



Pire Mazar Balandar, a rock art site in Balandar, Mashhad province, Iran. The image shows candles, stones and prayer beads offered by worshippers who associate the site with the prophet Imam Reza (photograph by D. Sigari; from Sigari et al. in this issue's Project Gallery).



The remains of burnt houses at Drenovac, a Neolithic settlement in the Middle Morava Valley, Serbia (featured in this issue's Project Gallery, by Slaviša Perić).

EDITORIAL

🛡️ Protecting heritage is a mission to which all archaeologists will readily subscribe. How best to do so is a more difficult question. We cannot simply fossilise the past; nor (most would agree) should we commodify it, converting it into monetary values that are open to buying and selling. It has a value that goes beyond that: one that makes World Heritage Sites “parts of the cultural and natural heritage [...] of outstanding interest and [that] therefore need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole”¹.

This brief preamble brings us to Stonehenge. Once again the UK government is proposing to bury the busy road that runs alongside Stonehenge (and through the middle of the designated WHS area); and once again the archaeological community is deeply divided as to the merits of the scheme.

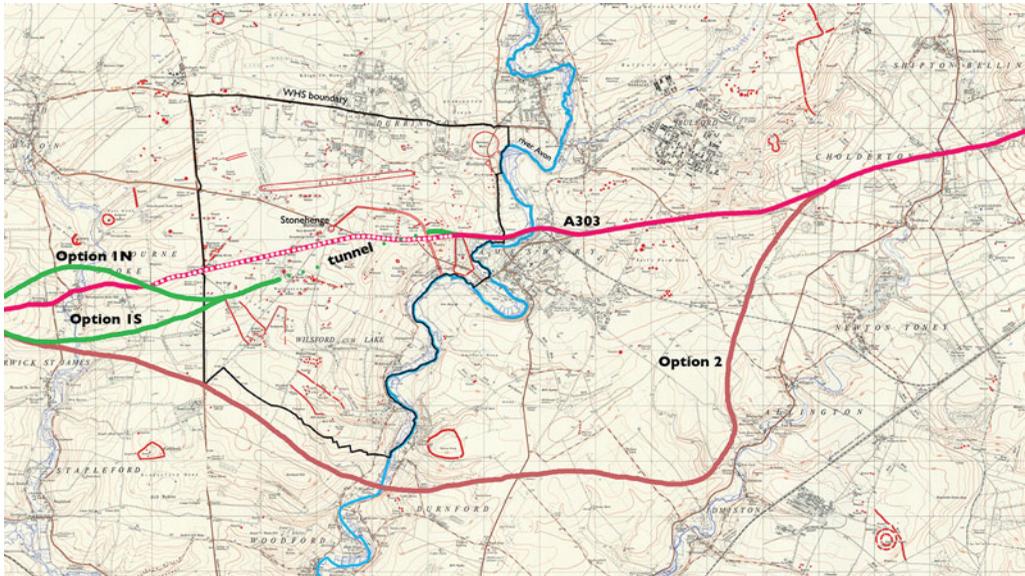
What should we do when cars and culture collide? The A303 carries heavy traffic from the London area to the South-west, and the single carriageway stretch past Stonehenge is a notorious bottleneck. Widening the road to a dual carriageway has long been an economic priority. The constant background rumble from lorries and cars so close to Stonehenge is highly disagreeable, so the proposal to bore a tunnel past Stonehenge would appear to be a good idea. Stonehenge, however, doesn't stand in splendid isolation, but sits at the heart of one of the richest and most important prehistoric landscapes in Britain. Putting the road into a tunnel has to be balanced against the damage that the wider landscape will suffer.

As many readers will know, the issue already has a long and troubled history. A tunnel, 2.5 miles (4km) long, was first proposed in 1995, then dropped in 1999 in the face of widespread opposition. A second, shorter tunnel (1.3 miles/2.1km) was proposed in 2005 and withdrawn in 2009, partly on the grounds of cost. The latest proposal originated in 2014 and envisages a bored tunnel 1.8 miles (2.9km) in length. Other options (including diverting the road to the south) have been explored, but the primary aim is to improve traffic flow on the A303, and this is the scheme now favoured by the government, as set out in the public consultation document².

There has been a predictably mixed response from archaeologists and heritage bodies. For Helen Ghosh, Director-General of the National Trust, “this does for the first time feel like a real opportunity to tackle the blight of the road that dominates the landscape of Stonehenge”. Kate Mavor, Chief Executive, English Heritage, broadly echoes that view. On the other hand, the tunnel and its portals will inevitably damage parts of the World Heritage Site; both of the portals, and the lengths of road leading to them, will lie well within the WHS's boundaries. For some, that is simply unacceptable.

¹ UNESCO. 1972. *World Heritage Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage*. Geneva: UNESCO.

² Highways England. 2017. *A303 Stonehenge Amesbury to Berwick Down: technical appraisal report. Public consultation 2017*. Guildford: Highways England.



The proposed routes of the A303 replacement, showing the location of the tunnel and its approaches marked in green (Option 1), and the surface road marked in red (Option 2). Map reproduced with kind permission of Mike Pitts.

To reflect the diversity of opinions, I have invited a range of specialists who have been closely involved with Stonehenge over the years to give a brief comment on the proposals. To open the debate, here is Heather Sebire, Senior Property Curator for English Heritage with special responsibility for Stonehenge:

Stonehenge is the most architecturally sophisticated prehistoric stone circle in the world. Along with Avebury and associated sites it was inscribed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1986 for its Outstanding Universal Value in terms of the survival of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age ceremonial and funerary monuments.

English Heritage looks after Stonehenge, and the organisation opened the award-winning new Visitor Centre in 2013. As part of this, the landscape north of the stones was opened up with the removal of the old visitor facilities—described as a national disgrace by the House of Commons—and the closing and grassing over of the A344 road, which ran adjacent to the monument. These improvements made a dramatic difference to visitors' understanding and enjoyment of Stonehenge, and greatly improved the atmosphere of the site.

To the south of the monument, the proposed A303 road scheme has the potential to transform the World Heritage Site landscape further. The long-term vision for this remarkable and unique ancient site is the removal of the busy current surface road, as it will allow Stonehenge to be experienced without the intrusive drone of traffic and glare of headlights.

Visitors will be able to look out to the many burial mounds associated with Stonehenge from the monument, without the constant blur of cars and lorries obscuring the view. If the proposed tunnel scheme, and associated infrastructure, is designed well

and located sensitively, the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Site and its assets could be greatly enhanced whilst simultaneously improving the setting of Stonehenge itself, and people's experience of it.

U Nick Snashall, archaeologist for the National Trust, also gives broad support to the proposals:

The National Trust's involvement in the Stonehenge landscape stretches back to 1927, when we acquired the land on which the aerodrome stood. Its acquisition was part of a public campaign to purchase land surrounding the stones to ensure that "the solitude of Stonehenge should be restored"³.

Ninety years on, the Trust owns and cares for almost a third of what is now the World Heritage Site. Today we have a much deeper appreciation of the significance and complexity of all of the archaeological remains that stretch far, far beyond the stones themselves.

Any proposal to carry out even the smallest infrastructure project in a landscape as precious as Stonehenge should give us pause for thought. And it is surely incumbent on us all to give proper consideration to the implications of such a project; which is why our response to Highways England's current proposals for a tunnel as part of road improvements to the A303 at Stonehenge is firmly grounded in an evidence-based approach.

Based on our assessments, we believe a tunnel of at least 2.9km, appropriately located and designed, could be transformational for the WHS. But it must be the right scheme, in the right place, with standards of archaeological evaluation and mitigation befitting this most iconic of archaeological landscapes.

U Moving away from the heritage bodies to individual specialists, the scheme has the support of Mike Pitts, freelance journalist and archaeologist who has himself excavated at Stonehenge:

The new options for the Stonehenge road are the best we have had. My own view—I first excavated at Stonehenge in 1979, and have engaged with the place ever since, including walking there today as I write—is to agree with Historic England and the National Trust. Burying the road past Stonehenge in a tunnel brings enormous benefits. An eastern portal beyond the Avenue earthwork is very significant (anyone who misses this does not know the landscape). The western portal is not good: but this could be mitigated with a bit more thought and money.

The key point I would make, however, is that the debate suggests that we have failed the public. Who but ourselves can we blame for ignorance of the Stonehenge landscape—its archaeology, its history and its modern use and appearance? We have allowed commentary to play unchallenged with hyperbole and fantasy: with absurd and unsupported claims of the archaeological remains that road alterations might destroy (using logic that would ban all research excavation); with dishonest portrayal of the

³ Quoted by Dai Morgan Evans in his chapter 'National landscapes, National Parks, national figures & the National Trust' (1996; Woodbridge: Boydell, p. 36).

proposed new road breaking through pristine downland; and with denial of the traffic problems.

Part of our failure lies in poor communication among archaeologists, with no active links between fieldwork occasioned by the road proposals, and the substantial research excavations and surveys that have been running in parallel. That evaluation excavations should be conducted in the World Heritage Site without consultation, and the results treated as confidential, is baffling.

My compelling reason for supporting a tunnel is the effect it would have—on research, on enjoyment, on imaginations—in opening up the landscape around Stonehenge. The nature of the objections emphasises the lack of that wider understanding and appreciation.

❧ Not everyone is so sanguine, and a particular issue has arisen over the position of the western portal of the proposed tunnel. The National Trust, among others, is unhappy with it. The eastern portal would be placed so that the road no longer cuts across the Avenue. The western portal, conversely, would be very close (some say too close) to the Normanton Down barrow cemetery; and would be directly in line with the midwinter sunset as viewed from Stonehenge. After dark, the headlights of vehicles entering the western portal would be pointing directly towards the stone circle. As we now believe that the builders of Stonehenge were focusing on midwinter sunset rather than midsummer sunrise, that would obscure a key feature of its original setting. So should we be thinking harder about the alternatives, as Mike Parker Pearson, Professor of Archaeology at University College London and leader of the recent Stonehenge Riverside Project (*Antiquity* 81, 83, 86, 89, 90) argues?:

There is enormous opposition to this scheme from the archaeological profession—the tunnel proposed is just too short, and would lead to destruction of large sections of the WHS outside the tunnel portals, albeit with prior rescue excavation. The Prehistoric Society, the Council for British Archaeology, the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, ICOMOS-UK and a consortium of 21 Stonehenge experts have all objected to this unsatisfactory scheme. As ICOMOS-UK has highlighted, “benefits to parts of a WHS cannot outweigh irreversible negative impacts on Outstanding Universal Value in other parts of the site”. The OUV should be sustained wholly and not bargained away on the basis of cost.

It seems extraordinary that the one proposed route that not only avoids the WHS but is also the cheapest has been ruled out even before public consultation has begun. This surface road beyond the southern edge of the WHS [marked as Option 2 on the map overleaf] has been discounted because of impacts on various sites of moderate landscape or wildlife significance, along with other concerns about local rat-running, etc. The harm to the WHS has not been given adequate weighting, given the international and unique importance of the Stonehenge WHS.

The tunnel options have major drawbacks, which could be ameliorated if the length of the tunnel is increased to protect much more of the WHS, although this is not as satisfactory as avoiding the WHS altogether. Those drawbacks are:

- a) *The landscape/astronomical impact of the proposed western portal, and its approach road, on the key midwinter sunset alignment from Stonehenge.*

- b) *The destructive impact of the approach roads to the western and eastern portals within the WHS, including slighting the perimeter of a precinct constructed around Stonehenge in the Early Bronze Age.*
- c) *The expensive and time-consuming requirement to maintain the highest standards of archaeological recovery within the WHS, both of artefacts from ploughsoil and of ephemeral features from hand-trowelled subsoil surfaces.*
- d) *The setting of a dangerous precedent by allowing large-scale destructive development within a WHS. This 'lowers the bar' for development to over-rule conservation within World Heritage Sites in general.*

 Others are urging us not to get lost in the details but to welcome the benefits the new scheme will bring. Among them is Tim Darvill, Professor of Archaeology at Bournemouth University, who excavated at Stonehenge in 2008 and has also been on the trail of the Stonehenge bluestones⁴ :

Sorting out the roads and tracks crossing the Stonehenge landscape has been a stumbling block for conservation and management initiatives for as long as anyone can remember. What we have now are not proposals for a new road; that would be unacceptable. On the table is the long-anticipated outline proposal to upgrade an existing, long-established, busy road; it includes removing around 3km of the current eyesore in the most sensitive section south of Stonehenge by putting the A303 in a tunnel. The land liberated in this way will be returned to open access.

Many issues have to be balanced, and not all of the answers are yet visible. However, accepting that much detail remains to be resolved, I believe that the advantages of an on-line solution involving a bored tunnel of around 3km outweigh the inevitable costs. The land-take for an on-line solution is relatively small compared with other options, although great care is needed to position and design the portals, and the construction works need careful planning; these are challenges for the next phase of work on the scheme. Right now, major advantages outweigh the negative factors: greatly reduced noise, light and air pollution in the vicinity of Stonehenge; reinstating the line of the Avenue; reunifying the 'Stonehenge Bowl' as an accessible world-class archaeological landscape; improvements to road safety for visitors exploring the WHS; and research opportunities to investigate areas about which little is known.

There is a danger that over-concern with specific details of the project, many of which can be resolved through dialogue between planners, engineers, architects and archaeologists, will mask the big picture, derail the process, squander the opportunity, and forfeit the real prize. If anyone needs reminding of just how magnificent the Stonehenge landscape south of the monument will be with the A303 put underground they should reflect on the hugely beneficial effects of removing the A344 that once

⁴ Darvill, T. & G. Wainwright. 2014. Beyond Stonehenge: Carn Menyn Quarry and the origin and date of bluestone extraction in the Preseli Hills of south-west Wales. *Antiquity* 88: 1099–114. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00115340>

thundered past the stones on the north side; this quarter of the landscape is now an oasis of calm and quietude.

🗨️ The prospect of a peaceful Stonehenge, with traffic and other modern paraphernalia removed, is certainly appealing. But are we seeking to ‘restore’ an imaginary, pristine past, rather than accepting that archaeological sites are inevitably part of the modern world? To close this editorial, here is an imaginary scenario from the future, offered by Dan Hicks, Curator of Archaeology at the University of Oxford:

Stonehenge 2417. Two students, E and H, are on a BA Heritage Criticism fieldtrip when they trip on a reconstructed round-barrow and fall into an old ventilation shaft. Landing safely in the disused tunnel, they await rescue. As they get their bearings, conversation turns to this 400-year-old chamber: its concrete columns, alignments and portals. What was this place originally for?

“This ruin is our discipline’s birthplace”, says E. “Weird how elite archaeologists used to think they protected expert-approved sites—rather than valuing monuments by building within them. Obviously archaeology’s outdated Authorized Heritage Discourse couldn’t survive after Stonehenge’s Bypass”.

“Yeah”, agrees H. “Even before the idea of ‘world heritage’ was junked, archaeologists understood that World Heritage status was just a convention some governments signed up to—a material consideration perhaps, but not a legal protection. Just think, without the Stonehenge Bypass, our most conservative universities might still be teaching Archaeology, not Heritage Criticism. And we might never have had Mesa Verde Heritage Spaceport”.

“Or Angkor Trump”, chimes E. “But the real pioneers were the landscape phenomenologists. They were the first to prove that Stonehenge landscape is just about experiencing Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments, and that we should keep archaeology as far away from contemporary Wessex as possible”.

A National Trust Golf Cart rolls into the long-abandoned dystopian tomb, collecting H and E. On the journey back to the surface, the cart’s Heritage Screen displays historic tweets from the time of the tunnel’s construction:

- *The #StonehengeTunnel would set a disastrous precedent for construction projects within @UNESCO World Heritage Sites*
- *Stonehenge’s problem is not its historic road, but its traffic*
- *A 2.5km four-lane dual carriageway will actually increase the road surface area within the World Heritage Site*
- *A longer tunnel ... bypassing to the south ... road-widening—anything but this monumental new Bypass!”*

We hope these comments give a flavour of the range of views that the new scheme has generated. We will keep readers updated as the situation develops.

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Durham, 1 June 2017