Scrapped Stonehenge road could fund South West's sustainable travel revolution

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Connecting South West England: in place of A303/A358 widening. The Executive summary is here, and full report here.

An alternative transport investment to connect South West England – a forgotten region

Supported by the Stonehenge Alliance, our allies Transport Action Network (TAN) [1] commissioned transport policy experts, Greengauge 21 [2], to explore better transport connectivity for the South West, after the scrapping of two highly contentious road schemes by the Government. Published this month, the report [3] proposes using some of the £2.5

billion saved by cancelling the A303 Stonehenge and A358 schemes [4] to invest in rail, bus and active travel instead.

Recognising that public finances are tight, the report's proposals are modest, but nonetheless essential if the South West is to grow jobs and homes, and avoid becoming the forgotten region, cut off during extreme weather events.

What does the report say?

The Government has saved over £2.5bn from scrapping the deeply unpopular A303 and A358 road schemes. It needs to reinvest some of that into low carbon solutions that will safeguard connectivity to the South West, improve opportunities and grow the economy by:

1. Delivering a showcase **integrated public transport network** across a swathe of Wiltshire–Dorset–Somerset–Devon–the broad A303/A358 corridor, using railheads as key hubs for all transport modes

2. Enhancing the capacity and capability of the **Salisbury–Exeter railway**

3. Opening **new station and enhancing services** to deliver sustainable housing expansions–for example Wellington, Somerset, and Devizes Gateway, Wiltshire

4. Replacing the diesel fleet providing today's Salisbury-Exeter railway services with a **discontinuous electric solution** using adapted existing rolling stock

5. Adopting an explicit **climate change adaptation** strategy to sustain rail access to South West England through adverse weather events

6. Supporting the re-introduction of **rail freight** in the South West with a new regional R&D grant as necessary to get services up and running

7. Funding the creation of a **national cycle route**, broadly parallel to the A303, in addition to much improved local active travel networks.

Strategy Summary map: Connecting South West England in place of A303/A358 widening © Greengauge 21

Chris Todd, Director, Transport Action Network said:

> *"For far too long the South West has been the forgotten region with transport policy and investment stuck in the sidings. Beeching's legacy is undermining the South West's ability to cope with an increasing population and extreme weather events. This report aims to turn that around, with a set of pragmatic, but necessary, solutions to boost economic growth and new homes.*
>
> *"We can't escape increasingly severe weather events, but we can better prepare and ensure that when there is flooding on the Somerset Levels, alternative rail routes are available. At present, these alternatives are not robust and the South West risks becoming cut off from the rest of the UK."*

Network Rail has long recognised that the line suffers from poor reliability and punctuality but lacks the investment.

Nick Hurrell of Salisbury to Exeter Users Group (SERUG) told the BBC:

> *"Performance is appalling. There's a target of 90% of trains to run on time. That target has been hit on just one day in the last four months. Over half the trains run late on this line."*
>
> *"There are 88 miles between Salisbury and Exeter. It needs 12 miles of additional track, doubling the loops where trains can pass at speed. That would transform the line from, at best, two trains an hour to four or even five in both directions." [6]*

The Transport Minister's response to the debate this month on Railway Services in the South West, was encouraging:

> *"SWR performance on the west of England line has been challenging, and falls way below our expectations for passengers. The mostly single-line section between Salisbury and Exeter has suffered multiple failures and has little resilience in the event of disruption. SWR and Network Rail have therefore dedicated a specific working group to looking at minimising the impact of delay and cancellation going forward." [7]*

NOTES:

[1] Transport Action Network (TAN) helps communities press for better and more sustainable transport through investment in bus and rail services and active travel. More here.

[2] Greengauge21 is an independent policy research group specialising in transport and its wider impacts. More here.

[3] The Executive summary is here, and full report here.

[4] The A330 Stonehenge was costed at £2.5bn, while the A358 was last costed at £397m and was cancelled as an "unfunded transport commitment". See table in Cancel New Roads to Boost Growth

[5] The A303 was scrapped by Rachel Reeves on 29 July 2024 and the A358 Taunton – Southfields was scrapped in the Autumn Budget on 30 October 2024. More information about the issues surrounding the A303 Stonehenge road scheme can be found on the Stonehenge Alliance website.

[6] BBC report, 17 January 2025, *Railway sorely in need of investment, study finds*

[7] Simon Lightfoot MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary for Transport on 14 January 2025 at the Westminster Debate Railway Services: South-West. Transcript here

ELSEWHERE IN MEDIA

Rail Magazine 17 January 2025 'Failing' Waterloo-Exeter line 'sorely in need of investment ' as study recommends key improvements

Salisbury Journal 24 January 2025 'Scrapped Stonehenge road to fund sustainable travel'

SERUG (Salisbury to Exeter Rail Users Group) 20 January 2025 Response and review of Greengauge report (to come)

Alton Talks in memory of Kate Fielden

Alton Arts Presents Alton Talks September – November 2024

A series of three talks in memory of the late Dr Kate Fielden
Coronation Hall Alton Barnes SN8 4LB

7.30 to 9.30pm.
Doors and Bar open from 7.00 pm. Bar is also open after the talk

Kate Fielden was a resident of Alton Priors since the early 1980's and was a member of our Parish Council for many years. She lived in The Old Smithy in Alton Priors and was a much-valued member of our society.

Kate's first job as a Doctor of Archaeology was with the National Trust in York. She then moved to Devizes and was employed by the Wiltshire Archaeological Society doing much-associated work at Devizes Museum. In 1985 Kate began her long association with Bowood House as an Archivist and Curator. As part of her work, she wrote **'Bowood Revisited: The Revival of a Country Estate',** a chronological account of the 9th Marquess of Lansdowne's stewardship from 1972 to 2016.

During this time Kate was becoming a seasoned activist and

campaigner. It was Kate's love and understanding of the archaeological, historic and cultural importance of the entire landscape that drove her to tirelessly remind the authorities that *"the Outstanding Universal Value of Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites WHS was fixed at the time of designation"* and that development could "*never benefit one part of the World Heritage Site without harming other parts*".

How lucky we are that Kate was prepared to selflessly devote so much of her life to champion the Stonehenge landscape and the entire World Heritage Site of Stonehenge and Avebury. It was as if Kate's considerable professional and campaign experience in archaeology, curating, editing, countryside planning, heritage, archaeology, and environmentalism were destined to come together to fight the protracted battle for Stonehenge. Her advice on all these local things is sadly missed by her local community and all conservation organisations she supported. More about Kate with photos whilst campaigning with the Stonehenge Alliance here.

PROGRAMME

Thursday 26 September 2024: "Playing with Giant: completely revising our understanding of the Cerne Giant" Talk by Dr Michael J. Allen BSc MIfCA FLS FS

The Cerne Giant is an iconic hill figure overlooking the Dorset Downs, which is just one of two extant hill figures of the human form. Both have been considered to be any date from prehistoric to post medieval. In 2020 the National Trust undertook a project to date the Cerne Giant once and for all … and that excavation led to many more discoveries. Who was he? Why was he there? What was his purpose? Why have many famous scholars and antiquarians travelled the road between Dorchester and Sherborne never commented on him? All of these, and more, will be addressed.

Thursday 24 October 2024: “Sighting the Sun – and Moon – at the Stonehenge World Heritage Site” Talk by Dr Amanda Chadburn FSA FSAScot

Most people know about the summer solstice celebrations at Stonehenge, far fewer know about the many astronomical alignments at the Stonehenge World Heritage Site. In fact, archaeoastronomy – the study of how ancient peoples understood phenomena in the sky and what role the sky played in their cultures – is not well understood and this has led to numerous theories and common misconceptions about Stonehenge, particularly concerning its relationship to the sky and the heavenly bodies. This talk will explore how ancient people designed their monuments to sight the sun – and perhaps the moon – in and around the Stonehenge World Heritage Site.

Thursday 28 November 2024: “Wiltshire’s Chalk Horses” Talk by Garry Gibbons

Wiltshire’s stable of equine chalk hill-figures are arguably the county’s most prominent group of landscape monuments. They have persisted across the decades due to a strong symbiotic relationship between each chalk horse and its local community. Yet the simple question of why this nationally unique herd of current – and lost – chalk horses were corralled within a small area of Wiltshire across the 18th and 19th centuries continues to evade us. This talk begins by exploring how today’s popular understanding of Wiltshire’s chalk horses came to be established, it then proceeds by presenting recent investigations at Marlborough and Devizes, the results of which demonstrate that a more nuanced understanding of the county’s equine chalk hill-figures can be achieved through a combination of topographic survey and social history research.

Book in advance online. Tickets £8.00 each. Tickets in advance £6.00 each if booking for all three talks
All money raised through this series of talks will go towards the upkeep of our village Hall, The Coronation Hall in Alton

Barnes. All those taking part have offered to give their service in memory of the late Kate Fielden and are thus helping the community that Kate supported while she was living here.

www.ticketsource.co.uk/alton-arts-for-the-coronation-hall-alton-barnes

SPEAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES

Mike Allen Thursday 26 September

Mike Allen is a geoarchaeologist and environmental archaeologist, but an archaeologist. He specialises in the study of soils, sediments and snails (as you will see) and has studied the landscapes of Stonehenge, Avebury, Dorchester, Cranborne Chase (rewriting the textbook understanding of these) as well as abroad (eg, Malta and Cape Verde). He has run his own lab and environmental archaeology consultancy for over 15 yrs, but before that he set up and ran the Wessex Archaeology environmental department for 20 yrs. It was during his post there, and then on ASHARG that he regularly met Kate Fielden – in fact she edited his first published article from Wessex Archeology (land snails nail from the Marlborough Downs, a WNHAS monograph)

Amanda Chadburn Thursday 24 October

Is an archaeologist who has worked for nearly 40 years in local government and government agencies, notably for English Heritage and Historic England – for many years as the Lead Adviser, at Stonehenge and Avebury WHS. She is now semi-retired but still works in archaeology as a Tutor at the University of Oxford; as a heritage consultant; a researcher and as a Trustee. Her new book with Clive Ruggles is on archaeoastronomy – ***Stonehenge: Sighting the Sun.***

Garry Gibbons Thursday 28 November

Garry spent the first 20 years of his career working in design, photography and publishing before taking a first degree in archaeology at Southampton, since when he has combined heritage with his creative impulses. He has constructed continuing education courses through Oxford University and delivered modules in postgraduate courses through Brookes University. Spanning that entire period he has wrestled with the question of Wiltshire's chalk horses, publishing results of investigations in the Wilts Archaeological Magazine and, recently, contributing to a book on the Cerne Abbas giant and other chalk monuments.

For information about Alton Arts please email:- altonarts@altonsandhoneystreet.org.uk

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Booking opens for all talks 26 August

www.ticketsource.co.uk/alton-arts-for-the-coronation-hall-alton-barnes

Historic England statement misrepresents UNESCO's position

Historic England's Chief Executive, Duncan Wilson published a misleading statement on 1 August 2024. It is reproduced in full interspersed with our comments.

> *"We understand the government needs to make difficult decisions on public spending, but we are disappointed at the decision to cancel the A303 Stonehenge Improvement Scheme as we believe this was the right scheme for the World Heritage Site."*

Stonehenge Alliance points out: the Planning Inspectors disagreed and did not think the scheme was appropriate for the World Heritage Site and recommended that it should not proceed.

> *"We are reassured that UNESCO has now considered the advice from us and the Advisory Bodies and not placed Stonehenge on the List of World Heritage in Danger."*

This is misleading. The **Stonehenge Alliance reminds Historic England:** For many years the World Heritage Centre and their advisory body ICOMOS have had a deep criticism of the road proposals with which UNESCO's World Heritage Committee has agreed. The UK Government's advice and cosmetic improvements were considered but nevertheless UNESCO experts recommended that Stonehenge should be put on the List of World Heritage in Danger. [Note 1]

The WH Centre's report reveals lobbying by the UK of members

of the World Heritage Committee on three separate occasions. Whilst this resulted in the overturning of the World Heritage Centre's recommended decision it is noteworthy that UNESCO has recently welcomed the cancellation of the Scheme. On July 31st the Director-General of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay, stated that UNESCO "welcomes the Starmer government's decision to cancel the construction of the road tunnel under the #Stoneenge World Heritage Site."

Mr Wilson's statement ends by saying that:

> *"We remain hopeful that at some point in the future, this scheme could be reconsidered as the best option to solve the longstanding traffic issues around Stonehenge and reunite this internationally important prehistoric landscape."*

The Stonehenge Alliance reminds Mr Wilson that reuniting the prehistoric landscape is limited to a visual appreciation from the Stone Circle since most of the land south of the A303 is privately owned and restricted to existing rights of way.

Of greatest concern to various NGOs is that the 'longstanding traffic issues' has polarised the historic and heritage community. [Note 2] The Government's cancellation of the scheme is an opportunity to develop a consensual approach that does not compromise the unique landscape of the World Heritage Site.

NOTES

1] Their recommendation in para 11, p16 states: *Decides therefore, in accordance with Paragraph 179 of the Operational Guidelines, to inscribe Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) on the List of World Heritage in Danger with a view to mobilizing international support"*

Furthermore, the UK's State of Conservation Report to the

World Heritage Committee was suppressed until the Delhi papers were published. Not even Danny Kruger MP was allowed sight of it. Thus the £55m worth of modifications were not publicly available but used for selective lobbying.

2] See statement by Rescue – The British Archaeological Trust, 30 July 2024: [‘A303 Stonehenge Bypass’]

Cancellation of Stonehenge road welcomed!

Stonehenge Alliance Press Release

The Stonehenge Alliance [1] has welcomed today’s announcement by Chancellor Rachel Reeves to cancel the £2.5bn A303 Stonehenge scheme [2] as a “low value, unaffordable commitment” [3].

The Stonehenge Alliance believe the road should have been binned in 2020 when it was recommended for refusal, after a six month examination, for the damage it would cause to the World Heritage Site [4]. However, the previous government's obsession with road building resulted in it approving the scheme despite acknowledging that it would cause permanent and irreversible harm to the World Heritage Site. It was also grotesquely expensive, but even based on National Highways' own figures the economic case for building was fatally flawed. The road scheme would have been lucky to create 50 pence in economic benefits for every £1 spent [5].

John Adams, chair of the Stonehenge Alliance said:

"This is a vindication of all the work of so many people over so many years from supporters around the world. National Highways' misguided project was called out for what it was: low value and unaffordable. It was also highly damaging. Now that it has been scrapped, we need to move on. As soon as the budget is there, we need to ensure, as a priority, that local traffic is better managed and rail access to the South West improved."

Tom Holland, historian and president of the Stonehenge Alliance, said:

"This is wonderful news. This entire monstrous project, a proposal to drive a gash of concrete & tarmac through our most sacred prehistoric landscape, should never have got off the drawing board. That cancelling it will also save £2.5 bn is obviously an additional perk."

– ENDS –

Contacts:

John Adams OBE, chair of the Stonehenge Alliance and one of the three directors of SSWHS challenging the scheme in the courts: 07917 670509

Tom Holland, historian and president of the Stonehenge Alliance: 07702 312080

Notes to editors:

[1] The Stonehenge Alliance supporter-organisations are: Ancient Sacred Landscape Network; Campaign to Protect Rural England; Friends of the Earth; Rescue, the British Archaeological Trust; and Transport Action Network.

[2] The £1.7bn is from around 2017 and is clearly out of date as can be seen by this answer to Danny Kruger MP's Parliamentary question (12 March 2024). This admits that even in 2018, the construction cost was estimated to be £1.9bn with maintenance costs of £8m a year. With construction inflation being so high since then, it is likely that the combined total cost of the scheme is over £2.5bn and that's before it runs into any difficulties tunnelling in phosphatic chalk.

[3] Rachel Reeves outlined her proposals this afternoon to Parliament. When she spoke on transport starting from 15:47, she said Labour would not go ahead with the A303 Stonehenge scheme, but she didn't say cancel. However, in the published policy paper the scheme is listed as cancelled (section 3.2)

[4] The Examination Report, dated 2 January, 2020 and written by five planning inspectors, who presided over a six month examination, recommended that the application be refused. It was published on 12 November, 2020, when the Secretary of State made his first decision to approve the scheme.

[5] The scheme's economic case depends on National Highways claiming that the scheme would deliver £1bn in heritage benefits. But given the Examination Authority recommended refusal for the 'permanent and irreversible' harm it would cause the World Heritage Site (see [4] below) and the Secretary of State's acceptance that the scheme would have a significant impact, this is no longer credible.

National Highways has also tried to boost its economic case by ignoring costs already spent and increasing benefits without providing any evidence for its claims. Even so, the scheme would only deliver at best 50 pence in benefits for every £1 spent. See page 4 onwards of Stonehenge Alliance's rebuttal of National Highways change to its economic assessment.

Travesty for Stonehenge as dodgy amendment rewrites history in New Delhi

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14. *Having considered whether* ~~***Decides therefore in accordance with Paragraph 179 of the Operational Guidelines***~~ *, to inscribe Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) on the List of World Heritage in Danger with a view to mobilizing international support, recognises that the proposed design developments offer enhanced mitigation of the impacts on the integrity of the property and that the impacts of the proposed open 0.7km cutting at the Western Portal do not constitute sufficient ascertained or potential danger to warrant inclusion on the List of World Heritage in Danger;*

15. ~~*Requests furthermore the State Party, in consultation with the World Heritage Centre and the Advisory Bodies, to prepare a Desired state of conservation for the removal of the property from the List of World Heritage in Danger (DSOCR) and related corrective measures, which must include either discontinuation of the Scheme, or modification of the Scheme to reflect the Committee's decisions and the recommendations of the 2022 Advisory mission, to deliver the best available outcome for the OUV of the property;*~~

15. *Notes that the Scheme, with the proposed design developments, provides the most feasible solution for the State Party to the impact of the A303 on the integrity of the property;*

16. *Finally requests the State Party to submit to the World Heritage Centre, by 1* ~~*February*~~ *December 2025, an updated report on the state of conservation of the property and the implementation of the above, for examination by the World Heritage Committee at its 4*~~*7*~~*8th session.*

The World Heritage Committee's amended decision (above) to postpone reporting to UNESCO by a further 18 months in effect green lights the road widening scheme. It's a scheme that had failed the planning authorities' test on grounds of permanent

and irreversible harm to its World Heritage. Is this what the new Labour Government intended?

Press Release

The Stonehenge Alliance is shocked that a highly damaging and inaccurate amendment from Kenya [1] to the draft decision on Stonehenge was passed at the World Heritage Committee today [2], albeit with some minor changes. The amendment, which appears to have been proposed on behalf of the UK, effectively gives the green light to the UK to go ahead and permanently damage the World Heritage Site (WHS) with its £2.5bn A303 dual carriageway. The Committee is meeting in New Delhi in India this week [3] discussing the threats to World Heritage Sites around the world as well as designating new WHSs.

The amendment of the draft decision effectively overturns all previous Committee decisions and now means that the site will not be placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

The Stonehenge Alliance is calling on the new Labour government to distance itself from the misleading briefings and political manoeuvrings that have been going on in New Delhi.

Preventing Stonehenge from being placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger does not alter the fact that the road scheme would cause permanent and irreversible harm to the World Heritage Site [4]. It also does not alter its appalling economic case [5].

John Adams, chair of the Stonehenge Alliance and one of the 3 directors of SSWHS, said:

> *“This is a dark day for Stonehenge and a hollow victory for the UK government as this decision won’t stop the harm to the World Heritage Site. We should not forget that this scheme failed the planning test. It was recommended for refusal*

> *because of the 'permanent and irreversible' harm it would do.*
>
> *"After their promises of change and greater integrity in politics, we hope that the new Labour government will distance itself from the shocking goings on in New Delhi. Otherwise people will assume it was behind the untrue statements that helped sway the debate."*

Tom Holland, president of the Stonehenge Alliance, said:

> *"This is a travesty of justice. The weakness of the Government's case can be measured by the grotesque lengths they have gone to in their attempts to cover it up. If Labour ministers are complicit in this, then it disgraces them."*

– ENDS

Notes to editors:

[1] Kenya's proposed amendment can be found here. A list of the inaccuracies and misleading statements is available here. Agenda item WHC/24/46.COM/7B.Add on List of World Heritage in Danger: Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites on Wednesday 24 July 2024 PM Session can be watched on YouTube starting at 2:16:56

[2] The final decision will be placed on UNESCO's website in due course but the draft Decision was heavily modified along the lines of the Kenyan amendment before being agreed this afternoon.

[3] UNESCO's World Heritage Committee is holding its 46th meeting in New Delhi, India, from 21 – 31 July, 2024

[4] The road scheme was scrutinised by 5 planning inspectors in a 6 month examination. They recommended that it should not be built and that it would cause permanent and irreparable harm to the World Heritage Site.

[5] The scheme will return less than 50 pence in economic benefits for every £1 spent building it. It makes no economic sense and would be a profligate waste of money especially during a time of tight public finances.