

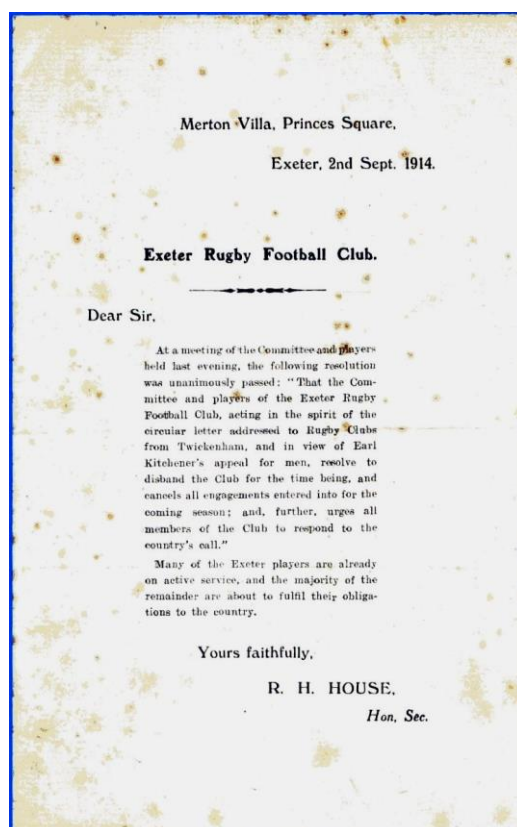
43rd – 46th “The Missing Seasons” 1914-1918

Following the Annual General Meeting at the end of June 1914 there was an air of well-founded optimism abounding in the club. “Exeter Rugby Club’s Bright Prospects” declared one headline. “Club’s Bright Prospects for the Future” stated another. With the benefit of hindsight the irony of these remarks is all too obvious. Prospects indeed were bright. After one of the best seasons for some years the playing strength remained more or less intact with W.J. Lutley reappointed captain. A strengthened fixture list included Bristol, Coventry, Leicester and Aberavon as well as regulars Newport, Bath and Clifton. When the time came to put the renewed hopes to the test Europe was at war.

After the declaration of war against Germany on the 4th of August a number of Exeter players quickly responded by joining the colours for what was naively described as “The Great Adventure”. By the end of August it was estimated that some ten or eleven first team players had enlisted. Estimates vary but it seems likely that of 52 Exeter Rugby Football Club players and officials, 47 saw active service. Of this number at least 12 did not return.

The Devon Rugby Union gave no direct lead and left the decision whether or not to fulfil fixtures for the coming season to each individual club under its jurisdiction. A meeting of the Exeter committee at the Queen’s Hotel at the end of August decided to call a meeting of playing members to see if sufficient numbers would be available to undertake fixtures. A decision was soon made.

On the 2nd of September the club issued the following statement.



The club thus went into abeyance for the duration of the war.

A week later, at the "Seven Stars", the Supporters Club held a meeting to decide how to approach the coming season. Having previously raised £41 that enabled the parent club to clear its deficit, the Supporters Club now turned its activities to raising money for patriotic funds. An initial £3 3s 0d (£135) was immediately donated to the Mayoress's Depot Fund (later renamed Hospitality Fund), a depot for distributing comforts to serving soldiers. From the Depot, appeals for the donation of footballs of both codes often appeared in the local press.

Rugby was played on the County Ground. In October the Supporters Club organised a match between the Devon Yeomanry and a team entitled Kitchener's Army to raise money for the Belgian Refugees Fund. The Army scored four tries without reply from the Yeomanry. Some £35 (£1,600) was donated to the fund. Four matches were played in all, the last taking place in March when, with permission from the R.F.U., a game was staged between the 3rd Devons and the Devon Yeomanry. Each side scored five points in an entertaining game and another £15 (£650) was raised.

The "home" team during the war years at the County Ground came from the Royal Field Artillery (R.F.A.) Cadets who were based at Topsham Barracks. Initially games were played against other student teams like those from the Royal Naval College at Keyham, Blundell's School and Sherborne School. Later opposition came from further afield and included service teams from Australian and New Zealand units stationed in the south-west. Another team, Devonport Barbarians, included several civilian dockyard workers engaged in reserved occupations. All games raised money for charity.

Many Exeter players enlisted in the 1st-4th Battalions of the Devon Regiment who were initially despatched to India before detachments saw service in the Persian Gulf and Mesopotamia (Iraq) before later returning to the European theatre of war. Other players served with a number of Regiments and various service organisations in a variety of locations including Gibraltar and Salonika.

Even as late as 1916 the local press still referred to the conflict as the "Great Adventure" long after the horrors of war became only too evident. Like so many other clubs, societies and organisations, in villages, towns and cities, Exeter Rugby Football Club suffered a desperate number of casualties.

News of the first of the club's fallen came in July 1915. Jimmy Cook, the first Exeter player to turn professional, was serving with the King's Royal Rifles at the front when he was killed by an artillery shell blast. Four months later came news that two current players had died. Emrys Jones had sprung into rugby prominence in the last seasons before war was declared. A Welshman, Jones appeared for the Royal Albert Memorial College before joining Exeter and making his debut for Devon. He was an assistant master at St. Sidwell's School. He was to die leading an attack on enemy positions in Mesopotamia. Charles Tudor Jones initially joined a Cyclist Corps unit before transferring to the Royal Flying Corps. The aircraft in which he was an observer was shot down killing both Tudor-Jones and the pilot. The German squadron that had been involved in the action sent wreaths to the funeral of the two British fellow aviators.

Articled to an Exeter solicitor, Tudor-Jones played regularly as a half-back with the "A" team in the last season before the war.

Club captain in 1900-1 Maurice Parsons joined the Royal Horse Artillery and rose to the rank of Captain. He died aged 35 in France in July 1916. Four members of the Parsons family, including Maurice, who were killed in the war are commemorated in a stained glass window in the chancel of the parish church at Misterton, near Crewkerne. In June of the same year Geoffrey Culverwell became another member of the Devonshire Regiment who died in Mesopotamia. A regular member of the first team pack, he was just 21 years of age when he lost his life.

George Bickley had made his debut for Exeter in 1911 and quickly established himself as a centre three-quarter of high quality. He played regularly for Exeter up to and including the last match before the onset of the war. He also played for Cambridge University, Harlequins in London and the Devon county team. He died in action in October 1917 as a Captain of a Machine Gun Corps unit attached to the Devon Regiment in Belgium. He was a native of Lyme Regis and in his memory his family commissioned a stained glass window to be installed in St Michael the Archangel Parish Church.

Four more players lost their lives during the last year of the war, namely Harry Carrington, Billy Goff, Leonard Veitch and Albert Webber. Billy Goff had captained the Chiefs in 1906-7 and even after he moved to Wales he appeared for Exeter when visiting his family in the city and he became a regular member of the county XV. A Lieutenant with the Royal Welch Fusiliers he was killed in action in France in April 1918. The following month saw the death of Major John Leonard Veitch the highest ranked Exeter player to fall in the war. He saw action on the Somme, where he was wounded, and in Italy before leading his battalion in Flanders. Albert Webber was a club stalwart appearing for the senior and reserve teams over several seasons,

Even after the cessation of hostilities the toll mounted. The last scourge of the war came in the form of a virulent influenza epidemic that took thousands of lives including, in March 1919, that of Sidney Hucklebridge an "A" team player. Two months later came news of the death of Walter John ("Beefer") Edmonds a member of the Exeter committee and well respected referee. He had gone to India with the Devon Regiment but was invalided home for six months sick leave. Later he was sent to Italy by the War Office but his health was again undermined; He returned from his overseas duties to take up a posting in Liverpool. After a long illness he passed away at his home in Ilfracombe.

There were other players who had assisted Exeter over the years and who lost their lives in the war. They played for the club as guest players or substitutes. These included Jim Dodd (Exeter Oaks) who died of pneumonia at Chatham in 1917, W. G. Commins (Heavitree), Wilfred Partridge (Exeter School) and Percy White (Alphington). There are likely to have been others.

Inevitably a number of Exeter players were injured including W.V. Cavill the leading forward in 1912-3. In fact the club thought he had died of his wounds but he survived to pursue his career in education in Hull. Captain Willie Brock, a former player and

city councillor, suffered an eye injury during the Dardanelles campaign in 1915 and was invalided to Cairo.

There were players who received decorations too including Jack Vale who was awarded the Military Cross and Billy "Father" Pike and Jack "Smiler" Coombes who both won the Military Medal There were probably even more unsung heroes.

The Royal Field Artillery Cadets continued to play attractive rugby on the County Ground but because of "regrettable behaviour by spectators" in January 1918 the team retired to Topsham Barracks to play its matches. They soon returned and on March 23rd the Cadets faced an unbeaten team of New Zealand Engineers from Boscombe. The result was a very creditable draw for the Cadets. Later that evening smoke was seen to be rising from the Grandstand and at 8.20 p.m. it was discovered that the wooden structure was on fire. By morning the conflagration had reduced it to a smouldering ruin.

Games at the County Ground continued until the end of the season with 1,000 chairs sited on the touchlines to replace the stand accommodation.

Not only had the Exeter playing strength been decimated by the war the club was now without a viable ground for important matches.