

### 38<sup>th</sup> Season 1909-0

This time there could be no disguise of a poor playing record. Less than a third of the games played were won. The exact record for the season is unclear. At the end of the season local press reported that 39 games had been played with the last match to come. The Rugby Football Annual covering this season quoted the playing record as P.39 W.13 D.2 L.24. However press reports of only 38 matches can be found. One possible reason for the contradiction might be found in yet another reorganisation of the Devon Cup competition. The competition was arranged on a regional "league" and a final knock-out stage. Exeter, grouped with Crediton, Sidmouth and Exmouth, did not progress beyond the "league". Matches against Exmouth and Sidmouth were already on the fixture card but those against Crediton had to be shoe-horned in. The result of only one meeting between Exeter and Crediton has so far come to light.

Again the season promised more than was delivered. International T.S. Kelly had arrived back to work in the city. He played for half the season before announcing his retirement at Christmas due to a knee injury sustained when appearing for Devon. Another hope came in the shape of three-quarter W.J. Rees from Aberavon who had enrolled at St. Luke's College. Although he was released to play for Devon when required the College authorities maintained that his commitment should be with the St. Luke's team rather than the city club. Nevertheless Rees did make several prominent appearances for Exeter throughout the season.

Another potential match winner was M.A Mathew who had taken up residence in the city after his studies at Oxford University. He made only a handful of appearances at the start of the season before deciding to play hockey instead. One useful recruit during the season was M.M. Mann, a centre from Northampton. On the debit side former wing "Dicky" Seaman had migrated to Devonport Albion whilst regular W. Atkins after half a season was to be found in the Newton Abbot ranks.

Elected captain was W.J. (Billy) Pike a resident of St. Thomas, who had made his first team debut in the 1905-6 season. A versatile player he often figured at full-back though he was more valuable as a forward. He was another player who was considered to be unlucky by not receiving more recognition by the county selectors. He continued to make occasional appearances in the senior team and figured in the last XV fielded before the outbreak of war by which time he was affectionately known as "Father", Serving with the Royal Engineers as a corporal Billy Pike was in his forties when posted to France in 1918 where he was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry on the battlefield.

The playing season began with a comfortable win at home over Sidmouth in a cup match (33-0) before the team travelled to Plymouth where it lost to a heavier side (0-18). A slow start saw Exeter win only six games before Christmas. In addition to the opening game, a double was achieved over Paignton (7-3 & 8-0) to go alongside expected victories over Blundell's (21-3) and a cup match against Crediton (6-0). Blundell's School had offered to play a Saturday game in place of the Barnstaple club which had disbanded. The home win over Crediton was achieved by the Reserves as the senior team was losing at Plymouth (0-6) where they had agreed to fill another gap left by Barnstaple. The only other victory before the end of the year came by courtesy of Royal Navy at home (18-3).

One drawn game at home to Exmouth (8-8) was registered in this period but the "Championship of the Exe" this season lay firmly with the seaside town who won three out of five games, the other two being drawn. Exmouth effectively put an end to any progress Exeter might have made in the cup competition. Defeats by Newton Abbot, Torquay Athletic, Plymouth and Devonport Albion were predictable.

Christmas usually brought Exeter some respite but the first half of this season did not end well. Traditional opponents Old Edwardians cancelled and were replaced by Penylan from Wales. Exeter was without captain Billy Pike who was married on the morning of the game, and after what was described as "a disappointing display" homesters lost (5-14). A trip to Exmouth the following week saw the team travel with only thirteen players. Two substitutes were found but a disorganised team was comfortably beaten (3-16).

In contrast New Year's Day saw a near sensation at the County Ground. Exeter had to field a second choice half-back pairing against a full strength Devonport Albion. Exeter held their own until one of their three-quarters, E.H. Hill, was injured. Albion were able to exploit this deficit to score the only try of the game in the last few minutes (0-3). It was said that Albion were not the force they used to be but they could still attract promising players like Exeter's Percy Baker who joined Albion due to the "exigencies of the labour market".

In contrast Exeter followed up with a "severe and bitter disappointment" at the County Ground against Paignton (0-11). The fact that the home team was missing four leading players could not be accepted as an excuse for "an extremely mediocre performance",

Three more defeats completed the month of January. A depleted side did quite well at Newton Abbot (4-6). T.S. Kelly was recalled to face Cheltenham (3-8) but his leg injury meant that he did not finish the game. Kelly came out of retirement at a time when other leading players appeared "reluctant to take their place in the side."

The next victory came when Exeter accepted an invitation from the landlord of the George Hotel at Axminster to play an exhibition match against the local XV. The trip was greatly enjoyed as was the easy victory (20-7). On the same day the County Ground staged an England Schoolboys trial. It was estimated that the crowd numbered only around 1,500 and that "interest in ruggar in the Ever Faithful is just about as low as it can possibly be."

After completing a double over the Royal Navy at Plymouth (12-3), Exeter then faced Exmouth at home where in a high wind and employing kick and rush tactics the two teams slogged out a draw (8-8) though the home team deserved to have won.

Form took another tumble when losing away to Sidmouth who fielded only 14 players (3-7). As this was a cup match Exeter's interest in the competition was again ended early. Bouncing back at home, Newton Abbot were defeated in the last few minutes when newcomers Slade (try) and Budd (conversion) scored the points (5-3). "It's a long time since hats and sticks were thrown in the air at the County Ground" was a significant comment.

A week later the Queen's Park ground at Paignton was swamped but a farcical game took place with each side fielding only 14 men (3-9). Consecutive games against Taunton highlighted Exeter's notorious erratic form. After a "delightful game" at home Exeter won (13-8) but one week later the team was "outclassed" in the return match (0-17).

The Easter fixtures started late. Old Merchant Taylors arrived nearly an hour late due a delayed train but not before some disgruntled spectators left the ground after demanding their money back. The visitors did not perform at their best (11-6). Two further victories were followed by the now usual end of season slump when the final four fixtures all ended in defeat.

Exeter, earlier in the season, had sought financial assistance from the Devon R.F.U. to bolster dwindling funds. The D.R.F.U. was unable to assist directly but they did allow the season to be extended by two weeks to enable Exeter to gain extra gate money. Hosts Newton Abbot "helping a friend in need" handed over the gate receipts to the visitors after a game Exeter had lost (4-16). The final game of the season saw Exmouth travel to the County Ground to play the home club as part of Exeter Sports Day and Exeter Rugby Football Club Gala (3-5).

At the July A.G.M. the report for the season regretted the results of both the 1<sup>st</sup> and Reserve XV's even though the Reserves had posted 13 wins and one draw in 23 matches. Both teams, the report went on to say, failed to reach the standard expected of them.

The next statement appears to contradict what had happened during the course of the season. Basically it said finances were good despite the deficit increasing to £40 (£2,300). "There need be no fear of the future if the players would only do their best when on the field". Chairman P.C.M. Veitch concluded his presentation of the report with the remark "It is no use being downhearted".

During the course of the season it was evident that the club's income was being affected by the success of Exeter City A.F.C. The appeal for financial assistance from the D.R.F.U. was unsuccessful and two extra games were played at the end of the season to boost income. It had also been rumoured that the club would be unable to afford the rent for the County Ground for the coming season. Yet it was said at the A.G.M. that finances were sound.

Season 1909-10 saw the election of T.C. Pring, a member of the Exeter Brewing Co, family, former Exeter player and Devon's representative on the R.F.U. Committee, being elected to the position of President of the Rugby Football Union. In 1908 he had survived an operation to remove his appendix and had returned to play a major part in the administration of the game. His first year of Presidency saw the revival of the England XV that went on to win the international championship for the first time since 1891-2. He also oversaw the opening of Twickenham as England's permanent home venue.