

## 18<sup>th</sup> Season 1889-0

This season saw further advance for the Exeter club. Not only had the team won the Devon Challenge Cup by the end of the season, but they had also extended their horizons. Since inauguration, apart from three games in Clifton and four visits to Sherborne, all Exeter's matches had been played within the counties of Devon and Somerset. Following three seasons of good playing records, the club made not a cautious step but an ambitious giant stride. Home and away fixtures with Cardiff had been arranged.

In contrast both the Exeter Training College and Sherborne School reappeared on the list but for only two further seasons. Another feature was the appearance of Portsmouth who had arranged a tour at Easter – the first of many touring teams to appear at holiday times.

The captain was now Arthur Melbourne Suthery who, the previous year, had joined the staff at Exeter Grammar School (later known as Exeter School). A Cambridge University cricket blue, he was soon drafted into the Exeter fifteen where he comfortably played alongside the other talented three-quarters. For the first game against Cardiff at Matford he is reported to have driven down from Buckinghamshire to play. The type of vehicle was not reported but it would have been horse-drawn. Early in January he received a serious neck injury when playing against St. Thomas but he was back by mid March to appear in three important games.

The overall playing record was a satisfactory one as of 32 games played, 20 were won, four drawn and eight lost, though there are reports for 33 games of which nine ended in defeat. The B XV won five and drew one of fourteen games.

Cardiff visited Matford on the 28<sup>th</sup> December where, in front of an estimated crowd of 2,000 spectators, they were victorious by a goal and a try to nil, a result regarded by local commentators as a pleasant surprise. The main difference between the teams was that the Cardiff forwards were “always on the ball” whilst the Exeter pack was weak at “following up”.

Matford now boasted a stand that held 500 persons replacing the canvas enclosure. Ironically this was to be the last full season of the club's tenancy of this ground. Whilst the club could now collect 6d (2½p) from those who could afford to use the stand, there were complaints from “artisan spectators” about the increase in gate charges for “important” games. Crowd problems were an issue.

Newton did not play Exeter this season because of the “unreasonable behaviour” of Exeter spectators at previous matches. A week after the Cardiff game Exeter lost to Albion at home by a try to nil in what was described as “a noisy game”. Many of the crowd took exception to decisions made by the referee who was threatened at the end of the match and was ushered into a cab by his friends to be driven away from the ground. On another occasion an unruly element broke down a fence to gain free admission despite “police warning boards” and the efforts of the committee.

The home game against Bridgwater in November was a quiet affair. The teams played only 25 minutes each way as Bridgwater wanted to catch an early train home!

On the first day of March Exeter faced Crediton and won by three goals to a single goal. What drew the headlines was the feat of Lee Ashford who kicked three types of goal. He dropped a goal, converted his own try and kicked a goal from a mark. The mark was made by half-back Harry Sayer but the kick was entrusted to Ashford.

The following week a trip to Barnstaple for a first round cup match was made and Exeter won by two goals and two tries to nil. A week later Exeter met Tiverton in a semi-final again. The match was staged, probably with a view to maximising gate takings by the D.R.F.U., at the "neutral" venue of St. Thomas. The attendance was estimated as being between 1,500 and 2,000. The referee was C.G. Lovesay of Crediton who was once an Exeter player. Tiverton was not the force it used to be and Exeter won by a goal and two tries to nil

Between the semi-final and the final, came a comfortable win over the United Services College and the first trip to Wales to meet Cardiff at the Arms Park for the return match. For the journey a whole saloon carriage was booked at a fare of 12s/9d each (64p).

Exeter, by their own standards, sent a strong team but it was overwhelmed. The final score against them amounted to five goals and four tries to a solitary try. For the home game Exeter had fielded four three-quarters (as did most Welsh teams of the day) but only three three-quarters were selected for the away match. A forward, H. Osmond, was withdrawn from the pack during the game to bolster the defence of the backs.

After this chastening defeat, Exeter had to regroup for the cup final a week later, but before then another cup competition dispute had arisen. Albion contested player qualification rules and, when their protest was not upheld, they withdrew from the competition. This left Torquay Athletic to face Exeter in the final at the same location and with the same referee as Exeter's semi-final.

Torquay had already beaten Exeter at Matford earlier in the season but that fact did not detract from one Exeter supporter's optimism. He declared that "If Exeter don't beat Torquay then they had better lodge their jerseys at Uncle Tom's and boil their boots for Bovril". The press was more cautious warning that it would not be a runaway match.

In the event Exeter did win, the margin being two goals and two tries to two tries. The Exeter team comprised:- A.P. Baker (full-back); Arthur Sutthery, Lee Ashford, Walter Pring, James Wilcocks (three-quarters); Billy Sayer, Harry Sayer (half-backs); Charles Mudge, R. Biddell, H. Osmond, Tommy Wills, Bertram Wallis, Horace Milton, W. Lucas, H.B. Martin (forwards):

At the post match dinner a telegram sent by former captain Henry Wilson was read. He declared that he had "just had a pint of champagne in honour of the victory". The current captain was more realistic saying that he regretted Albion's withdrawal and would rather have lost to them in the final than win it without them in the competition. He went on to say that he thought the days of the knock-out cup were numbered. He was right.

Following the dinner, a torch-light procession paraded through the streets of the city in celebration of the victory.