



Top left to right: New Forest heathland. Sketch of the bridge over the River Rother near Midhurst (photo shows same). Photo (and sketch) of Chichester Cross. Bridge over the River Stour near Sturminster Marshall. (All the original illustrations were by J Ayton Symington)



realising Jessie's plight, helps her escape from Bechamel. They head off into the night together, Hoopdriver having upgraded his bicycle by the simple expedient of stealing Bechamel's. It must have been a good bike because they fairly whizz along for the rest of the story!

THE PURSUIT

The next day I followed in their wheel tracks, heading west towards Fareham. This stretch, following NCN2 for a while was... functional. But Hoopdriver's route from Fareham towards Winchester, through the lanes and rolling countryside of Hampshire, was very pleasant in early July. The narrative here involves a trio of pursuers, including Jessie's mother, arriving by train and almost catching them at Botley. I followed on, passing through Winchester and on to Wallenstock.

Wallenstock? The place doesn't exist! Wells had clearly given Stockbridge a fictional place name, for reasons unclear to me. Perhaps it had to do with him having Hoopdriver fall out with the locals and get in a fight? Nothing that exciting happened to me, fortunately.

Wells's story takes a leap from chapters 32 to 33, with Hoopdriver and Jessie embarking on an elaborate doubling manoeuvre that puts them in Blandford Forum. There's no mention of the journey but the route I took, through Salisbury and Cranborne Chase AONB, was



The Rufus Stone is still there. The hotel nearby is now a service station

pretty. The quiet roads allowed for some reflection on the differences in touring between Wells's time and now. For example, Hoopdriver carries nothing more than "a neat packet of American cloth behind the saddle containing his change of raiment". His cycling attire is a brown cycling jacket – "a Norfolk jacket thing" – and checkered stockings. There's no mention of waterproofs or cooking sets or tents. The roads are all gravel. And cars? They practically didn't exist! Clearly, bikepacking on gravel bikes was all the rage in 1896.

My last day took me from Dorset back into Hampshire, where the *Wheels of Chance* comes to an end. A chase across the New Forest involving an assortment of bicycle designs makes for some comic moments, culminating at the Rufus Stone where a reckoning takes place at a nearby hotel – now a Happy Eater service station that's only accessible by car.

I enjoyed miles of glorious cycling along gravel tracks, and at the Rufus Stone itself, with nothing but the forest and a few ponies for company, I reflected

on the journey. Despite the passage of time, the novel's route remains and, for the most part, it winds through villages and forests, purple heathland, grassy downs and along quiet country lanes where one can ride at one's ease. More than a century on from Wells's novel, cycling remains "not half a bad way of getting about." ●

Wells's novel

'The Wheels of Chance: A Bicycling Idyll' by HG Wells was published in 1896. One of Wells's least known works, it is notable for its portrayal of a strong independent female, something uncommon in literature at the time. Of interest to the cyclist are the descriptions of real places and routes, as well as the cycling craze of the 1890s, in which Wells was an active and enthusiastic participant. An online illustrated copy of the 1913 edition can be found at The Internet Archive (bit.ly/cycle-wheelsofchance), while Kings Langley Press (kingslangleypress.com) sells a print version (pictured) complete with new maps and illustrations.

