

### 34<sup>th</sup> Season 1905-6

This was a momentous season for Rugby Union football in the British Isles. The first fully representative touring team from New Zealand, the first All Blacks, landed at Plymouth on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September bringing with them a new playing style which revolutionised the game.

Based at Newton Abbot, the New Zealanders began fitness training and practice almost at once. They took time off to watch Devonport Albion play Torquay Athletic on the first Saturday after their arrival. The following week they faced Devon, the current champions of the south-west, at the County Ground, Exeter, in their opening fixture. What happened next was something that left the 6,000 or so spectators dumbfounded. Their heroes were soundly defeated by 55 points to four (a dropped goal).

By the end of their British Isles tour the All Blacks, in a programme of 32 matches, had lost but a solitary game, that against Wales by one try to nil, though the tourists claimed they had scored an equalising try that the referee, catching up with play, failed to award. Their influence on the home rugby scene soon became evident.

Meanwhile Exeter had begun their season in much the same low key manner as they had done for several seasons. Under the continuing captaincy of Tom Kelly there was optimism over prospects for the season. A number of new players appeared on the scene and half-back W. Tuckett, the ex-Friernhay player, had returned from his spell with Devonport Albion. The fixture list contained the usual Devon club mix together with new opponents Cheltenham and Stroud. Again the Devon R.F.U. cup competition was entered.

A practice was held on the first Saturday in September during which the ball burst. This must have been the only ball available because the leather casing was stuffed with straw to allow the practice to continue. One commentator thought this produced a better game as the “new” ball could not be kicked. This situation compared favourably with a practise held in September 1890 when only five players turned up and there was no ball at all available.

Performance in the first match did not did not bear out the pre-season optimism as Exeter escaped with a fortunate draw at home to Newton Abbot (3-3). More practice was needed. So on the following Saturday the Exeter players gathered in the stand to watch the Devon v All Blacks game wearing their football kit ready to take part in a practice match following the big event.



If ever there was a case of “after the Lord Mayor’s Show” then this was it!

It could have been different. The players in the stand could have been principal performers in the main event for when the New Zealand tour was first mooted the Exeter club had been offered a match for a surety of £50. In the light of the club's ongoing financial deficit the committee decided that this sum was too much to risk and turned down the opportunity. Exeter was represented in the main event only by Tom Kelly and the club jerseys of white with a broad black chest hoop and arm bands. The new Devon jerseys had not arrived in time.

Resuming their season Exeter travelled to Devonport Albion and, as usual, suffered defeat (0-22). This was followed by a victory over the Royal Naval Engineering College (14-3) and a loss away to Cheltenham (3-6). Such was the early success of the New Zealand formation – a 2-3-2 scrum formation with a wing-forward as scrum feeder, a scrum-half at the base of the scrum and a five-eighths line-up in the backs, that it was adopted by many clubs. Amongst this number was Exeter for their game against Cheltenham. Although not a success in this encounter the new formation was tried again in subsequent matches.

Against Plymouth at home Exeter achieved an unexpected victory over (11-6) and it was reported that the Exeter players were “so excited at winning they forgot the New Zealand system”. Success using the new formation came again the following Saturday at Bristol (6-3).

Next Devonport Albion came to the County Ground with a weakened team. They had just played a mid-week game against the All Blacks (3-21) and the team was missing half a dozen leading players. The home crowd, after the victories over Plymouth and Bristol, expected Exeter to win. As it turned out their team was unlucky to lose (6-9) when the visitors were awarded a late try. Exeter had played an open game scoring two excellent tries whilst the visitors kept the game in the forwards. Near the end of the match, the ball was kicked over the Exeter line and in the race to touch-down a Devonport player fell over the ball and did not touch it with his hands. The referee, from some distance behind the play, awarded the try. In a regrettable display the crowd demonstrated their displeasure and disappointment at the decision and delayed the restart of the game for several minutes. Worse was to follow when the two teams next met at the County Ground.

A lucky win against Lydney (9-8) drew the comment that the new formation “still requires solid tackling, hard pushing and quick heeling”. Before the game, at a practice, only one first team player attended and he was a three-quarter. Earlier in the season the committee thought that only players who attended practice should be selected until it was pointed out that about six first team regulars did not live in the city.

Missing three players on county duty, another poor performance led to defeat against Cinderford (0-8) on a wet day before only 500 supporters. Exeter began using the New Zealand system but reverted to the old system due to the superiority of the visiting forwards.

The return of Kelly saw a much improved display at Bath (8-3). A win at home against Bridgwater Albion (13-8) in incessant rain was achieved using the old style

formation. With Kelly again injured Exeter faced visiting Newport with a slightly under strength team. Fog threatened the match but its late clearance allowed the game to go ahead but with a smaller crowd than was anticipated. Leading by eight points at one stage Exeter held on for a well deserved draw (8-8). On this day England lost to New Zealand (0-15) whilst later in the tour Newport faced the tourists excelling themselves in a tight game (3-8).

Form dipped again up to Christmas with a draw against Barnstaple (0-0) and defeats by Torquay Athletic (3-6) and Newton Abbot (5-9) before the team revived. Honours were even with visitors Aberavon (3-3) but it was pointed out that had the game been played twelve months previously Exeter would have won. Exeter's three points had come from a goal kicked by Tom Kelly from a mark. At the start of the season the value of a goal kicked from a mark had been reduced from four points to three.

At the end of December the match with Northampton was described as "the finest game on the County Ground for years". Scoring seven tries Exeter won in style (23-6).

The inconsistent form of the Exeter team meant that of the remaining fifteen games of the season only five resulted in victories to set against ten defeats. At Devonport Albion, Exeter had hopes of winning having included in their ranks Dr. L. West of Hartlepool Rovers who was the current captain of Scotland and at this time resident in Southampton. His only appearance for the club could not prevent Exeter going down (3-8).

Bouncing back an under strength team beat Bath on the County Ground (19-0) but lost the next game away to Lydney (6-11) before the fourth game of the season against Devonport Albion.

This latter match proved, in one sense at least, the low point of the season. A crowd of 6,000 assembled at the St. Thomas ground to witness this needle encounter. During the game Albion displayed bouts of "roughness" and the referee, Mr. Lean of Plymouth, merely cautioned the Devon player W. Spiers, when home spectators thought he should have been sent from the field. Later in the game two incidents occurred that caused an undesired reaction from the crowd. Firstly Exeter centre A.J.R. Roberts was obstructed when running to touch down in defence thus allowing the visitors to score. The incident was "obvious to everyone on the ground but the referee" and, despite a protest from the Exeter captain and the crowd, the decision stood. Then, in a similar incident Friend of Exeter claimed he had saved behind his own line but the referee who was "some 35 yards from the play" awarded Albion another try. Thus a game that should have finished as a draw ended in defeat (3-9).

Unfortunately problems did not end with the final whistle. There may have been cause for complaint at the way Mr. Lean refereed the match "but there was no excuse for the unsportsmanlike spirit shown to the referee and Devonport Albion players on leaving the field". The scene was said to be a disgrace with violent scuffles breaking out with "fists being used and threats made". The police on duty intervened as best they could and the name of one spectator was taken. He was later to be barred from the ground. The commotion continued as the players and officials made their way back to the Seven Stars in Okehampton Street.

Serious repercussions for the club could have followed when Mr. Lean, who was a committee member of the Devon R.F.U., made a formal complaint to that body. The D.R.F.U. decision was that entrance prices for Exeter's next two home games should be doubled. Exeter thought this decision harsh in view of previous decisions made by the D.R.F.U. relating to similar situations on other grounds. Rather oddly at the end of the season the "extra" income from the increased charges was handed over to the D.R.F.U. who then handed the money back to the Exeter club.

Potentially more damaging would have been the closure of the County Ground. Devon was set to meet Durham in the final of the County Championship at Exeter three weeks after the Albion game but the D.R.F.U. decided to stay with the original arrangements.

A completely different atmosphere was evident the following week after a defeat by Penarth (0-3) when the landlord of the Seven Stars ordered "no singing or we will lose our license"!

There followed two match cancellations. Exeter had entered the Devon Cup again and had been drawn to play Newton Abbot but the committee decided to forfeit the game and travel to Northampton instead (6-15). On the day of the County Final the game against Bridgwater Albion was called off. Devon won the final against Durham (16-3) in front of a crowd of 10,000 with the assistance of A.J.R. Roberts, Norman Odam and Tom Kelly from the Exeter club.

Yet another double over Bristol (9-3) was recorded before a run of three defeats against Plymouth (0-10), Torquay Athletic (3-5), when Kelly turned up at the ground wearing his International cap, the first of which he had won in January, and Cinderford (3-8) "the weakest performance of the season".

Over the Easter holiday a win over Cheltenham (19-5) was followed the usual defeat by Old Merchant Taylors (8-19). For the last home game only 500 turned up in the rain to see Durham City defeated (17-0). In this game veteran winger Finnimore slipped on the wet ground and broke a leg.

For the first fifteen the season petered out when a team was due to travel to Bridgwater Albion in compensation for the previously cancelled fixture on County Final day. However Exeter could not raise a team as of the fifteen selected ten declined. No Reserves players were available as that team was contesting, and winning, the Devon Junior Cup final after extra time against St. Chads from Plymouth (6-3).

Overall the playing record, although not coming up to expectations, was regarded as satisfactory by some and disappointing by others. Of 34 games played fourteen were won and four ended in a draw. The Reserve team played 26 games of which twenty were won and four drawn.

The financial situation had not improved although the club had paid its way during the season. Travelling expenses fell as the 3<sup>rd</sup> XV had been dropped. Gate receipts

increased but membership subscriptions fell. The deficit stood at £162 (approximately £9,000).

Although Devon had won the County Championship rugby football in the county was still losing ground to the Association game.

A.J.R. Roberts, who had played for Barnstaple, took up a post on the staff at Blundell's School and would have played for Tiverton had that club not been in temporary abeyance. Roberts transferred his allegiance to Exeter who recruited from clubs outside the city because there were no feeder clubs locally. Barnstaple was not the force it once was and Crediton was another club that closed down for a time in this period.

T.S. Kelly, who appeared in all four home internationals for England this season, was to move to London in pursuance of his career. In recognition of his services to Devon and Exeter he was presented with a case of pipes at the Devon R.F.U. A.G.M. in May.

Appearing alongside Kelly in the England team that faced Ireland at Welford Road was J.R.P. Sandford at centre-three-quarter who was winning his only cap for his country. Joseph Ruscombe Poole Sandford was the son of the Archdeacon of Exeter E.G. Sandford. The Archdeacon fathered nine children and of his seven sons five played rugby for the Exeter club mainly when on vacation from school or university. The first to appear was Temple Charles Grey who played in 1895. He was followed by Ernest John, a half-back. J.R.P. Sandford played a handful of games at the start of the 1903-4 season. He also appeared for Devon. Daniel Arthur and Francis Hugh made fleeting appearances in 1907 and 1908. The youngest son, Robert Douglas, was awarded the Victoria Cross in 1918 for his actions as a submarine commander during the Zeebrugge Raid. One obituary mentioned that he too played rugby for Exeter though this claim is yet to be substantiated.