

At YHA Streatley, I phoned AW Cycles in Caversham and explained my predicament. "Call in first thing – I'm sure we'll be able to help," I was told.

Day two: benevolent bike shops

I was on the Thames Path by 8am. The first swallows of the trip were swooping around meadows where well-groomed horses grazed. By 9.15am I'd reached AW Cycles and by 9.35am my bike had a new bottom bracket.

Thanking them, I slipped down a side road to rejoin the trail. Four hours later, I was pedalling up a country lane when I felt my left foot move at an erratic angle. The crank was loose. I stopped, knowing that to lose the bolt would be a disaster. It was gone. I freewheeled back a mile to look for it. No joy. I thought about phoning my father for a rescue but there was no signal. Surely Fleet would have a bike shop? I began a 10km walk.

Pedal Heaven was buzzing with a Pinarello demonstration day. The sight of a cyclist crank arm in hand was met with sympathy and a cup of coffee. The diagnosis was worn splines. A new bolt was Loctited into

position and I was back on the road with a promise of a five-star Google review and my dad undisturbed.

The bunkhouse at Puttenham provided a decent mattress, a hot shower and a good kitchen.

Day three: sun, sand and sea

Day three began in beech woods. "This is the best section of the route," a fitter cyclist shouted as he disappeared up the hill in front of me. There are various points on the map where you might be tempted to miss a section. Don't do it. Frensham Common is such a detour but it's there for a reason: it is a site of Special Scientific Interest with sweeping views. Just be aware that sections of the trail are a soft sand that beaches would envy – a feature responsible for my only tumble of the trip.

At the Devil's Punchbowl, I took my coffee break and enjoyed the view among hundreds of day-trippers and motorcyclists, who buzzed like wasps along the byways. I reached the South Downs Way that afternoon, grateful for the National Trail way-marking. At the summit near South Harting, I looked out over the English Channel.

Day four: monarchs and monuments

Opening the tent in the early morning, a barn owl was making one final pass of the hedge before heading home.

The South Downs Way takes the route closest to the hilltops except where it plunges into valleys, necessitating a gravelly scramble up the other side. On Twyford Down I paused to view Winchester. Traffic on the M3 roared as I dropped down from the bucolic wonders of chalk grassland into the clamour of urban life. King Alfred stands victorious above his city's main street; I leant the bike and took pictures.

King's Somborne proudly declares its association with John of Gaunt, but I was more interested in its yew trees. Dozens of ancient specimens mark boundaries, their role long forgotten. In chalk-stream country, away from the hills, fast-moving bodies of water moved across white beds of stone, green weed pulled taut like linen on freshly made beds. Dinner was locally caught wild trout. →

What bike?

Gravel and mountain bikes can both work but wider tyres do help

Having seen photos of the route in wet weather, I made the decision to use my mountain bike long before a weather forecast was available. While slower, I enjoyed the sure-footedness of a bike that I am used to slinging around local singletrack. I saw a couple of riders on rigid 29ers with bikepacking gear, and they seemed to cope well. Everyone was using similar (2.3in) knobby tyres as me. Depending on how much you need to carry, a gravel bike is probably fine. I wouldn't recommend a tourer.

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