

THE GREATEST RUGBY CLUB—HANSARD

In May 1945 the following of the continuing committee met : R. A. Cornish, D. E. Davies, G. V. Wynne Jones, Johnny Thomas, Gerald Heslop, with Brice H. Jenkins who had been co-opted during the war, and in view of the favourable war situation to the allies, and that we could muster some 35 players, most of them the nucleus of the war time personnel, *resolved* that the Rugby Club should resume full football activity on an "official" basis. The Welsh Rugby Union had not resumed its peace-time functions. R. A. Cornish agreed to act as hon. secretary, and from a sub committee (D. E. Davies, G. V. Wynne Jones and Gerald Heslop) for fixtures, I assumed the office of hon. fixture secretary for several years.

Dr. Jack Matthews was our appointed captain. He had a brilliant Rugby career as a Welsh secondary schoolboy at Bridgend, being a young 100 yards and 200 yards sprint champion. He had joined Cardiff from Cardiff Medical School, whose XV's he captained in war time, one of whom won a war time match at the Cardiff Arms Park against Cardiff's team by 28 points to 26. As an R.A.M.C. captain he led army teams whilst at the same time serving his unit and the club. Jack Matthews was one of the strongest running centres of his time, his devastating tackling was I think, much feared by opponents. His speed and breaks through the centre made scores of tries for his co-centres and wings. Strong in personality, he was, with his colleagues, Bleddyn Williams, W. B. "Billy" Cleaver and later on, Rex Willis, destined to win the highest honours in the game. He later served on the committee and was club chairman for 1954-55.

The brilliance of our centre Bleddyn Williams, to become one of the greatest centres of all time, the superb qualities of Billy Cleaver at outside half who was a great 'reader' of a game and one of the best tactical kickers of his day, formed the best mid-field triangle in Rugby football for some seasons. But there were also other players in Dr. Jack's XV who became great players; Maldwyn James a hooker of much craft and confidence; Lt. W. E. Tamplin one of the best post war leaders of a pack, strong in personality and an excellent kicker of goals; and Squadron Leader Les Manfield of the R.A.F., a great back row forward, already capped from Mountain Ash prior to the war and set to gain many more with Cardiff. In addition we had our pre-war wing Graham Hale; Ray Bale our vice-captain, also capped for his club pre-war as a prop; at least three "medicals" now qualified in Drs. Glyn Jones a wing, D. St. John Rees at full-back, Hubert Jones another back row forward, we also had George Tomkins and Gerry Blackmore, both forwards and now qualified mining officials; and the best 'nugget' of the props Cliff Davies the great hearted character, the simple miner, beloved by all, who gained sixteen Welsh caps and a British Lions tour to New Zealand in 1950. Not to be forgotten was W. E. "Billy" Darch the diminutive and popular scrum half from the Rhondda. There were many heartburnings when Billy Darch was superseded by Haydn Tanner who joined the club in January 1947.

And so, "we were off!" Our team blended well and it was not long before our brilliant performances became the talk of the country, our "gates" were a godsend to the finances of the club, we were unbeaten until we met the "Kiwis"—the touring New Zealand Army team on Boxing Day and lost by a solitary try on a very heavy pitch, governed by much gruelling forward play. The New Zealand broadcaster Winston McCarthy described the match as a "Wales/New Zealand affair—where Rugby football is a religion supported by fervent singing".

The great performances of the Blue and Blacks drew record crowds at home and on away grounds and in the annual report of the Cardiff Athletic Club I wrote that, "Once more Rugby football was vitally alive and Cardiff was its healthy heart." In fact the club's fame and success permeated the House of Commons, where, during a debate on Ways and Means Budget resolution—that on the entertainments duty concession, Mr. James Callaghan, M.P., himself a former Streatham Rugby player—at present as I write the Foreign Minister in Her Majesty's Government, described ours as the finest Rugby club in the four countries.

This is the extract from Hansard—Col 2751 of the 17th April 1946 :—

"Mr. James Callaghan (Cardiff South) : I join in the congratulations which have been offered to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on this concession. In South Wales, particularly among the struggling Rugby clubs it is welcome as a valuable help. Speaking as one who has the honour to represent *the City which has the finest Rugby Club* in the four countries . . ."

Hon. members : No. (Opposition came from James Griffiths of Llanelly I undersand). Mr. Callaghan : "I must appeal for your protection, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I repeat . . . doubtless I shall be contradicted in later speeches if Hon. Members do not agree with me . . . that Cardiff Rugby Football Club is undoubtedly the finest Rugby football club. On their behalf, and on behalf of all those other Rugby clubs, particularly the smaller ones, in the South Wales area who have been struggling very hard, I welcome this as a valuable concession."

After eleven splendid victories, we journeyed to play Coventry on 17th November. The Midland club was strong at forward with the brothers Wheatley already internationals and H. W. Walker to gain English caps later, together with Ivor Preece, who, with Stock were their half-backs. After a grand game, Cardiff took the Midlanders' ground record after a run of 63 consecutive matches without defeat. Our backs, Glyn Jones (2) and Jack Matthews and Bleddyn Williams with a try each were our scorers with Maldwyn James putting over two conversions, to one try by Coventry. There was a record crowd of some 15,000.

As the result of an invitation from the Nantes Club (Stade Nantais Universite Club) we embarked on a tour to France at the end of December to play that club and Cognac (Union Sportive Cognacaise). In pre-war days the former captain of Cardiff, Percy Bush had captained the former French team and raised their status. We were most hospitably received by both the French clubs whose leading officials were : at Nantes, Monsieur Henri Picherit the International secretary, and its President Marcel Pedron; whilst at Cognac we were well received by members of the Hennessy and Martell families, Henri Behoteguy former French international and the President Monsieur Massoulard. The Nantes Club was most pleased with our visit and presented the Cardiff club with a film of the visit and made Dr. Jack Matthews, Bleddyn Williams and myself life members of their club, a very rare distinction. The visit was an excellent link towards Anglo/French Rugby relations.

Cardiff supplied 13 players for the "unofficial" Welsh international matches (no caps were awarded) yet we still managed to win our club matches which clashed with those of the W.R.U. who had arranged theirs after Cardiff's fixture list was complete. Victories over Swansea on 22nd December and over Richmond—Blackheath (A) were among matches in point. On 1st December a Welsh trial match date, Wilfred Wooller now repatriated after his incarceration by the Japanese, played his last official match against Richmond—Blackheath, and to help us out with our depleted team, Glyn Davies the Pontypridd outside half and subsequent Welsh international also donned the Blue and Black jersey. Earlier Lt. Wooller had been invited to kick off in our match with the very strong New Zealand Services XV. He did so, and nearly knocked over the well known "Western Mail" photographer Mr. Harvey Harris, camera and all. Cardiff's win over the New Zealanders was a splendid one, they were indeed a strong Rugby football unit, their Reserve XV was taking on Northampton the same day.

Newport shared the honours in our renewed four match encounters. We lost by a single point to the Barbarians, 10 points to nine in another Rugby spectacular in which Jack Matthews not only scored Cardiff's try but, to the happy amazement of the large crowd (and himself, I believe) dropped a goal—the only one of his on Cardiff's books. In the Penzance—Newlyn match on the Cornish tour, Jack impressed with two tries, and also possibly a pretty young Cornish lady, to whom he has been happily married to this day. There were to be two most interesting events to wind up our season, our second time entry as guests in the Middlesex Sevens on 27th April—the same day we drew our away match three points each with Pontypool—and a nostalgic Past v. Present match on 1st May 1946.

Our "Sevens" team was : Dai Jones, Dr. Jack Matthews, Bleddyn Williams, W. B. Cleaver, Hubert Jones, Cliff Davies and George Tomkins, and in the first two rounds we disposed of the Wasps, London Scottish and were drawn to meet "The Kiwis" in the semi-final. We beat them in a match of tremendous excitement and drama. No quarter was given, the covering and the tackling of both sides was exhausting. It appeared to me running the touch line, that the Twickenham crowd were for Cardiff, but in any event they were not disappointed as we beat "The Kiwis" by one try scored most sensationally by our most popular and courageous prop, Cliff Davies. He took a short pass from Jack Matthews near half-way rather more to the left side of the ground, and he ran, most gallantly for the right corner flag with a Kiwi breathing down his back almost, all the way. As the crowd roared him on, Cliff was flagging a little—he was a prop forward, but he gave a wiggling, half look round kind of movement thus causing the chasing and now close "Kiwi" behind him to make a protective movement. This slight hesitation of the "Kiwi" just enabled Cliff Davies to keep his very slender bit in front with about only twenty yards to go, and, with the huge crowd roaring him on he made his last and most exhausting effort to finally dive over the line for a try near the right hand corner flag, and win the match. To all spectators and most certainly to me, it was one of the most gallant tries ever scored. He was cheered and cheered rapturously.

In the Twickenham dressing rooms now lay two exhausted Sevens teams—stretched out, not before the "Kiwi" captain Charlie Saxton had sportingly acknowledged to our captain that Cardiff had just deservedly won. But our "Seven" had now to meet the most experienced "Seven" in English Rugby, St. Mary's Hospital. Since 1939 "Mary's" had five times won the Middlesex Sevens Tournament and had been once runners-up. In this competition they had had an easier run than Cardiff, they scored 40 points in their three previous rounds without having a point scored against them. They were the fresher team in the final and ran out winners by 13 points to three. Cardiff had its chances, and perhaps had one perfect try by Bleddyn Williams under the post disallowed by Bernard Gadney England's international referee, but Mary's were too good for us.

Wooller captained the Past team against the Present in a nostalgic game. He scored a try as did Hubert Johnson, Gwyn Porter and Ianto Jones and Archie Coombs but the Present were both too young and too fast and ran out winners by 23 points to 17. The Cardiff Royal Infirmary benefited to the extent of £1,548.2.3, which included £148.2.5 which was Cardiff's share in the proceeds of the Middlesex Seven-a-Side Tournament. On 29th September 1946 the Cardiff Rugby Club Bed was dedicated (by the Rev. Emrys Rees, M.A., Vicar of St. Mary's Church, Whitchurch—father of our full-back D. St. John Rees) and a plaque unveiled in the William Diamond Ward of the hospital in the presence of Sir William Reardon Smith, chairman of the Cardiff Royal Infirmary Board. In this post war season 14 players were awarded 1st XV caps, their names are : Gerald Blackmore, W. B. Cleaver, W. Darch, Cliff Davies, Maldwyn James, Dr. Glyn Jones, Hubert E. Jones, W. G. Jones, Les Manfield, Dr. Jack Matthews, D. St. John Rees, Ltd. W. E. Tamplin, George Tomkins and Bleddyn Williams. For this unique post-war season I append the season's record together with details of scorers.

Twenty-two matches had been arranged for the Cardiff Athletic XV of which three were cancelled owing to weather conditions. R. H. Millar who had assisted Cardiff in the late thirties, now back out of the forces was appointed captain, he was a very neat and classy outside half who had also played many games for Newport. With only about 35 players in all for the club, "The Rags" had to be built up into a team with which to provide a good nursery for the 1st XV, and in the end more than 80 players were tried during 1945-46. The record was P19, W10, L9. Points 223 to 170. In the post-war circumstances there was not a bad record at all, as there were strong clubs on the fixture list including Maesteg, Penygraig, Kenfig Hill, Newport United, Briton Ferry, Bristol "A" as well as three service teams. The top try scorers in this rebuilding season were Selwyn Evans 9, Basil V. Williams 5, and four were obtained by Selby Davies the forward. Athletic XV caps were awarded to J. J. Beswick (forward), Selwyn Evans (wing), Lionel E. King (scrum half), and Basil V. Williams the Llanishen boy, wing threequarter.

During the season two of the club's most devoted officials passed away, namely W. Douglas and D. L. Evans, both of whom had given a life time of service as players and administrators. Their names will be found in this history of the Cardiff Rugby Club. Many of our players had been engaged in the country's war effort, both civil and military, and no record was maintained of those who did serve, but amongst those who made the supreme sacrifice were the Rugby players Pat Cox, C. R. (Cecil) Davies, Frank Gaccon, Ken Jones, Trevor Ransome, Howard Roblin, Ken Street, V. Neil Taylor and Maurice Turnbull.