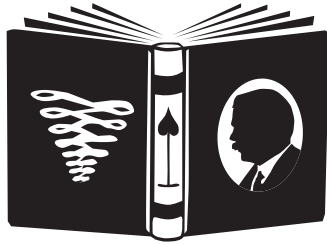

H.G. WELLS
~ FESTIVAL ~



FOLKESTONE
19 & 20 SEPTEMBER 2009

Runner-up

Back to Folkestone

by Jacob Saywell

Age 15, Harvey Grammar School, Folkestone

In the early years of the 34th century Sir Herbert Oliver put the first town on wheels. What had only been a fantasy, dreamt of in books, before now, took the world's imagination. Sir Herbert's project ended the world as we knew it, and thrust us in a different direction. At the time of these developments towns belched out huge black clouds of smoke and deep gashes were carved in the earth from the gigantic wheels that carried the monstrous meshes of steel that held the towns as they moved across the British landscape.

A disruption followed the town's changes in position: life and work in Britain could not continue as before. People would go on holiday to Birmingham to find themselves hopelessly lost and hundreds of miles from their desired town. The breakdown of work was first seen in the postal service where thousands of letters were cast into the empty pit where Plymouth had stood. Just as the postal service had become confused about the whereabouts of towns, Government was soon to follow. All communication broke down, and the wildlife became disrupted. No one knew which land belonged to whom, and it didn't matter anyway; towns, villages and cities trundled through anyhow. All towns in Britain were on wheels by the 35th century, except London, which was too heavy to move mechanically. The Capital was soon almost fully abandoned, for most Londoners now sought the thrill of living in a moving city.

The fashion for mobile towns soon caught on all over the world. Mayors would take their town from one country to another, and borderlines were completely forgotten. People no longer knew which country they were in, because the diversity of languages and cities was so varied. Swedish cities migrated to the warmer atmosphere of India, overpopulated China moved to the open spaces of Russia. If you had looked down from the timeless worlds of space, onto the polluted atmosphere of our Earth you would have seen our planet in disarray and confusion as towns dawdled across the face of the earth. By the 37th century man's infinite pleasure of going to and fro across the globe came to an inevitable halt. The huge expenditure of fuel used by the moving towns had become too much, and the oil was running out. Great Britain and the world were a different place; the map had completely changed. Towns were now situated in very different places: Liverpool was in Manchester, Edinburgh in Colchester, Bournemouth in Cardiff. The British lifestyle as we knew it was at an end. The upheaval throughout the world had changed all of mankind forever.

It has been four years now, since I climbed down from that rusted iron framework that was holding Folkestone in place. I still remember, as clear as yesterday, my flight from that threatening, overshadowing town. Folkestone had been situated near Newcastle for just over 300 years. It had broken down in the later years of the 37th century and while other towns trundled on, vainly seeking ideal surroundings, Folkestone settled down satisfied with their new environment. However, 300 years further on, much of Folkestone's population were dissatisfied with the resultant lifestyle in that part of the country, and I was included amongst them. I, George Wells, was born in Folkestone 4093, the very end of the 41st century. My mother and father, of whom I know nothing at all, abandoned me at 16 months of age to fend for myself. The first few years I was taken in by a Mr Maudie, but on my fourth birthday I was, without delay, returned to the streets. My neglect was a direct result of the astronomical cost of bringing up a child. Caring for a child was so costly that it was rare for parents to keep their child. Many foundlings were a result of this merciless predicament and this had made a large population of young, starved children in a dangerous, modern world. The morning of my disappearance in Folkestone happened as follows.

It was a sultry day in the middle of July and the shops were just opening. I was with four other foundlings and we were bouncing a tennis ball sluggishly to each other. We, as usual, were hungry and would occasionally steal from the opening stalls and shops. As we went down the crooked streets we would reach out and pinch an apple or a bread roll, rarely, if ever, being seen. All of us were still drowsy and James, the eldest of us, held a bottle of alcohol, which he'd got yesterday, and was near drunk. As we plodded down the main road we took little notice of the town awakening. Foundlings were 'no good', and though this was the public opinion, few people would bother us. The only thing a foundling had to do was keep low when police were about. To a foundling there were three types of policemen. There were those who couldn't be bothered to acknowledge a foundling, and this was the majority. Then some police would give chase for a few streets, but soon give up. Very few officers would give a long chase and even fewer would catch one of us.

That hot day in July was one of the days the third type of policeman was patrolling the town. As I snatched a freshly baked bagel from a bread stall, a copper, who had been watching us, seized me by the wrist. "I'm taking you..." the policeman started, but I twisted my arm round and bolted. I screamed, "Run" to my companions and we all darted in different directions as custom, but James, half drunk, tripped over an unlevelled paving stone and dropped his bottle, which shattered, scattering glass across the street. A second policemen quickly shackled him to a lamppost and continued after us. I ran down three alleys and almost collided with my tracker, he doubled back and kept on after me.

The chase continued for over five minutes and I was starting to slow. My pursuer seemed to be coming faster. There was almost nothing I could do to stop him from catching me now. I put on a burst of speed in a desperate attempt to put some distance between us. I was soon a road in front of him. I came to the corner and took a left, but as I came down to the end of the street I found myself at the edge of the town. I could see a way on the right and I could easily run back up the street I'd come and take an alley along it, but I was so ready to drop that I decided to hide, over the edge.

I climbed down that corroded metal structure and was overjoyed to hear the policeman above cursing about losing me. I decided to stay under the town for a while because the copper might wait or search the surrounding streets to find me. But they would never look under the town, even we, as Foundlings, wouldn't do that, it was much too dangerous. I stayed clasping the metal rods beneath the many tonnes of the concrete town for an hour, but grew very tired, hanging there on that hot, blue day, and chose to see what the natural ground was like. As I clambered down through the iron bars, that seemed to come from everywhere and go everywhere, I grew overconfident with myself and started swinging down like an ape on the rusted metal, as I descended to the earth. Just above the gigantic wheels I misjudged the distance between two bars and fell headlong to the ground below. I hit my head on a rusted length of metal and my head immediately drew blood, though I didn't notice for long as I tumbled into the warm mud below, breaking my nose and blacking out.

I woke, face down in the mud. The mud had cooled from earlier in the day and when I turned over and looked upwards at the night sky. As I gazed skyward I saw the stars above in the heavens and saw the colossus town above sitting on that intricate device of metal. It appeared to be swaying in the mild wind and I realised the ground I was lying on was completely firm. I rested my head down and quickly jolted it up again as I felt excruciating pain in my head. It began throbbing and I could feel dried blood in my brown matted hair. I took the shabby shirt I was wearing and ripped a strip from it and wrapped it round my head. I winced as I tightened it and as time went on the bruises from the fall became stronger. My nose felt tingly, like before you sneeze, but at the same time painful. I spent the rest of that night and the following morning regaining strength and comforting my wounds. I got my wits together, when the pain subsided a little, and thought of what to take as my next move.

As I lay there in the mud I saw two options ahead. One, I could climb back up the steel frame to Folkestone, or two, I could go away, explore what Great Britain was like. The latter was certainly more appealing, however I was ravenous and felt pessimistic about doing either. I soon became incredibly thirsty and felt it necessary to search for water. I managed to crawl a hundred metres or so and found a murky puddle. Though the water was so turbid and off putting my indefatigable thirst made me drink it. The water was foul to the taste but it refreshed me a little after my days of fasting and I continued on in search for food. I was that night able to find food and was strangely thankful for all that had happened the last few days when I saw the silhouette of Folkestone in the distance as the sun came down.

The following weeks were particularly hard going, with little food or water, and harder than this, company. The wild animals shied away from me after being undisturbed for so long and I was forced to eat the most challenging things. I will not record all those wearisome, similar days but they were the most miserable days of my journey. I remember the day I found myself without Folkestone's familiar silhouette in the distance. It was the most lonesome I have ever felt. I felt as though the only living human on the planet. In the next few days, in spite of my loneliness, I saw a town in the distance and decided to press towards it. In a matter of days I could clearly see the town ahead. Several days after this I found myself a few kilometres from the town, it would take less than a day. I decided to continue my journey in the morning. The next day I had overslept and woke up midday. I found a group of mushrooms in a grassy place, which I devoured and then continued towards the town. It was surprisingly smaller than Folkestone and I arrived at its mechanical mesh of steel framework late. As I looked up at the climb before me I saw a small figure bounding delicately across the metal lattice that held the town, she was descending quickly towards me.

'Wait, be careful', I was trying to shout, but, as my voice had not been audible for the last set of weeks it came out as a coarse whisper. The person continued downwards. I forced the noise from my lungs and I was abruptly told to 'keep quiet'. I could now see the girl's face clearly. She was very pale, had a small figure and brown eyes. Though at this time all I could notice was the solid determination in her face. As she neared to the ground I let up a quiet whimper of 'be careful'. She leapt to the ground, grabbed my hand and hauled me off at top speed. A few hundred metres off she pulled me down into a muddy trench and sat down breathing heavily. I stood there a while, shocked and out raged, a little frightened about what had just happened. I slid to the bottom of the trench, wondering about this mysterious, strong-willed girl who had so suddenly entered my journey. I began to wonder if she would ever even say hello, but she didn't. That whole night she didn't utter a word. I slept in the morning hours, despondent, wondering about this brash girl.

The suns beating rays woke me persistently but each time I woke I found her still sleeping. The heat was unbearably hot and the ditch I sat in made our air musty. I thought to leave my sudden 'companion' several times, but when I tried to put this plan into action the girl caught me by the leg and told me to 'stay put'. I tried sleeping for the most of the day to drift myself off from my current, unknown situation. As the day cooled I slept better but was soon woken by my unannounced friend to say we were moving. We trudged on through the night without a single sound between us, and as the morning light appeared we slumped back down into the trench. The following two weeks continued much the same but after a few days of silence she began to talk.

"How'd you break your nose?" She asked as we walked along by the trench one night, as was the norm. "What?" I replied.

"How did you, break, your nose?" She repeated.

"Oh... I fell on it when climbing down from my town. Anyway, who are you? What's your name?" She ignored my question and continued with her line of conversation.

"What town's that?"

"Folkestone. Where are we going?" I asked and this was again disregarded.

"Oh," she said drearily, "yours was one of the first to settle, weren't it?" I began to get annoyed that she wouldn't answer my questions.

"I wouldn't know," I said, gruffly.

"Well it was," she stated, "Why'd ya leave?"

"I was running from a... I'm a foundling." I stammered.

"Oh." She kept quiet after this, as if I had said something impertinent, and we continued that night's journey in silence. Our conversations kept up though and after a week or more of talking I found her name was Katie Finch, she was a year my senior, 17, and she had left her town for many reasons. She told me that as a child she had always wanted to go out and explore but her parents never let her. As much as wanted to deceive myself, I was starting to like her. The trench that we had been following these last weeks were the gashes from her home town's wheels. She said they made a sharp turn just past the midlands where we would leave it and continue on to London, her destination. From her small backpack she had produced an old map, which had been drawn up before towns started moving around. It showed London, where it still was presently, but all the other towns were no longer in the same position as on the map. There were a lot of marks over the map where it had seemed someone had tried to record where towns were now. When Katie gave it to me to have a look I found that Folkestone had been on the coast, and it must have been around these days when I decided Folkestone's original situation as my destination. From what I could see in Katie, she had been strictly organised in planning her trip.

We passed various towns and villages during our weeks of travel but we kept to our route all but once. One night we saw a town, which was very close by, which, from where we were, looked as if it were on a steep angle. The sight startled Katie's and my own curiosity and we decided to investigate. As we neared the town we saw the true dilemma that had occurred. The vast network of metal holding the town up had collapsed at one side! It was an amazing, but shocking sight. When we were close, about 100 metres or so, a low voice made us jump.

"Aye, who goes there? Looters? Huh? This is loaded and working you know, let me see your faces." The hairs on my arm were standing up and Katie and I did as the man demanded.

"We're not Looters, Sir", Katie said without a flinch, "We were just... intrigued by your town's strange sight."

"Aye, hmmm... I see yur just kids but you never know with man's greed, they're glory in our mishaps." The man gave a small smile showing the gaps where his teeth should have been.

"Anyway, I better be getting' back to my people yonder", he said pointing, "and I suggest you get going, some of my people aren't as sparin' or trustin' as me". Katie was still curious.

"Could you just explain what happened here? An which town is this?" She asked.

"Ha!" the man guffawed, "aye, I guess I could for a minute" We sat down there and he explained briefly the town was Dalkieth, a Scottish town, and the metal structure came crashing down after a festival where every man, woman and child had been present. They were now camping on the solid earth in tents. We bid him farewell and returned on our way to London. We continued along Beddgelert's tracks for many weeks and eventually arrived on the other side of the midlands. We left the trench we had followed for so long and continued southward. A few weeks after leaving the tracks we had our next excitement.

We were walking along as we saw two lights accelerating towards us. There was a low rumble in the air and we could feel the vibrations beneath us. We stood watching as an object whipped past us at an incredible speed. As it passed we felt the wind blowing in our hair and choked on the sudden dust-cloud that had arisen. It was soon followed by several others, which were going equally fast. We began to walk on when they had gone and arrived at the hive of activity. We came into the camp bewildered by all these metal monsters of speed.

"Hey you two! What you doin'?" A voice burst out from behind us. We both turned to see a boy get down from his machine.

“Hey come 'ere,” We went over to him. “What you doin' 'ere?”

“Passing through, what's your problem?” Katie piped up.

“Nuthin', was just curious about the two newbies.' He said.

“Good. We'll be off.” Katie said and we walked off through the rest of the camp. I could see the disappointment in her face however, that she hadn't fuelled her thirst for knowledge. At a hundred or so metres off from the camp a boy ran up to us and told us to wait. We walked to him and he asked us where we were going.

“London.” Katie replied, “Why do you need to know?” He told us that several scouts were going out in look for a new track to race on and was wondering if they could take us.

“It'll be a lot quicker.” He added. Katie agreed as long as they would go in the morning. We came back to the outskirts of the camp where he introduced us to his racing team, they would be looking in London tomorrow.

“The car racing,” Katie asked, “is illegal isn't it?”

“Yeah, but where are the authorities around here nowadays? Man's for himself.” Came the reply. That night we slept a little way off the camp, and I could sense Katie didn't like them for some reason.

The next morning Katie woke early and looked around the camp. After seeing everything she could she woke me. We sat together for a few hours waiting for the camp to awake. No one woke for hours and Katie was just deciding to leave when Teddy, the engineer of the race team, woke with a yawn. He turned and saw us sitting there.

“How long till everyone wakes up?” Katie asked.

“Cor, you're up early,” he replied, “I'd say 'bout an hour.” Katie wasn't impressed and was even less so when that 'hour' was in fact three.

“George, let's just go.” Katie asked this more than once but I managed to make her stay each time. We eventually got going to London by the afternoon, and though it gave us backache from the long drive, we covered a week or two of walking in a day. It was incredibly fast and such a thrill to move at those speeds.

We went to sleep that night and in the morning we saw London was a dead city. The stillness was profound and the silence had come like a thunderclap. We walked around together, Katie and I, to look at the large city we were in. The streets were horribly quiet and you could tell they hadn't been disturbed for years. We had half a mind to break into a building and have a look from high at one point, but decided against it. As we walked down the winding streets our footsteps echoed against the side of the houses. Katie was completely taken in by the size and complicity of the city. She kept muttering things like, 'Once the most populated city in Britain and now it's empty, completely empty'. The silence in this city was overwhelming. It was already noon and we began to ask ourselves why we were walking in this lifeless city? Why we were alone amongst all these buildings? We went back to our racing companions who were just waking under the shelter of those terrace houses. They looked around with us for a while then took a go around the city in their car to test it as a racetrack. It felt better to be going around in a group about that large, tranquil city. After they had finished Katie approached the race team expressing our gratitude and wishing them safety but we'd be going. We walked through the dead city together. The dusky houses about us stood tall and dim. We walked through the trees across a park, leaving our friends to explore the city.

It took us over a day to get out of London. We got lost in the maze and buildings, but once we were out we headed southeast.

“Where are we going now?” I asked on the third day of leaving London, “Aren't you wanting to stay in London?” She pondered the question a while which was unusual for her.

“Well... you did say a while back you might want to go back to Folkestone's original setting and take a look. I want to come with you. London's a dead city, no one's there.”

“There is most likely no one in Folkestone either. We could try and...” She interrupted me in mid-sentence.

“There'll be you though. We could set up there together.” I stood there speechless. I had never thought what to do after getting to Folkestone.

“Anyway,” she continued, “we can decide that when we get there.” This conversation stayed in my mind over the next few weeks. Is that how it would end, settling down together? I was dumbfounded. It was something I had never thought of.

We continued on our journey and a few weeks later we were on the verge of Folkestone's origins. It was an incredible feeling to think that my... no... our journey would soon end. It was amazing to think that just a few months ago I had set out and when I saw the large pit where Folkestone had been it was almost unbelievable to think of all the miles away it had travelled. It was the end of our journey, it was strange, I had gone from Folkestone to Folkestone, I was back at the start, it seemed. As I sit here, writing this it seems a breathtaking feat, what we did. I feel blessed to have had such an exciting story to tell, after all, I am only a foundling!