

Edinburgh Tram – the £13m inquiry

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Having been in New York last week, it's interesting to catch up on UK news... only to learn that I missed the long-awaited publication of the Edinburgh Tram Inquiry.

Having just penned [a piece on HS2](#) and still grinding teeth over that folly of a project, it feels only fair also to vent spleen over Edinburgh Tram – another project that leaves those who recall it fuming.

If you care to spend a little time finding out all about Edinburgh Tram and what went wrong, you should tune into a podcast we published back in July 2022 when Mike Flynn, of Michael Flynn Associates, ran listeners through this disastrous, directly-procured light rail project.

You can also access this Infra Dig episode on [Amazon Podcasts](#) as well as [Apple Podcasts](#). It is available, open access, over numerous other services.

Mike – an itinerant builder of railways – delves into the Scottish capital's light rail ambitions and looks at what went wrong. Amusingly, he never once touches on the inquiry that started in 2008 and concluded last week (September 2023), at a cost of a bit more than £13 million (good money after bad).

IJGlobal's advice is that you tune into that podcast and ignore the inquiry findings as this episode lifts the lid on everything that went wrong on a project that was always going to struggle.

The official inquiry

However, given that £13 million was spent (wasted) on the inquiry, we shall allow some column inches for the investigation into a project that left deep scars across the UK infrastructure industry and serves as a case study on how NOT to deliver a light rail system.

Lord Hardie's final say on Edinburgh Tram will take few by surprise.

Transport Initiatives Edinburgh (tie), the City of Edinburgh Council and Scottish Ministers come in for the fair share of criticism... which is entirely right as it was overseen by a procession of unqualified people in much the same manner as the Scottish Assembly building – which suffered the same fate of cost overruns and late delivery (you'd think they'd learn).



In the case of the parliament building, it had an estimated cost of between £10 million and £40 million at its planning in 1997. However, by early 2004, the final cost had galloped up to an eye-watering £430 million for a funky building.

Edinburgh Tram was projected to cost £375 million, but came in at £776 million for a massively reduced service that was in and out of court, hideously delayed and resulted in the destruction of more businesses than the city cares to remember.

Both projects put one in mind of that wonderful quote from the charming movie *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* where Michael Caine's character explains to Steve Martin that he once harboured artistic aspirations, but sadly lacked the skills, teaching him a harsh life lesson on limitations.

He said: "Freddy, what I am saying is: know your limitations. You are a moron."

The same advice would have been wisely targeted at those in power who thought they could procure infrastructure and oversee a challenging project that had to wend its way through the ancient streets of Edinburgh – with more unmapped utilities than you could shake a divining rod at.

Quite apart from deficient procurement procedures, a lot of the financing for Edinburgh Tram was scheduled to come from a congestion charge that was to be levied on all vehicles entering the capital.

However, failing in 2008 to take a leaf out of Ken Livingstone's London congestion charge book when he did not asking people whether they wanted to pay a tax, they put it to the vote and – curiously – the people of Scotland spoke with one voice... no, [they did not want to pay](#).

That effectively put paid to a major source of revenue for the tram system and put paid to John Prescott's aspiration to see congestion charging systems rolled out around the UK... which was a shame.

But let's take a look at Lord Hastie's findings. It is amusing to read: "Apart from Mr Kendall, tie and its employees had no experience of delivering a tram project and it depended on the use of freelance and contract staff, as a result of which there was significant 'management and staff churn'."

He continues: "The project involved the construction of a tram network consisting of at least line 1a (from the Airport to Newhaven) and the purchase of tram vehicles to operate on the network.

"From reports submitted to them councillors expected line 1a to be completed within the available budget of £545 million and to be open for revenue service by the summer of 2011.

"The construction of line 1a was delayed and a restricted line from the airport to York Place opened for revenue service almost 3 years late in May 2014 and at a reported cost of £776.7 million, which was £231.7 million in excess of the available budget for the entire line 1a.

"The reported cost was an understatement because City of Edinburgh Council allocated costs to other budgets that truly related to the project and failed to include the net present value of borrowing £231 million to complete the restricted line.

"There was also a substantial claim by a landowner of which there had been no awareness at the date of the reported

cost. The best estimate of the cost of the restricted line is £835.7 million.”

Ach – that’s enough of that. Listen to the podcast to hear what really went wrong. However, if you want to read on, Lord Hastie’s findings are (at the time of publication) [accessible here...](#)

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