

# FROM BLOOD AND GOLDS TO RORKE'S DRIFT

GLOUCESTER AND THE PROFESSIONAL GAME 100 YEARS AGO

## BILLY HALL AND THE BLOOD AND GOLDS

On Christmas Day 1913 a match took place between a Gloucester XV captained by William "Billy" Hall, one of the seven Hall brothers who played for Gloucester, and A S Perpignan the "Blood and Golds" at the Stade de la Route de Thuir.

The match, which was attended by the mayor and local dignitaries, attracted a crowd of 3,000 – a huge gate for a rugby match in France at the time. A second match was played on the following Sunday, December 29.

The Perpignan player-coach and captain was Rowland



Billy Hall

"Digger" Griffiths, an ex-Newport player and British Lion, who had played for Racing Club de France in the 1912 French Championship Final. Guesting for Perpignan were Raphael Lavaud of Carcassonne who played twice

for France later that season and Fernand Buscail of SCUF, the French Championship runners-up. They were said to be instrumental in bringing the Gloucester side to Perpignan. The matches were promoted by the Perpignan vice president Jean Laffon.

Local press coverage was lavish and implied that the tour was an official tour backed by the Gloucester club.

However, all was not as it seemed. The three Gloucester players named in the French press - half back and captain Billy Hall, back row forward George Griffiths and three-quarter James Hamblin - had all played their last game for Gloucester, although still in their twenties, and Billy Hall himself was on his way to a distinguished Rugby League career with Oldham.

Frequent references to the sacrifices made by the Perpignan club in order to obtain the services of the Gloucester XV suggest that the team were well rewarded. No mention of either match has been discovered in the Gloucester club records or the Gloucester press.

Gloucester, or "The "Blues" as they were described in the Perpignan local paper, won much praise for their entertaining and attacking rugby. Billy Hall himself was the subject of adulation and responded in an interview by making many generous comments about the local players and the hospitality he had received.

For the record the Gloucester

XV won both games – the Christmas Day game by 10 points to 6 and the Sunday game by 16 points to 0.

A S Perpignan went on to win the 1913-14 French Championship, beating Tarbes in the final in May. Renamed USA Perpignan later that year, they were in Gloucester's Heineken Cup group last season and still wear the "blood and gold" colours.

The match promoter Jean Laffon fought and died in the 1914-18 war and the Stade de la Route de Thuir, where the matches were played, was



renamed the Stade Jean Laffon in his honour. The stadium has been a Rugby League venue since 1940 and hosted a tie in the 2000 Rugby League World Cup. It is also the home of Perpignan Association Football Club.

## THE BATTLE OF RORKE'S DRIFT

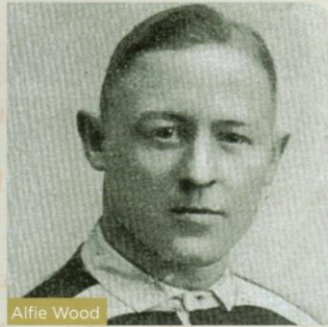
Six months after the match



in Perpignan, Billy Hall found himself playing in one of the greatest Test Matches in the history of Rugby League.

In June and July 1914, on the eve of the 1914-18 war, a Great Britain Rugby League side (touring as the Northern Union) played a three match Test Series against Australia. With the series drawn at one test apiece, the third and deciding Test was played on July 4 at Sydney Cricket Ground.

The Test Match featured three former Gloucester players - outside half Billy Hall, (139 games 1908-13), described by the French



Alfie Wood

an established figure in Rugby League for five years.

England Rugby Union international forward Dave Holland had left Gloucester at the end of

been scheduled for August in Melbourne, to be played after the New Zealand leg of the tour, but the New South Wales Rugby Football League unilaterally rescheduled the match for Sydney on July 4 to maximise their profits. The British team protested that it would be their third match in seven days and that several of their players were injured but the tourists were instructed by the Northern Union to play the match.

Great Britain were a man down through injury from the first



Sydney Cricket Ground c1910

press as a "bewildering acrobat", full back Alfie Wood (48 games 1905-08) described by Bill Bailey of the Citizen as "one of the greatest full backs of all time" and front row forward Dave Holland (97 games 1906-10), described by Bill Bailey again as "one of the greatest attacking forwards of his time" - all now playing in the cherry and white colours of Oldham RLFC.

England Rugby Union international full back Alfie Wood had been capped three times by England in 1907-08. He had left Gloucester during that season and played briefly for Cheltenham. He was originally approached by Oldham while watching the historic Rugby League international between England and New Zealand at Cheltenham in February 1908, and had been

the 1909-10 season and, while working in Devonport dockyards, had played for Devonport Albion. He was capped three times by England as a Devonport player in 1911-12. Holland was, like Billy Hall, a newcomer to the Northern game having joined Oldham with Hall in 1913.

The third Test had originally



Dave Holland

minutes of the game, and what followed was one of the most remarkable and heroic rearguard actions in the history of either code.

The match became known as the Battle of Rorke's Drift, named after the famous action in the Zulu Wars. Alfie Wood was one of the Great Britain heroes, kicking four goals in a 14-6 victory. Billy Hall was one of the casualties as the visitors were reduced to ten men, just ten minutes into the second half.

The Great Britain XIII went on to narrowly defeat New Zealand 16-13 in Auckland on August 1 and the team returned home to a nation at war.