

Jonathan Bray

Connections

Issue three: Dec 2023

News and stories of progressive change

I'm glad you asked

In late September a twenty year battle reached a catharsis. The first Greater Manchester Bee network services were launched in Bolton and Wigan. The first bus networks in Great Britain outside London to be put back under public control since buses outside the capital were deregulated in the mid-eighties. I've been involved in three big campaigns in my time. Stopping the 1990s road building programme in its tracks, the high profile Save our Railways campaign that nearly stopped rail privatisation and the battle over the buses. The third was the most frustrating. Mainly because to me (and the public) it's obvious that this key public service should be publicly accountable and integrated - plus the arguments against this always seemed so flimsy. But it's been particularly frustrating because so many of those organisations, entities and the transport great and the good (as well as the trade press) that should have at best been neutral all backed (and often got paid by) the bus barons in their mission to extract as much profit as they could from their monopolies whilst running down a public service relied upon by those with the least. I find it difficult to forgive and forget this. And guess what. I don't have to. So I look forward to writing the book given, inevitably, people are already claiming they were never that opposed to it in the first place. But despite all the obstacles we got there in the end and Greater Manchester put on a great launch at Bolton Town Hall. Great too to see the new Bee network is already outpacing what went before on both patronage and performance. Next stop for regulated buses: Liverpool City Region and Wales.

Talking of Wales, in October related to my role as the advisor to Welsh Deputy Climate Minister, Lee Waters MS, I spent the best part of a week travelling from Bangor to Carmarthen by bus with various side missions and diversions along the way. You can find out what happened in the 'In Depth' piece below.

In October I was in Sheffield for a Local Transport Summit which was still reeling from the current Westminster administration denouncing the contents of its own bus and active travel strategies as being sinister impositions from local government. I'm old enough to remember when Number Ten shouted at local transport authorities, and threatened to cut them off at the financial knees, if they didn't introduce more all day bus lanes and Low Traffic Neighbourhoods. There were a few presentations with something new to say but as ever, it was great for networking and I was blown away by the site visit to the beautiful and extensive [sustainable urban drainage schemes \(SUDs\)](#) in the city centre. There are places in the city centre that I'd been to many times which now, if I'd been teleported there, I wouldn't have recognised. Such is the extent of the transformation from streets for vehicles to streets for people...and plants. In my view Sheffield has always been the best of the core cities on urban realm because it's taken the time to do it in quality (so it doesn't date). These new street transformations really do take Sheffield to the next level and build on the earlier success of Sheaf Square, the Peace Gardens and the Winter Gardens. It no longer needs to be argued that we are facing more extreme weather - including heavy rainfall. We all know it. Roads policies should be therefore concentrating on making cities better places to be whilst 'slowing the flow'. But there's still too much concentration on increasing the flow of traffic through wasting money on zombie road schemes that have been kicking about since the 1970s.

After writing my first feature article for one of my favourite mags (Today's Railway Europe) on the [rail scene in Klaipeda \(Lithuania\)](#) I am now taking on the role of their correspondent for Lithuania and Latvia which will give me more excuses for expeditions to the more obscure reaches of the Baltic states (bliss!). It should get slightly easier to get there by rail now too as the missing gap in passenger services between the UK and Tallinn is being closed with a [new service between Vilnius and Riga](#) due to start in December.

Closer to home I'm looking forward to a stint with former UTG colleagues providing strategic advice on how the emerging North East Mayoral Combined Authority should exercise its transport powers. Meanwhile ten years of empty rhetoric and systematic underinvestment (by me) in the former fish and chip shop among the railway terraces that I call home in York has taken its toll on the place. So I'm spending a fair amount of time planning its renovation. This will also mean putting my money where my mouth is on tackling its appalling energy inefficiency and grappling with a sector that is far worse on decarbonisation (and a lot more besides) than the transport sector is - which is the building industry!

Policy geek postcard: Turin



European cities are better than we are in the UK at what they do with their former industrial sites. Not so driven by a mission to explain everything through over-interpretation. Not afraid to let them be in all their rough and rude deterioration, majesty and evolution. Not so constrained by the need to make everything tasteful and acceptable to a middle class designer aesthetic. Not afraid of scale. Not every former industrial site has to be a museum or interpreted into submission.

There are plenty of examples in Europe - the [Vítkovice Ironworks](#) in Ostrava in the Czech Republic, the [Zollverein](#) mining complex near Essen in the Ruhr and the [Völklingen](#) ironworks in Saarbrücken. My most recent experience was the [Parco Dora](#) covering 450,000 square metres of former Fiat and Michelin factory sites in Turin. They've kept some of the bare bones of the massive factory floors and opened them up to the sky. As part of the wider park complex there are ariel walkways, otherworldly industrial artefacts, grassed spaces. The river Po runs through it. As does a tram. They have left the space to breathe. To see what happens. And as the great architecture critic Ian Nairn said about somewhere else: *'life comes up to meet it - as it always will, given the chance.'* The floor of the factory is full of people, every kind of people, doing what they choose - idling, chatting, playing under a full moon as a winter blue sky thickens into dusk. This feels like a place left unfinished for the people to make of it what they will in that particular moment - rather than what architects, bureaucrats and designers have sought to fix as its purpose forever. It feels like another planet. A planet as it could be.

Stories of progressive change: The art of bus campaigning



I knew when I first heard that there was a bus regulation the musical (on roller skates!) that the battle to bring the buses home in Manchester was going to be won. Musicals don't have unhappy endings. The artist [Ellie Harrison](#) was the creator of the musical which was first staged at Manchester Art gallery in 2019 and was inspired by a childhood memory of watching Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1980s hit *Starlight Express*. The Musical featured local roller skaters playing superhero 'buses', to tell the history of public transport provision in the Greater Manchester area from the post-war period, up to the present day. The genius of the musical was it brought new energy, and opened up the the topic in a playful and inclusive way. The bus debate can often be a rather stale and technical debate dominated mostly

by men who who want to keep it as technocratic and as exclusive as possible. One of the enjoyable twists of the musical is that it respected and cherished the history and iconography of specific local public transport networks with a level of knowledge that would elude many of those on the inside of the bus sector. However it could also charm a more regular audience who didn't know that the Stalybridge, Hyde, Moseley and Dukinfield Joint Transport Board (a municipal bus operator) ever existed before it roller skated past them.

After the success of the [Greater Manchester Musical](#) in 2019 there were Strathclyde and Merseyside versions before a final presentation and talk by Ellie about the musicals (which was held at the same Manchester Art Gallery where it all began) on the happy night of the official launch of the new Bee network in Greater Manchester.

We have a tendency in transport to neglect the cultural arena when seeking to bring about progressive change. It needn't necessarily be so. In the US there is the [New Urbanist Memes for Transit-Orientated Teens](#) (NUMTOTS) movement which is fundamentally pro-public transport. Although, with its knowing in-jokes and sideways social media savvy it's a world away from the way public transport is usually framed. NUMTOTS' rapid growth, and backing for progressive transport policy, has given more young people the confidence to make their own way in the transport sector – as well as earning it praise from presidential candidate Bernie Sanders (who also joined the group). Meanwhile, a UK transit system that has always understood the importance of the cultural arena is the Tyne and Wear Metro. A recent example is [checkies](#) where a graphic artist turned interviews with staff into a wonderful comic of imagery, snippets and stories about the working lives of the system's frontline staff.

All of which shows that making progressive change happen is an art as well a science.

In depth: A journey into the future of public transport in Wales



As you've probably noticed, it's all happening in Wales. Of the four nations of the UK, Wales is taking by far the most progressive and coherent approach to transport. Making pretty speeches about climate is easy. Taking bold action at scale is what real leadership looks like. So when you hear transport organisations talk green it's always good to check the annex of their documents to find out what they are actually spending their money on. Often those annexes are full of sprawl distributing road schemes. Not in Wales. Not anymore. And whilst some back off when the going gets tough Wales has stuck with its plan for a default 20mph speed limit – keeping its eyes firmly on the prize of cutting the carnage hidden in plain sight that fast moving cars and lorries can cause.

But, if you are going to tackle car dependency you need a public transport network that people see as a serious proposition. So as well as pledging a planned and integrated bus network (of which more later), Wales is taking a rail network that had languished for years in do-minimum Pacer purgatory and is giving it a comprehensive upgrade. The Valleys will have a modern electrified rail service whilst a new fleet of smart and comfortable Class 197 diesel units will give longer distance routes a shot in the arm. In a story that says a lot about the change that's afoot, when one of the new trains pulled in at a Valley line station for the first time passengers stepped back because they thought it couldn't be their train as it was too good for them.

There's always a but though and this 'but' is that Wales is facing a financial crisis. The Welsh Government's annual budget is £20bn – and more than half of this goes on health and social care. This overall budget (which is set by the UK government) hasn't kept pace with inflationary pressures. This problem got far worse when the UK spring budget lopped a further £900m off its value in real terms. Transport (to keep the rail network going) and health were the only two budget heads to escape cuts in the resulting emergency budget in October. But with so little wriggle room on budgets rail poses an ongoing conundrum.

Anything to do with rail is rarely cheap. To cut costs on rail on the revenue side it's hard to make really significant savings without dramatically shrinking networks and getting rid of associated infrastructure costs altogether. And on the capital side we are in the middle of a network overhaul with all its attendant day to day operational problems (TfW has tumbled to the foot of the GB rail passenger satisfaction league) as well as the risks of cost overruns.

It's in this context that Welsh Government support for bus services has been feeling the squeeze. No doubt at this point many of the dwindling number of deregulation fans will be besides themselves with excitement that this shows why franchising is too risky when public authorities can be subject to periodic funding scares and alarms. But they say that because they never acknowledge one of the key arguments for bus franchising which is that it's a mechanism for ensuring more efficient use of whatever public funding there is. One way (not the only way) it can do this is by turning 'plate of spaghetti' networks, which reflect the competing ambitions and interests of different operators, into more coherent networks. In other words: same number of vehicles, same budget, enhanced networks, simpler to understand, more passengers.

It's important to rattle round on the actual buses themselves rather than just do the meetings and read the papers about them, so I went to see this for myself as part of a north-south traverse of Wales by bus from Bangor to Carmarthen. A trip that took me to Snowdonia on a misty October day where its mountain path access points and honeypot attractions were still busy with walkers and with more sedentary tourists having a ride out. Although it was busy it was nothing like as bad as it can get at its peak with police called in to tow cars and enforce some kind of order on out of control roadside parking.

All of which helped in rallying support for the revamped Snowdon Sherpa network which I used to get out and about in the National Park as well as to meet some TfW colleagues who had helped make it all happen. Sitting in a cafe in lovely Beddgelert they explained how the network had been redesigned based on a systematic analysis of the journeys people were making. The end result was taking a complex and uninspiring network of three tenders for nine routes (where services duplicated and didn't connect) and turning it into a simplified five-route network through a single tender, where services do connect and do run at regular headways. It's worked. Patronage has gone up by a third between '21/22 and '22/23.

Travelling on it you can see why. This isn't a typical rural bus service – where you feel like you are on your own to contend with a ghost of a service – more symbolic and residual than a realistic proposition for anyone other than stubborn diehards like me. This was a confident and assertive network doing a job well – giving locals access to opportunity and visitors a green way to get into the mountains as well as to the visitor attractions. A similar rigorous process is taking place to shape the future of bus networks across Wales: it is looking at how the resources which are currently employed on local bus services could be more efficiently used to create better integrated, simplified and more attractive bus networks.

Given the bus reform legislation will take time to go through the Senedd this is being implemented (as far as it can be within a deregulated environment) with local authorities via a 'bridge to franchising' approach in North Wales – where the vast majority of services are franchised on a route basis anyway. All of this will help pave the way for comprehensive roll out of the approach elsewhere in Wales when the powers are enacted.

After my Sherpa side mission I was back on the TrawsCymru network to get to Carmarthen. When combined with the rail network, the TrawsCymru network creates innumerable options and connections criss crossing the country (there just isn't an equivalent in, admittedly, much larger England, though there is in Northern Ireland and to some extent in Scotland). But good as the TrawsCymru network coverage is – some of the fleet that provides it is overdue replacement. The high-spec, all electric, TfW-liveried T1 (Aberystwyth to Carmarthen) shows the level of ambition. Compared with the other buses at a drizzly Aberystwyth bus station it looked like a spaceship had landed.

There's deep rural and then there's some of the parts of Ceredigion and Carmarthen that the T1 passes through. In many parts of GB this kind of territory would be lucky to have much of a bus service at all. But here the launch of the new T1 bus fleet was accompanied by a rethought and enhanced timetable and fares offer as well as ongoing promotion and marketing. The result: nearly 40% more passengers in April to September 2023 compared with the corresponding period in 2022. Alongside Sherpa it's another example of how public sector innovation can do what can often seem impossible: grow bus patronage dramatically in rural areas. All based on coming up with a well thought through service that passengers have confidence in.

There's a long and arduous journey ahead to give Wales the modern, integrated and accountable public transport it needs. The going has got tough. But Sherpa and T1 show what this future looks like. I couldn't be more on board for it.

This article was first published in Passenger Transport magazine and a pdf of the illustrated version can be found here: <https://jonathan-bray.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Novembe...>

Like this, heart that: Metropolitan - an ode to the Paris Metro



'...the play of light on the station vaults (like so many overhead rivers)...the satisfaction of being on the elevated sections (those stately underground rides), or the hallucinatory charm of the Guimard entrances illuminated at night (when they seem to be encouraging decadent behaviour)...'

I used to take the view that Paris was an ugly city (quasi motorways alongside the Seine, the dreary Haussmann boulevards, the Eiffel Tower) with a lot of beautiful details. But the motorways by the Seine are vanishing and there are countless beautiful details to explore. Something which Andrew Martin does in his new book on the Paris Metro from which the above quote is taken.

One of its more arch themes is the relationship between the Paris Metro and the London Underground. London got its Underground first and *'Paris having had a long cool look at it decided to do the opposite.'* Paris is a smaller and denser city - characteristics which the Metro emulates in the density of its network and the scale of its trains and stations. The telling dissimilarities continue. Whereas the Underground started by linking main line stations, the Metro shunned them. And while the expansion of the Underground was intimately linked to green field private housing development - the Metro reflected the uneasy relationship between the city and its suburbs by focussing solely on the betterment of the city of Paris itself. Something that the [Grand Paris Express project](#) (now coming to fruition) seeks to address in a decisive French way through more than doubling the territory encircling France's capital city with over 120 miles of new tracks, four new underground lines and 68 new metro stations. The idea is to better connect distant Paris suburbs to the city and to each other and better unite the suburbs with the city in a way which also meets the desire to eliminate car dependency through the provision of good public transport - everywhere. Meanwhile the Underground's expansion is rather more piecemeal and often continues to be linked to property development. These higher minded Parisian goals are also reflected in the tendency of the Metro to the dramatic. For example in the way its overhead sections rise from the depths to float above the boulevards. Martin attributes this to the fact that engineering isn't looked down as a 'trade' occupation by the French elites as it is by their British counterparts - so in France public infrastructure is confidently expressed. And finally on the theme of class - I hadn't realised the the Metro had first class until 1991. Although again all is not what it seems to British eyes as first class in Paris was probably more akin to choosing to sit down in a cafe rather than stand at the bar.

Martin skilfully weaves together his own Paris story with the social, cultural and engineering history of the Metro. His slightly lugubrious Yorkshire style is punctuated by the razor sharp observation, the vivid

evocation of time and place - as well as a relaxed attitude to digression and the guilty pleasures of detail. The reader is taken from one end of every line to the the other. From the many ways the unique smell of the Metro has been described to the clandestine riding of terminal loops, and from the colour palettes of tickets and trains to the role of the silver handles (*loqueteau*) that passengers use to open the doors on some trains.

'*Metro, Boulot, Dodo*' (metro, work, sleep) goes the Parisian expression but some days on the Metro you can feel agreeably like a cog in a well oiled Metro machine. Or in a dream (the Metro has an innate tendency towards dream according to one writer Martin quotes). You might then want to skip work, or the sights altogether, in favour of going with the Metro flow with Andrew Martin's book and a metro map in your pocket.

Side projects: The Dagenham Idol



My [short story about the Dagenham Idol](#), the second oldest representation of the human figure found in Britain. Discovered by workmen in the Thames Marshes close to the A13.

[Home](#)

[My Story](#)

[Key Skills](#)

[Download My CV](#)

[Side Projects](#)

[Contact](#)

[Visit my website](#)

Jonathan Bray

16 Wilton Rise, York YO24 4BW, YorkUnited Kingdom



You received this email because you signed up on our website or made a purchase from us.

[Unsubscribe](#)

