

The Stonehenge We Don't Deserve

We are assured by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport that Geoffrey Wainwright's article "The Stonehenge we deserve" [*Antiquity*, June 2000] is written in his personal capacity, which is just as well. This cannot be "the Stonehenge we deserve"; it is certainly not the Stonehenge we wish for; nor with any luck the Stonehenge we shall get.

The recently published Stonehenge Management Plan takes us some way down the necessary track, but there are still many hurdles. Among the relevant Departments of State listed by Dr Wainwright on page 334, the most important of all was omitted: the Treasury. It was a Treasury decision, one must assume, that in November 1997 upset the rather good applecart then travelling towards a conclusion that would have satisfied all the other bodies Dr Wainwright cites. The consensus choice at that time was the "long bored tunnel", to which both English Heritage and the National Trust had resoundingly committed themselves in 1994; but it was brushed aside. Although the Dome was awarded massive funding, Stonehenge was sent empty away.

From then on Sir Jocelyn Stevens produced a run of proposals, each heralded by consultatory fanfares, for first one, then a second, then a third site for the new "world class" Visitors' Centre for Stonehenge. Larkhill, Fargo North, and Countess East followed on each other's heels and the Secretary of State, Chris Smith, had to eat with exemplary patience many of the words he had uttered in public. At the time of writing [July 2000] Countess East survives as the likely site. (Dr Wainwright refers both to a Countess East and to a Countess Farm Site [p 337]: there are possible sites on both the East and the West sides of Countess Road but the farm buildings are on the West.).

In Spring 1999 English Heritage advertised in the Property pages of the *International Herald Tribune* (perhaps in the light of Messrs AT&T's

long run of advertisements featuring Stonehenge on the paper's back page) for an operator for the new Visitors' Centre: here was a "major international commercial opportunity". In July 1999 Dr Wainwright told Rescue's Stonehenge Conference at the Society of Antiquaries that a short list of would-be operators would appear in September. It didn't; nor in December; nor in March 2000. A July 2000 press release from English Heritage shows that (despite massive expenditure on lawyers and consultants' fees) no operator has been found, and that until the matter of the roads is settled and a flyover is in place at Countess Roundabout, nothing will be built.

On "the highways issues" [p. 337], Dr Wainwright refers to both the "one day international conference" that was mounted in July 1994 by English Heritage and the National Trust, and the 1995 Highways Agency A303 Planning Conference. But, as is now common, he fails to mention the ringing commitment made at the first by the Director General of the National Trust, on behalf of both the Trust and English Heritage:

"The first principle underlying all our joint discussions in recent years has been a total commitment, on the part of the Trust and English Heritage, to find a solution to restore, and to maintain thereafter, the unity of Stonehenge and its natural, unsullied setting...

"We have concluded that the only feasible on-line route [for the A303] which ... meets the essential requirements of this World Heritage Site, is a long bored tunnel starting east of New King Barrows and finishing to the west well past the monument ... That it is the restoration to its grand and natural setting that is the National Trust's and English Heritage's duty.

“There is no historic site in England where we shall uphold that duty with greater resolve and determination.”

The silent, never-acknowledged betrayal of this promise is perhaps the most dishonourable episode in environmental affairs of the last half century in our country.

At the 1995 Highways Agency A303 Planning Conference (under an independent Chairman) the consensus was that the Long Bored Tunnel should again be endorsed despite obvious funding problems, and the money - estimated at some £300m - should be sought outside the Transport Budget. The Lottery was gearing up, and seemed a likely source.

The then Government's response was to leave it to the next one after the upcoming election.

Confusion then took over the driving seat. First a decision was taken - how is not known - that the Long Bored Tunnel for which there was both a general consensus and the specific commitment of both English Heritage and the National Trust, should no longer be considered: it was “uneconomical”. Some extra money, however, would be found for the road from the DCMS budget: this was to be “an exceptional environmental scheme”. Some more was to be set against the future earnings of the commercially-run Visitors' Centre. The switching of environmental funds to a World Heritage Site road project was something new in this country, and was to be welcomed as a good precedent.

But the scheme itself was not well chosen. The Government knew it would eventually have to present a Stonehenge Management Plan to

UNESCO, (a Management Plan for the Avebury half of the World Heritage Site was prepared in full consultation with all the interested parties.) English Heritage (Dr Wainwright presumably in the van) started out on what it called the Stonehenge Master Plan, to which part of the new extra money would go. It was developed with limited external consultation, and its centrepiece was the pair of cut-and-cover tunnels to which so much objection has been taken. These tunnels would be cut straight down into the chalk of the World Heritage Landscape, immediately beside the Stones themselves. Their double trench - some fifty metres across - would then be refilled and covered over, the surface of Stonehenge Bottom would be raised and re-arranged, and the tunnel portals and lighting would be "sensitively engineered". Another part of the money would go for a substantial length of new dual surface carriageway within the WHS; and yet another part for a Winterbourne Stoke by-pass, which has nothing to do with the needs of Stonehenge.

The very existence of this Master Plan caused confusion (Dr Wainwright mentions it on pages 338 and 339.) Here the trouble arose because although the Management Plan would eventually govern the management of the Site, the Master Plan, including cut-and-cover tunnels and extraneous by-pass, was completed and announced in September 1998 by English Heritage, several months before the Management Plan Working Group had even met. Yet the Management Plan is what the Government, in fulfilment of Britain's international WHS commitments, has to present to UNESCO. The Master Plan was not, as Dr Wainwright suggests, "influenced" by the (much later) Management Plan: how could it have been?

What the so-called Master Plan spelled out - cut-and-cover tunnels and all - was widely assumed to be endorsed by officialdom and final: subject to planning approval and so on, this was what was to happen. Indeed in

Autumn 1999, Salisbury District Council, as the Planning Authority, were asked to accept as Supplementary Planning Guidance a planning brief for the Commercial Visitors' Centre, and they were told by English Heritage that the Master Plan governed policy, not the Management Plan. (Which anyway was still out to consultation.)

Alerted, and in some alarm, Ministers let it be known that this was upside down and back to front: the Management Plan is what is truly official and goes to UNESCO.

However, in April 2000, when the Management Plan was finally agreed and published, it did not mention the cut-and-cover proposal at all, and as part of a strategy to "provide comprehensive treatment of road links within the WHS" merely proposed, at 4.6.4, "placing the A303(T) in a tunnel...". It also stated at 1.5.11 that "the Master Plan...runs in parallel to, but independent of, the Management Plan".

So confusion still reigns: the Management Plan omits full discussion of the Highways Issues that are central to any proper management and protection of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site and the unacceptable cut-and-cover tunnels appear to remain in play with the "parallel" Master Plan: the dualled cut-and-covers are still (summer 2000) Highways Agency policy. But meanwhile another (Southern) route, the Parker Plan, with no tunnel at all, has emerged. And a new figure for the Long Bored Tunnel has appeared from a Highways Agency spokesman: only £40 million more than cut-and-cover (NCE ROADS REVIEW, 22nd June 2000, p XX) instead of the £100-odd million more which was mentioned previously.

In spring 2000, a group of organisations friendly to Stonehenge wrote to UNESCO to ask that Stonehenge be placed on its List of World Heritage

in Danger because of the unacceptable tunnel proposals. ICOMOS UK, UNESCO's representative in Britain, then advised that all the road proposals, specifically including the long bored tunnel, would "need to be assessed on equal terms", along with the cut-and-cover proposals.

Dr Wainwright ends his tale [p. 342] with an account of the Visitors' Centre - its monopoly car parking, its "full range of interpretation, catering and retail facilities". He claims that "the advantages" of the Master Plan "scheme" are such as to "justify the damage", and that the tunnels with their scars, portals and permanent lighting, the new dual carriageways, and the commercial Visitors' Centre itself, would all be

"in keeping with the principles of sustainability: one form of environmental capital will have been substituted for another with greater benefits to the landscape as a whole."

Unless we have all been dreadfully wicked, this does not sound like "the Stonehenge we deserve".

July 18th 2000

P.S. In fact, on July 10th, Sir Neil Cossons, the new Chairman of English Heritage, announced that the search for a commercial operator was over and that a more "hands-on role in the operation of the visitor centre" for English Heritage was being explored. The Highways Agency, on the same day, confirmed the Countess Roundabout Flyover, which is of course welcome, but attachment to the Master Plan was repeated by both the Highways Agency and Sir Neil: when they address ICOMOS UK's requirement that the long bored tunnel "need[s] to be assessed on equal

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terms” with the cut-and-cover proposals, and the “assessment” is carried out using the Environmental Appraisal Checklist included in the DETR’s 1998 Policy appraisal and the environment, they will make the better decision about that too.