

Minor in a major key

● *John Langley
on the merits of
restoring one of
the little classics*

WITH AT least one Morris Minor owner in the Cabinet and recycling suddenly fashionable, these are heady days for Charlie Ware and the Morris Minor Centre in Bath.

As a good constituency Member, Chris Patten, the Conservative MP for Bath, was one of the centre's earlier customers. Now as the new Environment Secretary he spends more time in his chauffeur-driven Ministerial car but still keeps the old Minor as a family stand-by.

Giddy prices being achieved at auction by some of the rarer "classics" may have passed the Minor by, yet the revelation that old cars may be worth rather more than we thought has done their prospects no harm, either.

It no longer seems eccentric to spend £5,000 on a sound 20-year-old-car, even one as commonplace as Sir Alec Issigonis's first mass-produced classic.

Charlie Ware, who has been preaching the gospel of "durable" cars and recycling for more than a decade, is not chasing the smart money fueling the classic car boom, nor, he believes, are his customers.

"They are practical motorists genuinely seeking an alternative to planned obsolescence cars," he says. "Some of them are reasonably well-off but they have realised the high cost of depreciation entailed with the modern high-tech car. A lot of them dislike having to change cars every two or three years. They want something they can keep and to be able to control their motoring costs."

After 13 years beavering away from his headquarters,



Mixed grille: car-restorer Charlie Ware with several of the Morris Minors he is currently converting at his Bath headquarters

an unrestored Georgian house in the Lower Bristol Road, Charlie Ware has ambitious plans for spreading the message.

Modern high-tech cars are designed for minimum servicing. As a result, the traditional servicing and repairing skills at the local garage are in danger of withering away through lack of demand. Charlie Ware reckons this trend will help to push motoring beyond the reach of small income or fixed income motorists, many of whom need their cars as much as the company car driver, especially in country areas where public transport is disappearing.

He argues that such motorists are better able to control their motoring costs with an

infinitely repairable, straightforward and heavier-built car like the old Minor, which has generated its own spare parts back-up than with the lightweight, high-tech models now being produced by the modern motor industry.

He also believes there is a desirable human and economic case for shifting some of the emphasis from heavily automated, centralised manufacturing to more localised maintenance and repair.

Unlike some of the "Green" elements, he is not anti-car and indeed offers improved suspension and braking packages, up-rated engines and more comfortable seats for owners who want to modernise their cars without compromising the Minor's basic structural strength and ease of repair.

His latest developments are a five-speed all-synchromesh gearbox (adapted from Toyota) and a modified cylinder head suitable for unleaded petrol. Soon he hopes to offer a catalytic converter for the exhaust system.

Recently I tried his Traveller estate car fitted with these latest improvements and found it impressively quiet and easy to drive, equally at home on the motorway as in local run-arounds. Purists may shudder at the thought of messing about with an original car but Ware is more concerned with producing a usable vehicle for modern traffic conditions than with merely restoring a collectors' item.

As well as the main headquarters at Bath, he now has an

associated centre within easy reach of London and the South-East, just off the M20 at West Malling in Kent. There are also plans for a Morris Minor "warehouse" off the M4 near Newbury and for a national inspection scheme for Minors, in association with one of the big motoring organisations. The idea is for structural inspections to be carried out to the standard formula used by the centre, then faxed to Bath for a provisional estimate on the cost of progressive restoration, over a period of years if necessary.

Using a building analogy, Ware's philosophy is to tackle the dry rot before you start thinking about hanging the wall-paper: i.e. a shabby-looking but basically sound car will be a better long term prospect than a shiny "instant restoration". It all seems a long way from the over-hyped new car scene. But ironically, the spread of the company car is bringing new customers seeking dependable, long-term second cars for the family to go alongside the business model changed every two or three years.

Whether Charlie Ware is right or wrong about the way the car business is going, he seems to have ensured that the Morris Minor will still be around for some time yet.

LOG BOOK

● A COUPLE of years ago you could hardly give them away, but a 1985 Sinclair C5 electric tricycle is expected to fetch between £300 and £500 at today's Sotheby's sale of the important Gangbridge collection of early and classic British motorcycles and "related material". Other items going under the hammer include a 1959 BSA Bantam (price guide, £500-£700), a 1954 Norton Manx 500cc

racer (£15,000-£20,000), a 1950 Vincent Rapide (£12,000-£14,000) and a 1930 Brough Superior SS100 (£15,000-£20,000). The sale starts at 1.30pm at Gangbridge House, St Mary Bourne, Hampshire.

● CLASSIC car prices are still rising, too. At ADT's (formerly British Car Auctions)

recent sale, held at the National Motorcycle Museum, near Birmingham, a 1960 Austin Healey "Frog-eye" Sprite fetched £14,400, a 1954 MG TF reached £29,400, a 1947 fully restored Triumph Roadster went for £29,100 and a right hand drive Maserati 3500 GTI Vignale Spyder soared to £158,600. An 1926 Bentley 3-litre needing total restoration was sold for £80,400.