

H.G. Wells in Woking

H.G. Wells came to Woking in 1895 - at the start of his writing career. *The Time Machine* (his first great science-fiction novel), was published in that year. Whilst in Woking, Wells wrote not only *The War of the Worlds*, but also *The Invisible Man* (as well as several articles and the book *Wheels of Chance*).

Wells had recently married for the second time and had borrowed £100 from his mother-in-law to help furnish a small, semi-detached villa in Maybury Road.

He lived there quite happily until the end of 1896. Then he and his wife decided to move to a larger house at Worcester Park, with room to look after his ailing mother-in-law.

By this stage, Wells was starting to make money from his writing. *The War of the Worlds* had already been published as a series of articles in *Pearson's Magazine*, and in 1898 it was released as a book.

In his autobiography, Wells recalls how he had learnt to ride a bicycle in Woking and how he had travelled around the area noting down suitable people and places to be destroyed by his Martians. It is perhaps appropriate then that Iain has produced two cycle tours looking at some of the places mentioned in the story.



H.G. Wells and Modern Art in Woking – A short walk

In recent years a number of items of public art in Woking have commemorated H.G. Wells, and in particular his famous science-fiction masterpiece 'The War of the Worlds'. The most prominent is the Martian Tripod by Michael Condron in Crown Passage (formerly Chobham Road) at its junction with Church Street East.



A whole chapter is devoted to 'The Heat-Ray in Chobham Road', and what happened to the 'shop-people and so forth' from town, but one unfortunate trader featured earlier in the story 'On Horsell Common' when the Narrator returned to the common on the Friday afternoon. 'An enterprising sweetstuff dealer in the Chobham Road had sent up his son with a barrow-load of green apples and ginger-beer' In Wells' day there was only one 'sweetstuff

dealer' in Chobham Road, so we can be reasonably certain who this enterprising man was - he was Henry Flowerday. Whether his son had served Wells one day with a flat bottle of ginger beer or a rotten apple, we can not be certain, but his name almost certainly is one of the *'suitable people and places'* Wells later recalled noting down for destruction by his Martians!

It is perhaps appropriate that this section of road (right outside where Henry Flowerday lived and worked) is where you can now find the Martian's cylinder and tripod!



From here it is a short walk west to 'Town Gate' (between Christ Church and Barclays' Bank), which is flanked by the green 'pine-trees' of Horsell Common and includes its own representation of the Martians fighting machine (look hard and you will see the 'head' of the tripod and one of the legs).

Turning back along Church Street West, and then left into Christ Church Way, brings you to the subway to Horsell and Wheatsheaf Bridge (which Wells refers to in the book as *'Horsell Bridge'*). Here, under Victoria Way, you will find a tile mural showing scenes from the book, including the landing on Horsell Common, the Mosque and the destruction of Woking!

'Horsell Bridge' is mentioned on a number of occasions in the chapters *'The Falling Star'* and *'The Heat-Ray in the Chobham Road'*. In the latter chapter he describes what happens on the Friday night after the terrible killing of the 'Deputation'. *'In Woking the shops had closed when the tragedy happened, and a number of people, shop people and so forth, attracted by the stories they had heard, were walking over Horsell Bridge and along the road between the hedges that run out at last upon the common.'*



The bridge in Wells' time was much different from today's wide thoroughfare. In those days there was very little traffic on the roads of Woking and the old brick arch bridge, built in the 1790s when the Basingstoke Canal was first constructed, was only fifteen feet wide.

By the time the Martians invaded 'early in the twentieth century' it would have been in a poor state as in 1906 it had to be closed to traffic and replaced by a wider girder bridge just prior to the First World War.



The canal, however, would have been recognisable to Wells. In his autobiography Wells mentions the Basingstoke Canal - *'a pretty and rarely used canal amidst pine woods, a weedy canal upon which one could be happy for hours in a hired canoe'*

Returning to town via Chobham Road and then turning left into Chertsey Road brings you to Weatherspoons public house which has a representation of *'The Invisible Man'* (another of Wells' creations during his time in Woking), and

inside, on the ceiling, a 'Time Machine' (published in 1895 - the year Wells came to Woking), complete with references to 'The War of the Worlds'.

From here you could make your way back up Chertsey Road towards Woking Station.

In Wells' time this was one of the main shopping streets of the town, and it was along here, heading for the station, that Ogilvy and Henderson must have come on the morning of 'The Falling Star' - 'One can imagine them, covered with sand, excited and disordered, running up the little street in the bright sunlit, just as the shop folks were talking down their shutters and people were opening their bedroom windows.'

It was here too, on the 'Friday Night' that 'a few seconds after midnight the crowd in Chertsey Road, Woking, saw a star fall from heaven into the pine-wood to the north-west.'

A few of the original buildings can still to be found in Chertsey Road mainly at the top near the station.

Wells mentions the station on several occasions in the book - the Narrator hearing the sound of 'shunting trains ringing and rumbling, softened almost into melody by the distance' on 'The Eve of the War'. It was here too that Ogilvy and Henderson headed when they ran into town to tell of 'The Falling Star'. 'Henderson went into the railway-station at once, in order to telegraph the news to London'. And the station was where on 'Friday Night' 'A boy from town, trenching on Smith's monopoly, was selling papers with the afternoon's news.'

From the station head down the High Street. Here you will see some other buildings that Wells would also have found familiar.



The mural here is perhaps the only piece of public art that does not feature Wells' work, but as it represents Woking in the Edwardian era, it does show some of the shops that would have been destroyed 'early in the 20th century' when the Martian cylinder landed!

The final piece of public art that features Wells can be found under the Victoria Railway Arch, where one of the enamel panels shows Wells and his fellow writer, friend and Fabian - George Bernard Shaw (who also lived at Maybury)

Some of the text and illustration for this article were taken from Iain's book 'Woking, Wells and the Real War of the Worlds' cycle tour 1 – Woking Town Centre and Horsell Common. See books for sale for details.