

Minor Miracle

Morris Minor guru Charles Ware says the little British dumpling still makes sense

ROBERT HOWLETT'S FAMOUS photograph of Isambard Kingdom Brunel catches the eye in Charles Ware's office, which looks rather like the aftermath of an explosion in Steptoe and Son's scrapyards. The picture is appropriate, for two reasons: first, because Ware's business premises in Lower Bristol Road, Bath, stand within a stone's throw of the engineer's Great Western Railway. Second, because 'Champagne Charlie', as Ware was dubbed by the *News of the World* during his millionaire phase, endorses one of the fundamental beliefs that made Brunel so worthy of our respect.

His finest works were designed and built to stand the test of time. Today, Ware preaches the gospel of durability to followers all over the world. He is the high priest of the Morris Minor cult.

He has written a book on the subject - *Durable Car Ownership* - and can prove that at least 30 percent of the overall costs with which owners of modern cars are saddled can be avoided by running a properly rehabilitated Minor. The following paragraphs, taken from an eight-page Morris Minor Centre brochure about how the archetypal district nurse's car can be updated, indicate Ware's opinion of the modern motor industry.

'The design engineers, who have to find the practical answers to the marketing men's needs, know that the comparative new price of the car on the road is crucial to its success, and within their given budgets have to find ways of saving on material and labour costs in order to be competitive. Each component is, therefore, designed to a given price rather than to long-term labour maintainable standards. This is known as value engineering or, as I prefer to call it, built-in obsolescence.

'Car manufacturers don't like this phrase but, in practice, this is what they are doing, because if they make long-life components, it would cost them more in material and man-hours than the market could stand...

'Put simply, it makes no commercial sense to manufacture components that



will last 100,000 miles when 40,000 miles is the acceptable industry norm, or a bodyshell which will last for over 15 years when under 10 is considered sufficient...

'The majority of owners who run second-hand motor cars will, therefore, have to resign themselves to paying the increased financial costs of this inappropriate system of manufacturing for many years, or drop out of car ownership altogether as their trusted old friends finally succumb to the crusher.

'Fortunately, the life support system we have built for the Morris Minor will allow it to go into the 21st century as a *useful* motor car which will be updated over the years as *real* durable improvements in engine, fuel efficiency or suspension and braking are put into general practice.'

Note the emphasis on 'useful' in the previous paragraph. The italics draw attention to the fact that classic car buffs account for a very small percentage of the Morris Minor Centre's customers. The vast majority are what Ware describes as

'serious' or 'survival' motorists. The car is more likely to be an essential provider of basic, low-cost transport than a polished, pampered blend of plaything and investment. Many of these cuddly little cars - the newest of which are now nearing their 19th birthday - are given names and regarded as members of the family. Typical owners mentioned by Ware include students, clergymen struggling to survive on small stipends, and retired people on fixed incomes.

Just over 1,600,000 cars and light commercials had been built when the ill-fated British Leyland Motor Corporation lowered the curtain in April 1971. About 100,000 are still on the road in Britain, according to the guru of Lower Bristol Road. Well over half, he estimates, are run by people who have precious little to spend on personal transport. At the other end of the scale are those who can afford a new car, but prefer not to have their money devoured by the ogre of depreciation.

Tourers occupy what Ware terms the 'frothy' end of the business. They are admired and coveted, but have almost invariably been treated harder than saloons. The timber-framed Traveller, motoring's answer to Anne Hathaway's olde worlde cottage on the outskirts of Stratford-upon-Avon, is popular for the very good reason that it's spacious enough to be a practical alternative to a modern hatchback.

The car destined to become as typical of Britain as roast beef, pewter tankards of best bitter, and cricket on the village green, was conceived by Alec Issigonis, almost half a century ago. Paul Skilleter's *Morris Minor*, published by Osprey in 1981, enshrines the earliest photographic evidence of the 'Mosquito' project. Taken in 1942, the shot is of a scale model that looks almost exactly the same as the mature Minors that still potter along many a high street. A prototype of sorts ran a year later, but it was 1948 before the new Morris made its debut at Earls Court, London, where Britain's first post-war motor show was staged.