

BACK TO THE FUTURE: WITH TRAMS



Dave Andrews, of the Bath Tram Re-Introduction Group proposes a revolution for Bath public transport

Bath is a beautiful city, a lovely place to live and deservedly a UNESCO World Heritage Site. But there is a problem – the traffic and the exhaust pollution. How on earth have we reached a situation where visitors to our lovely city take home as many memories of having to dodge cars as of the the Roman Baths, the spa and Bath Abbey?

It doesn't have to be like this. There is a way of using clean, sustainable energy, while at the same time getting rid of the dangerous tiny particles produced by the wear of rubber tyres on tarmac roads.

Exhaust fumes are an obvious problem – just ask any cyclist who has followed a smoky diesel lorry up one of Bath's hills – but in recent years another danger has come to be recognised, and given the name of the Oslo Effect from the city in Norway where it was first studied in detail.

What do you think happens to the rubber which is worn off your car tyres between the time they are new and the time the tread is so worn down that the tyres need replacing? As the tyre wears it loses rubber particles, technically known as particulate matter. Much smaller than the diameter of a human hair, these particles can pass through the lungs into the human blood stream, bringing with them the risk of heart attacks in particular.

And naturally the particles which come off the tyres have their counterpart in particles gradually coming off the road surface as it wears. All engines also produce iron particles from the engines and these are implicated in Alzheimer's and dementia as they can become lodged in the brain.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that the tram is making a long-overdue comeback, fume-free, no rubber tyres



MODERN PUBLIC TRANSPORT: with trams traffic can be controlled so that cars follow the tram in at speed, beating the traffic and giving passengers shorter journey times – above, the Nottingham tram system
Below, a modern tram takes a tight corner among historic city centre buildings in Nottingham

PHOTOGRAPHS: courtesy of Paul Abell

shedding harmful particles, and powered by electricity that can be generated in an entirely sustainable manner. If you have visited Nottingham recently you may well have seen the fine modern trams that are spreading over the city. They serve the shopping centres and amenities in the city centre, the railway station, the two universities and – particular boon for anyone who has tried to find a space in a hospital car park – the massive QMC hospital .

A key attraction is the service frequency – six minutes and the fact that with modern controls the trams can benefit from having the traffic lights automatically set to give the tram an unimpeded run into the city, a technique which cannot be applied to buses.

However you may not have seen the Nottingham trams when they are their most useful, especially if you were only visiting the city for the day. In the morning peak the trams really come into their own for commuters, helped by the massive car parks at each terminus. Taking so many cars off the road makes things much better for cyclists, while the spacious trams are a welcome sight for parents with pushchairs.

Bath used to have trams. Until 1939 tram routes brought people into the city centre from Bathford, Combe Down, Twerton, Newton St Loe, Upper Weston and Oldfield Park. Unfortunately the trams themselves were still the originals from 1904, so it is not really surprising they were replaced by buses. What a pity they were not modernised to give the fast, convenient transport found in Amsterdam or Prague, to name just two cities which kept their tramways and developed them.

Naturally a new tram network would reflect modern needs. A tram route up the hill to the university would be a no-brainer, while a set of park and ride sites would have

the same success in keeping cars out of the city centre as do Nottingham's 5,000 car park spaces. The park and rides at Lansdown, Odd Down and Newbridge would be much better used with a tram connection – they are presently little used during the key rush hour.

One third of the traffic during the rush hour is the school run, because parents do not trust the unreliable and less frequent buses, but with trams on a six minute schedule they will be happy to trust their children to a fast and reliable system.

Anyone who has commuted by train and by bus into Bath, will notice that trains are egalitarian, used by all, whereas buses tend to be used by lower income people and students – those without cars.

It seems that trams however are perceived as a smart, urban way of getting about and research shows that when a tram is installed 35% of the new users are previous car drivers, whereas buses do not attract car drivers.

Another interesting point is that whenever an expensive fixed link such as a tram is installed business property values rise significantly and investors will come into the area because they know the expensive link cannot be removed, whereas bus links can and are taken away at short notice much to the chagrin of the previous users.

Just as a school is more than bricks and mortar, a tram system is much more than a collection of vehicles running on some tracks, however smooth the ride would be. A modern tramway (and the changes in traffic flows it brings with it) does so much to improve the environment of a city that its citizens wonder how they ever managed previously – and the answer to that is that they did not manage nearly so well. ■

Visit: bathtrams.uk for more details.

