

National Trust AGM 8.11.14

Stonehenge Questions transcribed from NT's webcast [filmed] record

Kate Fielden's written question read out (but not the preamble previously submitted, *see next page **) by

Sir Simon Jenkins, NT Chairman:

“In view of the March 2006 press statement published jointly by ten national conservation organizations, including the National Trust, expressing as their ‘vision for the WHS’:

“To regain the tranquility and dignity of this unique cultural landscape, allowing present and future generations fully to enjoy and appreciate the WHS as a whole”

and calling for options for the A303 to be explored that

“avoid impacting on the WHS”,

Why is the Trust reneging on that shared vision and indicating support for a severely damaging short tunnel for the A303 at Stonehenge that would make it impossible for present and future generations fully to enjoy the WHS as a whole?”

Answered by Simon Murray, Chief Operating Officer for the NT:

“The thing about Stonehenge is of course we would all love to see a very long tunnel at Stonehenge that completely traversed the WHS. But this is a question of working with what is possible and it is just not likely at all that the government is going to support the funding of a tunnel of that length.

At the time, in 2006, we stood firm for a longer 4.5km tunnel and it was rejected; it was not funded. We believe that there is a serious, serious risk at this time that if we do not find a solution this time round that there will be a dualling of the A303 across the whole of the WHS on the surface and that would be the worst possible outcome for us. So we do believe that a 2.9km tunnel which will dip below the main bowl, in which Stonehenge sits in the centre, offers the best landscape improvement and visitor enjoyment – because it is not simply a question of archaeology – that we can possibly hope for.

And I would only say in conclusion that we will be very careful on the design if it goes ahead, as we were with the A3 that passes Hindhead, which has completely freed the Devil’s Punchbowl from the intrusion of that very, very busy road and has returned the Devils Punchbowl to a beautiful landscape that it once was. We can only hope that we can achieve as much for Stonehenge this time round.” [Clapping].

Kate Fielden replied:

“You didn’t include all of my preamble [to the question]; of course, it was long and I apologise for that; this is a very tricky subject. I was heartened to hear what you had to say earlier on about the Trust protecting the World’s heritage because it has a proper framework; [and] the “whole nation’s places for everyone for evermore.”

The Trust, in proposing a 2.9km tunnel to the SoS for Transport, is not protecting the whole WHS in its vision. The Site measures 5.4km across: the tunnel would therefore

only cover half of it. We are asking for something longer as the Trust did formerly, in order to protect a *World Heritage Site*, not just an English one or a British one – a *World Heritage Site*. And I would remind you that in Egypt a road scheme was stopped by UNESCO which had begun to encroach on the World Heritage Site of the Pyramids. I hope the Trust wouldn't face that happening here in England.”

Replied to by Simon Jenkins:

“I can only say we have been down this route literally so many times. A 3-mile tunnel [*sic*] is quite a long tunnel. The alternative to a 3-mile tunnel is a dual carriageway – we don't want that. And I may say that there is another [?] group of people who really don't want a tunnel at all because they think that's an intrusion on the WHS. I just think the best mustn't always be the enemy of the good. We have been asked to take part in this particular approach and I honestly think this is the most likely solution to a difficult problem. But no-one will always agree, I have to accept”

***PREAMBLE** [to Kate Fielden's question]:

“Professor Gaffney, leader of the international Stonehenge Hidden Landscape Project, says of their recent findings:

“Despite Stonehenge being the most iconic of all prehistoric monuments and occupying **one of the richest archaeological landscapes in the world**, much of this landscape in effect remains terra incognita.”

Dr Nick Snashall, NT Archaeologist for the Avebury and Stonehenge WHS says:

“Using 21st-century techniques, the Stonehenge Hidden Landscapes team have transformed our knowledge of **this ancient, precious and very special landscape**. Their work has revealed a clutch of previously unsuspected sites and monuments showing how **much of the story of this world-famous archaeological treasure house remains to be told.**” (Both quotes, Birmingham University website, 10.9.14)

The Stonehenge landscape is now under threat from the Government's desire to expand the A303 to the South West. The Secretary of State for Transport recognizes that the National Trust and English Heritage have expressed support for an A303 bored tunnel of between 2.5 and 2.9km at Stonehenge. Such a tunnel, resulting in at least 1.6km of new dual carriageway being constructed within the WHS, would be far too short to prevent severe and irremediable damage to the WHS landscape.

Meanwhile, the Trust is supporting a 24.7km bored tunnel under the Chilterns AONB:

“We also support the principle of a fully bored tunnel for the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This would provide significant additional protection for this nationally protected landscape and could benefit the views from Coombe Hill which we care for.”

[online NT News ‘Our HS2 petition goes to Parliament’
<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1355841078618/>]

The Stonehenge World Heritage Site, only some 27 sq km in area and about 5.4km across, is also a nationally protected landscape with an international designation, which the Government is committed to protect under the World Heritage Convention.”

Kate Freeman's question from the floor:

“The Trust is advocating a 24.7km tunnel for HS2 under the Chilterns AONB – quite right – but not a 4.5 tunnel under Stonehenge. As far as I am aware there is no proposal for a dual carriageway on the A303 across Stonehenge. So my question is: has the Trust considered a world-wide appeal on the position? The Trust has just now explained that they’re not shy of confronting Government!”

Simon Jenkins replied:

“Well, we have dealt with that, we really have, at some length. We have been discussing this for *so* long. We can go on pleading for a longer tunnel, we can raise a world wide appeal for a longer tunnel – we’re not going to get as longer tunnel. I just think the Trust has got to play the game – and the game at the moment is ‘Do we want a tunnel?’ There are plenty of people who don’t want a dual carriageway – because they want to be able to see Stonehenge from their car; they can’t see why they should be buried underground when they’re going past this great monument. I don’t want to get involved in this. It’s not our monument. But we honestly feel that in the discussions we’re having at the moment, the most important thing is to get a tunnel. And it’s a 3-mile tunnel – it’s not as if it’s a 300-yard tunnel. I totally take the point of archaeologists – they want the longest possible tunnel. I really think this one at the moment is done.”

Comment by Dame Helen Ghosh, NT Director-General:

“Just to pick up on the point implicit in that lady’s comment and the previous question: we have, in all our deliberations this time round, really consulted and thought about the WHS status. And we have had very detailed consultants’ and expert reports on the fact that the tunnel we are supporting will be of benefit to the WHS. So I just wanted to emphasise as indeed our actions and campaigning over in Northern Ireland at the Giant’s Causeway, I think emphasised, we really care about the World Heritage Sites that are in our care and we haven’t ignored that in any way in the position we’ve taken at Stonehenge.”