

Railwatch

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WHAT A WASTE: Rails for Merseytram unloaded at Scunthorpe before Whitehall juked three light rail projects Picture: MERSEYTRAM

Ready and waiting

A thousand tonnes of rails to carry trams back on to the streets of Liverpool were delivered to Scunthorpe in November just weeks before the Government dumped the whole £300million Merseytram project.

In just a few weeks, a bleak winter chill fell over three light rail schemes.

First the Government ditched the Leeds scheme, then said No to Merseytram, going on to block hopes of a light rail scheme for Portsmouth.

In early November, Merseyside was hoping its scheme would still get the go-ahead. On 7 November, MPs Louise Ellman and George How-

arth met Prime Minister Tony Blair to plead for £170million promised three years ago.

But Mr Blair backed his Transport Secretary Alistair Darling in plumping for "cheap and cheerful buses".

Mr Blair and Mr Darling, both lawyers, lectured the councils trying to inject new life into transport about "due diligence" on costs.

If either of them ever travelled by bus, they would realise how inferior it is to light rail.

Liverpool mobile phone entrepreneur Mike McComb had offered financial backing to keep the Merseytram scheme going. The 48-

year-old father of seven said: "I passionately believe in this project and I am not sure everyone realises how important it is to Merseyside.

"Someone needs to find the courage to make the decision to go ahead with the tram." Merseytram was hoping to get £170million from the Government, £40million from Merseytravel, £25million from the European Commission, as well as money from the North West Development Agency. Before the Government would release its £170million, it insisted

a £24million contingency fund was in place – to be used if the cost of the project were to overrun.

In Leeds, political and business leaders told the *Yorkshire Post* the Government's "No" will cost the city £2.4billion in inward investment in Yorkshire. The tram was

also expected to create 32,000 jobs. Commentators in Yorkshire have rightly identified the Government's love affair with roads and buses as the "road to ruin". Like it or not, the road lobby is still in the Whitehall driving seat.

