

53rd Year 1924-5

Resuming the captaincy Dr. H.L.G. Hughes had at his command what was said to be “the most improved team in the county”. Players of county calibre - the captain himself, George Liddle, Henry Rew, T.R.K. Jones and wing three-quarter Billy Braddon - were to be joined by hooker J.C.R. Buchanan who had captained Scotland during the 1923-4 season.

Buchanan accepted the position of Assistant Surgeon at the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital. After a season with Exeter he left the R.D. & E. to join the colonial medical service and was to become the last chief medical officer to serve the old Colonial Office. He spent many years abroad and was knighted in 1961. He died in 1976.

Having learnt his rugby at Stewart’s College he was first capped in 1921 whilst playing for Stewart’s College Former Pupils. He captained his country on four occasions and in all was capped sixteen times between 1921 and 1925.

Another new recruit to the team at outside half was Lt. E.S.B. Gaffney from Topsham Barracks who played for a couple of seasons before moving on and achieving the rank of Major General in his military career.

The playing record, despite the available talent, was not as good as that of the previous season due in part to an improved fixture list. Perhaps a more telling reason was that leading players were not always available for selection because of international or county duties and work commitments.

The official record showed that 39 games were played of which 15 were won and five drawn, though once again the press reports of matches played show a slight difference from the official tally. On occasions three teams were fielded. It was decided not to enter the Devon R.F.U. Cup competition. A report in John Wisden’s Rugby Football Almanack stated that “the outstanding feature of the season was the work of the forwards” but then added “Unfortunately, however, the pack preferred the outside game to scrummaging, thereby considerably handicapping the backs.”

Opening the season with a long railway journey to Redruth, the team had to take to the field almost immediately on arrival. In a “sporting game” Exeter did well to lose by only a single point (5-6). Only fifteen players travelled to the match but meanwhile another thirty were engaged in a trial match at the County Ground.

The next game was not regarded as an official 1st XV fixture partly due to the fact that “only a few members of the regular 1st XV are available”. The poor turn-out was due to the attraction of the 1925-6 All Blacks (“The Invincibles”) first tour match against Devon at The Rectory, Devonport. A losing trip to Crediton could not compete (3-9) and the result was not included in the final season record.

Regaining its poise the team then reeled off five successive victories, the first two at home, then two away to be followed by another home win. Against the Royal Naval Engineering College “the homesters looked smart in their new jerseys of black with white collars and cuffs”. The basic black uniform was to remain for the next seventy years or so. On the left breast was depicted the City of Exeter crest a miniature representation of which stills appears on club shirts in the modern era.

Six tries were registered against Sidmouth in a straightforward win (22-5). Barnstaple led at half-time but Exeter scored two tries in the second half to win by a point (6-5). On this day Exeter fielded three XV's all of which won their matches. At Bristol University four tries were registered by backs one of whom, K.R. Upright, was making one of his occasional first team appearances. The former Exeter School player ran in from the half-way line (12-0).

Next it was the turn of Devonport Services to visit the County Ground. Contrary to recent practice the Services fielded only one senior team on this date and so Exeter faced stronger opponents than had become the norm. Many observers "miscalculated" their predictions as Exeter put on one of their better performances of the season. A try from T.R.K. Jones and conversion by Henry Rew saw them home (5-3).

A team weakened by county calls went down at Brixham (3-8) and at home in incessant rain Wellington was held to a draw (3-3). Mid-week a game was played against the Devon Nomads scratch team as part of the St. Thomas Carnival that raised funds for the R.D. & E. Hospital. A Billy Braddon try near the end saved the game for Exeter (9-9).

Away from home defeat was suffered at the hands of the two Albion teams, firstly by Bridgwater & Albion (3-11) and then Plymouth Albion (4-14). In this latter game both teams were missing a number of county players.

"Honours Easy" was a headline used to describe the game against visiting Exmouth. Play was not as dour as expected but neither side managed to score (0-0). There was "very little to choose between the sides" at Sidmouth though the home side prevailed (0-6). The gap between Exeter and their next opponents Blaenavon was much wider. A far from representative collection of fourteen players travelled to south Wales where Exeter's performance was described as "disorganised" and the side was "overwhelmed" (0-31).

Recovering a week later, Brixham was defeated at the County Ground despite some experiments being made with the three-quarters (7-4). Remaining at home for a mid-week game against a "resourceful" Sherborne Pilgrims team, Exeter despite fielding all its county players managed to lose (6-9). The game was played in a "heavy mist" on a pitch that resembled a ploughed field. Another defeat followed at Paignton where a good side was said to have been "worn down" by their opponents (3-6).

The home Boxing Day fixture against Cardiff Scottish was said to have been a "heroic" performance in "horrible conditions". Exeter scored seven tries (29-6). Unfortunately for Exeter's finances the return fixture against Blaenavon the following day had to be called off due to the waterlogged pitch. The first fixture of the New Year at Exmouth was cancelled for similar reasons.

Although playing conditions had improved in time for a visit by Plymouth Albion, prospects for Exeter did not look good. Each club was supplying four players to the Devon team and in addition Exeter had George Liddle and V.G. Troulan on the injured list. Matters looked dire when Exeter took to the field with only eleven players. Two more were quickly added but before the final two had made it onto the field the visitors had registered a try. With their full complement Exeter more than held their own and were able to register an equalising try before the end of the game (3-3).

Exeter was expected to win the next home game against Paignton but fielding a good team they failed to do so (3-12). A week later an improvement saw the team overcome Bristol University despite some notable absentees and having to play two wingers at centre three-quarter (12-0). An eclipse of the sun was seen by none of those present due to fog!

Two away defeats came next. "The weather and conditions were as bad as they could be" at Newton Abbot (6-19) whilst with Buchanan and Rew still absent the game against Torquay Athletic was also lost (0-8)

This was turning out to be a poor season weather wise. Heavy showers persisted during a mid-week encounter with the Royal Air Force. The only try of the game was scored by the splendidly named Earl of Brandon who went on to enjoy a distinguished career in the service (0-3). Exeter experimented once again with its back line against Bridgwater & Albion at the County Ground. Peter Faulkner, newly arrived from Exmouth, played full back replacing regular Frank Buckland who moved to outside half whilst Edward Gaffney went into the centre. This seemed to work as both wingers, D.P. Wilcocks and Colin Hoare, scored tries in a narrow victory (6-3).

The game at Wellington started half an hour late due to a coach break-down. Missing a number of leading players Exeter went down by a single score (0-3). The weather was still disrupting Exeter's season when a mid-week game against the 1st Battalion Devon Regiment was cancelled due to a waterlogged pitch.

Enthusiasm in Barnstaple in support of the recently revived rugby club was still high and the Southern Railway operated a special train to Exeter. Some 500-600 supporters took advantage of the excursion and helped swell the gate to the largest of the season. Fortunately the pitch had dried out. Exeter was hampered by the absence of three leading forwards and during the second half Harold Pidgeon broke his leg. He was taken to hospital in a St. Johns ambulance. The travelling supporters were well satisfied with their team's victory (3-6).

The commitment of the R.N.E.C. students stood in contrast. The next fixture was cancelled as the College could not raise a representative team because many of their players were attending the Army v Navy encounter at Twickenham. The College was subsequently disappeared from the fixture list.

Student opposition for the next game came from the Combined Colleges of Exeter. The combined team lost one of its leading players, Rees a Cornwall county representative, with an injured knee and a substitute was allowed for the second half. The handicapped lightweight student team could not counter Exeter's advantage (26-0).

Opponents for the next two home matches were both criticised by the local press. The Exeter captain, Dr. Hughes, failed to turn up due to a problem with his motor-car but nevertheless his team in difficult circumstance defeated Newton Abbot (6-3). Reporters objected to what was termed "unnecessary tactics" adopted by the visitors. The culmination was the sending off of one of their forwards for rough play against Buchanan when in the act of scoring a try. The offending player was subsequently suspended until October of the following season.

The visit by Newport Police was disappointing. The game started in a snowstorm which may have influenced the visitors' "incessant kicking to touch". Play was even until the last few

minutes when the Police scored having missed a number of other opportunities (0-5). It was near the end of the game that a Police player was ordered off the field.

Poor weather continued for a mid-week evening visit by Torquay Athletic a game that was preceded by a hailstorm. With thundery showers continuing a draw was probably a fair result (3-3). Three days later at Devonport Services Exeter suffered something of a collapse. Losing by one score at half-time the defence held out for two thirds of the game before conceding fourteen more points playing against fourteen men (0-19).

As host to Taunton, Exeter scored nineteen points themselves in an easy win (19-6). The home team might have been fortunate in winning by such a margin as their forwards were criticised for “lurking about in a half-hearted manner”. Another evening game at Exmouth finished in semi-darkness (8-12).

The Easter programme kicked-off with a visit by a team called Notts County but not the association football club. This team was made up of former pupils from the Public Schools of Rugby, Burton and Nottingham. Fielding four reserve forwards Exeter found themselves down 3-17 at half time. In an extraordinary turn-around the home team scored eight tries in the second half without reply (36-17).

Three other games over the holiday week-end were all lost. Easter Saturday saw two matches being staged on the County Ground. In the morning an “Exeter Scratch” team that included a handful of players from neighbouring clubs lost to Risca from Wales (8-12). In the afternoon Old Blues from London beat an Exeter team that fielded an understrength pack (9-23). The selected fifteen had been further weakened when T.R.K. Jones met with a motor-cycle accident on his way to the ground. A first meeting with Moseley from Birmingham on Easter Monday was spoilt by the pitch resuming its quagmire status after heavy rain (6-13). “It was difficult to recognise players due to the mud.”

A win at Taunton was described as unexpected. Henry Rew successfully converted the three tries scored (15-3).

A final fixture saw Exeter travelling to Barnstaple for a second time for what turned out to be a most convivial occasion. The Barnstaple Town Band played and both teams linked arms to sing “Auld Lang Syne” before the kick-off which was undertaken by Charlie Thomas the old Barnstaple International forward. The result of the game almost became immaterial in the end but to their surprise the “Scarlets” were the victors (0-3).

After the game the Barnstaple Supporters Club entertained both teams to tea at the Victoria Hotel where it was announced that the total gate takings of £50 (£1500) from the match would be donated by the Barnstaple club to the County Ground Grandstand Fund Appeal. Such generosity was duly acknowledged by T.S. Kelly especially as the newly reformed Barnstaple club was the first in the county to come to Exeter’s assistance. The evening ended with another rendition of “Auld Lang Syne” followed by “For They Are Jolly Good Fellows”.

This appeared to have been a mixed season for the club. The Chiefs playing record was not as good as the previous season and the improved fixture list did not bring the required response in gate takings. Neither did the weather help in this respect. The second string just about held its own winning eleven and drawing four games out of 26 played.

In all probability the major achievement of the season was the progress made with the plans to erect a new concrete grandstand at the County Ground. Edgar Plummer agreed to transfer full proprietary rights of the County Ground to the club. By relinquishing the leasehold he thereby allowed the club to apply for a grant from the Rugby Football Union.

With the Supporters club donating a further £60 (£1800) to the fund to go alongside other donations a definite decision could be made to erect the stand and by July construction was under way.