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As we draw towards a conclusion, I ask Mellors what the future holds for him, but he's focused on the job in hand: "It's about having a relentless laser focus on delivery of a reliable, punctual operation, all year round, and that's a team game - Network Rail, Alstom, as our fleet provider, and other stakeholders. We've got to make sure some of the transformation stuff, like new trains, is delivered in a seamless manner, as any new train introduction is challenging. We're buying an established product we're encouraged with in terms of reliability, but we've got a lot of people to train whilst delivering the operation. That's the key focus for me. Getting day-to-day operational railway on a reliable, consistent footing."

Amidst the battle to run trains on time, there are special days that make it all worthwhile. Yesterday the team took 30 schoolchildren from Crewe to Liverpool for a day out, visiting the Liver building, going on a ferry across the Mersey and having the opportunity to talk about rail safety.

"Many of the pupils had never been on a train before," he says. "We've hosted trips like this for 2,500 students now and have set ourselves a target of 5,000 - it's so energising and reminds us of what the job is all about."

In these moribund times across the industry and where large owning groups often seem to lack character and come across as corporate monoliths bereft of charm and local identity, it's heartening that under Mellors' focused, under-sold, stewardship, Avanti is a train company that is motivated to 'do the right thing' for customers and communities, even if as a company it's still on a journey with challenges to overcome. I take things as I find, and I'm happy with the customer service I receive on many trips on Avanti, even if that doesn't make an eye-catching headline or exciting narrative! ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Alex Warner has over 30 years' experience in the transport sector, having held senior roles on a multi-modal basis across the sector. He is co-founder of transport technology business Lost Group and transport consultancy AJW Experience Group (which includes Great Scenic Journeys). He is also chair of West Midlands Grand Rail Collaboration.



# Poetry in motion - the Paris Metro

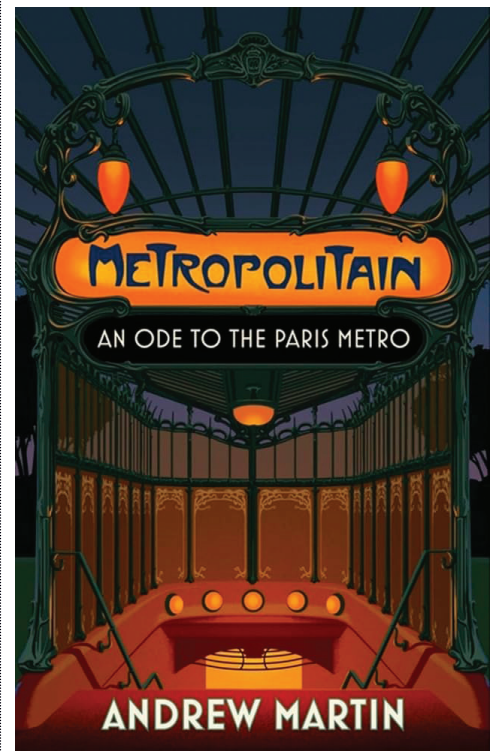
Andrew Martin's new book on the Paris Metro led me to reflect on the fascinating confluences and divergences with London

▶ I used to take the view that Paris was an ugly city (quasi motorways alongside the Seine, the dreary Haussmann boulevards, the Eiffel Tower) but with a lot of beautiful details. As well as a city that, beyond the 'grands projets', didn't have so much to offer on progressive thinking on transport. But the motorways by the Seine are vanishing, Paris has a mayor who has taken on the menace of SUVs... and won. And of course Paris remains a city of countless beautiful details.

Reading Andrew Martin's new book on the Paris Metro (*Metropolitain - An ode to the Paris Metro*) got me thinking more about Paris... and how it stands in comparison to London on transport. I say book, but it's more of a love letter really. Take this section as an example: "...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)..."

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 other. There is a section on the unique smell of the Metro ('Eau de Madeleine' is added to the wax

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Andrew Martin's new book on the Paris Metro



## “The dominance of the car on the banks of the Seine has been broken”

that’s applied to the platforms nightly). He takes semi-clandestine rides on terminal loops and ponders the history of the colour palettes used on tickets and there are digressions on the cultural significance of the silver handles (‘loqueteau’) that passengers use to open the doors on some trains.

But back to those London comparisons. London got its Underground first and as Martin says: “Paris having had a long cool look at it decided to do the opposite”. The original concept of the Paris Metro was that every Parisian should be no more than 500 metres from a Metro station and the Paris Metro has more stations than the London Underground despite Paris proper being 15 times smaller than London. Where the Underground built deep the Metro built shallow and where the Underground has surface buildings the Metro doesn’t. The telling dissimilarities continue. Whereas the Underground started by linking main line stations, the Metro shunned them.

While the expansion of the Underground was intimately linked to green field private housing development, the Metro focussed on the betterment of the city of Paris itself. This perhaps also reflects British antipathy towards urban life, in that the Underground was about getting people out of the city whereas the Paris Metro was about enhancing the life of the city itself. However, in Paris this also created a greater awareness of the tension between city and suburb - something which has become a wider faultline in politics in many countries around the world and in which the car is a major signifier (hence the ‘war on motorist’ rhetoric). Martin quotes research which found that: “The further away people live from a railway station, the likelier they are to vote for Le Pen”, while the deputy mayor of Paris for urbanism, Jean-Louis Missika, argues that the Gilet-jaune (yellow vest) fuel protest movement in France represents “a crisis of failed urbanism”.

The Grand Paris Express project (now coming to fruition) seeks to address this in a decisive 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. Or as then-president Nicolas Sarkozy said: “We want to rebuild the city on top of the city, remove the divide between Paris and its suburbs, reduce the divides which separate the neighborhoods, which separate the inhabitants, we want to restore unity, continuity and solidarity.”

I’m not sure on this side of the channel we have grasped the ambition and scale of this project. Meanwhile the Underground’s expansion is rather more piecemeal and often reflects its historic link with private property development. Paris has also been quicker off the mark on rapid, high capacity cross-city links. The Elizabeth Line is an equivalent to the RER in Paris (which serves four main corridors). 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 boulevards. Martin attributes this to the fact that engineering isn’t looked down upon as a ‘trade’ occupation by the French elites as it is by their British counterparts whose ancestors were not subject to the guillotine.

Incidentally, whilst London may have been well ahead of Paris on underground railways, Paris was where the bus was invented (and where the term ‘omnibus’ was coined). And whilst Paris regulated its bus services (including integrated ticketing across routes) London did not. In 1869, Charles Dickens wrote a review of the two systems which, whilst readily admitting that the Paris system had more advantages, argued that: “Who can say that, properly developed, the London system of free competition may not ultimately attain... the same degree of perfection that in Paris is enforced by monopoly.” More than 150 years later we are still waiting for bus deregulation to achieve such perfection.

In the post-war years it could be argued that Paris succumbed to the global trend of remaking cities to serve the car even more than London did. The Metro was described as ‘deserted’ in 1950. And despite owning a particularly beautiful house on the Île Saint-Louis, President Pompidou agreed to an expressway along the right bank of the Seine and presided over the opening of the Périphérique (inner motorway ringroad) in 1973. The Francophile writer and author of a piece called *The Assassination of Paris*, Richard Cobb, wrote that the Périphérique “circles Paris with

the constant roar of tyres, the screams of sirens and the presence of sudden death”.

Paris may have gone harder, and changed course later, in its relationship with the car - but it’s making up for it now. This year the speed limit on the Périphérique will be reduced from 70kmh to 50kmh by Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo. Mayor Hidalgo is the Paris equivalent of Ken Livingstone - a pivotal figure in decisively shifting the balance between the car and public transport. The dominance of the car on the banks of the Seine and on those Haussmann boulevards has been broken. Now when you visit you will see cyclists everywhere. In the future more of central Paris will be for people not vehicles and elsewhere the 15-minute city is the goal. Hidalgo is as savvy and populist as Livingstone was too - with recent referendums taking on both SUVs and the e-scooter hire companies.

Is there now more convergence in the approach to transport between Paris and London than there has been in the past? Perhaps. But, as ever, differences remain too. London has road user charging but public transport in Paris is cheaper. London may have a more integrated transport authority but its Paris equivalents are not under the cosh from a hostile national administration. The Grand Paris Express has no equivalent in London - but then the London Underground has more suburban coverage to start with.

The fascinating confluences and divergences between the two cities look set to continue. And Andrew Martin’s book is a good place to start exploring them. ‘Metro, Boulot, Dodo’ (metro, work, sleep) goes the Parisian expression. This is a book that also might make you want to skip work, or the traditional Parisian sights altogether, in favour of exploring the Metro with a map in one pocket and this book in the other. ■

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

► For decades Jonathan Bray has been at the forefront of making progressive change happen on transport - from stopping the national roads programme in its tracks in the 1990s to getting buses back under public control in the 2020s. He is an advisor to the Welsh Government on bus franchising and an independent advisor. [www.jonathan-bray.com](http://www.jonathan-bray.com)

