

Some thoughts on Strategic Roads Infrastructure at Stonehenge

Two of the presentations at the 11 February seminar included images of Stonehenge which lies on the route of the SRI project for the South West. One of the major challenges facing the Government in looking at widening the A303 where it crosses some 5.4km of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS) is how best to protect not only the Stones but also their surrounding archaeological landscape. This it is committed to do under the 1972 World Heritage Convention, notably Article 4 (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>), to which it recently reaffirmed its obligation in answer to a Written Question in September 2015 (<http://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2015-09-17.HL2384.h>).

The £1bn+ cost of the Government's proposed 2.9km bored tunnel offers poor value for money, especially as a 2.9km tunnel would not give the protection demanded under the terms of the 1972 Convention or the NPPF and Historic England's planning guidance on WHSs. There is an obvious conflict between these safeguards and the short tunnel announced by the Government and currently supported by Historic England and the National Trust. This conflict has been underlined as unacceptable by ICOMOS-UK, UNESCO's watchdog for our WHSs.

How can we best protect our premier WHS, an archaeological landscape that continues, with the help of modern technology, to reveal significant evidence of the past and an internationally famous tourist venue attracting well over a million visitors annually?

Road widening is known to induce traffic, causing problems for local road networks – currently compromised by inadequate road repairs and drastic cuts in bus services. At the seminar this issue received the wholly unsatisfactory recognition that a two-tier system of road funding *is* a problem but it isn't Highways England's to fix.

Road congestion at Stonehenge is worth closer examination. The A303 in general is very much free-flowing – as seen by displaying traffic congestion on Google Maps. It has few hold-ups compared with other strategic routes and simply does not compare with the miles of congestion now evident every day in and around all large towns and cities in the South West. Stonehenge is a bottle-neck mainly for weekend holiday traffic on Fridays and Sundays and on a few days each year when good weather and school holidays combine to prompt an exodus from London and the SE.

Congestion on busy days may be exacerbated by westward travellers stopping in slow-moving traffic to take photographs of the henge. The traffic jams encourage rat running through local villages whose inhabitants are naturally vociferous in demanding A303 widening because the local authority, strapped for cash, refuses to install the measures needed to deter it. Why doesn't Highways England help out straight away?

DfT AADF figures for the Stonehenge stretch of the A303 show traffic flow in 2014 below that in 2004, when the Highways Agency admitted that A303dualling at Stonehenge was not justified on road transport grounds. Could traffic flow be improved, when necessary, without road widening?

We are told that road user charging is unpopular both politically and with road users, yet it is widely used on the Continent as well as in London. Smart motorway management is being used successfully in England. The selective application of similar technologies at peak times

along the Stonehenge stretch of the A303 could help to change drivers' habits and encourage travel at less busy times.

There may be modern and more cost effective alternatives to an expensive and contentious tunnel at Stonehenge, especially a tunnel long enough to protect the site and its setting (around 7km). Some of the measures suggested above could be implemented, even on an experimental basis, well before 2020.

This article, by a representative of RESCUE: The British Archaeological Trust, was appended to the transcript of a Westminster Energy, Environment and Transport Forum seminar, *Priorities for the road network in England – investment, innovation and regional development*.

The seminar, held on 11 February 2016, was chaired by Shadow Transport Minister Richard Burden, MP and Baroness Kramer, House of Lords Liberal Democrat Principal Spokesperson on the Treasury and former Transport Minister.