

59th Year 1930-1

For the second successive year the Annual Report could claim that the club had enjoyed its best season since the War. The playing record of the first fifteen was very similar to that of the previous season. In addition during 1930-1 programme it was reported that team spirit was high and better co-ordination was displayed in its play. Long term injuries to centre D.G. Matthew and fly-half "Bunny" Turner together with the retirement of scrum-half Harry Davey might have had a damaging effect on the team in previous seasons but there were more than adequate substitutes to fill the gaps in C.H. Beer, Peter Steele-Perkins and Roy Yendell.

Another sign of the club's growing confidence was the strengthening of the fixture list. Some local club sides were dropped though Sidmouth as Senior Cup winners was retained. New opponents from London were included and Bath returned to the programme after a gap of ten seasons.

It was determined that such was the number of players available that four fifteens would be fielded, namely the Chiefs, a First (or Senior) "A" XV, a Second (or Extra) "A" XV and a "B" XV. Full matches involving four complete fifteens were staged as pre-season trials and practice games.

In charge of the First XV was Thomas Richard Kingston Jones, popularly known to all Devon sportsmen as "Jonah". A Cornishman born in Liskeard, Jones gained a Blue at Cambridge in 1921 and was to appear in an England trial. He was thought to have been unlucky in not gaining a full cap. At one point he was also approached by Wales with an invitation to play in a Welsh trial. After university Jones joined the staff at Blundell's School.

"Jonah" made his first appearance for Exeter during the 1923-4 Jubilee season playing in the forwards. His last appearance for the club came some eleven seasons later during 1933-4. Towards the end of his career he was selected to play at full-back. He appeared in Devon colours over six seasons serving as captain in 1925-6. He later took up refereeing and also represented Devon at cricket. He died at Whitnage, near Tiverton, in 1987 aged 88 years.

Given what was to follow, Exeter did not make an auspicious start to the season. An opening fixture at Plymouth Albion was not going to be easy especially as Exeter had only "youth and vigour to match the home team's weight and experience". Exeter put up a gallant defence but it was not enough (3-16). Comments regarding Exeter's light-weight pack were to continue throughout the season.

A home win against Newton Abbot was highlighted by four tries scored by the backs despite the greasy conditions (12-3) but then Sidmouth at home justified their retention of the fixtures with Exeter by winning in mid-week by a penalty goal to nil (0-3). The home forwards were too strong for the visitors and although the Exeter backs were superior they were unable to score.

A visit to Bath also ended in defeat. Comments suggested that Exeter created a good impression with their style of play and did not deserve to lose by thirteen points (3-16). Two victories followed. Another mid-week game when Exeter fielded seven reserves saw the defeat of the Royal Naval Engineering College (15-8). Wellington forwards dominated the

first twenty minutes of a game at the County Ground during which time the visitors went ahead but Exeter revived and held out to win (11-5).

A visit to north Devon produced the usual keen game and Exeter “gave Barnstaple a fright”. The encounter produced some poor rugby as both sides used “kick and rush” tactics too often. Exeter had to make two late changes to their line-up but managed to hold their hosts to one try scored just before the interval (0-5). Before the game two minutes silence was observed for the crew of the R.101 airship disaster.

Another away defeat followed at Weston super Mare where Exeter “did reasonably well” in spite of the fact that “Bunny” Turner was off the field with a knee injury for half of the game. The home team maintained their unbeaten record but even the local press reported that Weston’s victory was “not impressive” (3-16). In contrast a decisive victory was achieved against visiting Bournemouth when both teams were understrength (17-0). An easy win against Blundell’s School in an unofficial fixture followed (35-6).

At the Recreation Ground a brilliant display by full-back H. Arscott could not prevent defeat by Torquay Athletic in heavy going in a game “devoted to spirited forward play” (3-11). The Exeter forwards again proved to be too light when Old Blues came to the County Ground (3-10).

Exeter then enjoyed their best run of the season by avoiding defeat in a sequence of nine matches. It started with a visit to London to play National Provincial Bank where in constant rain Exeter gained an unexpected win despite the absence of “Jonah” Jones and Tom Browning (8-5). Back at home against Weston, Exeter achieved a well-deserved win that was the “most meritorious of the season so far” handing the Somerset side only its second defeat of the season (11-3).

Taunton came to the County Ground where the spectators enjoyed an attractive game in difficult conditions even though play was mainly confined to two evenly matched sets of forwards. Exeter scored all their points in the first half and managed to contain a rally from the visitors (8-5). A hat-trick of victories against Somerset teams was achieved at Wellington in a “splendid performance” where the Exeter had the advantage in their backs who played “high class football”.

After a blank Saturday due to a county game at the County Ground Exeter then played host to Plymouth Albion in a pre-Christmas game. The visitors were said to be missing seven regular players and the Western Morning News thought “Albion deserved to win” what turned out to be a pointless scrappy game (0-0).

Despite a heavy ground Boxing Day visitors Glamorgan Nomads provided opposition for an open game that saw Exeter playing with the wind leading at half time. The team did not score again but held out for a win (8-5). Two days later a crowd of 3,500 at Bridgwater & Albion witnessed an unattractive game during which the home side’s forward tactics did not pay off. The only score of the game came through Exeter winger William Cann going over for a try in the first two minutes (3-0).

Entertaining Woodford for the first match of the New Year, the Exeter wingers Cann and R.G. Rew scored three tries between them to win the match (9-0). Due to frost making the

ground too hard for play the next games against Devon Public Schools and Exmouth were unavoidably cancelled.

Resuming play in mid-January the team travelled to Newton Abbot where the Exeter forwards managed to heel the ball from set scrums only three or four times during the game. They made up for this by winning possession in loose play. Exeter again won by the only score. "Hero of the game was Cann" who outdistanced the opposition after all the Exeter backs had handled the ball. "It was a pity that the spectators were so few" (3-0).

Exeter's unbeaten sequence came to an abrupt halt at home to Torquay Athletic. "There was roughness and other discreditable tactics all the way through". A visiting forward was ordered off the field early in the game and twice before the end of the match Exeter centre C.H. Beer was injured and on the second occasion was practically carried off. "It was a very dirty game and no one wants to see another like it". One view was that the referee allowed "a great deal too much loose scrummaging" leading to many off the ball incidents. Harry Pape and Frank Buckland operating as wing-forwards "did little to try and win the ball". "As the teams left the ground a section of the crowd booed the Torquay team". Unfortunately all this took place in front of Exeter's largest gate of the season (0-3).

Another defeat quickly followed although Exeter was thought to be unlucky as the winning try was considered "doubtful". Playing in rain and mud Bournemouth maintained an unbeaten home record (9-11).

Back to winning ways at home against a new opponent, St. Thomas' Hospital, wingers Cann and Rew registered five tries. The visitors had played a Hospital's Cup match in the preceding week and their performance in this game was disappointing especially it was a guarantee fixture. The next week saw visitors Barnstaple win deservedly by a comfortable margin (3-13). A third home game in succession saw the defeat of Bridgwater & Albion during which Cann scored a hat-trick of tries (14-6).

A trip to Plymouth to meet R.N.E.C. was spoilt by snow, sleet and hail and with both teams understrength a dull game ensued (0-0) but a second successive trip to the three towns produced a victory against a Devonport Services team that had been depleted due to the Army v Navy fixture (9-6).

A mid-week game at Barnstaple demonstrated the close relationship between the two clubs. This unofficial match had been arranged by the Barnstaple supporters' club in aid of their baths fund. Exeter claimed only travelling expenses. The result was not included in the official record (3-26).

At Sidmouth the local team proved worthy opponents until half time. The loss of a player through injury and the temporary incapacitation of another meant that only thirteen players faced Exeter for a time. The visitors scored nineteen points in the second half and seven tries in all, Cann notching another hat-trick (25-0). The return fixture with National Provincial Bank produced seven Exeter tries with the backs again being dominant (23-11).

"Hats off to Exeter" declared one headline following the last game in March. "Exeter sprang a surprise" was the verdict of another report. The victim this time was Bath. Exeter led by eight points up to the final twenty minutes. Bath then scored with a dropped goal (then worth four points) and in the remaining time made three more unsuccessful attempts to draw level

with another dropped goal (8-4). "The victory was about the best Exeter has achieved since the war".

As a prelude to the Easter week-end a team was sent to Tiverton for a Thursday evening encounter where in constant rain another pointless draw was played out (0-0). Easter Saturday welcomed regular visitor Nottingham to the County Ground. The backs did not play up to their usual standard with C.A.C. Coombes, son of club secretary Jack Coombes, at fly-half. After an adjustment at half-time Exeter won the game in the last minute, scoring three tries to two in all (9-6). Monday saw a return of Old Millhillians when Exeter again scored three tries. Their opponents did the same but the difference between the sides was the fact that the visitors converted all three of their scores (9-15).

In their match programme Taunton described their fifteen as "a team of remnants". Exeter had also to make changes to their intended line-up and Taunton avenged a defeat earlier in the season (9-24). An evening game at Exmouth brought better fortune and Exeter achieved a "well deserved win" (11-3).

The official season was wound up with a home game that did not reach a high standard against a "fairly strong" Devonport Services team. Centre three-quarter Beer injured a leg but stayed on for the second half even though he was incapacitated (11-3).

A special extension to the season was granted for an unofficial "friendly" game between Exeter and Exmouth in support of the funds of the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital and to recognise the services rendered to injured local rugby players. Ironically Exeter back H. Pincott was injured during the game. He carried on but later had to be carried off the field. He was allowed home after treatment for concussion at the R.D. & E. Hospital! In the absence of Pincott captain "Jonah" Jones played at outside-half. Exmouth won the game (3-7).

The praiseworthy final record of the first fifteen as reported at the A.G.M. (and supported by match reports) stood at 37 matches played of which 22 were won, three left drawn and twelve lost. For some unexplained reason the record printed in the "Rugby Football Annual" quoted one less victory and one more defeat.

Running two "A" XV's was deemed to be only a partial success though the intention was to continue this practice. The Senior "A" won fifteen and drew three out of 27 games played and the Extra "A" won eight out of 25 games. The "B" played 20 matches winning ten and drawing one.

An improvement in gate receipts from £360 to £440 (£12,000 to £15,000 approx.) was reported and overall the financial situation was regarded as very satisfactory. There had been problems between the County Ground Company and the speedway organisation but the sport was to continue. In addition greyhound racing had been introduced at the stadium. Income from County Ground usage stood at £800 (£27,000).

During the course of the season six Exeter players represented Devon but the name of Exeter's star player of the season was not amongst them. William George Cann made his debut for the club in 1928 playing as a wing three-quarter. During the course of the 1930-1 season, after missing the first month, he accumulated 25 tries in official matches and 31 in all games. He continued to play for a couple more seasons but was nowhere near as prolific a scorer. During the Second World War he was serving as a Lieutenant with the Devonshire

Regiment when he contracted typhus during the Burma campaign and died at Imphal in December 1945. His death is commemorated on the Pinhoe War Memorial as well as the memorial at Sandy Park.

During the course of this season reference was often made to Exeter's light-weight pack. One weightier solution to this shortcoming was thought to be H.T. Venables who had joined the staff of Exeter School. He began playing for the Exeter club in 1929 and after noteworthy performances in the "A" XV pack he made his first team debut in March 1930. He made four more senior appearances during 1930-1 before damaging an ear which meant he had to forsake scrummaging to take a place as a three-quarter in one of the lower teams. During the summer he went on a solo walking holiday in the Welsh mountains and disappeared. After an exhaustive search his body was found in a ravine on the slopes of Cader Idris.