

## GIBSON-WATT, JAMES DAVID, BARON GIBSON-WATT (1918-2002), Member of Parliament and public figure

**Name:** James David Gibson-watt

**Date of birth:** 1918

**Date of death:** 2002

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** Member of Parliament and public figure

**Area of activity:** Politics, Government and Political Movements; Public and Social Service, Civil Administration

**Author:** David Lewis Jones

Born on 11 September 1918, the son of James Miller Gibson-Watt (1875-1929) of Doldowlod, near Llandrindod Wells, Radnorshire (Powys), and Marjorie Adela Ricardo. David Gibson-Watt was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge. In October 1939, he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant into the Welsh Guards. Serving in the African campaign as commander of No. 4 Company, 3rd Battalion, Welsh Guards, Gibson-Watt was ordered to take part in the attack, in May 1943, on the town of Hamman-Lif, Tunisia. Although wounded during the advance, he continued to lead his men throughout a very dangerous skirmish. He was awarded the Military Cross for outstanding gallantry and leadership. Early in 1944, Gibson-Watt took part in the defence of Monte Cerasola, near Monte Cassino, and his conduct during a successful counter-attack on 9 February earned him the award of a Bar to his Military Cross. Two months later, he led No. 4 Company in an attack across the river Po and was awarded a second Bar for his inspiring leadership and almost reckless courage. He achieved the rank of a Major and became an instructor at Sandhurst before he left the Army in 1946.

On his return to Doldowlod, he was elected to Radnorshire County Council and was selected the Conservative candidate for the Brecon and Radnorshire constituency. In a straight fight with Tudor Watkins, the Labour candidate, Gibson-Watt had a good chance of gaining the seat at the 1950 general election, but the appearance of an Independent Liberal candidate gave Watkins a narrow majority. The contest at the 1951 general election was a straight fight between Watkins and Gibson-Watt, but Watkins held the seat with a slightly reduced majority. When **J. P. L. Thomas**, the First Lord of the Admiralty, was created **Viscount Cilcennin** in 1956, Gibson-Watt was selected to fight the by-election in the Hereford constituency on 15 February 1956 and he held the seat for the Conservatives with a reduced majority. Within a few months, Gibson-Watt was appointed to government office, albeit unpaid, as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Julian Amery, the Under-Secretary of State for War, and as an assistant whip. In October 1959, he was appointed a government whip, but resigned at the end of November 1961, not from disloyalty to the Prime Minister but from a wish to play a more active role on the backbenches. He had served briefly as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Harold Macmillan, when Anthony Barber, the usual holder of this post, was in hospital. From 1962 to 1964, Gibson-Watt was Parliamentary Private Secretary to Reginald Maudling, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. When the Conservatives went into opposition in 1964, Gibson-Watt became a front-bench spokesman on the department of the Postmaster General and on Wales. In the latter role, he accompanied Edward Heath to the Investiture in 1969 when they stayed on the *Melissa*, a large yacht owned by a wealthy Tory Member of Parliament and anchored in Caernarfon Bay for the occasion.

When Edward Heath formed a government in 1970, Gibson-Watt was not appointed to a cabinet post but was made Minister of State at the Welsh Office where the newly elected Peter Thomas was Secretary of State. While Gibson-Watt did not support devolution, he accepted that the Welsh Office had become a permanent part of the government. One of his tasks was to chair the meetings of the Welsh Grand Committee where Labour members, irked by his background, tried to shout him down but he always managed to speak over them in a loud booming voice. Towards the end of the Heath government, Gibson-Watt had an operation and he decided not to contest the October 1974 election. Proud of the Conservative achievement in Wales, he reacted sharply to criticism of the party's record between 1970 and 1974. In a letter to *The Times* of 11 June 1975, he recalled that Heath's government had cancelled the Mid-Wales Rural Development Board, saved the valleys of the Senny and Dulais from flooding, set up the Welsh language advisory committee, brought primary and secondary education under the Welsh Office, and produced the first report on straying animals in the South Wales valleys.

As a landowner in Mid-Wales with a noted herd of Welsh Black cattle, Gibson-Watt had a great interest in farming and the land; he served as Chairman of the Livestock Export Council 1962-1964. After his retirement from political life, he devoted himself to rural affairs, being Forestry Commissioner 1976-1986; Chairman of Timber Growers, United Kingdom 1989-1990, and President 1993-1998; President of the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society 1976 and an industrious and supportive Chairman from 1977 to 1994. From 1975-1979, he was a member of the Historic Buildings Council Wales. He returned, briefly, to politics when he chaired the 'No Assembly' campaign, which argued for a 'no' vote in the devolution referendum on 1 March 1979. In the Queen's Birthday Honours List on 26 June 1979, he was made a life peer and took the title of Baron Gibson-Watt, of the Wye in the District of Radnor. His maiden speech in the House of Lords, as in the House of Commons almost thirty years earlier, was on the subject of forestry. Lord Hailsham, the Lord Chancellor, appointed Gibson-Watt Chairman of the Council on Tribunals, a post he held from 1980 to 1986.

David Gibson-Watt was a tall (6'4"), handsome man. He represented an older tradition of public service and gained the reputation of being "the most honest and decent man in politics". Despite his wider commitments, he served Radnorshire as a Justice of the Peace in Rhayader for many years until his retirement at the age of 70.

He married Diana Hambro, the second daughter of Sir Charles Hambro, Chairman of Hambro's Bank Ltd., on 10 January 1942 and they had three sons and two daughters; their eldest son, Jamie, died on 24 October 1946 at the age of three. Diana Gibson-Watt died in August 2000. Lord Gibson-Watt died at Doldowlod on 7 February 2002. The funeral was a private family occasion and a public memorial service was held at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Llandrindod Wells, on 27 April. He left an estate of £4,104,505. David Gibson-Watt was proud of his descent from James Watt, the eminent engineer who purchased Doldowlod as a summer residence in 1798, and he was helpful to researchers wishing to consult the large collection of Watt archives and artefacts in the possession of the family. He sold the manuscripts to Birmingham Central Library in 1994, and the remainder of the collection was sold in 2003.

### Author

David Lewis Jones

### Sources

*Who was who?* 2001-2005

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*Western Mail*, 12 February 2002

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The National Library of Wales holds the papers of the "No Assembly" campaign 1979

National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales, a filmed interview with David Gibson-Watt on his career

## Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Q5234119](#)

## Additional Links

Wikidata: [\\_Baron\\_Gibson-Watt](#)

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