

15th Season 1886-7

Walton Hussey was elected for a second term as captain. The season started well with four wins, two draws and a defeat at Bridgwater by a disputed last minute try. For the next game against Barnstaple it was reported that the “tall form of Hussey was missed during the afternoon”. Apparently differences of opinion and “grievances” had arisen within the team and Hussey had resigned. The cause of these differences is not known but the captain had been criticised for shouting at the forwards from his position at full-back.

He promptly joined the St. Thomas club and during his first game for them at Crediton he was hissed and booed by the home spectators. He appears to have acquired an undeserved reputation. However by February 1888 Hussey had resumed his accustomed place in the Exeter fifteen.

According to one report R.A. Glass had accepted the captaincy as the club was “at sixes and sevens” but he was then injured. Originally elected vice-captain, the ever dependable Charles Mudge led the team for most of the season until the final two games when B.W.L. Ashford took over.

Despite the upheaval, the season ended with a very creditable playing record. Of 17 matches played of which 12 were won, two drawn and only three lost. This season saw the introduction of points scoring to determine results. A goal was worth three points and a try just one. In 1886-7 Exeter scored 85 points (20 goals, 25 tries) to only 22 by their opponents (5 goals, 7 tries).

Twenty three games had been arranged but two were lost to the weather and four to Devon county matches. Strangely, bearing in mind the interest in the challenge match the previous season, no game was played against Tiverton. Two fixtures had been arranged but both coincided with county matches in which players from both sides were involved. There was a suggestion that another challenge match should be played but nothing came to fruition. Meanwhile the Devon R.F.U. began to plan for a cup competition for the following season.

New opponents among the fixtures were Dartmouth and Newton who assumed the place of Newton Rifles on the list. The mid-Devon club quickly became one of the strongest in the county. When Exeter travelled to Newton in October supporters were invited to travel with the team on the 2.23 pm train from St. Thomas station. For the last game of the season Newton travelled to Exeter with a number of supporters who then joined about fifty others who had walked to the ground having left their home town at 8.30 am!

After their experience the previous season at Teignmouth the south Devon team was not included on the list though one reporter urged Exeter to show its manliness and issue a challenge! At Bridgwater, Exeter, who had borrowed three Wiveliscombe forwards, had lost by a solitary try scored when the Exeter umpire had said that time was up. The referee decided to let the score stand. At the return match, which Exeter won, Bridgwater “cut up rough” and their players were “hooted” by the home supporters.

At this game it was noted that printed lists of players' names were distributed before the match, the first mention of a forerunner of a match programme at Exeter. Another innovation for the season was a suggestion from a spectator that half time lemons for players should be cut up! An R.F.U. directive declared that umpires would now carry flags and not just sticks. What difference this made to the control of a game is not recorded but disputes still abounded. Indeed the two games against Wellington (both lost) were singled out as exceptions, being "most pleasing" and free from disputes.

A one-off experiment was tried by Exeter in the game at Newton when four three-quarters took the field alongside a full back, two half-backs and eight forwards. Exeter had a number of talented backs at this time but they were unable to make a significant difference on this occasion as the game resulted in a scoreless draw. This new concept was a few years ahead of its time as far as the Exeter club is concerned.

Old problems still persisted. Secretary T.C. Pring found it difficult to get a team together for away matches when the train left before 2 pm. Most businesses worked half a day on Saturdays so assembling a team for an away game could be a problem in the strictly amateur days. For a game at Sidmouth only ten players promised to play. The game was, however, cancelled due to frost.

In contrast Crediton complained that when Exeter turned up to play there, included in the fifteen were several players who had opted to play for the club rather than for Devon against Gloucestershire. Exeter won comfortably.

Elsewhere in the city the Rougemont club went out of existence and joined forces with the St. Thomas club. As if taking its place, a new club was formed this season. Initially the new organisation was named Young Oaks and this club was, in the course of time, to emerge as Exeter Oaks and was to field a team second only to that of the city club.