

MIKE BURTON

MIKE BURTON WAS, AND IS, A GLOUCESTER LEGEND.

Playing in the amateur era, when Gloucester had fixtures against all the top Welsh clubs, games were not for the faint hearted. You had to be hard to survive Wednesday evening games at Pontypool or Newport, and Mike in particular never took a backward step.

In February 1974, during a typical rumbustious Kingsholm local derby against Bristol, he suffered a broken jaw before half-time, but saw the game out. The fracture was confirmed at Gloucester A&E, and a long lay-off advised. Four weeks later he played for England against France. The term "Gloucester Dog", could have been invented for him.

This hard introduction to rugby at club level led on to 17 England caps, and 53 for Gloucestershire.

Mike has the dubious distinction of being the first England



player to be sent off. This was in the "Battle of Brisbane" in 1975. From the first line-out, Australia came fists flying at the entire England pack. Following a general warning from the referee, Mike late tackled the Australia wing and was sent off.

Commenting on the game, Mike said, "The opening stages of the second test were like war, the Australians were kicking and punching everything as if on a pre-arranged signal. I followed up a restart after they missed a penalty shot and late tackled Doug Osborne the Australia wing. At Gloucester or Pontypool nobody would have said anything about the tackle."

Mike Burton, was in fact, not a Gloucester boy. He was born in Maidenhead on 18 December 1945. He played local rugby for Longlevens, the club that has produced so many Gloucester players. Here he came under the guidance of "Digger" Morris, who played for Gloucester before and after the Second World War. Digger mentored Mike, and instilled in him the "never stay down" attitude, which served Mike well for the rest of his career.

Mike played the first of 368 games for the Cherry and Whites on 14 November 1964 against Moseley. He quickly established himself at tight-head prop. His first try came on 30 September 1967 against Bedford.



1971-72 was the inaugural season of the National Knock-out Competition, and Mike played in every game. Gloucester were drawn away in every round and started with wins over Bath and Bristol.

In the quarter-final they ran up against London Welsh, which at that time bristled with British Lions and Welsh internationals.





All the pundits predicted Gloucester would be thrashed. As it turned out, those who made the journey to Old Deer Park would never forget the game. Playing against the wind in the first half, Gloucester resisted all the Welsh could throw at them, and turned around only 4-0 down. In the second half, Mickey Booth hoisted a big kick, the Welsh were caught in possession, the Gloucester pack drove on and Mike Potter scored. Eric Stephens converted, added a penalty, and Gloucester had won 9-4, to gain one of the greatest victories in the club's history. A couple of Gloucester players were seen to be in tears after the final whistle.

The semi-final at Coventry was drawn, but Gloucester went through as the away team, as there were no tries scored. The final against Moseley at Twickenham was an anti-climax. Moseley had a player sent off after five minutes, lost two more to injuries and finished with 12 men. Gloucester won 17-6.

In January 1972, Mike won his first England cap against Wales, retained his place, and toured South Africa in the summer. He was in the team which defeated South Africa at Ellis Park 18-9.

In October 1972, Mike was selected to play for Western Counties against the touring All Blacks at Kingsholm, and scored a try, although New Zealand won 39-12. A year later he again played for Western Counties against Australia; this time at Bath, and Counties won 15-14.

Whilst training with the England

squad in November 1972, Mike broke his leg and missed all the autumn and Five Nations Championship games that season. He was back in time for the England tour of Fiji and New Zealand in the summer of 1973, but did not play in the international.

In 1974 Mike was selected for the British Lions tour of South Africa, but did not appear in any of the tests. In 1975 England toured Australia, and Mike played in the first test, which was a very rough affair, and of course, in the second test he was sent off.

Many thought that would be the end of his international career, but he won five more caps in 1976. His final England appearance was in 1978 against Wales. In 1977 he played for a World XV against France, as part of celebrations for the 75th anniversary of the Fédération Française de Rugby.

Mike captained Gloucester in the 1975-76 season, and was in the team which beat Leicester in 1978 to win the John Player Cup. It was a low scoring affair, with Richard Mogg scoring the only try. Peter Butler kicked the conversion for a 6-3 win. At the end of that season Mike announced his retirement, his last game being on 29 April 1978, against Exeter.

Mike also had a long and distinguished career for Gloucestershire from 1968 to 1978. He won his first County cap on 26 October 1968 against Somerset. By the 1971-72 season he was a regular choice, and played in the County Championship final against Warwickshire at Coventry which Gloucestershire won 11-6.

Then from 1974 to 76 the County won three successive finals. Mike played in all of them. In 1974, Lancashire were defeated 22-12 at Blundellsands. In 1975 the final was played at Gloucester and Eastern Counties were beaten 13-9, and the third win was against Middlesex at Richmond. This victory was

remarkable for the fact that Peter Butler scored all Gloucestershire's points in the 24-9 win.

Unfortunately, one incident is often remembered from Mike's County career. In a quarter-final game against Hertfordshire in 1975, at Bristol, he was sent off for leading with his knee into a ruck. As he reached the main stand, he received a great deal of abuse from visiting fans from the London area, and Mike gave them a theatrical bow.

There was a lot of press coverage given to this. The following Saturday, Mike was due to play for England, but as a result of the incident his selection was reversed. No matter, after England had played abysmally against France and Wales, he was re-instated for the final match of the season against Scotland, and England duly won!

After retirement Mike had a very successful business career in field and corporate hospitality, specialist sport travel and player representation. In his playing days he had appeared eight times for the Barbarians and after retirement he was appointed to the club's management board.

To this day Mike is a delightful raconteur. He will entertain you for as long as you like with a stream of often hilarious stories and anecdotes about his career, teams and players he came up against.

