

## **A day out at Omloop Het Nieuwsblad**

So under the disguise of an educational trip to see some World War 1 stuff around Ypres, we made the first pilgrimage of the road season to Vlaanderen for the "Openings weekend".

Having decided we were "on a budget" the decision to take the ferry wasn't looking good when it took 2 hours to negotiate the Dartford Crossing on Friday tea time. Obviously we missed the sailing but were lucky to be given a free ticket for the next one (doesn't always happen on the ferries!) and finally arrived in De Panne about 2am.

The idea of heading to Ghent for the start of the Omloop was quickly aborted on Saturday in return for an extra hour in bed. So our first rendez vous with the racing was the women's peloton heading over the Nokereberg, their first climb on the day. What was immediately obviously was the anarchic style of racing over the cobbles even compared to the men. It really was every woman for herself with some riders aiming for the smooth guttering (on both sides of the road here) or trying to bludgeon a way right through the middle of the big (but nicely formed) stones. For a large number, after only 20km, the day was already almost done. They were out the back never to come back...

Then it was back in the car for a bit of a rally drive down the back roads of the Vlaamse Ardennen to the Haaghoek for the first passage of the men's race. The Haaghoek rarely gets a mention (although this is where Cancellara broke his back in E3 last year) but, for me, it's one of the more brutal pinch points in the Flanders hills. The downhill section is very scary especially when wet as I'm sure those who did the Ronde last year will confirm. Anyway, with a 250 strong peloton hurtling down the narrow road, the sounds and looks on some of the riders faces were hilarious. As with the women's race, this was going to be a long day for some people.



We headed in a different direction to most people at this point as we went back to find the women's race heading up the Molenberg. At first I assumed they'd changed the race route without announcing it as (a) there was NO ONE around and (b) the usual approach road was totally dug up.

Fortunately, it wasn't a wasted trip as they'd rerouted the race through what looked like someone's drive way and onto the hill. This is where Lizzie A started to show her strength and pulled clear right in front of us with an Orica rider. "Go on Lizzie". Even Molly's pals who'd never been to a bike race were getting into it now: "The World Champion is British? Wow! Who knew?".



No time for slackers; back down the hill through the team cars, across the muddy trench and roadworks and back to the Haaghoek for another passage of the men's race. The peloton was starting to thin by now and the speed noticeably higher. Those hanging on for dear life the first time round had been jettisoned and whilst the break was still a long way clear the strong men were coming to the front of the chasing pack.



Back in the car and onto the N8 (main road across the hills) for the Eikenberg. I knew the race would look completely different next time we saw it as the Boonenberg (Taaienberg) would split things a couple of KM down the road. And of course, if you've seen the highlights, this is where Luke Rowe attacked with GVA. So by the time they came up the Eikenberg the break was still upfront but was splintering with a much smaller gap. For most, their day was done. Rowe, GVA, Sagan, Benoot, etc came past and you could tell this was likely to be the winning move even with no Quick Steppers involved (asleep in the wheels, boys?). 30/40 secs later the peloton came up in single file, no one at all riding the cobblestones, preferring to mix it with the spectators on the tarmac at the side of the hill.

One last chance to catch the race "live". A "race" back up the Eikenberg and a 1km sprint to the car which had been strategically placed beyond the race route for an "easier" race to the end of the Holleweg. On Ronde race day this section is carnage and even today there were cars, bikes, pedestrians, team cars, scooters racing down the main road to get to the village of Mater. On the

plus side, the race comes back onto the main road so parking isn't an issue. You just stop the car in the middle of the main road and get out! Amazingly, we beat the race and take up position on the big cobbles of the Holleweg a few mins before the last two breakaway riders slowly weave past, closely followed by Rowe, GVA, Sagan and Benoot.

Of course, we then have to get the car out of the remaining carnage on the main road which, in the UK, would take hours. But seasoned race chasers in Flanders just get on with it and within 5 mins we're haring back to Oudenaarde to catch the last 25km on the TV in the Centrum Ronde van Vlaanderen. The cheering for the "local" GVA when he won was very lovely.

### **StevenDrew**

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