

WRITTEN REPRESENTATION FROM MIKE PITTS

I am an archaeologist with extensive experience of the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site (WHS). I was curator of Avebury museum in the 1980s. I directed significant excavations at Stonehenge in 1979–80 and co-directed another at the site in 2008. I have written many articles about Stonehenge and its world for peer-reviewed journals and other publications. As a consultant for a proposed visitor centre which might have been built north of Amesbury, I wrote a substantial report about visitor experiences in the Stonehenge part of the WHS (2003). I am currently a member of the Scientific Committee advising the A303 Heritage Monitoring & Advisory Group. I live in Wiltshire, a half-hour's drive from Stonehenge, and since the 1970s have often walked across the WHS and driven in and around it.

In 2000 (in my book *Hengeworld*) I wrote that “in the years ahead... major works at and around Stonehenge are likely to take place. Any ground disturbance has to be thought about with very great care.” I still feel that.

I am editor of *Salon*, the Society of Antiquaries of London's fortnightly e-newsletter, and *British Archaeology*, the magazine of the Council for British Archaeology. All views expressed here, however, are my own.

SUMMARY

I believe that the proposed scheme for road alterations including a tunnel through part of the WHS (from this point all references are to the Stonehenge part only) is an acceptable compromise solution to difficult problems that demand resolution: the works would have a major, positive impact on traffic issues that affect the WHS, local residents and businesses and a significantly wider area.

My concern here, however, is with archaeology. First, a positive effect of the tunnel would be to remove a barrier that both physically and psychologically divides the landscape. The present A303, to be crossed on foot only with risk to life, isolates the southern part of the WHS, interfering with public perception and enjoyment. It also affects academic engagement to the extent that for decades research has been focused on land to the north of the road, making it unrepresentative of the ancient world of Stonehenge. Tunnelling the road would change this.

Second, any roadworks would incidentally remove archaeological remains beyond both tunnel portals and inside the WHS, especially at the western side. However, I do not think that is grounds on its own for objecting to the scheme, as a proper archaeological response would bring sufficient mitigation; indeed, it would lead to greater knowledge and public appreciation, and hence could be seen as creative, not destructive. There has been considerable

public misunderstanding of this point, and not a little professional, which I will address as the main part of my representation.

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The process of archaeological excavation has been developed over more than a century, and properly done draws on a mix of sophisticated science, advanced field skills and informed intuition. The evidence sought comes in two forms: disturbances in the ground, such as graves, ditches and pits for house posts, which reveal now absent structures and other indications of how an area had been used in the past; and remains recovered from these features, which might include human bones, artefacts and scientific samples, as well as the dirt and rubble around them, which together allow archaeologists to estimate the age of the structures, what people were doing there and what the landscape around the site was like. Evidence of structures without their scientifically recovered contents is of little worth, as also are artefacts and bones without the contexts provided by the surrounding soil and the features from which they came. There is no shortcut to valid excavation, which requires expertise, time and funding.

Such excavation has written the ancient history of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site, and has fed into the national story of Britain's past. This is a substantial gain. Excavation cannot be repeated – the process destroys the target site (hence where possible, relatively small parts of known sites are excavated in the WHS, leaving the rest undisturbed). But it is not the end. Records can be reinterpreted, and new scientific studies can be conducted on finds stored in museums. Important recent insights into the WHS have come from research into the archives of digs conducted in the early 19th century, in the 1920s and in the 1960s.

This century most excavations in the Stonehenge WHS have been at protected, internationally famous monuments – the Avenue, the Cursus, Woodhenge, Durrington Walls and Stonehenge itself. Archaeologists recognised that the otherwise needless destruction of the excavated sites was more than compensated by the gain in knowledge. Results have made headlines around the world, and there has been great public interest in the significant advances made.

Some of the UK's most experienced archaeologists have directed and been involved in this work. In April 2018 22 archaeologists, calling themselves a consortium of Stonehenge experts, signed a letter objecting to the A303 road proposals. Of these signatories, all but three have been actively involved in the most recent research excavations, as directors, excavators and scientists. Their views are important, as an informed presentation of widespread public opinion.

They list four “major negative consequences of the tunnel options”. Three are archaeological, and I will address these first.

1. On the west a new road would “cut through the densest concentration of Neolithic long barrows in Britain, thus compromising the integrity of this unusual and nationally important group of burial monuments.”

2. This same road would “destroy part of a major Bronze Age settlement of national importance.”

3. On the east “construction of the tunnel portal... may have an effect on groundwater conditions which could detrimentally impact the survival of nationally important Mesolithic remains at Blick Mead.”

These cases are flawed.

1. The claim that “The road line would cut through the densest concentration in Britain of remains of Neolithic long barrows.... This is located in an area of less than 4sq km between Stonehenge and the western edge of the WHS” (Representation on the application for development consent, Prof. M. Parker Pearson 03 January 2019), much quoted, is false.

At Stonehenge there are nine long barrows within 4sq km (Fig 1). Elsewhere in Wiltshire, south of Salisbury, there is another 4sq km containing nine long barrows (Fig 2). If the area is enlarged to 16 sq km, it can be seen that the southern cluster is greater: it contains 17 barrows (Fig 4), compared to 10 at Stonehenge (Fig 3). A count over a wider area shows a similar disparity: 27 south of Salisbury (Fig 4), 19 around Stonehenge (additional sites to the north and east of the WHS).

The description of “the integrity of this unusual and nationally important group of burial monuments” may give the impression of well-preserved, upstanding earthworks. Two are significant monuments: one beside the Longbarrow roundabout (84m long, 3m high) and the most southerly (45m long, 3m high). The others have been levelled by the plough to a lesser or greater extent: their average height is 66cm (26 inches); two are invisible to the naked eye, having been confirmed by archaeological works conducted for the A303 tunnel project. If the tunnel had not been proposed, we would currently be saying there were seven barrows in the group, not nine.

2. It is correct that proposed roadworks would “destroy part of a major Bronze Age settlement of national importance”; its particular significance is less its scarcity, than its location in the Stonehenge landscape. It was first identified in 1967, during archaeological excavation when the roundabout was built at what was then a crossroads. Further finds suggesting Bronze Age and possibly Neolithic settlement in the area south-east of the roundabout and parallel to

and south of the A303 have been made during evaluations conducted for the A303 scheme.

This settlement area is currently unique for being seen in the WHS, and an important part of the landscape's story. That story can be told, however, only with excavation; currently we have the poorly recorded 1967 excavation, and a few pits with Beaker pottery and two burials, and artefacts collected from the ploughsoil, all found in A303 evaluation work. If the proposed road was to be built through the area, strictly it would not be true to say those works would destroy the site. For any such works should be preceded by full and proper archaeological excavation: thus it would be archaeologists who destroyed the site, just as the archaeologists who object to the roadworks destroyed parts of Durrington Walls and other monuments in the WHS.

There has been no research excavation around the western edge of the WHS. The site is not directly connected to Stonehenge, and has attracted relatively little interest from archaeologists until now. It is apparent, however, that it has already been damaged, not just by previous roadworks, but also by rooting pigs, and a case could be made for excavation to record what remains before further loss, regardless of the A303 proposals. But the latter offer the immediate incentive and important funding. As has occurred many times elsewhere inside the WHS, carefully controlled destruction of the remains by professional archaeologists would lead to new knowledge, a better understanding of WHS history and opportunities for new public engagement.

3. The claim that a tunnel portal might threaten the survival of "nationally important Mesolithic remains at Blick Mead" is the most contentious, as on the evidence available it contains two potentially misleading statements – that the site is nationally important, and that conditions have favoured the preservation of remains not normally found. As with point 2, it also misrepresents the nature of archaeological excavation: in this case, excavations now taking place are no less destructive of the site than changes in water level or makeup could be.

My understanding is that there is no evidence to support the claim of the threat; it is unfortunate that archaeologists are only now addressing the issue of the site's water table and the preservation conditions, having started excavations there over ten years ago. But it is the site archaeology I address here. I have written of the enthusiasm and commitment that has gone into the Blick Mead project (*British Archaeology*, May/June 2015); local volunteers are to be praised for their efforts, and cannot be blamed for any wider misunderstandings. Nonetheless, Blick Mead has been presented to the media with extreme hyperbole, with claims of being the country's oldest continuous settlement (so described in the Guinness Book of Records) and the "cradle of Stonehenge", and the source of the country's "oldest figurines"

and the first megalith in the WHS. Such claims, and more, are scientifically unsupportable (see <https://mikepitts.wordpress.com/tag/blick-mead>).

The dated finds excavated at Blick Mead consist of stone and animal bone, both of which preserve reasonably well in chalk soils. In fact, bones at Blick Mead seem to be less well preserved than might have been the case had they been buried away from water – say at Stonehenge: “The preservation of the bones was very poor, most fragments being very small and highly eroded; this is typical for chalk environments with water percolating through them” (Rogers et al 2018, in *Blick Mead: Exploring the ‘First Place’ in the Stonehenge Landscape*, by David Jacques, Tom Phillips and Tom Lyons, page 128).

In a Westminster Hall debate about the A303 tunnel in 2018 (Hansard 642, no 147, June 5), Blick Mead was compared to “an extraordinarily important Mesolithic site in North Yorkshire called Star Carr”. This was misleading. Star Carr is important because permanent waterlogging in peat preserved a collection of timber (from complete trees to a small shooting bow) and bone and antler remains that is unique in Europe. There is no peat at Blick Mead; no finds of wood have been made, or of anything that would not have been preserved without the water. We cannot yet say whether or not the site has always been wet.

The 22 archaeologists refer to “well-preserved organic remains of beetles, pollen, fungal spores and ancient DNA” from Blick Mead. Information published to date has not concluded that these are necessarily Mesolithic in age, and their relationship to the archaeological site is unknown.

There is a large collection of Mesolithic flint artefacts from Blick Mead. This is of considerable interest for the history of the WHS, and an important discovery. It is not unique, however. In Wiltshire, also beside the river Avon, a Mesolithic site was excavated at Downton in 1957. As well as thousands of flint artefacts, there was a hearth and a small hollow with stake-holes suggesting a house: no comparable finds have been described from Blick Mead. To the east on the river Kennet around Newbury Mesolithic artefacts and animal remains have been found in the silts and peats along 15km of the valley. There have been several excavations at sites of similar age to Blick Mead, often with better preservation. Where the river Avon flows along the southern edge of the WHS and beyond, there seems every likelihood of finding further sites similar to Blick Mead, and possibly in locations where there might be peats and better preservation.

To summarise, no evidence has been published to suggest anything nationally unusual about the site of Blick Mead or its preservation. Its interest for WHS history is strong. That interest can only be realised through excavation, whether that occurs as now out of curiosity, with little funding, or potentially because of a perceived threat due to A303 works, in which case funding

would be available to extend excavation and conduct appropriate scientific studies.

4. The fourth “major negative consequence of the tunnel” listed by the 22 archaeologists differs from the other three, and perhaps offers an explanation for the misunderstandings described above. Unsurprisingly, the archaeologists share a deep fondness for the Stonehenge area and its archaeology, with which they are extremely familiar (sentiments I also share). But this appreciation cannot be divorced from the realities of the modern world, which are reflected in changes in archaeological thinking and practice that have occurred since 1990.

“The creation of new sections of dual carriageway and slip roads (and temporary roads during works)”, they write, “... would entail large-scale destructive development within this WHS, potentially threatening its status and integrity and setting a dangerous precedent.”

I wrote a long blog on this topic in 2017 (<https://mikepitts.wordpress.com/2017/06/28/what-would-trump-do-with-stonehenge>). Two centuries ago it was possible to drive your horse and cart across open downland and enter the stone circle uninterrupted. Since then the landscape has been ploughed and fenced. What was the main road, passing close to Stonehenge (the A344), has now gone, while a minor track has become a national trunk road (the A303). On the western edge of the WHS a roundabout was built (and later enlarged) immediately adjacent to a prominent and significant group of ancient burial mounds; the carriageway approaching this roundabout inside the WHS is raised on a low embankment. On the eastern edge of the WHS a large roundabout was built, feeding a four-lane dual carriageway into a 1km-long deep cutting out of sight of Stonehenge; this dual carriageway continues a further 1km through the WHS, crossing the Avenue earthwork (where it was removed when the road was dualled, with little record), passing close to another important group of burial mounds on King Barrow Ridge; it then emerges into sight from Stonehenge, as the dual carriageway drops in a low but prominent cutting, and continues as a two-lane road over a conspicuous embankment. The visual intrusion of this road is compounded by the traffic it carries, more than it was designed for, day and night – the reason why Highways England would enlarge the entire route into a four-lane dual carriageway.

In assessing the impact of the proposed tunnel and works on the WHS, the 22 archaeologists make the common omission of not also fully considering the roads that are there now. The approach cutting to a western portal “will inflict a vast gash on the landscape”; the eastern portal “will badly damage the visual setting of the prehistoric hill-fort of Vespasian's Camp and affect its extra-mural archaeological deposits”; the proposal “inflicts within the WHS two enormous and deep approach cuttings to the tunnel portals”.

The western cutting and the two tunnel portals would have a significant visual impact within the WHS from places where they could be seen. Considering the wider picture, however, there are also positives. Neither portal would be visible from Stonehenge, nor would any road, now mostly buried in a tunnel, apart from the relatively distant western cutting. The landscape would be greatly improved. New visual lines would be opened up, and also opportunities for walking across the WHS in a north-south direction – for the first time in generations, for example, it would be possible to walk safely and without interruption from Stonehenge to Normanton Down to the south, where some of the most significant Bronze Age barrows in Europe are to be found, but which currently are experienced by very few visitors.

The eastern portal would be visible from Vespasian's Camp (which is on private land), but its visual setting has already been damaged by the existing A303, which passes immediately below in a deep cutting, leaving the fort perched on the edge. West of the portal, where the road now continues in a cutting, the land would have been rebuilt and no further road would be visible. The Avenue route would be visually restored, and no road would pass the King Barrows.

The 22 archaeologists refer to “large-scale destructive development” in the WHS. This again is a partial representation. “Destructive development”, ie roadworks, would occur after proper archaeological investigations: the sites would already have been “destroyed” before works began, in the same way that the archaeologists destroy sites in their own projects within the WHS.

The archaeological profession recognises this as a valid sacrifice in return for new knowledge. Since 1990, with the approval of planning advice by Parliament which still exists within the National Planning Policy Framework, the principle of “preservation by record” (ie excavation) has been a fundamental tenet of British archaeology. In approved circumstances, excavation of significant remains occurs ahead of development, paid for by the developer, with a consequent gain in public knowledge. In exceptional cases, as is proposed for the A303 works on a scale never before seen in Britain, mitigation also takes the form of alterations to development plans – of which the tunnel is here the most obvious instance.

While debate about the A303 proposals has been waging in recent years, archaeological excavation on an unprecedented scale for the area has been taking place (and continues) beyond the WHS boundary to the north and east, in advance mostly of new housing (Fig 5). This is classic “preservation by record” work, and has resulted in many significant discoveries, among them the Amesbury Archer (one of the most spectacular burials of its type found anywhere in Europe), another long barrow, and numerous settlements, burials and other finds contemporary with Stonehenge and its broader times, often on

a scale not seen inside the WHS if at all. It should be obvious that the WHS boundary had no meaning in prehistoric times, and that the archaeology immediately outside is as significant to our understanding of Stonehenge as that within. Every archaeologist, it seems, accepts that it is right to allow destruction of remains between Larkhill and Amesbury when archaeologists excavate them ahead of development that meets a public need. We might seek even closer oversight, and expect the availability of even greater resources, within the WHS, but the principle of exploiting development for the creative benefit of writing history is the same.

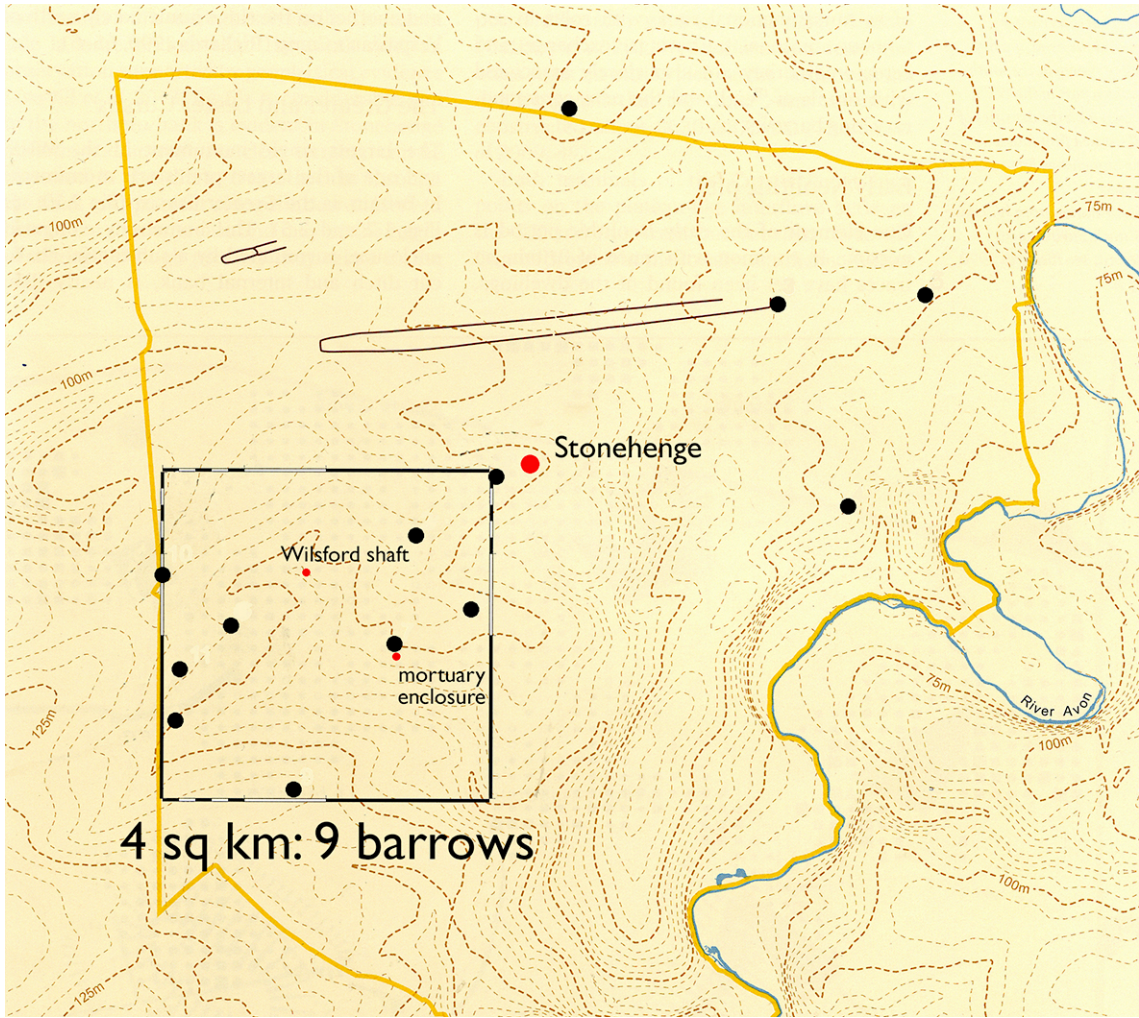
CONCLUSION

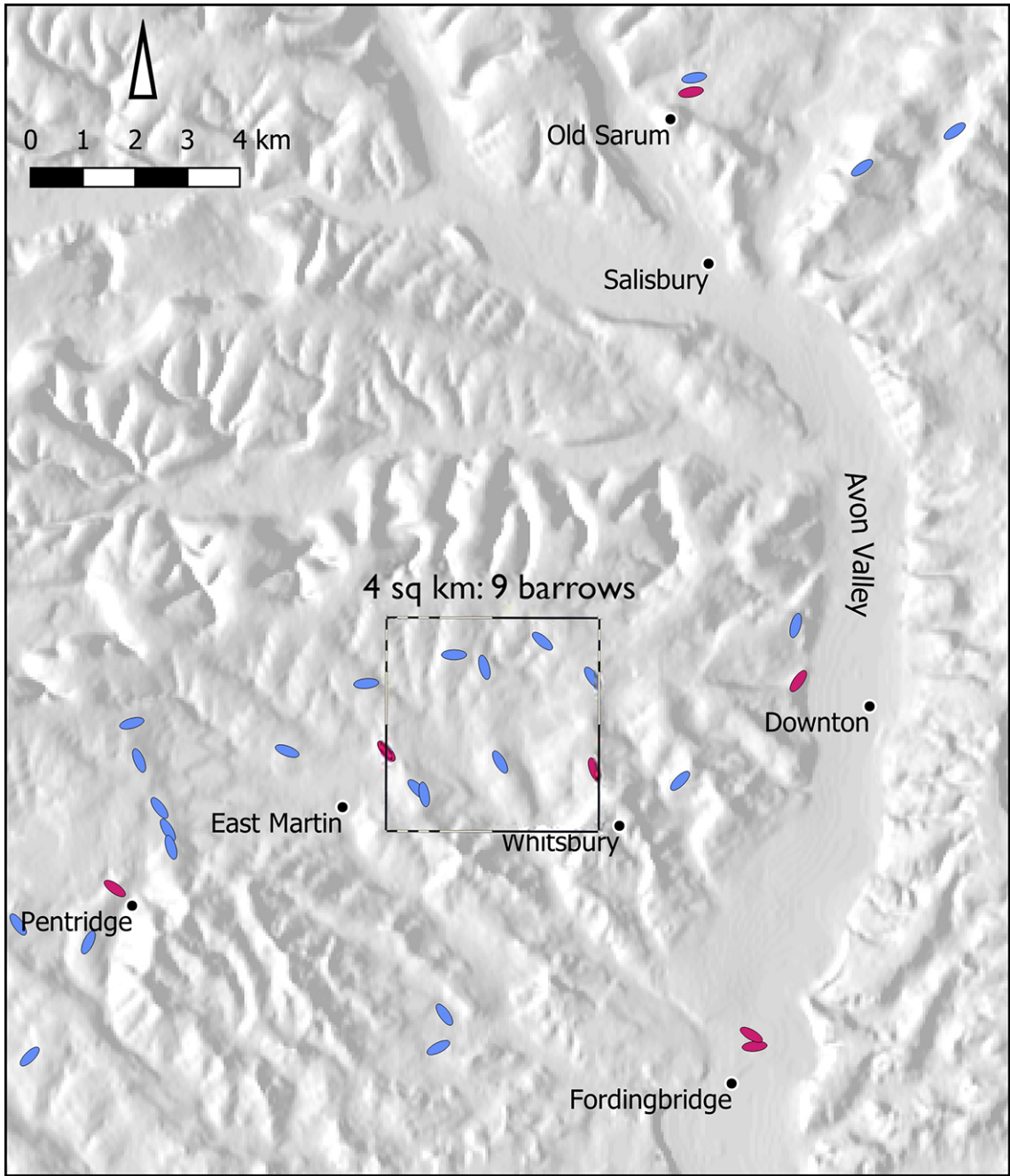
Taken together I believe the arguments presented above support a case for the proposed roadworks, with the critical proviso that appropriate prior archaeological investigations are professionally conducted and fully funded by the developing authorities.

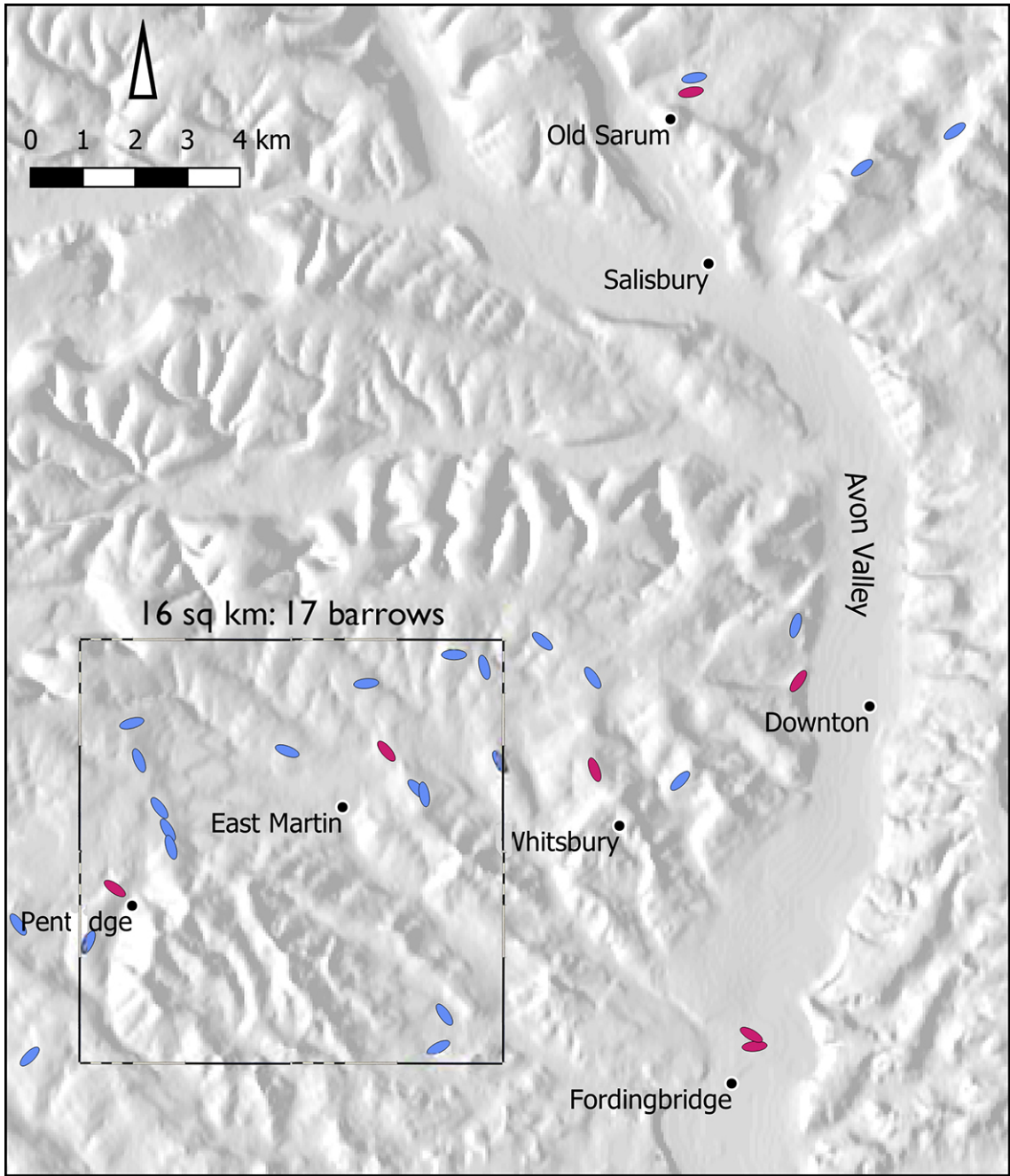
There are compromises. Other things being equal, none of us would wish to see a road tunnel portal in the World Heritage Site, still less two. But a substantial road and associated earthworks are already within the WHS, dominating public perception and engagement. Much of this would be removed. On balance, I believe the outcome of the proposals would be an improvement. The recent history of the WHS shows that people always want something better, and future generations would be likely to take advantage of the changes and seek further improvements.

Roadworks would break the ground, and without intervention remove and destroy areas of significant archaeological remains. But systems are in place for the proper response, which is to fully investigate any identified important archaeology ahead of the works, in the same way that archaeologists have been excavating within the WHS since its inscription and long before. There is a bonus: sites likely to be excavated are not typical of those usually addressed by archaeologists in the WHS, and the results offer the potential for new areas of public interest.

The tunnel and the opening up of the landscape that would follow, and the archaeological excavations done to mitigate surface ground disturbance, all at considerable financial cost, would together add value to the Stonehenge World Heritage Site, and be an example to the world of good heritage practice.







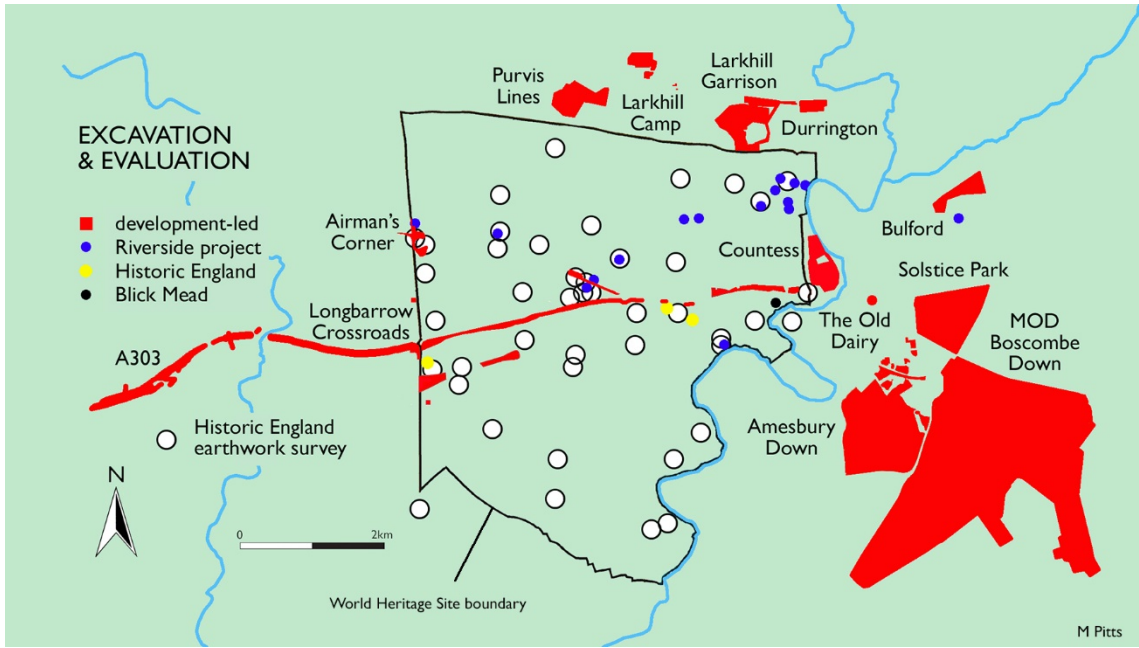


Fig 1: Stonehenge long barrows in a 4 sq km square (map based on M Bowden, S Soutar, D Field and M Barber 2015, *The Stonehenge Landscape*, updated with results from A3030 evaluation work)

Fig 2: Cranborne Chase long barrows in a 4 sq km square (map based on Michael Gill and David Field 2019, in *PAST* 91)

Fig 3: Stonehenge long barrows in a 16 sq km square

Fig 4: Cranborne Chase long barrows in a 16 sq km square

Fig 5: The red areas on this map of recent archaeological fieldwork are those where investigations have occurred in advance of development. This includes works associated with the A303 tunnel proposals, which more or less map the current road's route, and large areas of housing development to the east (map drawn by M Pitts for *British Archaeology* May/June 2018)