



BUDGE
ROGERS

A Rugby Life

BY PHIL STEVENS

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Introduction

*He either fears his fate too much
Or his deserts are small
That puts it not unto the touch
To win or lose it all*

James Graham, 1st Marquis of Montrose –
My Dear and Only Love

THE case for the first full-length biography of one of the greatest rugby players of the post-war period, Derek Prior ‘Budge’ Rogers, is easily made. Rogers is a rugby legend who captained Bedford RFC for five seasons, including the year they won the RFU club competition at Twickenham. Rogers made what at the time was a record number of England appearances, captained his country seven times, visited most of the world’s rugby-playing nations and represented both the British Lions in two Tests and the Barbarians on 25 occasions. Budge missed just one international in six years when his troublesome shoulder injury prevented him playing against Scotland in 1962. Rogers’s playing style and intense physicality, matched by supreme skills and unerring instincts, provided English rugby supporters with some of the most memorable moments of the 1960s. An exemplary playing career was followed by years in management and administration

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at the highest level as Rogers became a key figure in managing the difficult transition of rugby from its purely amateur status into the modern professional game we know today.

One of the most accurate and recognisable descriptions of Rogers appears in an article the journalist Victor Head wrote for *The Field* in February 1965.

It read: 'Rogers is lamb-like off the field, pragmatic, earnest, a serious student of the game. At 25, his grin is boyish, and the face under its fair thatch is that of a school history book Saxon.'

The 'thatch' remains, if a little grey in colour. Following retirement from playing in 1975, Rogers managed the England under-23 side and led England tours to the Far East and Latin America. He was appointed chairman of the England selectors in 1979/80, the season when England won the Five Nations grand slam. In 2000, the former open-side flanker became president of the RFU, the highest honour in the game of rugby. In the same year, Rogers was elected to the board of trustees of the Lord's Taverners. There are few people in the game of rugby who have had such a positive influence on the sport. In 1969, the Bedford man was awarded the OBE for his services to rugby union, the first person in the sport to receive such an honour. There is little doubt that Budge Rogers is one of the most influential sporting figures in post-war Britain and I was delighted when Budge agreed to co-author this biography.

I recognised Budge immediately as he strolled across the golf club car park. We had not met before but I had retained an image from the 1960s of a long-haired young man in a mud-spattered England rugby shirt. The shirt was cleaner but the hair remains intact and, at 76 years old, Rogers remains a commanding figure, liked and respected by the club members. We shook hands and settled over coffee and sandwiches to talk about the idea of a book on Budge's life in rugby. We talked openly for over an hour and I agreed to speak to the publishers and move the project forward. Then something extraordinary happened.

Our meeting over, Budge asked me to follow him to his car. He opened the boot and revealed six beautifully bound scrapbooks.

‘Take them,’ he said. ‘They can be the basis of your research.’ I had been introduced to Budge Rogers by a mutual friend and this was the first time we had met, yet he trusted a near stranger with his life story in six volumes, lovingly compiled by his mother, who was proud of her son’s remarkable achievements. I was hooked. I thanked Budge and carefully carried the weighty volumes over to my car. Before I left, the former England captain explained the complexities of the course layout. We said goodbye and agreed that our next meeting would be preceded by 18 holes at Budge’s beloved Royal Worlington and Newmarket Golf Club.

Any biographer presented with such a rich research bounty would feel both excited and full of anticipation. The scrapbooks contained more than I could have imagined – some real gems. Telegrams from the England selectors, press notices, letters of congratulation on Budge’s astonishing achievements, confirmation of his appointment as England captain, election as president of the RFU and later his OBE. There were heaps of photographs graphically illustrating a remarkable sporting life. Contained within the covers of these six volumes was the life of one of England’s greatest sporting figures of the post-war period. My one reservation on reading through this irreplaceable archive was the enormity of the challenge it presented. How was I to shape all this material into a coherent story of the life of one of the most outstanding rugby players of his or any era? I needn’t have worried. Budge was immediately reassuring – a constant source of stories, clarifications and encouragement.

On my second visit to the Royal Worlington, we played a round of golf together. It was abundantly clear that the 76-year-old had lost none of his zest for life and competitive edge that fuelled his remarkable rugby career. Within a few weeks, we began the work that culminated in this book. I wanted to write a serious biography as befits a man of Rogers’s stature in the game, but also one full of the rich anecdotes for which rugby is renowned. We very much hope you enjoy it.

Chapter 1

A giant among clubs

BEDFORD and Budge Rogers have become synonymous in the world of rugby. The success of this very local man can be understood in the context of the sporting history of the town. Set in the north of Bedfordshire, Bedford has enjoyed relative affluence for centuries. Its wealth was founded on wool and lace-making but following the arrival of the railway in 1846, brewing, engineering and brickmaking provided the main sources of employment for Bedford's growing population. But it would be wrong to think of Bedford as all brick and engineering works. Today, the large Italian community gives the place a real cosmopolitan feel, having introduced restaurants, shops and espresso bars in the period since the Second World War. The spacious park is one of the prettiest of the Victorian era and the gentle River Ouse, which flows through the centre, adds to the general appeal of the place. Today, like most towns in this part of the Midlands, Bedford has a multi-cultural population and enjoys all the amenities of a thriving urban centre.

Rogers comes from a long line of distinguished Bedford figures. Among the finest are John Bunyan, writer of *Pilgrim's Progress*; athlete Harold Abrahams; comedian Ronnie Barker; that wonderful golf commentator Henry Longhurst and, of course, our

hero Budge Rogers OBE, who continues to live in the town that developed his talent and encouraged his competitive spirit. For Rogers, it was one of the local independent schools that provided the young Budge with the opportunity to excel and prepared him for the glittering sporting career that lay ahead. The Bedford School alumni include author John Fowles, politician Paddy Ashdown, England cricket captain Alastair Cook and numerous Nobel Prize winners and local dignitaries. Founded by the Harper Charitable Trust in 1552, Bedford School was nearly destroyed by fire in 1979, but today sits resplendent in acres of manicured grounds close to the centre of town. With its glittering Planetarium, magnificent library and music room, the school is every inch a model of contemporary independent education. Consistent with its charitable aims, the school offers scholarships and bursaries to bright, working-class boys, funded by a £7m endowment from the Harpur Trust and the Old Bedfordians. I visited the school with Budge on a damp December morning in 2015. Despite the weather the grounds looked wonderful, with the immaculate rugby pitch laid out behind the spanking new science block. Across to the left was the cricket ground where future England captain Cook once graced summer Wednesday afternoons with his prodigious run-scoring. The cricket pavilion is a classic of its kind and would sit comfortably at the boundary's edge on most first-class county grounds. As we wandered around the school, we were greeted by a sixth-former sporting his arts colours. Like Cook before him, the boy sang in the school choir and played violin and piano. Budge asked him whether he was going to pursue a career in music, but he replied: 'No sir, I'm going to read medicine at UCL.' A sign perhaps of how the school had adapted to the modern world. We wished him well as we left this oasis of calm in the centre of this busy town.

The sporting history of England's provincial towns and cities was usually created over the centuries by local dignitaries, charities and business people. Bedford is one such place. The town we know today has been shaped by a curious connection between a 16th century philanthropist, the town's two public schools, a local

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workhouse and the arrival of the railways in the mid-19th century. In 1566, Bedford-born Sir William Harpur, a former Lord Mayor of London, endowed Bedford Grammar School (later Bedford School) with 13 acres of meadowland in London's Holborn, creating a rich endowment for future generations of the local boys. In the 1840s the trust, set up to manage the generous gift, rented six acres of land along Goldington Road from the local workhouse, rather grandly named in the 19th century as the House of Industry. The newly acquired site was cleared and relaid, providing the town's two schools with their own sports fields, a naïve if well-intended idea that had disastrous consequences for all involved. Boys from the two rival schools strongly resented ground sharing and fighting often broke out during matches. Following one particular squabble on the cricket field in 1859, a fight spiralled out of control and what followed became known as the Bedford riot.

The Bedford riot remains the most serious social disturbance in the town's otherwise peaceful social history. A ruckus on the sports field involving boys and masters from the two different schools erupted into a full-scale punch-up when a young lad from the Commercial School was beaten up and badly injured by a 19-year-old from the grammar school. It is worth noting two things at this point. Firstly, in the mid-19th century, there were no laws regarding the number of players in a rugby team. International fixtures often involved 40 players on the pitch at any one time, with tripping and hacking legal and often actively encouraged. Many in the sport believed hacking was absolutely necessary to combat the increasing practice of 'mauling', making it extremely difficult to retrieve the ball. Secondly, teachers were almost always included in the school rugby teams, adding to the intensity of the local rivalry. Is it any wonder that fights were part and parcel of the game in those early years? Legend has it that the Rev. Septimus Philpott, brother of the grammar school headmaster, played for the school on many occasions. When matches got a little feisty, the good clergyman would stop play, call the players to one side and offer up a prayer. Matches thereafter continued without incident.

Rev. Septimus's prayers did little to quell the trouble brewing on this particular occasion. The day after the incident over 2,000 people, intent on justice, besieged a local solicitor's office where the youth and his headmaster were holed up. Stones were thrown and windows broken but heavy rain came to the rescue of the fugitives as the crowd dispersed into the local hostelrys. The youngster recovered and the culprit was brought to justice and fined £5 for his bullying behaviour. The riot was the manifestation of a deep-seated division between folk who were loyal to the Commercial School, whose pupils were largely from the town, and supporters of the Harpur Trust-maintained grammar school, who were mainly sons of professional people, including a growing number of outsiders taking advantage of the excellent education offered by the trust. It is perhaps overstating the case to say that the Bedford riots were an example of an old-style class conflict – a feature of the turbulent years of the Industrial Revolution.

Bedford Rugby Club's biographers Neil Roy and Philip Beard claim that as a result of the activities of the Harpur Trust, education was Bedford's principle industry in the 19th century. The town's rapid growth and success, they argue, was 'almost entirely the result of the educational attractions of the Harper Trust'. This may or may not be true but what is certain is that the history of the two schools, Bedford Grammar and the Commercial School (later renamed Bedford Modern), is bound up with the history of the game of rugby in the town. It is a fascinating piece of social history that provides us with the context of the career of Budge Rogers, one of the most illustrious in the old amateur game. Bedford School dominated rugby in the region as its all-conquering team racked up huge scores in match after match. It was in this period that the reputation of Bedford School as a national force in schoolboy rugby was established.

It would be wrong to assume that the success of Rogers's club, Bedford RFC (known locally as either the 'Blues' or the 'Town'), was built exclusively on players from the two public schools, or that rugby in the town was the preserve of the middle and upper

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classes. Far from it. The club welcomed building workers, farmers and workers from the local engineering and brickworks. One of the most impressive of the working-class lads at Goldington Road was 17-year-old former Bedford Modern pupil Gerald 'Beef' Thomas Dancer. In the 1930s, Dancer represented East Midlands and the Barbarians. He started his working life as a farmer before turning to bricklaying which, he believed, 'toughened me up for rugby'. Bricklayer Dancer was Bedford's first British Lion but never won a full England cap, an omission that surprised and disappointed his club skipper, the eminent broadcaster Rex Alston.

Farm workers provided a steady supply of front-row forwards for the club. Cattle farmer Dickie Furbank had his finest hour for Bedford when he took on the Percy Park pack single-handedly during an Easter tour. Furbank played like a human tank that day and would have earned his after-match beer. This particular tour achieved legendary status as the 'booziest Easter ever'. Rumour has it that one of the Bedford players consumed a staggering 18 pints during a particularly raucous post-match celebration. Somewhat hungover, the culprit came down for breakfast the next morning minus half of his previously impressive moustache. There are many such tales, most best left unpublished.

The early influx of working-class young men into rugby in the late 19th century resembles the classic stereotype in village cricket of the blacksmith discarding his apron for his white flannels and skittling out the opposition in a few fearsome overs. There was a further welcome influx of working-class boys into rugby in the 1970s due largely to the introduction of rugby-playing PE teachers from St Lukes, Carnegie, Loughborough and Brunel into comprehensive schools. But young men from working-class backgrounds often found it difficult to adjust to the ethos of public school-dominated rugby. Birmingham-born Nigel Horton was 20 when he was selected to play for England in 1969 and admitted developing a chip on his shoulder that led to him falling out with officials. When a selector asked the Moseley lock to put his jacket back on at an after-match dinner, Horton refused. He wasn't

selected to play for England again for another two years. This may or may not be the reason Horton was left out but the story does suggest that players from poorer backgrounds often found the move to international rugby difficult. What is clear is that the public and grammar schools dominated rugby up to the 1970s. Very few of the grand slam team of 1980 were ex-pupils from the independent sector.

Despite the significant contribution to the success of the Blues by working-class boys in the town, independent schools historically remained the crucible in which the game of rugby was forged. For many in the game, this came as a relief. They may have admired the physicality of the local lad but believed he could never aspire to the qualities of 'true manhood and leadership' and, of course, the absolute values of amateurism fostered by the public schools, Oxbridge and the leading grammar schools of the 19th century. The entrenched attitudes in 'rugger' have in recent years come under extreme pressure, particularly with the introduction of professionalism in the 1990s. The social history of rugby is a fascinating topic and Rogers's Bedford provides us with a rich illustration of how rugby clubs have developed over the past 200 years.

In 1886 the Swifts, the major club in the town at the time, changed their name to the Bedford Rugby Union Football Club, with Goldington Road as its new and permanent home. The fixtures in the club's inaugural season included Northampton, Leicester, Bedford Grammar and Bedford Modern School. In effect, the club as we know it today was born on that day in 1886.

The Harpur Trust, the old workhouse buildings, two public schools and the two rugby clubs of the late 19th century are the historical roots underpinning the success of the Blues in the 20th century. The schools were critical to the success of the club and produced outstanding players, coaches and administrators.

'Up until its centenary, over half of its coaches, captains and presidents were either former pupils or masters at one or other of the two schools,' said Neil Roy.

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As we have seen, the presence of the trust in Bedford attracted wealthy families into the town for the quality of its schools. Great players like Maurice Pugh arrived to give their children the best education available in the county. Both schools produced some wonderful players. Bedford School has 19 internationals on its roll of honour, including such luminaries as Andy Gomarsall MBE, Martin Bayfield and, of course, Derek 'Budge' Rogers. Rivals Bedford Modern can claim eight full internationals, including the legendary Dickie Jeeps, although the latter never played for the Bedford club. Both schools produced British Lions, Barbarians and countless county players.

In addition to the wonderful players mentioned above, the list of former coaches at Bedford is equally impressive and includes Pat Briggs who, with Rogers as his captain, won the RFU club competition for the town in 1975. Eminent administrators include the Rev. SV Hartley, Harry Bitton, and Bruce Willey, all past masters or pupils at Bedford Modern. The contribution of independent education to rugby in Bedford was crucial, particularly in the years prior to the professional game. However, sustained success would have been difficult without the intervention of the Harpur Trust and the Britannia Ironworks. It is a success story that combines charity, industry and education in a rather unique way.

Since those formative days 130 years ago, it is fair to say that the club has enjoyed its fair share of success while enduring moments best forgotten. Riots, exhilarating triumphs, miserable defeats and numerous financial crises have characterised the history of this great English rugby institution. But in the early years of the 20th century, as the dust settled, the club quietly accepted its new role as the county's premier rugby club. Both the quality of the players and the club's fixture list began to improve. The club's growing reputation even reached as far as New Zealand. In 1905, the legendary All Blacks came to Goldington Road. Schools, shops and factories closed for the afternoon to enable people to witness this defining moment in the history of their cherished club. The result hardly seemed to matter. A 41-0 defeat to New Zealand was no

disgrace as the All Blacks rampaged across Britain's rugby grounds that season. The match announced the arrival of the Blues on the national rugby stage. As the town celebrated its hard-won status, the future looked very bright indeed.

During this time, an enthusiastic and energetic committee developed the club's ground and improved the fixture list. In the pre-war years, a new playing surface, a new stand at a cost of £1,760 and a splendid new pavilion were added to what was one of the most impressive rugby grounds in the country. The pavilion was built to such high quality and design that it has lasted right up until the present day – a tribute both to the ambition and far-sightedness of the club officials. We can safely assume that the pavilion's Scrum Hall bar must have witnessed some memorable post-match celebrations in its 100-year history. During the season World War, the army built Nissaen huts and field kitchens at the top of the ground but left the rugby pitch untouched so the club could resume business as usual after the end of the war. Most professional sports suspended their activities during wartime, although some amateur sports, including rugby, ran a limited programme. In any case, it was extremely difficult to raise a team of 15 men to play a regular game of rugby in the war years, and there was the added difficulty of travel. What we do know is that Bedford School and Bedford Modern both maintained a full fixture list throughout the conflict, while the Bedford club ran a very restricted programme. This meant that from 1945 there was a steady supply of good young players keen and ready to play for the Bedford club once life returned to some sort of normality. The *Bedfordshire Times* rugby correspondent at the time wrote: 'Has there ever before or since been a period in which so many great players were coming out of our local school?'

Bedford's reputation had never been higher and the club officials were determined to regain the lost momentum. Blessed with a winning blend of talented teenagers and returning military personnel, the future looked promising. During this time, the Blues played in front of packed houses as sport across the country entered a boom period. Goldington Road heroes at the time included Rex

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Alston, who captained both the rugby club and Bedford Cricket Club in the years after the war, England international Leo Oakley, rated one of the finest centre three-quarters ever to play for the club, Cambridge Blue and former Radley School pupil John Bance, Alan Towell, Geoff Kelly and the splendidly named former club captain St Lawrence Hugh Webb. 'Larry' Webb, the former Barbarian and England back row forward, was tragically killed in a helicopter crash at sea that also claimed his wife and daughter. Club legend David Perry said: 'Webb was a marvellous player and great captain. He would have made many appearances for England if he hadn't contracted flu when he was picked to play against Wales in 1960. Ron Jacobs took his place and Larry was never picked again'.

Oakley and Towell were a formidable midfield partnership. Towell made his Bedford debut while in the RAF, joined Leicester for three seasons before returning to Goldington Road and joining Bedford Modern as a PE master. He made his England debut against France at Stade de Colombes in 1948, a match the red rose jerseys won 15-0 – a record score at the time. Towell's club record was impressive, with 126 appearances and 96 points. The scoring feats of Oakley are the stuff of legend. Five times he scored three tries in one match and he is one of only ten Old Bedfordians in the club's 130-year history to score five tries in one game. Like Budge Rogers later, Oakley was also a champion boxer. His one and only England appearance was against Wales in 1951. Sadly, his career ended abruptly in 1953 following two broken legs in as many seasons. After Oakley died in 1981, the Bedford club named a memorial gate at the entrance of the ground in honour of this wonderful sportsman and loyal Bedfordian.

The club's success at this time led the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent to write: 'Bedford is a giant among clubs.' In the post-war period, the Blues gained a reputation as a club that put team ethos before individual glory, which may explain, despite the club's success, the relatively few internationals at Goldington Road during this period. One would think that great clubs would produce great players but this was not always the case, as Doddy Hay noted in the

March 1966 edition of *Rugby World*: 'Bedford has, to be sure, had their stars, but those who have received the accolade of international recognition are precious few. The real strength of the club has always rested on its teams – and this, surely, is the most admirable attribute of them all.'

Bedford was not a particularly fashionable club compared with some in the London area and in the west of England. Rather unfairly, Hay referred to Bedford as a 'trial horse among clubs' – a kind of back-handed compliment. 'A match against Bedford always serves to separate the men from the boys,' he continued.

There is no question that the 'Bedford character' was something the club had worked extremely hard to develop, but this character often failed to sufficiently impress the England selection committee. Hay's observations may have been true in the pre-war period, when Bedford were a hard physical team who ground out their victories. It was not so true in the post-war years, when a revolution in playing style, with an emphasis on mobile forwards and quick backs, took the Blues to another level. The day of great teams and great internationals was just around the corner for the Goldington Road faithful.

The Blues were particularly strong in the early 1960s, recording victories against most of the top sides of the day. When David Perry arrived from Harlequins in 1961, Budge Rogers had already made his England debut. Perry, one of the club's most distinguished former players, has clear memories of the team he joined.

'We had some great players in Lovell, Inglis, Webb and Rogers, to name just a few. It was great playing behind Budge. I just picked up the pieces he left behind.'

With 15 England caps, four as captain, Perry was one of Bedford's all-time greats and a wonderful No. 8. In the Blues's colours, he made 101 appearances, scoring 115 points. He scored two tries for England and on both occasions received try-scoring passes from his Bedford teammate Rogers. Perry was not a local boy. He was the fourth Old Cliftonian to captain England and, alongside his club teammate Fred Inglis (later a distinguished author and Professor

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of Cultural Studies), did his National Service in the Parachute Regiment before going up to Cambridge where, also like Inglis, he gained his rugby Blue. At the height of his playing days, the No. 8 was 6ft 3in and weighed 16 stone, much heavier than his back-row partner and fellow England captain. Inglis regarded Perry as one of his dearest friends and enjoyed playing under his 'benign and intelligent captancy' at Bedford and Cambridge.

Journalist Victor Head described Perry as 'a tranquil giant who crashes through defences as irresistibly as a tank on an assault course'.

The back-row partnership Perry formed with Budge is legendary at Goldington Road and the former teammates were lifelong friends. David Perry made a great success of life outside rugby. He trained as a company salesman before becoming chairman and CEO of the board games company Waddingtons. In his time as CEO, the former England captain successfully fought off two hostile takeovers from the infamous Robert Maxwell. With Budge's energy and the gentle giant's 'tranquility of mind' in the heat of the moment, they formed a formidable partnership. David Perry died on 8 April 2017, aged 79, following a long illness.

In December 1963, the Blues hosted the England Probables v Possibles trial, which drew a capacity crowd to Goldington Road. Bedford's back-row forwards Perry and Budge Rogers both played in the match. The Blues enjoyed a wonderful spell in the mid-1960s, with three Bedford players regularly selected for the England team. In Rogers, Perry and Geoff Frankcom, Bedford had three players in the same England team for the first time in the club's history. Two of these, Perry and Rogers, were regularly chosen to captain their country as the club began to dominate the English domestic game. Rogers, Perry, Frankcom and Danny Hearn formed a distinguished list of internationals during this illustrious period. With such a formidable playing strength, honours were bound to come and in 1970 the Blues won the *Sunday Telegraph* English-Welsh rugby union merit competition. But the club's finest hour came in 1975 when, captained by Rogers, the Blues beat Rosslyn Park at Twickenham

in the final of the RFU knockout competition in front of a crowd of 18,000. The club had become one of the most powerful in the land, able to compete on equal terms with the great London clubs and others like Leicester, Gloucester, Coventry, Northampton and Moseley.

It is true to say that in recent years Bedford's achievements have been more modest. Since that great day at Twickenham in the spring of 1975, the club have enjoyed only modest success and as a result have found it very difficult to hold on to promising young players. There have been some bright moments: promotion to Courage League 1 in 1989, the Allied Dunbar Premiership in 1997 and winning the Powergen Championship Shield at Twickenham in 2005 brought some joy to the club's supporters. A further bright spot for the fans was John Orwin captaining the England touring party to Australia and Fiji in 1988. When national leagues were introduced in 1987, the Blues were placed in Division 2 but were promoted to Division 1 in 1989. Sadly, success was short lived as the club were relegated the following season and endured a spell down in Division 3 – a real fall from grace for a club with such a distinguished history. Things were to get worse as the club struggled to cope with the advent of professional rugby driven by the Southern Hemisphere countries and the introduction of the World Cup.

In December 2015, I joined Budge on a visit to the Goldington Road ground. The club's former captain explained how the ground had hardly changed since the 1960s. The Scrum Hall bar remains intact, full of charm and memories. The pitch falls away down to the river, as it always did, and the main stand sits proudly with its back to Goldington Road. A host of temporary huts are scattered around the ground, painted in the club's bright blue. The place reeks of its history. Strolling around the ground, I am reminded of the words of the great football trusts pioneer Alan Lomax when he wrote: 'There is a sense of pilgrimage, of going to a sacred place; there is loyalty, sticking with something through good and bad times.'

Goldington Road, with its roots in the 19th century and its complicated historical links to the old workhouse and Bedford

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School, certainly feels like a sacred place, if we can apply that word in a sporting context. Perhaps the most significant change at this distinguished home of rugby is the club's youth academy based on the former practice pitch, overlooked by the looming presence of the old workhouse. Like most serious rugby clubs, Bedford has a successful youth policy led by an experienced and well-qualified coach. It is perhaps indicative of the times that there are no more than a handful of boys from Bedford or Bedford Modern schools playing their rugby at Goldington Road. The academy draws the best talent from a relatively wide area and the schools' historic connection with this forward-looking rugby club is not nearly as strong today as it was when Rogers was a pupil.

It is clear to anyone who has visited the Goldington Road ground and spoken to former players that there is a deep sense of pride and loyalty in being involved with Bedford RFC. Many of the fans retain memories of Bedford as one of the top three senior clubs in the country. In recent years, their patience has been tested to the limit. The severity of the club's recent predicament inspired Stephen Jones, the eminent rugby writer, to include a section on Bedford's troubles in his seminal work *Midnight Rugby*. Jones argues that the players, despite the lack of direction and leadership off the field, remained loyal to the cause.

As the club struggled to adjust to the shining new age of modern rugby union, coaches Paul Turner and Rudi Straeuli, together with their players, kept their patience and believed they could weather the financial storm. Scottish international Scott Murray spoke for the players when he said: 'We had a few meetings and decided we should all stick together.' Marketing director Kathy Leather told of debts to the laundry and bailiffs appearing to remove items from the offices and clubhouse. She said: 'There was so much goodwill towards the club in the town, you'd go along and ask a sponsor to pay before he was due and they always would.'

Things were to get worse when boxing promoter Frank Warren bought the club in the mid-1990s. Unfortunately, Warren's assets were tied in a legal battle he was fighting with his American rival

Don King. Despite sometimes drawing crowds of over 6,000, the town struggled to compete with the big London clubs and others like Bath, Leicester and Northampton, who were prospering under the new professional era. On 23 April 1999, the day before Bedford were due to face Northampton, the club were hit by a bombshell from which it has only recently begun to recover. On the Friday evening before the match, Warren announced that he had sold the club to a group of financial speculators, Jefferson Lloyd International, for the princely sum of £1. The following season, Jefferson made their expected exit and left the club to sort out the mess they had left behind. That season, the Blues retained their Premier League status in a play-off, but the future looked bleak. Crisis was not too strong a word.

There followed an exodus of senior players as Bedford sank back into what is now National League One. The club have since consolidated under the steadying influence of local owners and have trimmed their ambitions, while retaining a core of around 3,000 committed supporters. In his book, Stephen Jones claims Bedford suffered from bad luck, while other clubs enjoyed success through good governance, careful handling of finances and expert marketing. Today, those in charge at Bedford, including 'old-style' local businessmen Geoff Irvine and David Gunner, plan to break even financially and balance the budget mainly through rights issues, sponsorship donations and the hire of a marquee adjacent to the main pitch. Oh yes – and pray for a good cup run. In 2001, the directors' report outlined the club's current position in the starkest of terms:

'During the last financial year, it had become very apparent just how disastrous a financial position we had inherited from the previous owners ... general incompetence has cost us dearly.'

After the near-demise of the club in 1999 and subsequent relegation from the Premier League, average home gates fell to below 1,400 in 2001, but had increased to an average of just under 3,000 by 2010, reflecting the team's improved results on the field. Today, the club has a strong chairman and a board that enjoys local

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confidence. The future of Budge Rogers's beloved Bedford RFC is back in good hands.

'The way forward is to invest in a part-time team good enough to play attractive rugby and to challenge at the top end of the table rather than put big money into major infrastructure projects,' Roy and Beard explained.

So this is the model. Bedford has supporters who are genuine stakeholders in the club and can be relied upon for support. There is a thriving junior section and academy and the club has learned from the bitter experience of 1999. Those running Bedford today are unlikely to put at risk 150 years of heritage which produced several England captains, one of whom was one of the greatest players ever to don the red rose jersey of England.

During our visit to Goldington Road, Budge introduced me to highly regarded Director of Rugby, former Bedford player and Welsh international Mike Rayer, and Old Bedfordian Howard Travis. Rayer certainly commands the respect of the players having been capped 21 times for Wales. The Welshman has the confidence of the board and a growing reputation across the country as an inspirational and forward-thinking coach. A retired police officer, Travis has been part of the fabric of the club for most of his life and spends much of his time today lovingly cataloguing the club's treasures, which include old shirts, photographs and other artefacts. The clubhouse walls are adorned with rugby jerseys, team photographs and an impressive honours board, most of which features their most decorated player, Budge Rogers. Howard tells a rather gruesome and perhaps somewhat embellished story of former club members being buried beneath the first-team pitch. If this story appears a little fanciful, we do know that ashes have been scattered across the pitch on a number of occasions through the years, such is the loyalty this famous old club attracts. Travis and Rayer represent the past and future of Bedford and share a real sense of pride and commitment to the club.

Bedford's players are drawn from across the county and beyond, although due to their busy training schedule all now live in the town.

On 6 March 2016, Bedford finished third in the championship and the mood around the old place has been much more positive. But modern professional rugby is a tough environment. The players need to be fitter, stronger and tougher mentally. The old era of refraining from beer and fags for a few days before a match is long gone, and with it primitive training sessions and inadequate coaching. The new world of rugby costs money and lots of it. The club exists financially on gates of 2,500 for home games, an annual subsidy from the RFU and the generosity of the sponsors. It doesn't help that the Goldington Road ground is owned by the local authority, which makes it impossible to attract the level of sponsorship required to regain their place in the top flight. It is the main reason why the Blues have no serious ambitions for Premier League status.

Bedford have found their level but it is a long way from the heady days of the 1960s and 1970s, when Rogers inspired his generation. The club are working hard to secure their future. A successful innovation is a partnership with London club Saracens. In September 2016, the link with the European and British champions brought five of Sarries's rising young stars to Goldington Road on a season-long loan. Two of the youngsters are current members of England's successful under-20s team. Both clubs benefit from the arrangement, which has seen the likes of Owen Farrell and George Kruis gaining valuable experience with the Bedford team before proceeding to make an impact on the game with their club and country.

The link is celebrated each year by a pre-season friendly under the Bedford lights between Bedford's first XV and a strong Sarries team. Mike Rayer is clearly enthusiastic about the partnership. 'Everyone is aware of the close links between Bedford and Saracens and I'm delighted that we will once again benefit from the arrangement,' he said. 'There are some very exciting prospects on the way to Goldington Road next season and we are looking forward to helping them accelerate their development by playing championship rugby.'

A GIANT AMONG CLUBS

The Saracens Director of Rugby, Mark McCall, recently gave his club's view of the arrangement:

'The agreement between Saracens and Bedford continues to be of great service to both clubs. Many players have gained valuable experience within the championship before making the transition to the Premiership and we look forward to continuing this work.'

This is not what many of the older generations of Bedford supporters of the past 130 years would have imagined for their club, but those in charge have steered the Blues into a position in the modern game of which they can be proud. They are realists who understand that not owning their own ground will always be a barrier to attracting wealthy buyers. Maybe things are better the way they are down at Goldington Road.

Budge Rogers is unquestionably Bedford's greatest ever player. He made his first-team debut while still at school and went on to clock up 485 appearances, scoring 400 points that consisted of 126 tries and one dropped goal before he retired from playing in 1976. It was a remarkable career that had its roots in the 19th century on the muddy playing fields of the House of Industry, the Bedford Grammar School and funding from the Harpur Trust. For many years, when people spoke about sport in Bedford, they spoke about Budge Rogers.

Lord Wakefield of Harlequins, the most capped Englishman before Rogers relieved him of his record, paid tribute to his successor in words the good folk of Bedford would have appreciated. He said: 'There could not be a better guardian of our traditions on the field of play, nor a better exponent of the spirit and manner in which our game should be played.'

Bedford provided the platform for Rogers to build his international career and he always stayed loyal to his roots, remaining as committed to the success of his club as he was to the fortunes of England, the Barbarians and the British Lions.