

Summary of Open Floor Hearing Presentation

A303 Stonehenge Examination TR010025

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Outstanding Universal Value (OUV)

Mesolithic

Much mention is made of improving the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the site, but OUV is a United Nations expression and the advice of the UN is being openly ignored. The Statement of OUV mentions only the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, but was ratified in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in June 2013, before the Mesolithic discoveries at Blick Mead were widely known.

The arc of Mesolithic post holes discovered during construction of the old car park, adjacent to Stonehenge, suggests a circular structure stood at the site at about 10,000 years ago. The recent discovery of organic archaeology, preserved at Blick Mead because of the continuously wet ground, indicates that the site was occupied continuously throughout this period prior to the construction of Stonehenge.

The continuity of occupation going back almost to the end of the last Ice Age is unique for any known site in Western Europe. As such, the statement of OUV could be revisited at some point, to include the Mesolithic contribution to the value of World Heritage Site (WHS).

The unique geology of Stonehenge Bottom could also be considered to contribute to the OUV. However, it is difficult to assess this while key geological data is being withheld from the public domain.

I submit that the Examination should consider the importance of the Mesolithic in contributing to the outstanding value of the landscape and hope that one day the statement of OUV will be revised to reflect this.

I also submit that there cannot be a full and proper Public Examination of the geological and hydrological implications of the proposed tunnel route while key information is unavailable and this in itself is grounds for rejecting the application.

Astronomy, Spiritual Value and Access

The 'Pachyderm on the Plain' is the management of Solstice events. Stonehenge holds great spiritual value for many, as acknowledged by the statement of OUV. Any closure of the Byways or the route of the A303 to travellers visiting for special events is likely to create more problems. The spiritual aspect of Stonehenge should not be dictated by the heritage industry.

In addition, proposals for wholesale closures of Public ROW and creation of others would set a dangerous precedent for future schemes.

The Byways provide an opportunity to stop and see Stonehenge in its landscape for many, including disabled people who may not be able to use the visitor bus and people who do not want their experience of Stonehenge to be dictated by the heritage industry, including for spiritual reasons.

Many people cannot afford about £23 for the visitor experience and others are unable to leave pets in their vehicles at the visitor car park, which has no shade whatsoever.

The Byways are a long standing part of the landscape. Byway 11 (AMES11) south of the A303 aligns directly with the Stonehenge circle. Byway 12 (AMES12) also aligns with the circle, both south of Normanton Down and north of the Cursus.

Alignments are an important part of the landscape and should be preserved. It should be noted that the A360 south of the Longbarrow Cross Roads is aligned north-south, while to the north it is perpendicular to the Cursus.

The Solstice alignments are well known. The stone circle is built at the point where the Sun first strikes the Stonehenge landscape on Summer Solstice.

However, there are many other astronomical alignments that can be considered within the landscape, including with the brightest stars.

The landscape could have been used to track the slow movement of stars. The axis of rotation of the Earth makes a slow precession through the night sky, with a full cycle taking around 26,000 years. Today, Polaris is the pole star but at the time of construction of Stonehenge it would not have been and around the end of the last Ice Age the pole star would have been Vega.

This manifests as a slowly changing journey through the constellations of the position of the rising Sun at the Vernal (spring) Equinox. It takes around 2300 years for the Sun to move through each constellation. We are currently around the end of the Age of Pisces and entering the Age of Aquarius.

This process is known today as the Precession of the Equinoxes, or Axial Precession, which is one of the Milankovitch cycles. It takes around 70 years for the position of the stars to move through one degree, so the night sky changes little in a single lifetime. However, one of the purposes of Stonehenge could have been to track the changes over many lifetimes.

It is likely that many of the burial mounds in elevated positions around Stonehenge aligned with the rising and setting of bright stars at the time of construction. As such they provided a means of tracking the progress of stars through the sky over a long period, as well as being a final resting place for revered members of the community.

To me, the spiritual value of Stonehenge lies in the integrity of the wider landscape and what it meant to those who built it.

Hydrology

The Chalk aquifer on which it sits provides the lifeblood of this landscape. Any attempt to alter the hydrogeology of the aquifer, the way water flows through the rock, would be a desecration of this ancient monument.

The warm springs at Amesbury Abbey, said to flow year round at temperatures of 11 C to 14 C, would have been a vital water source around the end of the Ice Age. They would also have attracted animals that would have been an important source of food.

The abundant flint would have provided tools to butcher the meat, meaning food and water were available to the early inhabitants of the area.

As such, the area around Amesbury Abbey can reasonably be regarded as the cradle of our civilisation. It is a very special place and should be revered for what it is.

The proposed tunnel would form a concrete dam in the aquifer, obstructing north to south flow. At the same time, the act of tunnelling would inevitably cause vibration leading to additional fractures forming along the length of the route. This would result in new flow pathways that would draw water away from the higher parts, towards the low point at Stonehenge Bottom, where water would likely rise until they could flow over the dam. This could then result in dewatering in the vicinity of the tunnel portals, close to Longbarrow Cross Roads roundabout at one end, and Blick Mead at the other.

Digging of foundations for a Countess flyover close to Blick Mead and below the level of the water table could compromise the hydrology, with the risk of losing unique Mesolithic organic archaeology.

The hydrology reports do little to inspire confidence that the scheme would have no adverse effects. Indeed, it was telling that on the Accompanied Site Inspection that one of the representatives of Highways England did not appear to know anything about the hydrology monitoring equipment that had recently been installed at Blick Mead, without the knowledge of anyone at Amesbury Abbey.

The Highways representative immediately started taking pictures and making phone calls when the new water monitoring installation was shown to him. Presumably it has been installed by their contractor, AECOM, accessing the site directly from the A303.

Far from being a well thought out application, the impression is that the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. The categorising and assessment of potential risks appears to have been carried out by Highways. The invariable conclusion is that no substantial adverse effects are identified. This is hardly surprising, but the process does not seem to have been rigorous enough.

Alternatives

I propose an alternative scheme routed outside the WHS and have included several suggestions in my Written Response.

One possibility is a route to the north of Winterbourne Stoke, closely following the landform as there will be no need to create large embankments to dispose of tunnel excavation material. This could feed into the Packway at Larkhill, with a new Bulford southern bypass from Durrington roundabout to the A303.

Such a route would be outside the WHS, of similar length to the proposed scheme and undoubtedly cheaper to construct.

Another possibility is a route to the south via Boscombe Down and the A345, crossing the Avon to the north of Old Sarum . This could then re-join the A303 by way of the A360 and a Winterbourne Stoke southern bypass, or by feeding into the A36 with suitable improvements.

This route would also be outside the WHS and have the advantages of providing an Amesbury southern bypass and Salisbury northern bypass.

Both Larkhill and Boscombe Down are military bases and could be moved if there was the political will to do so.

The statement of OUV considers removing the A344 from the vicinity of Stonehenge, which has already been achieved, of great importance. Removing the A303 is considered of lesser importance and other features impede on the setting of Stonehenge, including Larkhill army camp, the old visitor centre infrastructure to the north-west and increasingly, Boscombe Down.

It would then be possible to remove the surface of the A303 past Stonehenge by reducing the route to a Byway and removing the modern dual carriageway by Blick Mead entirely. This would allow access to views of Stonehenge for those who want them, while reducing traffic volume and speed through the WHS, eliminating most of the current traffic noise at Stonehenge and hence improving the OUV.

In Conclusion

Any loss of access to Stonehenge for religious gatherings would be a breach of the Human Right to Freedom of Religious Expression.

Just as the stars in the sky are not permanently fixed in position, so the statement of OUV should also be considered dynamic and capable of changing as our understanding of this unique landscape develops.

Both Stonehenge stone circle and the row of burial mounds that align with the Neolithic Longbarrow adjacent to Longbarrow Cross Roads roundabout show evidence of a later people building on earlier traditions. After humans bring about their own extinction through climate change, a future intelligence will look at the great big hole the last people dug through the Chalk aquifer that forms the lifeblood of the Stonehenge landscape and wonder 'What on Earth were they thinking?'