

63rd Year 1934-5

Following a season in which the senior team had held its own whilst undertaking a stronger fixture list, Exeter was to fall away during the 1934-5 campaign. The official record announced at the Annual General Meeting stated that of 42 games played eighteen had been won with two drawn. The Rugby Football Annual showed only 41 games played of which seventeen were won. The standard of play throughout was inconsistent. Six of the first eight games were lost. Midseason saw the team lose only one of ten encounters but then the season ended with only three victories and two draws in the last fifteen matches.

The official verdict of the end of season report was that the first fifteen had “done well considering the light-weight pack and that injuries and other reasons had kept players out of the team especially at Easter”. It was known before the season started that it was the intention of “Jonah” Jones, Tom Browning and Tom White, all long-term stalwart forwards, to retire. The pack suffered in consequence.

The elected captain was Bernard “Bunny” Ward Turner an often brilliant fly-half who organised the back division with skill and craft. So notable was his play on occasions that he was considered by some members of the London press to stand an outside chance of being selected to play for England. He did not figure at International level and it is a curious fact that he never represented Devon in a County Championship game. Unfortunately for his club side he suffered a couple of injuries during his season of captaincy.

An artist by calling “Bunny” Turned was to become a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and after leaving the city he lived in Kent working at Rose Bruford College.

E.P. “Percy” Thomas, the vice-captain and pack leader, also missed games during the course of the second half of the season due to a knee injury.

The second string now played under the title of Exeter Harlequins.

At home to Exmouth for the opening fixture of the season Exeter was declared to have been unlucky to lose. With two minutes left to play Exeter was leading by two points and was thought to have the game sewn up when the visitors went on the attack. From a line out the ball came to full-back Waller who was tackled in possession. He was then penalised for lying on the ball though apparently he had no opportunity to release it. The penalty was kicked from in front of the posts. It was described as “an unfortunate ending” though the Exeter forwards were “outweighed, outreached and outpaced” in a game of “few polished movements” (13-14).

On the following Thursday the Exeter forwards were again no match for their opponents but the Sidmouth backs were poor. Exeter was said to be “prone to off-side” but the home team failed to take advantage (14-0).

In warm weather at Wellington conditions “proved tiring” for what, on this occasion, was described as the heavier Exeter pack (8-13). Another Thursday match, this time at Paignton, saw Exeter fielding several reserve three-quarters and although three tries were scored against two by the opposition, another defeat was suffered due to the failure of conversion attempts (9-10).

A loss to Teignmouth a twelvemonth earlier was avenged. The difference between the two teams this time was the presence of “Bunny” Turner and Peter Candler in the back line. After leading at half time the Exeter defence faltered and Teignmouth took the lead. Finally a late try plus a disputed but allowed conversion by Sid Waller won the game (18-15).

The revival did not last as three consecutive defeats were then inflicted by local opposition, two of which were quite heavy. At the Recreation Ground, Exeter was simply outplayed by Torquay

Athletic. Exeter had two players assisting Devon whilst four home players were engaged on similar duties but still the home side managed to score five tries without reply (0-21).

The score was a lot closer when Newton Abbot came to visit. Exeter trailed by six points at the interval and rallied but poor playing conditions and a slippery ball prevented the gap from being closed completely (3-6). Making his debut for Exeter in this match was Richard Frank Davey who had become a city resident in pursuit of his profession as a Chartered Surveyor. A former Wellington and Teignmouth player Davey had moved to London where he appeared for the Wanstead and Leytonstone clubs. Whilst with the latter he was selected to play wing-forward for England against Wales in 1931, his sole international appearance. He was also capped by Eastern Counties, London Counties and Devon.

At the Rectory poor form continued and Devonport Services gained its first home win of the season (3-16).

The tide then turned again when Clifton, making their first visit since March 1914 found "Exeter in scoring mood". After fifteen minutes no score had been registered but then Exeter registered no fewer than nine tries whilst the visitors managed to score eleven points in the last five minutes (33-16). Buoyed by this success Exeter was able to reverse the defeat by Devonport Services a fortnight earlier. Phil Paul went over for two tries in the first two minutes whilst K.F. McDougall scored another after a fifty yard touchline sprint. Only one of six tries was converted (20-8).

A second trip to Plymouth proved another mission impossible especially as "Bunny" Turner was unable to play. Dick Madge took on the fly half role and his place at the base of the scrum was filled by Joey Summers. At first Exeter was able to hold its own, being only three points down at the break. Falling away badly Exeter allowed Albion to cross their line freely to take the tally to six unanswered tries (5-18).

In front of their own supporters Exeter, on a sodden pitch and in a second half drizzle, overcame Old Blues in the last fifteen minutes when all the scoring took place (7-0).

The next two matches, both at the County Ground, would not have been anticipated by home supporters as likely to end in victory. Llanelly and Metropolitan Police were regarded as two of the stiffest tests on the fixture card. Contrary to the odds the home team led through a Sid Waller penalty at the interval against the Welsh side that contained three internationals. Exeter's lone international, Frank Davey, had an outstanding game. Llanelly had much the better of the second half (3-14). The Police team from London had much the better of affairs, dominating up front and showing better combination outside (3-16).

An opportunity was given to some younger players for a mid-week meeting with the 3rd Signals Regiment (Burford). In what was described "as an uninteresting game" it took a late penalty goal to seal the win for the home side (9-6).

A "grim struggle forward" caused by the rain and mud in North Devon saw Barnstaple as "much the better side". The margin of defeat might have been greater but for the conditions (0-8). Perhaps Exeter needed the week's rest that followed when the County Ground played host to a county match as the next seven games were all won.

The first of this sequence at Bridgwater & Albion could have been regarded as somewhat fortunate. On a heavy ground that made accurate play difficult the home side twice came from behind before Exeter won with a last minute try. Bad luck was the order of the day for the home team as they ended the game with only thirteen players due to injury and there was general surprise at the sound of the final whistle that was thought to have been blown early (9-8).

Another narrow away win followed at Newton Abbot where the wretched state of the ground meant that “scientific rugby was somewhat at a discount” but “rousing forward play and plenty of incident” was witnessed. A solitary try sufficed for Exeter (3-0). The margin of victory was the same for the Boxing Day encounter with Old Heleans, a side that contained several Exeter players. Despite the ground looking like a quagmire in places Phil Paul scored a try after an exhilarating three-quarter movement (3-0).

Exeter was due a visit from the touring Welsh Academicals side on 27 December but only a week or so before the Welsh Rugby Union had announced that the club had been suspended. To replace the fixture, secretary Jack Coombes hurriedly raised a Devon Nomads XV but on the day it was decided that the ground was unfit and should be rested for the match against Bridgwater & Albion two days later.

In the event the pitch became playable and Exeter amply avenged the narrow defeat by the Somerset side two weeks earlier and played “irresistibly” and “overwhelmed” their opponents. Through opportunism Frank Davey scored four of Exeter’s eight tries (28-3).

The New Year began with a holiday fixture against Blundell’s Squirrels that was won comfortably with a make-shift team (25-10). Another away defeat was avenged when Wellington came to the County Ground. In a poor game Exeter was always in command against opponents using spoiling tactics (21-5). A mid-week match against the touring St. Catherine’s College, Cambridge, produced “a rousing forward game” during which winger Phil Paul had to go off injured (5-3).

The run of victories that had lasted for seven games came to an end at Weston super Mare. The home side attacked from the start and could have won by a larger margin. Apparently the Exeter forwards played under par and “there was not an outstanding figure in the Exeter pack” (0-16).

Bouncing back Exeter won the next two home games. Torquay Athletic found their opponents “rising to the occasion splendidly” (8-3). Two late changes to the team selected to face the Royal Naval Engineering College saw Tom Browning and Tom White take to the field again. “Bunny” Turner took a pass behind his back and sprinting for the line found that he had to fall on his back to make the touch-down. Two more late tries made the margin a substantial one (22-3).

From the start of February Exeter’s form fell away badly. Of sixteen games up to the end of the season only three were won and two drawn. Five consecutive defeats, four of which came at home, began the sequence.

Plymouth Albion was not a team that Exeter defeated often so a goal line mistake that gifted the visitors an early try soon put the home team even further on the back foot. Albion soon added another score. Exeter scored the best try of the match through Turner but that provided his team’s only points. “It was an attractive game in spite of the fact that the standard of play was below expectations” (5-10).

A week later visitors Taunton again possessed the taller and heavier pack and two scores in the second half won them the game (0-10). The annual unofficial game against Blundell’s School was lost by a substantial margin (11-29).

For a journey to Llanelly, Exeter was lacking eight of its regular players yet in terrible conditions of high wind and heavy rain the visitors performed bravely. With the elements Exeter actually led at half-time by a try and that rarest of scores, a goal from a mark kicked by Turner. Llanelly was well on top after the break (6-16). It was shortly after this match that London newspapers tipped the Exeter captain for England selection.

Back at home Barnstaple could not be stopped from achieving the double for a second successive season. Outweighed by the North Devon men the Exeter pack was further handicapped by an arm

injury to W.J. Williams early in the game. Spoiling tactics by the visitors meant that Turner had a disappointing game being unable to evade the two players set to mark him (0-3).

A brief respite came with a win over St. Bartholomew's Hospital. With both sides playing an open game, Turner showed a welcome return to form scoring two tries and fifteen points in all (18-3).

Aggressive play by Bridgend meant another fruitless trip to Wales (3-17). The score was closer at the R.N.E.C. where a great start in the first twenty minutes was made but an injury to the skipper saw him relegated to the wing and the College sneak the game by a point (11-12). The leg injury ended the season for "Bunny" Turner.

Redruth had been beaten only once in the season up to their visit to the County Ground. The Cornish team had a tremendous weight advantage up front but failed to take advantage. Exeter suffered an early set back but rallied and it was only in the last few minutes that Redruth was able to draw level. K.F. McDougall scored the two home tries one with a sprint from half-way (8-8).

Unbeaten at home Exmouth took advantage of heavy rain to employ kick and rush tactics to continue their winning run (3-8). Another seaside visit, this time to Teignmouth, found the Exeter forwards being worn down in a hard and fast game (6-12).

Then came the surprise of the season when visitors Bridgend played "below expectations". Both teams were below strength and for once Exeter "had to thank their forwards for an unexpected success" (6-3). Victory at Tiverton came in a game that was reduced to twenty minutes play each way due to the wet conditions (5-3).

The Easter programme started with an "uninteresting pointless draw" against Burton when Exeter fielded what was effectively a reserve back-line (0-0). On Easter Monday Exeter again fielded a weak team that was further handicapped by injuries to Phil Paul and Dick Madge. Exeter failed to extend their opponents, Old Millhillians (0-11). The following day after facing Leicester one headline declared "City XV weak but plucky". Exeter was able to field only five regular players. Of the rest four were making their first senior appearance of the season and W.J. Wyatt, normally a reserve back, played in amongst the forwards. Leicester, fielding a back division that included four internationals plus the then uncapped Prince Alexander Obolensky on the wing, scored ten tries (0-42).

If the senior side was said to have performed fairly well, the record of the Harlequins stood out in contrast with 23 games won and two drawn in a programme of 31 matches. The "B" XV won fifteen and drew four out of 28 matches. It was decided to run only three teams for financial and other, unspecified, reasons.

Finance again became a concern. There was a balance in hand of £80 (£3,000) but major expenses loomed. Refurfing of the County Ground was now necessary and alarm was expressed at the big increases in expenditure in the management of the ground. Exeter City Council had decided to double the rates and in addition taxes had increased. Moreover a decrease in income had been experienced.

In an effort to increase income and swell attendances for rugby clubs in the region the question of the reintroduction of competitive rugby again became an issue. Although it was reported that players seemed to favour a league system, the Exeter club standpoint as expressed by President Dr. William Ashford and secretary Jack Coombes was that the club was against all competitions and would certainly withdraw should Plymouth Albion and Torquay Athletic back-out. In the event a new cup competition for senior clubs did not materialise.

In January 1935 Exeter born Peter Laurence Candler made his debut for England against Wales at Twickenham. Initially he played at fly-half before being moved to the centre position. He was capped ten times in all, including two as captain, while representing St. Bartholomew's Hospital and then Richmond. He will be forever remembered as being the player whose pass set up Alexander

Obolensky for the second of his two spectacular tries that led to England's first victory over the All Blacks at Twickenham in 1936.

The son of Dr. A.L. Candler, an Exeter surgeon, Peter Candler was educated at Sherborne School and made his debut for the Exeter club in September 1932. His talent was evident from the start and he made several appearances for the club. He would also appear at vacation times when attending Cambridge University where he won a Blue in 1934.

During the Second World War Candler served with the Royal Army Medical Corps. Later he became an obstetric and gynaecological specialist with the Kenyan medical department. He died in 1991 when a resident of Natal, South Africa.

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