

From: [REDACTED]
To: [A303 Stonehenge](#)
Subject: A303 Amesbury to Berwick Down: Request for Comments and Further Information
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To the Planning Inspectorate, on the matter of an Order granting Development Consent for the construction of a new two-lane dual carriage way for the A303 between Amesbury and Berwick Down in Wiltshire

I am pleased to comment again on proposed works to the A303 near Stonehenge, in view of recent archaeological news from nearby. I am editor of the London Society of Antiquaries e-newsletter and of *British Archaeology*, the magazine of the Council for British Archaeology, but all views expressed here are my own.

There is a perception that a list of self-described “Stonehenge experts” includes every archaeologist who knows something about Stonehenge. This is false. As well as many other Stonehenge experts who have not signed up to that group, there are thousands more archaeologists with expertise in wider and relevant areas of research, excavation, development and public engagement. Nearly 80% of archaeologists in the UK work in industry, among them some who in recent decades have been leading fieldwork in and around the Stonehenge World Heritage Site – excavating a larger area than has been explored by those “Stonehenge experts” who have also excavated there (not all have). In common with many of their colleagues, these archaeologists, whatever their views, are unable to comment publicly on the A303 proposals for reasons of professional confidentiality that do not constrain academics or the retired, or celebrity historians.

I am an archaeologist and former museum curator. I’ve lived in Wiltshire for over 40 years. I’ve directed excavations at Stonehenge, where I have made significant discoveries, and I have published many articles and books that deal with Stonehenge and its ancient and modern world. In the Stonehenge visitor centre there is a wall of quotations from antiquaries and writers, from Pepys and William Wordsworth to Thomas Hardy and Bernard Cornwall. One quotation is from me: I am the only living archaeologist on that wall. I am not a “Stonehenge expert”.

The discoveries at Durrington

Excitable stories in the media proclaimed that new discoveries at Durrington (“the largest prehistoric structure ever found in Great Britain”) are reason not to build the proposed road tunnel. On the available evidence, which includes a peer-reviewed paper, this is doubly misleading.

First, the new find seems to consist of three “massive geophysical anomalies”, likely to be pits or shafts, near a Neolithic earthwork called

Durrington Walls. These three join others previously identified, and now newly surveyed, to make a large, irregular ring of 20 blobs on the ground. It is difficult to know what to make of this without seeing the wider landscape similarly surveyed, and it would have been helpful to have comment from geologists. Few of the “shafts” have been excavated, none completely. We do not know what the discoveries represent, who or what made them or when they were made; they may well have a variety of different origins. They are intriguing, but linking them to Stonehenge is entirely hypothetical, and the reporting has been hyperbolic.

Secondly, regardless of what the Durrington features are, they can have no new bearing on the road debate. There are ancient remains around Stonehenge. This is not news. Indeed, there are already known remains of greater immediate importance and interest – we have a better understanding of what they are – in the area that would be disturbed by roadworks at the western entrance to the tunnel were it to go ahead.

The wider archaeological picture

If disturbing archaeology was reason not to build a tunnel, it would not be built. Neither would a single house or road anywhere in the UK. People rightly care greatly about World Heritage Sites, and this is reflected at those sites in more attention, more archaeological research and more spending on conservation; and higher barriers for new works to be approved – none higher than at Stonehenge. But the principles are the same.

No one who cares about Stonehenge would wish roadworks anywhere near it. Anyone who understands the Stonehenge landscape knows that sooner or later something has to change.

A busy, dangerous road crosses the World Heritage Site close to Stonehenge now, part of it dual carriageway in a deep cutting. It is a scar on the landscape. It cannot be ignored, however, that it is unable to cope with traffic demands.

Jams create long delays on a key trunk route and force drivers to rat-run through neighbouring communities. Decades of research have shown that the only viable option for change is to upgrade the road more or less on its current route. The alternative would be to push an entirely new dual carriageway through miles of special protected landscapes and some of the best preserved ancient remains in Europe (survival is poorer close to Stonehenge than in the wider area). The only thing to affect this analysis in recent years, is that traffic continues to grow.

Roadworks mean ground disturbances, affecting archaeological remains. But that need not mean loss. Archaeologists excavate to learn about the past. That is how research progresses. Knowledge of the ancient past depends on

excavations such as those conducted at iconic sites within the World Heritage Site by myself and some of the “Stonehenge experts”.

In similar fashion, A303 works would create a gain in knowledge and public interest.

We have in the UK a system of archaeological research conducted ahead of development works, paid for by the responsible developer, that has been running successfully for 30 years. This has already led to large excavations immediately east of the World Heritage Site, ahead of new Ministry of Defence housing, with results widely welcomed by archaeologists: discoveries include a Neolithic enclosure, henges, burials and other remains of greater obvious importance than the mysterious “shafts” at Durrington.

Close to Stonehenge this has meant that the proposed road route has been thoroughly researched. Anything of interest likely to be damaged would be recorded ahead of the works. Within the World Heritage Site, Highways is being held to high and unusually expensive standards – among other things, were excavation to occur we expect a higher proportion of remains to be fully investigated than is often the case. The archaeology is overseen by an independent specialist committee (I am a member, and one of my concerns has been to press for opportunities for the public to be involved from an early stage should works proceed).

The case for a road tunnel

My purpose here is to argue that archaeology in itself is not a reason not to build a road tunnel. The decision on that should be based more on matters of landscape, public amenity, traffic, communities and budgets, and specifically with reference to the World Heritage Site status of the area. Whatever the decision, there are processes to take advantage of any works to the benefit of archaeology and the public.

Clearly, extending the existing surface dual-carriageway to continue throughout the World Heritage Site would be counter to UNESCO principals and those long adopted by the British government. Tunnelling the road has been exhaustively explored as an alternative. The net effect, I believe, would be beneficial: the tunnel is the least damaging option to resolve a complex problem.

For visitors to Stonehenge – the most popular ancient site in the UK, where over half the 1.5 million tourists are from overseas – the effect would be transformative. The proposed tunnel plan would result in a reduction in visible road surface within the World Heritage Site. None could be seen from the monument, where the sight and sound of continuous traffic would disappear.

More broadly, the existing east-west road divides the landscape, physically,

visually and intellectually. Almost all excavation by the “Stonehenge experts” has been north of the road, which is where historically most research of any kind has occurred. Yet south of the road are more remains, often better preserved, that have been barely examined. There are walks through some of the UK’s best “ancient landscapes” in the southern half of the World Heritage Site that are all but unknown to the public.

One such walk starts at the southern edge and reaches Stonehenge via the best close view of the monument (Turner and Constable, who both approached Stonehenge by the A303, missed it). But it cannot be done: the A303 blocks access to Stonehenge. Removing that road would transform creative, academic and leisure experiences, leading to new public understandings and engagements.

Mike Pitts

