

THE MAN OF ALL TALENTS

The Extraordinary Life
of Douglas Clark



Including contributions
from 'Duggy' himself

STEVEN BELL

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PART 1

*'It is excellent
To have a giant's strength;
But it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant.'*

— William Shakespeare

A COAL BOY, A LAKER, A CANDLESTICK MAKER

October 1906
Ellenborough, Maryport
Cumberland

IT WAS 5am and the first true cold snap of the impending winter had hit the Lake District. It was still the black of night and a low mist hung over the Irish Sea. A strong breeze blew easterly into the shore, causing waves to crash into Maryport Lighthouse as a light coastal drizzle blanketed the town and its tiny suburb of Ellenborough. Black smoke began to bellow from the chimneys of the small townhouses as the first adults to rise stoked the kitchen fires with coal to heat their homes before the rest of the family woke. No smoke, however, came from one chimney.

‘Sorry mam. I completely forgot coal cellar was empty. Mr Clark will be ‘ere on his rounds soon. We’re getting a delivery this morning, I promise,’ a middle-aged man said to his elderly mother in the tiny but freezing end terrace house just the two of them shared. As he talked, his breath was visible in the air. Only two lit candles cast any light into their kitchen: one on the mantelpiece, the other in the window. The old lady gripped the collar of her dressing gown tight up to her chin as the few teeth she had remaining chattered together.



Maryport Lighthouse Foxys_Photos

A quiet and distant clip-clop of a horse's hooves on the cobbled road filled the moustachioed man with relief. John Clark had turned his stallion on to their street.

'That's him now!' said Mr Robson to his mother, frantically making his way to the back door in his slippers. He went down to the coal cellar entrance, which sat beneath the kitchen window – the candlelight from inside just making it visible enough for him to see what he was doing as he opened the heavy wooden doors, the glorious sound of the horse and cart getting louder all the while. The noise was soon joined by whistling and footsteps coming down the path the house shared with its neighbour.

'Morning Mr Robson!' a large set young man cheerily boomed as he appeared around the corner of the house carrying two hundredweight sacks of coal, one over each shoulder. It was 15-year-old Douglas Clark.

'Morning, young Doug. Thank God you're 'ere. We're empty. Mam's freezing in there. Thought it could have been death of 'er.'

'OK Mr Robson, I'll leave these here for you,' Duggy replied as he lowered both sacks down to the floor near the open cellar. 'I'll take some straight in and we'll get you lit.' He delved into

one of the sacks, his giant, blackened hands reappearing with at least six large lumps of coal in each. He turned and casually walked through the back door, wearing a long fleece coat and a flat cap, his charcoal-covered face barely visible in the darkness. Mr Robson attempted to drag just one of the floored sacks closer to the cellar, but he could barely budge it, such was its weight.

‘Morning Mrs Robson!’ said Duggy as he knelt down in front of the fireplace and began to place the invaluable chunks of fuel into the fire bed. Mrs Robson began to smile.

‘Thank you, Douglas. I saw your mam last week. She’s so proud of you, she was all, “Our Duggy this, our Duggy that.” How is she?’

‘Oh, she’s fine. I try not to get under her feet too much now I’ve left school. But between working with dad down pit and doing my rugby and wrestling training, I barely see her.’

‘I heard you were doing well, Doug,’ Mr Robson said quietly as he attempted to strike a matchstick.

‘I’m playing with the older age groups now, sir. I can’t wait until I can wrestle with the older lads too. I don’t want to sound arrogant, but ...’

‘You can throw them poor young boys like confetti?’

‘I could. But I don’t. Don’t seem fair. But I’ve got the junior county championships tomorrow at Braithwaite, so that should be much more of a challenge.’

Mr Robson placed a flaming, rolled-up newspaper on to the perfect coal pyramid Duggy had built. Within seconds, the edges of each rock turned a violent, glowing red and began casting heat into the freezing temperature, so much so the air around the fireplace visibly shimmered. Mrs Robson allowed the tight grip she had on her dressing gown under her chin to loosen.

Three loud claps echoed from outside. They were the sound of a horse’s shoe hitting the cobbles. It was Duggy’s

father, John, sending the signal through the stallion that he was waiting.

Mrs Robson and her son spoke over each other, both expressing their gratitude to the young man.

‘My pleasure. Take care now.’

‘Good luck tomorrow, son. And give your mam my love!’ Mrs Robson yelled as Duggy closed their back door behind him and jogged back up the narrow path. As he effortlessly leapt on to the back of the wagon, the horse snorted as his dad cheerily sang an unidentifiable song under his breath. The cart began to move up the street as smoke finally began to rise out of Mr and Mrs Robson’s chimney.

The following morning, Duggy slept in later than he had planned, after a week of hard graft. He was desperate to make it to the wrestling competition, so he jumped out of bed and got ready as quickly as possible. He packed his kit and ran downstairs, where his tiny mother, Elizabeth, was laying out breakfast for all of the family. Duggy gulped down a glass of orange juice and then grabbed a slice of toast. He bent down low, kissed his puzzled mother on the cheek and said, ‘Wrestling. I’ll be home for tea.’ He shouted goodbye to the rest of the house and with that shut the door behind him.

His siblings began to appear from their various bedrooms and hiding places. Duggy was the middle one of the nine children John and Elizabeth had been blessed with. Sarah was the eldest, already 24, Lizzie was the youngest, still just a baby.

Duggy picked up his bike, which had fallen down on its side in the small front garden. Away he went, leaping aboard the bike as he ran with it, already building momentum to take on the 18-mile journey to Braithwaite as swiftly as his legs could pedal.

He knew the local land instinctively; he rode out of the village, up on to the hills and through the fields. Within 30 minutes, he was at the village of Cockermouth. He quickly

passed through and was soon back on to rural terrain. He pedalled east, across to the northern tip of Bassenthwaite Lake, where he turned south. The mist hung heavy over the lake as Duggy rode the potentially treacherous journey down and across the hillside.

In little over one hour, he had made it to his destination. Just in the nick of time, he registered for his age group competition. The local style of wrestling, a hugely popular sport in the north of England, was known as ‘Cumberland & Westmorland’. In this type of grappling – just one of countless regional wrestling styles worldwide that go back almost to the beginning of mankind – the two competitors would stand chest to chest, grasping one another around the upper body. The right arm of each would be under his or her opponent’s left armpit, with a tight interlocking grip taken between the shoulder blades. Once the umpire is satisfied with the tie-up, he calls ‘*En Guard*’, followed by ‘*Wrestle*’. Using strength, technique and ‘chips’ or ‘throws’, they attempt to unbalance one another. The one who clearly hits the floor first loses, and a ‘fall’ is awarded to his opponent. If the umpire cannot decide who has crashed to the ground first, he will award a ‘dog-fall’, and both wrestlers will score a point. The first competitor to secure two falls is declared the winner, although some matches and tournaments are sudden-death, one-fall-to-a-finish contests. The matches take place in open fields, with spectators close by the perimeter of the circular ring, and the wrestlers wear traditional attire consisting of white vest and leggings with black, embroidered velvet pants over the top.

Of the many sports and pastimes the folk of England’s northernmost counties took part in, wrestling held pride of place. Almost every village, town and county would have a local champion. But culminating the wrestling season every year (still to this day) is the world-famous Grasmere Festival – a full weekend each August Bank Holiday during which all the champions of

each age group and weight division from across the counties and beyond battle for the ultimate champion to be crowned.

Below, in the words of Douglas Clark himself, is a summary of some of the terminologies used in the sport, the origins of which go so far back. Many believe it was introduced to these shores by the Vikings.

- *'HOD'* – A hold. Placing right arm under opponent's left, and left arm over opponent's right. Each then gripping own hands. This is preparatory to the commencement of actual wrestling and before any of actual wrestling and before any of the various 'chips' are employed. The moment the holds are taken, wrestling commences.
- *'FALL'* – A 'count' or 'score'. Secured by throwing, from a standing position, an opponent to the ground. Should even the knee of either competitor touch the ground, this is sufficient to be counted a 'fall'.
- *'CHIP'* – A wrestling trick [such as:]
- *'BACK HEEL'* – Draw forward your opponent. Place right heel behind his left. Grip the lower part of his back and at the same time throw your weight on his chest.
- *'BUTTOCK'* – Generally used by men of small stature, particularly against bigger men. Place left leg across opponent's and left foot just in front of his left. At the same time, slip your hold to his neck. Then, pulling down his head, apply the hip to his middle. Your man should then come clean over the hip. A beautiful fall.
- *'CROSS BUTTOCK'* – Step quickly with the right foot extended towards opponent's right foot, placing right a few inches in front of opponent's right foot and pull him over-leg.
- *'INSIDE CLICK'* – Place right leg between those of opponent and hook the back part of knee round his left knee. Then jerk him forward onto his right knee.

- *'CROSS CLICK'* – Similar to *'Inside Click'*, except that with the right leg you take your opponent's right leg from under him.
- *'HANK'* – The moment an opponent comes forward, place leg between his legs, turning your leg round his right. Then place instep on the outside of opponent's ankle. Follow up by lifting and turning him and finally throwing. N.B. – a very effective 'chip' and one which is successfully used by lighter built men against much heavier opponents.
- *'OUTSIDE STROKE'* – Place inside of foot to nearest leg of opponent, and just above ankle on the outside. Simultaneously, twist him the opposite way and throw him off his balance and on to the ground.
- *'SWING AND HIPE'* – Step a few inches (with right foot advanced) towards opponent. At the same time, lift and swing him in circular fashion once or twice towards the left. Steady yourself. Apply right knee to the inside of opponent's left. By this movement it should be possible to turn your man in the air and in the fall his shoulders come to the ground.
- *'TWIST OFF THE BREAST'* – Lift your opponent on your chest, swinging him in so doing. Quickly reverse the movement and throw him, when he will fall with neck and shoulders touching the ground.

Many athletes who compete in the sport will train to perfect one or two of the above manoeuvres and attempt to execute their preferred 'chip' in almost every contest. The more chips that can be perfected, the more versatile and unpredictable the wrestler will be.

In less time than it took him to get there on his bicycle, using a full array of the above manoeuvres and without giving away a single fall himself, Duggy easily won his tournament.

He described himself as ‘feeling 6ft tall’. In truth, not yet 16 years old, he actually wasn’t far off 6ft tall. His naturally thick frame, enhanced by the hours of hauling those sacks of coal, had made him an irrepressible physical force at his young age. After each victorious fall, he would help his stricken foe back to his feet and shake his hand. Occasionally, he would even apologise.

Into the late afternoon, the temperatures once again dropped towards zero and cloud gathered on the hilltops before beginning to climb down them, making for a dark and murky autumnal evening. But Duggy needed to wait right until the end of the trophy presentation to collect his prize.

When called forward for the award, the ripple of applause was all that was needed to warm young Duggy up. ‘Well done, lad,’ the patrons would say as he walked past them. Presenting Duggy with his trophy was a very tall, slender man wearing a black top hat, a long, black overcoat, a white shirt with a large, sharp collar and a cravat.

‘Well done, young man,’ the gentleman said to Duggy as he shook his hand and presented him with his prize.

‘Thank you, sir,’ replied Duggy, who couldn’t hide his befuddlement at the modesty of the trophy he had travelled and battled so skilfully for. It was a long, slender copper candlestick – and quite an old one at that.

As what remained of the crowd dispersed and darkness began to fall, a rather disgruntled Duggy was now wrestling with another opponent: his bicycle. He was trying to figure out a way to securely fasten the candlestick to the bike frame for the long and bumpy ride home.

‘You don’t look too proud of your prize, sonny?’

Duggy looked around, his gaze starting at floor level. He saw a pair of polished, shiny black brogue shoes. As he lifted his gaze, he saw the top-hatted gentleman who had presented him with the trophy.

‘Well, fancy coming all the way from Elbra’ for that thing.’
Duggy nodded towards the dangling candlestick.

Smiling almost to the point of laughing, the nobleman asked the youngster how much he felt his award might be worth.

‘Bout ten bob,’ Duggy answered, shrugging his shoulders.

‘Then here you go,’ said the man, delving into his pocket. ‘I’ll give you the ten shillings for it.’

‘No thank you, sir,’ came the instant response from Duggy. ‘Mother would never believe I had won if I hadn’t anything to show for it, and beside, this is my first win. I am surprised at what the prize is, but I am very proud of what it means.’

‘That is the answer I wanted to hear, son,’ the man told him. ‘I enjoyed your wrestling. So here, take this ten shillings anyway and get yourself some tea on your way home.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ a smiling and grateful Duggy said before riding off.

A policeman who had been observing the discussion from a distance stopped Duggy. ‘What did you say to that old toff to make him laugh so much?’

‘Nothing much, sir. Why, who is he?’

‘That’s Lord Lonsdale, lad, one of the richest men in the north of England and the man who pays for all these type of events putting on around ‘ere.’

Meanwhile, Lord Lonsdale approached the trainers who were packing up their equipment and asked to be personally kept informed on the progress of young Duggy, who managed to get home even more quickly than he had got to the event, running high on adrenaline and excitement, to show his mam the trophy.

Lord Lonsdale – real name Hugh Cecil Lowther, the fifth Earl of Lonsdale – was an English peer and an avid sports competitor, supporter and philanthropist. He would pour his huge wealth not only into the local wrestling tournaments, but into boxing, rugby, football and all manner of equine sports.

He even had his own horseracing stable. To this day, the British boxing champions across all of the weight divisions are awarded the famous and historic 'Lonsdale Belt' – first donated by the Earl in 1909.

The copper candlestick would go on to be one of Douglas Clark's most prized possessions.

As much as Duggy adored his wrestling, it was second in his affections to his beloved rugby. He had attended Ellenborough National School and starred for its team. Upon leaving, he had signed for Brookland Rovers. At just 15, he was a regular for their under-18 team.

After beginning as a folk game played with a mass (any number) of men, the first set of formal rules was published in 1845, stating the teams should be of 20 men each. By the latter part of the century, it had grown in popularity and competitiveness. The Rugby Football Union (RFU) was formed in 1871 and teams were reduced to 15 men for the 1875/76 season. The sports foundations were heavily built around the representative teams of the colleges and universities of the south. It was strictly amateur and rules were in place and enforced around the non-payment of players.

The popularity of Association Football was growing quickly. It had turned professional in 1885 and subsequently invested in training and advertisement to create a true entertainment spectacle and a national league structure of rival clubs. Professional players made for a product of such quality that supporters were happy to part with their hard-earned wages to watch their local team.

With scarcely any students in the north of the country, amateur northern rugby-football teams consisted of men who worked down the coal mines, on the farms and in the cotton mills by day. Naturally fit, strong and rugged, these young men began to excel at the sport and soon, against the expectation of the RFU, Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cumberland were

dominating the county championships, the stellar and most lucrative competitions of the time. When those championships reached the latter, knockout stages – which invariably took place in the south – many of the young men competing for the northern counties were forced to take unpaid time off from their laborious day jobs to participate. The one-way travel alone could take a whole day. This was something they simply could not afford to do, such were the levels of poverty in many of those regions at the time. The governing bodies of the teams concerned would invariably find a way to reimburse those star players they had asked to make the sacrifice. This went on for a few years and slowly the method of paying players for the ‘broken time’ of their employment filtered into the club sides as well as the counties.

When the RFU officials found out about this practice, they came down on the teams concerned with heavy sanctions, including fines and suspension from competitions. With many northern teams now heading into the big national matches weakened as some of their most important players could not afford the time off from work, the southern club sides and counties began to regain their stranglehold on the major competitions.

Members of the boards and committees of the northern teams appealed for a ‘broken time’ law to be introduced where, if a player of full-time employment could prove he would be losing a day’s or two days’ wages, he could be recompensed by the club or county that he was playing for. The RFU would not budge. Instead, as the 19th century entered the middle of its final decade, it increased the punishments for breaking the ‘non-professionalism’ rules, despite the protestations that this was simply not a level playing field.

Secret meetings began to be organised by the chairman of the 21 northern clubs that competed at the top level. The clubs were Brighouse Rangers, Batley, Dewsbury, Huddersfield (or

‘Fartown’ as they were more commonly known – the district of the town in which they played and trained), Wigan, Tyldesley, Broughton Rangers, Leeds, Oldham, Warrington, Swinton, Liversedge, Salford, Hull, Wakefield, Manningham, Rochdale, Halifax, Bradford, Hunslet and St Helens. They discussed various options as their relationship with the RFU officials became untenable. The most extreme of those options, and initially the least favourable, was a complete breakaway from the RFU and to start their own sporting union.

As one favourable option after another was proposed and subsequently quashed by the governing body, the radical option of a split began to carry more and more favour at the discreet meetings held in various hotels, mainly in West Yorkshire due to its central position.

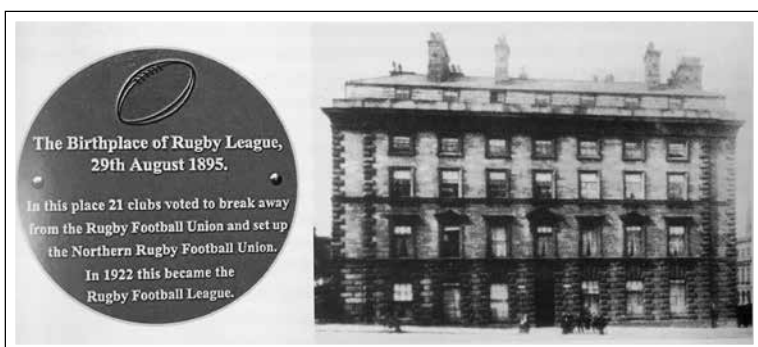
Vice-president of Huddersfield Rugby Football Club, John Clifford, was passionate about defending the rights of the northern clubs and their players, and securing fairness and equality for them. John, alongside his brother Joe, had grown up in Huddersfield as a rugby fanatic and had played for the club – even captaining them in the mid-1880s. Afterwards both he and Joe became involved with the club on an administrative level, eventually becoming vice-president and chairman respectively. They were almost identical in appearance, always immaculately turned out in smart suits and trilby hats, and both wore thick, greying handlebar moustaches.

On 29 August 1895, at The George Hotel in Huddersfield, John hosted the latest meeting between representatives of the northern clubs and decided that enough was enough. On that day, the option of splitting from the RFU was put to the vote. Twenty out of the 21 clubs opted to create the Northern Rugby Football Union. Only Dewsbury were against it. The result was implemented with immediate effect and the RFU was informed. That is widely regarded as the day rugby in Britain split into two codes and the modern-day rugby league was born.

The Northern Union was made up of three rugby-playing counties: Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cumberland. Every season, each county would hold its own league championship and knockout cup competition. Meanwhile, all teams would compete for the two flagship trophies: the Northern Union League Championship and the Challenge Cup. The end of the season would also see representative teams from each of the counties play off in a round-robin to crown the champion region.

The Northern Union began to create its own rules regarding 'broken time' payments and professionalism – and it wasn't just administrative laws that the Northern Union was changing from those inherited by the RFU. It wanted to create an entertainment spectacle to rival not just the rugby-football being played in the south, but one to challenge the Association Football clubs in the north for the hearts, minds and entrance fees of the enthusiastic sporting men in its communities. As the years went by, RFU also got creative with the rules of the game themselves, as it sought to establish itself as the premier and more entertaining code.

By 1906, it had evolved the game. Teams would play with 13 men rather than 15. Once tackled, the offensive player would be allowed to 'play-the-ball', instead of pile-ups of players –



The George Hotel, Huddersfield, in 1895, and the plaque that is still mounted there to this day Huddersfield Rugby League: A Lasting Legacy

a scenario in which spectators cannot see the ball or what is happening to it – resulting in a ‘ruck’ to determine which side would next hold possession. The ‘line-out’ was abolished. Even the scoring system was tweaked, with the Northern Union determining three points for a try and just one for a goal kick would deter tactical and possession-based kicking and encourage running and dribbling with the ball and flowing passing moves to open up defences.

As attendances rose to see the top teams play in this new, invigorated sport, the clubs were permitted to pay players professional salaries.

Representative teams from England and Wales would compete against one another, and there were rumours of a Great Britain side one day competing against touring squads from Australia and New Zealand.

Huddersfield was still regarded as the home of the new code of the sport. The Clifford brothers wanted to build a team to reflect that heritage. They had finished bottom of the Yorkshire League in the opening Northern Union season and things had not improved dramatically in the decade since. They had the infrastructure: the Fartown Ground was named after the small district of the town in which it had been built, the stadium could hold 30,000 standing supporters and was regarded as one of the premier rugby auditoriums in the north, and thus hosted many cup finals and county matches.

With the game becoming more global, Australia and New Zealand embarked on tours of the Northern Union. Closely observing, the Cliffords – alongside head trainer Arthur Bennett – were inspired. They had now seen these Southern Hemisphere teams first hand and, in the case of New Zealand in particular, were awestruck by how they played the game: less kicking; faster running; swift passing moves. It was dynamic, entertaining and, when done well, impossible to stop. They set about building a Fartown team of young, strong and

technically gifted youngsters they could mould into playing this expansive style. The first man – or boy, as the case may be – they targeted was a mercurial 15-year-old (actually just 17 days younger than Duggy) from nearby Holmfirth. He played for his local amateur side, Underbank Rangers, and his name was Harold Wagstaff.

Joe Clifford, who always wore a long camelhair coat over a dark suit, approached the father of Wagstaff regarding making the youngster a professional rugby player at just 15. A humble labourer to a local painter and decorator, Mr Wagstaff was sceptical, worried it may all be a little early for his son, who was still growing into his adult form and nowhere near his full potential. He told his son to stay with the juniors at Underbank. But Clifford was persistent; he visited Mr Wagstaff at his home, at his work and also at the Druids Hotel, where he drank of an evening – his brother being the landlord.

‘Get yourself brightened up, lad,’ Mr Wagstaff said to Harold as he walked in from work in his paint-soaked overalls one Friday evening. ‘We’re going down to your uncle’s to see that chap from Huddersfield. Might as well hear what he’s got to say.’

Clifford bought the drinks and his charm began to pay dividends as Wagstaff senior realised just how much faith they had in his son at Huddersfield and how much they wanted to nurture his talent. Sensing he was about to clinch the deal, Clifford reached into his pocket and pulled out five shillings. Harold’s eyes lit up and his father offered out his hand to Mr Clifford.

That was 2 November 1906. Just eight days later, at the age of 15 years and six months, Harold Wagstaff pulled on the woollen claret and gold hooped jersey for the first time as he made his Fartown debut. A natural centre, creating and exploiting space came naturally to him. As he further improved his positioning, handling, dribbling and pass timing, he became a devastating and revolutionary playmaker.

Meanwhile, 170 miles north-west of Huddersfield, the new rules were turning the already talented youngster Douglas Clark into a renowned star. With his size, strength and speed, the extra space and freedom for him to run forward with the ball was making him simply unstoppable in his own age groups. In the 1907/08 season, at 17 years old, Duggy was a regular starter for Brookland Rovers in each of the under-18, under-21 and senior/'A' teams. He won medals with all three in that season alone. A dedicated student of the game, he practised passing daily until he could perform it with such hand speed that no defender could react quickly enough. His strong, muscular frame, rapid speed and a perfectly honed tackling technique meant no opponent could get past him.

In the summer of 1908, Duggy achieved peak physical condition as he trained hard for the upcoming season; he had been named captain of the under-21 team and would continue to appear regularly in the senior squad. He used wrestling practice predominantly as part of his rugby training. He was, however, disappointed to find out that the rugby campaign would begin slightly later than usual. His father had seen first hand during the coal rounds just how astonishingly strong and fit his son had become. The later start to the season gave John an idea.

One light summer morning, whilst Duggy sat next to him on the horse-drawn cart, John asked him how would he feel about joining his parents on their annual trip to the Grasmere Festival as he now wouldn't be playing rugby on the Bank Holiday.

'Delighted!' Duggy responded, instantly buoyed at the prospect.

'Good. It's a pity, though, we didn't send in your name before the entries closed. Would you have wrestled if we had done so?'

'Yeah!'

A COAL BOY, A LAKER, A CANDLESTICK MAKER

‘Well that’s alright then. ‘Cos I’ve already entered you on the off-chance you were home for the holiday.’ John looked at his son with pride. Duggy’s face filled with excitement, the delayed rugby season now a distant memory. He would instead be competing in the ‘All-Weights’ competition of the Grasmere Games – the most prestigious and legendary tournament in the world of Cumberland & Westmorland wrestling.



17-year-old Douglas Clark (rear, third from right), with the triumphant senior team of Brookland Rovers Elizabeth James & Imperial War Museum