Once again, roadworks near Stonehenge are being discussed. The Council for British Archaeology has visited the sites and examined the proposals. Overleaf, Jane Grenville, chair of the board of trustees, introduces a consultative draft of an updated statement of principles. First, we review the latest developments.

A tunnel past Stonehenge?

The green light is on.
met along any future road route are greater than they were.
It was a decade since such options had been considered. How did they look now? The starting point was the recognition that the present road “has a major adverse impact”. That impact might be seen to be felt more keenly now the A344 has gone: with no traffic there, the landscape benefits of removing one road have been demonstrated, and the never-ending noise at Stonehenge from the A303 is more evident.

The tunnel approved in 2004 but later dropped (feature Mar/Apr 2008/99) is now seen to have “neutral” effect. All other options are judged “significantly beneficial”, with one, a 2.9km tunnel with the A303 moved a little south (A1–E on the map overleaf), deemed “the most positive”. In the latter route, the A303 and its junction at the Winterbourne Stoke roundabout are distanced from an important group of prehistoric burial mounds and other buried archaeology. This, said HE and the NT, would be “a huge improvement on the previous 2.1km tunnel scheme”. 

Below: The A303 passing Stonehenge; the grassy footprint of the old A344 can be seen climbing the hill on the far right

Historic England (HE) and the National Trust (NT) welcomed the government’s commitment to a new tunnel. They presented an assessment to the Department for Transport, of how four options for the road might affect what Unesco calls the outstanding universal value (ouuv) of the world heritage site, and its “integrity” and “authenticity”. In the past, conservation emphasis was placed on the area close to Stonehenge (known as the Stonehenge bowl), while the rest of the world heritage site was accorded lower value. Ouuv puts equal weight on the entire area. This means the conservation demands that have to be

“This is different”, said prime minister David Cameron of the long-debated tunnel project, “because the green light is on. The money can be spent.” He was standing in the centre of Stonehenge. Later in the day then deputy prime minister Nick Clegg was also on site – though outside the fence – to promote the scheme. As the Telegraph pointed out, the proposed spending was concentrated in areas, like that of the A303, of Tory (Cameron) and LibDem (Clegg) constituencies. A general election was imminent.

Nonetheless, over a year later the green light seems still to be on for Stonehenge. With a new visitor centre open (features Jul/Aug 2013/131; Jul/Aug 2014/137), and grass growing where the smaller A344 road close to the stones used to be, talk is now about the third and final piece in the great Stonehenge puzzle: the A303.

at least 1.8-miles long (2.9km).
In October 2015 Iconos (the International Council on Monuments & Sites, which advises Unesco on world heritage sites) sent an “advisory mission” to Stonehenge. Their report (published in May, see end note) essentially approves a 2.9km tunnel, subject to details of portals and cuttings, which would “require rigorous investigation, evaluation, iterative design and assessment”. Iconos sees the project as an opportunity to show the world best practice. Historic England, the National Trust and English Heritage were delighted.

Others remained unhappy. Ruth Scurr, author of an imaginative biography of John Aubrey (Books Jul/Aug 2015), thought the antiquarian “would have been horrified”. The Stonehenge Alliance, long-term opponents of works within the world heritage site, claimed the report supported its call for a longer tunnel. Referring to his excavations at nearby Blick Mead (feature May/Jun 2015/142), David Jacques told the BBC, “our only chance to find out about the earliest chapter of Britain’s history could be wrecked if the tunnel goes ahead”.

Last October the NT and he showed trustees of the Council for British Archaeology (cba) around the world heritage site. They visited sites of possible tunnel portals and a rerouted A303, and the proposals were explained. In light of this, Jane Grenville outlines the cba’s Stonehenge Principles.

**Stonehenge Principles: The CBA’s view**

“Every age has the Stonehenge it deserves – or desires”, wrote Jacquetta Hawkes in Antiquity in 1967, bowdlerising as many have done before and since, the aphorism coined by the monarchist French philosopher, Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821): “Toute nation a le gouvernement qu’elle mérite”.

The cba has long been central in the modern debate about Stonehenge. That conversation is bracketed by the monument’s long history, through the present and into the future. Our knowledge of its past is increasing every year. In the present it is a national treasure, recognised around the world; it is at the centre of a landscape of extraordinary complexity and interest, archaeologically and ecologically; it is a tourist destination and hence an economic resource; it is a site of significance to a modern religion; it is next to a bottleneck on a trunk road… the list can roll on endlessly, as every individual gives the monument their own meaning. Its future is unknown, but is in the hands of the present generation and capable of influence.

Will we have the Stonehenge we deserve? Or can we have the Stonehenge we desire?

There is so much to consider: the mounting archaeological evidence and its interpretations; changing fashions in the management and presentation of archaeological resources; the impact of the monument and its surrounding landscape on those who live there; the interests of other species, not least the rare stone curlews that nest in the southern quarter of the world heritage site. Some would say that the fluidity of meaning, the absolute impossibility of tying Stonehenge down to a single agreed interpretation, is its most fascinating aspect – and yet in the world of “rational economic man” in the 21st...
century, politicians dictate that roads are built and highway engineers get to work. How can we possibly reconcile all interests?

The answer is that we cannot. But the trustees of the cba have agreed a first draft of a revised set of Stonehenge Principles – a policy document that will guide our approach to schemes as they come forward. Old hands will recognise that an earlier version was agreed by members at the September 1998 AGM. The central principles established then remain little altered, with adjustments to reflect changes to access (such as the removal of the A344 and the new visitor centre at Airman’s Corner), and changes to national planning processes and international approaches to the management of world heritage sites. This nine-page document is now out for consultation (see end note).

Here, in advance of that process, are the main points; at its heart lie the Cardinal Principles.

STONEHENGE: CARDINAL PRINCIPLES

The cba’s primary objectives are:

1. To protect and conserve Stonehenge itself and its landscape of inter-related monuments
2. To manage appropriately and plan for the whole landscape whose prehistoric significance is now becoming increasingly clearly understood
3. To further public understanding of that increasing significance.

Principles for assessing proposed change

The siting and design of new infrastructure and land use (and, where relevant, the removal or alteration of the existing) should ensure:

i. Minimum damage to known or potential archaeological remains
ii. Minimum visual intrusion on monuments and landscape
iii. Maximum benefit to the visitor in terms of enhanced presentation and understanding of the archaeological significance
iv. Maximum tranquillity
v. Maximum reversibility
vi. Efficient use of previously developed areas.

Our primary concerns, then, are to protect and conserve, to manage the whole landscape well, and to increase public understanding and enjoyment. Even within these three elements, there are tensions: how exactly do you protect and conserve at the same time as carrying out archaeological interventions that increase public understanding? Taking the area as a whole, the tensions are even greater. In the longer document, we set out the issues of the recent past.

Since the early 1980s much effort, thought and money have been dedicated to the search for a solution to “the problem” of Stonehenge. Identified concerns arose from a combination of factors:

- The proximity of modern roads severing Stonehenge from its landscape
- Growing appreciation of the significance of the wider landscape of which Stonehenge forms a part
- Traffic which generates pollution (noise, fumes, light) and damaging vibration
- Inadequacy of the present A303 trunk road for traffic flows
- Inadequate visitor facilities
- Damage to the stones and their immediate surroundings resulting from visitor pressure
- Agricultural degradation and fragmentation of the open landscape of the world heritage site (whs).

The search for solutions has been frustrated by multi-party (sometimes conflicting) interests, such as divided landholding, inadequate funding, diversity of opinion, and complexities of implementation. It has been exacerbated by the absence of a single source of strategic control, notwithstanding shared recognition of the importance of the issues and the need for a shared solution.

Since 1998, there have been substantial changes in archaeological research, policy (nationally, Europe-wide and internationally), and specific site management. In the longer document we consider these at length and highlight the challenges they pose. Here I present an overview.

New research has revolutionised our understanding of the articulation of prehistoric sites in the Stonehenge whs, and beyond. This enormous increase in knowledge potentially exacerbates the adverse impact of inappropriate development, and strengthens the justification for beneficial change and investment.

Internationally, Unesco has introduced the concept of outstanding universal value (ouv) in world heritage sites; a Statement of ouv for the Stonehenge and Avebury whs has now been retrospectively written and must be taken into account in development. Perhaps
more controversially, Unesco policy now advises that WHS management should “embrace initiatives that deliver mutual benefits to the property and its surroundings that may not seem essential to the protection of the OUV, but may prove important in the long run because they tie the property into its context in a positive and enduring way, thus favouring its long-term survival” (Managing Cultural World Heritage, Unesco 2013).

The European landscape convention (adopted 2000) seeks to promote the protection, management and planning of all landscapes. It lays particular emphasis on the importance of the quality of life for local populations, and the need to manage but not to “freeze” landscapes, which are dynamic temporal entities.

The National Planning Policy Framework seems to have maintained the strength of heritage protection in England. In practice, however, is this compromised by the cuts to planning authorities, national agencies and other interested bodies?

In terms of the roads, the A344 has been closed to through traffic. Southern approaches remain compromised by the presence of the A303. The economic function of this road was highlighted during the closure of the railway line to the south-west at Dawlish following storms in February 2014. This strengthened the political demand for “fixing” the A303 as it passes Stonehenge. Part of the argument for a tunnel therefore rests on traffic issues, quite outside the archaeological ones.

Three iterations of the World Heritage Management Plan have progressively moved towards a broad strategy for the management of the monuments, the archaeological landscape, visitor pressures and other economic uses of the surrounding area, and have encouraged stronger governance arrangements.

The continuing debates that led to the new visitor centre, and opinions about it, illustrate that multi-party interests can engender conflict or consensus. Undoubtedly, the new arrangements have enabled public interpretation and presentation to develop a four-dimensional matrix of the whole landscape, three of them spatial and one of chronological change.

Above: Walking to Stonehenge from the south along a byway; the A303 blocks access to the stones

Below: CBA trustees tour the Stonehenge world heritage site

All eyes, of course, are on the potential for a tunnel of “at least 2.9km” as promised by the government. Last October the CBA was invited to a stakeholder interview by the Joint World Heritage Centre/Icomos Advisory Mission; I spoke on our behalf. The tunnel was at the heart of the conversation, as it is of all Stonehenge conversations these days. Thinking about the various contentious issues, I noted that if conflicts were to be avoided (not only between archaeologists and planners, but also within the archaeological community, where a range of opinion exists given the breadth of issues we need to take into account), then the operative part of the phrase “at least 2.9km”, was “at least”.

A longer tunnel, whose portals did not impact on the WHS, would solve so many problems. We have asked Historic England to gather accurate estimates as to the additional costs of further extensions to the tunnel, given that it is the portals and approach roads that swallow up much of the money. It could well be that extra mileage is not prohibitively expensive – and in any case, we would argue that this is a site of international significance, with the eyes of the world upon it, and it deserves an investment commensurate with that of the Lower Thames Crossing.

And if not? If there is intransigence over 2.9km, then the CBA will apply the Cardinal Principles as set out above, and argue, case-by-case, its position over proposals for portal siting, and whether the disadvantages of removing the road from the surface outweigh the benefits. We are confident we have the weapons to fight the good fight. A period of consultation within the membership is now open, to ensure that we have a mandate and that the document is expressed as clearly and succinctly as possible. Please comment. The document will be put to members for agreement, amended as necessary in the light of feedback, at our AGM on November 7 2016.

The full CBA document and details of how to respond can be found at http://new.archaeologyuk.org/stonehenge. The Icomos report is at http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/579/documents. Jane Greville is an honorary research fellow at the Department of Archaeology, University of York and chair of the Council for British Archaeology’s board of trustees.