



In praise of... Cobbles

It's a road surface entirely unsuited to bicycles, so why do we love cobbles so much?

Words TREVOR WARD Photography HENRY CARTER



he hero of Flann O'Brien's comic novel *The Third Policeman* is a member of a rural Irish constabulary who

has an interesting theory about cyclists using the local cobbled roads:

'[They] get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle as a result of the interchanging of the atoms of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who nearly are half people and half bicycles.'

Sergeant Pluck goes on to offer as evidence the case of the local postman: 'He will lean against the wall with his

elbow out and stay like that all night in his kitchen instead of going to bed. If he walks too slowly or stops in the middle of the road he will fall down in a heap.'

Cobbles may not quite have the power to disrupt the molecular universe, but in the world of cycling they are not for the faint-hearted, instilling in riders equal measures of respect and fear. Tom Boonen, four times winner of Paris-Roubaix, described the race as 'a slow killer', although there is no record of whether he sleeps propped up against his kitchen wall.

The cobbles of Sergeant Pluck's early 20th century Ireland would have been large pebbles from beaches, but

The hewn lumps of rock that make up the cobbled roads of Belgium and France have become trophies in their own right. The one above comes from the Kapelmuur, and was acquired by *Cyclist* while the road was being repaired (they won't miss just one)

by the time Boonen was dominating the Classics (he has also won the Tour of Flanders three times) most cobbles were uniform blocks of stone hewn from Belgian quarries. Although the latter are not as prone to gaps and unevenness, they remain a test of man and machine, especially in the wet.

Carved in stone

Cobbles aren't like a climb or a side wind, when teammates can offer you a degree of assistance or protection. They are much more capricious and cruel. They add an element of chance and drama to one-day racing, which explains why they are so revered in Belgium and northern France despite the fact they often play havoc with the fortunes and reputations of the biggest names in the sport.

Yes, these riders invariably describe Paris-Roubaix as 'beautiful' once they've showered and changed, but



You don't have to head to Europe to enjoy the cobbles for yourself – there's a growing number of sportives in the UK that feature deliberately rough roads

'Riding the cobbles is like climbing a mountain in the Tour. To win a cobbled race, you need to be very strong. You are a hero'

▷ before that epithets such as 'bollocks' (Theo de Rooij in 1985 when only 35 riders finished) and 'bullshit' (1981 winner Bernard Hinault) are more likely to be applied.

The cobbles are 'the soul' of Paris-Roubaix, according to the group of volunteers – Les Amis de Paris-Roubaix – who inspect and maintain the 27 sectors of pavé all year round. President François Doucier says, 'Riding the cobbles is like climbing a mountain in the Tour. To win a cobbled race, you need to be very strong. You are a hero.'

His passion is shared north of the border in Flanders. Legend has it that the Tour of Flanders' toughest climb, the Paterberg, was only introduced in 1986 after a local farmer paved the road up it with cobbles because he wanted to see the race go past his home. The truth is no less impressive: a cycling fan working at the local town hall, on hearing that the council planned to tarmac the road, suggested they use cobbles instead.

'They would be slightly more expensive but aesthetically more beautiful and maybe the Tour of Flanders would use them,' Philippe Willequet told Belgium's *Sport* magazine in 2012. His hunch proved correct, with the cobbles of the Paterberg being classified as a protected monument in 1993.

In the UK, miles of cobbles have been ripped up by councils more concerned about health and safety than history and heritage, but it's not impossible to find inviting stretches of pavé. Just down the road from me in the city of Dundee is a hill, Strawberry Bank, which would give the famous Koppenberg in Flanders a run for its money: a 300m narrow stretch of slick, square cobbles that gets steeper towards the top. Ben Ulyatt, who discovered it while researching a Classics-inspired route for his club, COG Velo CC, describes it as 'exactly

like a true Dutch or Belgian sector, and probably my favourite Strava segment of all time'.

The Flanders of Cheshire

But even when it's not inclined at an angle, a sector of pavé can be just as challenging as a mountain climb. When events organiser Francis Longworth was planning a new sportive for the UK two years ago, he took his inspiration from the cobbled Classics rather than iconic climbs.

'We'd noticed that nearly all the interesting sportives in Britain were focused on climbing: how many climbs, how long, how steep and so on,' he says. 'We felt that creating a sportive based around variations in the road surface rather than gradient was a relatively underdeveloped and compelling idea.'

The result was a series of sportives inspired by the pavé, bergs and strade bianche of the spring Classics. The Tour of the Black Country, for example, features 20km of cobbled roads, stony farm tracks and bridleways, while the Cheshire Cobbled Classic includes five cobbled climbs, including Swiss Hill in Alderley Edge, which is used by Team Sky in training for the Tour of Flanders.

Riding over cobbles, says Longworth, produces 'a massive overstimulation of the senses' caused by the acceleration required to glide over them as efficiently as possible. He compares the sensation of 'rider and bike continually being thrown this way and that' to white-water rafting or skiing, 'where the roughness of the ground creates increased G-forces on the body and heightens the feelings of speed'.

But a word of caution: if you find yourself, in the words of Sergeant Pluck, 'leaning with one elbow on walls or standing propped by one foot at kerbstones', you're probably overdoing it. 🌪