

41st Season 1912-3

This was a troubled season for Rugby Football in Devon. For several years there had been rumblings of professionalism, veiled or otherwise, within the county. During the summer of 1912 there came an attempt to set up a Northern Union league in the south-west to be known as the Western League. The attempt was abortive and by the end of August the scheme was abandoned, except that this inevitably led to an enquiry by the Devon R.F.U. which in turn led to a full scale enquiry by the Rugby Football Union.

By December the R.F.U. had suspended a number of clubs and officials. Some even faced expulsion from the game. Among the clubs involved were Torquay Athletic, Plymouth, Teignmouth, Paignton and Newton Abbot. The ground at Plymouth was closed for Rugby Union purposes. The game was in crisis in Devon.

Exeter was not subject to any enquiry. Indeed a press reporter wrote "Exeter and Exmouth have reason to feel proud of their isolation" and that they stood "on a pedestal of innocence".

The main effect on Exeter came when trying to complete a full programme of fixtures. Already, since the previous season, Exmouth had been excluded, though the clubs did patch up their differences and met twice in the second half of the season. The Plymouth and Paignton clubs did not feature at all. Nor did Torquay Athletic until their suspension was lifted and two matches were arranged at the tail end of the season.

Additionally Exeter did not enter the D.R.F.U. Cup competition so the fixtures turned out to be a mix and match of some traditional opponents plus some new and revived contacts. Almost inevitably the season started late following a trial game on the first Saturday of September. Three victories were registered before the end of the month.

The margin of victory against Sidmouth (33-5) came as a pleasant surprise but in the next match against new opponents Wiveliscombe the margin should have been similar but the rustic tactics of the Somerset team pegged Exeter back (14-0). In this match, making his sole appearance for Exeter, was one E.J. Hyde, a former Irish international. Not since 1900 had the Wellington team been seen at the County Ground. They too had to suffer defeat by the home club (20-0).

Three wins, all at home, in the opening fixtures raised hopes of an Exeter revival. "Not for some time has Exeter had such a well balanced side" commented one reporter. Well balanced was probably a true observation but it seemed to ignore the fact that no fewer than five different full-backs were fielded in the opening half a dozen games.

At the helm, this time in his own right, was Stan Havill who was a member of a well-known local family of High Street butchers. He was much respected for his loyalty and sportsmanship, representing Devon on a number of occasions and eventually becoming a popular referee. He was to serve on the Exeter committee as well as that of Devon and became president of the Devon Referees Society.

The season had not long been under way when a letter was sent to a local newspaper suggesting that Exeter might do better if W.V. Cavill was appointed as pack leader. A Yorkshireman, Cavill, who was to play for Devon later in the season, was sports master at Crediton Grammar School and later became headmaster at Hymer's College in Hull where he developed a reputation as a strict disciplinarian and an advocate of compulsory games.

After the encouraging start Exeter reverted to old habits. On the day that Devon faced the touring South Africans at the County Ground, a weak side was despatched to play Bath where the team was outclassed (5-33). Then, all at home, they alternated two victories over less demanding opponents while losing by wide margins to two of the county's strongest teams.

The game with Blundell's School was closer than the score suggested (23-5), then they started with only fourteen men against the newly rechristened Devonport Services (3-21). It was the captain, Stan Havill, who turned up late! One of the suspended clubs, namely Paignton, was due to be met next. A new organisation had been formed in the seaside town but Exeter refused to recognise this club. Instead they raised a scratch Public Schools XV comprising local players who had attended an appropriate educational establishment. Victory was not as easy as it should have been (18-6).

The fourth home game in this series saw the team face what was in effect a Devonport Albion team made up of many reserves as the match took place when Devon was playing a Championship match. Exeter, it was said, did well to nearly upset their opponents (0-7). One of the leading forwards, W. Snell, who, for some unexplained reason, had been left out for the game responded to an eleventh hour call to motor-cycle from Cullompton to St. Thomas to take part in the game.

An away defeat followed in north Devon. Exeter were left disgruntled by the referee who was an old Barnstaple player (8-11). The return match against Devonport Albion followed on a Devon match day again. This time Exeter did have a player involved in the county match. W.V. Cavill took his place alongside many Albion players. Exeter could have done even better than they did a fortnight previously. Initially the team was handicapped when Tod Kerswell missed the train – very much an occupational hazard of the time – and then, early in the game, Percy Kerswell broke a collar bone (12-17).

Stan Havill then led his team literally into foreign territory. Exeter made its first tour to France. Even before the team left there was criticism that the club had agreed to meet Stade Bordelais Université on a Sunday which was customary in France. Although only one match had been arranged the trip was nonetheless arduous. The party that probably included only fifteen players left Exeter on a Friday arriving in Paris at 5.40 am the next morning. The following day the party arrived at Bordeaux at 7.40 pm. The return trip was similar with the tourists crossing the Channel on the night ferry from Calais.

The game itself proved unfortunate for Exeter. The teams were level at half-time but the play of the French was described as "very robust" leading to injuries to four of the Exeter players. These handicaps led to defeat (3-12).

Luck was still not shining on Exeter six days later when the team went to Weston-super-Mare. Already missing the injured players, Exeter was further handicapped when W. Snell and half-back Force failed to turn up due to a motor breakdown. The margin of defeat was almost inevitable (0-31).

The status of a mid-week game against Blundell's School is undetermined and may not have been included in the end of season record. The School won this game (13-14) but a week or so later Exeter Reserves comfortably defeated the School (15-5)

In December the weather took a turn for the worse and for much of the remainder of the season the County Ground became very muddy, often with pools of water on the surface. In unfavourable weather Barnstaple were defeated by a solitary try (3-0), a result Barnstaple contested as Exeter were awarded a late try when the visitors thought they had touched down in defence.

A match at Newport ended in predictable fashion (0-41) but at Bridgwater the following week Exeter did better than normal away from home (13-8). Boxing Day opponents, Old Monktonians from Cardiff, arrived with only thirteen players, the other two having missed the train. The County Ground would not have presented a welcoming site with pools of water on the pitch and a gale blowing. Two substitutes were found for the visitors but strengthened by the inclusion of George Bickley, G.D. Roberts and Peter Lawless, Exeter won comfortably (12-0). Lawless lived in Exmouth but played occasionally for Exeter. After the First World War he made a name for himself in London rugby circles, captaining Richmond for two seasons. After retirement from the sport he wrote a book entitled "Rugger's An Attacking Game".

"Exeter's Revenge" was the heading for a match report on the next game with Weston. Four weeks previously the Somerset side had won easily but this time Exeter performed much better and so reversed the result if not the score margin (12-0). The first Saturday in the New Year saw the County Ground at its worst for the visit of Newton Abbot. Exeter did well but not well enough (11-16).

A similar pattern was evident in the next two games against Newport, mid-week, and Pontypool. "Although Exeter lost both matches they certainly did well" commented a reporter. Newport included seven international players in their team. Exeter could claim one – G.D. Roberts. Two new three-quarters were selected, Ferrier formerly of Devonport Albion, and Eric King who was studying at Oxford University. Newport might have been expecting an easier victory (5-16). Pontypool too expected an easy game as their team included five or six reserves. After 30 hours of rain the County Ground resembled a swamp. All players were soon coated in mud but George Bickley "took away less soil than any of the others". Perhaps on a drier pitch the margin of the visitors' victory might have been different (0-8).

The 1st February witnessed the reappearance of Portsmouth in Exeter for first time in a dozen years. A familiar situation arose yet again. Exeter started the match with only thirteen players when forwards Snell and Merry turned up late. The former was to land a conversion and the latter a try in a home win (14-3).

Partly due to the chaos in other parts of the county, Exeter and Exmouth patched up their differences that had caused a rift in relations the previous season and fixtures were resumed. It was not a happy return for Exeter being soundly beaten at Cranford (0-31) in what was described as a “discreditable” display by the team. Exeter fielded a reasonably strong fifteen though not one of full-strength. Half-back Reggie Scoble reappeared after an absence of six seasons.

Another low spot came when only twelve players travelled to Portsmouth where “defeat was expected”. Portsmouth won for the first time in this fixture (0-6). In contrast Exeter were said to be better than the twelve point margin of victory against Bridgwater (17-5). The visit by Exeter to Newton Abbot did not attract a lot of local interest and there was a poor attendance. The result and score line were identical to the game between the two sides in January (11-16).

“Well Done!” was the verdict on Exeter’s performance at home against Bath which compensated for the drubbing received at the start of the season. Centre Eric King scored three tries and kicked a conversion in a satisfying win (17-3). “All Exeter played well” though a later comment said that “Exeter needs a hooker”. The improved form continued with defeat at home over Clifton (20-5) in a “sporty” game. King was conspicuous in defence and also scoring another try before he had to retire with a damaged ankle. On his return in second half Sid Kerswill then had to leave the field through injury.

The Easter period saw a run of four defeats. Old Merchant Taylors yet again proved too strong (0-9) as did Gowerton the following day. Not at full strength in the pack, Exeter showed many weaknesses in defence (3-29). At Bristol, Clifton then avenged their earlier defeat (3-12). It was a familiar story at home to Exmouth in “a hard but not rough game”. Exmouth had gone seven months without defeat and their record at the end remained intact (0-16). A home win over Devonport Services, “one of the surprises of the season” (18-6) stopped the rot. Apparently the visitors were “nonplussed”.

One outcome of the professional enquiry saga was that a ban previously imposed on Torquay Athletic was lifted and fixtures were squeezed into the end of season schedule. At Torquay the home side led by six points at half-time but Exeter came back to win a high scoring game (25-21).

Between the Torquay fixtures Exeter sent a party of thirteen players to Pontypool to play on a Monday. Only two or three Chiefs were included in the side while Pontypool was missing several leading forwards. The Welsh team led by 18 points at the half way point. Exeter did better in the second half scoring two converted tries but Pontypool doubled that tally (10-38).

The final game of the season saw Torquay Athletic at the County Ground. Apparently the teams were not as strong as a week previously and “therefore play was not so interesting”. Exeter bowed out with another win (12-3).

Although appearing to achieve a similar record to the previous season the precise record is difficult to determine. At a Players’ Dinner held on the last Saturday of the season, it was stated that the record was Played 39 Won 18 Drawn 1 Lost 20 but at the

Annual General Meeting the figures reported were Played 38 Won 18 Drawn 1 Lost 19, Taking the results of all matches reported as first team fixtures then the record reads quite differently – Played 40 Won 17 Drawn 1 Lost 22. It is difficult to reconcile any of the results to match the other stated records.

At least it was agreed that the Reserves won 13 and lost 11 of 24 games played.

At the Dinner it was reported that an air of optimism prevailed. However there was a cloud hanging over the County Ground. In September 1912 the directors of the United Bank decided to call in the mortgage loan of £2,000 approx. (£114,000) on the County Ground as they did not think it was worth that much. Three months notice was given and an appeal to the public to take up shares was made. If £700 (£40,000) was raised a benefactor had offered to make up the difference. The County Ground was saved. It was suggested that the United Bank wanted to acquire the land for building purposes.

July 1912 saw the formation of a Supporters Club and by October was said to be growing and was doing much to benefit the club. A Penny Ticket scheme was launched whereby the winner could watch any home match up to Christmas Eve for free and have the opportunity to purchase for a shilling (£5) a watch worth £7 10s (£430) donated by F.G. Towill, one of the rugby club committee members.