

Charlie Ware

One-time bankrupt who had a talent for restoration and applied it to rebuilding old Morris Minors

CHARLIE WARE, who has died aged 79, was the founder of the Morris Minor Centre in Bath, a home where much-loved "moggies" went to be restored, reconditioned and repaired.

Tapping into a very English vein of nostalgia, Ware held surgeries for his "patients", many of whom were regular visitors and had names such as Molly or Gertrude. He also rescued them from scrapheaps, farmyards and garages, carefully restoring and finding new homes for them.

The Morris, with its curved wings and bonnet, was designed by Sir Alec Issigonis and had been a mainstay of family motoring since 1948. By 1972, when British Leyland stopped production, some 1.3 million had been built. But when Ware started in business four years later their numbers were falling rapidly and spares were hard to find.

Ware had been a millionaire property restorer in Bath in the 1960s, one of the campaigners against the "sack of Bath". He enjoyed the good life, financed the early days of Roxy Music and was dubbed "champagne Charlie" by the *News of the World* for his parties. After the property crash he was declared bankrupt in 1975.

Within months he picked himself up, borrowed £200 and was visiting car auctions to try to make some quick cash. Morris Minors and Travellers, he noticed, were being treated in the same way as Georgian houses: discarded when they had the potential to be restored. "I noticed that



Ware (with son Zac): later, iPods could be fitted

whenever I got one it always sold very quickly," he told *The Sun*, "and I realised that I had tapped a very English thing."

The Morris Minor Centre opened beneath a railway arch in Bath in 1976 and owners were soon flocking from around the world to admire Ware's craftsmanship. The cars came from many different sources, including barn finds, auctions and tips. Ware recalled how on one occasion a senior Army officer was in tears as he handed over his beloved Morris Minor.

In his book *Durable Car Ownership* (1982), Ware described how the cars' mechanical simplicity means that they lack the built-in obsolescence of modern vehicles. "Treat the car like a house, like a long-term investment, and there's no reason

why it can't last 40 years," he said. Almost everything could be replaced or repaired: panels were cut out and reinstated; five-speed gear boxes were installed; the steering was made lighter and more comfortable; and alternators were put in, allowing owners to add radios and later iPod docks.

Ware was a great believer in the value of skilled labour; he also declared that he never again wanted to be a millionaire: "Money puts a ju-ju on everything - business, friendship, even the way people react in the street."

Charles Fabian Ware was born in Edinburgh on November 8 1935. His grandfather was Major General Sir Fabian Ware, founder of the War Graves Commission; his parents were artists and conscientious objectors. Young Charlie was educated at a Rudolph Steiner school, after which "National Service [in Cyprus, largely playing cricket] was a pretty surreal experience".

He studied art at the Slade in London, before moving to Wiltshire to teach at Corsham art college. By then he had been working on small housing conversions in north London, helping to save Victorian terraces in Islington and Camden.

His attention turned to Bath, where he bought up derelict houses, restored them and sold them on. He lived in one in the Royal Crescent, which he bought for £5,000. "At that time no one wanted to live in old, dirty, black and crumbling buildings," he said. For a while he owned

the Theatre Royal in the city where, on one occasion, Roxy Music gave a free gig as a thank you to him for guaranteeing the payments on their first van. After his bankruptcy he lived in a damp basement.

Ware recalled how the company began with only three cars, while working capital was hard to come by. "If you are starting up a business with nearly nothing, you become totally aware of cash flow," he told the *Financial Times* in 1983. For many years his only marketing was a fortnightly advertisement in *Exchange and Mart* and press publicity, which he had a knack for attracting.

In 1991 he went into partnership with Dhanapala Samarasekera, a Sri Lankan businessman, who set up the Durable Car Company, making spares for the Morris. They made a short film, *The Businessman, the Buddhist and the Morris Minor*.

In 2007 the Morris Minor Centre moved to Bristol. Illness led to Ware's retirement in 2009, but he was able to resume his painting and still be a regular visitor to the workshop.

Charlie Ware married Helen Robinson in 1960 and Veronica "Bunny" Sheppard in 1967; both marriages were dissolved. In 1995 he married, thirdly, Helena Harding, who survives him with their daughter, a son from his first marriage and two sons from his second, one of whom, Zac, now runs the Morris Minor Centre with his partner Lucy.

Charlie Ware, born November 8 1935, died July 4 2015