

14th Season 1885-6

The evolution of Rugby Football took a decided step forward during the mid-1880s. Old problems still persisted like disputes over the legitimacy of scores, especially where boundaries of the pitch were signified, at best, by posts with no ground markings. Umpires were not always impartial in these disputes. Fulfilling away fixtures with a full team was still a headache.

On the other hand, press coverage began to extend beyond mere descriptions of games. For the first time there would be mention of finance, fitness, discipline and competitive rugby.

“Football is now an institution” declared a city councillor. Football in Exeter was still Rugby Football. Games under the Association rules were few. The remark made at a council meeting was in support of efforts to place the Exeter club on a more substantial financial footing. At the start of the 1885-6 season the books showed a deficit of £19 (current value just under £2,000) which had risen to £26 (just over £2,500) by February 1886. Fellow councillors and dignitaries were urged to attend a performance by the Exeter Cantata Society of Gilbert and Sullivan’s “Princess Ida” at the Public Rooms as it was “a disgrace to see the city club languishing”. The concert raised £13 0s 7d (over £1,300) and by May the club accounts showed a favourable balance of £18 16s 6d (about £1,900).

In a game against Tiverton it was reported that the Exeter men took to the field wearing nine different coloured jerseys. Despite the worrying financial situation, the club invested in a new set of jerseys first worn in a match against Barnstaple in December. The new colours were white with a black stripe running from the right shoulder to the left thigh. This club uniform was worn for a further ten years or more.

An early season defeat at Newton College gave rise to the comment that the Exeter players were out of condition in contrast to the students who had been practicing daily for two weeks. In November Charles Mudge called a meeting of local players at the Bude Hotel with a view to holding a bi-weekly run. A dozen took part in the initial run (including Mudge and five other Exeter players) over a route through Fore Street, High Street, along Canal Banks, over Countess Wear Bridge, returning along Topsham Road and back to the Bude Hotel. Including a stoppage of twelve minutes the run took exactly an hour.

Games were generally played over two periods of thirty-five minutes but when Exeter arrived late at Barnstaple the game lasted only fifty minutes. When one considers that, for a match at Wellington, the Exeter team travelled by train to Taunton and then transferred to a horse-drawn brake for the Wellington leg, it is easy to see why teams did not always arrive on time.

The away match at Teignmouth lasted only fifty-seven minutes but for a very different reason. During the game Exeter took exception to the unruly, obnoxious play of one of the home team who used his boots to excess on an Exeter back and was unduly rough with another. When he started fighting, the Exeter captain asked the opposing captain to remove the player concerned from the field. When this request was refused the Exeter captain led his team from the field. It was reported that this

was the first time Exeter had been obliged to take this action for three years but there is no record of the circumstances of the previous incident.

The Exeter captain for the season was J. Walton Hussey who became Sheriff of Exeter in 1920 and was to head the local family auctioneering firm Hussey & Sons. For Exeter he was a reasonably successful place kicker appearing as a full back, three-quarter and half back before ending his career as a forward. He played for Devon in all these positions as well. He also played cricket for Exeter and Devon.

The season could be described as average. Of 24 matches played ten were won, four drawn and ten lost. Two games were lost when Exeter had supplied players to the county team and of the victories two came in easier games against Blundell's and three against city teams St. Thomas and Rougemont.

Towards the end of the season Exeter travelled with thirteen players to face Newton Rifles in weather that was "as bad as it possibly could be". One substitute was enlisted but the team struggled in a heavy defeat by two goals and four tries to nil. At full-back for Exeter was a player named Sandford who tried to borrow a piece of sacking from a spectator to use as some protection from the squalls of rain. His request was refused but in any case, judging by the score-line, he should have been too involved in the play for the covering to have remained in place for very long.

Two notable players appearing regularly during 1885-6 were T.C. Pring and C.G. Lovesay. Thomas Carter Pring was a member of the City Brewery family who in turn became President of Exeter F.C., Devon R.F.U. and in 1909-10 and 1910-11 served two terms as President of the Rugby Football Union, the only Exeter player to be given this honour.

Lovesay hailed from Crediton where he had been captain of the local club. After playing several seasons with Exeter he became a long term servant of the Devon R.F.U. As a noted referee he was said to have officiated on every major rugby ground in Somerset, Devon and Cornwall.

Ground improvements for the season at Matford saw boards being laid along part of the touchline for "the use of ladies and the gentlemen accompanying them". The seasonal lease at Matford ended at the end of March so that the final two matches of the extended season were staged in Polsloe Park. The extension of the playing season came about due to a challenge match.

Interest in rugby was now at a level where speculation was rife over which was the strongest club in the county. This led to a lot of press coverage that resulted in a public subscription being raised for a challenge cup to be played for by Exeter and Tiverton. Both teams took this challenge very seriously and enlisted the services of playing members working away in London.

In the event Tiverton won by two tries to nil causing much celebration in that town. The seeds of competitive rugby in Devon had been sown.