

22nd Season 1893-4

If there were lessons to be learned from the two previous poor seasons then the Exeter committee took no heed of them. A pre-season review declared that Exeter was now “under new management”. Whatever this meant it made no difference to the fortunes of the club. The playing record for 1893-4 was even worse than those that proceeded. Of 30 matches played only five were won, three were drawn and the rest lost.

How far had Exeter fallen can be illustrated by the composition of the Devon Senior League competition. After finishing bottom of the pile the previous season, Exeter withdrew from the competition. Winners Albion also withdrew their senior team but for a different reason. The club from Devonport entered their second string team to compete for the honours. Torquay could field two teams (Town and Athletic) and the competition was won by the Barnstable club that was turning out to be a formidable opponent both within and outside the county.

Exeter B team continued to compete in the Junior Cup but with such a poor showing that they finished at the foot of the table. By comparison the Devon R.F.U. accepted Exeter Oaks, the rising junior team in the city, into the Senior League competition for the following season.

Amalgamation of Exeter and Oaks was again mooted but was rejected by the Oaks. For a game against Bristol at the County Ground in April, the Exeter team included six Oaks players. The experiment was deemed not to be a success by the Oaks club but their mind had already been set. Just previously a meeting of the Oaks had been held at the Seven Stars, St. Thomas, where former Exeter stalwart Horace Milton was now landlord. As treasurer of the junior club Milton said he could see no reason how amalgamation would benefit the Oaks.

Whether amalgamation would have been of benefit to Exeter is a matter for conjecture. Team organisation within the club was dysfunctional to say the least. There was an understanding that the first team would not select B team players when they were playing Junior Cup matches but early in the season it was suggested that members of the B team would not accept a place in the first fifteen in any case. Later, when half-back Charlie Pretty, a regular county player, could not travel to away matches with the senior team because of business commitments, his services were not required at home by the B XV.

It would appear that the second string was turning into a club within a club but by the end of the season Exeter had asked the D.R.F.U. if the club's senior players were eligible to play in B team cup matches as the first fifteen was no longer competing in the Senior League Cup. The request was declined.

By November the elected first team captain, M. Cutcliffe, a medical man, resigned when he purchased a medical practice and moved to North Devon having recently been married. His place was filled by J.F. Finch an enthusiastic forward who had first appeared in club colours the previous season. He attempted to revive training sessions but was not able to fully revive the club's fortunes.

Reliability was again a problem. The team was never a settled one, particularly amongst the backs. Even the veteran Walton Hussey made a return for a handful of matches nearly ten years after he captained the side. For a home game against Totnes only thirteen players turned up and two would-be spectators took up the vacancies despite not having played for three years. Exeter lost by a single point.

A fixture with Hull in January was under threat when the Devon R.F.U. banned the use of the County Ground before a championship match. The Hull game was switched to the Oaks' ground at Fair Field in Okehampton Road and was undertaken by a team labelled Exeter & District. The combined XV lost by eight points to nil. This result was not included in Exeter's record for the season.

Perhaps the keenness of the new captain did have some effect. The team's showing in Christmas games at home against Cardiff Harlequins (0-6) and Llanelli (0-19) received praise in the press. If only two games were won in the second half of the season (Paignton and R.N.E.C.) and two no-score draws achieved (Taunton and Torquay), many of the margins of defeat were small. Three defeats, however, stand out.

Performances in two of the defeats again received praise from the local press. After having been beaten 0-37 at Barnstaple in January, Exeter did well in the return match in March and held the soon to become champions to a 4-10 score line. Albion the previous season's champions had defeated Exeter 0-29 in December but were held to a margin of three points to eight in March. In this latter game the Albion and Devon captain, Allington, was ordered off the field after an incident involving Dickinson, an Exeter forward. Spectators demonstrated in Cowick Street as the Albion team were driven away. It was suggested that Allington struck Dickinson in the changing room. Allington was suspended for three weeks.

Perhaps the lowest point of the season was soon to follow. Before the final match against Bristol, Exeter travelled to Cardiff to meet the leading Welsh side with a very under strength team one of whom was a 17-year-old college student – another lesson Exeter that had not learnt from a previous visit. The result was a rout – 0-58. This season the value of a try had been raised to three points. In modern day values the score would have been 0-86.

As the Exeter club was feeling the threat of Exeter Oaks on the rugby field, they may not have given much thought to the formation in September 1893 of Exeter Association Football Club who would play in chocolate and white halved jerseys.