

Origins of Rugby Football in Exeter

As a relatively prosperous city during the middle years of the nineteenth century Exeter was home to many professional and business families that could afford to send their sons to public schools and universities for their education. At these establishments various forms of football would have been played. Football however was a popular pastime with all classes of society. From the 1850s there are several reports of youths appearing before local magistrates for playing football on the streets of the city.

For the swelling ranks of such young men with sporting inclinations the chosen exercise in the winter months was football and gradually some structure began to emerge. In 1863 eleven footballers from Exeter travelled to Torquay to meet a like number of enthusiasts at the cricket ground there. Only seven of the local team turned up and four spectators made up the numbers. Then “a little difficulty was experienced at first about the rules, some of the players being accustomed to the Rugby, and others to the Eton and Westminster”. The game ended in favour of Exeter “by one goal”. Although hurriedly arranged the match was said to have been a success with the hope of it becoming an annual event. No further accounts of similar games have been found.

Additionally in Exeter, football was played by the military stationed at the barracks within the city and by the Royal Artillery at their camp on Topsham Road. After training camps, exercises and marches members of the various Volunteer regiments (the equivalent of the modern Territorial Army) would engage in games of football. Educational establishments in the locality such as the Devon County School and Exeter Grammar School advertised facilities for the playing of football and there is another important ingredient to add to this mix – the Exeter Training College.

When the Training College (later known as St. Luke’s and even later absorbed into Exeter University) moved from the centre of the city to its Heavitree Road site in 1859 money was provided for recreation and a ground was prepared at the rear of the premises adjoining Magdalene Road. There the College began playing football matches against local schools in the 1860s.

There is an intriguing reference in a local newspaper in 1868 to a performance at the Theatre Royal being staged under the patronage of “the Football Club”. The report does not specify who or what constituted this club. There is a possibility that the report could refer to an embryo Exeter football club but, at yet, no evidence has come to light to support that supposition. Some fifty years later one former player suggested that members of the Exeter Cricket Club may have played football during the winter months and may have referred to themselves as “the football club”.

Certainly young men in the area were playing football at weekends in the late 1860s and early 1870s. As later recalled by players from those early days, they would meet in Polsloe Park or any other field they could find to play “pick-up” matches. Sometimes there might have been as few as four players on one side and three on the other and at other times there might have been ten a side. More often than not they had to make do with a badly shaped ball. On one occasion a concerned citizen,

passing through the park, summoned the police to what he saw as an affray and two constables turned up at the game.

A press report dated January 1869 does exist stating that “A game of football resulting in a draw took place near Dawlish yesterday, between ten young gentlemen of Exeter headed by Mr, Turner, and ten of Dawlish, captain Mr, Walters. Another match will be played shortly”. No further information about a return match or Mr. Turner has yet come to light.

Players in games during the late 1860s and the early 1870s were those who went on to become founder members of the formalised Exeter Football Club in 1872. It has been recorded that there were twenty or so of them. At this period Rugby Football matches could be played with up to twenty players on each side.

Although the press generally did not distinguish between the two main codes of the game, and made reference merely to “football”, make no mistake, the newly formed Exeter Football Club (1872) was to play under the laws of the recently constituted Rugby Football Union (1871). Some occasional games under Association rules were played in the locality but it was not until the closing years of the century that the round ball game began to gain popularity within the city.