



# BENEATH THE COBBLESTONES, THE NORTH...

Long threatened, the route of Paris-Roubaix has become a legacy to which the people of the region are now very attached. The legend stems from a small stone block some 20 centimeters deep with a surface about 14 centimeters square: the pavé of the North.



## The backbone 2001

The cobblestones—the pavés—make up the backbone of this event from another age. It's an almost prehistoric race that can make the spectators look like paleontologists. And whether ancient or new cobblestones, the helmeted racers almost swallow them up like pythons.

# The stones are eternal

It is gray or blue, depending on whether it comes from the granite basin of Brittany or the quarries of Hainaut province in Belgium, or whether it's sandstone from Artois. It's often referred to with over-the-top expressions like “sugar lump” or “bowler hat” when nicely rounded, “baby's head” or even “barnum,” an evident allusion to the circus it generates as soon as the race takes off on this monumental rattletrap. It has given rise to a quite a few expressions. To stay on “top of the pavé,” for example, refers to taking the privileged path in the center of the road, not on the sides where mud and water gather. Alternatively, one might be “thrown in the pond,” an allusion to those side channels. Either way, this cycling hell is known for being “paved with bad intentions.” Finally, when a tiring racer can no longer cross the pavé at a good clip, he is condemned to “counting the cobblestones.”

These back roads of the North, which sink to the level of the fields and are sometimes buried by thick earth, are the vestiges of another time. Their cobblestones resound to the deep memories of a region. In the gray dawn, it's the clatter of miners' clogs that suddenly rises to the surface. Under a low sky, the pavé returns the echo of cartwheels, belonging to peasants or weavers, who once went as far as the spinning-mills of Roubaix. Beneath the cobblestones, the North...

The pavé is not tender; it does not wilt like roses. “A cobblestone, that's eternal,” says Alain Bernard, president of the Friends of Paris-Roubaix, an association that continues to play an important role in safeguarding this legacy. “The only enemy of the pavé is water,” Bernard continues. “The blue sandstone cobbles are more fragile; they sometimes split when water infiltrates, and in winter, when it freezes, they crack. But the Brittany cobblestone is indestructible.” If it has survived, that's witness to a frame of mind transmitted through the ages. “In the North, people have always worked hard, and the cobblestone represents that work ethic,” affirms François Doulicier, vice president of the Friends of Paris-Roubaix, and one of the most ardent defenders of this course that recalls a hardworking past.

One must recognize, however, that the vocabulary of Paris-Roubaix has also borrowed heavily from that of World War I (1914–1918): words such as *trench*, *breach*, and *chaos*. Indeed, in the aftermath of that conflict, to prepare for the race's return in 1919, Victor Breyer, the special correspondent for the sponsoring newspaper, *L'Auto*, accompanied by the champion cyclist Eugène Christophe, toured the countryside devas-

tated by myriad shells and bomb holes. Breyer coined a phrase that has passed into posterity: “the Hell of the North.”

At that time cobblestones were by no means specific to the North. There are still some scattered all over France, especially in towns. But if, elsewhere, the major roads were made of dirt, the pavé recalled that the North, apart from its industrial past, has always been a land of transit, where invasions were commonplace. The cobblestones reflect an obvious military interest, because they render the roads passable in all weather conditions. Indeed, later on, when the first roads of the North region were paved over with tarmac, they were referred to as “strategic pavement.”

## Only 22 kilometers of cobblestones in 1965!

When Paris-Roubaix was created in 1896, cobblestones were hardly quaint. Indeed, the press did not even mention their presence along the route until the following year, when it singled out the “poor” cobblestone stretch between Seclin and Lesquin. On the contrary, the chroniclers of that era took pleasure in citing the rare stretches of asphalt. What truly stood out about this race back then were not its cobblestones but its relatively short distance—about 280 kilometers. This length contrasted sharply with the typical long-distance classics of the day, such as the 600-kilometer Bordeaux-Paris, upon which racers built their reputations.

In the aftermath of World War I, authorities in the North went about repairing the roads damaged during that apocalyptic conflict. The main roads, as far as Amiens, were paved with bitumen. From 1922 to 1939, the great restructuring of the national French highway network took place. And was it a coincidence that as the roads between Paris and Roubaix gradually improved, so did the Belgians strengthen their domination over the event?

The countryside, for its part, was barely affected by this modernization project. The national and departmental roads were still composed of nice cobblestones. In general, they were in good shape, except for a few bad stretches, notably around Wattignies, Seclin, Hénin-Liétard, and Lesquin. To be sure, some secondary roads were in miserable shape, but they were still superior to roads made of pebbles,



**Urban cobblestones**  
**1914**

It's often forgotten that in the Belle Époque all the streets in the towns along the race route are cobbled, like this one that passes the city walls of Paris and is laced with tram rails.



### The ruins of war 1919

Paris-Roubaix has become the Hell of the North . . . of France because it traverses the terrain battered by the Great War of 1914–1918. Writer Victor Breyer penned the terrible “Hell of the North” phrase after seeing the ruined buildings and shelled streets during a reconnaissance of the 1919 racecourse.

resembling the gravel driveways one sometimes sees today leading up to a grand French château.

In the long history of resurfacing the roads between Paris and Roubaix, the year 1939 marks a turning point. That year, the race’s first kilometer of cobblestones, between Forest-sur-Marque and Hem, disappeared under concrete. No one despaired; on the contrary, they rejoiced. Progress was on the march. A director of the Highways and Bridges department went so far as to predict, “In six years, all the roads of Paris-Roubaix will be modernized.” It took the intervention of another war to retard this inevitable prospect.

When the race resumed in 1943, few paid attention to the 2 new kilometers eaten up by tar, between Lesquin and Ascq, in the suburbs of Lille. Still, the tendency was by now irreversible. Initially, the route had included some 60 kilometers of cobblestone roads, a third of which were through the cities of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Pontoise, Breteuil, and Amiens. The balance was an uninterrupted stretch of 40 kilometers from Hénin-Liétard to Roubaix. By 1955, however, the length of the pavé sections was nearly halved, with only 31 kilometers remaining. Ten years later, at the lowest point, the total had fallen to just 22 kilometers. The year before, 1964, was marked by a disturbing development: the Dutchman Peter Post won the race averaging 45.120 kilometers per hour, collecting the “yellow ribbon of the road” for setting a speed record in a classic longer than 200 kilometers.

Hell was rapidly becoming softer than its reputation. “It had become much less difficult, less hostile than it is today,” says Jean-Marie Leblanc, the race director of the Tour de France (and Paris-Roubaix) until 2006 and a staunch northerner. “From Doullens on, the national roads were paved. They were normal traffic routes, wider than those employed in the race today. They invariably had adjacent bicycle paths made of cinder, and the racers alternated freely between the road and the bike paths. That’s how they crossed the region during those years.”

In fact, the number of races that ended in sprints on the velodrome multiplied over the years. The race lost much of its allure. From 1955 on, one had to comb the countryside to find any remaining cobblestone roads. One explored, for example, Pèvele, a region whose name derives from *pève*, the old French word for *pavé*, the cobblestone. Finally, in 1968, came the cobblestone revolution. In May of that year, French authorities collected cobblestones to build barricades in Paris, to quell the student uprising. But more to the point, a month earlier, the race’s

technical director, Albert Bouvet, had sent the Paris-Roubaix racers over the famous course we know today, mostly back roads and abandoned farm tracks. Bouvet had been commissioned to find the cobblestones at any cost by race director Jacques Goddet, who was keenly aware that this masterpiece of a race was on the endangered list. Bouvet found that, yes, cobblestones still existed, and not just any cobblestones! All he had to do was bend the route toward Valenciennes, where the principal sectors awaited.

### Under a shroud of tar

At the same time as it uncovered the forest of Wallers, in 1968, Paris-Roubaix acquired what was arguably an excess of cobblestones. Paradoxically, however, it was this anachronism that helped make the race very modern and highly newsworthy. “Before, you only got to see the last 30 kilometers on television,” observes François Doulicier. “Then came coverage of the Wallers-Arenberg section during the mid-day news hour. Now they broadcast all the cobblestone sections without interruption.”

Still, in the 1970s, the “race against time” that haunted Bouvet’s sleep was far from won—not as long as the tar-spraying machines stayed active. “Every election, more cobblestones would disappear, as mayors kept their pledges to lay more pavement,” recalls Jean-Marie Vallaeys, who initiated the creation of the Friends of Paris-Roubaix. This resident of Roubaix, devoted to all cycling causes, launched the formidable crusade that led to the present policy of preserving cobblestone sections rather than systematically destroying them.

Here’s one example of the resistance to cobblestones. In 1972, the mayor of Nomain, Raymond Vandermesse, launched a poster campaign coinciding with the race—which was assumed to give the North a wretched image. “They don’t deserve this,” ran the message over a background of abominable cobblestones stagnating in a filthy pool.

The president of the Friends of Paris-Roubaix remembers this era when tar was synonymous with the comfort of the residents, and new housing developments were springing up in every village. “Cobblestones were not particularly bothersome for the locals,” explains Alain Bernard. “But those who had arrived from cities to live in the countryside