



Photos left to right: Bridge over the River Mole near Cobham (ditto the top sketch, though it's transposed in the novel). Guildford High Street (also the lower sketch). Putney High Street, where Hoopdriver's journey begins



**Fact File:**  
**A novel adventure**

**Distance:** 260 miles over five days: four to the New Forest, one to return to London.

**Route:** Starting at Putney High Street, the route heads south via Guildford and Midhurst to the south coast at Bognor Regis. Passing through Winchester, Stockbridge, Cranborne Chase AONB to Blandford Forum, it then turns east through the New Forest, ending at the Rufus Stone.

**Conditions:** Very hot – it was the 2022 heatwave! Mostly quiet country lanes and plenty of gravel in the New Forest.

**Bike used:** 1999 Dawes I-Down.

**Maps/guides:** Planning – Wells's novel, the website [cycle.travel](http://cycle.travel), and the National Library of Scotland online maps. For the trip – an old Garmin Edge.

**I'm glad I had...** A new chainset with very low gears. Factor 50 suncream.

**Next time I would...** Take more time (six or seven days) and record my thoughts and experience for a podcast.

**Further info:** Read about another tour that takes in part of Hoopdriver's route: [cyclinguk.org/cycle/riding-past](http://cyclinguk.org/cycle/riding-past)

his way along on his first morning are now the A3 and A308. Never mind: I was enjoying myself; the segregated paths were pleasingly adequate; and Kingston upon Thames was a nice stop for lunch. By this point Hoopdriver has fallen off at least once, has found the hills taxing and has managed to learn how to ride his heavy secondhand machine. In comparison, I was doing all right.

Between Kingston and Guildford, Wells packs in plenty of commentary on cycling, as well as Hoopdriver's first encounter with the 'Lady in Grey', Jessie, whose proficiency on a bike far surpasses Hoopdriver's. After a quick stop in Esher to visit the Marquis of Granby pub, which gets a mention in the book, I was on the lookout for "a charming little place between Cobham and Esher, where a bridge crosses a stream".

This is where Hoopdriver meets the cad of the story, Bechamel, who is fixing a puncture on his own bicycle. The 1913 edition has an illustration of the encounter. Alas, I didn't find anything like that illustration between Cobham and Esher. Before joining the six-lane A3 on what I expected would be a very sketchy cycle path (it was), I paused to check the map. It dawned on me that the bridge on which I was standing looked familiar... Success! The place did exist, just in a different location from the story. I rode on.

I ambled into Guildford later that afternoon and had another happy experience: capturing a recreation of an illustration of its pretty high street. Hoopdriver finds accommodation at a 'coffee tavern' (confirming HG Wells as a visionary futurist in my opinion) for very little outlay. I settled instead for the Puttenham Barn bunkhouse outside town.

**HOW MR HOOPDRIVER REACHED MIDHURST**

The next day, after a visit to Guildford Castle, I headed south. From this point on, I would be overtaking the narrative. Hoopdriver's "ten days or so" would be four for me, and between here and Bognor Regis lay some hills. Hoopdriver has to push his machine up the hill to Kingston earlier in the story, but at no other time are hills mentioned as challenging. I contemplated this as I rolled into Midhurst, nurturing aching legs from the steep climbs I'd traversed, and wondered if I'd overreached myself, given that the afternoon would take me over the South Downs.

Before that challenge, I had Midhurst to explore. Midhurst was where Wells went to school, then later lived and worked, first as a chemist's apprentice and then as a teacher at his old school. A lot happens here in the *Wheels of Chance*. Hoopdriver stays in a room above a sweetshop next to the Angel Hotel (as did Wells in real life), and I was pleased to find that the sweetshop and hotel still exist. Unfortunately both were severely damaged in a fire a few months after I visited. But the town's stocks are still there, as is the doorway in which Hoopdriver and Bechamel have a farcical confrontation.

Pushing on, I had a choice: the A286 or the South Downs Way? I took the scenic route... and paid for it with overgrown bridleways and an hour of hike-a-bike in the first heatwave of the year. The view was worth it, however, and the ride from the downs towards Chichester along the Centurion Way was fast and fun. I made a mistake here: instead of eating a hearty dinner after all that climbing, I pushed on to Bognor Regis, where I suffered from the dreaded bonk.

At Bognor, Hoopdriver,

