

GLOUCESTER RUGBY
HERITAGEwww.gloucesterrugbyheritage.org.ukJOHN GWILLIAM
1923-2016

CAPTAIN OF WALES

INTRODUCTION

One of the great figures of Welsh rugby, John Gwilliam played No. 8 or lock in 23 matches for Wales including 13 games as captain. He was a Cambridge blue in 1947 and 1948 and played six times for the Barbarians, leading them on three occasions.

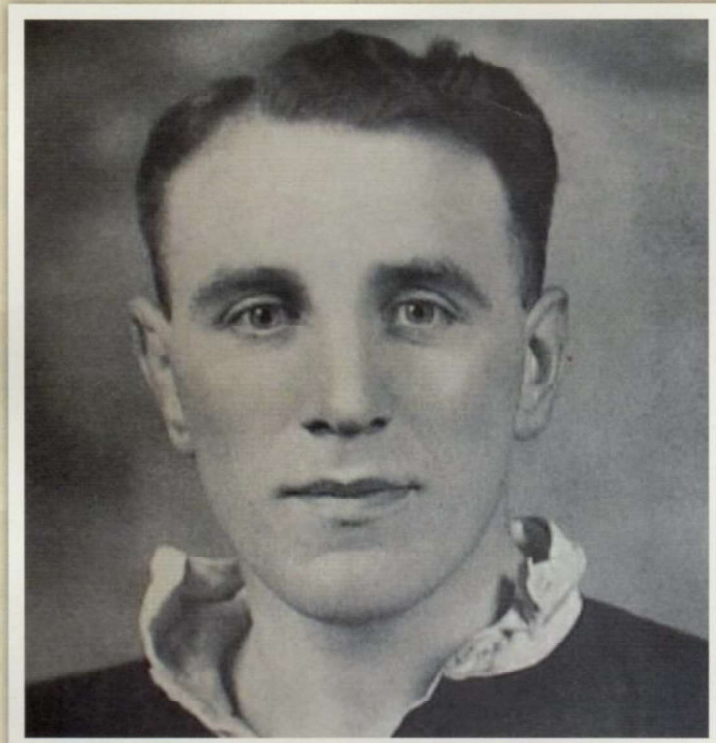
He led Wales to Grand Slams in 1950 and 1952 in a period that many regarded as the second "Golden Age of Welsh Rugby".

When his career as a schoolmaster took him to Bromsgrove School, he joined Gloucester and played 49 games for the club between 1953 and 1955. Although he joined Gloucester late in his career, he played his last 5 internationals while at Kingsholm, becoming the first player from the club to captain his country.

NEWPORT AND
CAMBRIDGE

John Albert Gwilliam was born on February 28, 1923 in Pontypridd and educated at Monmouth School, where he won a wartime Welsh Schoolboys cap. He spent a year at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1941-42 before being commissioned as an officer in the Royal Tank Regiment.

John played for Newport in 1945-46 while still on Army service and again in 1946-47 before resuming his studies at Cambridge. In December 1947, after an outstanding Varsity match, he made his debut for Wales v. Australia in the second row. He was dropped but recalled for the Ireland match. In 1948-49 (his



final year at Cambridge) he played in all the Home Internationals, continued to play occasionally for Newport and made his debut for the Barbarians

EDINBURGH WANDERERS

In 1949, after leaving Cambridge, he became a teacher at Glenalmond School in Perth. He joined Edinburgh Wanderers and in January 1950 became captain of Wales for the first time, beating England at Twickenham. Wales went on to win the Grand Slam under his captaincy, their first for 39 years.

The Times considered that he would have been a certain selection for the 1950 Lions tour of Australia and New Zealand had he been available, and many were tipping him to be chosen as Lions captain, but his teaching duties at Glenalmond prevented him from travelling.

He led Wales to a second Grand Slam in 1952, the only Welsh player to captain his country throughout two Grand Slam seasons, and in the process became the first player to twice lead the Principality to victory at Twickenham. In his three



seasons with Edinburgh Wanderers he had captained Wales on twelve occasions and been victorious on nine of them. Despite the brilliance of the Welsh backs, his tactical aim was for forward domination. His Welsh side were a team of forward power with Gwilliam as the dynamic No. 8 at its core.

GLOUCESTER

In 1952 John Gwilliam moved south to teach at Bromsgrove School. He was persuaded by Tom Voyce to join Gloucester for 1952-53, making his debut against Lydney in the first match of the new season.

Very influential in two successful years with Gloucester, he alternated between lock and No.8. Peter Ford paid tribute to "John Gwilliam, the captain of Wales - a player we all looked up to when he joined us that season. His play and his ability ... we just looked up to him so much."

John regained selection as No. 8 and captain for the first Home International against England by captaining the Possibles to victory over the Probables in the final Welsh trial. It was to be his thirteenth and last match as captain but, although Wales lost and the captaincy then passed to Bleddyn Williams, he came back to play against Ireland and France.

1953-54 was a record-breaking season for Gloucester who were captained by John Taylor, with elder statesman John Gwilliam as his vice captain. Wales continued to call on Gwilliam's services and on 19 December 1953, again under

Bleddyn Williams's captaincy, he helped his country gain their last victory (to date) against the All Blacks, whom they beat 13-8 at Cardiff.

He went on to play one further international against England at Twickenham in January and finished the season on Gloucester's annual tour of the West Country. There was one last big game before retirement when he turned out for the RFU President's XV against Wasps in September 1954.

AFTER RUGBY

John Gwilliam left Bromsgrove School in 1956 to become Head of Lower School at Dulwich College, moving on in 1963 to become Headmaster of Birkenhead School, where he remained until his retirement in 1988. He was noted as a firm disciplinarian with strong religious views as well as for his enduring love of rugby, which he passed on to generations of schoolboys.



Gwilliam was added to the Welsh Sports Hall of Fame's exclusive Roll of Honour in 2005. In the centenary history of the Welsh Rugby Union "Fields of Praise" he was described as "perhaps Wales's greatest captain in a hundred years."

He lived in retirement at Llanfairfechan in Gwynnedd, and passed away at a nursing home in Deganwy at the age of 93 on 8 December 2016.

