

35th Season 1906-7

Despite the loss of a few experienced players, after two full scale practices when new blood appeared on the scene, optimism for the new season was again high. New jerseys of black with a white band incorporating a canvass neck and shoulder piece in the New Zealand style had been purchased to be matched with white shorts, and the fixture list for the first XV had been expanded to an ambitious 40 matches for the first time,

By the time of the Annual General Meeting the following July it was recorded that the playing record “was not what the committee would have wished”. This must have been something of an understatement as only a dozen games ended in victory with five left drawn. A stuttering start, followed by some mixed results was spoilt by a final run of 18 matches of which fourteen ended in defeat.

The reason for this decline is not made clear but “want of method and brains” was attributed to failure in one game. Certainly injuries to leading players, especially at the end of the season, disrupted the team. Among those laid off for some weeks was the captain W.S. Goff.

William Setten Goff was an Exonian whose mother for many years ran the Cathedral Restaurant in Exeter. He made his senior team debut in September 1901. Initially he played full-back or centre three-quarter but later knee injuries saw his inclusion amongst the forwards. He became a regular for Devon for whom he played his final match in January 1914. Articled to Messrs. Whitton & Laing, auctioneers and estate agents of Gandy Street, his profession later took him to South Wales and in the last few seasons before the outbreak of war he made a number of first team appearances for both Swansea and Cardiff.

At the outbreak of war he joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers rising to the rank of Lieutenant and winning the Military Cross. He died in Belgium in April 1918.

The opening game of the season, at home to Bridgwater, ended in a lucky victory and the thousand or so spectators were not impressed. Leading by three tries to a converted try Exeter conceded another try near the posts towards the end of the game. The conversion would have given the visitors victory but confusion between the ball placer and the kicker saw the referee disallow the attempt at goal. As one reporter put it, Exeter won “on a technicality”.

Defeat in the next four matches would not have come as a surprise as Exeter faced four of the strongest opponents on the list. At home to Devonport Albion, despite it being reported that Exeter heeled only once from a scrum during the whole game, the team did well to lose narrowly (0-8). A poor performance at the County Ground against Bristol meant Exeter again came second on the day (0-6).

The team then embarked on a two match tour to the Midlands. Leaving St. David’s Station on Friday evening, the party stayed overnight in London before continuing their journey to Northampton on Saturday morning. There were 4,000 spectators at Franklin’s Gardens to witness one of the brightest periods of play shown by Exeter in the entire season. Deprived of the services of captain Goff with an eye injury, fourteen

Exeter players scored thirteen unanswered points in a period of a quarter of an hour. Later in the game centre Norman Odam was also injured and the home team finally prevailed (13-16).

Sunday was sightseeing day. The party visited Warwick Castle, Leamington Spa, and the Rudge Whitworth Bicycle factory before attending the Harvest Festival service at St. Michael's Church, Coventry (where the organ was being played by a former Exeter resident).

On Monday 1st October, to complete the team to face Coventry, Exeter recruited the services of a Northampton forward named Harding to replace their injured skipper. Again misfortune struck when half-back Scoble broke an arm and winger Jimmy Cook was also injured. Despite a try for Exeter by Geoffrey Roberts, Coventry completed a comfortable victory (3-24). The party arrived back at St. David's at 5.00 a.m. after a 530 mile round trip.

Five days later an under strength team was out-muscled by Torquay Athletic (6-8). Brothers Sid and Tod Kerswill were selected for this match but neither turned up. A week later against all predictions and missing eight regular players, Exeter travelled to meet Bridgwater Albion and won (6-3). The Torquay game saw the debut on the wing of Reverend C.W.G. Moore of Ottery St. Mary who scored a try from half-way against the Somerset team. Moore soon became a regular in the Devon XV.

Inconsistent performance was again evident when at home against Exmouth, Exeter could only scrape a draw (0-0) in a match they were expected to win. This was followed by an "astonishing performance" when losing narrowly at Cinderford (0-3) with a weak team.

Meanwhile at the County Ground the Reserves suffered a narrow defeat by Devonport Albion Reserves. The outcome, in the eyes of home supporters, was due to a non-decision by the visiting touch-judge who was mobbed and allegedly struck. It was suggested that the County Ground Company should place spikes on top of the railings on the "cheap side of the ground"! It was not possible to implement this suggestion but instead it was determined that no spectator be allowed to stand inside the railings!

For patrons of the stand life was different. At a the home game against Paignton, fresh tea, coffee or the ubiquitous Bovril could be purchased and delivered to any seat in the stand! The play of Exeter in this game was described as "delightful". Playing much of the game with fourteen men Exeter won in style (16-3).

A draw at Bridgwater (3-3) and victory against R.N.E.C. (18-3) suggested a revival in fortunes. Before the next match against Plymouth at home, at a players meeting, it was agreed that more players should turn up for training. This resolve appears to have come somewhat late in the season! In a mainly forward struggle the Exeter pack showed their lack of fitness as the visitors secured a narrow victory (0-6).

The same was again evident the following week at Newport. An under strength Exeter team held their own in the first half but fell away in the second (3-13). At Paignton a narrow win was salvaged (3-0) before Exeter again showed promise of improvement with a well earned victory at home over Cheltenham (9-0).

Unfortunately the already injury hit squad was further weakened for a game at Devonport Albion when they lost both first choice half backs. Sid Kerswill was to be married on that day and his brother Tom was engaged as best man. Both players did turn out for the Reserves later in the day! An Exmouth player was recruited to fill one vacancy. A day or so before the game Exeter had lost the services of Lee, one of the regular forwards, who had damaged some toes in a scything accident.

In the circumstances Exeter performed above expectations but still went down (3-11). Owing to the visitors turning up late at the Rectory Field, play lasted only half an hour each way.

The team then entered the best spell of the season over Christmas and into the New Year winning four and drawing one out of five consecutive games. Fortified by the return of G.D. Roberts, on vacation from Oxford University, the Boxing Day game against London Devonians was won (14-3) as was that against Old Edwardians (18-0) the following day in front of 4,000 spectators.

On the last Saturday of the year Newton Abbot came to the County Ground to defend an unbeaten record. The visitors did not like the look of a frost bound ground but the referee deemed the pitch playable much to the dislike of some visiting players. One wonders if the presence of a crowd of 5,000 influenced the decision. It was fitting that the match ended with honours even (3-3).

Exeter started the New Year with a trip to Barnstaple to play a first-round Devon R.F.U. Cup tie. A victory was hardly deserved but the visitors were satisfied with the outcome (6-3). The Barnstaple crowd were less than satisfied. Players from both sides and two policemen escorted the referee from the field to prevent him from being mobbed. He had appeared to alter his decision over a disputed Barnstaple try.

Despite tinkering by the selection committee, the team achieved another victory at home against Cinderford (8-0). For some reason the New Zealand 5/8th system was adopted for this match without any recent practice. This formation was not mentioned again.

Then came a dramatic decline in fortunes. In the final three months of the season only two victories (home matches against R.N.E.C. and Bridgwater Albion) plus two draws (Gloucester and Old Millhillians), also both at home, were off-set against 14 defeats. Injuries had mounted. At the end of February a half strength team went to Plymouth and paid the price (0-29). Despite the return of skipper Goff in March the form of the team was described as "utterly rotten".

The most meritorious performance in this lean spell was given at home against Gloucester who included international players in their team. Exeter led at half-time by two tries to nil but the visitors were able to draw level in the second period (6-6).

Perhaps the most frustrating game came at Easter in the prize fixture against the touring Barbarians team. So plagued by injuries was Exeter at this time that the services of five Exmouth players were enlisted in order to field a competitive XV.

Rain also sought to spoil the game. Although beaten, Exeter did well for much of the match (3-19).

The most depressing performance came in a dismal display at Devonport Albion on the last Saturday of the season (0-46).

Despite the poor playing record the club's financial deficit was reduced, The Reserves managed to balance their books with ten wins, ten losses and two draws. Elsewhere Exeter were criticised again for "poaching" but as clubs in east Devon like Tiverton (in abeyance), Sidmouth, Ottery St. Mary and Sidmouth were struggling and Crediton having just restarted it would have been understandable why better players migrated to Exeter.

A more significant criticism of the club was that Exeter did not give enough attention to junior rugby in the city and that the County Ground was being used more for association matches in place of junior rugby games.

Devon again reached the final of the County Championship meeting Durham again. After two drawn games it was decided that the title should be shared. Assisting Devon in the finals were Rev. C.W.G. Moore on the wing and G.D. Roberts in the forwards where he played alongside T.S. Kelly now representing Harlequins.

In March 1907 Geoffrey Dorling Roberts went on to be selected for England against Scotland at Blackheath. He was to win a further two caps and he appeared twice for Oxford University in Varsity matches. "Khaki" Roberts, as he was popularly known because of his dark complexion, was an Exonian, the son of C.T.K Roberts who had played for the city club in the 1870s. He first appeared for the senior team in December 1905 and appeared regularly during vacation times. He was a regular try scorer and goal kicker. He also appeared regularly for Devon and the Barbarians club.

Engaged in the legal profession, Roberts was called to the Bar in 1912 and became a leading criminal barrister. He was a prosecuting counsel at the Nazi war trials at Nuremberg in 1945. He had also been Recorder of Exeter between 1932 and 1946. He died aged 80 in 1967.

The July A.G.M. saw the resignation of long-serving secretary Charles Mudge who was to emigrate to Canada. He had first appeared as a player in November 1883 and was elected captain for 1884-5. He also appeared as a forward for Devon on a number of occasions.