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Then and now, opposite, Charlie demonstrates one of his top-of-the-range convertibles; this page, back in his 'Champagne Charlie' heyday. He doesn't have the Howard Hodgkin painting any more: it's in The Met

# Minor fascinations

Once a fixture on Bath's Lower Bristol Road, the Morris Minor Centre moved to Bristol earlier this year. Mark Sparrow chronicles the colourful life and times of its owner, Charlie Ware

Charlie Ware was the child of a couple of bohemian artists who nurtured their son to be an outsider. "My father was a pre-war vegetarian, nature-cure socialist, and during the war he was on reserve occupation because he was a pacifist," he says. "I was brought up completely outside the system. Perhaps that's why I've always viewed the world as being fairly strange."

Art ran in the family and Charlie was a good enough draughtsman to gain a place at The Slade. "It was the place to study art," he recalls, "and I was there at the same

time as people like David Hockney. If I'd gone on painting I might be a respected English artist by now..."

After graduating in 1964, he headed west for a job lecturing part-time at the Bath Academy of Art.

*"If I'd gone on painting, I might be a respected English artist by now..."*

"I fell in love with the city, and it was then that I saw a house for sale in the Royal Crescent for £5,000. Art school was well paid in those days so I was able to get a 90 per cent mortgage. At that time no one

wanted to live in old dirty, black and crumbling Georgian buildings. "Not long after, I left the Academy and became a builder because I was bored with art. I worked in Islington for a while and, as I was quite good at organising spaces, I decided to become a developer. I was one of the first conservation developers in the country."

"One weekend when I was down in Bath visiting my house, I noticed that all the little houses behind Julian Road were being demolished. I phoned the Bath Preservation Trust to complain but they didn't give a damn, just as long as the Royal Crescent and The Circus weren't destroyed. ➤

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Motoring in a **BIG** way...economically...



IN THE *Quality First* **MORRIS MINOR**

Left and opposite page: postcards from the 1950s reflect the contemporary enthusiasm for a car that was once described by Lord Nuffield as 'looking like a poached egg'



"The council said the houses were slums and wanted to pull them all down. That's when I thought I'd better do something, and I started buying all kinds of property – not just posh houses.

"I owned about 30 Georgian buildings and I became a trustee of the Bath Preservation Trust around the time the Buchanan road scheme was being finalised. The scheme would have destroyed more than a thousand Georgian houses and yet the Trust only seemed interested in whether there were chestnut or cherry trees on the roundabouts... they didn't care. The scheme was eventually overturned by the government – much to the council's disgust."

Unlike the houses, Charlie's property empire didn't survive. "It went bankrupt. My descent was very rapid. Towards the end of 1974 everything was fine, but within six months it had all gone. The banks started calling in their loans.

"I was borrowing the equivalent of £60 million in today's money, but I didn't set aside anything for myself. When the bad times came I was left with absolutely nothing. It was riches to rags.

"I went on the dole but I eventually paid off all my local debts and the only money I owed was to the banks, but as they made a lot of money out of me I didn't feel too desperate about it. A chap let me use his condemned basement in Brock Street because I had nowhere else to stay. *The Sun* newspaper visited me there and did a wonderful piece entitled: 'The Rise and Fall of Champagne Charlie'. That was probably my lowest point.

"I'd been out of work for three months when a chap invited me to the Westbury Car Auctions. It was there I decided that the

conservation of Morris Minors was what I really wanted to do. I'd always thought the Morris was a good piece of design and I liked the economy and look of it. The whole thing was perfectly formed, easy to repair and simply constructed."

Charlie's enthusiasm for the Morris is infectious, and he's not alone.

"I once bought a Morris from a Wing Commander who'd fought in the Battle of Britain and when I drove the car away he was in tears," he explains. "Everyone who sells a Morris wants it to go to a good home. When

I go out hunting for cars I take on a persona that's a mixture between a doctor and a vet. You're dealing with something sacred, almost like a family member or a pet. Very few things engender that kind of loyalty."

And yet, despite the cult status of the Morris, buying into the dream is, says Charlie, surprisingly affordable. "We work on the principle that to make a Morris sound and functional means a starting price of around £2,500 but they go right up to posh ones for £18,000. Most people opt for something in between," he explains.

Driving in my car: a spruced-up beauty like this one can cost up to £18,000



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"We improve the brakes, but the suspension and layout are the same as the original Sir Alec Issigonis design of 1946. It's a 60-year-old car that drives like a little room on wheels with a high ceiling."

Motoring is of course a hot topic at the moment because of the fear that global warming is being accelerated by the carbon emissions from car engines. Surely a 60-year-old car can't be as environmentally sound as more modern lean-burn models, can it?

"Morris Minors can use unleaded fuel but they don't have a catalytic converter. They do put out a certain amount of CO<sub>2</sub> but keeping the car going rather than replacing it every few years probably makes it a very green car... it's not all about emissions. In fact, the Morris is an object lesson of how a different sort of car market could work."

But it isn't just the environment that the Morris Minor can help: the car is also making a difference in the developing world. "One of the good things about our business is that it has created another enterprise in Sri Lanka, where we have a workshop for making new car panels. One person in Birmingham using a press could make all the panels we need, but instead we employ 35 people in Sri Lanka who get well paid in their own currency.

"If you can get people doing jobs they really like and making a good living from it, and you can afford to do it because the pound is so strong, then it's something that many more companies ought to be doing in developing countries."

After many years on the Lower Bristol Road, Charlie has now relocated his Morris Minor Centre to Bristol – a move he describes as "a sentimental wrench: but our new place is very functional. The same space in Bath would be five times the cost."

"The business employs about 18 people, and although it doesn't make a lot of money, it's a bit of an institution."

And no, retiring is not currently on the cards: "Well, I will at some point, but not yet. I'm 71, and I keep going by visiting the gym most days."

"The main thing is not to fall apart, but it's hard as you get older – especially when increasingly you read obituaries of people you once knew." □

*"The Morris is an object lesson of how a different sort of car market could work"*

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## Minor details

Morris Motors was once given the chance to buy the ailing German car maker Volkswagen but they declined, reckoning that the 'Beetle' wouldn't sell.

'Morris Minor' is an official pedigree cat's name.

The Morris Oxford Ambassador is a close relative of the Morris Minor and is still very popular in India.

The Minor's original name was Morris Mosquito.

More than 1.6 million Morris Minors were produced between 1949 and 1971.

In the 1997 movie *The Borrowers*, almost every vehicle in the film is a Morris Minor. There's even a stretch Morris.

The band Madness was once known as 'Morris and the Minors'. In the video for *Driving In My Car*, a white Morris Minor convertible was used because the band transported their equipment in one. (More trivia: while driving said vehicle through Camden Town, front man Suggs once stopped for the editor of this magazine at a pedestrian crossing, waving her across the road with a gallant flourish.)

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