

Buying a Traveller (1560 Words)

The Morris Minor Traveller was introduced in 1953 and was named after one of its main potential markets ("Traveller's Car"). Indeed, it proved very popular as a sales rep's vehicle carrying samples etc. to visit clients up and down the country. Many went into such commercial service and they were also very popular with the Military with much use of them being made by the Armed Forces. The boot on the saloon was not very large and being a curved shape, does not have much of a load carrying capacity. The Traveller, however, with its double doors and ability to drop the rear seat to make more room, proved a hit with many buyers who needed a bit more room. They made excellent family cars too and their popularity was not hard to fathom. When I started work in 1972, the office had the use of two 'pool' cars – a late Austin Minor Van and a 'G' registered Traveller. This Traveller was my first experience of such a car and was my favourite!

The timber from which the rear bodywork is constructed is Ash, which is a light, strong wood – ideal for coach building. Sadly, however, it is not very durable and as a result, the Traveller's biggest problems are usually related to the condition of the wooden bits. There were only ever about one quarter the number of Travellers made as compared to the 2 and 4 door saloons. This coupled with the shorter life expectancy of the woodwork meant that Travellers tended to be a less common sight. This is particularly true of older ones. Series II Travellers are quite rare these days (particularly the 'cheese grater' grille 1953-4 ones). However, it seems that many have been restored and there are plenty of later ones about with new (or newer) woodwork. Occasionally, you will find a well-preserved example with the original woodwork. This will probably be a car which has been well looked after by one owner and kept in a dry garage all its life. If you can find one of these, you will be very lucky!

On the Traveller, the condition of the wooden frame is very important. It is a structural part of the car and as such provides an element of rigidity for the vehicle. However, it is also *extremely* prone to rot. Rotten bits are fairly easy to spot and difficult to hide, however, most Travellers, unless recently restored are likely to have less than perfect wood. Darker areas are indicative of rot damage. Moderately dark areas can be artificially lightened with chemicals and/or scraped back and re-varnished. Beware of cars that have had a dark stain applied. This is usually done to hide the rotten bits. My preferred finish is a light, honey coloured stain with a couple of coats of varnish. Beware of too much varnish since it takes on a life of its own and lifts off allowing moisture beneath. Not everyone likes varnish however and Danish oil is another common form of treatment - this gives a matt finish and is preferred by some people.

Most damage occurs at the joints, particularly the waist rail/rear post and the tops of the rear post. The timber frame is slightly flexible and joints are bound to move given the slight flexing in service and environmental changes which will cause shrinkage. Rear doors should open and shut easily with no big gaps between the wood and the seals. I prefer doors that open one at a time, but a lot of cars need both to be open and shut together. It might not seem that serious but the rear door seals are important not only from the point of view of keeping the weather out but also the exhaust fumes. Since the Traveller was not designed in a wind tunnel, the

aerodynamics of the styling tends to 'suck' the fumes up over the rear doors and through any gaps in some cars.

Later cars (not sure of the build dates) have laminated sections used for the rear corner posts. This was done as a cost saving measure and not for durability which was undoubtedly compromised. These tend to open up due to moisture ingress. Most don't look very pretty now. The waist rails seem to be fairly vulnerable and go rotten due to blocked window channel drains and at the joints with the front and rear posts. The other favourite rot point on the Traveller is the joint at the top of the rear posts which is in the direct line of water running off the roof. The joints on the rear doors can loosen and rot and can be easily checked. If this is the case, the door can be carefully dismantled and re-glued if necessary.

From the front doors forward, of course the Traveller shares the same anatomy as the other passenger cars in the range and so the condition checks are the same. The reduced strength caused by interfering with the 'monocoque' construction, is compensated for in a similar way to that utilised in the convertible. The Traveller sills have an extra steel channel piece welded inside (as per the convertible). Underneath is almost the same, but the outer rear sills have a slightly different arrangement. Instead of the outer rear edge panel, as on the saloon, there is a 'trapezoidal' shaped plate called a "side-to-floor closing panel". These are screwed to the bottom timber foot rail and span across the gap to the inner sill panel. They have a habit of falling off and exposing the boxing sill. I have known Travellers to fail an MOT due to the absence of the closing panel. Bizarrely, however, it is not the absence of the panel which is the issue (it is only screwed on, remember and performs no structural function). No, it is the fact that the inner boxing sill is exposed to view and it might be rusty. Of course, no one would advocate deliberately hiding rust damage, but this is a case of "what the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over."

The usual advice that applies to most 'ordinary' classic cars is that you should think carefully about the aspirations you have for your prospective purchase. If you are looking for a project, then you will know what you can take on and hopefully have a pretty good idea of what it will cost you, both in time and money. It is encouraging that there are enough of you out there that are happy to resurrect these cars and keep more of them on the road. This approach is not for everyone, of course and a significant number of buyers will want something that they can just drive with a little bit of 'tinkering and fettling' at the weekend. This is where hopes can be dashed at the realisation of the true cost of good quality repair work on a car that was thought to be 'OK'. The Traveller, because of the woodwork can be complicated and expensive to repair. Whilst individual pieces of the wooden frame can be replaced, matching the appearance can be difficult and it is not an easy job to successfully and accurately replicate the joints. Accordingly, it is usually better to replace complete side frame sections or doors as necessary. So you can see how the next step would be to say, 'let's get the whole lot done!' Before you know it, you have agreed to have a new body. There are several specialists who make the ash frames and the job can be done at home. If you have not done it before, it will take quite a long time, but it is worth it. If you are paying someone to do, you should err on the side of pessimism – costs do tend to escalate. You may have to allow for additional welding when the body is off. I have known the cost of the job of woodwork replacement to exceed the

value of a very tidy Traveller. That may be acceptable, however, if you are keeping the car. Don't be put off though; they are great cars, *probably my favourite*.

Living with a Traveller

The best way to preserve a Traveller is to keep it dry. Also you should re-apply the varnish when it starts to deteriorate. Keep an eye on the woodwork joints. These will 'flex' when in use and this allows the water to penetrate and set off the rot process. I think that the application of many coats of varnish to get a deep shine is not a good idea since the varnish tends to lift away slightly and allow moisture underneath. It is better to put on about 2 or 3 coats of good quality varnish after a good rub down every few years or so or when it starts to look tired. You should check and clear the drain holes on the mid-rail under the windows occasionally to make sure they are clear. The window slider channels don't last very long and when these are replaced, it is a good idea to temporarily block these with dum dum (or even blu-tak etc) and run some preservative into the cleaned out timber channel before putting the new sliding window channels in (and removing your 'blocking agent' of course).