

Historic decisions

The 25-year wait for a tunnel under Stonehenge could nearly be over. **Tom Stone** gets a project update, and reports on the latest from another UK tunnel proposed near London

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Derek Parody, project director Highways England

Above & Inset: A tunnel under Stonehenge will not only improve traffic flow, it will return some level of peace and serenity to the ancient monument currently blighted by traffic noise

Right: An computer-generated representation of how the north entrance to the Lower Thames Crossing might look

A final decision on the go-ahead for the UK’s long-awaited Stonehenge tunnel is expected on 17 July 2020, the deadline having been pushed back from 2 April 2020, amid the coronavirus crisis. The delay has caused some frustration, although in context it is only small – a tunnel was first proposed at the site in 1995.

Highways England seemed cautiously optimistic at the prospects of Transport Secretary Grant Schapps approving the Development Consent Order (DCO), as it announced in June that it is starting the four-month process of selecting archaeological experts to undertake a £35m contract to carry out excavations ahead of tunnelling. Nevertheless, it was carefully pointed out that this “in no way pre-empts” the go-ahead for the project.

“The World Heritage Site around Stonehenge is a heritage site of national and international importance,” says Highways England project director Derek Parody “We want to ensure archaeological remains are preserved and recorded, in advance of construction, by commissioning appropriate archaeological expertise.

“Throughout this project we have been working closely with the country’s heritage bodies and a scientific committee of eminent archaeological experts to ensure the scheme will conserve and enhance the World Heritage Site, and this will continue throughout the archaeological investigations and the construction process.

“The procurement process in no way pre-empts the granting of the DCO and while we await the Secretary of State’s decision, we need to progress the procurement to ensure the project is in the best position it can be in to proceed at pace thereafter.”

The centerpiece of Highways England’s proposed £1.7 billion (US\$2.15bn) upgrade of the A303 between Amesbury and Berwick Down is a twin-bore two-mile long tunnel underneath the World Heritage Site, closely following the existing A303 route, avoiding important archaeological sites, and avoiding intrusion on the view of the setting sun from the stones during the winter solstice

The A303 route past the stones is currently a single-lane bottleneck, where delays are

exacerbated by the fact that drivers often find it irresistible to slow down to get a better look at the prehistoric architectural wonder. Apart from the tunnel near the stones the upgrade will also include a further eight miles of dual-carriageway, a bypass north of the village of Winterbourne Stoke, a viaduct over the River Till valley and two new junctions.

Highways England is also progressing the procurement process for the main works contract and is participating in dialogue with three bidders over a six-month period before they submit their final tenders. The preferred bidder is expected to be announced in 2021.

Under the river

But Stonehenge isn’t the only major tunnel project proposed in the UK. A new tunnel beneath the eastern most reaches of the River Thames, known as the Lower Thames Crossing, is in advanced planning stages. A supplementary consultation with the public was extended by a week due to the coronavirus pandemic, finally closing on 2 April 2020. The initial count showed that it received over 6,000



£1.7BN
The estimated cost of the new Stonehenge tunnel and A3030 upgrade

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