

The Morris Minor rides again

MOTORING

Confirmed Minorophile Ian Nairn explains how to get a guaranteed, good-as-new Morris for under £1,000

CHARLES WARE is a polymath, though that desiccated word ill-suits his ebullient personality. Trained at the Slade, he abandoned painting for building and became a property developer, specialising in conservation and renovation.

He became a millionaire, in the process saving Bath's Kingsmead Square from demolition and organising the alternative Bath Festival, or Happening, which must have surprised the citizens a year or two back. Came the property crash, he lost everything. So, back to square one, he started again in the conservation business. Serving Morris Minors.

The Morris Minor Centre is in Twerton, an industrial western suburb of Bath and a far cry from the terraces and crescents. It was started up last November and it is running at an output of around 150 cars a year: the Minor, all the varieties of Minor, and nothing but the Minor.

The firm buys Minors where it can get them, does them up to a basic specification—which it will happily extend upwards to order—and resells at a price range which reflects the amount of work needed. At the moment they come from £750 up to



Charles Ware: back in the conservation business

£1,100; convertibles and Travellers from £875 to about £1,300.

For that you get reconditioned engine and gearbox, new clutch, a respray, new trim, new hood on convertibles, new wood on Travellers. Plus whatever else needs to be overhauled. You then have a car which goes on for ever, and one for which spares are still easily available. So help me, they still make wing panels.

And also a car which in its quiet way is a classic; one that

will appreciate in value rather than the other way round. Classless as well as classic; Mr Ware's clients have included titled ladies as well as engine drivers. (The garage is beside a viaduct on the main line to Bristol; High Speed Train and Morris Minor make a piquant transport combination.) It is Britain's answer to the Beetle; but much as I respect the VW's durability, it is much less fun to drive.

I have, of course, a vested

interest. And I've put my money where my mouth is. My own Minor convertible, XPC 359G, is now undergoing treatment, and I'll be reporting in the autumn—they don't like to hurry things, and it will take about eight weeks, depending on just when the craftsmen are available.

But I must emphasise that this, luckily for me, was a special case. The Centre doesn't overhaul customers' cars in this way. It would like to, and may start doing so next year, but at the moment there simply isn't enough space. The yard is tiny and looks like one of those garages deep in the Auvergne where mechanics perform miracles and then go off to a splendid Routier-type lunch. I find this very reassuring: a glittering Morris Minor showroom would scare the pants off me.

And also, I suspect, off Charles Ware. He's seen the ups and the downs, taken the risks and not gone into a sulk when the long-shot didn't come in first at 40 to one. In this race, to run the metaphor into the ground, I think he is on a winning favourite.

Mr Ware is very fond of Brunel, who had the same kind of roller-coaster life, and I can see why. Technical ability, imagination allied to a hatred of pretensions, and a stubborn refusal to cut and run. Good luck to him; it's a long way from sleek salesmen and bikinis on bonnets at the Motor Show.

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