

## 19<sup>th</sup> Season 1890-1

Progress was again evident when, following on the giant stride of the previous season, Exeter made a leap of faith by arranging home and away fixtures with Swansea, Newport and Gloucester. Cardiff did not reappear on the list but Cardiff Harlequins, a separate club, was met at Easter. Although all of these games ended in defeat only the match at Gloucester was a major disappointment. In most of the other matches the pundits were pleasantly surprised by some of the narrower margins of defeat.

Exeter was not always able to field its strongest team for big games, especially those that were not home fixtures and the much vaunted three-quarters of the previous season rarely appeared together. In his second year of office the captain, Arthur Sutthery, appeared on only ten occasions. Now blooded in a wider arena, Exeter was probably wiser for the experience. Before the game at Gloucester one of their supporters said of Exeter "They play a very gentlemanly game".

Against Swansea at the County Ground in February a visiting three-quarter was ordered off the field by referee H. Terry of Torquay. Late in the second half a Swansea wing three-quarter received an accidental kick whilst he was on the ground, whereupon he rose and "put himself in a fighting attitude" towards his opponent. On his dismissal a number of other Swansea players went to follow him but were prevailed upon to finish the game, which they did, Swansea winning by a goal and a try to nil. This seemingly innocuous incident, the first recorded sending off in a match involving Exeter, was to lead to an interesting repercussion the following season.

A two match Welsh tour in January produced a financial loss when a game against Llanelly (as it was then spelt) was cancelled due to snow on the pitch. As a consequence it was decided at the Annual General Meeting in May 1891 that, apart from Gloucester and Llanelly, "not to make any more expensive fixtures".

In the light of the more demanding fixtures, the playing record for the season was considered to be satisfactory. Of 27 games played, 11 were won, 3 drawn and 13 lost. No less than seven matches were cancelled due to the weather. Two home games, against Wellington and Torquay, were called off on the morning of the game and notice was given to the public by means of posters and placards carried by sandwich-men parading the city.

Tiverton fixtures again caused a problem. In October Tiverton could not raise a team to travel and in January Exeter cried off as they had five players playing for Devon.

Appearing among the fixtures for the first time was Totnes and more mid-week games were arranged.

After three seasons of disputes and difficulties the Devon R.F.U. replaced the Challenge Cup with a League Cup competition which fitted in more smoothly with already arranged fixtures. The League format, although well supported, did not carry the same impact. Exeter finished third behind Albion and the R.N.E.C.

Another change was announced by the club in December when it was decided that "in common with several other English clubs, Exeter has decided to adopt the Welsh

three-quarter system and in their future engagements will play with four-three-quarters”.

The home game against Gloucester on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October was played at Matford in what was to be last match played there by the club. The land had been sold to speculators and was now “open to ruthless builders – alas poor Matford”. Another reporter commented that Matford had “broken out into stone heaps”. From now on all main fixtures for the club were played at the County Ground at St. Thomas.

The club had offered to play an early season game in support of the Hospital Saturday Fund. Albion agreed to be the opponents providing Exeter returned the compliment later in the season in Plymouth. The home game at St. Thomas attracted 3,000 spectators and raised £48 (nearly £3000) for the Fund. Two players in the home team were listed as “T. Ford” and “W. Ford” – thinly disguised *noms-de-plume* of Lee Ashford and his brother, William.

Exeter has supported several charities over many years including raising money following the Theatre Royal fires in the 1880s, supporting the Montdidier fund after the First World War and aiding the restoration of Exeter Cathedral after the Second World War. Exeter has always played its part in civic and community initiatives.

The club took care of its players too. Provision of free insurance for members was introduced during the season and a gymnasium was provided for use by players as well.

Press reports for Saturday home matches began to arrive at a local newspaper office “By Carrier Pigeon”. Most appropriately the newspaper was the Exeter Flying Post!