

74th Year 1945-6

Recovery of rugby football in Exeter following the end of World War Two was swift. The club had been fortunate to be able to field teams in all but two years of the conflict and was therefore well placed to resume activities early in September 1945. Only six clubs had informed the Devon R.F.U. of the intention to resume a full fixture list for the forthcoming season. Plymouth Albion, Torquay and Barnstaple either re-started later in the season or the following season. As a consequence the Exeter fixture list contained several service teams but as the season progressed stronger teams were met.

Exeter senior team had enjoyed its best ever season in 1938-9 just before the outbreak of the war. The team now resumed with another record breaking season. In all 37 senior games were played of which 34 ended in victory whilst one was drawn. The two defeats came in home encounters with Bristol and London Welsh, two of the strongest clubs in the country at the time. Remarkably not a single game played away from home ended in defeat. The points tally stood at 647 against which opponents scored only 147. These statistics were hailed as “the finest in the country” and, despite the general standard of the opposition, the 1945-6 record was thought by long standing ex-players as the club’s best performance of the pre-professional age.

The ubiquitous Colin Paul resumed the captaincy and appeared in all 37 matches whilst vice-captain and full-back Sid Waller missed only one game. Waller recorded 118 points during the season whilst his captain notched 91.

At the Guildhall on the 14th September the club held its first Annual General Meeting since resuming a full fixture list. William Ashford took the chair. A report on the 1938-9 season was presented. Despite the record playing achievement a loss of £17 12s 0d (£505) was recorded but a credit balance of £88 13s 1d (£2,800) was held. It was also recorded that some 65 players had served in the forces during the war. For the current season it was decided to revive the 2nd XV which would continue to bear the name Exeter Harlequins.

The most significant decision at the meeting was the acceptance of the proposal from Colin Paul that a Memorial Hall to fallen members be erected at the County Ground. The Memorial Clubhouse remained in use until the club’s departure from St. Thomas to Sandy Park some 60 years later.

After an early season practice match, the new campaign began with a home match against Royal Air Force (Chivenor). Exeter started with a bang scoring 23 points by half time but then tailed off registering only a try and a dropped goal in the second period. A heavier pack provided Exeter with the main advantage (30-3). Remaining at home Exeter then faced naval opposition in the guise of Royal Naval Air Station (Henstridge) who went down by a similar score to that of the previous week (32-3).

Next came the turn of an Army team. Exeter travelled to Williton to face a Royal Artillery Training Regiment XV. Playing brilliantly, Exeter made the opposition look ordinary. Dick Madge in his first game of the season scored two tries and had a hand in several others (51-0). The first month ended with a visit to H.M.S. Drake, the name given to the Royal Naval Base at Devonport. Play was bright and open but Exeter won through a pack that dominated both scrum and line-out (16-10).

Back at home the first civilian team faced was the Plymouth Combination XV that up to this point had, like Exeter, been undefeated. The visitors did well in the scrums but were otherwise outplayed (30-0). At Tiverton a weaker than normal side accounted for the home team (15-0). Back at home Exeter defeated the Royal Naval Engineering College by a narrow margin after a fast moving open game. Rain after half time made handling more difficult and the result remained in the balance until the end (11-6). A return to Tiverton for a mid-week match with Blundell’s School produced another victory (19-3). To end the month of November, Paignton brought “a near Devon XV” to the County

Ground but, although the teams were well matched, the Exeter run of unbeaten matches continued (12-3).

Venturing outside the county for the first time in the season, Exeter travelled by char-a-banc to Bournemouth where the game "aroused considerable interest in the seaside town". Territorially the game was even but the home side "lacked skill and forcefulness in attack" (21-3).

Exeter's growing reputation caused another opponent to seek reinforcement for a visit to the County Ground to which venue "a large crowd was early making its way". The Taunton XV included players from Somerset Police and some R.A.F. service men in an attempt to maintain its own unbeaten record. In the absence of Bill Sanders, Exeter lacked possession from the set scrums but the efforts of two other stalwarts won the day. Colin Paul scored three tries and Sid Waller converted each of them (15-3).

Exeter's own unbeaten record was not to last as, on the 17th of November, visitors Bristol gained victory. A later Exeter match programme commented "We must agree that the better team won" (0-14). After the match Bristol players were entertained at the "Gardeners Arms", Wonford, (run by former Exeter scrum-half H. Davey) at a "Reunion Supper" for past and present players.

Back to winning ways against Royal Naval Air Station (Yeovilton) at the County Ground, Exeter made better use of the chances that presented themselves and displayed better constructive play - but then took things too easily, allowing their opponents to score nine points in seven minutes towards the end of the game (19-12). At Bridgwater against a strengthened local Barbarians side the reverse applied. The home team took an early lead but pressure from Exeter told in the end (11-8).

The club was then to receive a boost from returning servicemen. Cecil Ford, in his first game since demobilisation, contributed three tries and two conversions in a victory over the previously undefeated R.A.F. (Dunkeswell) team. The airmen did better in the second half when Exeter was restricted to one try (21-0). A combined Taunton & Somerset Police team did not fare any better when Alan Brown re-appeared in the visiting Exeter XV (15-6).

After three consecutive away matches a return to the County Ground was marred by wind and heavy rain. Despite the conditions, Exeter tried to keep the game open and proved to be too good for their opponents, R.A.F. (Chivenor) (14-0). Playing conditions remained difficult when a combined H.M.S. Stewart/Teignmouth team visited Exeter for a game on Boxing Day. Exeter made the game attractive to watch and scored nine tries, not one of which was converted (27-0).

Three days later Old Blues from London came to visit and the two sides produced a thrilling encounter for the spectators. The home team went behind by eight points and still trailed by five at half time. Exeter, at this point, made positional changes, the most significant being the move of Colin Paul from centre into the pack. The changes had the desired effect and after a terrific struggle it was veteran forward Percy Thomas who registered the winning try (9-8).

The New Year began with a home fixture against Bath. After a pointless first half, according to a Bristol newspaper, "Bath faded". The view of the Exeter press was that the local team won by "running Bath off their legs". (11-0). It was also reported that too many good players were becoming available. Exeter was dubbed a "team of talents".

A large crowd assembled at Teignmouth where the home team went ahead by kicking a penalty goal but thereafter showed a lack cohesion (23-3). The match was played in aid of the National Fire Service Benevolent Fund. Unfit ground conditions caused the cancellation of a game at Weston. Resuming at Paignton, Exeter gave their poorest display of the season. The team was "overshadowed for possession" but it still managed to squeeze a win despite lacking the services of eight players either injured or playing for Devon (6-0).

Following war-time hibernation, Plymouth Albion had resumed activities in early January and Exeter showed support for their county rivals by rearranging a fixture to accommodate the re-established team. It was to be the first meeting between the clubs for six years. Albion opened with a spectacular try before Exeter found the need to rearrange the selected fifteen. Sid Waller was missing his first game of the season. His replacement at full back was then removed from that position long before the interval and another player placed there. The visitors managed to draw level before pulling away in the second period despite a slippery ball. "Exeter not at their best" was the verdict (20-3).

Exeter went behind early on again in the next game at Keyham against the Royal Naval Engineering College. The team led at half time but, despite a wind advantage, only one try was added before the end of the game. Mishandling spoiled a number of chances (8-3).

The next three fixtures also tested Exeter's mettle. When facing Weston at home five players were absent assisting the combined Devon & Cornwall team opposing the touring Kiwis. Exeter found difficulty in getting the ball away from set pieces and was further tested when Ford was injured. The game was a grim struggle, mainly confined to the forwards. A Waller penalty and a try from Hook before half time won the game (6-0). The Bridgwater Barbarians team for its visit to Exeter was either "strong" or "depleted" depending on the origin of the newspaper report. Facing the wind and the sun, Exeter opened brightly with Dick Madge putting in a lively performance. Leading by eighteen points at half-time Exeter eased its efforts (27-0). Away at Plymouth Albion it was a different proposition. The home club had begun to re-assert itself in top flight rugby. Madge tore a stomach muscle after 26 minutes and Jack Force was taken from the scrum to replace him. Play was "fast and entertaining" but only one score was registered – a dropped goal from Waller. A good pack and strong defence were the principle factors in achieving a double despite the home team dominating play towards the end of the game (4-0).

The next home match was attended by a party of Dutch children who were being entertained by the club for the day. What the guests made of what must have been a puzzling sport to them is not recorded. Despite several Exeter absences through injury and illness, the opposition, Royal Naval Air Station (Yeovilton), was overwhelmed. Sid Waller landed seven conversions and the club passed 500 points for the season (39-5).

Exeter's growing reputation during the season attracted London Welsh, at that time one of the leading clubs in the country, to test the city club's prowess. Four thousand spectators witnessed what was described as "one of the best club performances ever seen on the County Ground". Exeter "put up a magnificent fight" with the forwards dominating the first half. The visitors displayed greater pace and thrust and although the club admitted that London Welsh deserved victory, Exeter was "a trifle unlucky to lose". Handicapped by the absence of the still injured Madge, the Exeter backs were sadly lacking in confidence. "Bunny" Lock, the replacement half-back, was constantly harried by the Welsh wing-forwards and service to the three-quarter line was poor. Nonetheless Exeter led by six points to three at half-time. The visitors then went into the lead but the home side staged a rousing finish. Sid Waller attempted a penalty goal from near the touch-line. The ball hit a post and rebounded into play. A little later, Ford lost possession of the ball when tackled over the visitors' try line. Jack Force was said to be the outstanding forward on the field. "If this standard of play can be maintained we shall rank as one of the leading clubs in the country" proclaimed one club source. (10-12).

A collection taken at the game raised £60 19s 2d (nearly £600) for the Memorial Clubhouse bringing the total raised to date to £400 (£10,400).

After the heroics of the previous week, Exeter remained at home to put in a "sound display" when defeating Devonport Services. Madge and Ford were back together at half-back and with Madge's "immaculate" service the backs regained their form. The game ended with a "picture try" by A.D. Hunt after all the backs had handled (21-3).

A visit to Bristol attracted the biggest crowd of the season to the Memorial Ground (as it was then known). Exeter “played well enough to avenge their early season defeat” as, after a shaky start, the visitors were “the smarter side in all phases”. Rather strangely the backs again showed a lack of confidence and uncharacteristically failed to finish off handling movements despite conditions being ideal. After twenty minutes play Cecil Ford scored a try and in a rare second half attack Bristol claimed an equalising try (3-3).

Next it was the turn of the Recreation Ground at Bath to witness one of its best crowds of the season. Still enjoying ideal conditions, it was the home team that went ahead with a try. Fortunately for Exeter, the conversion from under the posts was missed. During the second half the Exeter forwards gained ascendancy enabling the visitors to regain and hold the lead (10-8). This began a sequence of six consecutive victories to finish the Exeter season.

For its return fixture at the County Ground, the Bournemouth team experienced an adventurous journey. At Rockbeare cross-roads the motor-coach in which the team was travelling was involved in a collision with a private motor-car. Leaving their driver to deal with the police, the team managed somehow, after only fifteen minutes delay, to arrange lifts to its destination. The mishap did not prove a hindrance to the team’s performance as it went ahead through an interception try and then went on to hold an eight point lead until midway into the second half. Thereafter, Exeter made an exciting recovery to achieve what was considered to be “a flattering win”. Exeter had seven players on county duty on the day (15-9).

On Monday 15th April the crowd numbered 6,000 for what was another record at the County Ground for a club match. In fact the game was a sell-out. Haydn Tanner, the famous Welsh scrum-half and captain, had agreed to bring an International XV to Exeter in recognition of the club’s achievement during the season and to aid fund raising for the proposed Memorial Clubhouse. True to his word Tanner had enlisted the services of twelve players of international standard for his Invitation XV. Exeter fielded one – Alan Brown. The visitors took a six points to five lead soon after the re-start but through “relentless work of the forwards and smart finishing of the backs” Exeter achieved a noteworthy win. Winger Idris Roberts “spread-eagled the defence to take Exeter to thirteen points” (13-9).

The game “crowned a brilliant season” with a playing record said to be “the finest in the land”. Post-match, the teams gathered for dinner at the Clarence Hotel.

Exeter had three games still to play. On Easter Saturday Old Edwardians received “a trouncing” and Exeter became the first club in the country to top 600 points for the season. The visitors showed great promise for twenty minutes but then their defence could not cope with a “brilliant scoring machine” that notched 29 points in the 2nd half (37-0).

Winding up the home programme with an Easter Monday visit from Leicester, Exeter found themselves outweighed forward but still managing to secure a fair share of the ball in the loose. Usually slow starters, Exeter reversed this trend by hammering the visitors’ line from the kick-off yet there was no score at half-time. In the second period, Webber, a Teignmouth player recruited for the game because of injuries, picked up a loose ball to score a try. Ford converted and added a penalty goal. Leicester’s score came near the end of the match (8-5).

An end of season Wednesday meeting at Weston super Mare was arranged to replace the cancelled January fixture. With seven regulars unavailable, the team faced a stiff task but after a close call Exeter maintained its unbeaten away record for the season (5-3). Exeter had played five games in ten days and won them all.

On the final Saturday of April, Exeter won its own seven-a-side competition, beating Kingsbridge in the final by 36 points to three. In previous rounds the South Devon team had played two periods of

extra time whilst Exeter had received a bye in the first round. Even with Jack Harrison a passenger on the wing Exeter strolled through the final.

After twenty-five years' service as Honorary Secretary, Jack Coombs was presented with an inscribed silver cigarette case on Easter Monday. He had taken office at the time Exeter had lost use of the County Ground. He then helped steer the club to recovery and was in office to witness the best season that the club had enjoyed.

In May the club was honoured with a civic reception at the Guildhall. Players, officials, committee members and their ladies were entertained by the Mayor and other civic dignitaries. The Mayor expressed the city's pride in the club's achievements and extended good wishes for the future.

The Annual Report recorded total receipts of £1546 4s 7d (over £40,000) of which £1386 (approximately £36,000) came from takings at the gate. The biggest item of expenditure was Entertainment Tax at £461 9s 2d (£12,000). The balance in hand stood at £494 14s 5d (£13,000) whilst the Memorial Clubhouse Fund now held £750 (£19,500). It was urged that future expenditure should be directed at improving the dressing rooms at the ground. Following enquiries for the following season and the season beyond, it was announced that notable additions had been made to the fixture lists of both the 1st XV and the Harlequins. A Colts XV was also to be fielded.