



First West Yorkshire 36225 (BD12 TAV), one of 98 Volvo B9TLs with leather-seated Wright Eclipse Gemini 2 bodies, in Boar Lane in Leeds city centre. DANIEL STAZICKER

LEATHER SEATS OR XMAS TREES?

PAUL KIRBY compares the public transport offerings in two regional cities, one British and one German. Neither is perfect and he weighs up their different strengths and their weaknesses.

With a population of 1million, Cologne has 25% more people than Leeds (2011 Census: 751,500), but they have a lot in common. They are, respectively, the centres of the fourth largest city regions of Germany and the UK and both aspire to be successful modern European cities.

That means keeping business and workers happy, providing leisure attractions and shopping, and making it an attractive, buzzing place to live. For me, and probably for you, a large part of measuring all that will be the quality of its public transport system.

Both have a regional public transport authority – Metro in West Yorkshire and VRS (Verkehrsbund Rhein-Sieg) in that part of the Rheinland. Both also have smaller rival cities within their wider region: Bradford and Bonn, the latter the former federal capital of erstwhile West Germany.

I visited shortly before Christmas last year and began my comparison by looking at the quality of information available to potential passengers.

There is a good choice of websites to plan specific journeys in Cologne. That of city operator KVB has details of its bus, tram and

KVB		Oper im Palladium	Samstag 21.12.2013	21:13 Uhr
Line	Richtung			Zeit
190	Wiener Platz			5 Min
190	Wiener Platz			17 Min
190	Wiener Platz			32 Min
190	Wiener Platz			47 Min
190	Wiener Platz			62 Min

Foöss "Die größte Silvesterparty Kölns" in der LANXESS arena! Garantiert ei

Live bus departure information inside a concert venue in Cologne. PAUL KIRBY

train services, while the VRS website offers a regional picture. For all journeys large or small the Deutsche Bahn site provides an excellent search facility.

All offer translations into English, French, Dutch, Spanish and Italian, but the Yorkshire websites — bus companies, Metro and Traveline — do not afford the same linguistic generosity to European visitors.

In Cologne, you will find adequate maps and timetables for all three modes of public transport, but the quality of bus maps is one issue where Metro excels. The Cologne printed map does not contain street names, frequency of routes, location of city centre bus stops or some of the other useful information available in Leeds.

The quality of bus maps is one issue where Metro excels in Leeds

Over the years, Metro has improved its maps to include local attractions, which is helpful for the visitor and encourages leisure travel. Route maps inside many of the Metro timetables also put them ahead of their German counterparts.

However, Cologne's tram stops and bus shelters contain fully detailed maps of the city and its routes.

Real-time information displays are common at many of Cologne's city centre bus and tram stops. Given the Germans' reputation for efficiency and good timekeeping, this investment may mainly be more for passenger confidence than necessity.

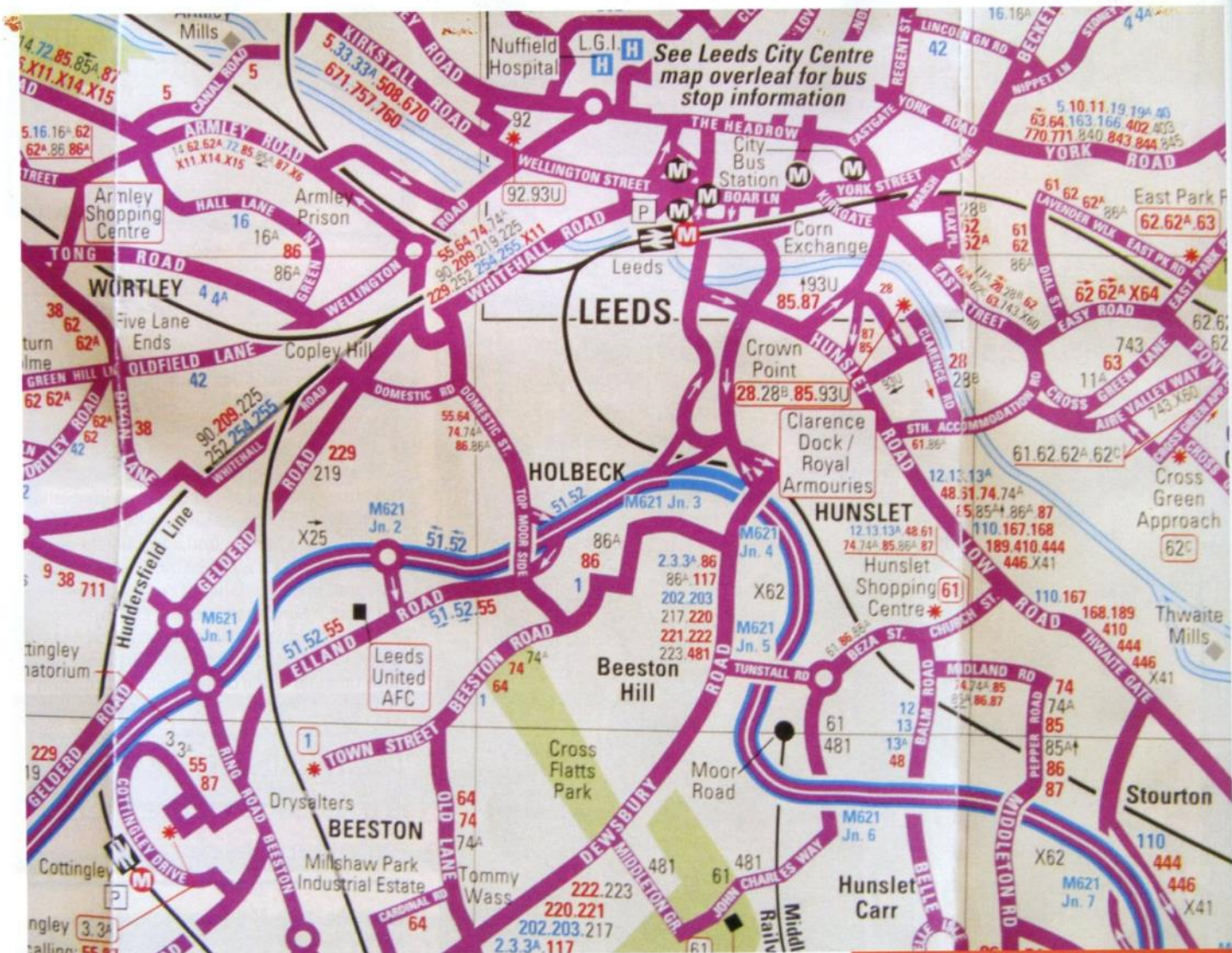
Sadly, few have confidence in the real-time system Metro has been looking after for many years. Whether it actually works is a topic often discussed with friends and colleagues in passenger organisations. A system that cannot tell you if a bus has been cancelled is not a good one. The fault may not lie entirely with Metro, however. Bus companies may also be responsible for its apparent shortcomings.

The waiting environment

I did not encounter any bus stations on my travels around Cologne and its suburbs. Metro has a good track record of building them throughout West Yorkshire.

Both cities have an adequate number of bus shelters and it is pleasing to see Metro keeping to its promise of providing timetable cases at every single bus stop.

However, KVB in Cologne seems to go farther in one aspect. Inside a concert venue



in a remote city location, it had a screen with real-time information of the bus route passing by. This clearly encourages the use of the bus and may help in reducing the number of drink-driving offences. Screens in the new Leeds Arena displaying times of last buses may tempt many car owners to leave their vehicle at home next time.

Cologne has a ticket specifically for visitors – the Kölncard. It offers free travel on bus, tram and train and includes price reductions to local attractions and businesses. The price is reasonable at 9 (€7.20). It is valid for 24hr from the minute you validate it, which can save you a fare or two the next day. Bus-only day tickets are available for West Yorkshire and Leeds but not in Cologne.

The VRS regional daily ticket costs a hefty 24 (€19.20). The Metro equivalent is £7.70 though the VRS ticket covers a larger area with a more comprehensive train and tram network. When I bought one, it took the ticket clerk at the rail station a good 5min pounding the keyboard of her computer to find the VRS TagesTicket.

All the buses I used in Cologne were on time, clean and functional. The internal displays and audible announcements for each stop are very helpful to visitors and new passengers who have ventured out of their cars. And they are invaluable to people with visual or hearing disabilities. I was surprised to see the equipment on a rural route on a Sunday.

As in many parts of the UK, Cologne buses are equipped with closed-circuit television cameras. I could not gauge the friendliness of the drivers as you can enter buses at the back, but their driving standards and appearance were professional. One person boarded with a real Christmas tree with no problems and I wondered how many of our drivers would have allowed that.

The buses of West Yorkshire are far superior when it comes to seat comfort. Cologne's

Public transport maps of Leeds (above) and Cologne (above right). The Metro map for Leeds has more useful detail.

Cologne wins out for journey availability and frequency

First operates the central area Leeds City Bus for Metro, using Optare Solos like 59306 (YK55 ENN) and 59307 (YJ07 EHO). The fare is 50p but the service originally was free.
MARK BAILEY





While a lengthy public inquiry considers Metro's plans for trolleybus rapid transit in Leeds, KVB has ordered eight Citea SLFA electric bendy buses from VDL Bus. Testing is due to begin next year, with fast charging at termini. VDL BUS



are functional with not much cushioning, whereas many of our buses now have luxurious leather seats. And they do not have double-deckers from which to enjoy the views of their fine city and the Rhein Valley. Perversely, they have double-deck trains and we do not.

Not high up on my list of priorities is the external appearance of a bus. In the VRS region they are, in general, rather dull — usually just one colour. One I saw in the Rhein valley had no clue as to which local or national company owned it. Cologne, though, does cover some of its trams and buses in highly original and striking all-over advertisements.

Open all hours?

Cologne has a comprehensive service on Christmas Eve and all of Christmas Day with trams every 15 or 30min throughout the night on Christmas Eve. In West Yorkshire, there are no buses after 20.00 on Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day in the entire Metro area the only service is the small free service operated in Keighley by the Keighley Bus Museum Trust.

Cologne trams run a normal Sunday service



Passengers are allowed to carry Christmas trees on buses in Cologne, but the seats are hard by UK standards. PAUL KIRBY



First buses, including two of the Wright StreetCar bendybuses for the Leeds-Bradford Hyperlink service, parked around Bramley depot on New Year's Day 2014 when no services operated. KVB published a guide to its Christmas and New Year services. DANIEL STAZICKER

on 25 and 26 December, which is at least half-hourly. Boxing Day sees a skeleton daytime bus service in West Yorkshire and no trains.

Likewise for New Year's Eve. The buses in West Yorkshire finish at 20.00 and do not run again until 2 January whereas an excellent tram service runs throughout the whole period in Cologne. How it finds time to carry out track maintenance is a mystery to me.

Cologne has a superb night tram network supplemented by one bus route to cover the whole city. Eleven tram routes cross through the city centre providing a comprehensive service to all areas.

Trams run throughout the week with a last departure between 01.00 and 01.30. This gives those going to a theatre, concert or cinema plenty of time after the show to get home and even have a drink afterwards. In

Leeds last buses leave the city centre between 22.45 and 23.30.

On Friday and Saturday nights in Cologne all but one tram route runs a half-hourly service between 01.00 and 05.00. In addition there are suburban Deutsche Bahn night trains, branded by VRS as NachtExpress. Weekday train services finish between 24.00 and 01.00, and at weekends they run roughly hourly.

The journey to Bonn takes 35min. The journey time between Leeds and Bradford is 20min and Halifax on the same line is 35min. The last train from Leeds to those places is 23.08 weekdays and 23.00 on Saturdays.

It is five years since the disappearance of the last of the seven NightRider bus routes in Leeds. At the time I was shocked that one of the biggest cities in England with a thriving

night scene and massive student population could not support a night network on Friday and Saturday nights.

Brighton, with less than half the population of Leeds, has night buses and, incredibly, has one route running every 10min throughout the week. Just over the Pennines, the lucky folk of Greater Manchester have an enviable network of night buses, some subsidised. Leeds has just one short route through the Headingley student area.

There were many reasons why the Leeds network finished — poor publicity and branding, gradual erosion of the service and a lack of interest/cooperation by Metro and Leeds City Council. To its credit, First tried new routes to expand the network but the marketing was poor and a slow and painful death for the whole service was inevitable. Taxi firms must be delighted by the current situation.

Blue sky thinking?

While in West Yorkshire we can enjoy a more interesting and comfortable ride on our leather-seated double-deckers, Cologne wins out over Leeds in terms of journey availability and frequency.

I believe that trams are more attractive to the average passenger and with the demise of the planned Leeds Supertram all the organisations will have to work harder to provide a bus network to compete with other UK cities, let alone our European competitors.

Metro, Leeds City Council and bus operators must cooperate to provide more buses on public holidays and at night for the pubbers, clubbers and night-time workers of Leeds.

With proper marketing, these services could be run commercially, as proven in many towns and cities throughout the UK. Only when these improvements are made can Leeds call itself a modern European city. It should be simple: copy best practice from the UK and abroad, no blue sky thinking necessary. ■



Arriva Yorkshire 1705 (YJ13 FKE), a Wright Eclipse Gemini 2-bodied Volvo B5LH hybrid electric, at Crossgates on a Leeds-Castleford service. STEPHEN WHITELEY