

## Ronde van Vlaanderen, March 2013: vague recollections from the saddle.

“...133km in the flatlands of Belgium. How difficult could it be? Climbs? They’re not climbs, they’re bumps in the landscape. And talking of bumps: cobblestones? Pah, we laugh at their medieval intent...”

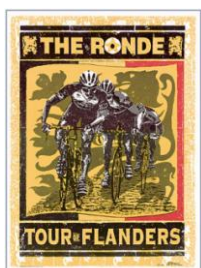
[PAVÉ [par-vay] *noun* a naturally rounded stone, larger than a pebble and smaller than a boulder, formerly used in paving.

“GET ON TOP OF THAT GEAR,” screamed the maniacal banshee that once was known as Tim; his Flandrian alter-ego, Timmeke Boonen, was now our host for the day. And what a day it was. The Tour of Flanders Sportive; an opportunity to ride the hallowed roads of one of cycling’s ‘monuments’ before the Big Boys came out to play the following day to show us mere mortals (banshees notwithstanding) how to ride the pavé properly. The screaming, the clattering and the [relatively] high speed jolting were our mistresses for the day – all of them being encouraged by Timmeke. A thing possessed indeed. Give us back Nice Tim, please, before someone gets hurt.

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The Ronde van Vlaanderen is a mecca for European cycling fans; Belgium being the home for a host of Spring Classics it’s no surprise that the country’s national sport is cycling. Every village has a cycling shop that would shame most UK city stores. It’s in their blood, their beer (oh, their beer...), their landscape and their history. Belgium IS cycling. Period.

Being the culture vultures we are, it felt appropriate that Velo Teifi Cycling Club should seek out this strange land, the strange customs and even stranger road surfaces. So a bunch of wannabe Belgie-phile club members packed their chamois creams and headed for the Eurotunnel. En route, honorary Club Members were established and, all in all, eight cycling geeks set out for a weekend of fun, frites, frolics and, er, cobbles. This is the vague recollections of a couple of them; those few who could form a collective memory of the trip, not too greyed out and fuzzy as a result of Leffe Blond and Duvel abuse.



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## Introducing the Band.



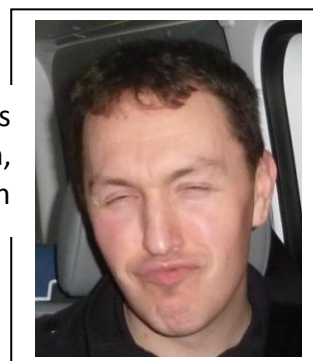
On bass,  
The Late  
Dave C.



On hurdy-  
gurdy,  
AndrooL.



On the  
drums,  
Stevie  
Sums.



On his  
organ,  
Rainman



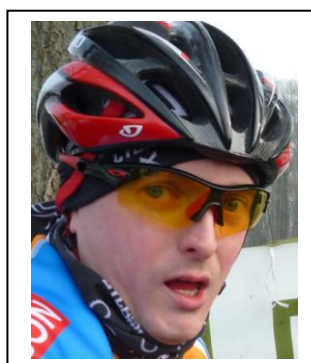
On triangle,  
Hoogerland.



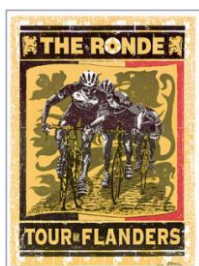
On  
screaming  
lead  
guitar,  
Prepared  
James.



On  
vocals,  
Timmeke  
Boonen.



On it all  
weekend,  
RC.



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### Thursday, 28<sup>th</sup> March



The VTCC Team Car

With the Team Car safely collected, chamois cream procured and copious amount of cardboard squirreled away from Dyfrig's bins to aid the bike packing, AndrooL and Hoogerland loaded up and set-off for Chez Cynan a.k.a. RC. That week, concern was raised about RC's health status after a bout of man-flu almost saw him off, but he was ready, primed; the Canyon beautifully prepped and looking 50mph at a standstill. Onwards then, to curry, cheese and chips country to collect BigD.

BigD was ready, waiting and chomping at the bit; his usual boyish enthusiasm positively eking out of every pore. At what age does 'boyishness' stop,

wondered the team as BigD bounced around like a Walt Disney tiger-friend of Winnie the Pooh "...his bottom is made out of rubber, his tail made out of springs..." His enthusiasm clearly extended to packing as bag after bag emerged from the house. BigD's chosen machine for the weekend was prepared and shuffled towards the bus accompanied by RC's thoughts that St Fagan's might have a gap in their display this weekend – clearly not a weekend for the shiniest toys, but as BigD had tackled De Ronde before, did he know something we didn't?



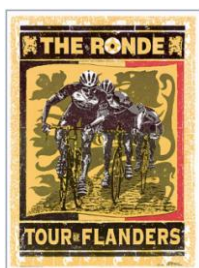
Apoplectic and Cool

Time was pressing now, so it was agreed that Hoogerland would be Driver #1 and a pitstop would be taken at Leigh Delamere, where after Driver#2 (AndrooL) would leap in á la Le Mans style and scream off, back into the race. There was to be

no Driver#3 or #4, the psychological scars of France 2009 were still healing, and the re-opening of the wounds had been mitigated by keeping the RC and BigD in the back seat. Leigh Delamere was reached and 'splash and a dash' was the order; the team raced for the building, the van having been carefully positioned to avoid proximity to the shops and other savoury temptations of motorway services. 15 minutes later, Drivers#1 and #2 were wondering why the van was so quiet, "Ahh, the children must be sleeping." A quick check revealed no children. Clearly, the parking strategy had not been good enough and Costa had cast its evil spell. You don't want that Grande size fella, that'll come back to haunt you. Prophetic words indeed.

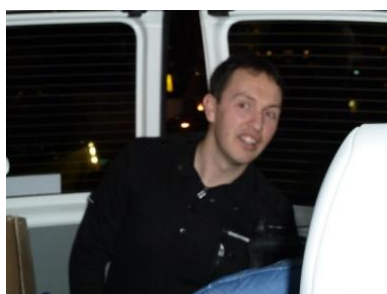


Creeping Madness



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So, there was time to be made up – Eurotunnel waited for no man. Fortunately, Androol had more room on his license for penalty points and he rose to the challenge magnificently; the Mystery Wagon being caned to within an inch of its life. The M4 passed in a blur; the M25 did not. In a panic, Hoogerland went on to Twitter to relay their plight – clearly of no help to the situation, but it made him feel better.

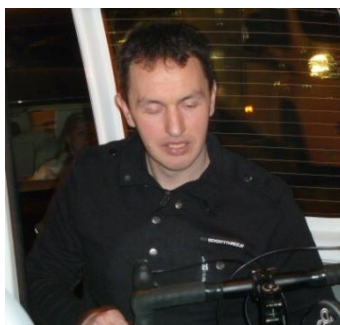


We know what you're doing.

The team arrived with minutes to spare for their scheduled departure. As had about a thousand other vehicles it seemed; a 'technical problem in the Tunnel' had put back departure by one hour so the team settled in for the wait. BigD felt the beginnings of technical problems in his own

tunnel; the Costa Grande was looking for its own departure. Sat in ten lanes of waiting traffic with no obvious surrounding cover posed a problem for our chum, whose eyes had begun to water. Ever sympathetic, the team proceeded with their best waterfall sound impressions; tinkling springs and babbling brooks were all attempted.

He could take no more and decided the neck of his water bottle could accommodate 'Little BigD' and, with a careful semi-crouch within the confines of the open rear doors of the van, Tinkle Toes attempted a download.



A Study of Relief

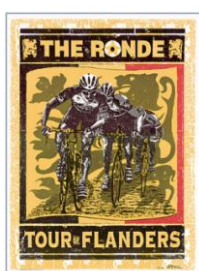
Of course, the lady in the van behind had a great view of a strange man

attempting to squeeze his genitals into a water bottle. Not sure she was overly impressed.



Not impressed.

The train crossing was uneventful and the first night's hotel unremarkable, but at least we'd made it for last orders (or the French equivalent). BigD was clearly happy to risk fluid intake again, partly due to his plans for an early morning sauna and gym visit. Was he trying to fine tune some marginal gains? After the beer, the wild things of Velo Teifi set about wreaking havoc in their respective rooms and with the hot chocolate finished (not too hot, not too cool) bedtime beckoned. Wild indeed.





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### Friday, 29<sup>th</sup> March

The day dawned early with the sound of small children excitedly dashing around hotel space; amazed and agog at the opportunities for freedom. When the children knocked on Androol's and Hoogerland's door they were greeted with "do run along small people, it's a little early for us," or words to that effect.



You couldn't make it up.

With all of the hotel's facilities exercised by 9 o'clock, Androol lifted BigD and RC into their retainer seats and the family unit set off in search of breakfast; Holiday Inn's feeble attempt to extort Euros for a less-than-regional offering was sneered at. BigD spotted the local breakfast spot first, the taste of France, regional cuisine. "Garçon, trois

petit déjeuner Anglais, s'il vous plait et une omelette". At least the coffee was good.



Mur van Geraardsbergen

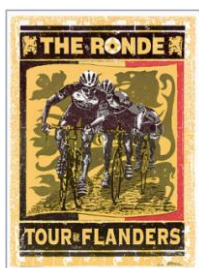
Sated, the group headed off for their rendezvous with the rest of the team and their home for the next two nights. It was at this point, that BigD's recollection of detail pertaining to European roads, features, signage and other facets became alarming. Alarming in the level of detail recalled. Total recall. It was like he'd had another life; a continental existence unknown to anyone else. The makings of a new trip name for BigD were forming but at the last minute, an alternative was plucked out of air by the ever-vigilant RC. And so it was that Rainman was identified. Uncanny, savant-like ability to

remember detail coupled with an inability to tie his shoe laces. Seemed appropriate.



The Bosberg Pose

With the SatNav redundant, Rainman guided the group to the front door of their Aalst hotel; bedrooms were allocated and plans made for an afternoon reconnaissance of historic cobbled climbs no longer used by De Ronde. But not before Androol had christened the bedroom's 'bathroom pod' (some form of caravan-style affair, inserted into the corner of the bedroom – with the best shower of any hotel in a long while, by the way); the christening was loud and raucous and naked flames were banned for a 500m radius.



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Respective software downloads completed, the team lycra'd up and headed to Geraadsbergen in search of such icons as the Muur van Geraadsbergen and the Bosberg although after a few hours of touring around some interestingly-named hamlets, the cold started to nip at the extremities (Rainman had forgotten his water bottle in which to tuck and warm his extremities up). To warm up, the opportunity to call in at a 'village bike shop' was taken. Wow. To say it spoiled for

choice is an understatement and seemingly, this approach to bicycle-related purveying was repeated village after village. With pricing typically 30-40% lower than the UK, the temptation to back up the van and fill 'er up was strong.

With the recce completed it was time to dip into Oudenaarde to complete the registration for the team's big day. It was also an opportunity for Androol to pick-up another t-shirt for his "I'm a cyclist" statement

collection. Paul Smith would be proud. On the way back to meet the Lahndahn Boys, the group remember they'd not eaten since their local delights that morning so a detour into Lidl was taken to grab a snack that respective Mothers would not have been proud of: there was some fruit, but also crisps, chocolate and chorizo sausage. No one said it was going to be pretty... And with that lot scoffed, it was time for supper and to practice the cocker-ney accents.



Waiting for the pavé



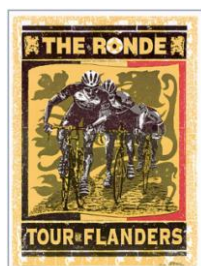
Looking down the Bosberg



The Registration Shuffle

### The Lahndahn Boys

*"...London nights - when the party's out and the fever drives you,  
I wanna get up tonight,  
I wanna keep on loving you..."* London Boys, 1989.



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Admittedly, VT's Wales-based contingent had some preconceived ideas of the post-supper meet up with the club's honorary members coming along with Timmy P, but a few Leffe Blonds later and all irrational fears of scary city boys had been dispelled, especially when they began regaling stories of Timmy P's 'previous' when it came to riding experiences with him. The moniker Timmeke was soon formed in the Author's mind, given our pseudo-Belgian leader's history in Flanders and in respectful reference to national hero, Mr Boonen.

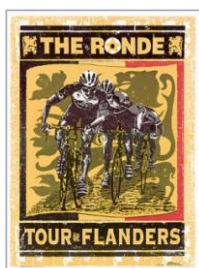
A few more Leffes later and bonds were formed left, right and centre. Davey C (who came with a described reputation for being a little tardy due, in the main it seems, an in ability to make

quick decisions on kit alignment: does Rapha go with Assos, and so on) had quickly crafted a Colnago alliance with AndrooL. Their bikes were even the same colour and to compound their apparent lack of imagination, high-fives were now being exchanged. RC pointed out that his Genesis was the same colour scheme, but their contempt was plain to see; he would not be slapping skin with the Col-Bros tonight.

Steve, apart from having a penchant for maths, was a city-boy with a passion for endurance having cycled such random routes as Newport (curry, cheese and chips) to the Gwaun Valley. Such was his adventurous nature he was even familiar with the local delicacy in the latter-referred location – Bessie! Bessie's is an

institution of certain repute in the locale; indeed, The Late Dave C hinted that he was familiar with a gastro-pub in the area, and the name rang a bell. No-one had the heart to tell him. Well, not straight away. After about four and half seconds, the merciless mickey taking began.

The final VT Honorary member was James, a quiet, thoughtful man. A lean, racer-look about him too as he set about a large bowl of pasta at 11 o'clock at night, just nipping at his Leffe (as opposed to the RC 'glugging' approach). This man clearly was getting ready for a big day; prior preparation prevents p\*ss-poor performance and all that. The Welsh Boys had one more Leffe for the road. And one for the pavé. RC had another one too.



## Saturday, 30<sup>th</sup> March: Tour of Flanders Sportive

Cometh the day, cometh the men. And breakfast saw the men cometh-ing down very early for their continental selection. A general stumbling around in a half dressed state was *de rigueur* except, that is, for James. Or Prepared James as he clearly was, down to the level of wearing his helmet and Camelbak. The rest of the group were in awe – just having the ability to fasten a helmet buckle at six in the morning was something the Celtic Crew could only dream of. Mostly 'cos they were still asleep.

Notable by his absence at breakfast was Rainman. In an attempt to avoid incurring unnecessary expense, he'd wisely saved some Lidl-snacks from yesterday and was Secret-Squirreling in his room. No-one had the

heart to tell him breakfast was included; another croissant, anyone?

With pre-race bellies full, Timmeke led the drive to the start line (having first chivvied The Late Dave C). No-one had heeded the tails of doom from the night before and the direction-finding became what seemed to those in the Scooby Van, as free-form. Especially when the vehicles hit a section of pavé at 60mph, the lead (Timmeke) vehicle entering into an interesting game of chicken with an oncoming local. The Scooby Van occupants closed their eyes. The local car relented. Timmeke seemed not to notice.

With a dubious parking spot located in Oudenaarde, the group

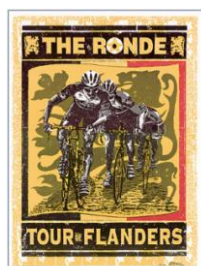
formed; nervous anticipation was evident: how many layers to wear? What food to take? Where's my hat? Whose coat's that jacket by there? The eight-some edged in the direction of the start location and then it happened. A large peleton of already-started riders passed by and excitement, energy, enthusiasm and chaos kicked in. Stevie Sums exploded away, quickly being immersed in the fast-moving group. AndrooL, Rainman and Prepared James also dived into the crowd and the rather more conservative Hoogerland, RC (conservative, really?), The Late Dave C and Timmeke were left at the roadside, scratching their heads. Ah well, it was good while it lasted.



When you're ready, Dave...



Timmeke, before the Banshee.





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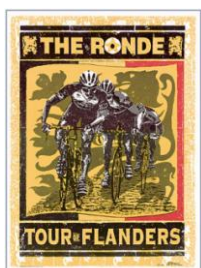
For the Hesitant Four, Timmeke assumed control and indicated the way towards the official start line; he'd done this before. Again, the previous warnings weren't heeded. After 10 minutes and a dead-end, Timmeke explained, "I remember this now. We did the same last year." Not being a slow-learner may be a pre-requisite for next year.

At the start line, the Hesitant Four re-grouped with the Eager Three; obviously the latter mob had Rainman – why wouldn't he know where to go? So four become seven, as the Spice Girls might have sung. Stevie Sums' exuberance was clearly insatiable and he was probably half way up the Koppenberg by now. Doing a wheelie. One handed.

The Tour of Flanders itself passed by in a blur. Literally. Pavé is not conducive to either brain function (check for internal bruising/bleeding) or visibility (eyeball retention is a real skill). A vague recollection of the 133km goes something like this:

- Opening kms are smooth, fast and busy as 16000 riders track their way via cycle tracks and farm roads towards the Koppenberg;
- The Koppenberg is too narrow, too steep and too pavéd for any more than two abreast; anyone stopping or 'dabbing' will cause a ripple affect back into the thousands coming along behind. Suffice to say, we all walked the Koppenberg;
- At the sight of pavé, Timmeke transforms into some sort of demonic creature, screaming at his ride buddies with ugly, contorted features using words like "gears", "on top of" and "get";
- If in doubt at where Timmeke is on any section of pavé, just listen for the endless screaming sound (it is audible above the clangs, bangs, rattles, dings and other shouts/screams) and look for a parting of the masses as riders dive for cover at what is obviously an incoming lunatic who will take no prisoners;
- Prepared James wasn't expecting a rucksack to be thrown into his front wheel on one of the pavé climbs. So much for P P P P P;
- Stevie Sums was expecting his fillings to be rattled loose, he wasn't expecting his cleat bolts to do the same;
- Belgian waffles are good feedstop items, as are tubes of honey;
- Trackstands should be practised before attempting De Ronde;
- Man flu a week before-hand is no reason not to partake;
- Maintaining a working group of eight is nigh on impossible on this sportive.

And so the 2013 De Ronde sportive was dispatched with only minimal incident, a little cramp and much panache (we like to think). Post-ride frites were taken by some and ignored by others (no class, some people); post-shower spag bols were wolfed down in a local bar that served only spag bol prepared in a variety of ways. Well, two ways anyway. All that was left to do line up the Leffes and consider the race day to follow that would demonstrate exactly how to ride pavé. With panache.



Ronde van Vlaanderen, March 2013: vague recollections from the saddle.

## Sunday, 31<sup>st</sup> March: Ronde van Vlaanderen 2013 (96<sup>th</sup> edition, 100<sup>th</sup> Year: feeeeel the history)

Once Dave C was roused from his endless faffing in his room, the group set off for a day in Old Kwarement to soak up the cigarette smoke, chip odours and beer breath that formed the mainstay of the village square. With the race passing by three times and big screen coverage for the interim and finale, the spot could not have been better. Warmer, but not better.

The Late Dave C had not wasted his faff time, having formulated a betting syndicate that would reward podium places of the De Ronde. The riders' names and numbers were divided up and an extra edge introduced to race viewing. Obviously, the betting was rigged in favour of Lahndahners and so it proved, with Timmeke (the banshee having now departed his physical being) taking the spoils. Well, he did have an engagement ring to pay for, so fair's fair.

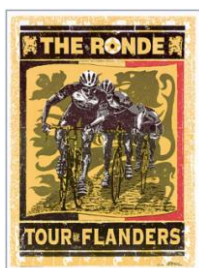


A monkey? You saucy sod. Make it a pony and the Nelson Eddy's will be yours. Gaw blimey, Guv'nor. And other poor stereotyping.

Cancellara's Monument win was warmly received by our new Village friends; obviously Tommeke would have been preferred but he wasn't in contention after a fall. Third place Roelandt would have caused frites-explosions had he been able to come around Sagan, but it was not to be after his out-front heroics that afternoon.

A great trip, great sportive and great race-day atmosphere. The only dodgy part was the dubious company – till next year then!

Zonder dank!



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### Post Script.

Once back in Blighty, the Celtic Cousins spoke with The Lahndahn to seek their views on the over exaggerated diatribe in the preceding pages. With regard to the pavé excursion on the Saturday as the group made their way to the start line of the sportive, the following explanation was offered:

*"...On the Saturday, once we'd left the hotel, talk in the [Lahndahn] car quickly turned to the sweepstake for the pro Ronde, how to randomise 200 riders divided between the 8 in our group. This became such that we missed a specific turning to the start in Oudenarde, and didn't realise it for few kms. Stevie Sums picked up the map and plotted a course back to Oudenarde, which took us across all manner of minor roads and on to the straight section of authentic pavé..."*

Authentic pavé indeed. Authentic game of chicken too. Not to mention authentic multitask #fail. So, with regard to the sportive ride details, a little more background and in-fill was offered thus:

*"...On the ride itself, the pavé sections come thick and fast and appear suddenly. In particular the Molenberg which is approached from a nice smooth concrete main road. The bunch of riders ahead are turning left over a narrow bridge, and I remember it from previous years. I find myself yelling "granny ring, straight away" mainly as a note to self. The road looks like it will end up in someone's garage, as it winds between houses. Prior gear selection is imperative, as there is no time to be changing on the steep, heavily cambered lumpy cobbles. Also you need a low enough gear to maintain cadence in the saddle, as traction is compromised with out of the saddle effort..."*

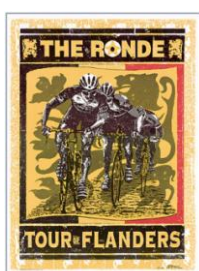
Quite. However, the rest of the group recall the Molenberg Yell as more of a Gestapo-style order dispensed with manic stare and screeching vocals; failure to follow the seemingly strict instruction would have, we felt, resulted in subsequent interrogation through the use of nipple-adjustment tooling and amperes. To say he scared us is an understatement.

On the Late Dave C's penchant for Italian based relationships:

*"...The [Late Dave C's] Colnago appreciation session continued on the early part of the ride as he fell into conversation with a burly German riding a C59, also in red..."*

That clearly explains the evening wear choice of lederhosen. We weren't going to mention it.

And on the subject matter of getting to the race-day viewing location, the view from Lahndahn was this:



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*"...On the morning of the pro Ronde, the many road closures are already in place as we approach Kwaremont, our chosen spectating point on the route, forcing us to make a wide detour. Again Stevie Sums assumed co-driver role, leading us down increasingly minor rural roads until the steeped Kwaremont church was visible. Parking up leaving us a 10 minute walk into the village square, joining a steady flow of race fans..."*

Hmmm. All we remember were the endless dead ends and the stand-off between the Lahndahn Half-track and armed Gendarmes. Even the Timmeke stare-down wasn't going to win that episode.

