

TOM VOYCE

By Malc King

Anthony Thomas Voyce was born in Gloucester and educated at the old National School, which produced many fine players for Gloucester. Tom was such a good player that he succeeded in every position he played. His playing career flourished early, and in 1911 he earned international honours playing for England schoolboys at fly half. He signed up at the start of the war as a private in the Glosters, but was later commissioned, passed out from Sandhurst and became a Captain in the Buffs. He found himself selected for an Army trial as a forward. During the war he sustained injuries which affected his sight for the rest of his life.

In 1920 he made his early appearances for Gloucester on the wing, but an injury to Tart Hall caused him to be switched to wing forward, where he made such an impact that he was selected for the County and for England in that first season of senior rugby. He went on to play 28 matches for Gloucestershire and to captain the Club for 3 seasons, 1924-27.

He made his reputation as a wing forward who revolutionised the role of that position by putting the emphasis on moving quickly away from the pack and causing mayhem amongst the opposition backs, leading him to be dubbed as the “father of all wing forwards”. His effect can be judged by his label as “the scourge of the Welsh”, although he was revered and respected there as the really great, tough English forward they loved to hate the most.

Tom recognised that he played on the edge of the law at times, and recalled an occasion when the referee was going to take some drastic action in a Gloucester match - “That great tactician, George Holford, immediately shouted to me: “I’ll report you to the committee next week!” and the astonished referee said: “Play on, men!”

He ended up with 27 England caps between 1920 and 1926, one of them on the wing but the rest at wing forward, and played in the England team which won 2 back-to-back grand slams. He also played for the Barbarians and for the combined England and Wales team against Scotland and Ireland in the centenary match of the game played at Rugby School.

In 1924 he was selected for the British Isles team to tour South Africa, where he again distinguished himself, not only at wing forward, but also when standing in at centre – he played in 4 test matches and was the leading points scorer on the tour.

“A wonderful inspiration to any side,” was how Tom’s old England captain, Wavell Wakefield, described him. “Tom had that personality and mental, competitive outlook that makes up a truly great player; and he was a shining example to others in that he was determined to put something back into the game for all the pleasure he had out of it.”

At the end of his playing career, Tom went onto the Gloucester committee, and was elected Chairman on the death of John Brookes in 1939, a position he held until 1947. He remained as a Vice-President until 1969, when he replaced "Doc" Alcock as President of the Club. He finally brought his tenure to an end in 1979, saying that he wished a younger man to take on the job, and handing over to his old friend, Canon Mervyn Hughes. Tom died the following year, aged 83., after 69 years service to the game he loved and was so good at.

Mervyn said of Tom that "he was a legend in his own lifetime, and a "true son of Gloucester" who adopted as his motto in life, the motto of his old school - "Never Step Backwards", which epitomised his life".

Tom also had a distinguished career as an administrator of the game at county and national level. He served on the Gloucestershire Union committee, and was President 1933-35, and on the Rugby Union committee from 1931 until its centenary in 1971. He was elected President of the RFU for the 1960-61 season, the only Gloucester man to be accorded this honour.

Tom's business career was in insurance where he was the district manager of the Royal Exchange Group and a director of the Lowndes Lambert Group. He was also a member of the Gloucester City Council, representing Linden ward for the Conservatives, and was active in many other organisations, including the Municipal Charities, the Gloucester Royal Infirmary Governors, the Hospital Welfare Committee, the British Legion, the War Pensions Committee, the City Youth Committee, the Boy Scouts, the National Savings Committee and the Road Safety Committee. He was Captain and Chairman of Gloucester Golf Club, a member of the National Fitness Council and Vice President of the North Gloucester Rugby Combination. He was awarded the OBE for his public work in Gloucestershire, particularly with the National Playing Fields Association.

Perhaps the last word should be left to Tom himself. He was asked to reminisce on the occasion of the 60th jubilee celebrations of Kingsholm in 1951 – "To reminisce is, of course, one of the joys of a ruggie man, particularly when he has put away his boots and jerseys and has to confine himself to memories. Of all games, ruggie must be the greatest of all for cementing those friendships which are so valuable in later life. And my wonderful experiences in Gloucester R.F.C. have provided me with some of the happiest days of my life. I have so many memories that it is difficult to select those which call for special mention. But I like especially to recall our unbeaten home record for seasons 1920-3-4 and our defeat of the invincible Newport fifteen."