

42nd Season 1913-4

“Undoubtedly the standard of play has been raised” proclaimed the Annual Report when reviewing the best season for some time. The playing record of the 1st XV again differs between sources. The Annual Report records 18 wins in a programme of 37 matches with seven drawn games and 12 losses. At the Annual Dinner it was announced that the victories amounted to 19 out of 38 games played. Press reports support the latter two figures but they record only six drawn games thereby raising the total defeats to 13. The Reserves, now officially known as the “A” team, won only eight out of 28 matches and lost the rest.

The senior side still displayed its old frailties from time to time like sending weak teams to away matches and inviting guest players for important games but overall the standard of play, especially at the end of the season showed a distinct improvement. Photos of first team players taken this season show them wearing smart black and white quartered jerseys.

Captain for the season was a forward, W.J. Lutley, an employee at Fox, Fowler & Cox’s Bank in the High Street. He was later to pursue his banking career in India, South Africa and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). Injury prevented his appearance until the fifth game but he completed the season as one of the strengths in a solid Exeter scrum.

The first full-scale practice for the season was hampered by the fact that the club could use only a part of the County Ground as most of the area had been given over to the Exeter Carnival. A full mid-week practice match was held four days later in compensation.

Missing four regular forwards from the previous season as well as the injured captain and W. Snell who was ill, Exeter welcomed Weston-super-Mare, the Somerset champions, to the County Ground for the first match. Play was open being described as “to and fro” and honours ended in even fashion with a draw (14-14). Then Devonport Albion again proved to be too strong in a one sided contest (0-45). After seeing that result Torquay Athletic may have come to Exeter expecting a comfortable win but it was not to be. Despite full-back Alan Nicholls being off the field due to injury for much of the game, Exeter proved to be the better team (11-8).

At Bath both teams fielded a weakened team, Bath due to a Somerset trial and Exeter probably because the team was playing away from home. In addition Cecil Clark missed the train and club secretary Bert Isaac filled the vacancy. On a slippery ground Bath won (0-9).

In a “bright game” at Keyham, Exeter managed to defeat Devonport Services whose team now comprised only officers (19-8). In another bright game Bridgwater was defeated at the County Ground with Cecil Clark at centre proving to be the “star turn” (5-3),

The first day of November was the occasion of the second meeting with Devonport Albion, this time at the County Ground. Albion was not at full strength having supplied players to both Devon and Cornwall for a county match. Exeter were at their best and “brilliant passing brought three tries”. Albion matched the home team’s score

to square the game (11-11). One journalist reported that the Exeter crowd was “in ecstasy” while a, more conservative rival simply wrote “Well done, Exeter!”

True to their old habits, Exeter then let themselves down by being badly beaten at Brixham (0-15). Brixham was the better team but Exeter made numerous mistakes which caused their downfall. Bouncing back, the next game at home was won. Barnstaple was to have provided the opposition but that club had become defunct again. Devonport Services took the vacant date. “A victory well earned” was the judgement (11-10). Centre Robert Drayton went off injured three minutes into the second half whereupon the Services scored their ten points. Cecil Clark saved the day with a try in the last few minutes.

A first meeting with the students of the Royal Naval College resulted in “one of the finest games seen at the County Ground”. The College usually played games only against other student bodies. The team agreed to fill another gap in the fixture list. They acquitted themselves well and at the end of the game honours were even (21-21), though Exeter was considered lucky as the young, lightweight College forwards found the effort required too much towards the end of the match.

At the end of November a group of Exeter players again journeyed to France. Meanwhile a decidedly “A” team strength Exeter team was fielded at home against North Petherton, the losing Somerset Cup finalist of the previous season. Weeks, one of the few Chiefs playing, scored Exeter’s try in a drawn game (3-3). Over the Channel, again playing on a Sunday, the leading Exeter players were defeated by the Racing Club de Paris (0-17).

Resuming normal fixtures the team travelled to Newton Abbot where the game was closer than the score suggests (3-23). The home team scored three tries near the end of the game and Exeter’s tactics were “puzzling”. Again away, Exeter bounced back with victory over Clifton (6-4), a result that was described as a “surprise” by one newspaper and “sensational” by another.

A third away game in succession was not a happy one. The opposition was provided by Bridgwater Albion who won by a score that was by no means representative of the play (3-31). With diplomacy a reporter recorded “Exeter could do little right from an official point of view and Bridgwater little wrong”. Later in his report he further commented, “It was something of a novelty to see a referee in an important fixture attired in long trousers”. Exeter full-back Chudley was off the field for most of the second half.

Boxing Day saw two matches played on the County Ground. The Supporters’ Club arranged a game between Past and Present players. The “Old Crocks” won (5-17). The main event was another meeting with Clifton in what was described as a “moderate” game. George Bickley twice ran most of the length of the field to score tries in a home team win (14-8).

The last game of 1913 and the first of 1914 were both against Exmouth. In what was described as “a dull game” the Exeter forwards were slow in their play “possibly due to an excess of rugby over the holiday period” (0-11). Exeter fielded a 17 year old full

back named Moffatt who, rather unkindly, was dubbed “Muff it” in one report. At the County Ground, crowd numbers were larger than they had been in recent times for a club game. Play was “ding-dong” but the Exeter forwards again failed to last the pace (0-8). Exeter had now lost eight straight games against “The Cockles”.

The following Monday saw Exeter not only last the pace against a strong Newport team but stage a late rally that narrowed the margin of defeat (11-16). Because of injuries (including captain Lutley), Exeter invited two Newton Abbot players to bolster the side. On Saturday Exeter went to Weston super Mare without seven first choice players (0-17).

Exeter then paid a visit to a new Barnstaple team playing under the name Barnstaple Albion that contained many players from the defunct town team, Percy Kerswell, in the absence of Lutley, led his team to a narrow victory (6-3).

With captain Lutley recovered from injury and playing at full-back, the team managed a draw at home with Devonport Services (10-10). At this match a collection was made in support of families of victims of the A7 submarine disaster. The collection raised £2 16s 2d (£160). The next match, also at home, proved to be the turning point of the season,

On the day that Exeter City lost 1-2 to Aston Villa in a F.A. Cup tie, on the other side of the city the rugby club lost to Brixham yet again (0-9) in the “poorest game seen on the County Ground for some time”. Exeter had five selected players cry off and had to play a forward, Bodley, at scrum-half. Another forward, Webber, had not played for 18 months. “Exeter’s show was of the crudest character”. Comments appeared in the local press accusing some committee members and players of apathy.

These accusations appear to have galvanised the club and must have stirred the senior team for of the remaining fourteen fixtures up to the end of the season eleven were won, one drawn and the other two lost.

To start this sequence Exeter were either somewhat lucky to win or deserving of victory in beating Torquay Athletic by two goals to three tries (10-9). It depended on which newspaper was being read. In a rain spoilt game on a poor pitch at Bridgwater, Exeter defeated the town team by the only score of the match (3-0). To follow came a game on another poor pitch. This time the location was the County Ground where the centre of the pitch resembled a quagmire. Nevertheless Exeter overcame the conditions and Newton Abbot through tries from half-backs Sid Kerswill and Bert Isaac (6-0).

A game against what was tantamount to a scratch team came, next. Committee man Reg House raised a side composed of former pupils of Emmanuel School. His team contained some ten players with connection to the Exeter club. It was agreed to play only thirty minutes each way. The Old Emmanuelites failed to trouble the scoreboard. (20-0). Against Combined Colleges the difference between the sides was not so wide but Exeter prevailed (19-3). A similar score was registered against visiting Sidmouth when Exeter was “superior in every department” (18-3).

After a run of six victories Exeter, who had comfortably beaten the Combined Colleges, ought to have won against St. Likes College. Playing in a gale on a sea of mud the students showed great enthusiasm gaining an unexpected success over a strong Exeter team (3-6).

The following week, in typical Exeter style, the team exceeded expectations with a home win over Bath (9-5). An even better result was posted seven days later. In what was described as a spectacular game, each of the four home three-quarters scored a try in the “win of the season” (12-0). The victim was Clifton who were beaten for the third time in three meetings during the season.

Another scratch team was beaten with ease. The side styled Devon Wanderers had been raised by T.S. Kelly but they proved no match for the improving Exeter team (38-13). Another substantial victory was achieved at Sidmouth (23-3).

Just as the earlier game against Bridgwater Albion was not a happy one, the meeting of the two teams at the County Ground was distasteful. Two visiting forwards were sent off the field for rough play. Such was the strength of the visiting team that they scored nine points with only fourteen men on the field. It was near the end of the game when the opposition numbered only thirteen that Exeter managed to draw level (12-12). This was not the end of the matter as soon afterwards the Exeter committee decided to cancel future fixtures with Bridgwater Albion.

Somewhat chastened Exeter slipped to only their second defeat since the end of January in the Easter match against Old Merchant Taylors. The tourists from London yet again proved far too strong for Exeter (0-32).

Opponents for the final game of the season came from Bristol but the team did not represent that city’s senior club. Bristol Saracens were thought capable of giving the Exonians a close game but that proved not to be the case (39-5). In the Exeter ranks was a player named “Smith” who was “easily recognisable as a former England international”. This player was, in all probability, T.S. Kelly.

With some modesty, at the Annual Dinner, it was recorded that “The team has not done all that badly”. There was even better news at the A.G.M. when it was announced that the club’s long standing deficit had now turned into a surplus of £19 (almost £1100).

At this meeting the President also recommended that the club investigate insuring players against serious injury. For the first time the club appointed someone “to look after the players”. The appointee was Jack Rushmere, a wine merchant whose High Street business went under the name of Caunter’s. His expertise in helping to mend strains, sprains, dislocations and breaks was such that it was reported that he was sometimes called to give assistance at the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital in Southernhay. Jack was to become a long term servant of both Exeter and Devon teams. At the end of the season he was presented with a clock in recognition of his services to Exeter players.

The appointment of what was to become the ubiquitous “trainer” was thought by some to be another step on the road to professionalism. Exeter was quick to point out that Rushmere was a “true amateur”.

Professionalism was still a sensitive issue. The Heavitree club complained in the press that Exeter had offered inducements to players to join the city club. Secretary Bert Isaac was quick to respond to the accusation. “This you will recognise constitutes a very grave charge against an amateur club”. The Devon R.F.U. investigated the matter and found no substance to the Heavitree claim.

The Exeter club had been a supporter of schools rugby since its inception and the club was saddened in February to learn of the death, at the early age of 23, of Harry Campbell Exeter’s first schoolboy international. Campbell had played for Exeter while at school and had appeared regularly at full-back during the season 1910-1.