

<b>Institution:</b> University of Bristol		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 28) History		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Stonehenge and English Heritage – University of Bristol Research Leads to Improved Visitor Engagement, Heritage Strategy and Practice		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2010-2013		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Ronald Hutton	Professor of History	04/1985-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> August 2013-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		

### 1. Summary of the impact

Professor Hutton's research on Pagan Britain has led to significant cultural and economic impact for Stonehenge and English Heritage (EH). This impact was primarily delivered via his appointments as Academic Adviser for the design of the new Stonehenge Visitor Centre, and later as Trustee of EH. Hutton's argument for an open-ended interpretation of prehistoric religion shaped the planning and implementation of the opening exhibition of the Visitor Centre's display gallery (2013), and a new solstice access strategy (2016-2017). His input led to increased visitor numbers, enhanced visitor experience, improved relationships with key stakeholders, and has widened access to and participation in solstice events.

### 2. Underpinning research

Professor Hutton's underpinning research is embodied in his 2013 monograph *Pagan Britain* [3.1], which was the culmination of work conducted since 1993, followed by an intensive period of work between 2010 and 2013 [3.2], [3.3], [3.4]. The monograph brings together all the current evidence for, and interpretations of, prehistoric and early historic religious practice in Britain, from the Old Stone Age to the conversion to Christianity, synthesising hundreds of specialist studies with Hutton's own research. It was followed by smaller studies applying this theme to specific subjects such as the Druids, ceremonial landscapes and archaeoastronomy [3.5], [3.6].

In his monograph, Hutton consistently argues that the evidence for pre-Christian religious belief and practice in Britain – spanning 36,000 years of data – can be interpreted in many different ways, which generally conform to the pre-existing ideologies and emotional needs of the person making the interpretation. He suggests that this could in fact be represented as a positive feature, suited to an increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-faith modern society based on individual choice. Consequently, Hutton proposes that henceforth professional archaeologists, historians and heritage managers locate, obtain and display the evidence for ancient ritual behaviour and belief, place it in the best possible chronological, technological, economic, cognitive and ethnic context, and lay out the apparent options for reading its meaning. They should then 'step back' and allow the public to make their own individual choices with regard to that meaning, with the understanding that these would necessarily be contingent, subjective and ultimately speculative. This, Hutton suggests, should replace the traditional approach whereby experts tend either to embrace opposed polemical views, and engage in a struggle for supremacy, or collectively adopt a particular view for a generation and then have it overturned by newcomers. An example of the former effect would be the rival personifications of prehistoric religion as either wise and learned or barbaric and bloodthirsty, and one of the latter would be the consensus in the mid-twentieth century that Neolithic peoples worshipped a single Great Mother Goddess, abandoned in the 1970s. He asserts that both tactics are counter-productive and intellectually dishonest, given the intractable and multivalent nature of the evidence.

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At the same time, Hutton recognised the scale of the barriers that were obstructing acceptance of his recommended course of action. These comprised not only the professional traditions cited above, but the belief that experts must provide value for money, in the form of certainty; a continuing faith in human progress, perceived as a cumulative reduction in ignorance; a feeling that Britain (or at least its component nations) needs a commonly accepted view of the past to bond it together under the strains of globalisation; and the appeal of the quest romance, with a goal ultimately and decisively achieved, as a model for scholarly enquiry, especially as presented through the mass media. What was needed was a high-profile test case for the operation of his proposed strategy; and that was soon provided, leading to the impacts described below.

### 3. References to the research

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- 3.1 **Hutton R** (2013), *Pagan Britain*, Yale University Press [monograph, 213,000 words, available on request]

#### Associated Publications

- 3.2 **Hutton R** (2010). Caveats and Futures, in Carver M et al.(eds.) *Signals of Belief in Early England*, Oxbow, pp.201-207 [Available on request]
- 3.3 **Hutton R** (2012). Druids in Modern British Fiction, in Gibson M et al. (eds.) *Mysticism, Myth and Celtic Identity*, Routledge, pp.23-37 [Available on request]
- 3.4 **Hutton R** (2014). The Strange History of British Archaeoastronomy, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, 7:4, pp.376-396, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v7i4.376>
- 3.5 **Hutton R** (2016). Modern Avebury, in Lievers M and Powell A (eds.) *A Research Framework for the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site*, Wessex Archaeology, pp.136-142 [Available on request] <http://www.stonehengeandaveburywhs.org/assets/Avebury-Resource-Assessment-part1-1.pdf>
- 3.6 **Hutton R** (2016). The Rediscovery of the British Druids, in Parker J (ed.) *The Harp and the Constitution*, Brill, pp.119-133 [Available on request]

### 4. Details of the impact

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Hutton's research has had significant long-term and sustained impacts on the approach to the interpretation and presentation of a specific monument, Stonehenge, and, more generally, on the practices of English Heritage (EH), a charity that manages over 400 historic monuments, buildings and places. These impacts emerged directly from Hutton's research expertise: through two key advisory roles he has (a) shaped the strategies and practice at Stonehenge to improve engagement with visitors and key stakeholders, and (b) had economic impacts on Stonehenge and EH.

#### **Stonehenge: Creation of a World-Leading Visitor Centre**

##### *Established a new approach to interpretation and presentation at Stonehenge*

Hutton's impact on Stonehenge began after he presented research for *Pagan Britain* [3.1] at a conference in July 2012, the audience for which included the Chair of EH and members of its commission and executive board. He was subsequently invited by EH to accept the post of Academic Advisor for the construction of the first Visitor Centre to be built at Stonehenge as part of the Stonehenge Environmental Improvement Project, to be opened in December 2013. This role involved advising the organisation's Stonehenge Director, its Senior Properties Historian and its Head of Interpretation at Stonehenge. Based on the arguments made in *Pagan Britain*, he advocated – and they agreed to establish – a permanent section of the Centre dedicated to 'meaning' and which would contain an ongoing series of exhibitions to emphasise the changing interpretations of the monument. His research directly informed the first of these exhibitions, running through early 2014, on the changing meanings of the monument, entitled 'Set in Stone?'

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As noted by the then Chief Executive Officer of EH, Hutton had a 'direct impact' on the exhibition and its success. He was the 'main historical advisor and provided invaluable advice on the initial exhibition ... ensuring that the temporary exhibition and the permanent gallery had a consistent voice ... [this] contribution was not simply a narrow academic one: it was one of interpretation'. He also advised on the display of human remains, especially to acknowledge the controversial nature of this activity, which allowed Stonehenge to improve its engagement with visitors and so – further to quote the CEO – 'underpin[ed] one of the overriding objectives of the exhibition' [5.5].

### *Increased visitor numbers*

Since the opening of the Centre in late 2013, the volume of visitors to the monument increased from 1.2 to 1.5 million; in January and February 2014 visitor numbers were up 29% on the same months for 2013 [5.1], [5.6]. Stonehenge is the seventh-most popular visitor attraction in the UK, at a time when tourism represents the fifth most important industry in the nation, adding GBP22 billion to the economy in 2017 [5.2]. It earns one quarter of the total income of EH, and the 18 June 2019 ITV national poll voted it Britain's Greatest National Treasure.

### *Enhanced the visitor experience*

The award-winning Visitor Centre (European Heritage Award / Europa Nostra Award prize EU Prize for cultural heritage) has been able to – to quote the Stonehenge Director – ensure that 'visitors are more engaged with the stories around Stonehenge' [5.7]. Hutton's contribution to it shaped those 'stories', particularly through his emphasis on the importance of meaning and interpretation.

Feedback on the Visitor Centre has been overwhelmingly positive, including responses to the exhibition on which Hutton especially advised, with members of the public describing it as 'very well done and informative'. The management has acknowledged the broader appeal, especially to an international audience. In terms of the improvement of Stonehenge's engagement with visitors, it is notable that many since 2014 have specifically compared their experience with previous visits, commenting online that it is 'vastly improved', 'much better', and that 'while the rocks haven't changed, the entire experience has ... I learned so much this time around' [5.1], [5.4].

Visitors also leave the attraction with a clear understanding of the open-ended nature of historical interpretation: 'The interpretative centre and signs are very helpful but remember as we discover more our ideas must change' commented one visitor from Australia. Another visitor from the US wrote: 'I love the fact that they say clearly we cannot be certain as to the purpose or function of the stone circle... it's nice to know the story isn't completely written' [5.4].

## **English Heritage: Adoption of Improved Strategies and Practice Leading to Widened Access to Heritage Sites**

Hutton's research on Druid and Pagan groups [3.1], [3.3], [3.6] has shaped EH's policies and strategies. In April 2015, he was appointed Trustee, as a combined representative of history and archaeology, on the new Board formed to manage the organisation as a charity. In this role he was invited to continue implementing his strategy for the interpretation of the ancient past. As the current CEO of EH notes, he is 'the sole professional historian on the board', where he 'exerts authority as a leading academic' and has also 'made an impact on a more ad hoc basis as a counsellor and "sounding board" for various issues' [5.6]. The Stonehenge solstice strategy was one such issue.

### *Facilitated the successful implementation of new policy and safeguarded relationships*

Based on his research expertise, Hutton was invited by EH to advise on and approve the new strategy adopted in 2017 to reduce the number of visitors to Stonehenge during the periods of free access at the summer and winter solstices. The cost of such access had become unsustainable, and the behaviour of visitors was deteriorating, so the Stonehenge Director had decided to charge for car parking and ban alcohol. This policy proved controversial, especially to modern Druid and Pagan groups, who regarded the monument as their holy place and alcohol

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as sacramental. As a result of Hutton's detailed knowledge of the beliefs of these groups, he was able to counsel the Director about how to talk to group leaders in a particular manner, and so to persuade them to understand and accept the new arrangements. This removed most tension and enabled the successful implementation of the policy. These impacts are particularly significant because the new arrangements were considered to be very risky for the organisation since they could have resulted in a public relations disaster and a permanent breakdown in their relationship with key stakeholders.

These strategies, as with those for the new Visitor Centre, have had benefits for Stonehenge both through improving relationships with its visitors and through a positive economic impact for EH. In consequence of the approach taken with Hutton's advice, opposition to the new solstice arrangements virtually disappeared, while visitor behaviour improved, and access became sustainable again.

To quote the Stonehenge Director: '[Hutton's] input has allowed me to change my approach towards the solstices and stakeholders of that particular event', and 'Ronald has undoubtedly helped me to build more productive relationships with key stakeholders' [5.7].

One of those stakeholders, leader of the largest Druid group, likewise testifies to Hutton's crucial mediatory role in producing 'an atmosphere of renewed understanding and amity, which was unlikely to have been possible ... without his advice to both parties and his readiness to bring together' [5.8].

### *Widened access and participation in solstice celebrations*

EH's new policy on solstices aimed to create a more peaceful and enjoyable experience and to open the events up to a new demographic, including children and families. In June 2019, the Summer solstice was observed by up to 10,000 people, an increase on previous years, with many of these visitors coming for the first time [5.3, 5.7].

Overall, Hutton's research has demonstrably acted to make the management of Britain's greatest ancient monument both more profitable and less controversial. This has taken place within a wider effect of his research: allowing a greater diversity of interpretation of, and relationship with, the monument, which is suitable for a more diverse society. The policies adopted at Stonehenge will be used as a model of best practice and help to shape EH's approach to its other ancient ceremonial monuments.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

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- 5.1 English Heritage Reports: [Annual Report for 2013-2014](#); [Annual Report for 2017-2018](#); [Stonehenge World Heritage Site: A Strategy for Interpretation, Learning and Participation 2010-2015](#) [Accessed October 2020]
  - 5.2 Government Reports: [Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Heritage Statement 2017](#); [Heritage Counts 2017 Heritage and The Economy, Historic England](#) [Accessed October 2020]
  - 5.3 Media and press coverage: BBC (December 2014), [Stonehenge visitors 'break record'](#); Wiltshire Times (June 2019), [Thousands of people celebrate the summer solstice at Stonehenge](#) [Accessed October 2020]
  - 5.4 Social Media statements and visitor feedback (2015-2019)
  - 5.5 Letter of support from former CEO of English Heritage (2014)
  - 5.6 Letter of support from current CEO of English Heritage (2016)
  - 5.7 Testimonial by Stonehenge Director (2019)
  - 5.8 Letter of support from Chief of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (2019)