

# 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 –**

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**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[2] The £1.7bn is from around 2017 and is clearly out of date as can be seen by this [answer to Danny Kruger MP's Parliamentary question](#) (12 March 2024).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.

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# UNESCO raises the stakes over Stonehenge

Stonehenge Alliance Press statement: Tuesday, 25 June, 2024



The World Heritage Committee repeatedly requested that the cuttings be removed from within the inscribed property because they would have major negative impact on the overall prehistoric landscape, and compromise the physical intactness of the “highly significant ancient cultural landscape.”

Photo © [Stonehenge Drones](#)

The Stonehenge Alliance (SA) [1] welcomes UNESCO’s recommendation that the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage

Site be placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger due to the threat from the A303 road scheme. The recommendation is contained in a report to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee that will be meeting in July in India [2].

The report reveals that National Highways and the UK Government have proposed changes to the scheme to try and disguise the deep cutting through the Bronze Age landscape on the western side of the site. These include 'cantilevered sides' and another 'green bridge' adding £50m to the scheme costs [3]. However, these do not appear to have addressed UNESCO's concerns.

Also revealed is the level of frustration with the UK Government's attitude towards its obligations under the World Heritage Convention. Also, with its failure to respect UNESCO's request to pause all work to allow further discussion [4]. This was seen earlier in the year when National Highways pressed ahead with closure of the A360 (to much local concern) to carry out preparatory works for the scheme [4].

All eyes will now be on the incoming (most likely) Labour Government as it will inherit the scheme and will have to decide on its future.

John Adams, chair of the Stonehenge Alliance and one of the 3 directors of SSWHS [5], said:

*"This is a damning verdict on National Highways' plans. Its minor tweaks have quite rightly cut no ice with UNESCO. You can put lipstick on a pig, but it is still a pig. Whichever way you look at it, this scheme will be hugely damaging and should be scrapped. The money should be spent instead on improving public transport links to and around the South West. That would be the best way of reducing pressure on the A303, while still retaining the view of the Stones for passing travellers."*

Tom Holland, president of the Stonehenge Alliance:

*“When in a hole, stop digging – and when the hole is one that has been dug by your political opponents, definitely stop digging. The new Government will have the perfect opportunity to reverse a road scheme that is not only ludicrously expensive, but risks huge damage to the country’s international reputation. We hope that whoever comes to power next week will seize it.”*

**– ENDS –**

**Contact us by email [SaveStonehenge \(at\) gmail.com](mailto:SaveStonehenge@gmail.com)**

**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] UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee is holding its 46<sup>th</sup> meeting in New Delhi, India, from [21 – 31 July, 2024](#), which will be live streamed.

[3] This additional work would all be permitted within the existing DCO, which further suggests its limited impact, given the UK Government had previously stated that longer tunnels would require a new DCO. UNESCO is of this opinion ([extracts from page 13, item 7B of the provisional agenda](#)):

*“The proposals for changes to the consented Scheme put forward by the State Party would have only very modest visual benefits. The two bridges would allow access across the four-lane highway, but would not minimise, or even reduce the impact on archaeological resources or the integrity of the landscape. The current main road through the landscape is undesirable, but the proposed cuttings represent a more*

*serious and irreversible threat to the OUV of the property. Furthermore, these changes do not comply with the 'minimum' requirements previously determined by the Committee, nor do they align with the recommendations of the 2022 Advisory mission, and they do not offer what was sought in the request for corrective measures set out in Decision 45 COM 7B.62, which provided an explicit indication that:*

*“the minimum change required must include an extension of the underground section of the western approach (in tunnel and/or cut-and-cover) to at least the western boundary of the property, with the western portal relocated as far west as reasonably practical, thereby reducing the length of the cut-and-cover section and minimising the extent of archaeological resources which must be removed”;*”

The report also states:

*“Although the State Party considers that the consented Scheme provides ‘best available outcome for the OUV of the property’, that is within the limits that the State Party itself has set for this project.”*

[4] UNESCO’s frustration is revealed here (top of page 13, [item 7B of the provisional agenda](#)):

*“Moreover, contracts for the construction of the DCO Scheme have been awarded (subject to necessary approvals) and preliminary works are taking place in 2024, with substantial construction to proceed in 2025. While the preliminary works are outside the property and not subject to the DCO, they do not comply with the request of the Committee in Decision 45 COM 7B.62 that ‘all further decisions or actions to implement the Scheme in its current approved state are halted until the Committee has reviewed the comprehensive information package of proposed modifications at its 46th session.’”*

[5] [Save Stonehenge World Heritage Site \(SSWHS\)](#) is the organisation set up by the Stonehenge Alliance that has been granted permission to appeal the judgement on the latest Government approval of the A303 Stonehenge Development Consent Order.

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## **Are National Highways' provisions for the rare stone-curlew on the Salisbury Plain secure?**



A pair of fledgling goggle-eyed stone-curlew on the Salisbury Plain Special Protection Area. Image copyright: Stonehenge Alliance

[Stonehenge Alliance comments](#) on National Highways' planning application for a replacement stone-curlew, prompted journalist, [Gareth Huw Davies](#), to ask in this guest article:

*“At a time of declining biodiversity, should we deliberately risk degrading a complex mesh of natural life in favour of a road scheme?”*

The first casualty of National Highways' multi-billion-pound scheme to plunge the A303 in a tunnel under the Stonehenge World Heritage site is likely to be a strange, rare bird of the night, as insignificant and retiring in the historic landscape as the stones are massive and dominant.

Few people will ever see the stone-curlew, crow-sized with a large head, yellow legs, and a haunting call. It sits perfectly camouflaged on the rolling downland by day, and probes for invertebrates in the short grass with its sharp eyes by night.

Confined to a few sites in East Anglia and Southern England, the bird is listed under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, an elite list of rare birds 'protected by special penalties'. One of its strongholds is near Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plain thanks to a conservation programme involving farmers and the RSPB over the past 20 years. [1]

The problem for the stone-curlew (unrelated to the curlew, predominantly a shore bird) is that one of its nesting sites in Winterbourne Stoke just happens to lie within the construction zone of the A303 scheme.

National Highways does not gloss over the damage the road will do to the stone-curlew breeding sites on Salisbury Plain. But the message on its website is reassuring. 'We found stone-curlews breeding in the area as part of our environmental surveys, so because it's (sic) protected we need to make

special provision for them. The creation of an area of new chalk grassland will establish new habitats for wildflowers, bats, butterflies and birds, including the rare Stone-curlew.' [2]

So far, so optimistic. National Highways has applied to Wiltshire Council for permission to create a replacement breeding plot, on Parsonage Down National Nature Reserve. This would be a one hectare 'land scrape', where turf would be removed to expose the chalk. The hope is that the migrating stone-curlews returning in the spring would, of their own volition, find this an attractive breeding habitat.

In addition, National Highways has even held out the prospect of 'net enhancement' by creating a further breeding plot on the RSPB's reserve at Winterbourne Downs, eleven kilometres east of Stonehenge.

But are National Highways and their RSPB advisers being too blasé about the potential of stone-curlew finding a new safe nesting spot? Is the road promoter not being overly optimistic that it will achieve 'net enhancement' on new plots eleven kilometres away? These site-faithful birds will surely look closer to home. It is surprising that Natural England and the RSPB both support the application. Neither has objected to the threat of disturbance, from the A303 road scheme, to the population successfully established by the RSPB near Stonehenge where they have created the perfect habitat over many years. [3]

After all, attracting stone-curlew to new plots is not the same as introducing red kites in Southern England in the 1990s, untroubled as they boldly soar over town and countryside. Stone-curlews are known to be easily disturbed, and even if the new site were quickly colonised, the bird would face an immediate adverse factor.

Land close to the new nesting site is to be the place where

contractors will dump 'arising', 400,000 m<sup>3</sup> of chalk excavated from the tunnel and road cuttings. Objectors to the road scheme, the Stonehenge Alliance, question whether the stone-curlew could tolerate years of heavy vehicle movements and human activity close to the new plot. [4, 5]

Some might see a huge imbalance here: the fate of a rare, retiring bird which most people will never see, and may not even have heard of, set against the, so its proponents claim, benefits of a new road created to make life easier for the public and business.

But look at it another way. In a world of severely declining biodiversity, should we risk deliberately degrading yet another piece of the complex mesh of natural life we revere so much in TV programmes, in favour of a transient, polluting form of transport which itself could become obsolete in not too many generations from now?

## **References and further reading**

- [1] RSPB (27 February 2017), [The return of the stone-curlew](#)
- [2] National Highways (25 January 2024), [Planning application for stone-curlew breeding plot](#)
- [3] Irvin Times (15 May 2024), [The National Trust, RSPB and WWF unveiled guidance on Wednesday designed to help workers encourage their businesses to put the climate and nature crisis at the heart of decision-making.](#)
- [4] Taylor et al (2007), Work on disturbance factors to Stone Curlew on Salisbury Plain quoted in Sharp et al (2008), [The effect of housing development and roads on the distribution of stone curlews in the Brecks: Evidence to support the Appropriate Assessment of development plans and projects in Breckland](#)
- [5] Comments by the stone-curlew specialist advising Stonehenge Alliance can be found on p9 Appendix 2 [here](#). At

the time of publication, [National Highways' application](#) had not been determined by Wiltshire Council.

### **Listen to the stone-curlew**

Stone curlews have been nicknamed Goggle-eyed plovers, Thick knee and Wailing heath chickens. Listen to their call at dusk and dawn here: BBC Radio 4 (30 April 2014), [Tweet of the day](#)



[Charles J. Sharp – Own work, from Sharp Photography, sharpphotography.co.uk](#) Wikimedia Commons

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## **Sleep walking into a national scandal**

An excellent video by Matt Sibson of Ancient Architects that comprehensively demolishes any thoughts that the A303 Stonehenge road scheme is about conservation. At the heart of Sibson's objection is the commodification of Stonehenge, tidying up the landscape and making it look "pretty" for tourists whilst risking the destruction of our "ancient

wonders", known and unknown, contained within the World Heritage Site. Below we quote liberally from Sibson's compelling argument by kind permission.

"This video is not about the standing stones of Stonehenge, it's about the bigger picture. The whole landscape is truly awe inspiring with dozens of known structures and countless others unexcavated."

"The underlying geology will be tampered with and the water table will certainly be affected [by the 1.8 mile tunnel, 8 metre high flyover and 1.6 miles of Expressway]." "This colossal work will be devastating."

"We potentially as a nation are allowing damage to a site of extreme historical importance. [This project] is about removing the road from the landscape for as little money as possible to open up the site for tourism [...] It's about making the site look more pretty. It's a nice idea but not if archaeologists say this will harm the landscape and put many important sites at risk."

"It's all about money and tourism [...] The whole project is really a national scandal."

Sibson wants to raise awareness of the devastation whilst we have the chance. "We the people can change these scandalous plans. Please share this video to educate more people, and follow [Stonehenge Alliance to say no.](#)"

@MattSibson

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# Busting the Mythbusters!

UNESCO said that "...the benefits of a 2.9km tunnel to the centre of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site cannot be offset against the damage it would cause to other parts of the Site."



A 'mythbusting' item has been published by English Heritage as part of a joint press release on behalf of English Heritage, National Trust and Historic England. We reproduce these 'mythbusters' with our responses beneath.

**PLEASE NOTE 6 August 2020:** *Since publishing the link to English Heritage's page above their mythbusters item has been removed. We have pasted the original copy below.*

- **English Heritage says: The proposed tunnel won't run under Stonehenge.** The current proposals are for a 2.9km tunnel to run about 600m to the south of the current A303 surface road. The stability of the stones will not be affected at all.

*The Alliance says: The Stones stand within c.10 sq.mls of a c.5.4km-wide UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS). UNESCO has advised the Government to seek alternative road solutions to avoid damaging the WHS. Geotechnical survey work is*

*incomplete: ground stability may be an issue.*

- **English Heritage says: A tunnel won't remove the stones from sight.** Removing the busy and noisy road means that there will be more opportunities for people to get out of their cars and explore the world heritage landscape that has for years been severed by the road.

*The Alliance says: Several generations of motorists and passengers value the view of the Stone monument from the A303: this would be lost. Most visitors would have to pay to see the Stones. Footpaths and byways would be fenced. Much of the WHS is private land.*

- **English Heritage says: There is no evidence that the proposed tunnel will damage the Mesolithic site of Blick Mead.** The proposed tunnel and any infrastructure needed to improve the Countess roundabout are well away from the site (Blick Mead is 700m away from the roundabout). Highways England is aware of the water table issues and will be assessing any potential impact on the site.

*The Alliance Says: The extent of Blick Mead is unknown and needs further investigation. A massive flyover would pass alongside and possibly over part of the site; it would also impact on a Grade I Listed house, its Registered park, and a Conservation Area. Water table issues are still uncertain.*

- **English Heritage says: It's not a 'done deal'.** There's still work to be done on the tunnel proposals, and the scheme is likely to change, on the basis of feedback from the current consultation process. Later this year, Highways England will make their application for a Development Consent Order (DCO) – a special type of planning permission for nationally significant infrastructure projects.

*The Alliance says: The Government is committed to a short tunnel in the WHS. The consultation process assumes that the scheme is a 'done deal' since objections to it will apparently not be considered. Consultation is being undertaken without full information available. [In the event the Examining Authority recommended against the scheme].*

- **English Heritage says: Doing nothing isn't an option.** The A303 past Stonehenge regularly carries 24,000 vehicles, nearly twice as much traffic as it was designed for, and on a summer weekend that figure leaps to 29,000. The result is severe congestion which compromises the WHS. It also causes delays, affecting local communities, commuters and visitors to Wiltshire. With around 120,000 new jobs and 100,000 new homes expected across the South West by 2021, and even greater growth after that, the A303 will get busier still.

*The Alliance says: Doing nothing would be better than trashing a WHS. But measures could be taken now to stop rat running and reduce congestion. There is far worse regular congestion in towns and cities in the South West. Road widening induces more traffic, placing strain on adjoining roads. New technology may revolutionise transport over the next 20–30 years, making road widening unnecessary.*

**Highways England's consultation runs until 6th April.** Details of the scheme can be seen [here](#). The consultation booklet [here](#) and the official consultation response form [here](#).

**Check out our website, [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) for more about the scheme. We have made some [initial non technical suggestions here](#) for responding to the consultation. We will publish a fuller response after we have had time to study the documentation.**