

## 27<sup>th</sup> Season 1898-9

Even before the season had got under way captain Hitt declared that Exeter had “too many first class reserves”. Fortunately this bold statement eventually was justified as the final playing record proved to be even better than that of the previous campaign. The squad was further strengthened when Sid Labbett, having announced his retirement, was persuaded to resume his position at half-back and a perceived weakness at centre was resolved when Harry Escott returned in February after playing for Exmouth. His former centre partner Harry Reed departed to fill the gap in the Seaside team.

The usual crop of injuries and county calls meant that the reserves called up from the A team got the opportunity to prove their playing abilities. They also showed their worth during the busy Christmas and Easter periods.

By the end of the season rival club Plymouth would declare “Exeter are undoubtedly the best trained team in the County”. Praise indeed. Against Plymouth and Devonport Albion, Exeter won at home and lost away and against Barnstaple they lost at home but won away so honours were more or less even within the county. The strength of local rugby was proven when Devon won the County Championship competition for the first time in April.

The senior team match record showed improvement on that of the previous season. Playing one more game, 22 matches were won, two drawn and 12 lost. The A and B teams played 52 matches winning 29 between them.

The new leader, Frank Lloyd Hitt, had made his debut in December 1894 as a teenager quickly becoming a fixture at full-back and occasionally playing as a wing or centre three-quarter. He made several appearances for Devon. In December 1899 following injury he retired from the game on medical advice though he did reappear on a handful of occasions in 1900-1 and 1901-2 seasons. Representing Exmouth he later became a member of the Devon R.F.U. committee until he moved to London in 1919. An all-round sportsman he also played local cricket, hockey and table-tennis.

Confidence was well placed as the season commenced with a win at Weston (10-4) and a scoreless draw at Bridgwater. Four further victories followed before the team travelled to Gloucester for the first time since March 1892. Talk in the “Ever Faithful” was not about who would win but of the margin of defeat for Exeter. Defeat by only two tries to nil was deemed a worthy effort.

A win at home over Exmouth (11-0) in front of a crowd of 3,000 spectators preceded away games at Devonport Albion and Bristol. Both were lost but only by narrow margins. Only one further game was lost before Christmas when three attractive games had been arranged for the holiday period.

Firstly on Christmas Eve Wickham Park from London was defeated (11-0) to be followed by a victory on Boxing Day over Aspatria (6-0). This latter match saw the reappearance in Exeter colours of former favourite and captain Jimmy Wilcocks who was in the city on holiday from Canada. He scored what was described as a spectacular try having “jumped two or three opponents close to the line”.

The opposition on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December was provided by the touring Barbarians on the eighth anniversary of the famous club's foundation. Unfortunately the game was played in wretched weather but this did not prevent Frank Hitt gathering the ball at an early stage in the game to race fully 95 yards (87m) to score a try "the like of which had never been witnessed on the County Ground". Despite fielding two reserve half-backs Exeter won in style (11-0).

After this notable victory the team slumped to defeat in eight of the following nine games, and failed to score in six of them. Amid this run came an unexpected draw at Leicester (0-0). Meeting the east Midlands club for the first time Exeter, at home, had lost by six points to nil twelve days before the return match.

Preparation for the match at Leicester was unusual. Fourteen Exeter players arrived in Leicester at 2 a.m on Saturday. Later that morning a trip was taken around the town in pelting rain. On returning to their hotel near the ground the players enjoyed a fortifying drink of hot Bovril. To this beverage was attributed one reason for the team's vigorous performance. In addition the party had been joined by Ernest Sandford an occasional Exeter player who was studying at Keble College, Oxford.

On taking the field the visitors received a rousing ovation from the 4,000 or so spectators. The game however was spoilt by the weather and ground conditions. The Exeter team arrived back in their home city at too late an hour to be welcomed by home supporters. By that time the number of players had dwindled to twelve. Sandford had returned to his college whilst Frank Hitt and Ted Baker had missed the train and did not arrive home until 10 a.m. on Sunday – "in time for church".

Three weeks later Gloucester came to the County Ground to snatch victory by a solitary dropped goal (0-4). After the game complaints appeared in the press concerning the behaviour of a spectator who verbally abused and assaulted a visiting player. The Exeter committee took steps to bar the culprit from future home games. The visiting player was said to be Percy Stout, a current England international. Later the Gloucester committee decided to drop Exeter from their fixture list as it "entailed a long and not very profitable journey".

Following the Gloucester match Exeter had an open date. The team had been due to meet Torquay Athletic but the south Devon club had been suspended, in January, by the D.R.F.U. for "poaching" a Welsh player and offering "inducements". Later in the season Torquay was reinstated and comment was made by the club on Exeter's "want of sympathy in the affair".

The gap in the fixture list was filled by Penarth who returned home having been soundly beaten (36-0). The recently returned centre, Harry Escott, scored 19 points (including four tries), a feat that caught the attention of the Devon selectors. He was chosen to play in the next county game at full-back in place of his club captain Frank Hitt. Hitt resumed his county place for the Championship semi-final.

In direct contrast to the results since the turn of the year, Exeter had now embarked on a run of ten victories in eleven games. Two of these wins took place away from home,

against Bath and Barnstaple. The post match reception following each of these games could not have been more different.

With a team weakened by county calls Exeter defeated Bath (5-3) in a hailstorm. On the mile walk from the ground to the train station the players were followed by a mob who “threw mud etc, at them”.

A week later the team returned to Exeter having defeated Barnstaple on their ground (9-4) for the first time in nine years. Reportedly Barnstaple introduced “roughness” into the play for which Arthur Brock remonstrated with the home forwards as they were “taking the sport out of the game”. A crowd was on hand to meet the returning train and enthusiastically accompany the players back to the Bude Hotel.

March 18<sup>th</sup> saw nigh on a thousand travelling Exeter supporters take the train to Exmouth where they witnessed a victory (8-0) by their team. A week later an even more creditable win was accomplished by the “Ever Faithful” (6-3). The victims were Devonport Albion who had been hailed as the “Western Champions”. Post match problems again were evident. Enthusiasm turned into a “rough and tumble” which half a dozen constables had difficulty in controlling. The press described the treatment of Bildings, a county regular, as disgraceful. He lost his cap in the melee and had to walk to the bus bareheaded. Presumably it was a club or county honours cap that he lost.

A weak Aberavon team, fielding five new players, went down by only a try to nil on Good Friday. The following day Old Merchant Taylors won by seven points to nil. Over several years Exeter were successful only rarely in encounters with this team.

April 8<sup>th</sup> was a significant date for rugby in the south-west. Devon became County Champions by defeating Northumberland (5-0) at Newcastle. Included in the green and white team were Frank Lloyd Hitt, Arthur Brock and James “Ducky” Powell from the Exeter ranks. Powell converted the sole try of the match.

Meanwhile on that same day Exeter, fielding three substitutes for their county representatives defeated Bath (11-0) at the County Ground. The strong finish to the season concluded with satisfying wins over Plymouth (16-9) and Neath (3-0).

In January 1899 C.H. Harper received his one and only England cap against Wales. Some works of reference ascribe him as playing for Exeter. This is not correct. Harper was a Devonian who played for Barnstaple. He received his cap whilst playing for Oxford University where he attended Exeter College.