

25th Season 1896-7

The task of continuing the progress of the Exeter Football Club now fell on the shoulders of S.G. (Sid) Labbett, a half back who made several appearances in the Devon county XV. He hailed from Crediton where his parents ran the Central restaurant and who played for his home town club before transferring to Exeter at the start of the 1894-5 season. He continued playing for Exeter until December 1899.

He was faced with the usual problems of captaincy. Some players were no longer available while new players were gained, there were two minor disciplinary matters to deal with, a couple of selection aberrations and an ill-timed tour to Cornwall when the captain and two other players were absent on county duty.

However, all these minor problems did not hamper the club's progress. By the end of the season the playing record of the Chiefs and those of the A and B teams were all highly satisfactory. All this must be set against the back-ground of improving standards of rugby in Devon. The Plymouth club was making great strides to match its rival Albion, now often referred to by the name Devonport Albion. A new Exmouth club had been formed and would now prove strong enough to challenge the leading Devon clubs.

By the end of the season the Chiefs had played 33 games, winning 20 drawing 3 and losing 10 scoring 297 points and conceding 152. The A team played 24 matches and achieved 14 victories against seven defeats. The B team record was even more impressive losing only three and drawing two games out of 24 played. The senior team could field most players on a regular basis but clearly there were many adequate reserves seeking promotion to the Chiefs. What is surprising is the comment made by Sid Labbett at the end of season dinner in May. He said "... the players did no training whatever" but went on to add "Training should be done next season and the committee ought to insist on it". This comment was met with applause.

Victories in the two opening fixtures, away to Plymouth (6-3) and home to Tiverton (21-0) augured well but next came a surprise defeat at Weston (3-8). On the morning of this latter match Harry Reed got married. Harry Escott acted as best man whilst the bride was given-away by "Ducky" Powell. The wedding breakfast was held on the train going to Weston. One wonders how these events might have contributed to the unexpected defeat.

Only two further games were lost before Christmas, away at Barnstaple (0-3) and at home to Bristol (0-5). Two games were drawn one of which was away to Newton (3-3) where Harry Escott was "entertained" before the match by home supporters in what was described as an "unsportsmanlike" act. As a result Escott was dropped for the following match at Bridgwater (6-0). For the game against Bristol, to the surprise of many, Exeter included the name of Goodwyn, a former Devon forward, who had last appeared for the club in January 1890. His reappearance was short lived and he did not appear in Exeter colours again. According to one observer "he cannot stand the pace".

Both Christmas visitors were defeated, Saracens (9-0) and Barrow (14-8) as were Wellington (3-0). There followed a narrow defeat at Bath (0-3). A crowd estimated at

4,000 spectators at the County Ground gathered to witness the game against Albion. £40 was taken at the gate comprised mostly of those on the ground paying three (old) pence and six (old) pence from those in the enclosure.

At half time Exeter trailed by 7 points to 3 at which point the teams retired to the dressing rooms. The home players were said to have partaken of some of Harry Angel's "City" Football Punch", a mineral water produced in Summerland Street in the city. This refreshment appeared to do the trick when Exeter, in the second half, scored a further eight points without reply by the visitors resulting in much celebration by the crowd at the end of the game.

There was much excitement generated at Exeter's next match too. This was the first match to be played by the city club at Cranford the home ground of the newly constituted Exmouth club. "The Seaside's Match Of The Season" declared the match bills. "Come Early To Prevent Crush" said others. The crowd of 1,300 included 500 persons from Exeter who saw their team victors by 7 points to three. During the game Sid Labbett's shorts suffered during an attempted tackle. He retired from the field for a replacement pair. On his return to the field there was much hilarity as his new shorts were bright red.

Resounding wins away at Wellington (15-3) and at home to Weston (33-0) were followed by three consecutive defeats against strong opposition. At Rectory Field against Albion. Exeter was handicapped after ten minutes play by an injury to one of the forwards, Baker, who had joined the club at the start of the season from the Heavitree club. Playing with fourteen men for the final hour Exeter went down 3-13.

A home defeat by Barnstaple (3-10) was disappointing. Strangely Exeter had decided to include in their team for this game one G.S.A. Jones who hailed from Lyme Regis and had won a blue for Oxford in the 1896 Varsity match. His appearance was written off as a failure by the press and he did not appear for the club again.

Away at Bristol the team did well to restrict the losing margin to only three points. In the next game at Tiverton torrential rain caused the match to be abandoned with twenty minutes still to play. There had been no scoring so a draw was the declared result. After two more victories came a two match tour to Cornwall at the end of March.

The party included 16 players two of whom had been recruited from the Oaks club for the trip. Three leading players, Sid Labbett, Frank Hitt and "Ducky" Powell had opted to play for Devon rather than their club. Included in the party was former club captain William Newberry in his come-back season. His play was not quite up to the mark. Defeats by Penzance (3-9) and Redruth (5-14) were disappointing.

Returning to Devon four games ended in victory for Exeter including the away match against Torquay Athletic where a home spectator allegedly struck T.C.G. Sandford who had scored a brilliant try on his debut. Against Newton at home Arthur Brock failed to turn up and a substitute had to be enlisted. It transpired that Brock's mother and sister had been involved in a carriage accident on that morning. Another win came against United Hospitals who were filling a gap on the fixture card left by the

withdrawal of Racing Club de Paris who, in January, had cancelled a proposed three match tour to the south-west.

The final game of the season ended in a disappointing home defeat by Plymouth, “the rising stars of Devon rugby”.

For the final two months of the season both Harry and Fred (“Johnnie”) Escott were missing from the team. It appears that they had been dropped from the team for some unreported reason. For the following season they threw in their lot with the new Exmouth club but Harry returned to become a regular again from 1899. “Johnnie” appeared only occasionally.

In January 1897 William Ashford gained the first of his four caps for England. Born at Woodbury and younger brother of Lee Ashford, William made his debut for Exeter in March 1888 at sixteen years of age whilst a pupil at Exeter Grammar School. He was an Exeter regular before he embarked on a medical career. He played for St. Thomas’ Hospital before joining Richmond. He captained Devon for a time before appearing regularly for Surrey.

Elsewhere in the city the Oaks club was said to have survived the season with only seventeen playing members. The club also lost its stand at the Cowick Barton ground during a gale. The indefatigable Percy Preece helped organise fund raising events on their behalf.

September 1896 saw the formation of a new association football club, Exeter United. It was this club that was to form the basis of Exeter City F.C. in 1904.