

# Foreword

## by Ryan Giggs

It's an honour and a privilege for me to write a few words about Cliff Jones, one of the greatest Welsh footballers of all time, a star many years before I was born and a man for whom I have the warmest regard and admiration.

Having mentioned that he played long ago, I should say that he has looked after himself so well down the years, and is such a lively character, that I find it very difficult to take on board that he's entered his eighties. I think there must be some mistake on his birth certificate!

Although I was brought up on stories of the heroes who took Wales to the quarter-finals of the World Cup in Sweden in 1958, I had never met Cliff until one evening at White Hart Lane after Manchester United had played Spurs. As I was waiting on the coach before going back up north, he put his head round the door and introduced himself, saying that we might have a bit in common.

And certainly we do. In a football sense, he grew up at The Vetch Field in Swansea, which I visited for the first time to play in a schoolboy international when I was only 14. Mind you, that day I captained England to victory over Wales, but Cliff didn't hold that against me, and I enjoyed giving him my impressions of the old ground, which has now been demolished. I remember having to slip through a small gap between houses to reach the pitch – it felt like strolling through somebody's garden.

Throughout my life I have heard so much about Cliff Jones. People I trust tell me that, despite the fact that he wasn't very big, he was absolutely brilliant in the air and so incredibly brave. Then there's the way he used to run with the ball at speed, which is also something I can identify with.

## It's a wonderful life!



I wasn't aware he was watching at the time, but Cliff now tells me how he saw me playing for Salford Boys against Islington Boys in the quarter-finals of the English Schools Trophy and how he picked me out as having a bit of potential, which was nice of him. We knew we were in for a hard game that day because Islington were an excellent side, but we gave one of our best performances and managed to win.

I'm delighted to say that there are even more footballing connections between the two of us. Cliff was a key member of the wonderful Spurs team which became the first in the twentieth century to lift the League

and FA Cup double, and winning that pair of trophies was an uplifting experience which I was fortunate enough to share in my own career, although I wasn't a pioneer like he was.

Also he was in the first British side to win European silverware, when Tottenham brought home the Cup Winners' Cup in 1963, and once again I've had the luck to be involved in success on the continent, following the trail that he blazed so gloriously so many years before me.

On the international front, of course, I could never equal what he did in becoming a World Cup quarter-finalist. Looking back, it's such a shame that the incomparable John Charles was injured and forced to miss the last-eight clash with a Brazil team that included the young Pele. Still, the fact that Wales got so far in the competition, and held their own against such top opposition, is a colossal achievement of which Cliff and his teammates could be so, so proud. The scale of what they did is only emphasised by the fact that it has taken our country more than half a century to reach the finals of another major competition.

All this underlines the status of Cliff Jones in the history of Welsh football. Truly he is, and will always remain, one of our game's principal figures. This was illustrated vividly to me at a function organised by the National Football Museum in Manchester at which he got up to speak at the inauguration of his old friend the late Ivor Allchurch, another all-time great.

Cliff held the floor for about 15 minutes and he had the place spellbound with his stories and his insights. People were hanging on his every word. The venue was full of famous football folk that night, some of the biggest names you can imagine, but there was never any doubt who everyone wanted to have their picture taken with afterwards. I'm not just talking about fans, either, but top players from all eras – they all sought out Cliff and wanted to share a bit of his time.

And it's easy to understand why. Not only is Cliff a true legend of Welsh football, but he's a lovely man, full of fun and wisdom, so humble and accessible and down-to-earth. I hope his book sells a million.

Ryan Giggs, September 2016

## CHAPTER ONE

# A Swansea Jack with brains in his feet

The origin of the term ‘Swansea Jack’ to describe any lad born in our dear old town is open to lively debate. Some say it was a nineteenth-century nickname coined to describe locally-born sailors, or Jack Tars, who always enjoyed a glowing reputation for their exceptional seamanship. Others get a bit more technical, reckoning Swansea-based miners, the hard men who dug coal and copper from the earth, used something called a jack tin to carry their lunch.

Then there is a third theory, perhaps the most romantic, that the name derives from an extremely brave dog who rejoiced in that title, a muscular black Newfoundland with a long coat, who made a habit of rescuing people from drowning in Swansea Docks in the 1930s. Local legend declares that the courageous hound saved 27 lives over the span of around half a decade before he fell victim to rat poison.

That particular Swansea Jack became a national hero, winning an award as the Bravest Dog of the Year from a London newspaper and being named Dog of the Century by a rescue organisation as recently as 2000. There is a monument to the canine hero on the dock promenade, close to St Helen’s rugby and cricket grounds.

Finally, though rather less acceptably, there is the notion that Swansea Jack was an alias used by a fellow from the town accused of murdering a Cardiff man in 1847, and that it was adopted to describe any man or boy hailing from the thriving community at the mouth of the River Tawe.

Whatever the truth of the matter, and I have to say I like the idea of the fearless dog who was in his intrepid prime around the time of my birth, the

fact remains that I am, and always will be, a Swansea Jack through and through, from topknot to toes. True, I have lived in London or the surrounding area for more than half a century now, and have been immensely happy there, but I remain fiercely proud of my birthplace and my heritage, and I get back to Swansea, where I have countless friends and family members, as often as ever I can.

It's not my intention to paint my childhood in a rose-tinted light that might have seeped from some cosy Sunday-evening television drama set in the good old days, but the fact remains that my growing-up years were happy and contented ones, broadly speaking.

I was born into a remarkable family of professional footballers, and such were my own talents and inclinations that I was always going to follow in their sporting footsteps, but much more of that later. Let me first attempt to paint a picture of the earliest daily life I can remember.

I first saw the light of day on 7 February 1935 and was brought up at 8 Beach Street, Sandfields, which was very much a working-class area of Swansea situated, as the name implies, very close to the waterside.

Our house was very ordinary, terraced, three-up-and-three-down with not a lot of spare space, no front garden and only a small vegetable patch at the back, but it was home to seven of us – my dad, Ivor; May, my mother; and five children. In descending order of age there was Bob, Valerie, Bryn, myself and Freda.

The world we inhabited was very close-knit, with friends and relatives nearby in all directions, all living in very similar houses. It seems almost like a cliché to mention it now, but it really was true that most families didn't lock their doors, and folk wandered in and out of each other's homes pretty much at will, often without even knocking. Nearly all communication was by word of mouth. Hardly anyone had telephones, although there were red boxes on many corners. Nobody had cars, so the streets were safe and the kids could play in them. There were little pubs everywhere, which were key focal points of the community. Socially and work-wise you lived your lives in a very small area.

They were different days, very rough and ready, but people were more grounded in reality, mindful of the things that really matter in life. Although

## **It's a wonderful life!**

there was plenty of hardship around, folk were grateful and relieved to have come through the war. They were more easily satisfied, more ready to make do and mend, weren't consumed by the absurd and unrealistic aspirations that appear to obsess so many people today.

Close by us was a cobbler's run by Bryn Wilkie; Dolly Furseland had a greengrocer's shop; there was Thomas's, the Welsh shop, and Puddicombs, the butcher, where we would go every Thursday without fail to get our faggots and peas. Also nearby was Joe's ice-cream parlour and I shall always remember his sales pitch: 'There's ice-cream, and then there's Joe's.' Finally there was Cambden the barber with the red-and-white pole outside – short back and sides for one shilling and sixpence (seven and a half pence in modern money).

Best of all, my maternal grandfather, Bob Messer, lived next to me and he ran a fish-and-chip shop which had a deserved reputation as the best in Swansea. It even had a bus stop named after it. When I popped home from school at lunchtimes – it was only a stone's throw away and school dinners were rare in those times – he always let me help myself to the freshly-cooked chips, which I loved. They never made me put on weight, no matter how many I ate, because I was always so active.

Granddad Bob was a central figure in my young life and I spent a lot of time with him, especially relishing our joint excursions to the fish market. He was a former rugby league player who had moved down from the north, and in later years when I developed into a pretty nippy winger, people used to say I had inherited my pace from him.

That said, I was never going to be anything less than as fit as a whippet because, I am reliably informed, all through my childhood I never stayed still for a moment. I was always on the go with my mates, either playing football or cricket or any one of the usual games like cops-and-robbers and hide-and-seek.

I was probably a bit of a scamp, roaming round with the other kids and getting into scrapes – always wholesome scrapes, mind, just ordinary naughtiness, nothing malicious. I always threw myself wholeheartedly into every activity, some might say recklessly, and there were times when I paid for my overwhelming determination. Too often for coincidence, I would end up in

the casualty department of Swansea hospital, more likely than not having to hold still while stitches were inserted into my latest wound.

At least that stood me in good stead for my football career, during which I suffered no shortage of injuries. At Tottenham they used to tell me I had more scars around my eyes than legendary boxer Henry Cooper, most of them caused by heading the ball and sometimes making contact with my marker's nut. In some ways, I suppose, I was a victim of my own enthusiasm, but I can honestly say that whenever the ball came near me it didn't even cross my mind that I might get hurt, I just threw everything I had at putting it into the net. Fools rush in, you might say!

Back in my time as a schoolboy adventurer, there were other discomforts, too, notably a food shortage on one ridiculously disorganised occasion. Together with a group of friends I went camping in woods not all that far out of town. We had planned to make our expedition last for a couple of days – it was meant to be a real Swiss Family Robinson affair – so we had taken plentiful supplies with us. But, being typical lads with healthy appetites, by lunchtime on the first day we had gobbled the lot. Soon I was pining for my grandfather's fish and-chip shop and we made an emergency return to base for extra supplies, shrugging off the severe ribbing we received in the interest of re-lining our stomachs.

Given all the energy we burned, we used to get tired so on one trip we planned to go to sleep early in the evening, as soon as it started to get dark. One of my pals suggested we stuff something in our ears to keep out the bugs, and I thought I was being clever by rolling up pieces of newspaper, then forcing them in as far as they would go. Of course, they went a bit too far, right into my inner ear, and pretty soon I was on one of my hospital visits to have them extracted. I felt pretty daft, and everybody had a good laugh at my expense, but at least the doctor didn't need a needle and thread on this occasion.

Many of the most vivid recollections from my boyhood involve the Blitz. Swansea was targeted repeatedly by the Luftwaffe because it was a very industrial area, with the steelworks and the docks, and all the kids were given Mickey Mouse gas masks to protect them during the frequent air raids.

Though I was only six at the time, I can recall with absolute clarity three or four consecutive nights of bombing in 1941 when I had to race to the

## **It's a wonderful life!**

bomb shelter and dive into it with lots of other people. Looking back, I suppose it was quite eerie because you'd hear the bombs coming down but you wouldn't know where they were going to land. We called them whistlers, which was a pretty cheerful name for something so deadly, but it was very important for everybody to keep their spirits up.

There were Anderson shelters in many of the gardens in our terrace, some of them shared by three or four families. They were made of corrugated iron with sacks stuffed in to block up holes. Of course, all this would have been utterly useless against a direct hit but it was needed to deflect the flying shrapnel, of which there was plenty. During the daytime we youngsters would comb the area, collecting shards of the shrapnel that had been blasted seemingly into every corner, then we would swap pieces with each other.

To us it was all a bit of a lark, a dash of adventure which broke up the routine of daily life, but to the grown-ups, who truly understood what was at stake every time they heard the drone of an approaching bomber, it must have been terrifying.

At one point I was evacuated, along with my brothers and sisters, to the comparative safety of Merthyr Tydfil, where my father's folk were based, and other members of the clan turned up from all over the place, including Birmingham and the London area. Because there were five of us we all slept in different houses but we saw each other every day, being part of a close-knit and extended family. Even to a child, the sense of community was obvious, and it was extremely reassuring. There was a feeling that everyone would look after everyone else, which is an ideal way to live. Sadly, that ethos seems to have seeped away from many areas of modern life, and that's a shame.

Another positive memory from the war was the fun we had when the Americans arrived in Swansea. Generally speaking, we children got on well with them. They were lively and ready for a laugh, and suddenly there seemed to be a lot of chewing gum around. With so many of our local lads away on active service, all the girls seemed to fancy these glamorous newcomers and, in an era of sharp cultural change, it's hardly surprising that there were plenty of GI brides.

For me, though, everything always came back to football and, for all the closeness of my relationship with Granddad Bob, there was never any way that I was going to follow him into the oval-ball code. Football was part of my DNA, hardly surprising when you consider that my father was a Welsh international inside-forward who collected ten caps between 1920 and 1926 and his four brothers – that's Will John, Emlyn, the famous Bryn and Bert – also played the game to a high level, three of them professionally.

Dad's family hailed from Merthyr Tydfil, some 30 miles along the Rhondda Valley, and their collective aptitude for football was truly astonishing. Among such a keen bunch you might expect one or two to excel, but for the whole lot to be blessed with rich talent with a ball at their feet defies belief.

The eldest of the quintet, Will John, was the only one to remain in the amateur ranks, turning out for Merthyr, Ton Pentre and Porth, but opting to make his living in business.

Next came my dad, Ivor, to whom I'll return shortly. Then there was Emlyn, a clever inside-forward like most of my clan, and he played for Everton and Southend United. The fourth brother was Bryn, who served Wolverhampton Wanderers, Arsenal and Norwich City at club level while winning 17 caps for Wales, and finally there was young Bert, apparently the most gifted of all, who gave exciting notice of his potential with Southend and Wolves before being killed in the war in Burma, cut down tragically before what should have been his prime.

As for my father, he left school while playing his football to a commendably high level as a centre-half with Merthyr, then headed down a local pit shaft to start work as a coalminer, as was the inevitable custom for young men in those parts.

But then his way of life was turned upside down as, in 1917 while he was still only 18, he was called up to serve in the Army in the First World War. When peace was declared he came home and shifted his football activity to Caerphilly, for whom he shone brightly in a game with Swansea reserves, mightily impressing new Vetch boss Joe Bradshaw. Accordingly in 1919 he was recruited by the Town for a transfer fee of just £50 – how incredible to reflect that such a sum wouldn't pay for more than a few minutes of a Premier League player's time today.

## **It's a wonderful life!**

By all accounts my dad was a lovely ball player, very smooth in possession and a natural schemer who could pick a pass and then place it on a sixpence. Strong and stockily built, he didn't score too many goals but he created plenty for others and soon enough the news of his talent spread well beyond South Wales, so much so that by the spring of 1920 the club had received 25 enquiries about signing him, nearly all from Football League clubs.

At that time the Swans were members of the Southern League, but for the 1920/21 season they became founder members of the Football League's new Third Division. It was at that point that my father, who had just become the first Swansea man to enter the international arena – making his Wales debut in a 2–2 draw against Ireland in Belfast – became very much in demand.

The approaches continued to pour into The Vetch until April 1922, when finally he was transferred, to West Bromwich Albion of the top division at a cost of £2,500.

Reporters of the day were mostly very complimentary about Ivor's clever play, though I read one account where he was criticised for attempting more than he could hope to achieve single-handedly. That might be translated as hanging on to the ball too long, and my only comment on that would be: Like father, like son! I was never over-keen on passing either, a tendency which used to have Spurs captain Danny Blanchflower tearing out his hair at times. As he put it to me once, lacing his customary eloquence with heartfelt profanity: "The ball is f\*\*\*\*\* round, and it rolls, so why not f\*\*\*\*\* pass it occasionally?" Of course, that wasn't my style, but I'll make my excuses for that later in my story.

My dad seemed to fit in well at The Hawthorns, filling both inside-forward positions at various times and linking beautifully with excellent wingers such as Howard Gregory, Jack Byers and Tommy Glidden. He stayed there until 1926, the year he received the last of his caps and when injury problems began to hamper him seriously.

Probably his proudest achievement in the game was being part of the squad which lifted the Triple Crown in 1923/24. He operated at inside-right in the 2–0 victory over Scotland at Ninian Park, but was replaced by Newport County's Jack Nicholls for the subsequent wins over England and Ireland.

After leaving the Throstles – that was Albion's nickname in the old days, before everyone started calling them the Baggies in modern times – he returned

to Swansea, as a player-coach, then had further footballing billets with Aberystwyth Town, Aldershot, Thames, Eastside and Aberavon Harlequins, but eventually left the game to make a living for his growing brood.

Meanwhile Bryn, who was a dozen years younger, was working his way towards what would become an illustrious career, and which took off when he moved to Wolverhampton Wanderers from Aberaman Athletic in 1933.

Up to that point, though clearly endowed with enormous talent, he had wandered from club to club, completing a trial here and a brief stint there before starting to dazzle at Molineux. Over the next five years his displays in the famous gold shirt, usually with a number ten on his back, made him one of the hottest properties around.

Come 1937/38, in his mid-twenties and probably at his peak, he hit the form of his life, scoring 15 goals in 36 games and proving inspirational as Major Frank Buckley's Wolves finished as runners-up in the title race, only a point behind the champions, Arsenal.

My Uncle Bryn's burgeoning influence was duly noted at Highbury, and that August he broke the world transfer record when he moved to Arsenal for £14,000, a deal which made him an instant celebrity.

To anyone who knew him, that was a strange state of affairs because Bryn was a quiet, modest, delightfully unassuming character who would never seek the limelight. Certainly he was never concerned about being feted as the most expensive player there had ever been. Rather it was just something he took in his stride. After all, it wasn't something he was going to make a fortune from – things have changed a bit now, you might say!

Unfortunately, although he remained at Arsenal for 11 years, his time at the club was not the glorious sojourn which had been anticipated. Soon after he arrived in north London – he had completed only one season, in which he had struggled to settle into producing the best of himself for George Allison's star-studded side – along came the Second World War and he joined the Army, thus finding himself involved in an altogether deadlier type of action than what he had had in mind.

Happily he survived, but the conflict had cost him and his generation what should have been the finest years of their careers. Six years on, it must have been monstrously difficult to pick up the threads and he never really

## It's a wonderful life!



*Back where it all began, at Oxford Street Secondary School in Swansea. I don't recall the name of the lad in the blazer on the left of the back row, but I do remember the rest. Standing, left to right after the mystery man, are John Williams, Buller Champion, Freddie Spridgeon and Alan Blewitt. In the middle row are our maths and games teacher Mr Ebo Evans, Billy Peters, Alan Davies (who became a top comedian at the local dockers' club), Gerald Griffiths, Brian Parker, Terry Tracey and headmaster Mr Logan. That's me cross-legged at the front on the left with Aubrey Argent on the right and some hard-earned silverware in between us.*

managed it, making precious little impact over the next three campaigns before enlisting with Norwich City, then in the old Third Division South, as player-coach in the summer of 1949.

In such poignant circumstances, a lot of people might have fallen prey to bitterness, blaming others for their own misfortunes, but Bryn was never going to be like that. When his playing days were done, Arsenal helped him to get a little newspaper shop in Islington, north London, in which he worked successfully for a long time, and he always retained enormous

respect for the club. He spoke as he found, declaring that they looked after their former players fantastically well, and I feel that attitude reflected immense credit on Bryn, who died in 1985 at the age of 73.

Normally I'm not one for looking back and eating my heart out for what might have been, but I have to say that one of the most intense regrets of my life is that I never saw my father – who didn't fight in the war because he was working below ground in a Merthyr colmine during the hostilities – or any of my uncles in action on the pitch. Dad's career was over before I was born and even though I was ten when the war ended, with Bryn still playing for Arsenal, those were very different days, with practically no live football on television – and anyway, for many years we didn't have a set!

Meanwhile, I must admit to not being the most avid of readers, but even if I had been there would have been nothing but the occasional match report in the London newspapers from which I might have gleaned some precious information. Remember, this was a time before magazines such as *Charles Buchan's Football Monthly* and *Soccer Star* – both long disappeared and much lamented – so there was precious little for a young lad in South Wales to consult.

Still, I do have some treasured memories of my father with a ball at his feet. Sometimes when I was a little boy he would take a few of us on to the beach, or to a local pitch, for a bit of a kickabout and you could see even then, though he was in his forties and cutting a distinctly portly figure, that he could do a bit. Oh yes, I have no doubt that Ivor Jones was some player in his day.

So, with so much emphasis on football in my family and in my everyday life, it always seemed completely natural, totally inevitable, even a matter-of-fact circumstance, that I would grow up to play the game professionally. To most boys of my age, back then and even more so now, becoming a footballer was little more than a dream. To me it was reality.

My earliest memory of playing anything close to a structured football match is on the beautiful expanse of open space that is the beach at Sandfields. Every Sunday morning there would be a communal game, perhaps 20-a-side, mostly made up of older boys but also including tiddlers like me who were keen to have a go. For loads of football-crazy youngsters, it was the big occasion of their week.

## **It's a wonderful life!**

And it wasn't just the Sandfield boys in action. You could gaze around Swansea Bay, a glorious sweep of about seven miles of hard-packed sand when the tide was out, and there were pockets of football all the way along. There'd be the Brynmill Boys and the Port Tenant Boys and many more, an amazing sight, an inspirational one really, the mere thought of which transports me back to my childhood. They talk about the beach football of Brazil, but I can vouch for the fact that the Swansea version wasn't bad, either!

I suppose it was our local equivalent of Hackney Marshes, where there are nearly a hundred full-sized pitches which have been the subject of some fantastic photographs – I only wish I had a picture of Sandfields in its footballing prime. Of course, it was much more informal than Hackney, with no marked lines, but it lifted the heart to see it. Once again, we come back to the notion of community, and this was a truly powerful illustration of that, with so many folk immersed in their sport together.

Mind, I wasn't having such profound thoughts at the time. I was just having fun while soaking up experience that would stand me in good stead even when I was running up and down the wing for Swansea, Spurs and Wales.

What I learned most surely was that, with so many people in the same team, when you passed the ball you might not see it again for another 20 minutes. My solution to that was simple – I would hang on to the ball as long as I could. That's where I honed my dribbling technique, it's as basic as that. Obviously I had a certain fundamental ability and the athleticism to avoid some of the, shall we say, rather vigorous challenges that came my way, but in the final analysis, I owed my progress to my time on the sand.

Even before those tumultuous Sunday morning sessions, I used to nip out of our back door and over to the beach to kick a ball around at every opportunity. Every time I stepped outside to join my friends, out would come a ball. Any lad who owned anything like a proper one was a top man. I never possessed one myself, but there was always someone who did.

We had one favourite location, a bombsite on the corner of Beach Street, a sandy piece of ground where we would play for hours on end. There wasn't much space, it was probably no more than half the size of a penalty area, but there was one sound wall from which we would get reliable

rebounds. We would improvise goalposts with anything that came to hand, often a coat or a stray piece of wood, and employ our vivid imaginations, transforming our humble venue into whatever famous stadium took our fancy – Wembley, Ninian Park, Hampden, Old Trafford, White Hart Lane... you name it and we played there! There was even a handily placed street lamp which served as our floodlight. What more could a bunch of football-mad kids ask?

Often, too, I'd be playing street games with a tennis ball in the time-honoured tradition followed all over the world. With the smaller ball bouncing at any old awkward angle off kerbstones and boot-scrappers and door-handles, it was brilliant for perfecting your skills.



*That's me sitting on the left, looking a fair bit younger than most of my mates in the Swansea Schoolboys team in the mid-1940s. On the other end of the bench is Lenny Allchurch, whom I went on to play alongside for Swansea Town and Wales, while the fellow with the ball at his feet is Jim Pressdee, who found fame as a Glamorgan county cricketer.*

## **It's a wonderful life!**

Tellingly, back in the 1940s there were no distractions such as television or computers and, even more crucially, it was absolutely safe to stage a football game on the street because there was virtually no traffic around. Also – and it makes me feel very sad to say this – the community was far, far safer than it is today. Parents had no qualms about sending their children outside to play for hours on end, confident that no harm would come to them, and if they did take a tumble then there would always be somebody sympathetic on hand to pick them up.

Our local copper was old Dai Salmon, who would go through the motions of chasing the young footballers off the streets, but we weren't bothered by him and, anyway, he knew we weren't doing any harm. The cry 'Old Dai's coming!' would go up and we'd all scarpers somewhere else to re-start our game. Honour was satisfied all round.

The important thing was that in all the years I was growing up, I never felt threatened or in any sort of danger. Of course, in any neighbourhood at any time there is the odd dodgy character, but we knew everybody in Sandfields, especially the ones who might be described as villains, and we knew the ones to stay away from.

My first school was St Helen's Infants, where there was no organised team. That step up came when I made it to the Oxford Street Secondary Modern at the age of 11, by which time, without being big-headed because genuinely I hate to blow my own trumpet, I knew I was pretty good at football. It became clear that I had something a little bit extra to most of the lads because they couldn't get the ball off me, even boys who were much bigger and older.

When I was 12 I was picked for the first time for Swansea Schoolboys, which had become quite a breeding ground for professional footballers over the years. At the time I was an inside-forward, like my dad and all my uncles before me, and I was captain in 1950, my last year at school when we won the English Schools Trophy, beating Manchester Boys in the final.

We drew 1-1 at The Vetch in front of 20,000 fans, then we travelled north to Maine Road – then the home of Manchester City – and we won 1-0, with Bryn Evans from Gorseinon getting the goal.

Before the game we had the thrill of our lives when Dai Beynon, a marvellous



*Slurping my soup (centre of picture) after Swansea Schoolboys had beaten Manchester Boys 1-0 on their own turf to win the English Schools Shield in 1950. To my left are teammates Bryn Evans, who scored the goal, Gerald Griffiths, a cherubic Mel Charles and Dai Davies.*

man who organised our football and looked after us magnificently, introduced us to the great Billy Meredith, the original Welsh Wizard.

Billy, who has been called football's first superstar and not without reason, shone for both Manchester clubs, emerging as a City hero in the late nineteenth century, then winning everything in sight with United before returning to City to finish his career in the early 1920s.

Along the way he accumulated 48 Welsh caps, a vast total in those days of fewer internationals per season, and still found time to be one of the main moving forces behind the players' union, which was needed desperately at a period in history when footballers tended to be exploited mercilessly by club owners. Billy was a genuine pioneer, a true trailblazer.

Dai got him to talk to us, which was really uplifting. The wisdom was



*The spoils of victory. As the Swansea captain, it fell to me to receive the English Schools Shield in 1950.*

practically dripping out of him and he was superb at motivation, telling us to go and win it for Wales. As for that famous toothpick with which he was always pictured by cartoonists, I can confirm that it was no myth, he really did have it in his mouth all the time.

It was a privilege for me to play in that schoolboy side, which lifted a prestigious double that season as we also won the Welsh Shield, though it did surprise me when I was the only one who went on to become a professional. It was thought at the time that the centre-forward, Dai Davies, had a good chance. He was quick and strong, an outstanding prospect, but he never developed. I guess it's fair to say that size is a massive advantage for any reasonably talented

lad at that age, but often the young giants just don't go on. Another pair, the wing-half Gerald Griffiths and defender Kenny Chard, did join the Swansea Town groundstaff at the same time as me but they never progressed, and there were a few more who had trials at The Vetch without making the grade.

I suppose if any confirmation were ever needed that I was destined to make my living in the game, it came when I didn't pass my 11-plus examination. I have to admit that the result came as a disappointment because I believed I was bright enough to succeed. The truth is that, although I always had a certain intelligence, being capable of expressing myself, I was never genuinely academic. I was never too bad at English and I had decent handwriting, but I was never much good at maths, history, geography or science. My heart just wasn't in those subjects. My development was all geared around sport in general and football in particular.

One of my teachers, an enormously encouraging individual called Gabe Williams, had helped me a lot and now he attempted to let me down lightly, telling me that there was more to life than exams. “Anyway,” he added, “your brains are in your feet!” No argument from me about that. I recounted that story in July 2014 when I was elected an Honorary Fellow of The University of Wales, Trinity Saint David, at an awards ceremony held in The Grand, Swansea.

Still, for all my lack of significant classroom achievement, I do have plenty of worthwhile recollections of my schooldays, even some which had nothing to do with football. For example, there was the time when I was late and was sent to the headmaster, who caned me. Then he gave me an extra whack because I had blamed my mum for my lack of punctuality, telling me: “Jones, you shouldn’t blame your mother. She’s the best friend any boy ever has!” And he wasn’t wrong, was he?