

## Classics



# NOT JUST ANY OLD CAR

More drivers are shunning modern motors. **David Williams** catches up with fans of reinvigorated classics

W elcome to the motoring world of Hugh and Anne Marshall. They like driving – although travelling is probably more accurate – and see themselves as “fairly green”. They want a car for local errands and holiday trips to Wales and the West Country. Tomorrow they pick up their new English setter, a rescue dog that will need to be transported in comfort. He is, after all, their new retirement chum.

It wouldn't be everyone's choice, but today they are collecting their 1968 Morris Minor and you'll be hard-placed to tell it wasn't straight out of the box. In shiny maroon, with fresh chrome on its bumpers and its exposed ash frame in impeccable condition, it sparkles in the sunlight.

In fact the Marshalls are typical of a growing breed of motorist for whom the conformity of a modern eurobox holds little allure. They ditched their “perfectly adequate” Ford Fusion and bought the refitted Minor for £18,000. Many people would consider this an eye-watering sum for a car that went out of production in 1971 and was still viewed as an old banger until fairly recently, rather than a classic car worth preserving. But as converts to Charles Ware's philosophy of “durable

motoring” (certain older cars should be treated like a house: endlessly repaired and adapted on a planned budget, minimising their impact on pocket and environment) they see the Morris as a sound eco-investment. At Ware's Morris Minor Centre in Bristol ([www.morrisminor.org.uk](http://www.morrisminor.org.uk)) every component has been stripped, rebuilt and, where possible, rust-proofed and reused. Their Traveller has been adapted for 21st-century motoring with servo-assisted brakes, halogen headlights and a heated rear screen.

They could, had they wanted, have asked the MMC to fit a 1,300cc engine (£2,075), five-speed gearbox (£1,350), satnav connections (£210) and front and rear suspension conversion (£480), making it even more of a match for today's traffic. In fact they're happy with the original 1,098cc unit and four-speed gearbox. “We like the sound it makes, and we don't go fast. There's no point rushing up to the next red traffic light,” says Hugh, a former advertising copywriter and civil servant.

Every week, handovers of similarly refurbished old cars are taking place outside family-run businesses the length and breadth of Britain, whether it's urbane thirtysomethings spending £6,500 on a restored VW Camper for surfing holidays



**Light touch:** restoration in progress at the Morris Minor Centre, where attention is paid to every detail. **Top:** Charles and Zac Ware and Anne and Hugh Marshall with their £16,000 Morris Traveller

or self-made businessmen parting with the thick end of £200,000 for a comprehensively restored Jaguar E-type.

All are in search of something a little different, a little more rewarding – possibly a little more romantic – than anything a modern car showroom can offer. They're not necessarily interested in getting their hands dirty and restoring an older car themselves; they're happy to pay for an expert to do it for them and, in 2011, there is no shortage of small firms willing to do so, marquee specialists and general garages alike.

“There is an upswing in interest in ‘modern’ classics and it's character that people



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are after, often mixed with a touch of nostalgia,” says Nicholas Froome, whose Brighton-based business specialises in the extremely tough W124-series Mercedes estates of the late Eighties and early Nineties. Henry Pearnan, of Sussex-based Eagle E-types, says: “Modern cars are all too similar. Drive a classic and people smile at you. They let you out at junctions instead of blocking you in.”

At the Morris Minor Centre they sell 50 to 60 refurbished models each year, ranging from £6,000 to £23,000, and are constantly hunting for further sad saloons, convertibles and Travellers into which they can breathe fresh life. But as with

Trigger's broom in *Only Fools and Horses* (he insists he's had the same one for 20 years even though it's had 17 new heads and 14 new handles) it's hard to tell where vintage ends and modern begins. Such is the extent of the restoration work at Bristol, where there is a rabbit warren of old-fashioned, oily-floored workshops (they still roller on the primer, old-style, before flattening it with obsessive rubbing down) that sometimes no more than 15 per cent of the car that was wheeled

in at one end emerges into a new dawn at the other. “People sometimes say that only the glass still looks old and with good reason,” says Zac Ware, who, when he isn't touring as lead guitarist with The Proclaimers, helps his father run the business. “The glass, along with the transmission tunnel, dashboard and roof, is one of the few parts on one of our extensive refurbishments that we don't replace.”

“Of course, you need to give an older car a bit more attention than a modern one to keep it in good condition,” says Zac. “But buying one is greener than acquiring a brand-new car whose manufacturer will exert an enormous toll on the environment. With a bit of attention you can keep a Morris going virtually for ever. It's like a love affair.”