

**LONDON TRANSPORT**

# Frontiers of Management History

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# **LONDON TRANSPORT: A HYBRID IN HISTORY 1905–1948**

**JAMES FOWLER**

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2020

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78973-954-1 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-78973-953-4 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-78973-955-8 (Epub)



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# Acknowledgements

The content of this book greatly benefitted from the advice of Dr Kevin Tennent, Professor Richard Common, Dr Alex Gillett and Dr Roy Edwards over a number of years. The support of the Transport for London archive and the London Transport Museum library have also been of critical importance in providing the material on which this book relies and I am very much indebted to them. Finally, I am also very grateful to Kevin and Alex for inviting me to contribute to this series.

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## Chapter 1

# Modern Relevance

### London Transport's Current Situation

A total of 1.35 billion journeys are made on the London underground every year. Another 2.24 billion journeys are made on London's buses. These are record levels in the history of the organisation and they are comparable to the 1.7 billion annual journeys made on the entire national rail network and the 2.20 billion trips made on buses nationally outside London. If that were not enough, then it is worth considering that the 1.7 billion national rail journeys include a significant proportion of journeys on London commuter lines that are not counted as part of Transport for London (TfL). The size scale and dominance of London in the public transport market is self-evident. Simply, it is as big as all other public transport in the UK combined.

Rising usage has gone hand in hand with a quarter of a century of major investment, most visible in the form of the Jubilee line and Crossrail projects. As well as these flagship developments the system as a whole has grown palpably newer, cleaner and safer. But it has not always been so. After the Second World War a long decline in the service and usage set in, cumulating in a nadir of public usage in 1982 with just 1.5 billion journeys on all modes and major disasters at Moorgate in 1975 and Kings Cross in 1987. But despite the period of decay London transport remained firmly in the public eye, albeit for the wrong reasons (Cutler, 1982). London transport's scale and preponderance guarantees attention, whatever the wider narrative.

The more positive and prestigious story since the 1980s runs in parallel with the re-invention of London once again as a pre-eminent global city as it was in the nineteenth century. Once again it is a home not only to the British governing elite but international financial elites, only seriously rivalled by a few conurbations in the United States and Asia. This prominence is symbolised politically by the devolution of power given to the Mayor and by London's successful hosting of the Olympics for a third time in 2012. This catapulted London's mass transit system up the public and political agenda, with the four yearly contests for the mayoralty dominated by the transport issue above any other (Edwards & Isaby, 2008).

In national and municipal politics the contested legacy of utility privatisation in general and rail privatisation in particular at this current moment indicates that

the search for the best system of service, ownership and control of London transport is far from over. In the public sphere, as well as the daily media coverage, the wealth of literature from the purely nostalgic through the technical and political to the academic shows how much the issue of London transport is engaged with by hundreds of millions of people in the UK and visitors from abroad. Given the stakes, it is a safe bet that the provision of London's transport will remain highly contentious for decades to come.

### **A Brief Overview of the Contents of this Book**

The purpose of this book is a simple one. It is very easy to find facts, figures, pictures and maps from past and present about London transport. It is much harder to find out why the system works as it does or make valid and reliable judgements about it. Many people have a view about whether it is good or bad, but few arguments are situated in historical context, presented analytically or systematically backed up with evidence. In place of these there are a number of uncritically accepted assumptions, most of them dating back to the period 1905–1948, the time scale which this book focusses on.

The book aims to redress this. It provides a systematic analytical account of whose financial interests London transport operated in, how it was governed and how it was led. It asks why those things came to be and what the implications were. It does not concern itself with rolling stock, rural branch lines or the design of signalmen's buttons. It does not want to add anything significant to the detail of the chronological history. Its central purpose is to ask why things happened, not to describe what or how. It situates its analysis in the area of business, organisational and management history and provides a historical perspective on the present service and theories of quasi-public or 'hybrid' organisations.

It finds that contrary to previous accounts, in financial terms the passengers rather than the investors were the primary beneficiaries but that investors were nevertheless better remunerated than was thought. It also finds that London transport was run by an essentially unaccountable body. However, contrary to current theory on hybrid organisations, there is no evidence that this was detrimental to the quality of service provided. In fact, service quantity and quality markedly improved over the period in question. Finally, the management and leadership qualities of the two central figures in London transport in first half of the twentieth century are critically and systematically assessed here for the first time. Previous accounts do not place their evidence within relevant theoretical frameworks and are often somewhat hagiographic. The scale of the achievement in unifying London transport is held to have been a strategic end in itself. Which corporate strategies were pursued and what their long-term implications were has been left largely unexamined up until this book. All these conclusions have important implications for TfL today.

In summary, initial accounts published 40 or 50 years ago have been uncritically accepted and are themselves too unquestioning of the sources they used. The history of London transport is overdue a revision. Having seriously censored of the current state of affairs in what is known about London's transport system, this



critique should now justify itself by a much closer look at what has been said and written up until now.

## Arguments, Omissions and Misinterpretations

Conceptually, what are people arguing about? The gist is straightforward as the tension between the ideals of public administration and the realities of politics in the governance of large public network utilities is a well-trodden theme. In London transport the controversy arose out of a growing political conviction the late nineteenth century that purely private sector provision no longer provided the necessary services for the capital. This ran up against an immense institutional resistance to idea of public ownership rooted in concepts of *laissez-faire* and the defence of private property. This argument has never gone away.

However, the detail is a great deal more nuanced than this. Regrettably, the reader will not get much of it from most of the classic histories or the nostalgia industry which, as I will show, were written with a very different purpose. It is easy to find what and how things happened in London transport, but surprisingly hard to get to grips with why they did. In this book, the evidence and arguments for why are laid out in this section in three blocks: financial, governmental and executive. However, before looking at those specifically, I make some general observations.

Firstly, the nostalgia industry is dominant in the history of London transport rather than more rigorous evidence-based argumentation. This book is firmly pitched at the latter, though I acknowledge that the cultural influence of London transport in general and the London Underground in particular has been so great that it is impossible to ignore nostalgia completely. It has undoubtedly influenced academic writing on the subject. Thus Barker and Robbins (1976) reference ‘Metroland’, a concept they acknowledge as entirely originating in popular marketing and literature. Ashford (2013) discusses both the development of the inner London tube network and suburban ‘Metroland’ underground through the medium of novels, paintings and films. Dennis (2008) considers the development of London through fictional writing and art in his book *Cities in Modernity*. Whilst the focus here remains on academic texts, the influence of popular culture is recognised and acknowledged throughout.

Secondly, few accounts of the development and history of London transport discuss it in terms of the service provision being a result from the clash between organisational dynamics and political models. As Tennent (2017) observes the case studies are often focussed on the sequential narrative at the cost of critical analysis or focusses on the passenger experience rather than the actions of over-arching institutions.

Both these tendencies are present in the canonical histories of London’s transport. Some of these include Jackson and Croome’s *Rails Through Clay* (1993), Barker and Robbins’ *A History of London Transport* (1976) and Wolmar’s *The Subterranean Railway* (2005). Their principle form and purpose is a descriptive chronological narrative covering the progress of network expansion coupled with a supporting cast of technical developments that made each stage

of development practically feasible. This method of approaching the topic is understandable, as the authors' purpose is mainly to give panoramic views of the entire development of the system and its component organisations over more than a century. Nevertheless, concentrating on the physical results of transport policy and neglecting the politics of its governance is a considerable omission. As we will see almost all the recurring arguments described are in a strategic sense the highly attributable but under acknowledged product of the actions of London's private, public and quasi-public bodies.

The issue with relatively descriptive and uncritical accounts is that whilst the critical junctures in the development of London transport are all carefully documented, the authors ask few critical questions about why events turned out as they did or in whose interest these outcomes were. For example, both books cover the issue of the under-payment of the 'C' stockholders by the London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB) in the 1930s. In theory, this should have resulted in the receivers taking over, but in the event nothing happened. Few explanations are offered, though the row over the issue was important enough to lead directly to the Vice-Chairman's resignation. Similarly, when covering the initially unchecked expansion of private 'Pirate Bus' operators in the early 1920s, little is made of the intense political struggles and compromises between figures in the London County Council (LCC), The Labour Party, Trade Unions and Parliament that determined the course of events. Finally, there is a tantalising section in Jackson and Croome (1993) entitled 'Why the LCC failed to control London Transport'. Sadly, this discussion is scarcely a page long and concludes by informing the reader that the government failed to transfer powers to the LCC 'For reasons best known to itself'. This is distinctly uninformative. The preference for description over asking hard questions and analysing the 'so what?' of each situation presented is a structural weakness throughout these books which means that whilst the physical effects of the development of London transport are well described, the link is seldom if ever made to the underpinning political causes and interests.

The lack of engagement with the governance London transport can be overcome by moving further afield from London, and in some cases further away from transport itself. Given the title this may appear self-defeating, but the paucity of the specific compels an investigation of what is related. There are a variety of books such as Barker and Savage's *An Economic History of Transport in Britain* (1959), Bonavia's *Railway Policy between the Wars* (1981) or Hannah's *Engineers, Managers and Politicians* (1982) all of which do deal with the interplay between the organisation and management of public sector network utilities and political trends. More currently, Hibb's *The Dangers of Bus Re-regulation* (2005) or Wolmar's *Are Trams Socialist?* (2016) discuss the governance of public transport in Britain in greater detail but are either too focussed on one mode (Hibbs) or else move too far in other direction by adding few specifics to an already too generalised commentary in other previous books (Wolmar). Overall, the issues considered are clearly highly analogous but the conclusions are either too indiscriminate, focussed on parallel but separate industries or consider too narrow a slice of the entire transport market.

Finally, there are series of books which directly deal with the issue of the changing governmental framework surrounding all sectors of the economy in the interwar years at a national level. Middlemass (1979), Broadberry (1986), Millward (1995), Chick (1998), Greaves (2005) and Floud and Johnson (2008) all offer commentaries on the 1905–1948 period which are invaluable in understanding the political-economic context. Occasionally London transport merits a specific mention as an organisation. However, the focus here is on sectors rather than organisations, and on macroeconomic trends and industrial policy in general rather than the particular. As such, they offer highly important contextual understanding but few useful details.

In terms of municipal governance, the general history of London's government in the periods discussed here is covered by Robson (1939), Laski, Jennings, and Robson (1936) and Finer (1941) as well as forming part of Chandler's book *Explaining Local Government* (2007). Other books from the period such as Porter (1907), Shaw (1908), Masterman (1909) and Knoop (1912) are highly illustrative of the state of political debate about public, municipal, quasi-public and private organisations providing collective goods at the time in question, though as the reader will see, Porter and Shaw's perspectives are very narrow financial ones. There are also a wide range of recent books and articles considering the overall performance of quasi-public bodies in providing public services such as Common, Flynn, and Mellon *Managing Public Services* (1992) and Overman's *Agentification and Public Sector Performance: A systematic comparison in 20 countries* (2016). Again, the issues raised are analogous but the focus of the research either does not concern either transport or London (Overman) or deals with just one element of the London transport network amongst many other studies in a later time period (Common).

We are left then with a handful of books and articles that explicitly cover both London's transport, its governance and its management. The principle example from the period is Herbert Morrison's *Socialisation and Transport* (1933). This is an excellent analysis of the situation from a well experienced though biased politician. Obviously, it also stops short in 1933 at the very inception of the first wholly unified body running London transport. More recently, there are a series of articles and academic works each covering different aspects of London transport. These include Turvey's 2003 article 'The London County Council's River Steamboat Service', Hey's 'Transport Co-ordination and Professionalism in Britain Forging a new Orthodoxy in the Early Inter-War Years' (2010), Darroch's 'London's Deep Level Tube Railways: Visibly Invisible' (2012) and Turner and Tennent's 'Progressive Strategies of Municipal trading: The Policies of the London County Council Tramways c. 1891–1914' (2019). Taken as whole, these are excellent guides that explicitly cover critical arguments in all the issues mentioned above. Nathan Darroch's work is especially useful as it examines the changing attitude towards land ownership in London and its pervasive influence on the construction of the underground railway network. Turner and Tennent's article does a similar job in linking the politics of the LCC to the construction and amalgamation of the tramway network. Overall, they emphasise that political attitudes to property ownership versus collective or 'club' goods such as transport are a key element in explaining the governance puzzle on London.

*Finance*

We now move to a number of specific observations about the way in which the financial data that underpins many of the authors' assumptions is handled and presented. The primary weakness which is that Lord Ashfield's<sup>1</sup> highly personalised and inconsistent views on the finance of London transport are uncritically accepted. Given his extraordinary length of service and seniority it is easy to understand why his opinions have been regarded as synonymous with the truth. The problem is that Ashfield's views changed frequently, and whilst this is faithfully documented in both volumes, no critical questions are asked about why he might have changed his mind or about which audience he was addressing when he gave varying speeches. Ashfield's mostly downbeat financial prognostics are propagated and left unchallenged by the authors, leaving readers to wonder why bond issues in the 1920s for the tubes were so enthusiastically bought up by investors. Ashfield's style of leadership is also unanalysed and uncritically accepted. In a similar vein, the strong connections between Ashfield and politicians in raising finance and shaping political and public perceptions about how transport should be financed are largely unexplored.

The second weakness is that the financial data used to illustrate the arguments is scattered and non-continuous. Both Barker and Jackson concede in their prefaces that in the trade-off between depth and breadth they have opted for breadth. Nevertheless, a complete series of data for the financial results of the LPTB 1933–1948 exists in the archives, and apart from some aspects of the war years, it is highly detailed. Similar accounts exist for the LPTB's principal predecessors from 1913 onwards after the 1911 Railway Companies (Accounts and Returns) Act was passed. Omitting to give data over long continuous periods gives the reader little sense of trends. Selective presentation of statistics means that only relatively short periods of time can be contrasted with one another. This does not stop the authors drawing wide-ranging conclusions on the basis of what is presented, and this is problematic because Lord Ashfield's views on finance are simply uncritically proffered and are not verifiable against the actual long-term results published by his companies.

For example, much use is made of Ashfield's quote in 1924 that the underground railways in London were never in their whole career able to earn anything approaching a reasonable return, but there is no way of comprehensively checking that assertion in the text and the authors do not query or examine what a reasonable return on investment might have been.

Thirdly, much of the financial data relates to dividends and bond returns or overall receipts. The problem here is that these statistics only represent the interest of one set of stakeholders in the operation of London transport, the owners of capital. Movements in fares and pay and conditions which represent the interests

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<sup>1</sup>In 1907 Lord Ashfield (then Albert Stanley) became the chairman of most of the companies that would eventually become the London Passenger Transport Board in 1933 – where he was again appointed chairman until the organisation was nationalised in 1948. In effect, he ran London transport from 1907 to 1948.

of passengers and employees are poorly covered. It is hard to judge on the basis of the financial evidence presented how much services improved for customers and conditions and real pay improved for workers. Thus, in so far as conclusions are drawn by the authors about the operation of the LPTB and its predecessors at all, the generally favourable verdict is insufficiently linked to data covering the interests of all stakeholders.

Fourthly, although some hard words are reserved for the financial performance of the London transport companies and the LPTB, there are no meaningful comparisons drawn between transport companies in London and comparable organisations elsewhere. The returns given by the London underground railway companies are compared unfavourably to some of the bus companies and the Associated Equipment Company, a vehicle manufacturer. Neither example constitutes a valid comparator. As organisations their purposes and fixed costs were wholly different as the authors themselves concede. Truer comparators would be the London suburban railway companies, or the 'Big Four' railway companies from 1923 onwards. Little or nothing is said about any of these, especially the Southern Railway which was the LPTB's main competitor but which paid substantially lower dividends. Additionally, the performance of transport organisations in comparable capital cities such as Paris, Berlin, New York or even British provincial cities are seldom if ever averred to. Whilst making direct comparisons between different jurisdictions is problematic, they would nevertheless serve to indirectly illustrate and contextualise a number of key assumptions about the financial structure of London's transport.

Finally, no continuous data sets are presented depicting wider macroeconomic conditions such as the rate of inflation or the Bank of England base rate. Without these sources to draw on, it is hard to make valid and reliable arguments concerning the financial performance of London transport or in whose interests it operated. In fairness, the books largely eschew making such explicit judgements. However, by printing and then leaving Ashfield's views unchallenged, they are implicitly perpetrating his 'official' version of events.

In summary Barker and Robbins' (1976) and Jackson and Croome's first edition (1962) and second edition (1993) fail to engage sufficiently with the underlying financial and governmental themes which influenced the development of London transport and favour a descriptive review of technical and network-related developments. Nevertheless, their work is extensive, very comprehensive and essential in understanding the chronological sequence of events. Consequently, it has also influenced much of what has been written subsequently.

Principally, the more recent accounts consist of two books published by Wolmar and one by Halliday. Wolmar's work *Down the Tube* (2002) concerns the finance of TfL and *The Subterranean Railway* (2005) is a full-scale historical study comparable in scope to *Rails Through Clay* and *A History of London Transport*. Halliday has also published *Underground to Everywhere* (2001) in a similar vein. The fundamental issue with both books is that they add very little to their predecessors in terms of financial analysis.

If Barker and Robbins and Jackson and Croome essentially unquestioningly repeated the consensus of the 1920s and 1930s, then Wolmar and Halliday repeated

them in turn again. As evidence of the former's influence on the later authors, Halliday's and Wolmar's discussions of the development of the underground electric railway are also typically couched in terms of the terrible congestion on streets above, the problems thrown up by a steam railway underground, the rivalry between different owners such as Watkin and Forbes and the evolution of electric motive power, rolling stock and progress in tunnelling techniques. Discussion of passenger numbers and turnover is scarce, and the conclusions of previous works are simply accepted rather than challenged or investigated.

However, unlike the previous authors both Wolmar and Halliday do make a more explicit attempt to situate the development and financial operation of London transport in a political context. The gist of their arguments is that in order to win the political argument over the creation of a public corporation, too generous a deal was given to the bondholders on the creation of the LPTB in 1933. Consequently, the LPTB like all its predecessors was over burdened by debt interest to the detriment of the services provided to passengers and its employees. The issue remains that like Barker and Robbins and Jackson and Croome, the gnomonic utterances of Lord Ashfield about reasonable returns on investment are simply accepted without rigorous comparative analysis, and little evidence is offered about fares, pay and conditions, similar companies in the UK or similar organisations in other cities. Without consistent and continuous financial data over long time periods, I find it is hard to accept their assertions about whether the LPTB was a good, bad or indifferent organisation or in whose interests it operated. Though both more recent books offer the same wide panoramas in terms of historic scope and the breadth of material covered, they offer only slightly more politically orientated analysis backed up by even sparser evidence.

As well as these all-encompassing studies, the development of transport in London generally and the underground railway system in particular has generated a large body of empirical literature such as the series on each individual underground line published by Capital Transport aimed at both the popular market but with a high level of specialist information in text. As before, their central weakness is their inability to link the well described specific operational issues encountered by the industry to the more sparsely covered wider financial, governmental and managerial contexts in which it operated, and to critically analyse the organisational responses. Consequently, these books give descriptive and relatively uncritical accounts of the history of the physical expansion of the system or else focusses on the development of specific technological innovations in the system, primarily regarding engineering, rolling stock, manufacturing, artwork, architecture or design. These topics are treated by the authors as being interesting factual accounts in themselves, rather than as the basis for wider critical debate or theory forming, which make them valid but also partial and technical (Harvey, 1989). They form an essential part of understanding the development of the system, but their purpose is the meticulous record of the facts rather than analysis.

In summary, I find that the literature covering London transport omits key features of the financial operations and the interests involved. Fundamentally, it lacks a critical voice. In the specialist works on engineering, design or artwork this matters less, but in the panoramic histories too much received opinion was



simply accepted by the initial researchers, and their conclusions have not been subsequently challenged sufficiently. Secondly, despite a profusion of financial data available to researchers over long time periods relatively little of it seems to be used. Thirdly, where it is used it is poorly applied and contrasted. Finally, the linkages between practical results and political causes which are visible in the financial data have only recently begun to be acknowledged and are not fully understood. We now turn to this aspect of the historical interpretation.

### ***Public Governance***

There was lively debate in the period covered by this book about the governance of the bodies providing collective goods by authors such as Porter (1907), Shaw (1908), Collins (1936), Robson (1937) and Finer (1941). At a national level, the traditional view suggests a long British fixation with governmental centralisation based on a unitary state often termed the Westminster Model. Works on the subject from the period are often written by members of the establishment keen to legitimise the status quo. However, this view is challenged by some authors who suggest that this assumption of untrammelled executive power at Westminster has always been exaggerated (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003; Rhodes, 1981). It is also challenged by Robson (1937), who points out that the legal doctrine of *Ultra Vires* did not gain widespread currency with regard to limiting the powers of local authorities (LAs) until mid-way through the nineteenth century. Few writers at the time offered reasons why LAs powers should start to be constrained in this way, though an implicit explanation can be drawn from the literature as whole which is that as the duties of public authorities moved away from the concerns and control of private individuals and towards the notion of a public good managed by public servants, Parliament became more anxious to control its remit (Chandler, 2007).

Two books of the period demonstrate this concern: Shaw's *The Common Sense of Municipal Trading* (Shaw, 1908) and Porter's *Dangers of Municipal Trading* (1907). Both books are overwhelmingly concerned with the raising and spending of money by LAs to fulfil their duties rather than the duties of local government being discussed as part of wider constitutional arguments such as the balance or devolution of powers. The implication is that the actions of municipal government have to be justifiable according to private sector conceptions of the 'bottom line' and profitability. In the context of an un-codified constitution this ensured that LAs' powers progressed on an incremental case by case basis relating to specific financial responsibilities, however neither book fully explores the long-term implications of this trend.

Overall, books in the period 1905–1948 are limited by their focus on the financial concerns of the private individual rather than trying to build theoretical frameworks to either explain the past or guide the future development of public administration, particularly at the local level. Later literature engages at a higher more theoretical level of discussion, constructing theories and offering plausible rationalisations (Chandler, 2007; Leopold & McDonald, 2012; Marquand, 1988; Rhodes, 1981). Marquand (1988) offers a good overview as to why Britain did

not create the administrative institutions at a national or local level necessary for a development state or give its state officials sufficient latitude for what he calls discretionary intervention. He blames a moral and philosophical outlook rooted in eighteenth century individualism for a failure to build political and economic institutions at all levels with sufficient power to act in the public interest. Chandler (2007) buttresses this argument by pointing out that fear of socialist using the powers of LAs to practise the kind of state interventionism eschewed by Westminster led to the dramatic curtailment of LA powers by Parliament in the late 1920s. Taken in combination, the financially focussed books of the period and the theory building narratives of more recent authors offer a useful but generalised context within which to place the hostility shown to transport coordination and municipal or public control of it.

Having set the national scene, we now need to move to look at what is said about municipal government in London. Robson (1939) notes that London had been excluded from the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act, and as a result an astonishing plethora of overlapping minor decentralised authorities and bureaucracies had grown up in London in the early nineteenth century as incremental responses to pressure and interest groups in the capital. He and others attacked the situation as a state of inefficient semi-anarchy where London contained seven Boards of Commissioners for sewers, approximately 100 different lighting, paving and cleaning boards and 172 different vestries (Finer, 1941; Robson, 1939; Shaw, 1908).

The weakness of the literature of the period lies in its only obliquely addressing the issue of why, if chaotic disorder was so disliked, the imposition of order in public services via the formation of a municipal body like LCC was so resisted.

Again, modern literature offers better explanations. Chandler (2007) and Darroch (2012) propose that centralised planning and control of transport was resisted was that the first duty of municipal administration was perceived to be protecting private interests, not promoting public ones. Therefore, whenever additional supervisory powers were created or proposed, for example, for a London-wide municipal body or a city-wide transport authority, they ran up against not only parliamentary sovereignty but also fierce local debates about the extent of public bodies' practical financial obligations on a case by case basis. Worse still, in London these fears were stoked by specific events in the locality such as the Poplar rates rebellion, and in a more specific transport-related context, the dismal financial failure of the municipally provided Thames passenger river boat scheme (Turvey, 2003) as well as concerns that the development of tramways was being used as a deliberate method of furthering social housing schemes (Turner & Tennent, *in press*). This kept political debate focussed on short term, cost efficient solutions at a minimal cost to ratepayers, preferably implemented by arms-length quasi-public bodies rather than municipal bureaucracy (Chandler, 2007; Robson, 1939). Thus, at a London as well as national level, the persistent avoidance of any centralising direction of development and the continual political anathema shown towards extending municipal control is explicable, and the eventual outcome of an unaccountable hybrid organisation running public transport quite predictable.



This lack of priority and powers allocated to the municipal provision of transport (and other public goods) is often portrayed as British problem (Offer, 1981) but this omits to mention that other authors (Radford, 2013) have pointed out that in the US municipalities had faced similar problems. They were able to circumvent them by autonomously raising funds provided that it could be shown that they could be underwritten by the revenues generated by the enterprise. The reasons why this did not occur in London are not explored, though it was noted in the period that the absence of this process in the UK played a significant role in the formation and the structure of the LPTB itself (Robson, 1939).

There are no accounts directly covering the reasons why the governance of transport in London took the path it did even when there were other alternatives. Laski et al. (1936) recognise that bodies like the Advisory Committee or the LPTB were set up incrementally as independent offshoots answerable to a central authority rather than being part of a municipal democratic process. In other words, they were early examples of what today would be described as Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisations though few modern authors except Millward seem to have made this connection and still fewer engage with the reasons about why this form of governance was preferred for London's transport.

This brings us to modern general theories about quasi-public organisation or 'hybrids'. There are two omissions in the arguments. One is that their origins are scarcely accounted for. Literature places them 'emerging' as an actor in the arrival of New Public Management in the 1980s (Andresani & Ferlie, 2006). However, this leaves some questions about their provenance and also over how quickly they were adopted, especially in European countries (Van Thiel, 2004). The emergence of hybridity is misconceived though, and the idea is the result of a chronocentricism that does not look far enough back in time. American studies do acknowledge the long history of hybridity, though they arguably benefit from the absence of nationalisation as a break between the pre-second world war practice of governance making historical memory more continuous and preserving continuity in hybrid organisations (Radford, 2013).

This omission leads to an argument over the performance of hybrid organisations which is also overly located in the late twentieth century. Most literature is critical of the outcomes (Cornforth, 2005; Overman, 2015; Rhodes, 2012; Van der Walle, 2008; Van Thiel, 2002). This case study shows that almost none of criticisms hold true for the LPTB in an earlier period. We should investigate why, not least because there may some important and relevant lessons for today.

In summary, most the arguments concerning London transport and municipal governance simply sail past each other without engaging. Transport historians rail against the haphazard nature of London's tube and railway network. They blame it on all the easy catch of all the 'Free Market' but they do not investigate any further into the discourse surrounding municipal trading or what that would have meant in terms of London's government. Equally they puzzle about why a great municipal central transit authority like New York's was not set up for London. This is attributed to the perfidy and self-interest of Parliament, but they fail to spot that such a development was always highly unlikely in the British and London political contexts. They do not explore why opposition came from many

places as well as from Westminster or explain the details of how several attempts to create such an authority failed.

With the exception of Morrison (1933) there is no public governance literature that really engages with all aspects of London transport. This is more understandable, as theorists need wider canvases on which to paint their all-encompassing global concepts, but it leaves a gaping hole in the admittedly comparatively parochial concern of explaining how London transport developed as it did or was governed as it was.

By neglecting individual examples modern theories fail to fully account for the hybrid form. Some studies have puzzled over how quickly it spread and where it came from (Van Thiel, 2004). Look far enough back, and the LPTB is just one of numerous examples of QUANGOs from that period. Combine this with the periodic external fears of higher tax payers about democratic control of public services then there can be little surprise that they reappeared as a mechanism to detach public services from public control. Similarly, the record of QUANGOs is only scrutinised in relatively recent periods, usually the 1980s onwards (Pollitt, 1997; Rhodes et al., 2012; Van Thiel, 2002). The actual record of the LPTB is very much at odds with what might be expected on the basis of these modern findings, and to find out why the next section examines the arguments and what is known about the two key figures in the leadership elite of the Board.

## **The Management, Leadership and Strategy of London Transport**

The narrative focus in business history is often on the founders of organisations and their personalities (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2014). Therefore the largely dispersed and incomplete nature of the work dealing with the leadership and managerial effectiveness of its leading personalities, Lord Ashfield and Frank Pick<sup>2</sup> is unusual. Only one biography exists, Barman's *The Man Who Built London Transport* (1979) which describes the Pick's life. Admittedly, studies of Ashfield are hampered by the destruction of his personal papers. Nevertheless, extensive records of his business correspondence, articles and speeches remain, and are catalogued by Barker and Robbins in Appendix 4 of *A History of London Transport*. A similar catalogue exists of Pick's personal papers which are much more extensive than Ashfield's, and these have been used by all the wide-ranging London transport histories in support of their observations about the senior figures.

In the theoretical sphere, there is a very extensive range academic material discussing the role of management and leadership in the public sector. Dunleavy (1991), Common et al. (1992), Johnson and Scholes (2001) and Flynn (2007) describe the changing political climate in which public sector managers and leaders

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<sup>2</sup>Frank Pick arrived at London transport in 1906 as assistant to the then general manager Sir George Gibb. He became traffic development officer, commercial officer and deputy to Ashfield until his resignation in 1940.

have had to operate from the 1980s onwards. Their work covers a wide variety of topics, but for the purposes of this book its principal interest is in how and if public sector managers providing public goods can respond to increasing accountability through notions of public choice. Moving from institutional analysis to considering the actions of the individual, Bass and Avolio (1993), Popovich (1998) and Grint (2005) offer a number of models through which the actions of Pick, Ashfield and others may be interpreted, whilst Northouse (2016) supplies an interpretation of how individual leadership and management were perceived in the period in which Pick and Ashfield operated. Using Northouses's historiography of leadership styles, we can see that Bass's work emphasising the importance of idealised influence and personal charisma represents a move away from the situational-based management and leadership theories popular in the 1960s and 1970s and an indirect return to importance of individual character traits and behaviours that were held to be the essence of successful leadership in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, Popovitch and Grint's work offers an opportunity to reconcile the central debate between trait versus situation, that is, nature versus nurture in leadership theory. By acknowledging that problems and their solutions are essentially social or political constructions, they accept the situational element in any given context facing a public sector manager. However, constructionism also allows a role for personal agency in terms of what the manager or leader prefers to select as their leadership style and situate the problem and select the solution they opt for.

With its focus on the public sector and its ability to bridge both sides of the nature–nurture debate, Grint's work appears a highly appropriate analytical model for the study of leadership and management in public transport. However, all this scholarship is in a sense in vain, because the first of several key weaknesses in the transport history literature in so far as it discusses managerial or leadership ability in London transport is that it simply ignores any frame of academic reference. There is no attempt at a systematic analysis of Pick, Ashfield or anyone else's leadership and managerial ability situated within a theoretical framework. Consequently, the conclusions drawn about them are entirely based on individual recollections or impressions recorded by colleagues. As such, the arguments advanced are somewhat valid, but highly unreliable. The second issue is that Barker and Robbins' and Jackson and Croome's discussions of Pick's, Ashfield's and other key personalities such as Yerkes', and Morrison's leadership and managerial ability are scattered throughout the key literature rather than forming the single subject of specific chapters. The analysis simply never reaches the required depth. In common with much else, their management and leadership styles are simply uncritically accepted and described in a very piecemeal fashion. However, both Wolmar and Halliday do devote specific sections to Pick, Ashfield and Yerkes. Nevertheless, Halliday's is very brief indeed and few conclusions are drawn. The reader is left wondering what proof there is whether Pick, Ashfield and the others were good, bad or simply irrelevant to the operation of the organisation. The consensus from the literature is that Pick and Ashfield were especially pivotal to the success of London transport, but other than their undeniable longevity in post little is offered through the medium of managerial and leadership theory to support this claim.

The title of Wolmar's chapter on Yerkes 'The Dodgy American' illustrates a third weakness. This is that the activities of the key figures in London transport are largely presented by Wolmar and Halliday as individual human interest stories. Yerkes and Perks are presented as scoundrels, Pick as an honest dealer and Ashfield as a smooth operator. Little attempt is made to consider why these different personalities controlled London transport at different times or to what degree their methods proved effective or not. Their actions are not framed within conceptions of proper leadership of organisations in that period or subsequently. Yet again, the critical voice is absent and the reader is left amused by their peccadillos or impressed by their acumen and probity though still with insufficient information about their actual impact on the organisation or whether they were suitable leaders for organisations they led.

Fourthly, the literature contains a major gap when discussing personalities other than Pick, Ashfield, Yerkes and Gibb. Whilst these men were undoubtedly prominent, they were also indirectly and directly supported by a large cast of other able individuals such as Paish, Acworth, Speyer, Geddes, Bull, Morrison, Menzler, Graff-Baker and Latham. Their names crop up repeatedly throughout the histories. Admittedly, Morrison has his own biography and autobiography, but the remainders' contributions are acknowledged by fundamentally unexamined. Regrettably, this is also a weakness of this book, though it may offer scope for future research.

All these findings are consistent with the general weakness of the literature repeatedly alluded to throughout this review which is that the authors principally see their work as a descriptor of a historical panorama which seeks to inform, rather than a work of critical analysis seeking to explain. Neither Barker, Robbins, Jackson, Croome, Halliday nor Wolmar saw their books as being fundamentally engaged with leadership and management, even though much of what they write about and the conclusions they draw are hard to explain without touching on it. Consequently, the books are littered with momentary insights into leadership and management style, but at no point it is systematically addressed.

The only book whose central purpose is an exploration of these topics is Christian Barman's biography of Frank Pick (1979). Barman does cover all aspects Pick's life from his childhood, through industrial design to his work and at the Underground Electric Railways of London Company (UERL), the LPTB and events after his resignation until his death. However, there are a number of issues from the perspective of business or organisational historian. Yet again, none of the narrative is situated within managerial or organisational theory. Secondly, much of the book describes Pick's life and talents as a designer and his involvement in art and architecture. This is an interesting study of character, but little importance to his managerial methods. There is little attempt to systematically analyse or justify Pick's actions as a leader and a manager of a complex organisation.

As a result the reader is left with a slightly jumbled structure that well encompasses the huge variation of talents demonstrated by Pick, but it is inelegant and makes little attempt to analyse the findings or present them within academic theories or a unifying theme. In essence, the book remains a much longer version of all

other material concerning the management and leadership of London transport. It is a mass of human interest details, making only occasional stabs at critically examining Pick as a leader or manager of London transport within analytical frameworks. I suggest that the reason for this is both the book's greatest strength and greatest weakness: Barman knew Pick personally. Whilst this allows the author a unique level of insight it also prevented him from viewing Pick with the necessary detachment. The book's essential weakness is that a personal tribute to an esteemed colleague rather than a systematic examination of his managerial record at London transport.

Analysis of Lord Ashfield's life and his impact on the development and operation of London transport is even more superficial. There are several problems. Firstly, the destruction of his personal papers has undoubtedly stymied subsequent authors. As a result, it is Pick's personal papers are used to discuss the relationship between the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman, with the obvious implications for bias. Ashfield is typically and correctly portrayed as a successful amalgamating tycoon of the early- to mid-twentieth century, though there is no discussion about why he differed so greatly from his flamboyant predecessors or contemporaries satirised by Dreiser (1912) and Galbraith (1954). The series of events leading up to Pick's surprise resignation are very incompletely covered and Ashfield's often very personal interventions in industrial disputes are ignored whilst the nature of his political influence at Westminster almost as equally disregarded. He is given generalised credit for his influence over shareholders at key junctures in the development of the LPTB and recognised along with Pick as a 'Great Man' of London transport (Wolmar, 2005). However, the leadership and managerial methods by which he achieved his remarkable results remain largely unexplored, as is corporate strategy.

The absences here are in a general sense the same as those recounted above, and they do not need reiteration. However, the common key assumption that Pick and Ashfield's actions – in this case strategies – were good because they were present before, during and after the unification of London's transport certainly needs challenging and to do that effectively their strategies need to be explicitly classified rather than just assumed. Moreover, although this book accepts that their strategy was successful in achieving that unification the more important question here is held to be what came next. Pick and Ashfield's strategies might have been effective in the 1920s and 1930s, but what long-term course did they set London transport on?

## **Conclusion**

There is clearly a plethora of material, academic and otherwise, that concerns the overall history and development London transport in general. Unfortunately it is overwhelmingly focussed on describing what and how events happened rather than why they happened, hence the focus on technical change, network expansion, developments in service provision, human interest stories, etc. Insufficient effort is expended in analysing the reasons for events unfolding as they did. This is revealed by the relatively minor role assigned to London transport's finances,

management and leadership, and the almost total neglect of its governance successively as a private, quasi-public and public body.

Fundamentally, the nature of these omissions is rooted in three absences. Firstly, there is the absence of sufficient primary source evidence. This is the smallest of the problems that need to be addressed, but it is nevertheless critical as it prevents the construction of data sets over long periods from which trends can be inferred. Secondly and more importantly, there is the absence of critical analysis or interpretation of the evidence. Thirdly, there is the absence of theoretical frameworks within which evidence and analysis can be reliably situated. This book represents an attempt to answer those questions via a case study based on an extensive in-depth re-examination of the archives. The results are firmly situated in wider theory. As such, I trust the reader will find the conclusions reached valid, reliable and credible.