



## Heritage, whose heritage?

### *Managing Stonehenge*

**SUSAN:** So we've heard from some of the people with a stake in Stonehenge; now we're going to talk to the person with the task of actually managing it. The local director of English Heritage here is Peter Carson., Peter, what does Stonehenge mean to you?

**PETER:** Stonehenge for me has been a fascinating place ever since I was a child – I visited it on several occasions – but particularly fascinating around the Solstice time, it really does capture the imagination.

**SUSAN:** And now that you have got the job that you have, what does Stonehenge mean to you now professionally?

**PETER:** It means very much...about...To me it's all about providing access but at the same time conserving the monument. You have to manage the visitors, you have to manage the ground, the, manage the monument, but equally as important is to provide as much access for people, and that's not just to the visitors who come on a day to day basis, the overseas visitors, but that's for anyone who has an interest in Stonehenge and those are varied. And so I see that I should be providing equal opportunity for everyone to enjoy Stonehenge as it is.

**SUSAN:** Give me an example of where those interests if you like might come into tension and you'd have to sort it out.

**PETER:** The summer solstice is a prime example of that. When I joined it was only three years on from when we first opened the stones for people to be able to gather to enjoy a celebration of the summer solstice. There is no doubt that many people within English Heritage and also outside the organisation were very concerned about the the damage that might be caused. The way in which we've managed to counteract that is to work closely with the interested parties. Those people that want to come along to the summer solstice, they have taken a responsibility upon themselves to self-police almost the event. Yes, of course, we have our own security and stewarding, um, the police are present, but that's becoming less and less, as as the people who attend the summer solstice actually want to control it for themselves.

**SUSAN:** For such an iconic important site, a number of people are surprised by what they perceive to be the poor quality of the visitor experience here. What's your view about that?

**PETER:** We have to agree. The visitor facilities we have here are completely inadequate for the number of visitors we now get at Stonehenge. The visitor facilities were built in the late sixties when we were only getting probably between 300-400,000 visitors, and the approaches to conservation were very much different in those days. and to put a visitor centre right next to the stones seemed the right thing to do. But these days it's it's best to get the visitor centre away from the stones so it doesn't impact on the setting of the stones, but also and particular to Stonehenge is that on two sides it's got very busy roads, you can hear the traffic in the background, and that really isn't appropriate for what is a magnificent World Heritage site – we have a plan in place where a visitor centre will be built, hopefully, two miles away and people will be introduced to the whole landscape around Stonehenge so they get a full appreciation of why Stonehenge is situated where it is rather than simply focussing on the stones themselves.

**SUSAN:** Just tell us a little bit about what that visitor centre will involve then? What will be there?

**PETER:** The primary purpose is to introduce people to this magnificent landscape, people will be transported from the twenty-first century back in time, through various exhibitions, there'll be educational space for school groups to go and study, and there will be that much better facilities for the public, in the shop, catering, and also, just enough toilets, which obviously at the moment we do not have.

**SUSAN:** So what do our other interviewees, Phil Coulter from Premium Tours, Druid priestess Emma Restall-Orr and archaeologist Christopher Chippindale, think of the English Heritage scheme?

**PHIL:** I think what English Heritage are proposing first of all to close off the road that runs past – I think is a positive move and I hope the government will back this with funding. And I believe they have planned to have a visitor centre which perhaps interacts more with the past and explains more about what we were like as an ancient people – I think it will really help the visitors to get a better interaction with the stones themselves.

**EMMA:** From a spiritual-religious perspective it could be a complete disaster or it could be a beautiful result. The visitor centre seems like a great idea, as long as they don't create too much havoc in the area that they're planning to do it, environmentally. Partly it's a great idea because I think fewer people would come to the stones because humanity is essentially fairly lazy, um, and to go to a lovely big visitors centre which generated a huge amount of money selling chocolate and coffee, and then having a viewing platform where people could see but can't be bothered to walk to get here would be a great idea. The place needs to generate money, but also to get rid of all this tarmac that we're ...the paths that we're standing on would be wonderful. But we need to make sure that it is done in absolute consultation with those for whom this is a religious site, and the pagan community are very much wanting to be involved in that.

**CHRISTOPHER:** I think it's well-intentioned as well as very expensive. I think it's misconceived, I hope and expect it will never happen and if it does happen I think in a matter of years, and certainly in a generation, it will be deeply regretted.

**SUSAN:** Can you tell us why?

**CHRISTOPHER:** Although there are many weaknesses with the way you approach Stonehenge with the roads and so on very nearby – what you do is see, you see the place, the authentic place, and it's comparatively quick and easy. Even on a rainy and cold day like today you can nip in and out and do it in not too long. And I'm very fearful that the new arrangements, however splendid in principal, what they will do is they will mean that visiting Stonehenge will be slow, and difficult, and expensive, and discouraging, and that there will be a great attempt to educate people about the later landscape prehistory of southern England, but people don't come to Stonehenge to see that, they want to see Stonehenge, and it's not fair to impose on them almost an academic course in landscape prehistory when what they want to do is to see Stonehenge and they're right.

**SUSAN:** Emma, just thinking about noise and the road and so on– do you wish the site was more peaceful?

**EMMA:** Yes, I would love it to be more peaceful but we can spend hours here and not hear one sound of a car, just because we're not focusing on that. Yes, it would be nice. But the 303 is much older than Stonehenge – it's an older road, it's a part of our heritage in terms of a trackway heading southwest.

**CHRISTOPHER:** And that itself is actually a historical fact – there's beautiful Turner watercolours, made 200 years ago, of the roads past Stonehenge. So they are a modern intrusion but they also have their own history and authenticity.

**SUSAN:** And the tunnel?

**CHRISTOPHER:** Tunnels are appallingly expensive and therefore the tunnel is going to be very short. The tunnel past Stonehenge is fine but the approach to tunnel is enormous deep cuttings – the approach cuttings – and they will be huge and enduring wounds in the wide landscape. The present arrangements of a car park nearby and an approach tunnel and a sort of concrete bunker for the shop and so on was only installed in 1969 in 1970. There was no discussion then, there was no controversy, it was obviously sane and sensible. And within twenty-five years it was denounced by a parliamentary committee as a national disgrace and now the idea is to abandon that and build a visitor centre on a greenfield site, which hasn't been built on, and construct a new approach road because it's so far from Stonehenge people can't walk to Stonehenge, they'll go in some sort of road train and that needs a road. You cannot respect Stonehenge and care for Stonehenge, if every twenty-five years you make a radical intervention, and modify the landscape, and twenty-five years later say, Oh dear, that was all a terrible mistake. And however well we do it now, in not many years it will be a period piece of the early twenty-first century.

**SUSAN:** So, Peter, I mean, some of the people we've spoken to think that if you build a visitors' centre 3 km away, fewer people are actually going to bother coming up to the Stones themselves, do you think they're right ?

**PETER:** We have heard that criticism and we completely disagree with it – we've done a huge amount of market research, focus groups with groups of people who we've taken along to the periphery of the World Heritage site, we've walked them into the World Heritage site, and we've pointed out various features – the ancient processional way, the avenue – and how they interlinked with the stone circle itself, and people found it absolutely fascinating – and thoroughly enjoyed the experience, an experience which lasts maybe four or five hours, as opposed to maybe half an hour as it is at the moment. But it's an experience and they're going to go away with and they're going to tell their friends about because it's something that will be life changing.

**SUSAN:** This visitor centre is inextricably linked to the road project. Tell us why you want to bury the 303 behind us in a tunnel.

**PETER:** Well, what we want to do is create an appropriate setting for this magnificent monument. No doubt the most important part of this landscape is of course the stone circle but it should not be in isolation, it should be linked with the surrounding landscape and the only way we can provide safe access for people across the whole World Heritage site is by getting rid of these roads – and also it just means that there aren't the intrusions of... the visual and audio intrusions which you currently get which do spoil people's experience.

**SUSAN:** Would your projected road scheme mean in effect that English Heritage controlled the access here and that if I was in my car and wanted to stop and have a peek through the fence I'd no longer be able to do so?

**PETER:** It is true that we would be preventing people to actually view Stonehenge from the road and that is regrettable because many people do enjoy that view as they drive down the A303. It's a landmark. But what we believe is that the experience for visitors will completely outweigh the disbenefits of people not being able to view the stones.

**SUSAN:** How is English Heritage then dealing with its frustration at not being able to provide the visitor centre that you think is essential?

**PETER:** Well, it is a frustration, but what we've done is we've managed to get planning permission for the new visitor centre. Yes, you're quite right, it is linked to the road scheme and we cannot start until the government announce the published scheme which is a 2.1 km tunnel with a flyover at Countess Roundabout which provides access on into the visitor centre itself and then a bypass around Winterborne Stoke which is to the west of Stonehenge. Yes, that has to be published. Yes, it is a lot of money. But these are schemes that have been considered for the last twenty or thirty years. And it's a scheme which the government supported, the public enquiry for the road came out in favour of, and the only stumbling block was the fact that the cost increased quite considerably. Yes, that is important factor but we

believe that it is the only pragmatic way of moving forward, to make sure that Stonehenge has an appropriate setting and that visitors do have a quality experience when they come and visit.

**SUSAN:** OK, you say that cost is a stumbling block but actually there's opposition in all sorts of different quarters –the archaeologists , some pagans, environmentalists, and even the National Trust. All those people say no.

**PETER:** I think I'd refer you back to the public enquiry and the inspector came out in favour of the published scheme. Many alternatives have been considered – over fifty alternative road schemes have been considered and this is the only one that has got to this stage. And yes, with any major scheme you will of course have opposition and people will disagree with the values that you're putting against certain environmental and heritage issues, but we believe that after all that time this is the best opportunity to give Stonehenge a quality future.

**SUSAN:** That's the view of English Heritage, but what kind of future would our other guests like to see here at Stonehenge? First Emma Restall-Orr, then Christopher Chippindale.

**EMMA:** I would like to see all this concrete tarmac taken away, all the barriers taken away. And to see people – not busloads of people who have flown across the world but people who come here ...who are drawn here. There are so many people who say 'Wow, I'd love to go back to Stonehenge. I remember when I was a child having a picnic with my Mum and Dad in the middle of the Stone Circle.' Those are the people for whom Stonehenge means something powerful. I can't imagine that for these kids with their iPods and their digital cameras, I can't imagine that it means anything at all. Nothing. Whereas that moment of 'Yes, we had...I remember and my father told me when he was a kid his father brought him here', that's what I'd like to see. I don't think we need to preserve it as a museum piece. I would like people to interact with it. Yes, it's nice that people don't touch it, you can see where the lichens are starting to come back. Um, we don't want people chipping into it and carving their names or...as they used to have little stone-cutting tools in in Amesbury that you can come and chip out your own piece of Stonehenge. We don't need that, but we also don't need to preserve it in a display case. And if another stone falls then another stone falls, that's a part of the ongoing story of the temple. But for it to be a spiritual experience for people, I think requires people to be able to walk through amidst them, to spend time, to be there.

**SUSAN:** One very modern solution is not very interventionist, actually, which is that a visitor centre might provide something like a virtual opportunity to visit Stonehenge – that one could do something which would disincline people to make the journey here. What do you think about that?

**CHRISTOPHER:** I think anything we do which is contemporary and which people enjoy now is great, provided we can figure out – and this is where virtual stuff is terrific – we can figure out a way of doing it at a distance and without having a direct interference with the integrity of the place itself. Stonehenge, the centre part of Stonehenge, is really small, only 30 m across, and with a million visitors a year English Heritage rightly feel we can't let a million people in, they'd trample the grass to pieces, so you have to stand back and see Stonehenge at a distance – and it's actually, unless you know the place as I'm lucky enough to do, it's really hard to figure out which part is which and how it works. And the great thing about a replica, or something done with virtual reality, is you can not just show what Stonehenge is like now but how Stonehenge might have been – the ideal perfect version as we think it was designed. And people can walk through it and indeed in virtual reality you can jump over it and all the rest of it, and the great benefit of this high-tech stuff is that you can do it separately, you can do it in a different place – whereas if you go back a century there was either authentic Stonehenge or there was nothing.

**SUSAN:** Perhaps the Stonehenge problem is intractable: almost everyone wants a more accessible Stonehenge, but those charged with its management would like to create a more peaceful setting. Millions want to visit the site but the Stones have to be protected from their popularity. And then there are all these competing claims about the best future for this site. Rodney, what's struck you most in all of this?

**RODNEY:** Well, I think the debate over the road tunnel and visitors' centre illustrates how heritage is integrally linked with a series of statutory controls and processes at various levels: be it World Heritage, national heritage or local planning controls. While these statutory controls protect heritage sites, they also define and create them. Ultimately, in the face of the threat of development, it's only places or things which are protected by legislation that can be conserved. It's in this way that the politics of value are made concrete in debates over the meaning and significance of heritage sites.