The Open University

Heritage, whose heritage?

Stonehenge and its significance

SUSAN: Welcome to Stonehenge! It's over twenty years now since Stonehenge first became a World Heritage site. In that time there have been countless millions of pounds spent on consultations and planning enquiries to improve the situation of the stones. If you can hear the roar of distant traffic, it's because Stonehenge is currently situated more or less on a traffic island sandwiched between two roads only yards away from here. The only facilities for visitors are a car park, a shop, a kiosk and some toilets. A Commons select committee once described it as a 'national disgrace'. English Heritage has proposed a new visitors' centre 3 km from Stonehenge itself and the Highways Agency has drawn up plans to close one road and put the A303 – one of the main holiday routes to the West of England – in a tunnel. But although English Heritage finally got approval for their visitors centre in April 2007, after a long planning battle, it was only agreed on condition that the scheme for a road tunnel goes ahead. But the government has shown reluctance to give that the green light because costs have escalated dramatically. So we've come to Stonehenge today to speak to some of the people who for various reasons feel strongly about the stones. And to look at how Stonehenge is managed on behalf of the nation and how it's become mired in years of consultations and planning applications. With me is Rodney Harrison of the Heritage course team – Rodney, what makes Stonehenge such an interesting case study, do you think?

RODNEY HARRISON: Well, Stonehenge is an iconic site; it's an international tourist destination, it's listed on the world heritage list and it's also a place that's become integrally linked with a certain vision of a British heroic distant past. It's also a place that local people and pagans and druids feel has a special social or spiritual significance. This whole range of values – social values, scientific values as an archaeological site and the economic values of the site as a tourist destination generates a range of different views on how the site should be managed.

SUSAN: Now let's meet then just a handful of Stonehenge's estimated one million visitors per year. These people got up at five o'clock in the morning; such is their dedication to beating the crowds to Stonehenge.

VOX POPS (Tourists):

- I'm from Ohio, Columbus Ohio
- I'm from Salt Lake City, Utah
- Toronto, Ontario Canada
- We're from Portage Michigan

SUSAN: Pretty international bunch then. To avoid damage to the stones by the sheer numbers of people who want to see them, most visitors are kept outside the perimeter fence some yards away from the stones themselves. But this is one of the relatively few groups for which English Heritage has allowed special access to walk among the Stones. So why did these tourists want to come?

VOX POPS (Tourists):

- We just find it intriguing and interesting.
- I think it's one of those things you should see before you die.

CATHY (Tour Guide):

- Look at this one, look, you can see the construction – that one standing up – this was the other one that's fallen down – look at he bump on top of it – this is the lintel. And there is the hollow that fitted on top of that. And the big mystery: how the heck did

they get that up there? You know that's why people think they levitated it, why people think it was space men!

VOX POPS (Tourists):

- It's strange because it's smaller than I thought it would be but yet it's bigger too
- It's huge, yeah, same thing

CATHY (Tour Guide):

- …if you want to see Christopher Wren's signature, he carved it on the stone over there; John Keats, the first single stone by itself in that direction …

SUSAN: Well, there's no chance of today's visitors leaving their signatures on the stones! While tourists marvel, some of course see Stonehenge as a solid business opportunity. Phil Coulter is Business Development Director of Premium Tours, the company which arranged that bus tour. I spoke to him at the company's London office.

PHIL: Stonehenge to us really is the welcome to England, a welcome to our ancient heritage. It's absolutely crucial to our business. We have daily tours and of course we have a guide on board the coach that, um, builds them up to the climax of arrival into Stonehenge. We also offer private special-access tours through English Heritage where we are allowed, thirty or forty days of the year, to take our clients in before it's open to the public, or in the evening for the sunset, so these are very special visits. And I would say our clients would stay on average forty-five to fifty minutes wandering round the stones, taking pictures and trying to get the ambience of the area. Something you can't do anything about really at Stonehenge is where it's situated, so it does tend to be a chilly and, er, windy experience. It's very strange how, um, overseas visitors feel that Stonehenge is is almost the pivotal part of our of our history – it's a pilgrimage that they have to make and, er, it's interesting that, um, English people perhaps don't rate it as highly as people from around the world do.

SUSAN: This is a place of pilgrimage, not just for tourists – and there are many of them here today - but for practitioners of paganism and druidism, as well as many people with an interest in ancient religious beliefs. The first record of modern Druid ceremonies taking place here was in 1905.

[*Druid ceremony*]
MAN: Arise, oh sun, let the darkness of night fade before the beams of thy glorious light! Our forefathers discovered….

SUSAN: Back in the late seventies to the mid-eighties, Stonehenge became synonymous with a free festival that was held around the time of the summer solstice. It was attended by new age travellers and Pagans. And in 1985 there were scenes of violence near here when Wiltshire police enforced an exclusion order to prevent large numbers of people gathering at the stones. It came to be known as the Battle of the Beanfield.

[Clip archive]
MALE NEWSREADER: A huge police operation in Wiltshire has been mounted to deal with about one thousand people who've been planning to hold an illegal pop festival at Stonehenge…

FEMALE NEWSREADER: A police helicopter pinpointed the progress of the four hundred hippies

MALE REPORTER: When the 140 vehicles came to a halt, fighting broke out. Police were pelted with lumps of wood, petrol bombs and stones. As lines of hippies came out under arrest, the police alleged vehicles had been driven deliberately at them. Hippies complained they'd been treated brutally.

WOMAN: The Stones is our temple, we'll visit them when we like.

SUSAN: After years of negotiation, since the year 2000, the Stones have again been accessible at the Summer Solstice. One person who was involved in negotiating that is Druid priestess, Emma Restall-Orr. Emma, what's the significance of Stonehenge for you?

EMMA: Stonehenge is an ancient temple, a place of religious or spiritual focus, a place of connection with the land, um, and our ancestors as modern druids and many animistic pagans consider religion to be about the language of the relationship between a people, a tribe, and the landscape they live in.

SUSAN: Why do some pagans want to come and be here at the summer solstice in particular?

EMMA: The solstice is extraordinary both summer and winter but particularly in the summer because you get that solar alignment – but the alignment now lasts about ten days it's not just one. When we have a group of druids at say the Gorseth here that we have on midsummer, the twenty-fourth, and we come here with a hundred people or so, and there is stillness, there's an incredibly magical sense of wonder, of awe, which you don't have to be a pagan, you don't have to know the language of a particular tradition, it's really just a human wonder at seeing a perfect line of light come in between the stones and flood that area.

SUSAN: While pagans like Emma feel a spiritual connection to the site, archaeologists are engaged in scientific endeavour to understand the many questions which this stone circle poses: who built it? What for? Why here? Christopher Chippindale is a curator at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and he's been studying Stonehenge since the 1980s.

CHRISTOPHER: In ancient times a temple was made and how it was used and what it was used for we have very little idea, and then it was lost and forgotten and then people of our own culture found it and in the twelfth century they called it Stonehenge, the places where the stones hang. So it's an ancient place but we can only see an ancient place through contemporary eyes – so there's this constant dialogue between the ancient and the modern.

SUSAN: For archaeologists, why is this a place of really special importance?

CHRISTOPHER: Because at the time it was built in the late Neolithic they made a whole series of extraordinary circular monuments in southern England and indeed right across Europe – many of them were made out of chalk and still survive, and some of them were made out of stone, and a lot of them were made out of timber. And these all perish; all you get are the holes, the post holes in the ground, where the posts were put up; and uniquely and strangely at Stonehenge for whatever reason they built one of these timber buildings in stone, with stone blocks, and they are joined together not with stone-worker's joints but with timber-workers' joints. So we get a glimpse of this whole lost world of timber.

SUSAN: Can you just describe to us how much more there is in this landscape which is of interest to archaeologists rather than just the stones?

CHRISTOPHER: Well, nearly everybody when they come to Stonehenge they head for the stones of course, but actually as you approach the stones there are a whole series of undulations which are the remains of an enormous bank and ditch which at one time would have hidden Stonehenge so if you looked from a distance you would have seen this wall of white chalk and not Stonehenge itself. And if you look out from Stonehenge it's just green fields and trees but there's something like 600 monuments in the immediate Stonehenge area – none of them, really, apart from Stonehenge, spectacular-looking, and that's a matter of survival. Stonehenge is built out of this extraordinary Sarsen stone which is hard as granite – everything else was built out of chalk and timber and earth and turf, and it's collapsed back and it needs a little bit of expertise and a little bit of imagination to see those other monuments and to realise how in their own time, some of them would have been as extraordinary and formidable and strange as Stonehenge.

SUSAN: Is what we can see now, looking at the stone circle, what would have been there 2000 years ago?

CHRISTOPHER: Yes and no. Physically, and it's astonishing, but physically - although it's incomplete and bits have fallen down and disappeared -it's not far off its original appearance but what's changed is the is the audience. This was known by the people who built it and they knew what it was and why was it built there. We come from a completely different culture, an alien culture and we seek to understand it as outsiders from a distance, rather than as inside it from its own culture and time.

SUSAN: Rodney, listening to those two very different accounts of Stonehenge – what do you make of what's been said?

RODNEY: Well both Emma and Chris share a concern for conserving what they believe to be important aspects of Stonehenge's heritage, but because they approach the issue of significance from completely different viewpoints they understand the values of the place in quite different terms; this in turn can lead to very different ideas about how the site should be managed. These competing claims need to be weighed up and understood in terms of the underlying values that they reflect.