

Highways England: A303 Amesbury to Berwick Down Project, Development Consent Order Application

Scheme Reference: TR010025

Stonehenge Alliance ref. no. 2001870

Follow-up notes on presentation by Tom Holland, president of the Stonehenge Alliance, at the Open Floor Hearing on 23 May 2019

On the evening of 23rd May, I spoke to you in my role as president of the Stonehenge Alliance. The Alliance has sent you ten written representations; but I wanted to explain on a personal level why I feel so strongly that plans to build a short tunnel through the Stonehenge landscape are calamitous, and will shame our generation if they go ahead.

The Stonehenge Alliance has the ideal of preserving something infinitely precious at its core; but that does not mean it is blind to the demands of those who use the A303. Quite the opposite: our opposition to the Stonehenge Tunnel is rooted in issues of accountancy as well as of conservation. We believe – as the National Audit Office believes¹ – that the scheme does not offer value for money; we believe – as the Tax Payers Alliance believes – that the money could be better spent on transport improvements in the South West “which would be of greater benefit to commuters across the region”²; we believe – as Andy Rhind-Tutt, President of the Salisbury Chamber of Commerce believes – that, based on Highways England’s own figures, the Stonehenge Tunnel “will save just 4.8 seconds per mile on an average 100 mile journey.”³ Concerns that the scheme will be a massive waste of money are certainly not exclusive to conservationists. The National Audit Office and the Tax Payers Alliance are nobody’s idea of tree-huggers. 14,000 years after the last mammoth vanished from Britain, it seems that a massive white elephant is lumbering towards Salisbury Plain.

Simultaneously, the Stonehenge Alliance is pledged to the conviction that money is not everything. Even if the current plan for a tunnel made perfect economic sense, and the balance-sheet was not inked over in red, the case against it would still be overwhelming. Time can be measured in seconds, and it can be measured in millennia. Nowhere else in Britain do the demands of the present and the claims of the past rub up against each other more insistently than amidst the Stonehenge landscape. The 4.8 seconds saved on an average car journey have to be measured against reaches of time so profound that they shade into the sacred. Stonehenge – the “stone gallows”, as the Anglo-Saxons called it – has embodied the mystery and the menace of the past for as long as people have been speaking English on this island. Already, in the 7th century, the construction of the circle was further removed in time from the burial of a decapitated man there than that decapitated man is from us. Stonehenge itself, in turn, is only part of an even older landscape. At Blick Mead, animal bones have been found that date as far back as 7500 BC. In the words of David Jacques, leader of the excavations at the site: “For years, people have been asking, ‘Why is Stonehenge where it is? Now at last we may have found the answers.’”

¹ <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/south-west-road-improvements-and-the-stonehenge-tunnel/>

²

<https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/taxpayersalliance/pages/9333/attachments/original/1517237666/Stonehenge.pdf?1517237666>

³ <https://www.salisburyjournal.co.uk/news/17653161.benefits-of-stonehenge-tunnel-uncertain-audit-office/>

Distracting though the distant roar of traffic may be to Stonehenge visitors, it would be more distracting still to know that we, as a generation, had the opportunity to trace the site's evolution and to solve many of its mysteries, yet wantonly squandered it. Today, we know that Stonehenge did not exist in isolation. That is precisely why UNESCO made sure to designate the wider landscape that surrounds it a World Heritage Site. The projected tunnel, it is true, will enable visitors to admire the stones without the distraction of lorries crawling along the A303 behind them; but the object of their admiration will be the equivalent of an otherwise extinct creature in a zoo. The landscape that provides Stonehenge with its context, and which is currently enabling archaeologists to trace the ultimate origins of the monument back almost to the original arrival of humans in Britain, will have been devastated. Vast quantities of concrete and tarmac will have desecrated it for all time. The destruction involved will create a huge gap in the archaeological record that, in future years, when archaeological techniques will undoubtedly have improved, and our understanding of the landscape been further refined, will be most painfully felt. We will have raised a monument to our own shortsightedness and folly that will cause future ages to shake their heads in disbelief.

One of the questions I was asked after giving my presentation has particularly stayed with me. This was because – although I was not alert enough to recognise it at the time – it brilliantly highlighted what is at stake with this scheme. 'What about the Romans?' I was asked. 'Did they not build roads?' Indeed they did – and for a number of reasons. To serve the needs of speedy transport, of course; but there was much more to the driving of these great gashes of stone across conquered landscapes than that. They were designed as statements of possession: expressions of the power of the Roman state to do what it wished to conquered territory, to erase primordial identities, to rub the noses of the conquered in the brute fact of their submission. What I should have said at the time (and so will say now instead) is that to compare the Stonehenge Tunnel to a Roman road is indeed the measure of just how terrible a thing it threatens to be.

Tom Holland 30.5.19