



LIFE IN *the fast lane*

CHARLES WARE IS ALMOST SINGLE-HANDEDLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RETURN OF THAT GREAT BRITISH ICON, THE MORRIS MINOR, TO OUR ROADS – BUT THAT’S JUST ONE OF HIS MANY ACHIEVEMENTS, AS MICK RINGHAM FOUND OUT WHILE TALKING TO HIM ABOUT HIS MUSICAL INFLUENCES

They say you can identify a Morris Minor bombing down the road towards you long before you actually see it. I can happily confirm this as I’ve been the proud owner of three of these classic beauties – long before they acquired national treasure status – and can testify to their very distinctive engine sound, which is like no other. Charles Ware is the man who almost single-handedly kept this little cult car on our roads right into the 21st century. He is now celebrating the 35th anniversary of his world famous Morris Minor Centre. However, his background is incredibly diverse and in many respects, reads like the plot of a Jeffrey Archer novel.

As a young artist Charles attended the Slade in London, going on to teach at Corsham Art College. During this time, in the early 1960s, he was already involved with a London-based building company, working on small housing conversions in Islington. He decided to take a more active role in the business, having a love for historic property, as well as possessing an eye on the market potential.

He said: “If you had a good idea at that time, you would take yourself along to the bank manager and he would lend you the capital – it was that simple.”

Over the next few years his passion for such conversions, helped him build up a remarkable portfolio of more than 2,000 properties. While visiting Bath one weekend he was shocked at the way the city’s historic buildings were being systematically demolished, to make way for unsympathetic and vulgar modern structures.

Charles takes up the story: “If you could convince people that renovating homes was a sensible proposition, they would start to listen. But I wanted to do more than just make money – I wanted to help save the city for future generations to enjoy.” As a result of this the conservationist in him took up the challenge, buying and renovating houses, many of which had been earmarked for demolition, as well several major projects, including a large former hotel and a 100-acre estate on the edge of the city. His main residence was a grand Georgian house in the Royal Crescent, where the parties he hosted were legendary, earning him the nickname Champagne Charlie.

But the icing on his property cake was when he purchased the city’s Theatre Royal. During this time he befriended a band who were trying to make their way into the music business. He agreed to back them financially – they went on to great success as Roxy Music. As a thank-you, Bryan Ferry and his band gave a free concert at Charles’ famous theatre.



THE MAN BEHIND THE WHEEL: main picture, Charles Ware in one of his Morris Minors, and, inset, Charles today, aged 76, and with no intention of retiring



A MUSICAL JOURNEY: left to right, Bryan Ferry of Roxy Music, The Doors and The Proclaimers



But in the mid-70s, the property market crashed and Charles was declared bankrupt. He says: “I lost the lot, everything went. My wife and our young son were generously lent a basement flat to stay in by a friend.”

Many of us would have thrown in the towel at this point, but not Charles. As he enjoyed restoring things Charles turned his attention to an iconic British car, the Morris Minor, restoring a handful of them in a small backyard. He later moved to a site west of Bath and after gaining national publicity with a feature in *The Sunday Times*, the business really took off. Five years ago he relocated The Charles Ware Morris Minor Centre to larger premises in Bristol and to deal with demand, now employs a 20-strong dedicated workforce.

“As a thank-you Bryan Ferry and his band gave a free concert, at the Theatre Royal”

In many respects Charles’ life has turned full circle, as once again, he has taken to his first love, painting, which has undoubtedly helped him recover from a recent illness. At the age of 76, he shows no signs of retiring gracefully. As he says: “They only give you one shot at life – so why not make the most of it?”

Charles’ top ten:

● **Vaughan Williams – *Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis***
My father was an artist and also a pretty good violinist. As a child I was lucky enough to live with my family in the Malvern Hills. Dad used to play this quintessential English music, the volume turned as high as possible on the record player. It really does paint a picture for me of those days.

● **Jacqueline Du Pre – *Elgar Cello Concerto in B minor***
This is very intense and exciting music from this wonderful musician, who tragically died so young. I remember seeing her play this piece in the early 1960s which was truly a magical experience and that has stayed with me ever since.

● **Roxy Music – *Virginia Plain***
In 1970 I became the band’s backer, also acting as guarantor as well as buying their first van. When Bryan and the band became famous they kindly did a free gig for me at the theatre. The benefit on the night went to the then Bath Arts Workshop, which was in its heyday at that time and I guess was a unique period for street theatre and general fun.

● **The Rolling Stones – *You can’t always get what you want***
My favourite Stones album of all time is *Let It Bleed* and I have so many memories of playing this record, in the very grand and huge L-shaped drawing room at my former house in the Royal Crescent. The press at that time had given me the name Champagne Charlie, which in many respects I lived up to.

● **The Doors – *Light My Fire***
During the late 1960s I first started to understand the scale of America. I rode on a Greyhound bus from New York to Los Angeles and on to San Francisco. I stayed in Haight Ashbury and became involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement. That whole period is a time I will never forget.

● **The Beatles – *A Day in the Life***
The band throughout the late 60s were writing seminal music that we all know and love. This is such an original track and reminds me of the artistic and musical changes that were happening then. The artist Peter Blake and his wife Jan Howarth gave me a signed copy of *Sergeant Pepper*, I still have it today.

● **Vivaldi – *The Four Seasons***
I regularly visited Italy during my late teens and early twenties. I would travel on my Lambretta scooter from England to southern Italy. I deeply love the art and the landscape of the country. Vivaldi helps me re-live many of those journeys.

● **Neil Young – *A Man Needs A Maid***
He was so big at the time and of course is still regarded as one of the great songwriters of his generation. This reminds me again of visiting and travelling across the wide open spaces of America. Such a vast country to experience and Neil Young gives the perfect sound track.

● **The Eagles – *Lying Eyes***
This takes me back to Key West in Florida. There was always a party going on and in all honesty I was known never to refuse! I remember timber framed houses surrounded by banyan trees. It was a time and an atmosphere where everyone let themselves go.

● **The Proclaimers – *Sunshine on Leith***
I chose this for two reasons. Firstly they’re a really great Scottish band and also the fact that my son Zac is the lead guitarist and a keen player of the pedal steel guitar. When the band aren’t recording or touring he has been helping me run the business. I’m happy to say that he is as keen as I am on the great little Morris Minor. ■

The Morris Minor Centre is at 20 Clothier Road, Bristol, BS4 5PS, tel: 0117 300 3754, visit; www.morrisminor.org.uk