



LIGHT RAIL - MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

The early 1960s saw a near total tramway annihilation in Britain, only Blackpool escaped. Added to this was the total elimination of trolley bus operation in the UK. Although Bradford had near perfect operating conditions for trolley buses, someone decided they had to go. A question that now needs asking: why is the British public being treated so badly by the Government, almost as though we had become a poor nation and could not afford quality urban transit? True, the Supertram price tag is higher but Discussion Document No 58 gave a list of over 100 high quality transit systems in Western Europe alone. This must surely give justification to Europe's positive attitude towards light rail. To go for a cheaper option after promoters had spent large sums of money engaging consultants tends to display contempt towards the local authorities and their advisers. The political reasons for encouraging car use and allowing its costly road expansion to escape unscathed when cuts are forced onto other modes must be overpowering, for instance Portsmouth badly needs a light rail tunnel and Liverpool a surface tramway. The underground railway lines, very efficient indeed, are of little use for shopping centre passengers wishing to make a short journey. A lost opportunity of major proportions comes from Leeds where the well-thought-out integrated tram and bus network has been rejected by the Government in favour of something that the city disposed of nearly 100 years ago.

The irony of this is what could be called "a geographical mix up": Leeds wanting a Supertram backed up by bus feeders being told to make do with trolley buses and yet Bradford, just ten miles away, wanting trolley buses, found itself with guided buses instead.

Could these missed opportunities be regarded as DfT failures (1), brought on by a lack of overseas travel, or failure to inspect technical developments?. Replacing Supertram with trolley bus routes could well be a sure way of keeping many of the faults that the tram would have corrected. The smaller loads by buses needs the retention of an excess of stops which forces passengers making a vehicle change to walk further. Leeds CBD is now almost free of general traffic, ideal for trams but (on safety grounds) not trolley buses.

The lack of overseas travel to improve the learning curve can result in more wasted years "reinventing that proverbial wheel". Problems once existed with rail profiles in Europe and it still seems to do so in Britain which may help to explain our slow pace with tram-train technology. Although Leeds appears to have been badly treated by the Government, Bradford has in many ways been treated far worse. The 60s decline in rail travel made it possible for both of its terminal railway stations to be redeveloped and then rebuilt further away from the CBD. A need now exists to provide a link between them. If experts from the DfT visited Kassel or Karlsruhe they could examine the clever way that the train becomes a tram to link the railway with the shopping centre.

A mirror image for Bradford would be a service starting in Otley and making use of the old railway trackbed into one Bradford station where it would access the traffic free streets to the other side of Bradford and then as a light rail line along the former abandoned railway line through the Spen Valley.

Although common in Germany, the running of trams along city centre precincts is not a regular feature in Britain but it will take on a more familiar occurrence here after Birmingham has built its city extension to Five Ways.

A return to trolley buses, ideal on Bradford's hilly roads, could also have its routes arranged to serve the two new terminal stations.

REFERENCES

- 1) Department for Transport (DfT) castigated over light rail decisions - LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY - page 11 - 2nd to 15th May 2008.

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