

23rd Season 1894-5

The start to the new season bore many similarities to the three that had gone before. An internal wrangle occurred before the season started, the elected captain resigned the post in November and only one game had been won by the end of that same month. Matters were again looking grim. Moreover the club decided to turn away from competitive rugby completely when the B team was withdrawn from the Devon Junior Cup.

At a players' meeting W.C. Newberry was elected captain and his deputy was to be P.C. Preece. At the General Meeting that followed in early September, the chosen captain was accepted but there was a proposal that the vice-captain should be E.J. Baker. This proposal was accepted by the members whereupon the long serving club secretary, Charles Mudge, tendered his resignation saying that the decisions of the players on who should lead them ought not to be overturned by a meeting that included non-playing members.

In the event Baker withdrew saying that he would not accept the post and Mudge was persuaded to continue in post. There was a certain amount of irony to follow. Newberry after playing only one game by November felt he could not continue as captain due to an ankle injury. Preece automatically took over the role and, to complete the circle of events, Ted Baker was appointed vice-captain. In December Newberry returned to play a further eight games under the captaincy of Preece!

William Newberry, who was born in Heavitree in 1869, had an interesting career with Exeter. A product of Hele's School he played junior rugby in the city before joining the Exeter club making his first senior appearance in 1888. Moving to Teignmouth he captained the local club for two seasons before returning to Exeter where he played regularly. He was able to occupy any position behind the scrum. After the season under review he did not figure again in Exeter colours until 1897-8. There followed another break until a further reappearance in 1903 when he also made an appearance for Devon as a late replacement at wing-three-quarter. He played for the club until 1907-8 when he was also acting as instructor in gym classes some twenty years after his first appearance. Outside his footballing career he was employed at some stage by Messrs. Lear, Browne & Co. in Exeter and later enlisted in the 2nd Devon Regiment and was sent to Aldershot. He served in both India and South Africa, being injured during the siege of Ladysmith, eventually rising to the rank of Sergeant. He died in Exeter in 1920.

Before the hiatus of the General Meeting Percy Preece had been very active on the club's behalf arranging practices and pursuing a one man recruitment campaign. In this endeavour he proved very successful aided by the demise of two local junior clubs, namely Alphington and that of the London & South Western Railway. The enlistment of Harry Reed and the brothers Harry and Fred Escott in particular proved to be of great worth in following seasons. New recruits also meant the end of "cliquism" so that now "a bank clerk or a shoe black stand on equal footing for selection".

On his assumption of the captaincy in November Preece sent a note to all players outlining tactics and he arranged extra training sessions at the Drill Hall. "One of the best captains Exeter has ever had", commented one reporter.

Another pre-season recruit came in the form of David Gwynn a native of Swansea who had won six caps for Wales between 1882 and 1891. Aged 33 he came to Exeter from Oldham where he had represented Lancashire in the County Championship. He played in the first four games of the season for Exeter and proved to be a disappointment and was promptly dropped. He did not appear for Exeter again.

Professionalism became an issue in Devon. Some eight months before the formation of the Northern Rugby Football Union (the forerunner of the Rugby Football League) scouts were reported to be active in the county seeking to recruit players. Although a strictly amateur game in Devon, in November, the Torquay Town club was suspended by the Devon R.F.U. for enticing players from local clubs by offering inducements in the form of payment for lost earnings. There were also allegations made against the Torquay Athletic club. Payments for "broken time" came to a head in 1895 when 22 clubs in Yorkshire and Lancashire broke away from the R.F.U.

Exeter Oaks accused Exeter of offering inducement to players. Exeter had applied to the Devon R.F.U. for permission to transfer James Powell from the Oaks club. At the hearing the Oaks captain W. Cornish (an occasional player for Exeter) claimed that Exeter offered inducements that the junior club could not match. These inducements were not financial - they came in the form of post-match refreshments! The D.R.F.U. agreed to the transfer.

What comprised these refreshments is not specified but one wonders if they played their part in persuading players like Frank Hitt (Heavitree) and Sid Labbett (Crediton) to change their allegiance to the city club.

Defeats in the opening eight matches would have presented a familiar pattern to Exeter supporters. One of these defeats came at home against Blundell's School in a special match to mark the opening of the Teign Valley Railway line.

Then, on November 10th, Clifton was to provide the opposition on what was now called the County Athletic Ground. Six Exeter players turned up late and J. Escott (brother of Harry and Fred), as a last minute substitute, played wearing everyday trousers. Despite the stumbling start much to the surprise of local pundits Exeter won by a try (scored by the veteran Bertram Wallis) to nil.

Expected defeats against tourists Swinton and Barnstaple followed before Sherborne School, after many seasons, made a reappearance in St. Thomas. The game was dismissed by the local press as literally, men against boys. Exeter won by 33 points to nil and one reporter refused to list the names of the "victorious" Exeter team. This was not to be the case the following week when Bridgwater were defeated by an even greater margin – 38-0. Only scant reports of this game can be found.

A defeat by Albion came as no surprise but what followed was certainly unexpected. Exeter proceeded to win six consecutive matches. Included in these victories were games against touring teams, Saracens from London and Bridgend from Wales.

By the end of the season another eight games had been won including a first meeting with Exmouth in April. To win a total of 17 games out of 34 matches played stands in stark contrast to the record of the three preceding seasons which had produced only 18 victories in 98 matches played.

Clearly the strenuous efforts made by Percy Preece were bearing fruit. The fortunes of Exeter Football Club had at long last turned the corner.

According to the club the final record for the season was played 34 won 17, drawn 2 and lost 15, but this is subject to debate. Following the return match at Bristol in March the Exeter press reported the result as a draw whereas both the Bristol and national newspapers record the result as a win for the home club. Exeter claimed that in the act of Bristol scoring a late winning try the ball had passed into touch but was brought back into play by a gust of wind. It was reported that after the game, when the facts had been explained to him, the referee declared that the result should be regarded as a draw. There is no record of an R.F.U. ruling on this point of law so given that the referee's decision on the field of play is final, the season record for Exeter should read P.34 W.17 D,1 L.16 Points For 217 Against 194.