

[The Stonehenge saga](#) [1]

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What gives motorists a thrill gives archaeologists - well, some of them - distress. The busy A303 one of the main roads from London to the Southwest of England, goes right past ancient Stonehenge (see picture). It's a magnificent view as you drive past, and I'm sure that many tourists are moved to turn off and go to the visitor centre, which is right next to the stones, and have a look round.

I think that's wonderful, but the opposing point of view says that the stones lose much of their majesty when you have nose-to-tail traffic grinding past - for this is one of the few remaining sections of the A303 that has not been made dual carriageway. Stonehenge isn't just a pile of stones in the middle of nowhere - it lies in a landscape teeming with ancient earthworks, and folk worry that any road widening, or even a diversion, would irretrievably harm that landscape.

There have been dozens of proposals. Twelve years ago a conference proposed a 4km bored tunnel; but the government balked at the cost, proposing a cut-and-cover alternative (right out because it would destroy a huge area of the ancient landscape). I was glad: a 4km tunnel would have meant denying motorists that magnificent view - not that the state-dependent heritage bodies and professional archaeologists worried about that. Driving by is how thousands of people see Stonehenge, and we should rejoice in that; but the quango-crats can't stand it. They're only interested in getting people immersed (apart from those who see the public as just a complete nuisance).

The government came back with a 2.1km bored tunnel suggestion, which would have preserved something for the motorist to look at, while still removing the traffic right next to the stones. Now it has shelved even that idea, on cost grounds.

This is a mixed blessing. It seems to put paid to English Heritage's plans for a new visitor centre, far away from the stones, which would require people to spend several hours just to visit them. A typical producer-driven solution. The present visitor centre and car park is right beside the stones, and all the archaeology round there is pretty shot anyway, so expanding that would seem a much cheaper and easier solution, which would allow people to go right up to the stones in just a short time.

This whole saga is testimony to what happens when governments and quangos are in charge of things. No doubt we'll still be talking about it a dozen years from now. Why can't we just have a people-driven solution?

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