

GLOUCESTER HOOKERS

PART 1

FOR MANY YEARS, POSITIONS IN A RUGBY TEAM, ESPECIALLY THE FORWARDS, WERE NOT DEFINED. IN THE VERY EARLY DAYS, AS A SCRUM WAS FORMED THE FIRST PLAYERS TO ARRIVE WOULD FORM THE FRONT ROW AND SO ON.

TIME passed, but for many years, although a team might have a regular front row, they could move around and fill in at prop or hooker. This was the case until well into the 1920s.

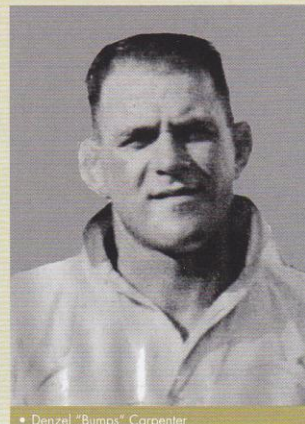
In the late 1920s, a miner from the Forest of Dean began his career at Kingsholm. **Denzel "Bumps" Carpenter** became a legend. He was born in 1900, and had already made seven appearances for Gloucestershire as a Cinderford player.

He played his first game for Gloucester on 1 November 1928 against Oxford University, and quickly established himself in the first fifteen. He first appeared for the club as a prop, but then became the club's regular hooker over a long career which only ended when Gloucester stopped playing games in 1941 because of the war.

He made his sole appearance for England against South Africa in 1932, where he started as a prop, but moved to hooker at half time. He was a reserve for England on more than twenty occasions.

"Bumps" played 61 times for Gloucestershire, which is the most by any Gloucester player. He appeared in five County Championship finals and was on the winning side four times, 1930, 31, 32 and 37.

He was as tough as teak. He would often work a shift at Lightmoor Colliery, and then come on to play for Gloucester



• Denzel "Bumps" Carpenter

the same day. He was held in great respect. In 1938 when Bill Hook, the Gloucester and England full back, played his first away game at Bristol, he was only 17 years old.

Before the game "Bumps" beckoned to Bill and took him into the Bristol dressing room, and addressed the whole team as follows:

"This is the babby we've brought down. He'll take anything fair and square, but you drop anything below the line and I'll be looking for you." Then beckoning to Bill, "Come on me babby, you'll be alright now."

And he was; at one stage he was tackled by one of Bristol's England internationals, who enquired solicitously as they lay on the ground together, whether Bill was OK. Bill said it was the easiest game of his whole career, and what is more Gloucester won 6-0.

Denzel made 354 appearances for Gloucester which, at the time, was the record for the club.

Forwards these days are very big fellows. Sixty years or so ago they were not so large, but even by those standards **Cyril Thomas** was referred to as "slight", weighing in at 12 stone.

He was, however, a brilliant hooker, who seemed to win endless strikes against the head in every game. He first played for Yorkley and Lydney before making his debut for Gloucester in February 1948 against Oxford University.

Although acknowledged as an outstanding hooker he only played in one England trial game and that was towards the end of his career, in 1959. It is also surprising that he only made 13 appearances for Gloucestershire, but this was largely due to the fact that John Thorne, the Bristol and England hooker, was selected in preference most of the time.

Ironically in 1960 when retirement approached he broke back into the county team and displacing Thorne he made three appearances. However, he played his last game for Gloucester on 31 December 1960 against Newbridge having made 357 appearances for the Club.

Cyril captained Gloucester in the 1958-59 season, which was not a successful one, where only 17 out of 42 games were won. From 1947 to 1960 he played in





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357 games for the club.
Reg Chamberlayne was a good hooker whose career corresponded with that of Cyril Thomas. Consequently he was invariably his understudy. However, he still made 127 appearances from 1948 to 1962,



• Reg Chamberlayne



• Cyril Thomas

and would have walked into the first XV of most first class clubs. He did though play in 43 games in the 1950-51 season, when Cyril returned to Lydney for one season.

Mike Nicholls was born in September 1940 and played his early rugby for Old Centralians. He had a baptism of fire when making his first appearance for Gloucester in September 1961 at Cardiff. It took him until the 1965-66 season to become first choice hooker, but for the next ten seasons there was no shifting him.

He was an uncompromising player and like a terrier around the field. He captained the team



• A grimly determined Mike Nicholls leading out the Gloucester team at Twickenham, under a canopy of elver nets

with great success from 1970-72 and again in 1973-74, each of which were record-breaking seasons in terms of games won. In the 1970-71 season he played in all 51 games, and in 1973-74 in 52 out of 54.

Perhaps the most memorable season was 1971-72, when Gloucester won the inaugural National Knock-Out Competition. The team played all their games away from home at Bath, Bristol, London Welsh, Coventry and, in the final, at Twickenham, Moseley.

The most memorable game was the win (9-4) against London Welsh, whose team contained four British Lions and



seven internationals. Nobody gave Gloucester a chance against such star-studded opposition. Much of the success must be put down to the leadership of Mike, who inspired the team. His pre-match talks, players freely admitted, were frightening.

The style of play did not endear Gloucester to the purists, or the press. It was a case of a formidable pack, rock hard tackling and well directed kicking. But it worked. The whole team was galvanised by Mike's leadership.

Although so successful at club level, Mike only made 10 appearances for the county from 1961 to 1972. He was unfortunate in that John Thorne and John Pullin, both of Bristol, were his competitors for the hooking berth. He also played in one England trial game.

Mike played his last game on 22 October 1977 against Nottingham. In his career he made 434 appearances for the club. After retirement he became team coach and a long serving Committee man for the Club. After a long illness he died in December 2012.



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