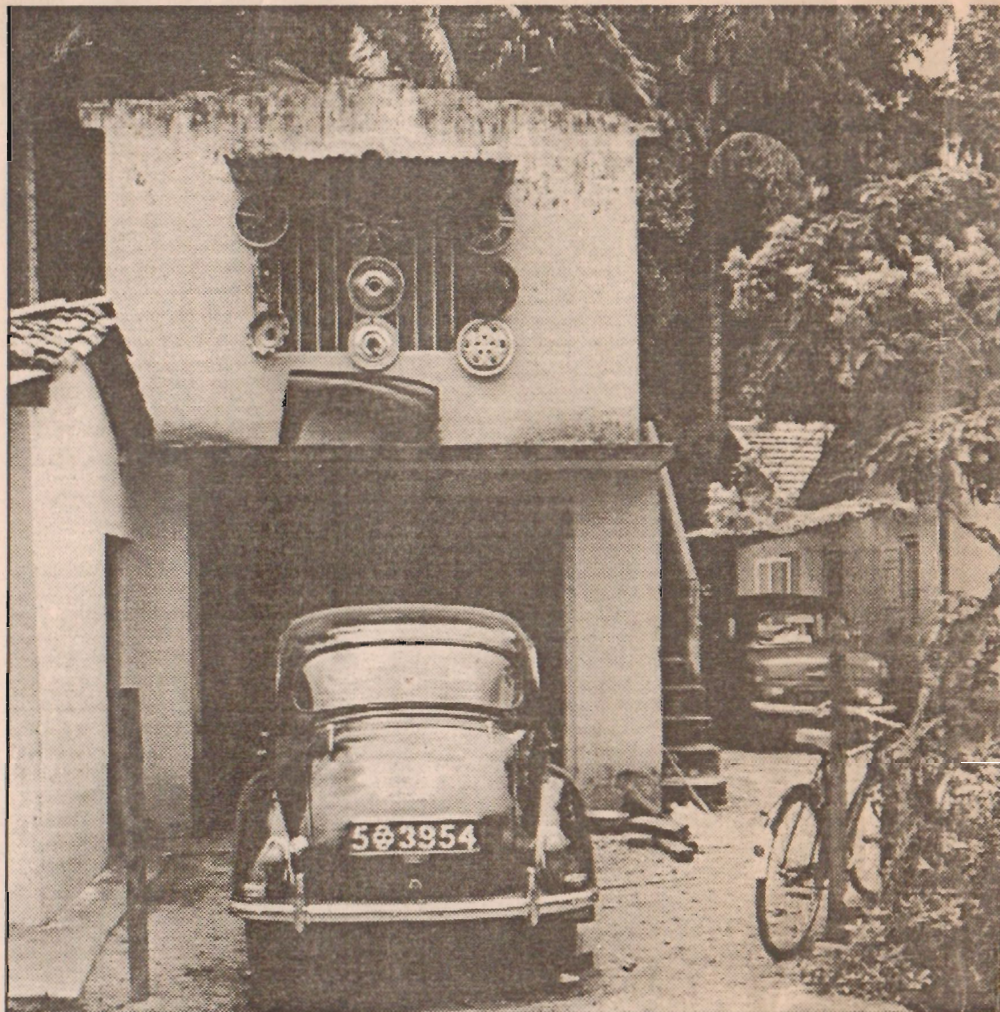
"Eventually, we could be employing about 2,000 people, about the same as the new Nissan plant in Sunderland. What we hope to do in a couple of years' time is to import the panels and components from Sri Lanka then jig up the complete body shells here, to create new jobs. We might go to a development area. South Wales would be very convenient."

Doing all the work in the UK would be prohibitively expensive. "The Heritage people were fortunate in that all the tools for the MGB were still in existence but that is not the case with the Minor. We would hope to end up making all the components, to a rather better quality than anywhere else."

Mr Ware preaches the philosophy of the Minor as a long-life durable car, with drastically reduced depreciation compared with more modern high-tech designs. So, as well as restoring cars to original condition for enthusiasts, he has also developed uprated suspensions, braking, engines and transmissions for owners who want a more acceptable level of comfort and performance without sacrificing the Minor's durability.

There are thought to be still about 100,000 Minors in Britain but Charles Ware says many are being scrapped unnecessarily through ignorance of their potential. Others are being sold at exorbitant prices after a cheap respray, even though they are structurally unsound.

The Morris Minor Centre is trying to set up a national register of sound Minors that have passed an approved inspection scheme. To help potential owners, it has just produced a new illustrated pamphlet: *The Morris Minor: where to look for rust*. It is available for 25p, including postage, from The Morris Minor Centre, Avon House, Lower Bristol Road, Bath BA2 1ES.



An unlikely setting: the Morris Minor quite at home beneath the Indian Ocean palms