

4th Season 1875-6

The publication of a full list of fixtures in October 1875 together with the election of a new leader, H.C. (Henry) Wilson, would have instilled in club members a renewed air of confidence. The captain was a lively three-quarter-back who with his brother R.P., a forward, were to become stalwart members of the Exeter team until their departure from the city in 1880 which was described as “a great loss”.

The season got off to a slow start as “floods of rain” caused the cancellation of the first four fixtures and the first game, a second XV match against Cullompton, not being played until November 17. Three days later the senior team, playing one man short, commenced their season with a comfortable win over a side from Somerset this time called Taunton College School. Another victory followed, against Budleigh Salterton, before a defeat at Sherborne School who won by “the new system of scoring”. A team could now win by a majority of tries if no goal was kicked. Sherborne scored two tries to Exeter’s one.

A new fixture followed against United Services College from Westward Ho! The match was played on a very slippery Training College pitch and began with a scrum that lasted for an extraordinary twenty minutes. Apparently the poor playing surface worked to the benefit of the visitors’ “light-weights (average being 9st 11lb)” who “could get over the ground more easily”. The modern weight equivalent would be 56.7 kg. However, Exeter had the advantage of the score-line, a goal and three saves to nil. The try was scored by Jimmy Hutchings, a regular since the club’s formation, and the goal kicked by W. Massey who hailed from Ottery St. Mary and who played when and wherever he could. He appeared for his home town team, for Budleigh Salterton, Cullompton and Exeter amongst many and later was captain of the first Devon representative side before going on to represent Somerset..

The second half of the season proved something of a disappointment with two wins and three defeats. Both victories came at the expense of Paignton, another new name on the fixture list. Defeats at the hands of Clifton (home and away) and Wellington might have been expected. Clifton was still a strong club and Wellington was about to become the strongest team in the south-west for several seasons.

Paignton arrived with only a dozen players. The home side provided three “subs” but then the visitors lost one of their backs through injury. The winning margin was four tries to nil. A month later it was Exeter who turned up short for the return match, but fielding only fourteen men they managed to win by a last minute try to nothing.

For the home match against Clifton there were some notable players on the Training College ground. The Clifton team included Arthur Budd who won five England caps and became the 9th President of the R.F.U. in 1888-9. For Exeter the two full backs were the aforementioned Massey and J.M. Batten making a rare appearance for the club after his sole England cap in 1874.

The defeat by Wellington came at the Training College ground where “The play was good, taking it all round, Exeter playing one man short, and not so together as Wellington”.

The first Devon match, mentioned above, was played against Somerset at Taunton on 25th March 1876. Devon won with C.T.K. Roberts of Exeter scoring the try that Massey goaled. Other Exeter players in the Devon team were H.C. Wilson at half-back and W.R. Elliott, a full back.

Charles Tanner Kingdom Roberts played for Exeter between 1875 and 1879 as a prominent member of the pack at a time when forwards occupied no specific position in the scrum. One of the many members of the club engaged in the legal profession he became a senior partner in the firm of Roberts and Andrew. He fulfilled many public roles in city life including election as Sheriff of Exeter (1883-4) and Mayor (1887-8). His son, G.D. Roberts, also played rugby for Exeter and gained three international caps for England between 1907 and 1908.