

## 36<sup>th</sup> Season 1907-8

At first sight, in a programme of 40 matches, the playing record of 15 wins and six draws would appear to show a slight improvement on the disappointing record of twelve months before. But appearances can be deceptive and the old axiom is borne out in this case. Nine victories in the opening ten fixtures only flattered to deceive. A rout of Teignmouth, a junior club, two victories against Sidmouth, on the rise but not in the top flight, two against scratch XVs and one against Blundell's School were no real test of Exeter's ability.

Only six more victories were recorded between the start of November and the end of the season. Whatever this might suggest, Exeter did play some good rugby and registered some sterling performances. At other times play was poor and inconsistent causing one observer at the end of the season to bewail "Exeter, Oh! Exeter. The most erratic team that ever existed".

No matches were played against Barnstaple and only one, a cup match, against Torquay Athletic, their places on the fixture card being taken by the rising Paignton team (twice) and Exmouth (five times). Plymouth was also met on five occasions.

One oddity was that Devon R.F.U. knock-out cup matches were superimposed on existing fixture lists. This resulted in previously arranged fixtures being fulfilled by Reserve teams.

After three practice games Charlie Morgan was declared to be "a good captain", and so he proved to be. Edward Charles Morgan first played rugby with Exeter Rovers in 1895 before appearing for Exeter Reserves. During the 1898-9 season he started to figure occasionally in the senior XV alongside his brother Ernie who went on to captain the team in 1902-3. Confusion arises from the fact that in the local press Morgan was sometimes spelt Morgon and the new captain was referred to as C. or E. or even E.C. and one newspaper named him Ernest Charles. On one occasion C. Morgan is referred to as "Ginger". The elder brother appears to have been named Ernest Charles and his sibling Edward Charles.

Inevitably some players had left and new ones arrived. Two losses involved the wingers who had scored at least nineteen tries between them the previous season. The Reverend C.W.G. Moore of Ottery St, Mary departed for Canada. He was to return to Europe as a chaplain to Canadian forces during the First World War. Jimmy Cook was initially thought to be leaving to join Devonport Albion but instead he became the first Exeter player to head north to play professional rugby in the Northern Union (Rugby League) by joining Salford where he attained legendary status. He was an early casualty in the war, being killed in 1915 on the Western Front.

One reporter urged Exeter to select "a team that can be depended on rather than chose stars". The club did not follow this maxim. A place could always be found for G.D. Roberts and two of the Sandford brothers at vacation times. Frequent appearances were made by three officers stationed at the Royal Field Artillery barracks at Topsham. Because of fixture congestion the Chiefs at times travelled to mid-week away games with only a handful of senior players. Much demand was made on players from the Reserves.

Use of a gymnasium for two sessions a week was provided and there were rooms available for “reading, dancing and other recreations”. The veteran Sgt. Billy Newberry was to run the instruction and gym classes whilst Pike and Webber, from the Chiefs, ran dancing classes for footballers.

New jerseys were again the order of the day comprising black and white hoops matched with white shorts. On several occasions the team played in an all white strip to avoid colour clashes with opponents.

New secretary J. Flood had an unsettling start to the new season. On writing to confirm the opening fixture against Torquay Athletic his opposite number denied knowledge of the fixture. After a flurry of further correspondence Torquay acknowledged that the date was indeed correct. However by the time the match was to take place the Athletic officials informed Exeter that they did not hold sufficient funds to send a team to the County Ground!

A replacement fixture was arranged with Teignmouth, at that time a junior club. The outcome was not so much a match as another practice game. Exeter scored fifteen tries. Full-back, E.H. Bale-Brock, a Honitonian medical student, converted twelve of the tries to establish what was thought to be “an English record” (69-0).

The first real test came at Plymouth where Exeter were narrowly defeated (0-6). An easy win at home to Sidmouth followed (29-0) before Exeter met a scratch team raised by their International forward G.D. Roberts. The press described the game as “a valuable practice only”. (35-3).

A crowd of 6,000 at the County Ground saw Exeter struggle against the kick and rush tactics of Exmouth but a penalty goal from Bale-Brock saw them scrape home (3-0). A mid-week game against Blundell’s saw only two senior players in the team. The narrow victory (12-11) was included in the official season record. On the following Saturday Billy Newberry was married in the morning and celebrated by scoring two tries against the Royal Naval Engineering College in the afternoon (17-0).

Leaving the Seven Stars at 1.30 pm the team travelled to Sidmouth by horse-drawn brake to fulfil the away fixture on the following Saturday, the score line matching that of a month before (29-0). A week later, at home, the team accounted for Bridgwater (13-4).

A somewhat bizarre match came next. At the instigation of the Devon R.F.U., Exeter was to meet a team selected by E.W. Roberts, the Devon captain. The game was regarded as an official Devon trial. The match could not be said to have been a success. Exeter won (16-8) and only three players appearing in the game were selected for the Devon team to face Somerset – and one of those players was E.W. Roberts.

After the initial run of successes four defeats followed - away at Paignton (3-8), at home to Gloucester (6-13), away at Bristol (0-11) and at home to Plymouth (0-13). The season had now been put into proper perspective. Against Plymouth it was noted

that the ball crossed the Plymouth line on eight occasions yet Exeter were unable to score.

A home draw against Bridgwater Albion stemmed the tide (3-3) but travelling for the return match at Gloucester, Tod Kerswill missed his train connection at Bristol and committee man A.J. Kerswill filled the gap. The veteran Billy Newberry, who was soon to be called up by Devon as a late replacement winger, played at stand-off in this match which resulted in another defeat (0-6).

A win at Cheltenham (8-0) was unexpected "considering the wretched form of the previous six weeks". This was followed by defeat at Exmouth (3-6). A bright game on Boxing Day saw Old Edwardians being defeated again (14-3). Snow and frost caused two cancellations including a potentially lucrative home fixture with Northampton.

On play resuming there were promising signs with a draw against Exmouth in "a scraggy game" (3-3), and a good performance at home against Newport (0-5). For the Exmouth game W.S. Goff, the former Exeter captain, was available for selection but was not chosen. He turned out for Exmouth instead! Improved form was again displayed during the first-round cup match against Torquay Athletic when Exeter's play was "first-class in all departments". Unusually for a competitive game play was open and Billy Newberry scored three tries (16-3).

Meanwhile, on the same day, the Reserves had been sent to fulfil the original first team fixture against the Royal Naval Engineering College and the team suffered the consequences (5-22). Both this result and that of the cup game appear to have been included in the official seasonal record.

One further success followed with a narrow win over Newton Abbot (6-3) when Exeter played the second half with only fourteen players due to an injury to Percy Kerswell. Of the next eight games, six were lost and two drawn. Devonport Albion sent their strongest fifteen to Barnstaple to play a cup game leaving their second string players at home to face Exeter. Albion won by three tries to nil (0-9). Exeter's form dipped alarmingly again when playing their next cup match at home four days later against Plymouth. "Rarely has Exeter made such a hash of an important game" was one verdict (0-19). Many spectators left before the end of the game.

Already at a low ebb, club spirits were not improved by Exeter Reserves captain Lynne being suspended for the rest of the season for using abusive language and refusing to leave the field in a game at Newton Abbot. He later took the whole team off the field. In addition centre three-quarter Skoines was suspended for six weeks and the whole team was cautioned.

A disappointing display at Bridgwater (0-3) was followed by defeat at Bristol (3-10) and another sorry display at Plymouth (0-25). The team then managed a draw at Exmouth (0-0). A mid-week game at Paignton was arranged to replace an earlier cancelled fixture between the teams, Paignton had just returned from a successful trip to France where they had defeated Lyon and Toulouse. The home team were still on a winning run (3-6).

Exeter, playing in London for the first time, could only draw a game they were expected to win against London Devonians (0-0). The match was described as “very pleasant” and later the teams dined together at The Mitre in Chancery Lane.

The last Saturday in March saw Exeter facing Devonport Albion at home. The fact that Exeter beat their counterparts for the first time since March 1899 after which they had suffered 27 consecutive defeats, might have been a cause for celebration. But this was a very hollow victory. Devonport Albion being engaged in the Devon Cup Final elsewhere, again fielded a team of reserves at the County Ground. To compound their plight the visitors had two players sent off during the game. This was hardly a victory worth celebrating (11-3).

Another mid-week fixture did not help morale. Only four senior players were available for a game at Newton Abbot but even so the margin of defeat came as a surprise (0-26). Some respite came with a draw at home against Plymouth (0-0). Exeter included G.D. Roberts, F.H. Sandford and four officers from Topsham Barracks in their team. To add some perspective to this result it should be noted that the two teams met on five occasions during the season. Plymouth had won the other four scoring 63 points without reply from Exeter.

Exeter then stumbled to two further defeats against Bridgwater Albion (0-5) and Cheltenham (3-13) before playing their Easter holiday matches. Erratic as ever Exeter placed what was thought to be a weaker XV than the one that lost to Cheltenham in the field to face Old Merchant Taylors. For the first time in ten attempts Exeter defeated the old boys from London (11-0). The next day a fully representative team met the Barbarians. Apart from including G.D. Roberts, Exeter also had the assistance Capt. R. Cotgrave who had appeared twice previously for Exeter and who also played for Exmouth. With several international players in their ranks the Barbarians won (11-17).

At this point Exeter cried off from a proposed mid-week fixture against Barnstaple. The final game of the season came at home against Exmouth to decide the unofficial “championship of the Exe”. Without any “stars” available Exeter fielded their standard club team. On the day nothing was decided. The match ended in another draw (3-3). During the season the two teams had met five times with each winning one game whilst the other three were drawn.

If the record of the Chiefs for the season was not what was expected, that of the Reserves did draw praise. Of 28 matches played, sixteen had been won and four drawn. Given the fact that many second team players had to be drafted into the senior team throughout the season this was a good record.

What was also welcomed at the A.G.M. was the fact that the club had cleared its financial deficit and still had money in hand after giving assistance to the Schools Union and the Juniors.

During the season much local press coverage was given over to the coming of professional football to Exeter. The Association club, Exeter City, was to be reformed with financial backing and was successful in its application to join the Southern League.

This move was greeted with much foreboding by some who saw the rugby game being threatened by an invasion of professional soccer in the city. Letters appearing in local newspapers referred to professionalism in football as an “evil” that should shunned.

On their part Exeter Football Club wished the new association organisation well and hoped the two clubs could work in harmony on matters like avoiding fixture clashes.

Meanwhile in March a report was issued that concluded “veiled professionalism does not now exist in the Rugby Union game”. This topic did not go away and was to become a major issue in seasons to come. Whatever might be happening in west Devon, Exeter Football Club adhered strictly to amateur principles and was to continue to do so right up to the modern era when professionalism in Rugby Union became accepted.

In July 1908 the summer Olympic Games took place in London. Entered in the 200 yards breast-stroke swimming event was Fred Holman who had played rugby regularly as a forward for Exeter in the earlier years of the century. A native of Dawlish he became resident in the city where he was prominent and popular in swimming and water-polo circles.

At the Olympics he was to gain a gold medal completing the course in the final in World and Olympic record time. This was the only event in which he took part. On his return to both Exeter and Dawlish “Our Fred” was lauded as a hero.

Whilst training as a chef he contracted typhoid after a visit to Exeter Swimming Baths and was to die at the tragically early age of 28 in January 1913.