

20th Season 1891-2

Several years of steady progress came to an abrupt halt. This was not a happy season. By its end only six victories had been registered from 33 games played. Ten games were drawn of which remarkably seven were scoreless. The playing record did not tell the whole story.

At the end of the previous season the annual dinner was cancelled “in consequence of the small number of applications for tickets” and before the new season started speculation suggested that six regular forwards would not be available. This number included Lucas, who had obtained a position as an organist in Surbiton, and May, who, after looking to play for a Welsh club, eventually turned out for Albion, though he did not appear against Exeter. It was soon apparent that secretary Mudge would have difficulty trying to get teams of reasonable strength to fulfil a strong fixture list.

The previous season for the B XV had been described as disastrous and the second team for the current season did not put in an appearance until the end of October and even then the team turned up three players short. This situation merely reflected a similar situation with the senior side. Secretary Mudge received fourteen refusals for one match and had continuing difficulty in putting a representative team onto the field. The final ignominy came on April 9th when a match against Paignton was cancelled as Exeter had only three players available – and this was a scheduled home fixture! A message was conveyed to the Paignton team on their train at Newton. They claimed the two league points and £2 10s (£150) from Exeter to cover expenses.

Earlier in the year an emergency meeting had been held at the Guildhall to discuss and possibly resolve the declining fortunes of the club. Defeat, discredit and dissatisfaction should have been on the agenda but a vote of confidence in the committee was carried and matters remained much as before. It was thought that an extended fixture list with the addition of mid-week games was a part cause of player unavailability though apathy was also cited as a prime problem. It was also suggested that clubs in Exeter should amalgamate to form a stronger city team.

The club was also criticised, especially in anonymous letters to the press, for being elitist. Working men formed the backbone of Welsh teams and the successful Devonport club but not Exeter. Moreover it was alleged that Exeter was dishonest by taking gate money at matches when they could not raise teams strong enough to make games properly competitive. The working man was thereby again penalised.

Inconsistent club policy was also evident. Despite resolving during the previous season to adopt the four three-quarter system, this formation appeared to be fielded only when the opposition did the same. The decision to play only Gloucester and Llanelly as expensive away games was not upheld as Penarth and Newport were also added to the more distant opponents.

Criticism also became personal. The club treasurer, former captain C.R.M. Clapp, was accused by the anonymous parties of using club funds to further his local political ambitions. These claims were completely unfounded but the treasurer nevertheless felt obliged to resign. Meanwhile secretary Mudge carried on in his usual indefatigable manner in the face of so many difficulties.

The captain for the season, Bertram Hugh Wallis who, despite being described as popular, appears not have been well supported by his fellow players. Wallis learnt his rugby at Exeter Grammar School and was a forward who first appeared in 1887. He became a very regular member of the team for several years. He made his last appearance in December 1895 by which time he was described as “a veteran”. Good enough to wear Devon colours on many occasions and to represent Western Counties in trial matches he was once described by a local reporter as “playing his usual plodding game”. “Consistent” might have been a more sympathetic description. After working as a civil servant in Totnes he died in Exeter in 1918 at the early age of 48.

The start of the season fixtures list had an odd appearance. On September 19th the team travelled to Penarth for the first time and suffered defeat by two goals and five tries to nil or 20-0 in the scoring values of the day. “Penarth is to Cardiff what Topsham is to Exeter” quoted one scribe who further commented on the absence of touchlines, the crowd infringing play and the Exeter touch judge wielding a walking stick and being ignored by the referee,

There followed two blank Saturdays which were filled by playing scratch teams - the 1st Rifle Volunteers and the Exeter Amateur Rowing Club. The results from these games (one won, one lost) were not included in the official records, though the matches were fully covered in the local press. The season in earnest did not begin too badly with a four try win over the Royal Naval Engineering College at home in aid of the Hospital Saturday Fund and a very creditable and unexpected no score draw at Bladderley against the redoubtable Albion team.

Four defeats then followed including home games against Penarth and Llanelli before four draws, a defeat at home by Gloucester and a win away at Tiverton took the team up to Christmas. The holiday period saw two touring teams visit the County Ground. A game against Clapham Rovers, a founder member of the R.F.U. and a leading club in the 1870s and 1880s, was drawn a try apiece and Jesus College Wanderers were beaten by two tries to nil.

The New Year started with a win against Newton and a draw against Barnstaple but then the accumulating problems came to the surface and the remainder of the season saw the playing record fall away drastically. Only two further games were won.

On the 23rd of January Exeter travelled to Newport and had to borrow a local player to complete what was already an under strength team. With the legendary A.J. “Monkey” Gould in prime form, Newport won by the massive margin of four goals and eight tries to nil. On the 13th of February there came another humiliating defeat, this time at the hands of local rivals Wellington. Travelling with only twelve players Exeter found three substitutes but lost by six goals and five tries to nil. It was this defeat that prompted the emergency club meeting referred to above. Newport’s appearance on the County Ground in March brought no respite, the margin again being six goals and five tries to nil.

In between these drubbings Exeter had managed to defeat Taunton and draw with Paignton but another five games were lost including away games at Crediton, where there was “Great rejoicings”, and Gloucester. One Gloucestershire reporter dismissed

Exeter as a club of “minor calibre”. He was disappointed that the home side managed to score only thirteen points against their visitors who had to recruit two substitutes on arrival.

The season ended at Easter with a further two games against Welsh opposition. The results, although against lesser teams, were nonetheless creditable. Neath won by a goal and two tries to a goal but against Pontymister Exeter managed to force a draw at two tries apiece.

Meanwhile the Devon League Cup competition had stumbled on. Before the season started the Devon R.F.U. had voted to discontinue the competition for senior clubs in order to “preserve the spirit of game” and avoid financial loss. A number of committee members had left the meeting early in order catch their trains and had not been present when the vote was taken. After protest the decision was rescinded at a later meeting. The competition was more important to some clubs than others. For the clubs this meant fixture congestion and inevitable disputes.

Exeter was inevitably and unwittingly involved in two such occurrences. At a match at Tiverton the referee ruled that the home team charged a kick at goal too early and ordered the kick to be retaken. The kick which had originally failed was now successfully kicked and won Exeter the game. Not only did the D.R.F.U. uphold the result but banned Tiverton from playing at home for a month because of the treatment received by the referee from the home spectators.

Early in January Totnes, Junior Cup holders and newly promoted to the senior league, travelled to Exeter determined to show their merit against the city team despite having been sent a telegram to inform them that the pitch was unplayable due to frost. Undeterred Totnes arrived, considered the pitch playable, changed, kicked off, gathered the ball, touchdown between the posts and claimed the game and two league points. On appeal the D.R.F.U. ruled that the game should be replayed and that Exeter should pay half the Totnes travelling expenses. The replayed match ended in a scoreless draw.

In the league that comprised ten teams Exeter finished the season in eighth place.

Disputes were rife. As a consequence of the incident that occurred in Exeter’s home match against Swansea, in February 1891 the R.F.U. banned English clubs from playing the Welsh club during 1891-2. The Welsh R.F.U. had not responded to a request to investigate the incident in which Thorogood had been sent off for striking Peter Warren an Exeter three-quarter. The W.R.U. thought Thorogood had received punishment enough through the adverse publicity received and that the matter had been dropped. The R.F.U. obviously thought otherwise. The Swansea secretary then sent a letter of apology to the referee whereupon the ban was lifted and the matter closed – a veritable storm in a teacup.

In a dismal season one redeeming feature for the Exeter club was the new design of its fixture card and its comprehensive contents which was well received and gained high praise!