

69th Year 1940-1

A war time shortage of newsprint meant slimmer newspapers. In addition there were reporting restrictions imposed on the press. These facts meant that coverage of many sporting events was absent or at best limited and, of course, there were far more important issues to cover.

At a meeting at the Globe Hotel in mid-September 1940, Exeter club officials decided to carry on providing games of rugby in the city. Expressions of interest received from army units suggested that there were sufficient players in the locality to run a team on a weekly basis. The club would continue to use Hele's School facilities but permission to use changing accommodation at the County Ground was to be sought.

On the first Saturday in October a reportedly weak team was sent to play the Royal Marines at an unspecified location. After a "splendidly contested" game Exeter ran out winners with Colin Paul scoring three tries and kicking two penalty goals (18-11). The first home game of the season was due to be an encounter with Paignton but instead a Royal Artillery side provided the opposition. As usual Exeter attacked at every opportunity scoring three tries (14-3). After a blank Saturday the Royal Artillery team returned to the Hele's School ground. By this time Colin Paul had been officially appointed as the Exeter captain and he led his team to another victory. On this occasion the visitors held Exeter to six points apiece at half time after which their defence "crumbled" (17-6).

For a return fixture with the Royal Marines Cecil Ford, who had joined the Royal Navy, was home on leave and was available to play. A strong wind spoilt attempts to play good rugby. The visitors took the lead with a penalty goal but despite "wholehearted striving" they could not contain the Exeter team (21-3).

Games against an Army XV and the University College of the South West were cancelled and then three more victories were added to the tally. An easy win against another Army XV (41-3) was followed by a further success against a Paignton team that had been strengthened by the inclusion of some Torquay Athletic players (17-8). Both of these matches took place in Exeter.

Despite restrictions on petrol supplies Exeter found the means to travel to Blundell's School by means of motor cars. A narrow win was the reward (14-11). A game at Torquay against an R.A.F. XV was cancelled. Travelling again Exeter went to Paignton where the teams were level at half time at three points each but thereafter the visitors' better combination proved decisive (18-3).

Finally on Boxing Day a game was staged in aid of the British Red Cross. A team, constituted mainly of University and Public School players, was assembled by W. "Billy" Hotblack an ex-Blundell's captain and war-time Cambridge University blue. Exeter won the game (24-3).

At this point the season ended though an anomaly remains. A printed fixture list had been produced by secretary Jack Coombes on which he had written the results of games played. On the 28th December for a home fixture against Somerset County Police he had written "Canc." indicating that the game had been cancelled. Coombes indicated that Exeter's season had ended at this point. However on the 22nd February a Taunton newspaper gave notice that a game between the Somerset Police and Exeter would take place at Mountfields that day. As yet no details of this match have come to light but according to an end of season review in the same newspaper the Somerset Police record is given as played 21 won 20 and one drawn and the draw was said to have been against Exeter.

The Exeter record for games played between October and the end of December 1940 as annotated by Jack Coombes was Played 9 Won 9 Points for 184 against 48. On the fixture card it was stated "If support is forthcoming the Fixture List for the second half of the season will be greatly strengthened". As yet no further information has surfaced to suggest such fixtures were made.

Towards the end of April a Seven-a-Side competition was held on the County Ground. An Exeter VII suffered a semi-final loss to the Devonshire Regiment who went on to win the trophy.

In December came another painful reminder of the conflict overseas when news of the death of Exeter sporting hero Henry Rew was announced. He had also proved himself a hero on the battlefield. Henry Rew had left his Woodwater Lane home to join the army well before the war commenced, serving with the Royal Tank Corps. During early action in France he was wounded but on recovery he re-joined his unit. Promoted from Captain to Major he was then posted to North Africa where he received wounds from which he died. He was buried in the war cemetery at El Alamein. He was 34 years of age.

Henry Rew made his debut for Exeter in March 1924 appearing many times for the club over a period of ten years. He represented The Army at Rugby Union and also played for Blackheath. In 1930 he was selected as a front row forward for the British team (later to be known as the Lions) to tour New Zealand and Australia. He played in all four test matches in New Zealand.

In 1939 H.M.S. Exeter was severely damaged during the Battle of the River Plate. After limping to the Falklands for emergency repairs the ship eventually made its way back to Devonport for a complete refit. In May 1940 the Exeter rugby club sent the ship a complete set of rugby jerseys in the club colours with the name "H.M.S. Exeter" embroidered around the city crest on the left breast. It was also reported that a ladies' working party had undertaken to knit a set of black and white hooped stockings to accompany the jerseys. On the occasion of the new kit being worn for the first time the H.M.S. Exeter XV won by seventeen points to three.

Former player, William Paddon (1919-1926), who also represented Devonport Services and Devon, was instrumental in getting Exeter rugby club to "adopt" the H.M.S. Exeter rugby team. As a Petty Officer, Paddon was a member of the ship's complement when it returned to action in the Far East. In March 1942 the ship was sunk, south of Borneo, during the second Battle of the Java Sea. Paddon was one of the survivors picked up by the Japanese, becoming a prisoner of war for the duration of hostilities. He was released in 1945 and taken to Australia before returning home.