

The Times: Rival factions battle for soul of Stonehenge

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In the world of archaeology there are two tribes: academics, who carry out research-led excavations at sites they choose themselves, and commercial rescue archaeologists, working on rapid excavations where construction companies have permission to develop.

They have joined battle this week over Stonehenge and its protected landscape after plans for a two-mile road tunnel through the world heritage site were approved by Grant Shapps, the transport secretary, despite planning officials recommending that the project be stopped because it would cause “permanent irreversible harm”.

An alliance of academics and historians is seeking legal advice on whether they can apply for a judicial review. They have six weeks in which to challenge the decision in the High Court.

In the meantime a group of 17 academics wrote to The Times calling for the length of the tunnel to be doubled, so that it would clear the world heritage site and prevent the estimated destruction of up to half a million artefacts in the densest concentration of Neolithic burial mounds anywhere in Britain.

Specially selected sample areas of the construction sites will be excavated and catalogued by archaeologists before tunnelling starts but opponents say the entire site must be excavated first if the tunnel goes ahead.

Mike Pitts, a commercial archaeologist who sits with 13 archaeologists on the A303 scientific committee, created by Highways England to advise on the archaeological aspects of the scheme, said that the claims of 500,000 artefacts being destroyed were “scaremongering”. “It might be right to say hundreds of thousands of artefacts will be lost but what is not being said is there is not a lot of information those artefacts would tell us that is new,” he said. Mike Pitts, left, and Mike Parker Pearson disagree on how to protect against the tunnel.

Mr Pitts said the vast majority of the destroyed artefacts would be pieces of worked flint in the topsoil, known as “plough soil”, which can indicate whether people were in a landscape and the broad time when they were present. “We know people were present in the landscape. It would hardly be a great revelation that people in the Bronze Age or the Stone Age were at Stonehenge walking across the fields. There has already been extensive sampling of this construction site anyway,” he said. The real discoveries were to be made by excavating deeper, he added.

Mike Parker Pearson, an archaeology professor at University College London and an expert on Stonehenge, where he and his team have discovered a new henge and a settlement where Stonehenge's builders may have lived, was one of the lead authors of the letter to The Times. Mr Parker Pearson, who also sits on the A303 scientific committee, said Mr Pitts was "utterly wrong" about the importance of flint artefacts in the plough soil and said they accounted for 90 per cent of all prehistoric evidence in the landscape.

He and his supporters, who include seven of the 13 committee members, say that if the tunnel must be built all the plough soil at construction sites should be sieved for artefacts and catalogued. "What we have discovered is that for 100 flints only two are what we call diagnostic — an arrowhead or a tool used for cleaning hides — and if you only sieve 10 per cent of the plough soil you are not going to find enough of the diagnostics to tell you about the date and activities that the tools derive from," he said.

The demand for 100 per cent sieving was described as "ludicrous" by Mr Pitts, who said it would take too long and cost too much to be feasible. Mr Parker Pearson said the argument that the construction area was too large to 100 per cent sieve was like "saying it's so big we won't go to the normal high standards employed in the world heritage site.

Specially selected sample areas of the construction sites will be excavated and catalogued by archaeologists before tunnelling starts "They don't want to know because [we are asking] far more than for a road project going through a normal piece of land. They didn't realise they needed to seriously up their game.

"We are looking at an area of 20 football pitches. We have sieved an area the size of a football pitch before," he said. "It's not how long it takes, it's the fact it should be done because these are the high standards expected in the world heritage site."

Mr Pitts said a "huge amount of thought and preparation" had been done over many years to create and refine an archaeological mitigation and recovery plan for the construction project. He said the chance any significant remains could be bulldozed was low because of the research that has been done to identify sensitive areas and "the skill and degree of expertise applied when the work is done". "University archaeology is a quite separate world from development, or hard-hat, archaeology that works with industry, and there is still a bit of sniffiness from the ivory towers of academics about archaeologists who make a living from digging for constructions — and this has exposed a bit of a rift within the archaeology world," he said.