

### 33<sup>rd</sup> Season 1904-5

Thomas Stanley Kelly, an Old Blundellian, first came to the notice of Exeter when playing for Tiverton, his home club. He was invited to play for the city team in “important” fixtures and became a regular player in 1903-4. In this, his second full season, he was elected captain becoming an exemplary leader, often playing when injured such was his value to the team. He became an automatic choice for the Devon team. Although specialisation of positions amongst the forwards was still in its infancy at this time Tom Kelly was regarded as being especially useful at line-outs.

In January 1906 Tom Kelly won his first international cap for England against Wales at Richmond Athletic Ground. Capped twelve times in all, the most yet won by an Exeter player, between 1906 and 1908, he captained his country against France at the Stade Colombes in 1908.

His career with the Customs & Excise took him away from Devon at times. Whilst playing for Liverpool Old Boys he made ten appearances for Lancashire, the first when he was only seventeen years of age. He also played for the London Devonians, London Civil Service and Harlequins. On his return to Exeter his place of work was the Old Customs House on The Quay. Tom Kelly continued his connection with the Exeter club being Chairman in the dark days following the First World War and remaining as a trustee until after the Second World War. In addition he served as Honorary Secretary to the Devon R.F.U. for 26 years.

For the new season home fixtures had been arranged with five Welsh clubs and the card introduced return matches with Lydney and a home game against Cinderford. Northampton was also a newcomer. Four matches had been fixed with Torquay Athletic, Plymouth and Barnstaple. As the club had entered the newly reconstituted Devon Cup competition, Exeter met Plymouth on five occasions. Tiverton did not feature on the list.

Despite doubts expressed at the A.G.M. over the financial viability of running three teams the club did field a third fifteen on occasions. At times it was referred to as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reserves and at others it was called Exeter B. A city youth team played several matches under various titles like Exeter Youth and Exeter Juniors. This team was officially affiliated to Exeter Football Club in November.

It was considered that Exeter possessed enough players to make “a strong and clever team. On the day they are eager to impress but do little to prepare themselves”. Harry Escott dropped out of the team by Christmas and the three-quarters were never a settled unit. Tallman switched from the forwards to play in the centre and on one occasion he was joined in the back line by Tom Kelly. It was noted that six of the first team regulars resided outside the city.

The two opening games had contrasting results that again illustrated the team’s inconsistency. A crowd of only 1,000 at the County Ground saw Barnstaple overcome with some ease (23-0). an encouraging victory that was only to be followed by an almost full strength team going down away to Plymouth by a large margin before an estimated 4,000 spectators (3-20).

There followed a run of seven games without defeat that included home wins over Lydney (10-0) and Penarth (9-3). Perhaps the most meritorious result in this spell came in the first encounter with Northampton. Having stayed at the Bedford Hotel in London overnight, Exeter, with their strongest team, continued their journey on match day. Exonians were delighted with the result, their team having played out a drawn match (3-3) with a try scored by Manning, another Tivertonian. Exeter was also said to have created a favourable impression with the 3,000 strong home spectators. The journey home did not go so well. The reserved carriage was hitched to the wrong train and the team travelled around the Midlands before reaching London at 10 p.m. It was not until after midnight that the players arrived home.

The unbeaten run came to an end with the visit of Devonport Albion at the beginning of November (3-11). Tom Kelly had injured his left shoulder in a mid-week county match but such was his importance to the team that he was selected to play on the wing for this game. Before a crowd of 4,000 spectators he scored Exeter's try by carrying the ball under his left arm and fending off defenders with his right arm. Nevertheless one report says he should not have played as he was "practically useless"! A week later, at Barnstaple (0-5), he was selected to play on the wing again but resumed his normal place amongst the forwards before the end of the game.

Up to the end of the year results alternated between wins and losses. Treherbert succumbed (21-5) to an Exeter team that included two new centres in Skinner from Tiverton and Pickering from Abergavenny whilst Maurice Parsons returned to the team to play on the wing. Complaints were voiced over the Committee's decision to raise admission prices at this game to encourage the purchase of season tickets.

A defeat at Weston (0-10) came on a day when Exeter was missing county players. In addition Finnimore went off injured in the first half. This was followed by an under strength team being sent for a mid-week game to face R.N.E.C. where a narrow win was achieved (5-3). A defeat on Christmas Eve at Torquay Athletic (3-13) drew the comment that the away form "does not reflect credit on the club".

Boxing Day witnessed a visit by Treorchy who included in their team Dick Hellings, the former Welsh International and Devon forward, who had made one appearance for Exeter in March 1898. He was said to be "a shadow" of his former self. The team from Wales recruited Harry Reed to make up their team. Exeter won (19-0) with centre Norman Odam, returning after a six week injury lay-off scoring fourteen points through four tries and a conversion.

The next day Belfast Collegians reversed the result of the previous year's game (6-11) but four players from Devonport Albion had been included in their team. Exeter included a wing three-quarter from the R.N.E.C. team.

The New Year could hardly have started in better fashion. On the last day of 1904 Exeter travelled to Bristol to face a somewhat under strength side. Nonetheless Exeter was pleased to register its first victory (8-3) on Bristol territory since their first visit in 1893. Next came Plymouth who travelled to the County Ground on a day when Devon was playing. As a consequence only 1,500 turned up to watch their team achieve a creditable draw (3-3).

Disappointment was to come when, of the remaining 17 matches, only five victories and two draws were registered. The latter included the game at home against Torquay Athletic (0-0) that attracted less than 1,000 spectators and was described as uninteresting with play being confined mainly in the forwards where some roughness was again displayed. The Exeter team contained a forward, Tallman, in the centre, an experiment that must have been considered a success as he continues in his new role until the end of the season. Pickering "the Abergavenny flier" was deemed to be a failure but he too saw out the season.

Defeat at Devonport Albion (0-14) came despite Albion playing the last hour with only fourteen players through injury. The next defeat came at home against Bridgwater Albion (0-12) when Tallman, the ex-forward, was partnered in the centre by Tom Kelly who had now injured his ear. The captain resumed his place in the pack for the home game against Bath when it was noted that his ear was now protected by a "maul cap", an item used by other players as well. Exeter beat Bath, weakened by County calls, comfortably again (22-0).

Back to back games against Plymouth resulted in defeat away (0-7) with Kelly and Manning absent, and a hollow victory at home (5-3). This latter game came on a day when Plymouth also fielded a team to play, and defeat Paignton in a Devon Cup tie. Exeter had drawn a first round bye in the competition.

Further disappointment was experienced on Exeter travelling to Torquay Athletic only to find that the game would not take place due to the pitch being water-logged following overnight rain. This caused "much indignation within the Exeter committee".

A Devon Cup semi-final match at home against Barnstaple roused almost as much excitement in the city as it would have done in an earlier era. Two thousand attended. Barnstaple was not the team of old and Exeter won with some ease (23-0) to progress to the final.

The last week in March saw Exeter travel to Bridgwater Albion, whose ground record for the season was thought to be in danger, but the visitors, with a near full strength side, went under (0-12).

The first week in April in contrast saw Exeter again show their inconsistency at home to Bristol. The visitors were said not to be at full strength but the team did include Butcher, a winner of seven caps for England at half-back, and Manning, the former Exeter forward. Three tries and a goal kicked from a mark (worth four points) by Kelly sealed the Exeter victory (13-3) and thereby record their first ever double in a season over Bristol.

Exeter then disappointed again with a defeat at Bath (3-16) thus affording the Somerset club a win in this fixture for the first time in fourteen attempts. Some thought the result "a foregone conclusion" for some unexplained reason. Exeter did suffer a blow when full-back Tom Goddard, a Honiton resident, missed his train connection at Chard and arrived at the ground too late as a substitute had already been found.

After a draw at home against Cinderford (3-3) came the Devon Cup Final against Plymouth to be played mid-week at a neutral venue. The neutral ground, selected by the Devon R.F.U. turned out to be The Rectory at Devonport – home of Devonport Albion and not one of Exeter's favourite hunting grounds! The match generated much excitement and was clearly important to the players as well considering James Peters, Plymouth and England's black half-back, is said to have played with a fractured bone in his shoulder. Exeter, without centre Odam and half-back Faulkner, were further handicapped when Tom Kelly injured his ankle so badly that he was forced to leave the field for the final twenty minutes. In the end it was Plymouth who lifted the cup by means of a one score victory (0-3).

All three remaining fixtures were lost. Only 1,500 turned up to watch Aberavon play an Exeter team missing six regular players (9-11). Evidence of a more modern age came at the start of this match when the referee failed to put in an appearance. On his way from Barnstaple his motor-car had broken down at Crediton!

Another weakened team was fielded against Pill Harries and another narrow defeat was the outcome (3-5). End of season lethargy seemed to prevail before the final game of the season, away at Torquay Athletic. Secretary Charles Mudge had the utmost difficulty in raising a team and a dispiriting defeat was the outcome (0-26).

Despite the poor displays in the second half of the season the team managed to come out with a credit balance by winning 17 and drawing five of the 38 matches played. The Reserves won 15 and drew three of their 30 games but the ill-fated 3<sup>rd</sup> XV won only five and drew six of their 24 outings. The adverse financial balance still persisted and had now risen to £152 (£8,700). Again it was proposed to drop the third team and to run 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and Boys teams. It was also hoped that a home game against Newport and two home games against Devonport Albion in 1905-6 would help the club's financial plight. It is not clear if the second game against Albion had any connection with the disputed fixture between the two clubs.

March 1904 saw the formation of Exeter City Football Club and in September the new club played its first fixture. At this stage it competed in an East Devon League only. Elsewhere it had been reported that "those playing association football outnumbered those playing rugby in both Exeter and Devon". The same might have been said of spectators. In January 1905 Plymouth Argyle could attract a crowd of 10,000 to see the team play Swindon whilst on the same day Exeter's match with Devonport Albion was watched by only 2,000 spectators.