

49th Year 1920-21

For a club struggling to regain its feet in the immediate post-war period, Exeter was dealt what could have been a near fatal body blow before the season began.

The directors of the Devon County Athletic Ground Company sought applications for leasing the ground on a yearly basis. Exeter, not being in a strong financial position, could only afford rent for the winter season. Several parties were said to be interested in renting the ground including local sporting organisations as well as individuals. During August it was one of the latter, Mr. Edgar S. Plummer who became the tenant of the County Ground for the sum of £200 (approx. £4,250) per annum. His intention, it was said, was to save the ground from speculative builders and to make the facility more attractive for all summer and winter pastimes.

Apparently the directors of the County Ground Co. arranged a meeting with Mr. Plummer and local sporting bodies but the invitation to Exeter Football Club arrived at a time when the then secretary was ill and no action was taken by the club. Mr. Plummer then made arrangements with the Young Men's Christian Association and the Victory League, a local amateur soccer organisation.

The outcome was that Exeter F.C., who had played rugby football on the County Ground since 1895, found itself without a home ground with the new season less than a month away. The situation was critical.

Following a meeting of players and members the club took the bold decision to carry on despite the difficulties. A replacement ground was found by renting what was known as Barn Field from a Mr. Huggett. This field was situated "right behind Okehampton Road allotments" with the entrance being through Oke Street off a turning by Emmanuel Church. There were no dressing rooms on the ground and the players were to use the facilities of the Royal Oak Inn. The newly elected secretary, Jack Coombes, some 25 years later, recalled the pitch as a mud heap with orange boxes placed around the ground for the use of spectators.

Meanwhile negotiations were commenced between Edgar Plummer and T.S. Kelly (Chairman) and Jack Coombes on behalf of the club.

An early September practice attracted more players than expected and an 18-a-side game was played. This pleasant surprise soon turned to disappointment when the team started disastrously with an "inglorious display" against Crediton in the opening match at Barn Park (5-8). The Exeter backs made too many mistakes and it was evident that heavier forwards were still needed.

A distinct improvement saw the team hold Sidmouth to a draw (0-0) when the referee cautioned a section of the Barn Park crowd "whose excitement overcame their discretion". Travelling to Exmouth the team gave a creditable display even though losing by a wide margin after leading by a Stan Havill try (3-25).

Entering the Devon Cup for the first time since 1911-2 Exeter had been drawn at home to Plymouth Albion. Clearly the "new" home was not fit to host such an important match. Allegedly Albion offered Exeter a share of the gate money if the

fixture was switched to Beacon Park. Exeter must have agreed to this arrangement but the team sent to Plymouth is likely to have been seriously under-strength as it was overwhelmed (0-46).

Despite its on-field disappointments the club was flourishing to the extent of being able to form an Exeter Juniors team. This move was made to encourage and give experience to players in the 15-20 age range. So now Exeter in effect fielded three sides. Immediately after the announcement of the formation of this new team the Chiefs went to Crediton and avenged their earlier defeat (14-3).

The effects of the World War were to last many years and in the wake of the armistice the City of Exeter was to “adopt” the French town of Montdidier which had been flattened in the conflict and where the population was still having to live “in dug-outs”. In aid of the Montdidier Fund, Bert Isaac raised an invitation XV from clubs in local district to play Exeter in a mid-week match that Exeter duly won (8-0) and thereby raising £15 5s (£350) in the process.

Almost to a pattern Exeter then lost four of its next five games. At home to Teignmouth the margin of defeat was unexpected (3-21). A draw at Weston was tempered by the fact that the home team lacked the services of players involved in a county match. Exeter managed a try by Sid Chudley to a penalty goal (3-3).

Travelling by char-a-banc to Paignton the team suffered yet another unexpectedly heavy defeat (0-19). Two less painful losses followed. At home to Exmouth, in the best performance to-date, Exeter was leading by a Cecil Clark dropped goal to an Exmouth try when the referee awarded the visitors a penalty instead of a scrum for a technical infringement. The goal was kicked and the game lost (4-6). Arriving fifteen minutes late at Torquay Athletic after Percy Kerswell had helped to adjust the carburettor on another char-a-banc journey, Exeter suffered another narrow defeat (5-8).

Facing two student bodies in the next two games Exeter managed two precious victories. The team had to play well to defeat Blundell’s School (12-5) and the weight advantage in the forwards was again displayed against the Royal Naval Engineering College (16-3). For this latter game at Barn Park, Exeter, who had been waiting six weeks for a new set of jerseys, could not use them. The quartered black white colours clashed with those of the College. Exeter wore the green and white of the Devon team instead.

Luck did not favour Exeter at Taunton where the team scored four tries only to lose to a dropped goal and three tries (12-13). At this point in the season a Torquay correspondent wrote “The Exeter club is a disservice to the code” which seems somewhat harsh seeing the struggle the club had overcome to survive. It was true that Exeter could not match sides like Devonport Services with their much heavier pack (0-21) and a mid-week match with Blundell’s was won only by a narrow margin (7-6) but even in defeat Exeter was still trying to play open rugby though lacking what now might be called a game plan.

Newton Abbot, with men on county duty, came to Barn Park and took their chances. Exeter did not. “Teams cannot win matches unless they have some sort of plan of

campaign and this only comes about by coaching and practice” (0-6). The best gate of the season contributed generously to funds for St. Dunstan’s.

Many Exeter players arrived late at Bristol where spectators were not used to a delayed kick-off. The two teams had not met since 1908 and although Exeter was described as “a plucky combination” by the local press, the result was predictable (0-27).

Then through the gloom came a very welcome early Christmas present. Exeter had experienced difficulty in arranging fixtures for the following season because of the state of Exeter home facilities. More immediately it would be difficult enough to adequately accommodate clubs like Newport and Bristol in the coming two months let alone trying to entice opponents in the future. It was galling to note that, despite the efforts of the new lease holder, little use was being made of the County ground.

After weeks of negotiations between Mr. Plummer and club officials a short note dated 15th December 1920 from Mr. Plummer was received at the home of the club secretary. The opening paragraph contained the following “I . . . have arranged that the County Ground is to be controlled by the Exeter Rugby Football Club from 1st January 1921”. The efforts of Messrs Kelly and Coombes had paid off and Mr. Plummer realised that his intention of providing a ground for all sports was not being realised.

“Home Again” was the headline in local newspapers after a meeting of Exeter Football Club at the “Seven Stars” had accepted financial responsibility for the County Ground. Rugby would again be played there and the junior soccer league would transfer to Barn Park. Exeter F.C. had already showed its intentions by making improvements to the cycle track around the ground and to establish a lawn tennis club operating in the summer months. The intention was there also to encourage the ground’s use by the Exeter Harriers. Fund raising schemes became a major preoccupation of the committee. There was also the continuing intention of rebuilding the stand and dressing rooms.

Buoyed by the good news, Exeter put up a good show at Exmouth on a poor pitch (0-9) and before the year was out the team played its last game at Barn Park when Devon Nomads, a team raised by W. Brock, was beaten (9-0). For this game, former club captain Walton J. Hussey who was now Sheriff of Exeter, acted a touch-judge. Yet again Exeter, despite its own financial burdens, played a match to raise money for charity, this time the beneficiary being the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital.

New Years Day 1921 saw the return to the County Ground for an encounter with Devonport Services, the first of three consecutive home matches. Unfortunately the day did not dawn well and only “a handful of spectators braved the weather”. Exeter was said to be nowhere near full strength in a disappointing game in which all the scoring came in the first half (3-16). Thought was given to the erection of some sort of shelter to be ready for the game with Newport that was ten days away. Conditions were no better for an easy win in pouring rain over Devon Public Schools (28-11).

The rain persisted both before and during the game with Newport. Nevertheless the attendance, estimated at 2-3,000, was encouraging. Mr. Edgar Plummer was invited to

kick-off and he made it “a very good one”. Perhaps not as strong a team as the previous year Newport again ran out winners (0-14). Welsh critics praised Exeter and the Newport players considered it to be one of their hardest games of the season. According to home reporters “Exeter is to be congratulated on putting up such a good show”. Stan Havill had to leave the field with a head injury in the first half and the visitors sportingly allowed a substitute to take his place.

A first visit to Teignmouth since 1910 brought no success (3-10). There were “far too many infringements for leg up by the homesters”. Exeter failed to take advantage and kicked only one penalty goal. A listless display at home to Exmouth produced a disappointing result (0-20).

At last Exeter defeated a senior club side. A reorganised team gave a much improved display to defeat Weston super Mare by four tries to one at the County Ground (12-3). This form was not reproduced away at Bridgwater & Albion where Exeter’s defeat was bigger than expected (3-28). Back at the County Ground, without either first choice half back, Exeter went down to Paignton (5-23). The ubiquitous Stan Havill filled in at outside half and scored his side’s only try. An old story was repeated on a visit to Newton Abbot where a weak Exeter team went under by a large score (0-25).

The depth to which the popularity of rugby in Exeter had sunk was well illustrated on the last Saturday in February. Exeter City, entertaining Queens Park Rangers in a Third Division soccer fixture at St. James’ Park, attracted a crowd of 8,000. At the County Ground the rugby club faced Bristol at that time one of the finest combinations in England. The local press estimated the crowd at less than 1,000. The Western Daily Press thought the figure to be nearer 600. The Western Morning News said the match was one of the finest games of the season whereas the comment from the Bristol newspaper was that “It was not a good exhibition of football by any means”. For some reason Exeter adopted the old New Zealand formation of eight backs and seven forwards. To some extent this worked and Exeter might have done better had the attack played as well as the defence. Fourteen of Bristol’s points came from kicks and Exeter scored two tries to their opponents three (6-23).

Veteran scrum-half Sid Kerswill was recalled for the home match against Bridgwater & Albion. He “delighted the crowd” and, although the home forwards were pushed off the ball in the scrums, the team “was not disgraced by any means” (5-11). The forwards did better against the R.N.E.C. students and with more possession available for the back line Exeter achieved a rare win away from home (5-3). It was then back to normal on a heavy County Ground pitch when Taunton ran out winners (6-18).

The first visitors for the Easter period were Westleigh Old Boys from Leicester. Again playing in Devon county jerseys Exeter managed a one point victory before a disappointing crowd (9-8). On Easter Monday Exeter played “a fine game” against traditional visitors Old Merchant Taylors and produced “one of the best performances of the season by the pack”. Although losing yet again to their rivals from London, Exeter could take heart from the narrow margin of defeat (3-5). The result might have been different had skipper Percy Kerswell not been injured during the game necessitating the withdrawal of Stan Havill from the forwards to play fly-half.

The following day Exeter fielded a weaker team against Civil Service Wanderers. A mixture of wind, hail and rain before the game kept scoring to a minimum. The visitors scored near the end of the game but Exeter then missed a chance to draw level. Centre Cecil Clark cross kicked in attack not realising he was over the opposition try line! (0-5).

The last three matches of the season all resulted in disappointing defeats. For the third time in the season Exeter played in green and white to avoid clashing with the black and white of Torquay Athletic. Forward W. Snell, a pre-war Exeter player now a Crediton regular, scored a try and kicked a conversion but Exeter lost “through a glaring mistake by the referee who did not see a most apparent forward pass” in a Torquay scoring move” (8-13).

Both of the last two matches took place away from home to allow the preparation of the County Ground for summer sports. At Sidmouth the crowd jeered the referee on awarding an Exeter try scored by Carah despite the fact that their team was well ahead (3-12). At Exmouth the appointed official did not appear and so Stan Havill took up the whistle. The home side proved to be “too clever” for the visitors (8-23).

A difficult season both on and off the field was reported at the Annual General Meeting in June as “disappointing”. The Chiefs record was recorded as Played 38 Won 10 Drawn 2 Lost 26 whilst the Reserves played 25 games of which they won eight and drew two. There was hope for better things to come as a result of the establishment of Exeter Juniors.

Fund raising meant there was over £300 (£6,400) in hand to help restore the cycle track. The club had started the season with a balance in hand of £11 10s (£250) which had increased to £61 14s 8d (£1,310) by the end of the season.

Another significant event took place at the meeting. A motion to allow the acceptance of Lady Vice-Presidents was carried. A Miss Clark became the first of several to take advantage of the privilege.