

6th Season 1877-8

Records of only eleven matches played by the Exeter club can be found for this season. Of these four ended in victory, three in defeat and the other four were left drawn. A report at the beginning of the following season records that thirteen matches were played with the two additional games being drawn, Apart from home and away fixtures with Wellington and an away match at Sherborne, all other opponents came from Devon. Of the games against Wellington the home match was won by a goal to two tries. After that narrow victory, the return match in January ended in the club's heaviest defeat to date. Nine tries to nil would have been ample revenge for Wellington's only defeat so far in the season.

The only new opposition came from the recently formed Torquay and South Devon club. The match took place in January on the Exeter ground with Torquay fielding fourteen men against thirteen for Exeter, two of whom were reported to be "subs". An apparently very much under-strength Exeter lost this inaugural fixture.

The Training College again was met on three occasions resulting in two drawn matches and a win for Exeter. A reporter was pleased to observe "that there were none of those unseemly disputes which have so often occurred in former matches between these opponents. After this season the Training College disappears from the fixture lists for many seasons. Later, in 1880, the college Principal, one Dr. Dangar, banned students from playing the game because it was becoming "too dangerous". Several accidents at football were reported in the local press. An Exeter player featured in one such report.

In the second match of the season at Paignton one of the Exeter full-backs, A.C. Dickens, who hailed from Sidmouth, was involved in a head to head collision with an opponent. Both fell to the ground unconscious. The Paignton player soon recovered and continued playing. Dickens however had to be led to the Esplanade Hotel where he was attended by a doctor who found him still "insensible and suffering from a concussion of the brain". Dickens remained in that state until the evening so he stayed overnight accompanied by two of his team-mates. He was sufficiently recovered by the following day to allow him to return to his home town by train. The name Dickens does not appear on the Exeter team sheet again during the season.

As to the game itself, Henry Wilson scored a try that was matched by a similar second-half effort by Paignton. The Exeter try went unconverted but the attempt to convert the Paignton try into a goal was disputed. Those behind the goal maintained that the ball went over one of the posts and not between them. The Paignton players maintained otherwise and it was decided that the result be regarded as a draw.

The result of the return match at Exeter on the last Saturday of the season was much more conclusive, the home side scoring two goals and three tries and Paignton failing to respond.

Rugby football was still in its formative years at this time. Although by now teams normally were comprised of fifteen players, occasionally sixteen men were fielded and several times the team played one, two or even three men short. Playing formations varied as well. Two full backs were the order of the day though sometimes

there was only one. Two, or sometimes three, three-quarters played in front of them and they were in turn fed by two half-backs, sometimes styled quarter-backs. The rest, be it eight, nine or ten, were forwards who played in no specific positions.

As can be gauged from reports recorded above, games were often interrupted by disputes that were usually resolved by the respective captains, umpires and referee. There were occasions when the dispute could not be resolved so the game would continue and the match result be left undecided.

In March 1878 Exeter met Blundell's in a return match at Tiverton. Exeter claimed to have scored what would now be called a push-over try. Blundell's in turn claimed a try could only be scored after the ball had emerged from a scrum. It was decided that the incident should be referred for clarification not to the Rugby Football Union but to the editor of "The Field", a sporting newspaper. The editor decided in favour of Exeter saying the action was a legitimate "touch-down in a scrum".