

5: From Stonehenge to Portsmouth

I've just passed through the small town of Ludgershall and am on my way to Stonehenge, cycling through a monotonous landscape spoilt by industrial buildings and military barracks. Several times I see small fighter aircraft hurtling through the sky. I reach Bulford and, heading into Salisbury Plain, take the road towards Stonehenge. So now I am, according to the words of Gilbert and Sullivan's patter song from *Iolanthe*, 'crossing Salisbury Plain on a bicycle':

...But this you can't stand,
So you throw up your hand
And you find you're as cold as an icicle
In your shirt and your socks
(The black silk with gold clocks)
Crossing Salisbury Plain on a bicycle...

This nightmarish poem, which begins, 'When you're lying awake with a dismal headache' was printed in a book that we had at school and it had fascinated me at quite a young age. Fortunately I slept well during the previous night and do not have a headache now, but the roads and scenery hereabouts are certainly something of a headache, and I'll be glad to get out of this area as soon as I can.

Suddenly I see the standing monoliths of Stonehenge in front of me. When I approach them, I discover that they are completely surrounded by tourists, even though it is a Monday. As I feel it is unsafe to leave my bike and luggage in the car park, I content myself by viewing the famous stones from the roadside. From where I stand, they look smaller than expected and do not impress me.

After ten minutes or so, I turn back to Amesbury and continue southwards to Salisbury, following the course of the River Avon. Although some of the villages are not particularly exciting, the scenery is pleasant and the region is peaceful. As it is approaching lunch time, I stop by the bridge at Upper Woodford, where there are benches and picnic tables at the water's edge, eat my lunch and rest. By now it has become very hot, almost to the point of discomfort.



Mompesson House, Salisbury

Rested and fed, I leave and continue to the town of Salisbury, which I reach at about three o'clock. Here it is quiet and peaceful, and the architecture is quite

enchanting. Consulting a map of the town, which I am given at the tourist information centre, I walk around the market square to St Thomas Square, where I visit the fifteenth-century church of St Thomas à Becket, with its 'doom' painting over the chancel arch. The interior is fairly simple and plain, but interesting nonetheless.

Afterwards I walk to the beautiful Choristers' Green, which is surrounded by elegant eighteenth-century houses, most of them built in red brick. Parking my bike outside, I visit the beautiful Mompesson House, in care of the National Trust, which Lord Moyne has recommended to me. I am very pleased that he has encouraged me to come here, as the house is certainly well worth visiting. The spacious rooms are filled with fine antique furniture of the period, and the décor is both fresh and restrained. I amble from room to room, unhurried, admiring the furniture, paintings and clocks.



Salisbury Cathedral and cloisters

When I finish my tour, the man at the door allows me to leave my luggage with him so that I can take a look inside the famous cathedral. For 20 pence (the students' rate) I am allowed inside. A rather pompous gentleman of the cloth approaches me and asks where I am from. While realizing the importance of this great Gothic cathedral, it leaves me cold on account of its height and very plain features. I walk around, seeing what is to be seen, and leave through the cloisters. I consider returning at 5.30 p.m. for Choral Evensong, but on discovering that the nearby Wilton House will be open until six, I collect my bike and luggage and set off westwards, towards the small town of Wilton. When I arrive at 5.20 p.m., I discover that the house is closed. A lady informs me that it is always closed on Mondays. What a waste of time and energy! I am annoyed by this turn of events.

Tired and hungry by now, I search for a restaurant and find a pub that opens at six. In contrast to the tasty meals in Biddesden, I dine on fish and chips, washed down with a half pint of lager. When I am finished, I spruce myself up and set off for Southampton and – hopefully – a boat to France.

First, though, I must return to Salisbury, then continue south-eastwards. I now take the country roads to Romsey, passing through the villages of West and East Dean, then following the River Test. The scenery, seen in the evening light, is quite pleasant. From Romsey it is an easy journey down to Southampton as dusk falls. I am surprised to encounter so little traffic.

Southampton turns out to be a large, sprawling industrial city with endless ring roads. Eventually I arrive at the docks. When I finally find the Townsend Thoresen ferry port, I discover that there is no sailing at 11.30 p.m. for Cherbourg – only a sailing at 9.30 p.m. to Le Havre. It turns out, because of ambiguous wording, that I have misread the timetable. As I watch, the big rear door of the P&O Ferry closes and sails off – I have just missed it. A policeman at the gate suggests that I try the Normandy Ferry cargo ship, which is to leave at eleven, but when I enquire about this, I am told that it is full.

By now I am exhausted and fed up. The man apologises and gives me directions to a nearby guesthouse. Unable to concentrate any more, I forget what he tells me. The policeman gives me fresh instructions and off I set along the deserted streets, but I am out of luck. I cycle to the other end of the city, where I get lost several times, and end up knocking on a door of a guesthouse just as the owners are going to bed. The house is being repainted, it is scruffy and the single bedroom is tiny. However, there is no point in complaining at this late hour. I thank the couple, fall into bed and am soon fast asleep. What a change from Biddesden House!

I eat a meagre breakfast (with no cereal) at eight this morning, pay £6 for staying in this dump and leave as quickly as I can. I cycle down to the docks, where I learn that there is only the expensive P&O ferry at 11 a.m. (£21) and no cargo boats. I decide to leave Southampton and catch the 11.30 p.m. Townsend Thoresen ferry from Portsmouth, which fortunately is not too far away.

I cycle out of Southampton (a rather long and tedious business) and head out into the countryside. Because of the gloomy weather and the lack of interesting scenery and villages, I find the journey a bore and begin to run out of energy. I stop for a picnic lunch of bread and cheese in a field, where I rest for a while, then continue my journey.



Pallant House, Chichester

I finally arrive in Chichester by about three o'clock, when the sun makes an appearance and cheers me up. As it is a beautiful town, I am glad that I have bothered to come this far, for I have in fact passed Portsmouth via a more northerly route. As the town centre is pedestrianized, it is pleasantly quiet; I amble around, admiring the fine old buildings. I stop to look inside the Guildhall and pause in East Street to eat a refreshing ice-cream. Passing elegant Georgian houses, I make my way to Pallant House, which I stop to visit. Although rather plain inside, it is restrained and beautiful. As some of the rooms upstairs have not yet been restored, it is interesting to note the difference between them and the rooms downstairs. I chat to one of the lady guides for a while and eventually leave before the house closes at 5.30 p.m.

Next, I pay a visit to the nearby cathedral, where I attend Choral Evensong, then eat a Chinese takeaway meal in the close, sitting on a park bench. A little Indian girl pesters me for most of the time, but she is reasonably well behaved.

At about seven o'clock, when the town centre becomes quiet, I leave and cycle to Portsmouth, which means going back in the opposite direction. As I take the main roads, the journey is uninteresting. By now it has cooled down; it has been oppressively hot all day. I arrive in Portsmouth at about nine o'clock and soon find the ferry port. I buy a ticket for £17.50 and kill time by writing my diary. I have still not brought it up to date when we board the ship at about 11.45 p.m. I have to join other cyclists and wait until every vehicle is in the ferry. Inside at last, I make my way to the lounge. Using the last of my small change I buy a beer, drink it, lie down on a seat and fall fast asleep. When I wake tomorrow morning, I will be in France.