Author of *HOW I WON THE YELLOW JUMPER*

NED BOULTING

101 DAMNATIONS

Dispatches from the 101st Tour de France

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About the Book

Join Ned Boulting as he reports on his dozen-th Tour de France, an event in which blokes do amazing things on bikes, and, we're oft told, the biggest annual sporting event in the world.

101 Damnations is a chance to relive the 2014 race, stage for stage, fall after fall, tantrum by tantrum; just the good bits mind, without all the aerial shots of castles. Or sunflowers. (Though it does wax lyrical about some stunning Alpine scenery . . . and, with the race starting in Yorkshire, even some stunning scenery not far from Bradford).

From Leeds to Paris (how often do you say that?), Ned details the minutiae of his encounters with the likes of Vincenzo Nibali, David Millar, Chris Froome, Chris Boardman (or 'Broadman' as some would have it), Marcel Kittel, Mrs Cavendish (Mark's wife), Peter Sagan and the rest. Their endeavours, achievements, humour and occasional rancour, sit alongside his own decade-long quest for the ideal end-of-race T-shirt.

Ned weaves together the interesting, amusing and unheralded threads of the race itself, and reflects on his own perennial struggle to get round, get on and get by. *101 Damnations* encapsulates all that is incredible – and incredibly ordinary – about the greatest race on earth.

About the Author

Ned Boulting started his broadcasting career at Sky in 1997, working as a reporter alongside Jeff Stelling on the now legendary show *Soccer Saturday*. In 2006 he was given the Royal Television Society's Sports Reporter of the Year Award. In addition to his work as a football reporter for ITV, he has now presented seven Tours of Britain, the Vuelta España, the Tour of California as well as the Tour Series and the inaugural Women's Tour. He has contributed features and live reports on twelve Tours de France. He is the author of the much-loved books *How I Won the Yellow Jumper* and *On the Road Bike*.

Also by Ned Boulting

How I Won the Yellow Jumper
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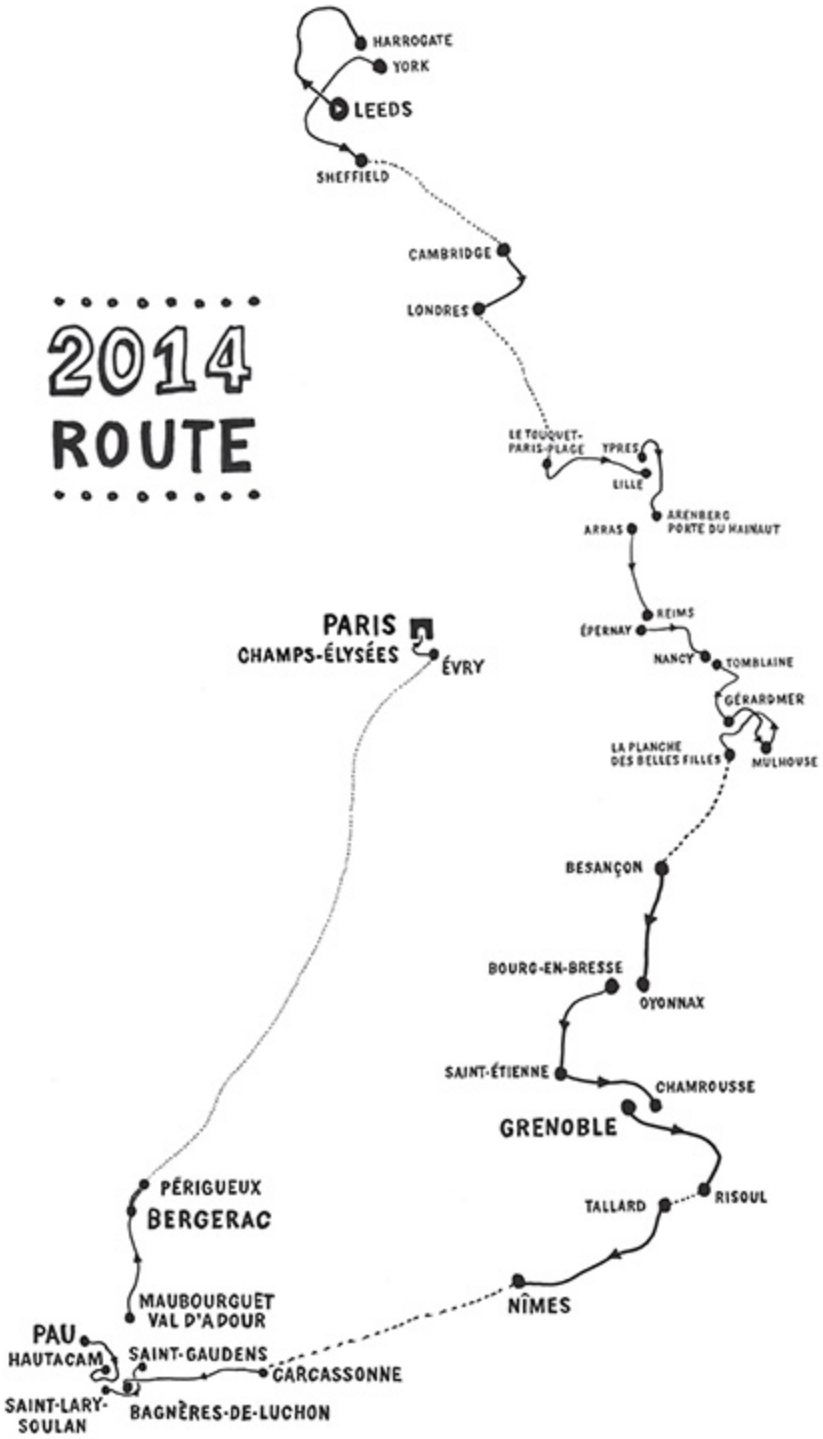
2014
ROUTE
HARROGATE
YORK
LEEDS
SHEFFIELD
CAMBRIDGE
LONDRES
LE TOUQUET-PARIS-PLAGE
YPRES
LILLE
ARENBERG PORTE DU HAINAUT
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NANCY
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LA PLANCHE DES BELLES FILLES
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PARIS CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES
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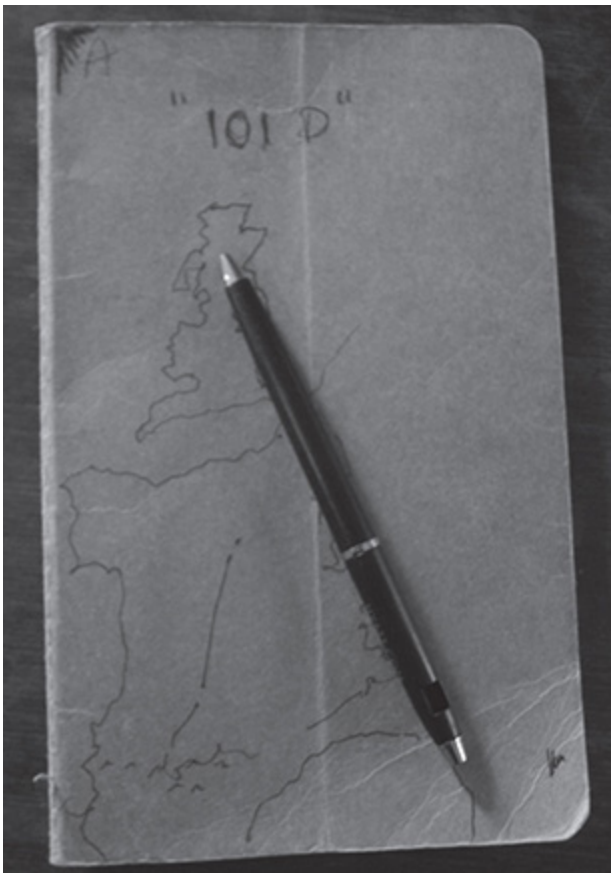
HAUTACAM
SAINT-GAUDENS
CARCASSONNE
SAINT-LARY-SOULAN
BAGNÈRES-DE-LUCHON

To George. For his casual return.



NED BOULTING

101 DAMNATIONS

DISPATCHES FROM THE 101ST TOUR DE FRANCE

YELLOW JERSEY PRESS
LONDON

PARIS

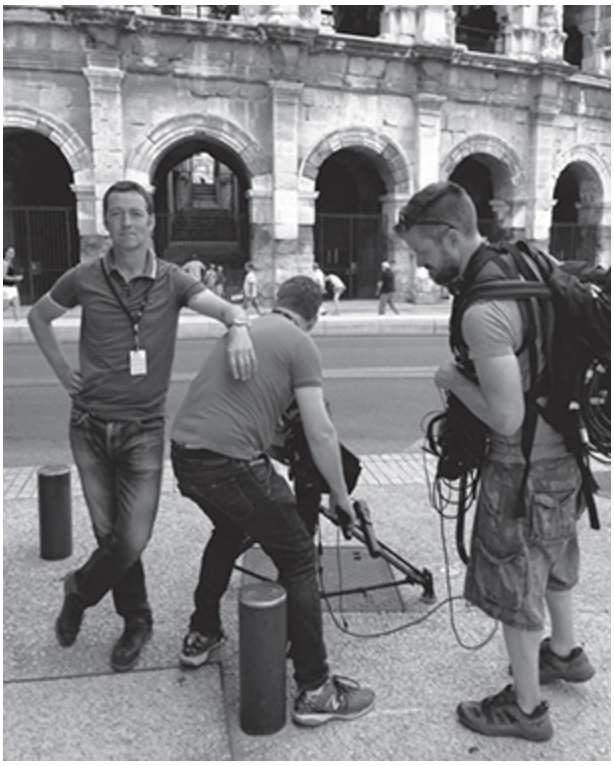
‘That is to say, I loved it.’

Something remarkable played out day after day, throughout July, before my eyes. But at the moment when Vincenzo Nibali clutched his cap and the Italian anthem bounced playfully off the darkening Parisian sky, I could not quite grasp the significance of what it was that I was witnessing. Perhaps there was none.

Later that evening, in the company of my colleagues, we made for a restaurant and tore into steak and chips. Absolved for the first time in almost a month of the need to be fit and proper broadcasters, we could now lift off the yoke of our accreditation and slip the knots that had tied us to the Tour de France.

Perhaps I’d best explain. For the last twelve summers my job has been to talk to the riders both before and after they have ridden their bicycles. These questions, and their corresponding answers, are then broadcast on television, either live, or more likely in the nightly highlights show on ITV4. Most days I go to the start of the race and then drive like a maniac to get to the finish in time to see who wins, and then talk to the winner. Repeat and fade.

Every day, our small team operates from a big white truck that parks up among a huge number of other trucks at the finish line of the race, ready to receive, analyse and re-broadcast the day’s events. French television provides us with a live feed of the race footage itself, so all we do is add on all the other bits: the chats, the features, the interviews.



Now the Tour was done and it was time to eat, our conversation turned to anything other than the bike race. Our crew was almost all there, sawing away at faux filet and gulping down Brouilly, save one or two. Gary Imlach had justifiably retired early to his hotel after anchoring a forty-fourth consecutive broadcast. Phil Liggett and Paul Sherwen, who commentate on the action as it unfolds from a booth on the finishing line, were also absent. They had disappeared off into the Paris night, each in his own separate direction, perhaps clutching better invitations than the one we could offer.

But Chris Boardman, our expert analyst, and Matt Rendell, the cycling writer who contributes in dozens of different ways, were both tucking in, deeply involved, in Chris's case at least, with a mojito, which he was sipping as if it were keeping him alive. Around us sat the ten critically important people who make sure that the show gets on the air looking and sounding right. Chatting away at the far end were Liam MacLeod and Jim Sefton, the cameraman

and soundman respectively, with whom I travel round France: my surrogate July family.

So there we were, scattered around the restaurant, perching on too many chairs around tables that were too small, and generally cluttering the place up. It was an inoffensively average bistro, furnished in red, and located just round the corner from the Place de la Concorde. It was the kind of establishment that would have expected to have closed at around ten o'clock on a regular Sunday night, were it not for the cursed, noisome annual presence of the Tour de France and its army of hangers-on. The laughter and the wine flowed easily.

It was late already when our party broke table and left. We had outstayed our welcome, and the young, immaculately coiffed waiter, who had at first been so solicitous to our needs, had run out of patience with our tiresome demands for beer and food and wine to be brought to the table in seemingly endless measures. The orders had kept him in constant motion, until suddenly he'd had enough and a bill appeared at our table with all the finality of a bailiff's notice. He hovered over us with his credit card machine. It was time to move on.

So we drifted up the street, a dozen of us, refugees from the race. One of our party had identified a bar, which, rumour had it, might still be open and happy to serve us. This seemed unlikely, but such was the momentum of the evening, no one had any better suggestions, except to gather around the minibar in one of our hilariously small hotel rooms and share a tube of Pringles and a can of gin-and-tonic. So now, too catatonic to take the initiative, most of us were strung out along the pavement's length, happy to follow the leader, walking slowly past shuttered antique shops, art galleries, and the lit windows of fashion houses. There was a male mannequin in a skirt and shawl, pointing heavenward. This was another bit of France, I was forced

to concede, which knew nothing of cycling, and cared still less.

I dropped to the back of our line, and there I found Matt Rendell, walking alone.

'Hello, Matt.'

'Aaah. Bloody hell.' This was Matt's usual greeting.

In 2003, on the eve of my first Tour de France, on a similarly sultry night near Les Invalides, this was the man who had taken me to one side and sat me down in a terrible cafe. Here, over a pale and flaccid pepperoni pizza, he proceeded to tell me in most earnest tones that everything I was about to witness would leave me overwhelmed, breathless, confused and dazzled. But with luck, too, it might also leave me with a lifetime's infatuation. I recall how I had toyed with my meal, fiddled with the stem of my wine glass, and not really listened to him, wishing all the while that I could have been anywhere else. I remember how an ink-black Paris sky was brewing up a violent storm above us as we ate. The thunder had broken sometime during the night, and by morning, on the glistening wet pavements, I had found myself for the first time in my life face to face with the Tour de France.

Now, eleven years, and twelve Tours later, I paced in step with my friend and asked him a simple question.

'Did you enjoy it?'

'What?'

'The Tour.'

'No, course not.'

I looked at him, knowing what was coming. He glanced at me, resettling his glasses on his nose in that familiar way of his that normally signals the fact that he is coming, imminently, to the point.

'That is to say, I loved it.' And then, in summary, he concluded, 'Both of those things.'

I clapped him on the shoulders, and grinned, understanding perfectly. We walked on a few more paces,

ambling now. Matt must have guessed my mood, and been alert to the almost imperceptible slackening of the pace. It was too late for me now to follow the rest of them to another bar, I was too tired. So, as the rest of them forged ahead, he presented me with an exit strategy.

'Here,' he said suddenly. 'If you go up there, and then take the second left, you get to the hotel.' He pointed up a side street. We were near to the Madeleine, close to the Hotel Alison, where we always stayed when the race came to Paris. I understood what he meant.

Wordlessly, I shook his hand, and smiled at him, then I did as he said, leaving him to catch up with the others. I turned right and then took the second left, and, as the streets grew quieter, my own question came back to me.

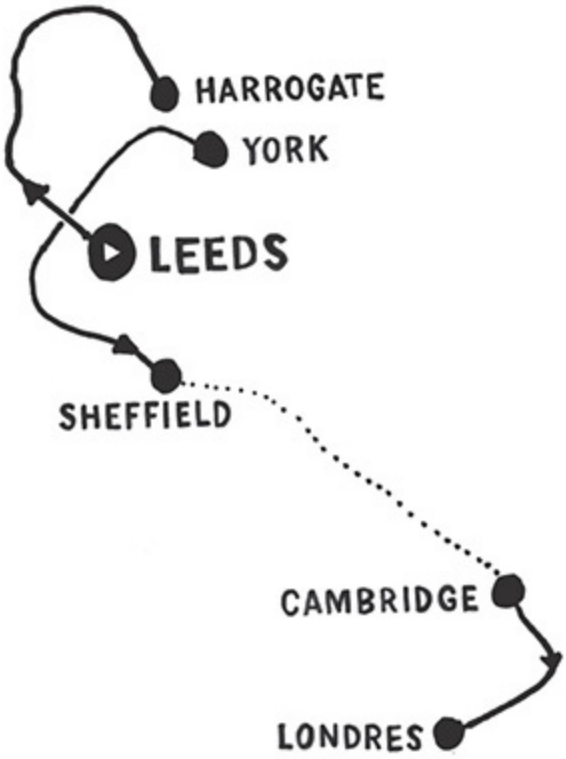
It had been a race that had conspired, over three grossly distended weeks, to produce a series of shocks and horrors, thrills and grave disappointments. From Yorkshire's glorious self-fulfilling prophecy, with its huge, welcoming embrace, to the desolation of the cobbles of Flanders, the sweep of the race had been immense. Naturally, there had been the usual smattering of farce, too. But some images that sprang to mind were not so funny. They involved riders in pain, clutching at legs, chins, elbows and wrists. They were pictures of rain, and mud. It is, after all, a hell of a long way from Leeds to Paris.

Had I enjoyed the Tour? Of course, not.

Had I loved the Tour? Yes. Both of those things

Before I knew it, all I could hear were my own footsteps, and Paris, closing softly in on midnight.

PART 1



GARITY

‘Percy Shaw, the inventor of cats’ eyes? From Halifax?’

About a week before the Tour de France began, I was retweeted by Arthur Scargill.

That sentence looks every bit as unusual written down as I thought it might. It’s not something I was ever expecting to happen.

Out of a casual spirit of celebration, I had penned something bland and optimistic about the Grand Départ in Yorskhire, and posted it on what broadcasters tend to refer to as a ‘social network’, when what they really mean is Twitter. I forget what my inoffensive tweet was now, but it must have read something along the lines of ‘Looking forward to the start of the #TdF in Yorkshire.’

I did not imagine, for a second, that the former leader of the National Union of Mineworkers would read my tweet and deem it worthy of wider agitprop distribution. But before I knew it, Scargill, the scourge of the Thatcher Revolution, the coal-faced crusader of the Left, had picked up on it, shared it with his followers and added something along the lines of ‘So proud of God’s Own County #YellowJersey.’

Two things amazed me about this. No, three things, actually.

The first was that Scargill was still alive. I don’t intend this to be unkind, but I had assumed, given that he had been publicly invisible for the best part of thirty years, that he might no longer walk among us. To the best of my knowledge, he’d not yet appeared on *Celebrity Big Brother*

dressed as a cat. Indeed the last I had seen of him, he'd been wearing a donkey jacket and shouting through a megaphone as a row of police horses bared their Conservative teeth at him. And that was several decades ago. I lose count.

The second was that Arthur Scargill liked cycling. The miners' leader with the bushy comb-over had never seemed to me to be the cycling type. Not that I'd ever wondered if he was, if truth be told. But, now that I was confronted with the reality, I found it hard to imagine him as a coffee-sipping, Bianchi-loving Continental aficionado of all things vélo.

But there it was, his affection for the Tour de France was on Twitter, and therefore verifiable fact.

And the third was that Arthur Scargill followed me on Twitter. This one was perhaps more weird than the other two put together, like discovering Neil Kinnock hiding in your airing cupboard.

Evidently this was going to be a summer that challenged preconceptions.

'We'd made a film to show them about Yorkshire,' Gary Verity recalls with a grimace. 'And the bloody DVD player wouldn't work.'

In 2010 the chief executive of Welcome to Yorkshire travelled to the French capital in the hope of buying, or at least renting, the Tour de France. But things didn't quite go according to plan. In a meeting room in Paris, faced with a panel of hard-nosed, inexpressive French cycling administrators, he found himself in a position of some discomfort.

The Frenchmen waited in awkward silence while another DVD machine was brought to the room. That one wouldn't work either.

'Well, don't worry about that,' said Philippe Sudres, one of the Tour's most venerable directors. 'Just tell us about it

anyway,' he intoned, probably in the French equivalent of a John Le Mesurier voice.

Improvising wildly, now that he no longer had his infomercial to fall back on, the Yorkshireman started to reel off great names of his county's estimable past in a last-ditch effort to sell the land of his birth to these Parisian sophisticates.

He subconsciously edited out Geoffrey Boycott, on the fair assumption that the men at the helm of the Tour de France would not necessarily be up to speed with the more nuanced aspects of 1970s' test cricket. But, he hoped, the prestigious Yorkshire icons left on the list would carry enough cultural heft to bowl over the men he was trying to woo.

'Yorkshire puddings, Yorkshire bitter, Bettys' Fat Rascal?'

This was his opening salvo, accompanied by a winning smile. There was no response, save for the raising of a few Gallic eyebrows.

'Treacle tart? Yorkshire Tea?'

'David Hockney? Barbara Hepworth? Henry Moore? The Brontës?'

There was an exchange of glances between Christian Prudhomme, the director of the Tour and his two lieutenants Cyrille Tricart and Sudres. Then Tricart, an archetypal, poker-faced, bespectacled bureaucrat, answered, 'We don't know about the Brontës.'

Undeterred, but by now beading a little at the brow, Verity ploughed on.

'J. B. Priestley? Joseph Priestley, who discovered oxygen?

'No.'

'Percy Shaw, the inventor of cats' eyes? From Halifax?'

'No.'

'Harry Brearley, the inventor of stainless steel?'

It was desperate stuff. Verity drew breath. He had just made a startling realisation, which looked likely to sink his bid at the first attempt.

‘They’d literally never heard of Yorkshire.’

The Yorkshire Miracle (let’s just call it that straight from the off, and leave ourselves no further space for hyperbole) had been a few years in the making. And it was, as is now well documented, almost entirely the brainchild of Gary Verity, who, for some reason I often, and embarrassingly, call ‘Garity’, even to his face. The fusion of his two names is too difficult to avoid.

When the day of the race finally dawned, Verity, the man who dreamt the whole thing up in the first place, was in his element. He strode from person to person, stage to stage, launch to launch and lunch to lunch as if his knighthood depended on it. He was a considerable presence, exuding marketing, breathing branding and sweating Yorkshire from every pore of his body. From the tip of his crocodile skin shoes to the glint of his bicycle-themed cufflinks, Gary Verity is all about the show. In fact he’s quite a bulldozer of charm. He is a tall man, with a cheeky, willing smile and luxuriantly floppy hair, occasionally parted down the middle and relaxed, at other times wonderfully quiffed. But his great gift, and by extension one of Yorkshire’s greatest gifts, is his prodigious ability to talk. He starts quietly but quickly picks up both volume and pace, until the words slide forth, avalanche-like, fluid and unstoppable. His happy countenance, ubiquitous blue blazer, sporting an enamel ‘Y’ on the lapel, and banana-yellow slacks became a potent symbol of the opening weekend of this year’s race.

Right up until midnight the evening before the 2014 Tour de France, every weather forecast you’d care to look at predicted heavy rain for Stage 1. And in the end, unfathomably, the sun shone brilliantly.

God’s Own County, they call it. And maybe they’re right. God was responsible, ultimately, only with a bit of facilitating from Garity, perhaps working on a sub-contract.

Verity made his name and his numerous quids in various different guises, riding the New Labour good years of boom and more boom before the bust, as something of a ‘career chief executive’. He went ‘troubleshooting’ in Hong Kong with Royal Insurance. He returned home to the Bradford and Bingley, where he took control of their ailing property division, converting a £1m monthly loss-maker into a £1m monthly profit machine. A couple of other jobs later, doing wondrously fiscal things at places like Prontaprint, he pitched up in the chief executive’s role on the Yorkshire Tourist Board.

At the time, he would have us believe, it was a fairly unambitious institution, boasting, ‘tea shops around village greens’; the kind of place you might drift around wondering if your aunt would like a tea towel for Christmas, and appeasing your children by giving them fifty pence to spend on a leather tasselled bookmark.

Part of his thinking in dropping out of the world of commerce involved the wish, indeed the need, to spend as much time as he could with his wife Helen, who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and to be there for his baby daughter Lilly. It goes without saying that this long period of Helen’s illness changed everything for all of them.

‘I became a bit more reflective, and I started thinking and wondering what I could do for Yorkshire that would be a game changer. I wanted to leave a legacy for Helen. I know I’m not discovering cures for the world’s diseases, and I know I’m not feeding half the world’s poor or anything, but …’

Helen died just before Christmas in 2009.

One morning, Gary nicked himself shaving when he hit upon the big idea. ‘Why not the Tour de France? It was almost too obvious. It was such an obvious fit!’

Somehow, he got hold of an email address for Jean-Etienne Amaury, whose family still owns the Amaury Sports

Organisation (ASO), which in turn owns the Tour de France.

Amaury is, as near as spit, a royal, and looks like it, too. In fact, he is only ever glimpsed stepping either into or out of helicopters, or with heads of state on carpets leading up to banquet halls. This was, therefore, something of a long shot.

Dear Monsieur Amaury,

Gary typed impatiently. The cursor on the screen winked excitedly back at him, waiting for its next instruction.

I'd like to do the Grand D …

At this point, there would, I am sure, have been a brief hiatus while he figured out how to write an *e* with an acute accent on the keyboard.

… Départ in Yorkshire at your earliest convenience. Please let me know your thoughts.

There really wasn't much more to say at this point. So he just signed off.

Astonishingly, he received a reply a few days later.

We'd like to discuss your idea. Please come to Paris and we will buy you lunch.

That brief email exchange set into motion an extraordinary chain of events. There were further visits to Paris, negotiations, setbacks. At their next meeting it became very clear that some seriously big hitters were also queuing up for a piece of the action. ASO were in receipt of bids from Barcelona, Florence, Utrecht and Vienna. And there was interest too from Edinburgh, as well as a list as long as your arm of French towns. And yet, somewhere, somehow, within the innermost workings of the highly secretive heart of ASO, the Gary Verity sales pitch was beginning to take seed.

He stuck to his task. The breakthrough came when someone at ASO realised that the Yorkshire terrier was from Yorkshire.

Now the French for this kind of dog is the borrowed English word, *le Yorkshire*. This was an unexpected and critically important revelation for the French, as well as for Verity's team. Having drawn a blank with the Brontë sisters and umpire Dickie Bird, they suddenly had found a winning association in these unremarkable small dogs, the kind that are popular with wealthy Parisian women of a certain age, and whose urine is to be found in vast quantities at the base of the horse chestnut trees on the Champs-Élysées. The sort of women who own this sort of dog are the sort of women who are married to the sort of men who work at a high level for ASO. This dog-related synergy was good news for Yorkshire.

One after another the pieces of the jigsaw fell into place. Barcelona withdrew, citing the complete collapse of Spain's economy as an excuse, and Christian Prudhomme, the race director, in the company of five-time Tour winner Bernard Hinault, was invited to a lavish helicopter tour of Yorkshire.

The sun shone, the place sparkled, and it was a triumph. In fact, it was corporate showing-off on a grand scale, and it worked. Prudhomme and Verity got on famously; it was the start of a genuine friendship.

'For whatever reason, I got the DNA of it,' recalls Verity. 'From that very first meeting, which is why I came back to Yorkshire and said, "We're going to get this." I genuinely did. I genuinely understand what the essence of the Tour is. And once you understand that you can see how it's survived a hundred and eleven years, and all these crises.

'There is an unwritten set of values about the Tour that have meant its survival through all the trials and tribulations. It is largely free, it is open to all, it is hugely physically challenging. It's like a huge adventure, a thousand times bigger than that. It's that. Multiplied up. If you're French, of course it's the link between urban and rural France. It returns back to the centre.

‘Christian has said to me on numerous occasions, “You understood what the Tour was, from the first moment we met.”’

Some time later, the deal was done, and in 2012 they announced that it had come to pass. Florence, Edinburgh, Utrecht, Barcelona and the rest of them would have to wait.

All that remained was to throw a big party. Yorkshire did that bit too, staging a lavish affair to which I, along with hundreds of others, was invited.

The announcement of the Grand Départ in Yorkshire, fully a year and a half before the event itself, coincided with Lance Armstrong’s appearance on Oprah Winfrey. It is hard to say which was more dramatic, or received more column inches.

Normally such things are not set to music. A more standard affair, whether the host is Liège or Brest, Utrecht or Strasbourg, would be to invite a smattering of local and cycling press to an arid press conference in a Novotel, where after a PowerPoint and a Danish pastry, they’d be sent on their way with a free Biro, a hat and an artisan sack of lavender. That’s about all that’s required really, all that the owners of the Tour, the imperious ASO, expect when they point their finger of fortune in your direction. Besides, Christian Prudhomme would normally have one eye on his Festina timepiece, to ensure that he didn’t miss the last TGV home to Paris. The bartering for the right to host the Grand Départ is usually the domain of the unitary authority, the council worthies and the local dignitaries, of spreadsheets and feasibility studies, market research and infrastructure contracts. Vast, gleaming, bronze organ pipes do not normally have a role to play.

Unless you are Garity.

At the climax to Yorkshire’s celebratory dinner, a huge curtain parted in the main atrium of Leeds City Hall to reveal the biggest organ pipes I have ever seen, in full cry

and encircled by an orchestra and a vertiginously terraced choir all bellowing at the tops of their voices.

I sat back on my gold-sprayed wedding-reception style chair, and let drop the folded cardboard name card that I had been fiddling with throughout dinner.

The choir belted out a string of inspirational anthems to the accompaniment of timpani crashing, harp-plucking, baroque bombast. I looked around the room, aware that a Pavlovian grin had broken out across my face, and remarked that pretty much everyone in the vast dining room was undergoing the same reaction to this musical onslaught of the senses. We had been wined, yes, and dined, but this was something else: now we were being forcibly serenaded by a couple of hundred impressively exuberant Yorkshiremen and -women. As they cranked up 'What Have You Done Today to Make You Feel Proud', I finally took notice of what it was that this misfit, unlikely-sounding Yorkshire Grand Départ was all about.

Suddenly I got it. It was the expression not so much of the proud will of a venerable county (however much it can lay claim to being the home of British Cycling heroics), as the sheer charismatic chutzpah of this man in charge. Somewhere, behind the scenes, Gary Verity was probably peeking out from behind black drapes to see if he could gauge the mood in the room by studying the faces of his illustrious guests as they turned and listened to his after-dinner entertainment. If he had harboured any lingering doubts at this point he would have known that the project was going to succeed whatever hurdles were still to be overcome. He and his million-man choir had simply blown everyone away.

Eighteen months later, hundreds of drivers, from Spain, Sweden, Russia and Portugal pointed their vehicles in the rough direction of Yorkshire, and, for the first time in their lives, typed 'Leeds' into their sat-navs.

DÉPART

‘No one has understood what will happen out there today. They will turn up in their millions. It will be an amazing thing.’

It was a disorientating experience to see all the Tour de France paraphernalia spread out on a piece of waste ground in Leeds city centre. The Tour had erected its sprawling tented village, which constituted its mobile headquarters, about half a mile from the railway station. This swiftly assembled, and then even more swiftly dismantled, village was known (rather inappropriately) as the Permanence.

So strong were my annual associations with this Tour de France environment that the whole display played havoc with my sense of geography, tricking me repeatedly into thinking that I was abroad. The signage was in French, most of the languages being spoken were not English, and even the rays of sunshine that beat down on the makeshift courtyards between marquees felt unusually strong for Yorkshire.

It was curiously unsettling, and not altogether mediated by the presence of a truly terrible burger van knocking out gristly sausages in stale baguettes to a bewildered clientele, more used to being served foie gras and gazpacho. I queued up behind a German, who asked for a ‘beef pattie’. The man looked at him as if he were simple. ‘We can do you a burger, pal.’

But even that strong hint that all was not quite as exotic as it might seem did not convince me that this event was actually, really, genuinely happening in Yorkshire.

It was to this central point, in the days preceding the race, that the entirety of the Tour's international entourage would be drawn. Everyone involved with the race had, at some point, to gravitate there to gather information, register radio signals and collect the all-important stickers for their cars, without which it would be impossible to navigate the route, as well as press flesh and shake hands with colleagues new and old.

Even the riders made it down to the Permanence. Team by team, and over two solid days, their buses would pull up, and deliver thin men in liveried tracksuits, wearily trudging into the press conference room to deal with a firing squad of unanswerable banalities.

'Arnaud, what are your ambitions for the Tour de France?'

'I hope to ride well, and maybe, if I am fortunate, get a stage win.'

'Frank, do you think you can get a top-ten position, or maybe higher?'

'I don't know. We will have to see. The Tour is long, and we haven't started yet.'

On the morning of the race, as I waited for our first live broadcast from the start line in Leeds, I was ambushed by a silver-haired, deeply tanned man with bright, manic eyes, outstanding teeth and immensely natty attire. He lunged towards me.

'Ha! You don't recognise me!' he trilled. Then he turned to the similarly finely turned-out lady to his right. 'I said he wouldn't recognise me.'

'Of course I do.' I didn't. That is to say I almost did, and figured that if I bluffed for just a few more seconds, his name might emerge, winking like a safety beacon through the fog of general disorientation. Silver hair, British, Tour de France, obviously met him before, has a wife—

‘Barry Hoban! Good morning, sir!’ It came to me in the nick of time.

The West Yorkshire-born cyclist, accompanied by his wife Helen, was a guest of honour at the Tour. In 1967, the day after the death of Tom Simpson, Barry Hoban had been accorded the honour of an uncontested stage win by the peloton in recognition of Britain’s loss. After that he went on to win many more races, including seven more Tour stages, a national record that stood until 2009 when it was overhauled by Mark Cavendish.

We stood there, fighting the loudspeakers that emitted a constant ear-splitting drone. I placed my hand across his shoulder and angled my head towards him so that I might make myself better heard, and at the same time, listen to what he had to say. He was talking about Cavendish. Hoban was certain that it would not be the Manxman’s day, and predicted instead a stage win for Peter Sagan.

He sighed, and looked back at me with real regret. ‘Just wish I was bloody forty years younger.’ He would have backed himself over Yorkshire’s testing, windy roads that he knew so well from long and lonely training rides. Hoban was never short of self-belief when he rode, and none of that had diminished in his seventies.

But one thing he told me stuck in my memory. He was quite specific about it, quite adamant. ‘No one has understood what will happen out there today. They will turn up in their millions. It will be an amazing thing.’

He knew better than anyone the scale of the event we were all about to witness.

And all the way down the course, his prophecy was holding true. In Leeds city centre, all morning, as the drizzle gave way to bright sunshine, the railway station released wave after wave of spectators, trudging in packs up the hill towards the start, where they took their place alongside the tens of thousands of others who had already beaten them to it. There they stood, for hour after hour,

immobile for the crush, unable and unwilling to relinquish their position by the roadside for fear that they would lose their spot altogether. And when the pavements were full, they climbed lampposts, or jumped up on railings, reaching balconies, any vantage point. It really was an astonishing sight.

What we did not know at the time, and what only later became apparent when the helicopters became airborne and pointed their cameras down at the race, was that the same thing was happening across the entire 190 kilometres of the race route, even the unlovely parts. Along the bleaker reaches of suburban Leeds, on ring roads and dual carriageways that bisected industrial estates, they had arrived in scarcely credible numbers. Stretches of road whose equivalent in France on a regular Tour stage might be populated by one man and his Yorkshire terrier, were flanked ten deep with people straining to glimpse the Tour de France pass by. Some time later, as we drove out of town, our route passed over a flyover above the race route, where they stood in just such overwhelming numbers, patiently awaiting the arrival of the riders. That was the moment at which I understood the magnitude of the event. But all this would only come fully to light as the race got underway, and would prove Barry Hoban quite correct in his patriotic assertion that it would be ‘an amazing thing’.

In the meantime, at the start line, the countdown to the race was gathering serious momentum. We were now minutes from the 11 a.m. roll out. Rider after rider, muscles twitching, and nerves fluttering, pushed their way through the hordes to mount the steps and sign on. Each one was cheered as if he were personally delivering a message from the Queen that we could all have next year off and she was going to pay for it.

Whether it was Markel Irizar or Martin Elmiger, Julien Simon or Michał Gołaś, they all got the same fevered reaction from the gathered masses, penned in by