

Jonathan Bray

Connections

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News and stories of progressive change

I'm glad you asked

I spent most of the Summer with my wife, Tiina, in Estonia with sojourns in Lithuania and Latvia. I read books. I observed the nature. I got stuck into some projects. I didn't miss working full time one little bit! For the first time I came back from Tallinn without the thousand mile flight. Rail is currently rubbish for crossing the Baltic states so it's better to get back to Blighty via crossing the Baltic Sea on a ferry and going by rail onwards from there. On this trial run, via the overnight ferry from Tallinn to Stockholm and then rail from there to Copenhagen, Hamburg, Cologne, Brussels and London (with an extended stay in Schleswig-Holstein along the way because you can do that kind of thing when you long haul by rail). It was a piece of cake. Expensive cake. But so much more civilised than flying (though Eurostar does its best to spoil things by aping as many of the dehumanising things about air travel as it can). I have thoughts from the experience [here](#) – including on what a difference to flight free European travel it would make if a ferry route were restored from GB to the Nordics or Hamburg.

I've also been busy working with Welsh Government and TfW colleagues on the exciting plans to bring buses in Wales under public control (where they belong) including spending a day exploring the good, the bad and the indifferent of buses in Cardiff and Newport.

In September I also headed in the opposite direction to the West Highlands of Scotland I reached Britain's most remote pub (and surely one of the best anywhere) the Old Forge on the Knoydart peninsular as well as one of the contenders for most remote restaurants in the UK - the Corrou Station House (which stands in magnificent isolation on Rannoch Moor). All by public transport (you can't get to either of the venues by regular car). And also involving the use of Britain's most romantic train - the

West Highland Sleeper from London Euston to Fort William. Though on this occasion in the seated coach to and from Edinburgh rather than a sleeping berth (0450 off Edinburgh outwards and 20.50 return). Shows what you can do by public transport. Quite something to roll out of the restaurant after a very leisurely dinner at Corrou station, following on from a day exploring the environs of Loch Ossian, and see the sleeper train climbing and winding its way up to the lonely platforms before slowing to pick you up.

When I returned I was delighted to have confirmed a five year senior visiting research fellowship at University of Leeds Institute of Transport Studies and to start to get to know new colleagues and to understand current and upcoming research programmes. I also have some other projects and roles which are in the process of coming to fruition.

And finally as a life long fan of big old freight trains it's hard to put into words how thrilled I am that my first feature article for my favourite mag, Today's Railway Europe, is due to be published shortly with one of my pix on the cover. It's an illustrated article on the railways of the port of Klaipeda in Lithuania and it will be on the shelves of WH Smiths and all good newsagents soon.

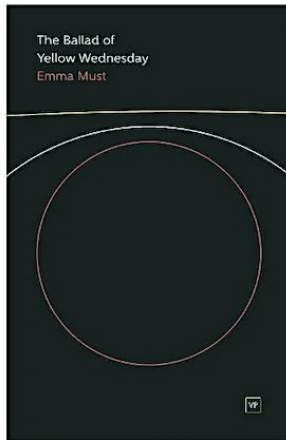
Policy geek postcard: Malmo



Scandi cities like Malmo feel like the policy research and development centres for decarbonising the planet. Brave and international, they also mean it - climate is front and centre of policy making. Next level decarbonisation pre-occupations in Malmo include: decarbonisation of construction; the circular economy; sustainable local and smart energy grids; nature based solutions; a just transition; climate

friendly food; and climate impact investment. They also have the world's first bike hotel! Read the full postcard from Malmo [here](#)

Stories of progressive change: The Ballad of Yellow Wednesday



Thirty years ago non violent direct action protestors took on the DfT's bulldozers, security guards, private investigators and lawyers to try and save Twyford Down in Hampshire from being ruined by an extension of the M3 motorway. That extension was part of a vast and wider roads programme which sought to systematically increase the scale and size of the country's motorway and major 'A' road network which the Government boasted was the biggest road building spree since the Romans. Whatever the environmental and financial cost. One of those protestors was Emma Must who went from local librarian to eventually ending up being imprisoned as a result of defying the court orders which the DfT hoped would end the protests. The road was built but the protests acted as a lightning rod for wider concerns about a roads programme which as a result was subsequently massively scaled back paving the way for a greater focus on public transport.

Thirty years on and Emma has written a powerful and unflinching volume of poems about what happened which has been shortlisted for the Laurel prize for nature and eco-poetry. *The Ballad of Yellow Wednesday* is the language of the land, its natural and human history juxtaposed with the mechanical language of its destruction and the persecution of those who sought to protect it. It's an intimate account of the course of the personal and communal experience of the protests and its aftermaths – from library shelves to the prison cell. And ultimately it's unforgiving of a system that is itself unforgiving of those who refuse to back down in defence of the environment. I played a leading role in the wider anti-roads coalition of the time and reading '*The Ballad of Yellow Wednesday*' shook me – it doesn't put a foot wrong.

In depth: The strange death (and rebirth) of trams in England and Scotland



Riding the tram as it rolled urbanely down the Leith Walk a few weeks back, on the new extension of the Edinburgh Tram, reminded me that this is what trams do at their best. They keep it simple (you know where you are going) and they keep it comfortable (ride quality matters). We didn't stop for anything other than when we should have (for tram stops). It felt like it had always been there. No longer one of the many former or might have been tram and tramways which haunt our cities.

It never gets less mind boggling that the UK got rid (one line in Blackpool excepted) of every urban tram system we had before the sixties had even got going. Why did we do that? And how best can we continue to put that mistake right with more tram lines like the Leith extension? An excellent recent book by Tony Young for the Light Rail Transit Association on ["Might have been Trams and Tramways"](#) filled in some more of the gaps for me.

From today's standpoint it's hard to comprehend the scale of the UK's tram systems in the first part of the 20th Century (as an aside, my great grandad's last manual labouring job was laying the tracks of the extension of the tram to Guiseley, 9 miles out of Leeds). In August 1916 (if you were willing to walk to close a 7 mile gap in Calderdale) you could travel from Bingley to Liverpool by tram - if you had a day to spare. There had been plans for much more. Everything from a tram to the heart of the Lakes at Ambleside and a proposal for a tram transporter bridge to carry double decker trams over the River Ribble on their journey from Blackpool to Southport. If the various plans for even more tram extensions had occurred you could have travelled from Fleetwood to Macclesfield by tram.

But already some of the seeds of destruction had been planted. Profits from the trams heyday (where some systems were rather hastily knocked together), which should have been set aside for inevitable future renewal needs, were spent elsewhere (including holding down the rates). Trams had to take the hit for paying for the roadway on which the tracks were laid (and eighteen inches either side) and Government was also starting to favour other transport modes. A Royal Commission report of 1929 (which formed the basis of the 1930 Road Traffic Act) recommended that *'no additional tramways should be be constructed...and they should gradually disappear and give place to other forms of transport.'* The was followed up by post war government guidance of 'design and layout of roads in built up areas' which stated that: 'There can be no doubt that tramcars running on fixed tracks obstruct the free flow of traffic...we welcome the tendency to replace tramcars by vehicles of greater flexibility.'

Not everyone had seen it that way. Some forward thinking figures in cities like Leeds and Liverpool had been providing their expanding cities with new roads with segregated tracks in the central reservation. There were 25 miles of them in the case of Liverpool served by trams with evocative names like 'Streamliners' and 'Baby Grands'. The same cities were also among those who had plans for tunnelled city centre sections, which would have been in effect a wider evolution of essentially Victorian tram systems into something closer to what we now know as light rail. It would have meant cross city trams with below street level trams in city centres. As part of this approach the tottering double decker trams of yore would start to be replaced by sleeker single decker trams (including the use of unpowered trailer vehicles to provide greater capacity) which as is common just about everywhere else in the world and which would have reduced operating costs. Some rather swish single decker pilot vehicles were produced in Leeds. After the war the advocates for upgrading existing systems put their case within city halls one more time. It was modernise or die. But the trams had become a political football (in Leeds it was Labour that did for them, in Liverpool it was the Conservatives). They were unwanted clutter from the past at a time when operating costs of public transport networks were rising and meeting housing targets was the big priority for investment. Death was cheaper than modernisation so die they all did. 250,000 names on a petition against the Liverpool systems closure was ignored. The trams were burnt and the infrastructure ripped out leaving the central reservations to grass over. Imagine Leeds now with trams criss crossing the city from their metro like central underground stations speeding past the jams on their way to the suburbs on their own segregated infrastructure. Go to Brussels and you can see sub-surface tram stations on tunnelled sections through the city centre - just like Leeds should have had. Britain does have one tram tunnel (and it's still there) - the Kingsway tram tunnel in Holborn. It allowed cross city tram routes when before they had all stopped at termini at the edge of the city centre. As in cities like Leeds there had also been efforts to complement such infrastructure by producing a tram of the future. Similar care was lavished on the design of what became known as the 'Feltham' double decker tram as later would be given to the design of the Routemaster bus. But unlike the Routemaster the Feltham was never mass produced. Ultimately London's half hearted modernisation drive went the same way as those in other UK cities. Trams were gone in London before the 1950s had got going.

The UK wasn't the only country to get rid of its trams. France did too. But the difference is they realised their mistake earlier and have moved faster subsequently. Although tram has had a revival in the UK it's been a halting one. Here Alistair Darling is the villain of the piece. Writing off millions of sunk investment by cancelling tram schemes in Liverpool, Leeds, South Hampshire and Greater Manchester in 2005 and as a result triggering something of a lost decade. Greater Manchester showed grit and determination in resisting the decision and in doing so helped reduce the chilling effect on urban transit of Darling's miserable tenure at Transport. Meanwhile in this story Boris Johnson could be given the role of villain's side kick. He may have been pro-bus and active travel in London but he cut off at the knees both the Cross-River and other tram schemes in the capital.

So what lessons can we learn from recent history that are relevant today? Costs did for trams in the 50s and costs will always be a factor in how fast trams come back. One of the many 'if onlys' of the past is could some systems have survived with greater standardisation? In particular if UK cities had (instead of designing their own trams) adopted, what became as close as we have ever had to universal tram car design - the single decker [Presidents Commission Car](#) or 'PCC'. Nearly 5,000 were built in the US and many thousands more became the mainstay of tram systems on both sides of Europe's Iron Curtain for decades - from the thirties, to in some cases the current day. The tendency towards the bespoke is still evident in new generation UK systems - whereas VDV (the German equivalent of the Urban Transport Group) has recently [procured 504 light rail vehicles](#) at a cost of EUR 4 billion on behalf of six of its members. Is bespoke is a contributory factor in what looks like relatively high costs for UK tram systems? Recent [analysis by 'Britain Remade'](#) found that tram projects in Britain are 2.5 times more expensive per mile than those in France. Is another contributory factor an approach to system construction that leans towards heavy rail engineering than is the case for many long standing European tram systems where a continuity of light rail specific expertise has been maintained? This heavy engineering first approach can also be seen on some parts of UK systems where arguably the opportunity to reshape and remake the wider urban realm to make light rail indispensable have not

always been fully realised (unlike in France which takes more of a city first approach to the look and feel of its systems). Finally is London the dog that isn't barking on trams and light rail? Clearly London has been under the cosh by the Treasury since COVID but the case for street trams to bring order to snarled up streets and congested corridors must on paper be as good as ever. Of course many of these challenges could be addressed by the principal problem - which is the lack of a consistent policy and funding environment which allows for a smoother upward trajectory of the revival of the tram. In the absence of such an environment those who have managed to get schemes built deserve every credit for their perseverance.

Like the later rail closures of the 1960s the destruction of urban tram systems in the 50s is a wound that hasn't healed leaving some of our largest cities with the traces of infrastructure which could have been the basis of modern transit systems. Let's not take any longer than it needs to cost effectively remedy that disastrous mistake so more streets like Leith Walk have trams rolling down them - like they never went away.

This article was also published in Passenger Transport magazine.

Like this, heart that: Books on deep time and no time at all



From the perspective of deep time there's no such thing as a constant and stable climate – or indeed constant and stable geography. We know this. But ['Otherlands - A World in the Making'](#) by Thomas Halliday makes it hyper real for us by going backwards into deep time to and giving us snapshots of different places at different times. For example, five million years ago, what is currently the Mediterranean Sea was periodically a largely empty basin when the straits of Gibraltar were closed by wider tectonic activity. A basin that was in some places 4 kilometres deep where at its depths the summer temperature could reach 80 degrees centigrade (25 degrees hotter than the hottest temperature ever recorded in modern times). Until that basin filled again like a giant bath tub when the straits opened again.

Monumental changes in global climate and geography are the way of the world of deep time. What's different with the current period of climate change is its speed (the nearest equivalent being perhaps the

massive asteroid strike in present day Mexico 66 million years ago or the greenhouse effects triggered by significant volcanic activity in other geological epochs). The lessons of previous periods of rapid change is firstly it leads to mass extinctions as flora and fauna can't migrate or adapt further or fast enough to compensate for the change in the climate. And secondly beware the feedback loops that intensify the pace of change. The difference between deep time and our time is that unlike an asteroid we can change course. As the last sentence of the book says: *'Change, eventually, is inevitable, but we can let the planet take its own time. as we allow the shifting sands of geological time lead us gently into the worlds of tomorrow.'*

['After geo-engineering' by Holly Jean Buck](#) looks at how mankind might slow that change through engineering the climate. Many instantly recoil from these ideas because it feels like it could be used to dodge the need to reduce carbon emissions in the first place and also because dystopian sci fi conditions us to assume it would definitely 100% go wrong. The book argues that we are right to be cautious but also because of the differential effects on different places that significant geo-engineering would have and how that could be biased to richer countries and corporate interests. There's also the amount of scaling up that would need to be done to have any significant impact at all given factors like the energy generation required to power some of these approaches, the scale of carbon sequestration needed and their unproven nature. However, the backdrop for all of this is that we are already changing (geo engineering by unintended consequence) the climate through our activities. Even doing the right thing on air quality can have the unintended consequence of heating the climate. For example, sulphur particles contained in [ships' exhaust fumes](#) have been counteracting some of the warming coming from greenhouse gases. But lowering the sulphur content of marine fuel has weakened the masking effect, effectively giving a boost to warming. Some researchers have [proposed](#) that the drop in SO₂ as a result of the International Maritime Organisation's clean air regulations could be behind a recent spike in global sea surface temperature. A Carbon Brief analysis shows that the likely side-effect of the 2020 regulations to cut air pollution from shipping is to increase global temperatures by around 0.05C by 2050.

It's also important not to see geo-engineering in monolithic, binary terms. The heading covers a variety of practices and activities - some of which cross over into sustainable agriculture and wider planet healing strategies. This includes everything from 'ocean afforestation' (part of which refers to ensuring there's a lot more seaweed to sink down with its carbon to the bottom of the ocean) and weathering (such as turning carbon dioxide into rocks) And whether or not geo-engineering is seen as a last resort depends where you are standing on the planet. For many parts of the planet the climate crisis is causing catastrophe now and it could thus be argued that for those areas it's time for last resort measures now - whereas it might not seem that way to those living in areas less affected like the UK. Whatever the arguments are since the book was written (2019) we are beginning to see scaling up and mainstreaming of carbon capture such as the Biden's [investment of \\$1.2 billion in direct air capture schemes](#) in Texas and Louisiana. [Amazon](#) have also said they will be supporting, what they call, the world's largest deployment of direct air capture technology by committing to purchase 250,000 metric tons of carbon removal over 10 years through direct air capture. Personally, given the urgency of the situation I think we should (but with our eyes open) be looking to scale up carbon capture and undertake more research into the more radical options. But reading these books is a good aid for making your own mind up.

Side projects: One short film from Krustpils and one photo essay from Chisinau



A short film of four poems written in Krustpils, Latvia, this summer is [here](#).

You can find a [photo slideset essay](#) of an ash grey day in a Mercedes Benz in Chisinau, Moldova.

Incoming

Sept 24th. The first regulated buses in England outside London since the 1985 deregulation disaster roll out of the depots in Greater Manchester as tranche one of the Bee Network bus franchising programme becomes a reality in Wigan and Bolton. Given I worked for twenty years at the Urban Transport Group to win the battle to make buses planned, integrated and publicly accountable again, I intend to celebrate and will be there for both the unofficial and official celebrations. For the former I will be speaking at a panel discussion following a screening of 'Bus Regulation - the Musical' at the Manchester Art Gallery on Sunday September 24th at Manchester Art Gallery. Full details [here](#)

March 23rd 2024. Due to the intransigence of the current Westminster administration (the devolved nations have settled the dispute) rail union industrial action means that the the Transport Activists Network annual conference which was scheduled for Sept 30 has had to be rearranged to be next year. Revised details [here](#)

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