

## 26<sup>th</sup> Season 1897-8

Despite county calls and injuries to leading players Sid Labbett's team, in his second year of captaincy, achieved a playing record almost identical to that of the previous season. One more draw and one more defeat were set alongside twenty victories in 35 matches.

At this time rugby football in Devon was becoming stronger whilst the hold on the County Championship by Yorkshire was ending partly through leading players forsaking the strictly amateur game to join the flourishing Northern Union (Rugby League). Professionalism was showing signs of creeping into the rugby game in the south-west too.

Exeter's position at club level in the region can be illustrated by their results against other leading clubs. The Chiefs suffered home and away defeats at the hands of the emerging Exmouth side and also against Bristol. A draw and a loss were recorded in the return matches against Albion and Barnstaple. Facing Redruth and Plymouth, honours were even with a win and a loss against each.

Bath was defeated both home and away. In fact Exeter achieved nine wins in nine matches played against teams from Somerset. Two games played against Welsh teams were lost albeit narrowly.

During the season there were suspicions of professionalism appearing in Devon. Two Welsh players were suspended for seeking to play for Devonport Albion without obtaining the required permission of the Welsh Rugby Union. There was also the strange case of one A.G. Towill, a former Falmouth player who played two games for Exeter in September as a wing three-quarter. Despite scoring a try in each game, he was deemed to be a failure and was dropped from the team. In Exeter's very next game he appeared in the Newton Abbot XV to face them. Later he was charged with "claiming more than out of pocket expenses". The case was heard by the Devon R.F.U. and the accusation was found to be "not proven".

The season started with another trip to Cornwall where Redruth won by a single point (5-6). In this game and in the two subsequent matches it was thought that the Exeter forwards would be too light to test the strongest opponents. Their average weight was 12 stone (76 kg). This did not appear to be a handicap when the team remained unbeaten for the next eight games including one at home, against Taunton, in which Exeter scored 40 points for the first time.

For the meeting at Home Park against Plymouth an estimated 5,000 spectators witnessed an Exeter victory (6-0). The numbers may have been swelled by those who turned up to see the recently retired legendary Welsh three-quarter Arthur Gould in action as the appointed referee for the game. He was greeted with a round of applause as he took to the field but reporters were not impressed. "An extraordinary player made an ordinary referee. He follows play with his hands in his pockets and without any hat". No explanation was offered why a hat was necessary to referee a game!

Just before the next game against Bridgwater at home, Harry Reed cried off due to an accident at his place of work. He did not return until after Christmas. His place at

centre was temporarily filled by Powell who normally played in the pack. He retained this position the following week when Barnstaple paid a visit to Exeter. This match received much comment.

Appearing in the Exeter ranks was the home grown International William Ashford who had temporarily returned to the city. Criticism was voiced about his use of Exeter club games for practice before the coming England games. Despite the presence of Ashford, Exeter could only manage an eight all draw before a crowd of 4,000. However, during the game full-back Hitt was concussed. He completed the match but appeared only once more during the season. At the Annual General Meeting the following July, one member proposed that fixtures with Barnstaple should be dropped because of their style of play. The proposal was not carried and the member who proposed the motion resigned. Barnstaple had considered the allegation "monstrous".

The full back position was then filled by former captain William Newberry for all remaining games bar two.

At the Rectory in November Exeter took the field for the first time in new style black and white hooped jerseys to face the Royal Naval Engineering College. The new attire replaced the white jerseys with a black diagonal sash. The change did not bring immediate success as Exeter lost (8-14) for only the second time in the season to date.

The following week saw Exeter venturing into Wales again to meet Llanelly. Departing from Exeter on Friday evening the party arrived at Cardiff at midnight. The ground conditions at Llanelly the following day were very wet which spoilt the game. Nevertheless Exeter did well to lose by only six points to nil. After dinner the party arrived back at Exeter at 2.29 a.m. on Sunday.

Three victories followed including an incredible win away at Wellington by 29 points to nil. When asked the secret of Exeter's success, the captain, Sid Labbett, answered with two words. "Drill Hall" he said. His comment at the previous July meeting about lack of training had obviously been heeded.

Holiday visitors Saracens, who included three players with former Exeter connections (8-0), and Redruth (15-3) were both defeated as was Bath away on New Year's Day (21-0). Victory also came in a now rare mid-week fixture against new opponents in the guise of Newton Blues (15-0).

In the game at Bath William Ashford had scored three tries and kicked a conversion. A week later it was reported that on a muddy County Ground against Bristol all his kicks at goal failed to get airborne. A Bristol player however was successful with a last minute dropped goal to secure a win for his side (6-7).

Still dogged by injuries Exeter managed to defeat Bridgwater away (5-3) and Newton at home (13-5) when the club fielded "as good a team as the number of their invalids would allow", before travelling to meet Albion at the end of January. Albion won comfortably (3-13).

Perhaps with confidence ebbing the team played four consecutive matches without scoring a single point. One of these games took place at Barnstaple (0-16). It was

reported that a bookmaker accompanied a group of travelling Exonian supporters. In front of the stand he loudly invited bets on an Exeter victory. The odds he offered are not recorded but as Exeter had not won at the North Devon ground since February 1891 his confidence may have been misplaced.

After two blank Saturdays Exeter did manage to avoid defeat in the return match at home against Albion that ended in a scoreless draw.

The Exeter XV for this latter game included the Welsh International forward Dick Hellings a collier from the Rhondda Valley who had been playing for the Llwynypia club. This was a time of depression for the mining industry in Wales and several rugby playing miners had moved away to seek a future elsewhere. Hellings probably escaped any suspicions of professional intent as he had in fact been born at Ebford near Topsham and his family had moved to Wales when he was two years of age. He won nine caps in all for Wales and he also appeared for Devon on a birth qualification. The match against Albion saw his only appearance for Exeter. For some unreported reason "Ducky" Powell refused to play in this game.

When the team travelled to Taunton in March a 6' 3" (1.9m) forward, Norrington, missed the train and the team played one short for the first time in several years. The match was won (8-5).

The following week at the County Ground, Torquay, just before kick-off, refused to take the field as they objected to the referee appointed by the D.R.F.U. and the Referees' Society, not on his competence but on the method of appointment. Torquay had withdrawn from the Referees' Society for some reason but eventually the team was persuaded to play (3-0).

After defeat at Bristol (0-12) Exeter entered the Easter holiday period still without seven leading players but still performed well. A narrow defeat by Aberavon (0-3) came between wins against Bath (6-0) and Coventry (18-7), the latter appearing on the fixture list for the first time.

The season ended with a disappointing single point defeat at home by Plymouth (9-10).

The overall record for the Chiefs was deemed to be satisfactory as were those for the "A" and "B" teams who between them played 54 games of which only seven were lost.

Financially the club ended with an adverse balance. Part of this was put down to the cancellation of the home game against Wellington when a county match was arranged to be played on the County Ground and poor weather at both Christmas and Easter. Travelling expenses to Cornwall and Wales and the purchase of new jerseys were probably contributory causes.

An increase in admission charges for important games like those against Albion, Barnstaple and Plymouth caused some supporters to switch their allegiance to the association game.

One item of expenditure was avoided as Sydney Lee (Fine Art Printers) of South Street gave away 500 programmes showing playing positions at every home Saturday game as well as distributing match bills.

In February 1898 during a period of dispute between the R.F.U. and the Welsh R.U. Exeter was proposed as a compromise venue for the International match between the two countries. As it turned out the dispute was resolved and the match was played at Blackheath where William Ashford appeared in the England XV.