

30th Season 1901-2

Having made his debut for Exeter in March 1894 and then becoming a regular player in 1894-5, the new captain, James Powell, could be described as a veteran. This would certainly be true when compared to the young Maurice Parsons a year earlier. Parsons continued as sub-captain, a role he was elected to fill in the following season as well.

“Ducky” Powell, as he was popularly known, had been given the nick-name as an infant by his brothers. He was a prominent forward who made many appearances for Devon, though he was not always an automatic choice, much to the annoyance of the corps of Exeter pressmen. A cornerstone of the Exeter pack, his selfless style of play often led to him getting hurt. Sometimes he would play out of position while still nursing an injury. After retirement from his occupation that involved horses he became licensee of the “Jolly Sailor”, East Street, Newton Abbot, where he died aged 65 in 1939,

There was a much better spirit abroad in the club and the Chiefs were a much more settled side. However there were problems in the lower teams. Reserve players had left the club and some second team fixtures had to be cancelled. There in no mention of a third team. This situation coupled with the demise of Exeter Oaks suggests interest in playing rugby in the city was dwindling. The one exception to this trend came from Friernhay, a club that reached the final of the Devon Junior Cup. The team played three drawn games against Teignmouth before the season ran out!

The fixture card had had its usual appearance. Four games against Devonport Albion - this season the total points margin was slightly less than before (6-57) - whilst against Barnstaple two victories and draw and a defeat resulted. The rise of Bridgwater Albion to rival the Bridgwater club meant Exeter played two visits to that town, both games being lost, and both teams at the County Ground, both games being won.

Bath reappeared on the card after an absence of one season. Exeter still held the upper hand in these games winning at home (20-3) and away (3-0).

The final record for the season (Played 36 Won 15 Drawn 3 Lost 18) showed a marginal improvement and was described as “moderately successful” but elsewhere the comment was made that “Exonians are not proud of the standing their club has taken amongst the clubs of Devon”. Exeter had contrived to lose all six games played against Plymouth, Torquay Athletic and the Royal Naval Engineering College.

The season began on the first Saturday in September, a week earlier than usual, with a home match against Exmouth as part of the Exeter Sports. Though seriously contested, the game resulted in a walk-over (32-0) with eight tries being registered, four of them by Maurice Parsons. By the end of the month the two defeats in Bridgwater were balanced by a home win against Newton (20-0).

October began with a trip to Leicester with the team this year staying overnight in Birmingham. The rest stop did not have the desired effect as Exeter went down (0-13) in front of a 6,000 crowd. Victories against Tiverton (11-8), Exmouth (9-0) and Bath promised well but the successful run came to an end away at Devonport Albion (3-16). A comfortable win against Bridgwater (29-5) was seen as an indication of

inconsistent form but the following week again the team again displayed improvement away to Bristol by losing only narrowly (5-9).

In the run up to Christmas three games were won and two lost, away, to R.N.E.C. and Torquay Athletic. During a home win against Sidmouth (14-0) Alf Vosper, the Exeter half-back, was fouled whilst in the act of crossing the Sidmouth line which resulted in the first recorded instance of Exeter being awarded a penalty try.

Attendance at the Christmas fixtures was small though both games ended in victory, against new opponents Nuneaton (13-0) and Old Edwardians (12-0). For the first home match in the New Year spectators would not have been encouraged by an increase of 3d for admission. Bristol included in their team "a dozen Gloucestershire players". As a spectacle the game was spoiled by an injury to Exeter winger Lee and a fourteen man Exeter lost (0-11).

For the next game, at Barnstaple, the Exeter team was weakened by injuries and this plight was not aided by some players missing the train. Three players from the Friernhay club were enlisted to make up the numbers but the team suffered a narrow defeat (5-7). The following week at the County Ground, the touring Leicester team was bolstered by two Llanelly players. For Exeter a player named Kelly made an impressive first appearance helping his team to share the honours with a scoreless draw. Kelly was later to become one of the major figures in the history of Exeter Football Club.

At home to Devonport Albion (0-12), Exeter was hampered by an injury to winger Harry Shooter but Albion sportingly allowed him to be replaced by substitute Hooper from the Friernhay club. Substitution of injured players was later to be banned by the R.F.U,

By the beginning of February it was reported that "resurrection was needed" by Exeter who sent a weak team to Sidmouth, with a forward, Ernie Morgan, playing at half-back. The team would have played short if "Titchy" Bates, an old Oaks player, had not been picked up on the way. This team also included the younger brother of Percy Preece, the former club captain. Sidmouth won the match (0-3).

A revival did not come as in the run up to Easter only a win and a draw against Barnstaple could be off-set against five defeats. One of these defeats came in February at home against Plymouth (0-8) that proved to be "a most unsatisfactory game" marred by roughness and foul play. So badly had play deteriorated that the Exeter secretary, Charles Mudge, went onto the field to tell the referee that if he did not stop the "fouling" by the Plymouth half-back he would withdraw the Exeter team. The referee, a Mr. Harris from Totnes, was asked by both the Devon Referees' Society and the Devon R.F.U. for his report on the game. This did not materialise and consequently he was struck off the list of referees.

Early in March Devonport Albion cancelled a Saturday fixture in Exeter as it coincided with a Royal visit to the city of Plymouth. The meeting between the teams took place mid-week instead. Exeter lodged a protest with the D.R.F.U. who decided that Albion should pay Exeter £5 (around £300 to-day) compensation and suggested that an additional fixture should be arranged the following season.

The season ended reasonably well. An Easter match against the Lennox club from London was won (11-0) but yet again that against Old Merchant Taylors was lost (3-8). Bridgwater Albion and Bath were both beaten but away to Tiverton, Exeter could only manage a draw. The final fixture resulted in a disappointing defeat at home by Torquay Athletic (3-8)

Financially the adverse balance from the preceding season had increased by £31 (about £1,800) and gate receipts were noticeably down. The matter was discussed at the A.G.M. where the Chairman, P.C.M. Veitch, impressed on the playing members the importance of regular training. "This was the secret of winning matches and if they won matches they would get big crowds to watch them play." The comment was applauded enthusiastically.

At the end of April an exhibition association football match was staged at the County Ground between West Bromwich Albion and Woolwich Arsenal. Some 6,000 spectators attended. Interest in soccer within the city was growing.

On Saturday 11th January 1902 England and Wales met at Blackheath in the International Championship, a game that Wales won (8-9). Included in the England XV were two players with local connections.

Amongst the pack was Leonard R. Tosswill who had played for Exeter when he was on vacation from his medical studies at St. Bartholomew's Hospital. He continued to make occasional appearances for the club for two or three more seasons. All three of his caps were won in this season. The son of Dr. L.H. Tosswill of Southernhay who was senior surgeon at the West of England Eye Infirmary, he went on to have a distinguished medical career and was twice decorated as a Major in the First World War. He had another claim to rugby football fame. As an author he wrote "Rugby Football and How To Play It" in 1926 and was also editor of a revised version of the classic work on the game "Football: The Rugby Union Game". In addition he was an early broadcaster on the game. He died in 1932 aged 52.

Winning his only cap in the game at Blackheath was Philip Leach Nicholas who some works of reference credit as representing Exeter. An Oxford Blue Nicholas had risen to prominence with Devon whilst on the staff at All Hallows School when he also played for the Honiton club. During 1902-3 it was hoped that he might be able to turn out for Exeter but was prevented for one reason or another. He was to make his debut for Exeter the following season. He died in 1952 aged 76.