

Charles Ware

Energetic champion of the Morris Minor and Georgian architecture

Charles Ware, who has died aged 79, was an exuberant devotee of Georgian architecture and the Morris Minor car who played a significant role in the revival of both. Nicknamed "Champagne Charlie"

by the *News of the World* in the heady early 1970s, he was that unlikely thing, a wildly popular property developer who spent his fleeting fortune on entertaining and imaginative social schemes.

This made him friends and admirers who rallied to his aid when, after playing a leading role in the regeneration of Islington, north London, and Bath, he was bankrupted in the 1975 property crash. From subsequent assorted, mostly offbeat, offers of help he chose an invitation to share in a couple of bids for worn-out crocks at a car auction in Wiltshire. Thus began the Morris Minor Centre, dedicated to the repair and restoration of Morris Minor cars.

Ware's notion was that a simple and reliable piece of design should be maintained in perpetuity. He applied it to both 18th-century town housing and Sir Alec Issigonis's famous car. In his hands, both were updated, with all manner of side-effects, including today's astronomical property prices in London N1 and a string of small engineering works in Sri Lanka making Minor parts.

He was given regular accolades, including the 2003 Green Apple award for environmental services to the motor industry. His dream of picturesque cottages, smelling of oil paint, "this was coupled with education at Steiner schools and, later, Frensham Heights school, Surrey, whose liberal values accompanied Ware to the Slade School of Art in London."

Ware was born in Edinburgh, to Harry and Armyne (nee Davidson), artists who gave him a colourful upbringing. Both parents were conscientious objectors during the second world war, and his father's duties as a landworker took the family to a series of what his son called "damp but picturesque cottages, smelling of oil paint". This was coupled with education at Steiner schools and, later, Frensham Heights school, Surrey, whose liberal values accompanied Ware to the Slade School of Art in London.

After two years' national service, which included action in Cyprus in the



Ware, once nicknamed Champagne Charlie by the *News of the World*, at the Bath Pageant of Motoring in 2014

late 50s, he was appointed as a lecturer in etching at the Slade. He settled in Islington, where he galvanised the revival of its smoke-blackened streets. Initially renting with Bohemian colleagues from art college, he bought a rickety terrace house and restored it with the help of friends. Its sale financed a second purchase, and so the regeneration grew. Over five years he and his friends turned around something like 1,200 properties in Islington, many of which had been earmarked for demolition. Although it is hard to imagine now, people preferred to buy newer houses in those days and the demand for restored Georgian properties at first needed stimulating.

Ware's move to Bath Academy of Art in the mid-60s relocated this sense of energy and purpose. He set up a consortium of architects to tackle Bath's war-damaged Georgian property and terraces, which had been blighted by planning uncertainty. Among his most monuments in the city are the restored Theatre Royal, the surviving parts of

Blitz-damaged Kingsmead Square and the splendour of the former Cleveland hotel in Great Pultney Street, which he bought semi-detached and used as the base for an arts and music festival before carpenters and stonemasons moved in.

Ware's flair for fun led him to become a patron of young artists at the start of their careers, including Roy Music, for whom he provided funding and a van.

He renovated his own house in the Royal Crescent, Bath, before moving to a 100-acre estate outside the city at Battlediffs. It was around this time that the Champagne Charlie tag was affixed to him.

The 1975 crash wiped out everything. The value of Ware's portfolio plummeted, and he was left owing just under £1m. Barred from running a business as a bankrupt, he relied on a friend to handle accounts and paid back all his local debts within two years. Aged 41 and with a young family to support, he was determined to rise again, but to think smaller in business terms. He took night school classes in car maintenance and gradually turned a small yard off the Lower Bristol Road, Bath, into a Morris Minor shrine.

"It reminds you of one of those garages deep in the Auvergne where mechanics perform miracles and then

go off for a Rottiers-style lunch," wrote a significant visitor in 1977, Ian Naim, the architectural critic of the *Sunday Times*.

Naim's article, inspired by an earlier piece in the *Bath Evening Chronicle*, triggered much publicity and a consequent business that has sometimes ebbed but never stopped flowing. Ware was also responsible for helping to create an offshoot business, The Durable Car Company, which was set up in the UK and Sri Lanka in 1994 to make low-cost Morris Minor panels.

He retired from his business activities in 2009 after suffering a stroke and kidney infection, but the Morris Minor Centre continues as a leading restorer of the marque, now based in Bristol. He bounced back from his illnesses and remained a familiar figure in Bath.

He is survived by his third wife, Helena Harding, whom he married in 1994, by their daughter, Miriam, and by three other children, Daniel, from his first marriage, and Zachary and Bamaby, from his second. Both marriages ended in divorce. He is also survived by his sister Gillian.

Martin Wainwright

Charles Fabian Ware, property developer and car restorer, born 8 November 1935; died 4 July 2015