

ROY “DIGGER” MORRIS – A GLOUCESTER LEGEND

By Malc King

This item has been compiled as a tribute to the sheer force of personality which was “Digger” Morris. His long and distinguished playing career, either side of World War 2, is detailed elsewhere on this site in the player profile written by John Theyers, but he remained at the heart of the Club he loved for many years thereafter.

Digger was renowned for being the heart and soul of the team, and continued to travel with the team after his playing days were over, giving advice to the youngsters (most notably telling Mike Burton to “never stay down”), and leading the singing, one of his favourite party pieces being the “Pig Song” (a recording of which can also be found elsewhere on this site).

Interviewing players across several decades, it has become evident how big an influence Digger had on the well being of Gloucester Rugby, how cherry-and-white flowed through his veins, and how much richer everyone felt as a result of being in his company.

Being as big in personality as he was in body, Digger naturally attracted the attention of the media and many column inches were devoted to his exploits. Fortunately Digger’s own scrapbooks have survived, and are now safely housed in the Gloucester Rugby collection within Gloucestershire Archives – when they have been catalogued and preserved, they will be available for public inspection. Meanwhile there follow those articles about him as a man, rather than as a player, which he (or his wife, Florence) chose to keep and paste into his scrapbook.

ROY MORRIS OF GLOUCESTER

By H C

Written c1938

Roy Morris of Gloucester, is a forward, six foot high, who goes through a loose maul with an escort of two cauliflower ears, and is loaded with 15st of high explosive. I think he will get a trial cap, possibly in company with his club captain, A’Bear, with whom he packs in the second row.

He may go further if he can temper his fine sense of aggression with a “modicum of reserve”.

Morris has been in the Gloucester side for seven years, and though he was not in the county fifteen which won the championship two years ago, he was in it last year, and has played seven times.

He drives a gas works van: he got his ears fighting professionally.

He played against Richmond last Saturday. On Monday he fought a well-known heavy-weight and knocked him out in 70 seconds. He is not a scientific boxer, and he has not been at it long, but he shapes like a typical Rugger forward, disregarding delicacy and his own safety.

Morris is the comedian of the side and is intensely popular. He has his leg pulled a great deal, but can take it.

If you go into the Gloucester changing room to talk to him the rest of the team want to answer all your questions themselves for fear he will be too modest.

Author and Date not known

Gloucester RFC Committee man "Digger" Morris went to Plymouth having watched his four-year-old greyhound, named Digger, win the 510 yards Top Heat at the City Stadium on Friday night.

It was her 24th victory, and the second in successive matches.

"I regard her success as a good omen for today's match," said Digger, whose main interests these days are the Gloucester club and greyhound racing.

A VERY LARGE GENTLEMAN

By Mervyn Clift

From The Citizen, 12th June 1985

Travel on any of the routes between Coney Hill and the City and you will eventually spot a very large gentleman riding a bike. And at 6ft 1 in and 17 stone there's a lot more gentleman than bike!

The man mountain will be Roy "Digger" Morris, Gloucester's famous lock-forward of the 30's and immediate post-war years, who now keeps fit cycling and exercising his two greyhounds, shoving to one side the fact that he was 74 on April 2nd.

How did "Digger" get the nickname which is used far more often than the Christian name bestowed on him by his parents? "Well", he says with a grin and a wink, "I used to get stuck in a bit and the lads on the terraces thought the tag appropriate."

There were many opposing forwards who agreed with "the lads"!

One Friday night during the 1931-32 season, "Digger" who had joined Gloucester in 1930 and was playing for the United, was contacted at his home and told he was in the First XV to face Northampton at Franklin's Gardens the next day.

He can't remember the result, but the new recruit made such an impression that he kept his first-team place almost to the end of his playing career. His last game for the Club was with the United against Old Luctonians when he was 45, but he had one or two matches with local sides during the next few years and was somewhere near his 50th birthday when he put his boots on the hook for the last time.

WELCOME NEWS FROM THE VALLEYS

Nowhere was Digger's aggression and talent more valuable than in South Wales and during the four seasons immediately following his promotion to the firsts, Gloucester recorded three outstanding wins over teams in that rugby stronghold.

There were lively celebrations in Gloucester on a Saturday night in 1933 when news filtered through that the Cherry-and-Whites had gained their first win ever at St Helen's, Swansea and two years later the rockets went up again when mighty Cardiff were beaten three points to nil on their own patch.

But the game Digger remembers best was the one at Stradey Park, Llanelli, in 1936 when Gloucester toppled the Scarlets five points to three to gain their first away victory over their old rivals since 1898!

Digger scored Gloucester's try (then valued at 3 pts) and international full-back Harold Boughton converted from the touchline.

Playing for Gloucester in the Cardiff match were Harold Boughton, J C Brookes, Roy James, Tom Pugsley, "Bumps" Carpenter, Tom Price, Albert Welshman, "Digger" Morris, Ken Smith, John G A'Bear, Cyril Harris, Ivor Williams, "Connie" Fifield, Bob Hook and Don Meadows.

Selected for Gloucestershire in 1936 and awarded his County cap in the 1937-38 season, Digger also played for Major Stanley's XV at Oxford and had an English trial in 1938. When his job as an engineer/fitter took him to the Midlands in 1935 Digger turned out for Moseley and during his long career he also "gusted" for Lydney and during wartime played for Bedford and Fylde when he was in the RAF.

FORCES RUGBY AND A KIWI ENCOUNTER

Although Digger's connection with Gloucester rugby was broken during the war, he was able to continue playing at a high level during service with the RAF in the Middle East and Italy.

He played for the English Services against the Welsh Services in Egypt in 1943 and was in the RAF Central Mediterranean Forces' touring side which faced an Eighth Army XV composed entirely of New Zealanders. Many of those Kiwis toured Britain just after the war and played Gloucestershire and Somerset at Bristol where they chalked up a 11pts-3 victory. Digger was able to renew "old acquaintances" on and off the field!

The Gloucester lock also played against the Fifth Army in Italy and for the United Services CMF against the South African CMF at Rome Stadium where the teams were introduced to Field Marshal Alexander of Tunis, Allied supreme commander in the Mediterranean.

It wasn't only within the borders of Gloucestershire that Digger was considered extremely unlucky not to win a full England cap, but he was reserve for England when they faced the New Zealand Services in November 1945 and was travelling reserve for his Country for the 1946 encounters with Scotland and Wales.

CAPTAIN OF CLUB AND COUNTY

Back at Kingsholm, Digger was elected Club captain for the 1946-47 season and in the same period captained the County, taking part in the 1947 final against Lancashire at Blundellsands which was drawn. Gloucestershire lost the replay at Kingsholm 3pts-14. In Gloucester's 1947-48 season, Digger played in every match!

It was at Hatherley Rd junior school that 10-year old Roy Morris had his first introduction to rugby. He graduated to the school's senior team and went on to play for the Tredworth Night School XV. Gordon League juniors, Wagon Works juniors (at scrum-half!) and the Works senior side. Then it was a case of Kingsholm, here I come!

A visit to Digger's Coney Hill home will not be complete without a long look at the scrapbook of cuttings and photographs which faithfully record his playing days and also his years as an official of the Gloucester Club of which he is a Life Member. The book, which has stood the test of time and much handling remarkably well, was

bought at Woolworth's by Digger's late wife, Florence, in the early days of his career with Gloucester.

CRICKET, BOXING AND A DOG CALLED SCARF

Rugby is not the only sport on view.

Trained by Billy Wagner, who was a stalwart of the Stroud pack for many seasons, the rugby lock-forward became a very useful heavyweight boxer and fought at tournaments staged at Gloucester Baths and in a booth in Westgate St. He also represented the RAF in the ring at Cairo.

Another sport to capture the Morris interest was and is, horse and greyhound racing. At one time he owned a greyhound "Chiffon Scarf" and entered her in events at the old Gloucester stadium. Now he contents himself exercising Scarf's son and daughter in the vicinity of his home.

On one or two occasions the rugby forward and heavyweight boxer turned his attentions to the more gentle art of cricket. Playing for the footballers against the cricketers in one of the annual fixtures at The Spa, Digger hit 34 runs and took four for 19 to contribute in no small measure to a one run win by the Kingsholm team.

Digger, who lost his wife 24 years ago, has a daughter Josephine who once played darts for England and two sons, Roy, the former Gloucester and Gloucestershire centre and Bob, who played for the United and now turns out for Civil Service.

In conclusion, may we draw the attention of theatrical agents to the fact that Mr Roy "Digger" Morris, rugby star, boxer and cricketer once trod the boards with RAF and civilian concert parties as a dialect comedian!

DIGGER MORRIS

By David Foot

From the Western Daily Press, 17 October 1994

NO TEETH BUT DIGGER KEPT HIS BITE

They still tell graphic stories, real or imagined, about "Digger" Morris at Kingsholm. Gloucester never had a more single-minded second-row forward. He played with all muscle, a touch or two of villainy, and a heart willingly donated to the club.

Eight times he was a reserve for England. Maybe the selectors were always fearful that he might be a shade too physical for the accepted proprieties of Twickenham. Bruised and battered opponents, with whom he unfailingly shared a convivial drink afterwards, would never quite have put him in the lily-white class. But it's an unchallengeable fact that not once in a 20-season career was he ever cautioned by a referee.

He reflects, grins endearingly and says "At times we knocked hell out of each other. Yet you had to know the way to do it. Rugby was probably more of a rough-house than now, when you get all that unnecessary niggling. My son tells me I wouldn't last a match if I was playing these days!"

As he chatters away sentimentally to his daughter's three dogs or proudly shows you his cherished scrapbook of cuttings and family snapshots, it's impossible to detect an ounce of malice in this 19-stone hulk.

Earlier that day, club president, Canon Mervyn Hughes, who played alongside “Digger” in the 30s, had recalled with much affection: “He was certainly a tough ‘un. He’d already lost his front teeth, probably in the ring, and when he stood up from the scrum he must have frightened the life out of the opposition.”

The two, the young army chaplain and RAF Corporal Roy Morris, had found themselves travelling out to Italy on the same troopship during the war. But Mervyn Hughes, with his officer status, hunted out his former team-mate.

“That was what I always liked about Gloucester,” said Digger. “There was never any snootiness. We had the young fellers from the public schools and universities, but we got on well together.”

Morris started playing for the club in 1930, and carried on after the war. His second-row partnership with John A’Bear was legendary. They were great mates and John was his best man. With what was intended as a serious comment, Digger reminisced: “He was short-sighted, you know.”

Perhaps, the good-natured confidants of the two of them would feel that was not exactly a disadvantage, standing and jumping next to Morris in the line-outs.

Apart from the missing front teeth, there was the cauliflower ear, the permanent reminder of a particularly muscular encounter with the Navy XV.

Digger was hewn from granite. He was brave and basic. He fought in the booths and then occasionally as a down-the-bill pro at the Colston Hall, Bristol, his native Gloucester and Stroud. Once he was on the same bill as Tommy Farr.

There were his famous scraps with Jack Haskins, who played second-row for Bristol and was equally useful with his fists in the ring. Captain Prince-Cox dreamed that gimmick up – for the Memorial Ground and Kingsholm.

But rugby was what he loved most.

He relished everything that went with the game. Grahame Parker retains an image from a county game with Cornwall when some of the players took a boat trip round Falmouth Harbour – and Digger grabbed the captain’s cap to cut a robust seafaring figure.

And, well yes, there was the Saturday evening, after a match, when they had to take Digger home. They knocked at his door and team-mate Bob Hook shouted to Mrs Morris: “Here you are, Floss – we’ve brought him back safely!”

Roy Morris – given that imperishable nickname because in his early playing days he was always being told to “Dig in there, son” – used to drive a lorry for the gas board before the war.

All his life he’s been full of amusing contradictions. Who, for instance, can imagine him in plus-fours? But he often wore them. “And once when three matelots were taking the mickey, that great character “Bumps” Carpenter who was in our team, sorted them out for me. All three!”

Digger has given up his cycle at the age of 83 but does plenty of walking. He’s Gloucester RFC’s senior member and rarely misses a match. His heart remains emblazoned in cherry-and-white.

DIGGER

By John Mace, dated 1996

To many in the game, Digger is synonymous with the Gloucester club which is hardly surprising because he first joined it in 1930 and, apart from five years in the wartime

RAF, has been a permanent fixture at Kingsholm as a player, committee man and life member, ever since. But there is more to the legend than long service because Digger is also revered as one of the game's former hard men and tales abound of his uncompromising attitude. Some, no doubt, are apocryphal and others may well have been embellished over the years but there can be little doubt that his reputation was well founded. He even admits to the veracity of the one about his causing Prince Obolenski to be stretchered off after stopping him in full flight with what was described by the press at the time as "a brutal tackle". He also affirms that his inclination "to have a go" earned him his nickname but then, with an appealing grin, claims that he was never warned or sent off. When I suggested that at 6ft 1in he must have been at a disadvantage in the line-outs he replied forcefully, with a meaningful gesture of his elbow, that "it was possible to get away with a lot more in those days".

Although now 86 years old he retains his massive frame, scarred features and imposing presence and it is not difficult to envisage that in his prime he must have been a formidable customer. But the eyes twinkle, his shovel-like hand envelops yours with a genuine warmth and a smile and a chuckle are never far away. He is an accomplished mimic and comedian who enjoys a joke. Perhaps this was just as well when I told him that a former Gloucester outside-half, Doug Perks, used to reckon that his archetypal cauliflower ears "would be lovely fried with a couple of eggs".