

International News

Morris Minor to be reborn among the coconuts

A CLASSIC British family car which last rolled off the production lines more than 20 years ago is to make a comeback — in Sri Lanka.

A factory to build the legendary Morris Minor has been set up among the coconut palms in the south of the island. It is already making spare parts both for local use and export to Europe, and complete cars will be turned out within the next couple of years.

Behind the scheme is British businessman Charles Ware and a retired Sri Lankan diplomat, Dhanapala Samarasekara, who have formed the Durable Car Company.

While Japanese and Western makers prepare for the 21st century by investing billions in high-tech plants with few human workers, the Sri Lankan factory is heading in a different direction.

"It is made out of coconut trees," said Ware, managing director of the Morris Minor Centre in the British city of Bath.

"Sri Lanka's most important resource is its people, who have one of the highest literacy rates in Asia. Our project is designed to maximise the part they play in the production process."

So robots are out and apprenticeship schemes are in. Instead of costly and energy-hungry machinery, the Durable Car Company relies on manual skills to make the parts

By GEOFF ELLIS

that can be sold around the world.

"Essentially we are investing in people, not automation," said Ware.

"It is a way of relating to the Third World in a sensible way. We are not ripping the country off. We pay good wages and we are very concerned that the factory should not cause pollution."

The Morris Minor was designed in 1948 by Sir Alec Issigonis, who went on to design the famous Austin Mini. Thousands of Minors were exported to countries such as Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan during the fifties and sixties, where their rugged construction and basic design kept them on the road for decades.

Indonesia and Malaysia still have plenty of Minors on the road, and there are small numbers in other countries, including Thailand and Singapore. They can also still be found in parts of Africa and Australia.

The original Minors were either exported to Asia complete or in kit form but were not made locally, unlike the Morris Isis. Production of the Isis stopped in Britain after a short run, and the whole

assembly line was exported to India where the car was renamed the Ambassador.

This is still being made — and a few Ambassadors are being exported from India to Britain, according to Ware — but makers from countries such as Japan are taking over the cars like the Maruti, based on a Suzuki design, are becoming more common.

Production of the Minor in Britain stopped in 1971 and spares were running out when Ware, a former property developer, started the Morris Minor Centre in Bath to help maintain and restore those still on the road.

In 1983 he was visited by Samarasekara who wanted to open a centre in Sri Lanka, and the joint venture was born.

Their factory in Battadua, Samarasekara's ancestral village in the deep south of the island, eventually will provide around 1 000 jobs in the area with an unemployment rate of 30 per cent.

Components for the local market — Sri Lanka has some 20 000 Minors still running, used mainly for taxis — are sold partly-finished to keep costs down. Those for export to Britain, where around 80 000 Minors are regis-



Proud owner of the new Morris Coconut

tered, are all highly finished.

The factory will make light commercial vehicles as well as cars, with the aim of making Sri Lanka largely self-sufficient in an important area of its transport system, cutting down on the need to spend hard-earned currency on imported, short-life modern vehicles.

Ware is convinced their low-tech approach makes economic sense. Modern

plants may turn out thousands of cars with very few workers, but the huge cost of setting up sophisticated — and soon obsolete — production lines more than offsets the labour savings made.

In the long run, the cost to motorists is also higher because modern cars soon lose much of their value.

The industry is making "more and more cars, which fall apart quicker

and quicker, with fewer and fewer people, so we are building structural unemployment into the system", says Ware, who believes the new factory could become a model for other developing countries to follow.

"I want to see us making a quarter of the cars with four times as many people, but to be able to offer an anti-rust guarantee of 25 years because the cars will last.

"I would like to see a car with 900 human hours in its construction rather than the handful of hours manufacturers are investing for."

The factory cannot use the name Morris Minor for its new car because the Rover Group, the successor to the original manufacturers, still holds the rights to the title. Ware is open to suggestions for a new name. — Gemini News