

## 17<sup>th</sup> Season 1888-9

Following two seasons during which he often filled in as captain Brice Wakeford Lee Ashford was elected in his own right. Ironically after playing in most games in the first half of the season he too became unavailable for selection, playing in only two games after Christmas.

Lee Ashford, a three-quarter, was an innovator, not only improving techniques and team tactics at Exeter but also wherever else he played. He was thought to be unfortunate not to be capped by England after playing in two trial matches. He might have done so but England, being in dispute, played no games against the other home nations. England played only against the touring New Zealand Native team (Maoris) with a side composed almost entirely of players from the north of England and London.

Another irony for Ashford was that the disagreement between the home nations had arisen from a disputed try scored by Exeter's Dick Kindersley against Scotland as far back as 1884!

Entering the banking profession with the Wilts & Dorset Bank (later part of the Lloyds banking group), Lee Ashford, as his career progressed, worked in many locations within the south-west region. His name can be found in team lists for Weston, Wellington and Torquay before playing regularly for his home city. He then moved to Bristol where he became much admired by introducing tactics as he had done at Exeter.

After his retirement to north Devon he was elected President of Barnstaple R.F.C. He also had the distinction of playing for three counties – Somerset, Devon and Gloucestershire. He in November 1923 at the age of 59.

The Exonia club merged with Exeter at the start of the season and following a decision to play club matches on county days the number of first team games played rose to thirty. Of these only six were lost and five drawn. The second string, referred to as Exeter B, played sixteen games of which they won ten.

New opponents this season were local teams. Junior club Clarence provided the opposition when the scheduled visitors scratched. A game against Exeter Grammar School Past & Present was played in the Christmas holiday period and an Exeter District XV was met under somewhat bizarre circumstances in March.

Interest in the game of rugby football reached a new peak. Some games at Matford would attract between an estimated 1,000 - 1,500 spectators. This increase in interest caused congestion problems around the home venue that led to tickets being sold outside the ground and carriages being banned from stopping immediately outside the gates. Access to the ground was to be via Wonford Road only, with an entrance in Matford Lane being closed. The latter changes followed a police instruction to prevent trespassers entering surrounding private property.

In contrast, an exhibition game under Association rules that was staged to promote the game in February attracted only 300 spectators. The South Staffordshire Rangers

defeated an Exeter District XI which included a number of Exeter rugby players. The round ball game in the city was described as “a plant of slow growth”.

Enthusiasm for the rugby game abounded both on and off the field. After an impressive away win against Albion hundreds of spectators met the team arriving on the 10.45 pm train at St. Thomas station. The crowd then carried both Ashford and Walter Pring on their shoulders back to the Bude Hotel.

It took two meetings during the preceding summer for Exeter to decide to re-enter the Devon cup competition. A first round victory over St. Thomas meant that Exeter would face old rivals Tiverton in the semi-final. In October a weak Tiverton team had been beaten at Matford by 25 points to nil (77-0 being the modern equivalent). In February an under strength Exeter team achieved a try-apiece draw at Tiverton. A month later the cup semi-final was also left drawn with neither side managing to score. Unlike the previous season this game was not decided by “minor” points.

There then followed a dispute about a replay. Exeter complied with the cup committee’s decision to stage the match at Matford on the following Thursday but it soon became known that Tiverton would not comply. Their argument was that the appointed date would not allow them enough time to engage the services of their London based players.

In the event there arose a somewhat farcical situation. On the day Exeter duly changed and took the field ready to play (except that Walter Pring wore his club jersey over his ordinary clothes). Tiverton did not put in an appearance. Walton Hussey duly kicked off and one of the Exeter forwards went on to touch down behind what should have been the Tiverton goal-line and thus victory could have been claimed.

That pantomime over, Exeter remained on the field to face an Exeter District XV that had been assembled to provide a game for the many spectators gathered to witness the cup tie. Pring did not play, his place being taken by none other than the club captain, Lee Ashford!

Exeter in fact did not claim the tie but instead stood by the ruling of the cup committee. Their decision was that the match should be played on Saturday 26 March at Matford. A close game ensued and Exeter prevailed by a goal and a try to a goal and so advanced to the final to meet Albion on Saturday the 30<sup>th</sup> at Cowick Fields, St. Thomas.

Having beaten Albion comfortably both at home and away during the course of the season, Exeter would have had high hopes of lifting the cup. It was not to be. The team from Devonport won a closely fought game by a try to nil. Exeter fielded almost their strongest team and, though their captain Ashford did not play, A.M. Sutthery was a very able replacement. Albion was to become an almost insurmountable hurdle for Exeter to climb in future years.

This season was the first of the 20 which saw Charles Mudge as secretary. The award of 1<sup>st</sup> XV caps was also introduced. These caps displayed figures showing the number of games played for the club.

For a match in February at Tiverton players were requested to attend in their playing uniform at St, David's station. The game was played in a blinding snow storm. The journey home could not have been a comfortable one.

Some ten years after the first rugby games by artificial light had taken place, the subject of floodlighting was again a topic of discussion. At least one game was attempted within the county but yet again Exeter did not attempt to stage an exhibition match despite the encouragement of one local press reporter.