

28th Season 1899-0

A season during which Exeter won 17 and drew 4 games in 34 fixtures might be considered satisfactory but, after two seasons of improvement, the local critics were expecting more from the team. The overall view was that performances were disappointing and erratic. As usual there were injuries with which to contend together with the retirement during the course of the campaign of three leading players, former captains Sid Labbett and Frank Lloyd Hitt plus long-serving wing-three-quarter E.J. (Ted) Baker. A local sprint champion, Baker had followed his full-back brother A.P. into the senior team in the 1891-2 season and became popular with home supporters through his try scoring abilities. Towards the end of his career he became prone to injury though he did return after breaking a leg. An aggravation of this injury, when playing under the pseudonym of "A. Goodman" in January, led to his retirement. He was then probably the oldest member of the team.

At the start of the season it was noted that the team members were all natives of Exeter bar one, - Sid Labbett from Crediton... By October it was further reported that over half of the Chiefs team were former Exeter Oaks players. This number included the captain Alf Browning who, after making occasional appearances for Exeter, joined their ranks as a regular player in 1895-6. He later became a town councillor.

The composition of the team drew further comment. After accusations of being elitist a few years previously the players were now mainly "working class". It was observed that support of the gentry at matches might dwindle as a result.

There were other changes too. The club headquarters moved from the Bude Hotel to the Era Hotel in St. Sidwell's Street where the proprietor was intent on building new dressing rooms with the "latest improvements, baths etc." This arrangement was to be short lived.

The club jersey was changed again. The new style was similar to the previous design but the bands of black and white were increased to four inches (10 cm). One observer thought the new scheme "made the players look bigger".

The relationship between the club and the County Ground Co. was not always a cordial one, especially over arrangements for County games.

The fixture list now took on a more parochial look with four games being arranged against both main Devon rivals – Albion and Barnstaple. Honours were even with the north Devon club with a win each and two no-score draws. Albion presented a much tougher task with the result that all four games were lost. The club also decided to drop Bath from the list for the following season in favour of games against Sidmouth. Bath however were absent only for one season.

A guide to Exeter's form can be found in the first half dozen games of the season. The Chiefs struggled at home to defeat Tiverton by only two tries, scored by Ted Baker and "Ducky" Powell (6-0). Next up was Devonport Albion and prospects did not look good but away from home Exeter did well to lose by only four points (6-10) in front of a crowd of 7,000 at The Rectory. Weston were easily defeated at the County Ground (41-4) and this game was followed by a disappointing trip to Leicester where

the Tigers won (0-11) in front of 8,000 onlookers. For this fixture the team should have broken their journey at Birmingham so the players could take refreshment but this did not happen. The journey home found the team arriving back in Exeter at 2.28 am on Sunday.

Recovery from this arduous trip was swift as the following match provided the highlight of the season at the County Ground. At last, after suffering thirteen defeats and managing a solitary draw in fourteen previous encounters Exeter managed to defeat Bristol for the first time (9-8). In this game the colours of the jersey worn by the visiting full-back clashed with the new Exeter strip. Despite an alternative shirt being offered by Charles Mudge, the persuasions of the referee and the remonstrations of the crowd he refused to change

Two further victories followed, away at Bridgwater (9-4) and at home to Bath (14-3). Next there came a defeat at Barnstaple (5-6) and a draw at Torquay Athletic (3-3). These results led to a debate concerning scoring values as in both games Exeter scored the only try of the match and their opponents could reply only with penalty goals.

In the run-up to Christmas four fixtures were also against Devonian opposition and only Exmouth was defeated (14-3) when Exeter were missing three players on County duty. At this time retirements, illness and injuries were beginning to take their toll. "Exeter had better close for alterations and repairs" said the Evening Post. At the start of the previous season the captain had said that Exeter had "too many first-class reserves" but fifteen months later this claim could not be upheld by the club. To fill gaps substitutes from other clubs like Sidmouth, Exmouth and even Torquay were used rather than promoting second team players.

The question of the city club merging with Exeter Oaks was again raised. Exeter Reserve and B teams were said to be a "financial drag" so it was no surprise when the committee rejected the proposed merger as the club would have inherited a financial deficit of £39 (approx. £2,500) into the bargain.

Home victories against Wellington (16-0) and tourists Castleford (8-0) and Old Edwardians (23-0) showed that the club could still field a winning combination but against strong sides like Leicester (3-11), Devonport Albion (0-13) the team was found wanting. Still trying to find a settled combination Exeter also lost away at Wellington (0-7).

Patriotism following the onset of the Boer war in South Africa was evident at a couple of matches. An early kick-off against the Royal Naval Engineering College was to allow spectators to witness the local Artillery Regiment departing the city and at a home game against Barnstaple in January local regimental companies were invited to attend. There was also a military band in attendance. Later, correspondence from former players Charlie Congdon and Billy Newberry "from The Front", was published in the local newspapers

Defeat at Albion (0-11) was to be expected especially as the kick-off was delayed to enable England international (and current Wellington player) H.T. Gamlin to take his place in the Devonport team. Because of "miserable weather" the game was then called off ten minutes early! With Harry and Fred Escott back in their ranks, Exeter

defeated Bath (9-0) for the sixth consecutive meeting. A defeat by Plymouth (0-10) at the County Ground followed. "The best team lost" said the Western Times criticising the referee and the visiting touch-judge – "the 16th man". It was noted that Plymouth did not feature on the Albion fixture list.

Still suffering injuries and absences a weak team was sent to Tiverton and defeat resulted (8-17) and at home against Sidmouth only a three-all draw resulted. According to the captain, Alf Browning, Exeter had ten players "knocked out". The club engaged the services of two medical advisors to examine the players. The outcome was "rest for some and restoration for others".

These treatments seem to have been effective as the club finished the season strongly once more. Of the six remaining fixtures five were won, the only defeat coming at the hands of Old Merchant Taylors again (0-24). The other Easter visitors came against Aberavon (8-5) and Castleford (3-0), the latter club making a return visit to the city in the same season.

On the 11th April Devon again appeared in the County Championship Final, this time against Durham at the County Ground. The home team lost (3-11) with only one Exeter representative in the team, "Ducky" Powell, who had been drafted into the side as a late replacement.

Whereas the Chiefs had held their own during the season, the Reserves, for the first time in several seasons, lost more games than were won (Played 27 Won 13 Lost 14). They had selection problems of their own having to play short at times and on one occasion travelling away with only eleven players. Moreover two players had been suspended in January, one for striking an opponent and the other for using abusive language to the referee, the first time such penalties had been recorded at the Exeter club.

The B team won eleven of its eighteen games, losing on only three occasions.

Financially it was not a good season for the club with income being down due partly to the war in South Africa and the loss of revenue due to some matches having to be played mid-week and others cancelled when Devon was playing at Exeter on a Saturday,