



## AN LRTA REVIEW OF CURRENT URBAN TRANSIT DEVELOPMENTS

### **UK's SUPERTRAM SCHEMES "BITE THE DUST"**

#### INTRODUCTION

Are we about to see in this country a third generation tramway revival? Our first generation, although a strong successful force during the first half of the 20th century, was eventually defeated on two fronts, fund starvation and the rise of popular motoring.

We all know now that the sea-front tramway in Blackpool was the only survivor. One fact gained from this was its robust nature when involved in an urban type service, its ability to efficiently move large crowds of people and proof that it is "good value for money" even though one has to wait 50 or more years to reach this conclusion.

#### EUROPE TOOK A DIFFERENT VIEW.

After a shaky start that almost followed British policy, the Europeans realised it was in the wrong direction and changed course before too much damage could be done. This was highlighted in Frankfurt (Germany) where passengers were fortunate in being able to recognise the difference between interurban light rail (light metro) and an urban tramway.

This was demonstrated when the authorities decided to bury the longer tram routes in city-centre tunnels along with railway style platforms but far fewer in number than tram stops. This arrangement works well with ~ London Tube type service on long routes but failed in Frankfurt because of the mistake made in eliminating street based tram lines through the pedestrianised shopping streets with its potential threat to business and mobility.

This then took form of a "them-and-us" type of dispute and became a "copy book" example of people power forcing a change in transport policy. Frankfurt has since built some tram routes on the surface in the city centre and the whole of the city has benefited by these new through services. London now appears to be following this Frankfurt example by planning a tram route across the Thames which will provide a connection between the Kings Cross area and several prominent locations on the South Side.

#### THE SUPERTRAM ERA, ENGLAND GETS "COLD FEET"

Over a short period of time, all 2nd generation tramway construction ceased despite the highly successful nature of our new tramway systems being popular with passengers. Another batch of three are seeking funds but have suffered from inflation, blamed on Government delays by their promoters. Inflation was not recognised by the DfT when an order was given "back to the drawing board" and, whether it was practical or otherwise, an instruction to change to another transport mode.

Luckily for Metrolink in Manchester, this new instruction appeared to lack serious intent and years of being at the end of a "see-saw" of approvals and cancellations were prepared to take on the Government. The strong argument that light rail and guided buses are not good "bedmates" found a small chink of light in the DfT's armour putting the "big-bang" concept back in the race. Manchester still hopes that the "big-bang" scheme in its entirety will eventually be built, an aspiration that could be helped by Europe looking at UK as a backward nation on transit matters.

#### A TRAMWAY PLAN WITH A DARK CLOUD OVER IT

Despite Leeds being overtaken in the urban transit queue but continuing to spend millions of pounds of local taxpayers money, the Government "pulled the plug" on the project with but a brief statement : "not value for money". All the signs for rejection were growing stronger by the day but until a final rejection the Council and the West Yorkshire PTA had little choice but to continue the funding of the project.

The apparent reasoning that justified this "up front spend" could have been that no Government with secret doubts would have allowed such a strong financial commitment when knowing full well that any funding at this late stage was heading for that proverbial Black Hole.

Leeds was now being pushed into financial embarrassment combined with a think again approach. Rubber tired street cars (disguised as trams) were cheaper and now appeared to be Government policy. Quite simply money for transit purposes was in short supply. Infrastructure funds for bus based projects came out of a very different "pot" which makes it difficult to assess the overall cost for comparison purposes. The well

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known Transport 2000 organisation (West Yorkshire Group) have called a meeting with the Deputy Chairman of the WYPTA (December 7th 2006) to discuss Leeds traffic problems. They also made the point that car usage had risen whilst bus use had declined 13% over the last decade.

MANY TRAM ADVANTAGES BUT LITTLE CREDIT

If added to the balance sheet, its many qualities could put it well ahead in the "value for money" calculations and could play a major part in telling the public that the rubber tired alternative is probably not what it seems. One major advantage for the tram, quietly practised in the UK and universally applied elsewhere, is its ability to safely mix with people in pedestrianised shopping malls.

Anyone doubting this should visit Bremen (Germany) and see the trams there using the pedestrianised shopping malls and pedestrianised tourist areas. (no fumes, little noise, guard rails not needed and capable of operating at the appropriate speed among people or among traffic)

Anyone lucky enough to regularly use a Supertram will know that the doors always line up with the marking on the footpath type platforms<sup>3</sup> and be level with the tram entrance.

QUALITIES WE CAN ONLY DREAM ABOUT

Karlsruhe (Germany) operates its urban and interurban trams on shared tracks through its town-centre pedestrianised shopping street. Possibly the most passenger friendly system currently operating in Europe.

Dublin (Luas), a new tramway system, is making a profit a full year ahead of expectations and does not now need the promised subsidy. So popular has the tram service become that plans are being developed for major extensions.

Melbourne (Australia) is now celebrating 100 years of continuous tramway operation. Whilst other cities discarded the tram in the 1950s, Melbourne stood firm to become the largest network in the Southern Hemisphere and claiming to be the world's most liveable cities.

SOME VALID AND INTERESTING COMPARISONS

Commercial speeds on urban duties are much higher on tram routes, made possible by their higher engineering qualities, faster loading and unloading, and traffic priority at traffic signals.

Environmental concerns have enabled power supplies to be partly provided from renewable sources. Calgary (Canada) is aiming to go over completely to wind power.

Spain and France (including Madrid and Paris) have embarked on an intense programme, of tramway construction.

The tram-train concept is gaining ground with its ability to operate under different electrical supplies with a single pantograph. One important development is the use of a railway line in suburbs and an urban tram line in a town-centre.

LAUNCHING ftr

The new Streetcar bus (ftr) suffered a setback when it was launched a few weeks ago in York. The Supertram project in Leeds had been cancelled on the strength of a claim that ftr can accomplish all that Supertram can attain at about half the cost. Although the transport press gave ftr a poor write-up, it has not helped Leeds to regain the Supertram. Many are no doubt hoping that a Metrolink style change could happen before Leeds sell off the land bought for Supertram.

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