

50th Year 1921-2

Still on the slow road to full recovery, this season yet again began in an optimistic vein. With some fifty playing members, Exeter could regularly field two senior teams and a junior team. Difficulties with the use of the County Ground were minor in comparison to those faced the previous year. The occupation of the stadium by other sporting organisations meant that the home venue was not available to the rugby club until October. Training and practice matches took place on a field used by Exeter Argyle association football club which was situated near the tram terminus in Alphington Road. Use could also be made of the Territorial's ground at Cowick Barton. The Argyle ground had soccer goal posts installed which inhibited "goal kicking practice".

At the final practice forty players turned up and a match with twenty-three players on one side facing seventeen on the other was attempted. By half time it was obvious that the field was too crowded and the number of players on the field was reduced. Topsham Barracks was again a source of talent and in the early part of the season four officers put in appearances from time to time.

Captain of the Chiefs was George Liddle one of the more bulky forwards in an otherwise still lightweight pack. Good enough to play for Devon, the captain was a committed leader. He missed only a handful of matches due to knee and other injuries. He retired from the game in 1926. At one time an employee of the "Devon & Exeter Gazette", Liddle later became the landlord of "The Royal Oak" in Okehampton Street, Exeter.

The elected vice-captain was C.H. Gliddon, a full back, but before the season was under way he decided to turn professional and headed north. Two months later Frank Shobbrook was appointed in his place.

On the opening day of the season, what was described as a mid-week scratch team was despatched to Okehampton to play the local club. Rain and long grass hampered the visitors whose play "did sparkle at times" (12-3). It is possible that this result was included in the final playing record. Continuing in local mode the second September Saturday saw the team travel to Crediton accompanied by some fifty supporters who included ladies in their midst. Exeter won comfortably enough by scoring three tries (9-3).

To follow came two games which would test Exeter's true mettle. At Beacon Park Plymouth Albion, conquerors of Leicester and Coventry on an early season tour, duly won but Exeter did perform better than expected. The visitors were said to be energetic but lacking finish. At least two try scoring opportunities went begging and near the end of the game Exeter's outstanding player, Colin Hoare, had to leave the field with a shoulder injury (0-22). A similar story was played out at Cranford where Exmouth ended on top with Exeter pushing them hard (0-14).

Another trip to Beacon Park was scheduled for a mid-week Devon Cup match but Exeter declared that they could not raise a team of sufficient standard and conceded the tie to Plymouth Albion.

The next Saturday fixture fell foul of the weather. Because of a drought, Blundell's School cancelled as they had been unable to practice due to the hard ground. The gap was filled by the Royal Navy Depot from Plymouth who travelled to Exeter in exchange for a guarantee. Five hundred spectators watched a close game that Exeter won (6-3). New forward H.L.G. Hughes was off the field for much of the game with a wrenched knee.

After a reasonable start, Exeter, in what had become typical fashion, then went on to lose all of the next dozen games. A weakened team succumbed on a hard ground at Teignmouth (0-14). A first home defeat of the season resulted from the forwards being unable to hold the scrums and thereby gain possession against Weston who scored the only points of the game within the first five minutes (0-5). Meeting Wellington for the first time since 1912, Exeter took a char-a-banc (departing Bedford Circus at 1.15 p.m.) for a game played in "boisterous" weather (3-10). A team disrupted by injuries played better at Exmouth than the score suggested (0-23).

A temporary stand was erected at the County Ground at a cost of £100 (£2,000) for the visit of Plymouth Albion. Exeter proved no match for their opponents even though they were lacking the services of five county players (0-14). A visit to Sidmouth brought no success (0-8). Defeat also came in a mid-week match against Blundell's who won by the margin of a conversion kick (12-14). Although heavier the Exeter pack did not succeed in pushing the school forwards off the ball. A return visit by Wellington saw Exeter on top for two-thirds of the game but chances were "thrown away" through poor handling (3-12).

At Rectory Field against Devonport Services, Exeter either "came a cropper" or "put up a plucky display" depending on which newspaper was being read. Exeter briefly took the lead when scrum-half Woodrow scored a try after running three-quarters of the length of the field (6-26). A disrupted team, with the captain George Liddle playing at centre, underwent another loss at Torquay Athletic (0-9).

A second mid-week match with Blundell's at Tiverton saw Exeter losing by a wide margin (0-32). There is no record of the composition of the Exeter team and it is possible that the two defeats against Blundell's School were not included in the final first team playing record.

On their own ground the Newton Abbot team was "on top form" and Exeter was once more unable to gain possession from scrums. A heavy defeat ensued (6-31).

Just when Exeter appeared down and out the team managed a mini-revival by winning four of the next five matches, all of which were played at home. Victory over Paignton was "cheered to the echo" (14-6). Against Devonport Services Exeter "just missed winning" (6-11). Christmas visitors Cardiff Scottish had not been beaten on tour for two seasons but they had to give way to an Exeter team growing in confidence (8-3). Devon Nomads, a team raised by Willie Brock from local public schools and the military, also went under (9-3). This match was refereed by Walton Hussey who captained Exeter for two seasons between 1885 and 1887.

The winning streak continued against Taunton even though the Exeter forwards, after playing together in the first half, lost their combination later in the game (17-10).

Hopes of maintaining good form were not helped when, on their way to Torquay Athletic, the captain, George Liddle, was plucked from their midst at St. David's station to play for Devon when that team was travelling one man short for a county championship match. Exeter continued their journey with fourteen players and the travelling committee man played in borrowed boots. When Exeter centre Cox was injured the home team supplied one of their reserves as a substitute. Such disruption did not help Exeter's cause (0-31).

Bouncing back Exeter, at home, defeated Teignmouth in a game of "dashing pace but little science" (17-11). Apparently the visitors did not take their defeat in a sportsmanlike way. "The referee may not have been one of the best but the mistakes he made were equally distributed"!

Five consecutive defeats followed. The one against Newport was to be expected even though the visitors were missing several leading players but Exeter did come out of the game with "much credit" (0-21). At home to Exmouth the outcome was similar. Exeter was attacking for most of the second half and only conceded a dropped goal in that period (0-18). "Exeter did not do all that badly at Weston" was one comment after the next game but that was no consolation when the Somerset club completed a double over the city side (0-9). When Newton Abbot visited, the home back line had to include George Liddle at wing three-quarter but an injury meant he was a passenger for much of the second-half (0-14). Nor did Exeter make a very favourable impression at Paignton (4-19).

A runaway victory over Crediton heralded a sequence of five games without defeat. Crediton was said to be somewhat depleted and the home team ran in a total of thirteen tries of which centre three-quarter Colin Hoare registered a hat-trick (43-0).

The opponents for the next two Saturdays should have been the Royal Naval Engineering College but that team was "no longer in existence". Stepping into the breach came the newly re-established Barnstaple side that had made great strides during the current season. Starved of senior rugby, a crowd of 4,000 spectators paid admission money to enter the north Devon ground. The result was regarded as a surprise though Exeter might have won had not scrum-half Woodrow injured a shoulder that meant the team played for half an hour with fourteen men (0-0). No substitute opposition could be found for the following week so Exeter experienced a blank Saturday.

Resuming the appointed programme Exeter faced Brixham for the first time since 1914 when an unfortunate incident in a match had led to a break in relations. Although the margin of victory was narrow, Exeter "played on top of their form" (8-5). Travelling to Taunton the Exonians completed the double over their Somerset rivals (20-17). Hosting Sidmouth, the play of the Exeter team did not come up to expectations. Even though the three-quarter line was often at fault three tries were registered and only one conceded. A draw was a disappointment (11-11).

April 1st saw another blank Saturday. A visit from Barnstaple had been arranged but the north Devonians had to withdraw as the team was due to play in a Devon Cup semi-final. Raphael Jago, an old Devonport Albion half-back who had first played for

England in 1906, offered to bring the Plymouth C.Y.M.S. (Catholic Young Men's Society) XV to the County Ground. He included himself in the team but the match did not take place due to a fall of snow.

Resuming against Exmouth the best crowd of the season assembled to witness the improved form of the home side. Though the score was close the home supporters went home disappointed (0-6). Exeter missed several chances in the first half when five unsuccessful drop-kicks were attempted. For the greater part of the second half, Exmouth was reduced to fourteen men when a player was sent off for using abusive language. The game was held up for several minutes by "wrangling" when Exmouth supporters tried to enter the field of play. The kick-off had been performed by the Mayor of Exeter, Mr. P.F. Rowsell, who, after the match, entertained both teams to tea at the Rougemont Hotel.

For the first time in many years Exeter was not at home over Easter as the County Ground was not available. On Easter Saturday the game at Brixham was played in a south-westerly gale (3-6). On the Monday the team appeared at Aberavon for a game they were not expected to win (3-19) even though the Aberavon XV defeated Guy's Hospital later on the same day! Expectations were not high for the next contest either at Bridgwater & Albion. Again in a strong wind, the home side won easily (5-24).

Missing five regular forwards a mid-week team went to Cullompton where Exeter managed to win. The home team was congratulated on the fight they made of the game (6-0). This result was possibly included in the final playing record.

To round off the season another trip to Barnstaple was made. The toll of playing five matches in seven days became evident during the game. The second half witnessed a chapter of accidents that saw Barnstaple finishing the game with fourteen men and Exeter thirteen. The Exeter casualties were the captain Liddle yet again and the veteran W. Snell. "Honours should have gone to the City", but they did not (6-8).

Before the end of the month Exeter sent a team to face Topsham in a game of association football in aid of St. Dunstan's.

The fiftieth year of existence for Exeter Football Club ended thus. The playing record for the season like so many that had gone before was one that "cannot be called satisfactory". There was a slight improvement for the senior team. Thirty eight matches had been played of which twelve had been won and two drawn. The same number of games had been registered the previous season but the victories had numbered only ten with two drawn. The "A" team improved by winning fourteen and drawing four of 31 games played.

The annual report affirmed that prospects for 1922-23 were never brighter. There was justification for this optimism. Two senior teams and a junior side were fielded regularly and there was a talented pool of players available to the club. Finance, although still a major issue, was now clearly under control and gate takings were beginning to improve. Toward the end of the season the Exeter Rugby Supporters Club was resurrected and this organisation was to help cement relationships between players and supporters and place the club on a much sounder base.

One of the first events organised by the Supporters Club was a combined players and supporters outing to Becky Falls and Haytor utilising two char-a-bancs. One broke down on the outward journey but both made the lunch meeting after which cricket and other games were played that included participation by some of the ladies. After visiting Lustleigh and Moretonhampstead the adventurers arrived back in Exeter at 10.30 p.m.

The club was steeped in the amateur ethos that prevailed in rugby union at the time. A press reporter, after a defeat by Newton Abbot, commented “Despite the fact that Exeter rarely win matches their play is always interesting which is mainly due to the committee selecting the best type of player. After all, brawn and muscle is not always required to make play attractive”. At the Annual General Meeting, Jack Coombes, the club secretary, stated “Exeter is one of the finest sporting sides in the West. A good name is to be more desired than an unbroken record”.

Winning was not everything in those days.