



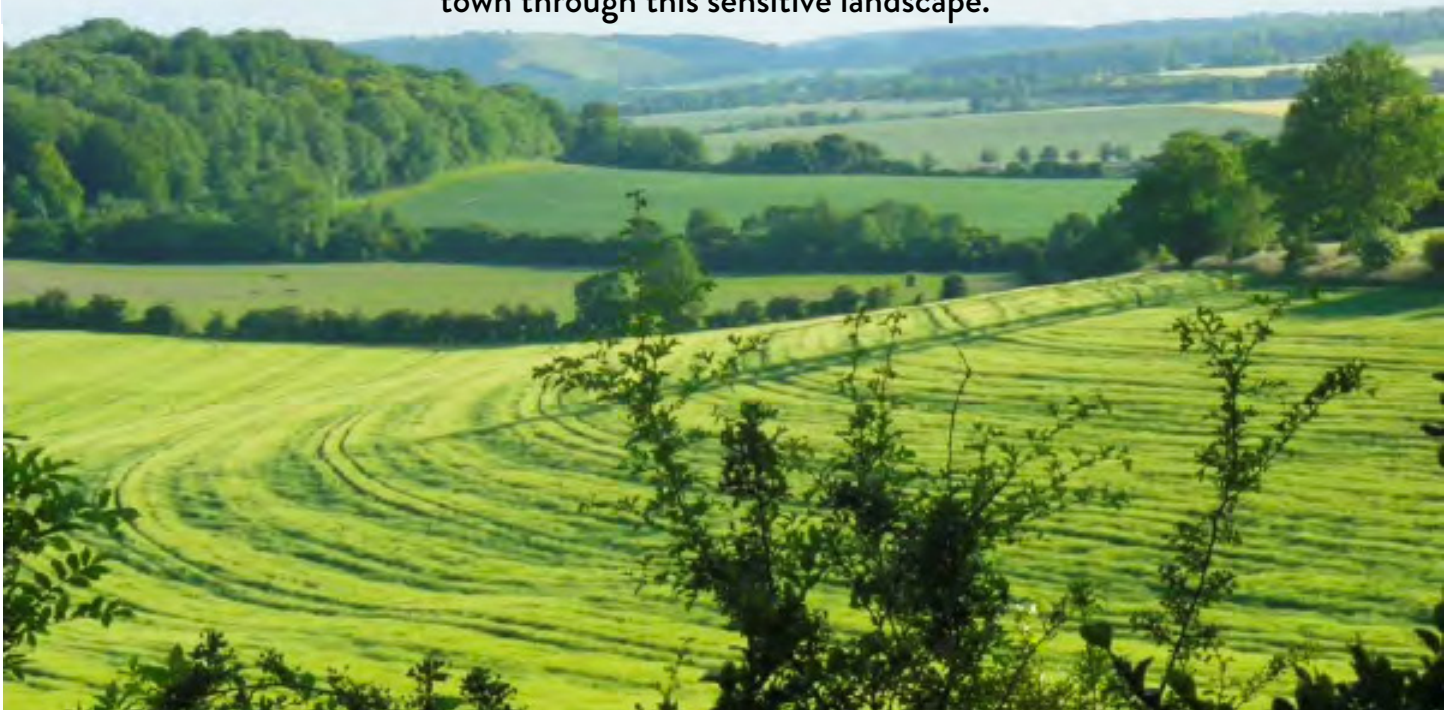
CURSE OF THE ZOMBIE ROADS

THE STORY CONTINUES

By Patrick Kinnersly

Is this a good place to build a highway bypass?

This is the Wellhead Valley, between the town of Westbury and the western escarpment of Salisbury Plain. The Wiltshire County Council wanted to build an eastern bypass of the town through this sensitive landscape.



(Photo credit: Jenny Raggett, June 2009)

Editor: The Curse of the Zombie Roads by Patrick Kinnersly was published in May 2014 (WTPP 20.2-3). The article below is an update from the author on the status of the Westbury bypass as well as descriptions of other misguided road schemes that will not die despite serious flaws. The sidebar highlights some of the larger policy issues that were revealed in the legal battle to fight the Westbury bypass.

The Return of the Westbury Bypass

The Curse of the Zombie Roads described the saga of the Westbury bypass from 1990 to 2014, which is summarized in the timeline in Table 1. After a long planning inquiry⁽¹⁾, in

2008 the scheme was axed by the government because the transport case was too weak to justify the damage it would have done to this tranquil landscape⁽²⁾. Opponents of the bypass had also achieved a rare

victory for public transport that had been “foreseen but not achieved by John Prescott in the heady days of 1997: money for a destructive road scheme had been switched to a rail improvement that had been awaiting



financing for years but had not received the necessary prioritisation in a regional funding process dominated by shire counties”⁽³⁾.

After seeming to accept that the scheme had been killed off, Wiltshire County’s new unitary council immediately set about reviving it, claiming that the safeguarded route survived ‘refusal of planning permission’ and so could live on as a ‘proposal’ in its new local plan for the period to 2025. When a planning inspector examined its draft plan in 2013, he accepted campaigners’ arguments and persuaded a reluctant council to delete the route.

But the council has never given up on building this destructive and discredited road. The A350 Westbury bypass remains its top priority scheme, key to its plan for a fast highway from the M4 motorway to the port of Poole on the Dorset coast.

The Westbury bypass is one of hundreds of ‘Zombie roads’ being brought back to life as Britain defies the climate emergency to embark on yet another wave of road construction, this one backed by a budget of £28bn.

Wiltshire Council is confident that it will get its share of that money. It has been lobbying hard for it ever since the Westbury bypass was cancelled. Working with three neighbouring councils - Dorset, BCP (Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole), Bath and NE Somerset – it produced a glossy ‘prospectus’ and an ‘economic study’ in 2017 making the case for ‘north-south connectivity’. Their lobbying paid off. In March 2020 the

government announced a new study of connections between the M4 and the South Coast. Two months later, Wiltshire Council set up a special team of officers to work on North-South corridor schemes, announcing that it would revive the Westbury bypass project. It hoped to submit an outline business case in 2024/2025.

Funding Uncertainty Again

But as government budgets tighten, funding may not be as certain as Wiltshire Council and its fellow Tory shires expected. The £12bn Local Growth Fund that subsidised local authority road schemes through Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) had already gone when Treasury officials admitted in December that ‘the commitment to spend £3.5bn for local road upgrades has been dropped’⁽⁴⁾. Only £1.3bn would be available for Major Road Network (MRN) and ‘local major’ projects.

In January of this year, the UK Department for Transport (DfT) wrote to councils telling them to review their roads programmes in the light of revised objectives and carbon costs and to reply by the first of March.

It was made clear that councils should not count on funding for roads that would increase carbon emissions or wouldn’t support active travel and public transport. Wiltshire offered to remove only one scheme, a junction redesign in Salisbury. No other road project was withdrawn in the ‘Western Gateway’ area⁽⁵⁾.

Did all the councils believe that all the projects they’d planned on the Major Road Network (MRN)

Policy implications and false assumptions behind decisions supporting road expansions

The following are some of the misguided policies that led to the resurgence of the Westbury bypass and other road schemes in England. For more background, see indicated pages from WTPP Issue 20.2-3.

- Current policies are based on the assumption that better transport means better roads; everything else (rail, bus, walk, cycling) is “alternative transport”. (WTPP Issue 20.2-3, p. 65)
- There is an ongoing disparity in funding between road building and public transport and active travel. (WTPP Issue 20.2-3, pp. 66, 72)
- Current policies fail to consider how investment in rail could achieve the same economic and transport goals. (WTPP Issue 20.2-3, p. 66)
- Current policies fail to consider the severe environmental damage from new roads: “The A46 section of the route is indeed unsuited to the role of trunk road. Severe environmental obstacles prevent a direct link between the A36 and 46 across the floodplain of the Avon east of Bath.” (WTPP Issue 20.2-3, pp. 69-70)
- Funding programs fail to accommodate operating costs of public transport: “Buses might seem like an easier option, but neither the council nor the developers will want to underwrite revenue costs stretching far into the future. There is no formula to demonstrate that such investments would ‘pay for themselves’ by cutting carbon emissions, removing traffic from congested roads or increasing social cohesion.” (WTPP Issue 20.2-3, p. 70)



would actually reduce carbon emissions, promote public transport and enhance biodiversity—such touching faith in the miraculous power of the zombie roads!—or that schemes would be nodded through in the old-fashioned way because the government itself was so clearly committed to the business-as-usual of economic growth on the strategic road network (SRN)?

Stonehenge Tunnel: Example of Faulty Cost: Benefit Analysis

No road is more ‘miraculous’ than the government’s own project to sink the A303 trunk road into a two-mile (3.3km) dual-carriageway tunnel under Stonehenge at a cost expected to reach £2bn. It seems that nothing can stop this road. The UN’s cultural heritage committee told the UK that the project was so damaging that it would endanger its status as a world heritage site (WHS). Notwithstanding, National Highways⁽⁶⁾ insisted the tunnel would actually enhance the ‘outstanding universal value’ (OUV) of Stonehenge. After a

lengthy Examination in Public, the Examining Authority concluded that the OUV would be harmed.

The High Court told the government that it acted unlawfully in granting planning permission for the project. The secretary of state for transport, Grant Shapps, decided to ‘re-determine’ the decision; he ordered another public consultation⁽⁷⁾ that ended on 4 April, 2022. The fact that the cost of the project – still listed at £1.7bn – has remained in the Treasury’s national construction ‘pipeline’ may suggest that re-determination is not expected to mean rejection.

The ‘miraculous’ properties of the Stonehenge scheme also granted it a special formula to satisfy the requirement to show ‘value for money’. The DfT’s established method of cost/benefit analysis (COBA) showed that the project would have a negative benefit-cost ratio (BCR); the cost of the long tunnel would outweigh the ‘benefits’ that would supposedly accrue through savings in the journey times

- Current policies favor serving new development with roads not trains

“A local authority that wants to plan something more suited to the needs of the 21st century will find it difficult to achieve. For a start, councils no longer have enough skilled staff to do all of the detailed planning. The alternative is to reach for the ‘plug-and-play’ solution: in effect you just subcontract most planning of housing, employment and transport to large developers, on condition that the local development plan will permit them to open up the large tracts of virgin farmland they put into their land banks years earlier.” It is almost inevitable that this approach to development produces large car-dependent estates remote from town centres. Small clusters of houses close to town centres take more design work and it is difficult to accumulate the housing numbers required, especially when sites are on former industrial land. The same applies to small enclaves in villages where a council might want to meet a desperate need for affordable homes for rural workers.

Supposing the council wants to do the right thing by locating new housing and employment allocations around new or improved public transport services? This classic formula for sustainable development is almost impossible for a local authority to achieve. Serving new development with new roads is a doddle by comparison. Councils cannot just put in a new railway station. It takes years of negotiation with Network Rail and train operators. Passenger numbers have to be assessed in commercial terms. Rail franchises have to be revised, extra rolling stock hired (none is likely to be available). There is no national plan for increasing



Stonehenge photo by James Jang
(Pixabay stonehenge-uk-327849)



of all the drivers using it over the lifetime of the road.

The roadbuilders circumvented the negative BCR by devising a survey about how people would value moving the road further away from the Stones. They summed this all up and called it a 'Contingency Evaluation'. Miraculously, this added more than a billion pounds to the 'benefits' side of the equation. Phil Goodwin, Emeritus Professor of transport policy at University College London, demolished this argument in his evidence to the Examination in Public (EiP) of the scheme. He argued that the Contingency Evaluation was predicated on the assumption that there is a cultural benefit to the scheme – the survey was asking people to value such a benefit. But the conclusion of the EiP was that the overall Outstanding Universal Value of the WHS was compromised by the scheme, as the UN's cultural watchdog ICOMOS⁽⁸⁾ had concluded. Prof Goodwin argues that the survey should be done again with a question that reflects these conclusions, e.g.: 'Given that this scheme is known to harm the OUV of the WHS, how would you value its cultural benefit?' In the end, the EiP inspectors were not persuaded that a Contingency Evaluation had the magical power to turn negative to positive.

Nevertheless, National Highways claimed its scheme offered other 'unquantified benefits', e.g. for residents in nearby communities and for biodiversity. At time of writing, a decision by the Secretary of State is still awaited.

Stonehenge Tunnel: Lack of Analysis of Carbon Emissions

No contingency evaluation can make the Stonehenge tunnel assist us towards Net Zero. In her response to the 're-determination' public consultation, Margaret Willmot, member of the A36/A350 Corridor Alliance (ACA) since its formation in 1993 and a veteran of the campaign against the Salisbury bypass, examined National Highways' environmental statement and found it struggling to explain away the road's contribution to the climate crisis:

'The document relating to Bullet Point Three – Carbon – goes to some length to find quotes from National Highways 'Net Zero Highways' and HM Government 'Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Better' which imply that business can continue as usual and that decarbonisation can rely on moving the vehicle fleet to alternative fuels, primarily electrification.

'This confidence is not shared by independent assessors of the situation. The Climate Change Committee, an independent statutory body established under the Climate Change Act 2008, reported on the changes to policy which would be needed, particularly during the 2020s, to meet Net Zero targets. Their report indicated that, to meet the targets which were mandated, it was expected that 6% of baseline car demand could be avoided or switched to other modes by 2030, rising to 17% by 2050, and also that factors including improved

the capacity of the local rail network. Indeed the government has ruled out major investment in improving local rail services because it would only add to delays on the system – a constraint curiously absent from plans for upgrading and repairing the road network."

(WTPP Issue 20.2-3, p. 70)

- Cost/ benefit analyses are faulty. WTPP Issue 20.2-3, pp. 69, 71, 72 and also in this article.
- New Road proposals ignore the true impact on carbon emissions. This is discussed in this article.
- Hidden motives behind road proposals. WTPP Issue 20.2-3, pp. 71-72 and also in the article below. Specifically, in the case of the Westbury bypass, landlocked Wiltshire sees the bypass as a vital piece of its fast route to the English Channel ports of Poole and Southampton (and its expansion) despite severe adverse environmental impacts.

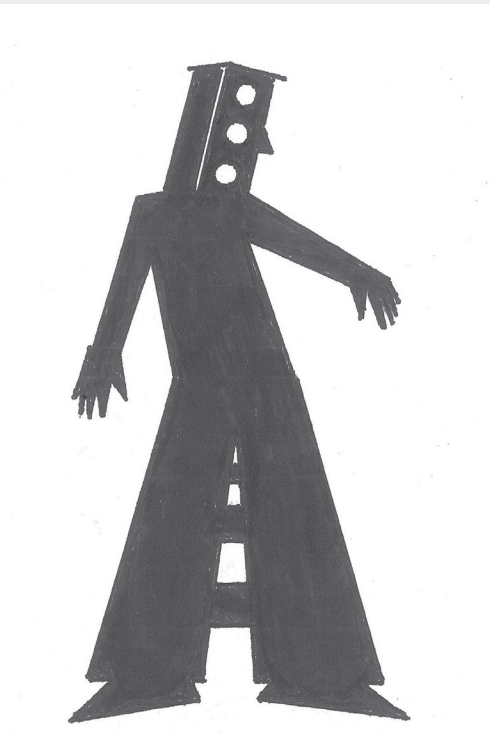


Illustration by Mark M. DeRobertis



logistics would mean that demand reductions for heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) would increase gradually to 10% for rigid HGVs and 11% for articulated HGVs by 2030, remaining at these levels thereafter⁽⁹⁾.

'Against this background it is unacceptable to allow a scheme which not only produces considerable greenhouse gases during the construction phase but which also produces more road user emissions in operation compared to the 'Do Minimum' option'⁽¹⁰⁾.

Chris Gillham, convenor of A36/ A350 Corridor Alliance (ACA), in his response to the public consultation on the proposed A27 Arundel bypass (see 'other corridors', later) says that National Highways is part of 'the New Climate Change Denial' which can be summarised as: 'We don't have to do anything because we are going to decarbonise all these trips we are generating'. Dr. Gillham continues that DfT further skirts the issue of carbon analysis by their assertion that the 'DfT decarbonisation strategy is a plan, when all it really is the setting of targets for future government to meet.' Dr Gillham points out that while DfT and National Highways rely on 'the accumulation of lots of little things that is at the heart of all the Webtag economic nonsense, it is cumulative carbon that matters ... cumulative carbon is the sum of real things and is really important, whilst Webtag's cost-benefit analysis (COBA) is the accumulation of imaginary things into an imaginary economic benefit. **The DfT has never demonstrated an overall economic benefit from road building.**'

Local authorities are also avoiding the challenge of carbon accounting. The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) has found that of the 24 local authority local plans adopted outside Greater London since the government's net-zero target was set, only one has set out a quantified strategy for how to actually reduce their emissions – (CPRE campaign update, April 2022).

Other Indelible Roads

As we have seen in the case of the Westbury bypass, even removing a road from the map does not actually kill it off. Lobbying by a consortium of local authorities, backed by Members of Parliament, **Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)⁽¹¹⁾** and now *Sub-national transport bodies* can bring zombie roads back to life. The *M4 to Dorset Coast Connectivity Study* is a new venture for the blacktop wizards – to search for zombie roads that can be stitched together into a zombie corridor. The White Horse Alliance (WHA)⁽¹²⁾ responded to the public consultation

on the study by pointing out that the work had all been done before:

'Your prospectus says you will be examining "interventions" that might result from your present study.

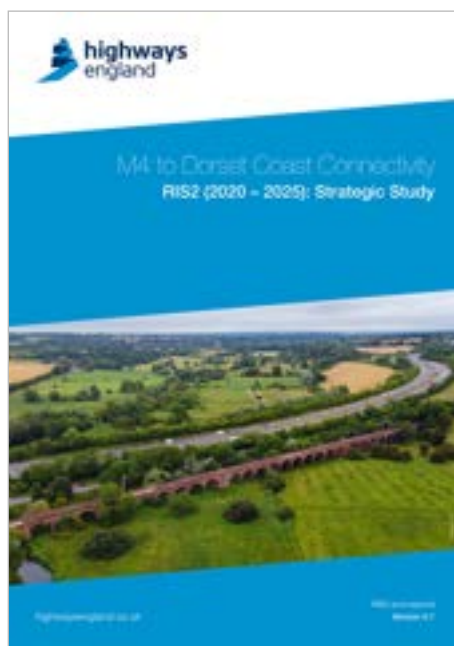
'Every major intervention I can think of has been examined and rejected at some point over the last three decades. Many millions have been spent on planning and devising and assessing roads that turned out to be duds and had to be withdrawn or rejected.'

We referred them to previous studies covering the same 'need' for faster roads across the sub-region and listed three decades' worth of schemes along the A350 and A36-A46 corridors.

Road Proposals Ignore Local Needs

The M27-A27 road along the south coast between Southampton and Hastings is another example of National Highways willfully creating what it will now call a 'pipeline' of schemes for delivery far into the sooty twilight of the carbon age. Heading east from Southampton, National Highways will create dual-carriageway bypasses at Arundel, Chichester and Worthing. The corridor builders have already ploughed through downland north of Brighton and cut through the southern edge of Lewes. The landscape to the north of the South Downs national park awaits further violation as 'substandard' roads are made into 'world class' highways.

Chris Gillham described this process in his objection to the Arundel bypass in West Sussex:





'We see staring us in the face a set of coastal towns with no obvious long corridor transport (what road builders always portentously refer to as 'strategic') need, but an awful lot of local transport needs and those needs are supposedly served by a decayed rattler of a train service, expensive and unreliable to the potential user, and rarer and increasingly expensive bus services.

'Do we solve the transport problem sustainably? Do we serve the people who live in the south coast communities? No, we get the preposterous creation of a long-distance 'strategic' corridor, by stringing together a paternoster of bypasses at vast expense. What do we do it for?

'We know that National Highways has an eye on generating enough traffic to cause other communities elsewhere (particularly along the south coast but also in the [SW] region where we have long campaigned) to suffer sufficiently that they can be cajoled into accepting further damaging schemes.'

This persistence in pursuing such major long-distance road expansions at the expense of real local transport needs raises numerous questions:

- Why do the Department for Transport and National Highways persist in this perverse and destructive behaviour? There must be more to it than the reason suggested by Gillham, 'To keep National Highways in its continuing role of a parasite on our economy.'
- Why was the light rail / tram link between Portsmouth and Southampton cancelled by the Blair government?

- Why has a successor light rail scheme languished at the route-study stage for so many years?
- Why is the railway between Southampton and Brighton so far from the 'world-class' quality that the current government desires for airports and roads?
- Why aren't 'world-class' railways considered just as important as 'world-class' roads?

Lack of money cannot explain this public transportation deficit when the A27 Arundel bypass alone is priced somewhere between £300m and £455m and completing the whole superhighway to Hastings would cost billions. In fact the Treasury's national infrastructure 'pipeline' contains 12 road contracts worth £13.23bn⁽¹³⁾. Among these road contracts are two for the Lower Thames Crossing project – a tunnels and approaches contract listed at £4bn and a Roads North contract to connect the tunnel with existing infrastructure in Essex listed at £2bn. This latest attempt to relieve congestion at the point where the M25 motorway crosses the Thames (two tunnels and a high bridge so far) is a worked example of why we cannot build our way out of congestion.

Underlying Intentions

We must ask our government: Why are major road expansions continuing to be proposed, when managing demand is possible by transferring car drivers to other modes and moving goods by rail? The answer may be waiting just off the M27 and not far from its junction with 'our' A36-A46 Corridor. The government announced in the 2021 spring budget that Southampton, already

the second largest container port in the UK, would become a 'Freeport'⁽¹⁴⁾.

This would require the government to revive the Dibden Bay deep-water container port on the west shore of Southampton Water. This project was rejected in 2004 after a long planning inquiry found that it would damage the integrity of the special area of conservation (SAC) and special protection area for birds (SPA) designated under the EU Habitats Directive. The inquiry found that the developer, Associated British Ports (ABP), had satisfactory alternative locations to meet its needs for another container port.

ABP began to revive the project, publishing a new master plan in 2016⁽¹⁵⁾. The constraints imposed by EU biodiversity law would stop any attempt to revive the project. European nature directives were written into British law but leaving the EU means that the government could repeal the Habitats Regulations and be free at last to trash the birds and marine life of Southampton Water and the Solent⁽¹⁶⁾.

The Southampton Freeport would then become a crucial staging post



Illustration by Mark M. DeRobertis



Freight on the Westbury bypass line A trainload of stone from one of the Mendip quarries heads east. The Westbury White Horse is on the right. ST8951. © Maurice Pullin

connecting the global networks of Big Transport into what the government would clearly like to become a fast highway network carrying 80 tonne heavy trucks to warehouses and factories in every part of GB plc.⁽¹⁷⁾

Summary and Conclusion ... as of now...

This nightmare vision inspired Mrs Thatcher's 1989 Roads for Prosperity⁽¹⁸⁾ and her government's plan for a fast dual carriageway (four-lane divided highway) from the M27 near Southampton along the A36 to Bristol and the M4. In response, in 1993, we set up our Alliance against that road in Salisbury. Thanks to relentless campaigning, backed by new environmental evidence, and helped by the government's need to reduce

spending, the superhighway dream gradually unravelled and has been deflated for now. Three decades later and deep into the climate emergency, is it really possible that we will have to do it all over again?

Author details:

Patrick Kinnersly is a founder member of the A36/A350 Corridor Alliance (ACA), formed in Salisbury, Wiltshire, in October 1993. He is Secretary of the White Horse Alliance which was established in the summer of 2007 to fight the proposed Westbury eastern bypass.

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¹⁾ Editor: A planning inquiry is usually a rather formal appeals process, much like a court procedure with expert witnesses on either side.

²⁾ <https://www.corridor-alliance.co.uk/news-july-2009.html>

³⁾ Kinnersly, Patrick. The Curse of the Zombie Roads. WTPP 20:2-3. p67.

⁴⁾ Highways magazine, 15 December 2021. <https://www.highwaysmagazine.co.uk/Funding-gap-as-councils-wait-for-upgrade-cash-news/8750>.

⁵⁾ *The Western Gateway is one of the 'Sub-national transport bodies' (SNBs) set up to co-ordinate transport planning over a larger area than the Local Enterprise Partnerships established after dissolution of the SW Regional Assembly.*

⁶⁾ A subdivision of the UK Department for Transport formerly known as the Highways Agency, then Highways England.

⁷⁾ In the UK, a process whereby a public body issues a document for formal comment.

⁸⁾ ICOMOS is a non-governmental international organisation dedicated to conservation of the world's monuments and sites.

⁹⁾ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/sixth-carbon-budget> - Surface Transport Report page 34.

¹⁰⁾ A303 Amesbury to Berwick Down TR010025 APFP Regulation 5(2)(a) Planning Act 2008 Infrastructure Planning (Applications: Prescribed Forms and Procedure) Regulations 2009 October 2018 6.1 Environmental Statement Chapter 14: Climate, para 14.9.5 and Table 14.15.

¹¹⁾ Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) are voluntary partnerships between local authorities and businesses. They have a board with members from the private sector, public councils, and others.

¹²⁾ WHA is a coalition of 13 organisations established in the summer of 2007 to fight the proposed Westbury eastern bypass. Members range from national NGOs, including Campaign for Better Transport, to regional and local bodies including ACA, Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) and four parish councils.

¹³⁾ *New Civil Engineer*, 20 September 2021.

¹⁴⁾ A freeport is a free-trade zone where customs and other 'restraints' are relaxed so that capitalism is even less regulated. They are sold to host communities as a source of wealth and jobs but the wealth goes in and out, in this case back to Dubai Ports, the private promoter, and the jobs will not be unionised. They are parasitical on local communities, not beneficial.

¹⁵⁾ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-hampshire-37790178>

¹⁶⁾ Editor: The Solent is the part of the English Channel lying between the south coast and the Isle of Wight.

¹⁷⁾ GB plc means 'Great Britain plc'. It's a common way of suggesting that the UK is run as a corporate enterprise or private limited company (plc). Tory politicians tend to use it approvingly; I use it sarcastically.

¹⁸⁾ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roads_for_Prospersity



Table 1: Life Cycle of the Westbury Bypass.

(Between 1990 and 2022, the Westbury Bypass proposal died, returned to life, or remained on life support in tandem with national politics.)

Year	Project Alive	Project suspended/ Transit supported	Project killed
1980s	Increased car ownership.		
1989	"Roads for Prosperity" published by DfT detailing the 'largest road building programme for the UK since the Romans'		
1990's	Thatcher-government disinvestment in public transportation		
1995	1994-1997 British Rail privatised		
1996			DfT Standing Advisory Committee confirms "building roads just encouraged traffic growth and further congestion and did not necessarily bring economic growth". A swath of road projects is cancelled.
1997		New Labour government, while not undoing the disastrous privatisations of railways, established a new superministry with the goal of shifting both passengers and freight to rail.	
2000		WC's first Local Transport Plan embraced roads as well as progressive ambitions for reopening railway stations and even briefly considered that WC itself might hire rolling stock and run local rail services.	
2001	Roads were funded, Rail was not. The railway stations earmarked for reopening remained closed.		
2008			The road plans were appealed by a coalition of 12 nonprofits and NGOs. "After a long public inquiry in 2008, the inspector's report was a damning indictment of the scheme." The Bypass was cancelled.
2012		After showing the public a plan that had removed the bypass, WC included a map of the original eastern bypass in the 'proposals map' in Appendix H of the 'Core Strategy'	
2013	Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced spending of £18bn on 'the biggest road programme since the Romans' including 221 extra lane-miles on motorways.		2013- The WHA and its member groups challenged this move at the Examination in Public (EiP) of the plan in 2013; it was ruled that "the application was a 'departure' from the Local Plan.
2017	WC produced a glossy prospectus and an economic study making the case for north-south connectivity.		
2020	In March the DfT announced a new study of connections between the M4 and the South Coast. Two months later WC announced that it would revive the Westbury bypass.		
2022		In January 2022, DfT told councils to reassess their roads programmes: funding should not be taken for granted if schemes would increase carbon emissions and wouldn't provide for active travel and public transport.	

WC- Wiltshire County Council
DfT- UK Department of Transport