

Minor Strike

When I was a kid I had an older friend who had a souped up (that's the correct period expression, by the way) Morris Minor. The engine had been bored out until the pistons overlapped, it had a full race camshaft that dictated a 3000 rpm tickover, a clutch from a Bedford truck, and it used to blow up with monotonous regularity. When it was going, mind you, it did go. It also proved that the Riley 1.5 brakes fitted with competition linings, which were useless when cold and caught fire when hot, weren't up to the horsepower.

The exhaust pipe (you couldn't honestly call it a system) was a straight-through device that my friend used to crawl down to inspect the valves. Handling improvements were limited to lowering the car on its torsion bars at the front and putting some blocks of wood between the axle and the leaf springs at the rear. Externally it was standard apart from slightly wider wheels and a complete lack of bumpers, so it used to really upset the local sportscar drivers of the day in their MGAs and Sunbeam Alpines. TR3s were a bit more on a par, except round corners where the Minor could leave them for dead.

Well, there's got to be something basically right about a car designed in the nineteen forties that became the first British vehicle to reach one million units, was in production for twenty three years, and of which there are still estimated to be a million on the road seventeen years after the last one left the production line in 1971. Designed by Sir Alec Issigonis, more famous for the Mini perhaps, the Minor was equally revolutionary in its day, being a monocoque with proper



They said it should never have been discontinued. The folks at the Minor Centre at Bath are trying to ensure that it isn't.
Tony Jones reports.

IFS when the opposition were still producing ladder-frame cars with beam front axles suspended on leaf springs. End of history lesson.

The Centre of the Universe as far as Morris Minors are concerned is the Morris Minor Centre in Bath. Here, a man called Charles Ware is making sure that old Minors never die – and I mean never! For this is not some classic restoration operation; Mr Ware is absolutely convinced that the Morris Minor is a car with a future. To such an extent that he is currently negotiating with the government of Sri Lanka to produce new body shells over there and all the individual panels that would enable new shells to be assembled over here.

His basic philosophy is that new cars are built as consumables, being uneconomic, if not impossible, to repair after a certain time, and that this imposes on the public the costs of depreciation as cars are handed down rapidly from owner to owner with but one eventual destination – the scrap heap.

Charles Ware doesn't accept that this has to be. Assuming that fashion isn't a consideration, he believes that you can keep one car for ever and ever. Just so long as that car is a Morris Minor. He has even written a very persuasive book called 'Durable Car Ownership' which proves just how economic motoring can be once you get away from all the hype. He does concede, though, that the Minor as produced up to 1971 is a bit inadequate in the performance, handling and braking departments compared with the modern CAD/CAM produced rot-box. And so he has made the Morris Minor Series Three. We will talk specifications in a minute.

But what's this got to do with replicas? Well, in Graham Arnold's book on the Lotus and Caterham Sevens he describes the Seven as having been around for so long 'that it is now really a replica of itself'. It strikes me that the same thing applies to the Minor. In purchasing this magazine you are identifying yourself as an inde-

pendent, intelligent individual with at least some interest in the more unusual aspects of motoring and car ownership. And if you're merely reading it in the newspapers waiting for the rain to stop, at least you've got taste. So is the idea of building a Morris Minor to your own specification such a silly idea?

I can give you two reasons for considering it right now. One is that the result of your efforts is likely to hold its value and almost certainly appreciate after you have built it. The other, is that if you want something different – a really nice Minor is certainly that! The big objection of course, is the lack of performance. Or is it? Time to talk specifications.

What Charles Ware has done to bring the car a bit more up to date is to modify the suspension and brakes very selectively and carefully. At the front the old lever arm dampers are now used only as a sort of top wishbone, and telescopic dampers have been added primarily for their longer life. This immediately bestows the car with better handling and ride and gives you the opportunity of fitting suitable adjustable items if you want to fine tune things even further. The torsion bar springing is retained, and is well up to the job. The boss of a highly respected kit car firm in Newbury recently admitted to me in an unguarded moment that he had once shoehorned a Jaguar XK engine and gearbox into a Morris Minor and still found it necessary to adjust the torsion bar settings to lower the car. And in case you're wondering, the rear carb was adjusted by groping under the dash. But I digress. At the rear, the lever arm dampers have been discarded completely as they performed no locating function, and telescopics

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are again the order of the day. The rear leaf springs remain, but a coil spring option is currently under development which would really make ride height adjustment easy. The new Marina rear axle also benefits from two anti tramp arms set at a slight angle to the fore and aft axis, so helping out with lateral location. A Panhard rod is available as an option for high performance versions. Beginning to sound quite sporty isn't it?

But it is in the braking department that the most radical improvements have been made. Gone are the cotton reel sized drums and in their place are Marina discs (front) and bigger drums (rear). Add to this a servo that gives a nice light pedal with plenty of feel and you have a totally modern system that really inspires confidence. The opportunity has also been taken of making the new hubs compatible with Marina thirteen inch wheels which lowers the car an inch from the outset, further adding to the enhanced stability. Optimum tyre size seems to be about 165 x 70 – wider tyres result in reduced wet weather manners.

So what about the 'go' department? Bearing in mind their priority of providing modern motoring on the cheap, the guys in Bath have so far remained faithful to the A Series engine. However, their standard engine is the 1275cc unit, not the 1098 one fitted during the car's production life. This is not the place to go into a detailed discussion of the states of tune available on this motor, as most of you will know just how much poke can be obtained from, say, a 1400cc Avonbar unit in road/rally trim, but 100bhp at the wheels is easy. The point is, the chassis improvements have resulted in a vehicle that is now capable of absorbing and handling power outputs that you wouldn't normally consider.

The power train is the next thing to look at. Standard equipment of the Series 3 is the Sprite or Midget gearbox, which is a bit stronger

than the original and has better ratios. A number of different rear axle ratios are available for the Marina axle, but even so the car cries out for a five speed box. And that is just what it is going to get. Under development is a conversion of the Toyota Celica ST five speeder. This has been around in Australia for some time, but Charles Ware has rejected the idea of importing this package and has had his own purpose-made bellhousing cast.

Just before Charles took me out in a customer's recently completed car, we had a look at what was going on in the various workshops. The place was a hive of industry; Morris Minors in various stages of renovation were everywhere. Several of those clever cradle things which enable you to lay a complete car on its side were in use in one place, while whole new chassis sections were being welded into body shells which had been stripped to the metal. There is clearly nothing that they cannot tackle regarding Minors, and quality of the work is beyond reproach.

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This became even more evident as, a few moments later, we pulled out of the forecourt in an immaculate burgundy red Minor convertible fitted with all the Series 3 modifications and an A series engine to MG Metro specification.

However, I encountered an immediate problem. Apart from the beautiful leather interior trim (Metro seats provide much better lateral location than the original bookend variety – whatever the covering material) the standard 'speedo only' dash, bus-like steering wheel and view out the front were absolutely 100% Morris Minor. My brain, receiving these visual signals, insisted that my



Charles Ware, designer of the Morris Minor Series Three, which he sees as a durable car with a future.

hands and feet conduct us in a suitably cautious manner.

After a couple of miles I began to adjust, and the next thing to hit me was how very taut the car felt, with nary a rattle nor a clonk in evidence, despite the road surfaces on the outskirts of Bath being in dire need of attention. This would have been praiseworthy in a saloon, but was exceptional for a rag top. The ride was

strate the car's braking system, which was very impressive, curtailing progress very rapidly indeed. Whereupon we swept round the obstacle in a very un-Morris Minor like fashion, overtaking another couple of 'moderns' on the way out. All this on damp, greasy roads without the little car giving any impression that it was near its limit of adhesion.

This brief run had certainly proved one thing to my satisfaction – that the Morris Minor Centre can produce a very high quality product which provides the possibilities for a very interesting, unusual and individual sportscar.

Charles Ware's primary aim is to prove that the revived Minor is a car for the nineteen-nineties, being economic, easily repaired and most important of all – depreciation free. However, he has a definite gleam in his eye and I could tell from the obvious pleasure he took in demonstrating the performance aspects of the new car that he would be more than happy to hear from people who wanted to use one for something other than going to the Post Office to collect their pension.

● The Morris Minor Centre is at: Lower Bristol Road, Bath Avon, BA2 1ES. Telephone: 0225 315449.