

GLOUCESTER RUGBY
HERITAGE

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BILLY JOHNS A GLOUCESTER HERO

Billy Johns played for Gloucester, Gloucestershire and England, and would have played for the Lions if he'd had the time. He was born in Gloucester in 1882, the son of a ship repairer and ship owner. He went to Sir Thomas Rich's School where he first played rugby and captained the school team for two seasons, 1894-95, whilst playing half-back. He went on to play for Rich's Old Boys and St Catharine's, before graduating to the City team.

A DRIBBLING MAN

He made his debut for Gloucester in a mid-week fixture at Kingsholm against Cheltenham in April 1902, and scored a try in the 28-0 win. The Club converted him to the front row, where he played as both hooker and prop. Billy was 5ft 9in tall, and weighed in at 12st 6lb, and was described as a sterling scrummager, and deadly tackler. He was renowned for his skill at dribbling the ball, but he was not one to carry the ball in hand very often.

season was to captain Gloucester against New Zealand at Kingsholm on 19th October 1905. The match was hard going as the All Blacks delivered a crushing 44-0 defeat. However, Billy's fine form caught the attention of the County selectors who awarded him his first cap. That summer Billy got married and gave up the captaincy.

ENGLAND CALLS

He handed over the reins at Gloucester to Dai Gent, but Billy's representative career was just taking off. He was the finest forward in a formidable Gloucester pack, he became a regular for the County, and played for them against the touring Australians in 1908. He won his first cap for England against Wales in Cardiff in January 1909, and retained his place for the next international against France at Leicester, scoring a try in the last minute. By the time he had completed the set with appearances against Ireland and Scotland, he was regarded as a lynch pin of the England pack. Gloucester celebrated his success with a dinner in his honour at the New Inn. By this time Billy also had the concession to produce the

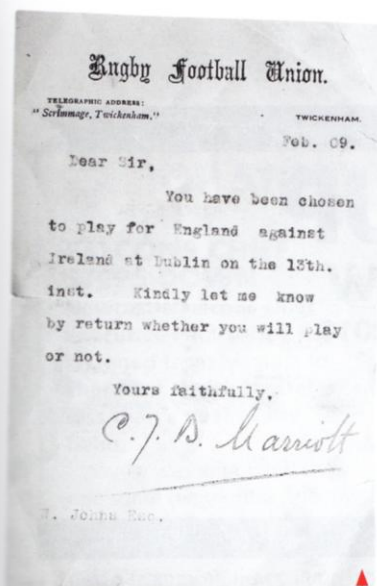
POPULAR CAPTAIN

When George Romans stood down, the players elected Billy as their new captain in 1904. The players had made an excellent choice – Billy proved to be a great leader and one of the most popular men ever to have captained the Club. The results reflected this, with the County Cup won by defeating Cheltenham, Stroud and Bristol along the way, and only 11 matches lost out of 36.

The following season was even better with 8 losses out of 37 matches, and a points difference of 661-165. The highlight of Billy's



Billy in his playing days



Invitation to play for England

Gloucester match programmes, for which he paid the Club one guinea per season.

The 1909-10 season provided Billy with many more wonderful memories. In January 1910, he played in the very first international in the new stadium at Twickenham, when England defeated Wales 11-6. Billy was the only England player retained from the team which had played Wales the previous year. The next international, when France were defeated 11-3 in Paris was to be Billy's last. However, Billy was invited to join the British Isles tour to South Africa that summer,

departing in June and returning in September 1910, but was only given a few days' notice and was unable to make the trip.

COUNTY HEROICS

In April 1910, Billy was one of the Gloucestershire heroes who defeated Yorkshire 23-0 at Kingsholm to secure the County's first County Championship, and was a stalwart in the team which won their second County Championship against Cumberland at Carlisle in March 1913, the season in which the match against South Africa completed his tally of appearances against Southern Hemisphere teams – "in this match the veteran gave a wonderful display on the treacherous ground, and was generally acclaimed one of the best forwards on the field."

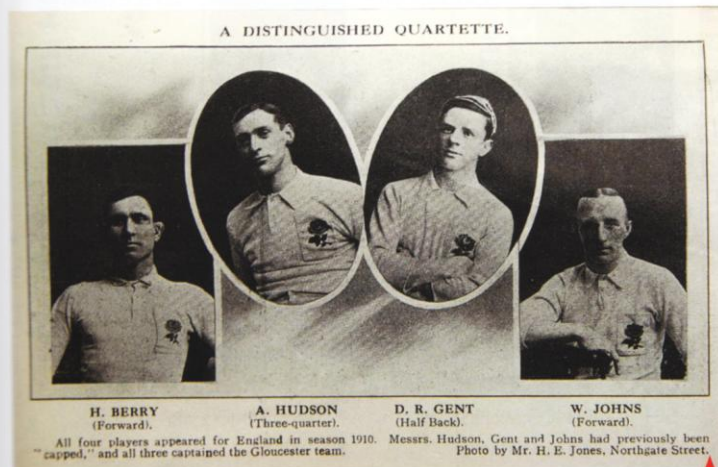
Injury and the demands of his job as a ship's chandler finally forced his retirement. He finished with 265 appearances for the Club and 24 tries. Even at the peak of his career, Billy was not only turning out for Gloucester whenever he could, but also played for the Gloucester Thursday XV – he loved his rugby and Gloucester in particular.

Billy signed up as a private in December 1914, and during the Great War rose to the rank of

Second Lieutenant. After the war he ran several hotels in Gloucester before retiring to Weston-super-Mare where he died in 1965. Billy left his interesting collection of memorabilia at the Club, which can now be viewed at the Gloucestershire Archives.



Billy in retirement



The four Gloucester men who played for England in 1910

BE GENEROUS TO THE GLOUCESTER FAN IN YOUR LIFE

As a present for Christmas, any Kingsholm regular would be delighted to receive a copy of the Gloucester Rugby Heritage book, which is a richly illustrated summary of the people and matches which have lit up the history of the Club. And/or they would be interested in "They Played for Gloucester and Fought for their Country" by Martin and Teresa Davies, a recent publication which honours those Gloucester players who died or were honoured in wartime, and which gave rise to the new war memorial which can be seen on the wall outside the Club reception. Both books can be purchased in the Club shop, at Hudson's Sports or on-line.