

GLOUCESTER RUGBY
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PLAYERS WHO
WENT NORTH

ON THURSDAY 29 AUGUST 1895, AT THE GEORGE HOTEL IN HUDDERSFIELD, REPRESENTATIVES OF MOST OF THE MAJOR NORTHERN RUGBY CLUBS, AGREED TO BREAK AWAY FROM THE RUGBY UNION TO FORM THE NORTHERN RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION AND "PLEDGE THEMSELVES TO PUSH FORWARD, WITHOUT DELAY ITS ESTABLISHMENT ON THE PRINCIPLE OF PAYMENT FOR BONA-FIDE BROKEN-TIME ONLY."

Rugby had become very popular in the north of England, particularly in Lancashire and Yorkshire, with working class people. Communities quickly associated themselves with their local club, and crowds became quite large.

The problem for the working class player was that, particularly if picked for an away game, it became difficult to get time off work in order to travel. Naturally enough the clubs wished to field their strongest fifteen every week, and so wanted to compensate their players for money lost by missing or leaving work early.

However, in the south of England, where the game was perceived to be played by the middle classes, the attitude was extremely hostile to any concept of payments to players. The conflict between the Rugby Union dominated by middle class officials, and the northern clubs had been rumbling on for years, but culminated, in 1894, with the suspension of Leigh, Salford and Wigan for professionalism, making a split inevitable.

At first the rules for payments were

very strict. Players had to be in employment and payments could only be for compensation for time lost from work. There are examples of players being refused any payment if they were not currently in work. However, by 1903 Leeds were paying their players thirty shillings (£1.50) per match.

Although over most of the midlands and southern England rugby tended to be played by middle class players, it was certainly a different story in South Wales and Gloucestershire.

Consequently it was not long before Northern Union club scouts were on the look-out for recruits. Dicky Goddard, a plumber and fly-half who played for Gloucester from 1896-1902, and his half-back partner George Hall (1897-1902), one of seven brothers who all played for Gloucester, both signed for Hull. Goddard played 95 times for Hull, scoring six tries and kicking 33 goals, and George Hall made 85 appearances and scored 12 tries.

Jim Cook (1897-1902) a Blacksmith's labourer, was signed by Hull Kingston Rovers but only made five appearances, whilst his brother

George Cook (1907-08) played for Oldham from 1908 to 1914 making 113 appearances, scoring 30 tries and kicking six goals.

But perhaps the most interesting story of Gloucester's connection to the Northern Union at this time relates to the trio of Willie Hall, Alfie Wood and Dave Holland who all played for Oldham.

Alfie Wood first played for Bristol before joining Gloucester in 1905. He was acknowledged to be a brilliant full-back. He won three England caps in 1908, having just left Gloucester to play for Cheltenham, and in records of internationals he is listed as "Gloucester and Cheltenham".



In 1908 a Northern Union international between England and New Zealand All Golds, was played at Cheltenham just after Alfie had won his third cap. He watched the game and was spotted by an Oldham scout who signed him up for the Northern Union club. He played for Oldham until 1920, making 244 appearances and kicking 342 goals. He won two England and four Great Britain caps.

Willie Hall, a three-quarter and half-back, another of the Hall brothers, played for Gloucester from 1908-13, and then signed for Oldham. He played on until 1925 making 240 appearances for the club, scored 53 tries, and kicked two goals. He gained two Rugby League England caps and four for Great Britain



Dave Holland, was employed as a driller in an iron-works. He was a back-row forward, who represented Gloucester from 1906-10. In 1910 he played in the victorious Gloucestershire team which won the County Championship beating Yorkshire 23-0 in the final. He later played for Devon Albion, whilst employed as a skilled labourer in Devonport docks. He played for Oldham from 1913-21, appearing 81 times, and scoring 19 tries. He also won four caps for Great Britain.



Willie Hall, Alfie Wood and Dave Holland were all selected for the Northern Union Great Britain team which toured Australia in 1914. The first two tests were played in quick succession, each side winning one. The Great Britain team had picked up a number of injuries as a result of those games, and requested that the third and deciding test scheduled for 4 July be postponed until the end of August, by which time the team would have returned from the New Zealand leg of the tour. The Australians would not agree, so the game went ahead on the original date.

The test match which then took place is accepted as one of the greatest in Rugby League history. It is called the "Rorke's Drift Test". This recalled the battle of Rorke's Drift in the Zulu War of 1879, when British troops held a post in the face of overwhelming odds.

Alfie Wood was brought into the team, despite having a badly broken nose. Willie Hall and Dave Holland were also picked. Soon after kick-off Great Britain's Frank Williams injured his knee, limping on until half-time when he had to retire.

Despite this Great Britain led 9-0 at the break, having scored a try and Alfie Wood kicking three goals.

However, in the second half another British player was forced to go off through injury, reducing the team to 11 players. Incredibly they scored another try, and Wood converted. Willie Hall was then concussed and taken off. It was now ten men against 13, and it was inevitable that Australia would strike back. They scored two tries, but that was all, and heroic defence was rewarded by a famous 14-6 win.

After WW1, Jack Stephens, a centre or half-back made 93 appearances for Gloucester, and scored 45 tries between 1926 and 1929. He was yet another player who went north to Oldham and played 186 times from 1929-35, scoring 79 tries and kicking 37 goals.

In more recent times, Ken "Tug" Wilson played two seasons for the Cherry and Whites (1961-63). He gained one England cap in 1963 against France, and almost at once signed for, of course, Oldham. He made no fewer than 316 appearances for the club from 1963 to 1974, scored 25 tries and kicked six goals.

Ken was a very good boxer and was RAF Heavyweight champion, and his many wins included a points win over the very well-known Billy Walker. He also fought another great of the sport, losing on points to the then amateur Bob Foster, the American who went on to become Heavyweight Champion of the World.

When "Tug" retired his final two games for Oldham were against Australia and then, to bring the curtain down, there was a testimonial game against a full England side. The programme notes for that final game said, "When the England team come here on Tuesday it will be the chance for the fans to show their appreciation for all he has done for Oldham in particular and Rugby League in general."