

A Lady Cyclist's Guide *to ~~Kashgar~~* **Shoreham**

CA goes on a sightseeing tour of Shoreham and the surrounding area devised by local novelist — and cycling fan — Suzanne Joinson

Words David Bradford Photos Chris Catchpole



Fleeing from sectarian uprisings in western China across the inhospitable plains of Central Asia, Eva English regards her bicycle as “my shield and my method of escape”. Eva is the narrator of the historical strand of *A Lady Cyclist's Guide to Kashgar*, the debut novel of Sussex-based author Suzanne Joinson. The plot follows two entwined narratives, one set in Turkestan in the 1920s, the other in current-day London — and cycling features prominently in both.

Not many fiction writers are bold enough to put biking at the forefront of their stories, despite the bicycle's rich history and metaphoric power, so *Cycling Active* decided to pay homage to Joinson's temerity by asking her: 1) to tell us more about her intriguing

novel, and 2) to design a ride for us on her home patch around Shoreham in West Sussex. Luckily for us, she agreed.

Thrill of movement

The central themes of *A Lady Cyclist's Guide to Kashgar* concern trying to overcome the emotional burdens of rootlessness, soured relationships and boredom by finding freedom and joy in the uncertainty and thrill of movement — specifically, movement by bike. Both protagonists — Eva in Kashgar and Frieda in London — attempt to leave behind discontent to discover new people, places and a renewed sense of belonging.

Joinson came to perceive cycling as a means of escape — an activity so liberating that it's “the closest one can get to flying” — after a spell living in

Above: The morning sun cast long shadows, showing the way north-west from Shoreham onto the South Downs

Right: The dreaming spires of Lancing College chapel had never dreamt of seeing such a rabble

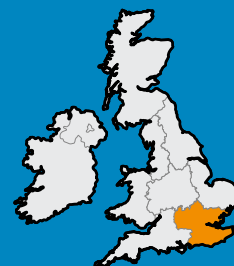
London. Fed up with late buses and crowded train carriages, she decided to tackle the commute from her home in Hackney to her work in Trafalgar Square by bike.

“It literally revolutionised my life, and the city transformed completely. Suddenly I was liberated from London's transport system, and I had this incredibly different knowledge of London... It felt like I suddenly owned the city; somehow I had got it under control.”

Many of us have experienced a similar two-wheeled epiphany, I'm sure — and it's a joy that never really wears off. Indeed, I'm enjoying the buzz of beating the traffic — pedalling along with friends Alan, Simon and photographer Chris — right from the beginning of the route Joinson has

HEADS UP

A couple of hours' ride from Lancing College to Shoreham Fort and back via Mill Hill on the South Downs



Distance: 21 miles (34km)
Big hills: 1
Challenge: ★★☆☆☆
Cafe stops: 1

Refuelled with cake, Simon puts the hammer down



"Step aside, I'm a champion orienteer!"



21
miles

designed for us. Having set off from the spectacular

chapel at Lancing College, we sail past queuing traffic on the outskirts of town as we head for Shoreham airport. Joinson is the airport's writer in residence, which means she explores its history and the lives of its aviators, writing articles and stories based on her findings — her next book is about early female pilots. Flight is clearly a preoccupation, and it's easy to understand why: the expanse of lawn-smooth grass, littered with toy-like helicopters and spindly aircraft, is captivating.

French defence

Another evocative setting awaits just a mile or so further along our journey down the River Adur. Where the river meets the sea, we find Shoreham Fort. Constructed in 1857, the fort was put in place to protect the port from a feared French attack which never came. Forty-odd years later, in the early 20th century, the site was used as an open-air film studio. "At the time, Shoreham was full of actors, musicians and bohemian decadent types," says Joinson. "There was an attempt to make it the Hollywood of the UK, but then the war and the Great Depression happened." We cycle around the ramparts and study the information boards; not much of the original structure remains but it's a spectacular place to gaze out to sea and dream of movie scenes and faraway places. Joinson has done more than merely dream; before becoming a novelist, she travelled widely in the Middle East, China and Russia in her job as a literary

events organiser for the British Council. Having specialised in projects in the Arabic-speaking world, she was moved to write about Arab women prohibited from riding bikes — disquiet that gained poignancy when she stumbled upon *Bicycling for Ladies*, a Victorian manual that served as a reminder of cycling's feminist significance. So deeply did Joinson fall in love with this 19th-century how-to-ride text that she inserted snippets from it into her novel.

"It's an absolutely amazing book — a spiritual guide to life. It made me realise what a revolutionary thing the bike can be."

In the late-1800s, before their fight for suffrage, women had to battle for the simple right to ride bikes. Through brave determination they won, and proved they could (and would) travel independently — in clothes that allowed them to pedal, and without interference from men. In 1896, the American civil rights campaigner Susan B. Anthony concluded that cycling had "done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world".

Nowadays, western women don't only take it for granted that they can cycle wherever they want wearing whatever they want; in extreme cases, they amuse themselves by sending men cycling up big hills! The next edict on Joinson's itinerary directs us from Shoreham town centre up Mill Hill and on to the top of the South Downs. It's a glorious climb and we're fortunate the wind is on our backs because it's a toughie. "I love the views," Joinson tells me. "It's the best place for watching planes coming in to land at the airport — and for picking blackberries."

Local name

Sussex locations crop up several times in *A Lady Cyclist's Guide to Kashgar*, and one of the main characters is called Mr Steyning — the name of a small town just a couple of miles from here, where, according to Alan's smartphone, we should find refreshment. So, after descending on the footpath from



223m
Total ascent



STOP!

Pubs and grub

Steyning Tearooms, 32 High Street, Steyning, BN44 3YE. 01903 810064

Bike shops

The Bike Store, 65 Brighton Road, Worthing, BN11 3EE. 01903 206311, www.thebikestore.co.uk

Places of interest

Lancing College, The college chapel is open to the public from 10am-4pm Mon-Sat and 12-4pm Sun. Admission is free. www.lancingcollege.co.uk

Shoreham Fort, www.shorehamfort.co.uk

Bramber Castle, www.english-heritage.org.uk

Train stations

Shoreham, Lancing, Worthing

Bagging the summit of Mill Hill



Twee-time: refreshment in Steyning



Mill Hill and dropping in at Bramber Castle for a brief spot of feudal role-play, we make a beeline for Steyning Tearooms. The coffee is strong and the cake portions are generous; we're happy cyclists.

Judging by today's ride, researching Sussex places was no hardship for Joinson, but why did she choose to set part of her book in 1920s Kashgar, a relatively obscure city in western China?

"I was looking for an Islamic city, and I wanted it to be the farthest-away place possible; somewhere no one had heard of, in the middle of nowhere," she explains. "Which wasn't an advisable way to choose, as I realised when I had to go there to research it!"

The intrepid author, travelling alone, made the 28-hour journey to Kashgar

with the aim of visiting its mosques and important cultural sites to absorb an authentic sense of the city. Things didn't go exactly to plan.

"When I arrived, there were no phone lines or internet connection — pretty cut off. I phoned the British Embassy to find out what was happening, and they said: 'What are you doing there? There's a massive revolution happening. You need to get out of there.'"

As part of their drive for cultural and ethnic uniformity, the Chinese authorities were in the process of expelling Uighur people (people of Turkish and Mongolian descent) from Kashgar and demolishing all its older buildings. Joinson was not deterred — she decided to "play the hapless tourist" and explore the city 'disguised' in a straw hat. She managed to dodge the riots for a few days, until finally "I got

Above: "If I were a feudal baron, I'd get someone in to sort the grouting," reflects Simon

a knock at my hotel door from a scary Chinese government official with a plane ticket."

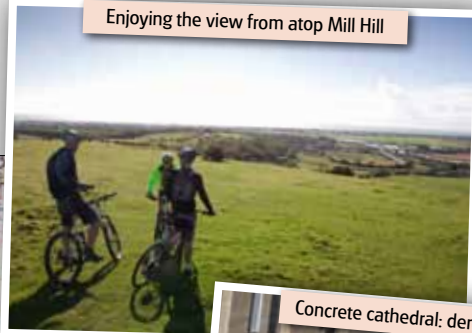
Turning tables

We opt to vacate Steyning Tearooms before causing a riot of our own, given that we took the last available table and Simon has gobbled down the shop's final (gargantuan) piece of fruitcake — and a gaggle of feisty, pushchair-wielding mums has just arrived. Our final stop is the disused Shoreham cement works, just to contemplate the clash of its stark, Soviet-style architecture against the chocolate-box countryside and gothic spires of Lancing College chapel, our ride's terminus, rising ostentatiously from the hills in the distance.

Take a closer look at our ride on Strava: <http://app.strava.com/rides/24785315>



Enjoying the view from atop Mill Hill



Concrete cathedral: derelict cement works



Bramber Castle

A motte-and-bailey castle built by the feudal baron of Bramber, William de Braose, in 1070. Not much of the original structure remains, except for a tall chunk of the gatehouse tower, but the views from atop the motte are beautiful.

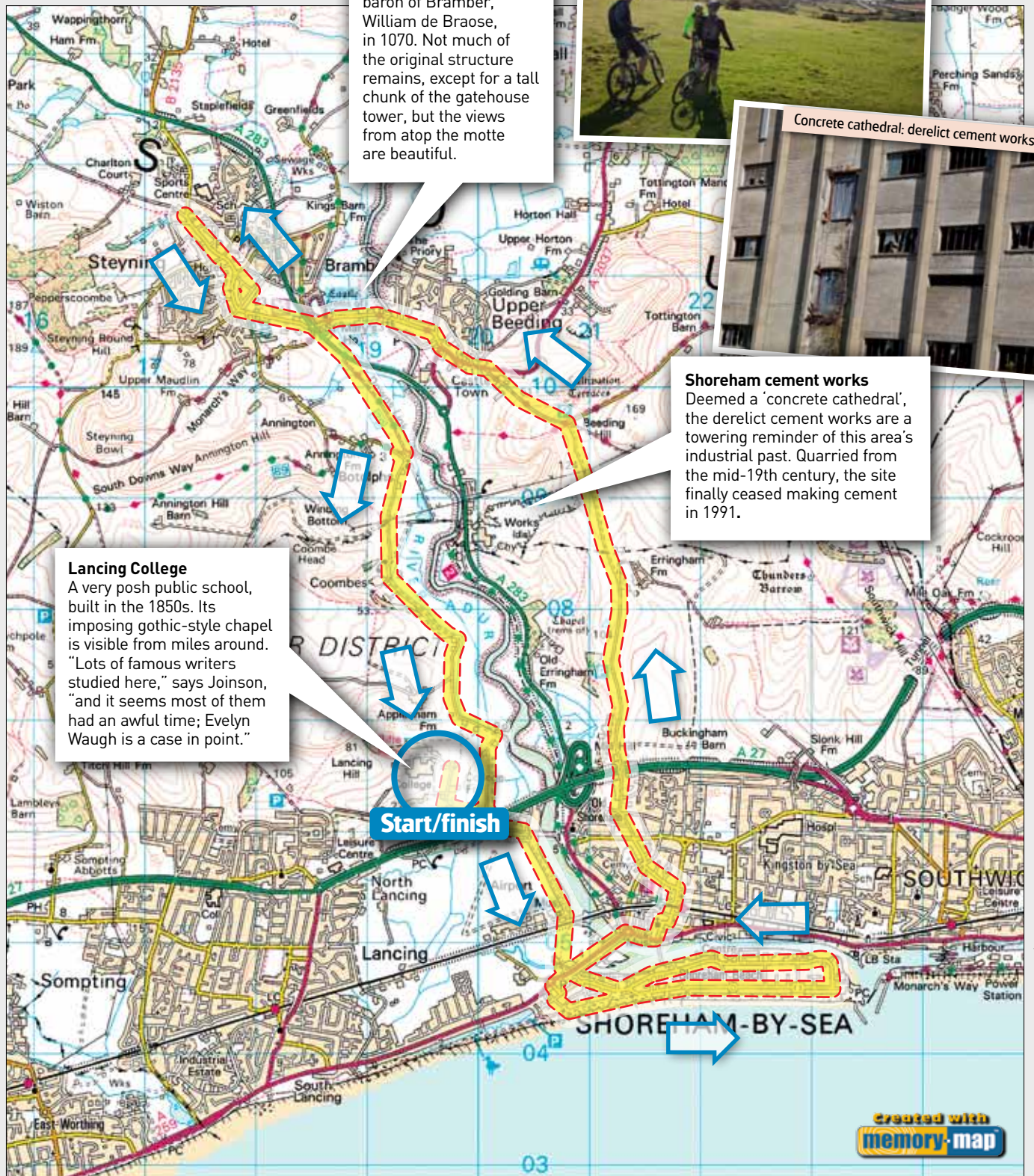
Lancing College

A very posh public school, built in the 1850s. Its imposing gothic-style chapel is visible from miles around. "Lots of famous writers studied here," says Joinson, "and it seems most of them had an awful time; Evelyn Waugh is a case in point."

Shoreham cement works

Deemed a 'concrete cathedral', the derelict cement works are a towering reminder of this area's industrial past. Quarried from the mid-19th century, the site finally ceased making cement in 1991.

Start/finish



Ordnance Survey mapping © Crown Copyright. AM44/11. Created with Memory-Map



RIDER'S WRITER

Suzanne Joinson

Suzanne Joinson fell in love with cycling while commuting by bike in London. As literary events organiser for the British Council, she travelled widely in the Middle East and China, which helped inspire her own creative writing.

Joinson now lives with her husband on the Sussex coast. She is writer-in-residence at Shoreham Airport, and her debut novel *A Lady Cyclist's Guide to Kashgar* (right) was launched in summer 2012, published by Bloomsbury.

