

21st Season 1892-3

The fact that the Annual Meeting was chaired by the Mayor (Mr. E.H. Houlditch) at the Guildhall before a large attendance suggested that the plight of the club would be foremost in the minds of those present. Nothing further from the truth can be construed from its outcome.

Firstly the meeting was not held until the 28th of September, three days before the opening fixture, which meant that there would have been no time to implement change even if it was passed by the meeting. Matters were left much as before. The Treasurer's Report, showing a small favourable balance, was passed and officers were elected. Very little else was reported.

In his opening address the Mayor congratulated the club on its position. He must have been referring the financial position as on his own admission his knowledge of the present game of football was infinitesimal. He could not have been referring to the playing standard of the club. From cup winners in April 1891 the club's fortunes had declined through two poor seasons and with no positive corrective action being taken by the end of the 1892-3 season Exeter found themselves placed at the very foot of the Senior League table. Complacency appeared to be the order of the day.

The playing record showed seven victories, the same number as the previous season, but with only two games drawn the club was defeated no less than 26 times in 35 games played. Suggestions were made in the press about how the club might improve its playing standard. The loss of the new Drill Hall in St. Thomas for practice did not help and the team was criticised for "lack of system". The issue of snobbery was again raised and one reporter ventured the opinion that the club needed to rid itself of "the cankerworm of cliquism". Although the club was later to refute this criticism, the decision to abolish the selection committee and leave this duty solely to the captain might suggest there was some truth in the accusation.

Amalgamation was again suggested but the Exeter Oaks club, although occasionally interchanging players with the City club, was gaining a good reputation in the county. Only minor clubs like St. Johns threw their lot in with Exeter. Torquay could boast two teams in the Senior League, each of which defeated Exeter both home and away, whilst the "Ever Faithful" had only one senior team and that one became holders of the wooden spoon.

Captain for the season was J.M. (Jimmy) Wilcocks, dubbed "The Little Wonder" by the local press. A nimble three-quarter who also appeared regularly for Devon, Wilcocks was able to fill the post for only half the season. His employment in the services in Devonport saw him travelling back to Exeter to take his place in the team. Half-way through the season he was posted to Clifton for a training course. He then chose not to travel back to Exeter as he decided to join the Bristol club where he played alongside Lee Ashford, another former Exeter captain. While in Plymouth Wilcocks had joined the United Services club and was selected to represent the Army.

In Wilcocks' absence, the elected sub-captain, B.H. Wallis took over the leadership. At this time a member of the staff at Exeter Grammar School, Wallis was also a regular member of the Devon XV.

On the fixture card for the first time were Bristol and Bath (home and away) plus home games with Cardiff Harlequins at Christmas and Salford and Penarth at Easter. Prospects did not look good when the opening two fixtures, both against Sidmouth, a junior club, were lost and later in the month the first league game against the town side from Torquay also ended in defeat.

The corner appeared to have been turned following wins against R.N.E.C. and Newton and narrow defeats against Wellington away (a try to nil) and Torquay Athletic, a game in which Exeter scored four tries to three by their opponents. As Athletic converted one of their tries they won, by the scoring values of the time by nine points to eight.

Any improvement by Exeter came to an abrupt halt when in successive games at the end of November they suffered heavy defeats by Albion (0-26) and Barnstaple (0-34).

A win at home against lowly Paignton was no consolation especially when an incident on the field caused a spectator to take to the field to threaten a Paignton player who should have been sent off. Exeter did well to lose by only six points on their first visit to Bath as both Wilcocks and Wallis were away playing for the county. Defeat at Crediton by a try to a goal (2-5) was followed by a creditable draw at Taunton. Eleven straight defeats were to follow.

Against the Torquay town side at the County Ground spectators hooted the referee when he left the field and in consequence the D.R.F.U. ordered Exeter to withdraw their lowest admission price (3d.) for a month which in effect would double the cost of entry for many home supporters. Travelling to Plymouth to play the strong Albion team, a weak fifteen went down 0-26. "A farce in Two Acts" proclaimed one headline.

At Bristol (0-13) Wilcocks turned out for Exeter whilst Lee Ashord played for Bristol.

Victory at home against Dartmouth at the end of February was a hollow one. At the end of play Exeter were victors by a Willie Brock dropped goal to nil. Later Dartmouth protested that Harry Sayer, a former Exeter regular now playing for Exeter Oaks was ineligible to play in a league game. The D.R.F.U. upheld the appeal and awarded the two league points to Dartmouth.

The following week the team could only hold Paignton to a scoreless draw. As Exeter travelled with only twelve players this result could be construed as a moral victory but the fact was that as they did not win this game and they had two points deducted following the Dartmouth match, Exeter finished at the bottom of the League table for season 1892-3.

Another heavy defeat (away to R.N.E.C. 0-25) came before a suggestion of improvement. Two wins (against Taunton and touring side Kent Wanderers) were accompanied by five more defeats. Whilst losing four of these matches, Exeter were

said to have performed well. In the final game of the season Exeter were unlucky once again. They scored three tries to two by Bristol but the visitors converted both tries and the home team only one. Bristol won by 10 points to nine.

If there were any bright spots in this dismal season one would be that some 3,000 or so spectators turned out to see Cardiff Harlequins on Boxing Day. Another would have been the revival of the B team which, under the captaincy of E.H. Underhill, won 13 and drew 5 of the 27 games played.