Archaeologists debate A303 at Stonehenge

On 9 November, the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) hosted a debate at its AGM to inform its members about issues concerning the future of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS). Following the debate, distinguished archaeologist Prof. Mike Parker Pearson gave the annual Beatrice de Cardi Lecture, on his work at Stonehenge.

National Trust, Historic England and English Heritage spoke to their organisations' support for a 2.9km tunnel and major road engineering. By contrast, ICOMOS-UK took a holistic approach to the WHS's cultural landscape and its setting, taking into account possible boundary changes. The Stonehenge Alliance pointed out that the priority should be protection of the heritage, rather than meeting the needs of traffic and economic development. We referred to the obligation under the World Heritage Convention to protect the whole Site, indicating there should be no further damage. (We will expand on our presentation later.)

The short tunnel supporters drew attention to Highways England's justification for road widening based on the Department for Transport's dubious traffic projections. Local concerns about traffic were also flagged up as reason for road widening. We agreed that congestion and rat running needed to be addressed but these issues were insufficient to justify damage to the WHS. In discussion George Lambrick, former CBA Director, suggested that the Highways Agency should be looking again at potential routes either side of the WHS.

Historic England and National Trust claimed that Highways England is seeking an 'exemplar scheme' at Stonehenge with their assistance. A damaging short tunnel, in our view, with new road construction within the WHS, could hardly provide an

exemplar. The suggestion that if we do not accept the offer of a 2.9km tunnel, we might end up with a surface dual carriageway through the World Heritage Site is not plausible. As we have stated previously this is not an option politically, unless the Government is prepared for an international outcry and, almost certainly, the loss of World Heritage status. Overall, no convincing case was presented as to why we should accept (and be grateful for) a 2.9km tunnel.

Commendable aspirations for the future of Stonehenge were made by other contributors, such as a return of tranquillity to the WHS and conservation of the landscape and its archaeology that people have worked hard to protect over the last century.

Prof. Parker Pearson in his lecture said that we now have an opportunity to reunite Stonehenge with its wider landscape when looking for a 21st century solution to 20th century problems. In particular, he mentioned restoring the link between Stonehenge and Bluestonehenge via the prehistoric Avenue currently severed by the A303.

However, this vision would be impossible with the 'offline' 2.9km tunnel proposal which would result in a new cutting through the Avenue to portals not far away; while on the western side of the WHS, the tunnel would emerge with dual carriageways cutting through an area where there are barrow cemeteries as well as evidence of prehistoric fields. Without a much longer tunnel it will be difficult to fulfil the shared aspiration for a reunited WHS while protecting it from further harm.

Stonehenge Alliance explains concerns to UNESCO mission

Stonehenge Alliance representatives met yesterday with UNESCO's World Heritage Centre's advisory mission to Stonehenge [1]. We had barely 20 minutes to outline our thoughts and explain our many concerns about Stonehenge and the A303, which included:

- When the Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS) was designated in 1986, it was agreed with the UK Government that the A344 would be closed. We pointed out that the A303 through the WHS *in its present form* did not compromise the outstanding universal value of the Site. If damaging new A303 engineering works were proposed, however, we fear the Site's WHS status and the reasons for its inscription might be threatened.
- The proposal for a 2.9km A303 tunnel that would emerge well within the WHS would be at odds with the planning framework that exists to protect the WHS.
- Our Government is committed under the World Heritage Convention to protect the whole of the Stonehenge landscape and transmit it to future generations. Nevertheless it appears to us that the plan for a short tunnel is driven by affordability and economic objectives rather than by the need to conserve the whole world heritage at Stonehenge.
- At peak times traffic at Stonehenge avoids the A303 and uses local roads through nearby villages. The Alliance would like to see measures adopted straight away to discourage rat-running. We think the Government should pay for this if the local highways authority cannot afford it.
- Likewise, we think well-established methods of easing traffic flow on the A303 at busy times should be

introduced now.

We mentioned our petition [2] and the very wide support we are receiving from all over the world for our request to the Government not to damage the WHS further by road and tunnel engineering.

A report by the mission is expected, which we hope will be published in due course.

FOOT NOTES

[1] The UNESCO World Heritage Centre was invited by the UK Government to send an advisory mission on A303 road proposals for Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS), an area of some 27sq.km. Their intention is to look at the WHS on the ground and hear the concerns of a wide range of stakeholders. The mission's representatives included an archaeologist and a geotechnical engineer, for the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and a project officer from UNESCO's World Heritage Centre Europe and North America Unit.

[2] The Stonehenge Alliance petition calls on the UK Secretaries of State for Transport and for Culture, Media and Sport, to protect the Stonehenge landscape and, if a tunnel is insisted upon, ensure it should do no further damage to the World Heritage Site. Link to petition is here.

Has the Government revealed

its hand about the A303 at Stonehenge?

A series of questions by Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb (Green Party) on the Government's intentions concerning widening the A303 near Stonehenge has revealed some interesting, if disturbing, answers.

Most shocking is that Highways England is working on preliminary designs for a new A303 at Stonehenge before it has consulted the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS-UK). How it can be proceeding with considering options, however preliminary, before it has talked to ICOMOS-UK to establish the parameters of any new development in or around the World Heritage Site beggars belief. It appears that the UK is not taking its commitment to safeguard the World Heritage Site very seriously, despite what it says in response to other questions.

The other revealing response – or non-response – was that the Government avoided answering the question as to whether it planned to tunnel under the entire surface of the World Heritage Site. This would suggest that it is still aiming to build a shorter tunnel past Stonehenge, with the result that there would be major construction and damage to archaeology within the Site. This is despite some advice that the Government has received from ICOMOS-UK that:

> "We appreciate the very real need to address the issue of the A303 and recognize that a tunnel could have beneficial impacts on parts of the World Heritage property. However, we are concerned that associated portals and dual carriageways could have a highly adverse impact on other parts of the World Heritage landscape that cannot be set aside however great the benefits of a tunnel." (reported by BBC)

In contradiction to the above, the Government did reaffirm its commitment to Article 4 of the World Heritage Convention which states that the Government will do all it can to safeguard its World Heritage Sites. However, this is not a pick and mix responsibility allowing it to make improvements in one area to offset damage elsewhere, which appears to be the Government's current approach.

Apart from these concerns, Government has said that consultation on options for the A303 at Stonehenge will take place in 2017 and should include a wide range of interested parties. It will also develop reliable cost estimates for longer tunnel options, so we hope these will now be on the table for debate and not dismissed beforehand. Funding is obviously an issue but, to date, Highways England has not sought funding for any A303 scheme at Stonehenge outside its own resources.

The full Parliamentary Questions and their answers can be read here.

Celebrating the Autumn Equinox



Walking down from Larkhill, not long after sunrise above Durrington Walls, Stonehenge appeared ahead of us in sharp silhouette, its megaliths just caught by the bright early morning light.

Some of those who took part in the celebrations were already making their way home and stopped to hold up our leaflets and sign the petition in support of our campaign.





Others who were leaving the site –



Stopped for a photograph with our banner



All who celebrated the equinox had left the henge area by 9am

and were returning to their vehicles for refreshments and a chat before setting off to destinations in the UK and abroad.





Many were shocked by the Government’s proposals for the A303. They took our leaflets and agreed to spread the word about our petition.

A last view of this amazing World Heritage Site landscape, with the distant Henge viewed over the Cursus monument, underlines how important it is to save it from destructive road building.



New discovery highlights road building folly

The massive stone monument recently discovered under the southern bank of Durrington Walls is yet another reason why the Government needs to abandon its proposal for a ‘short’ tunnel near Stonehenge and substantial road building within the World Heritage Site.

Durrington Walls lies about 3km from Stonehenge, yet is still within the Stonehenge World Heritage Site. Some 1.5km in circumference, it is one of the largest known henge monuments. Until recently, however, the line of stones lay undiscovered under its southern bank. The Stonehenge Hidden Landscapes Project has changed all that with the extensive survey work it has carried out.

While this new find is not threatened by A303 widening, it is roughly the same distance from Stonehenge as Blick Mead, where another highly exciting discovery has been in the news. Unfortunately, Blick Mead could be directly affected by the Government's road plans, as it lies adjacent to the existing A303 and too far away from the Stones themselves to be 'safeguarded' by the short tunnel.

That's why it amounts to potential vandalism to be contemplating any new road building within the World Heritage Site. There is still so much more to be discovered and understood.

Please add your signature to our petition today and share it with friends. Together we can help safeguard this special piece of our heritage for future generations.