

32nd Season 1903-4

Now elected captain in his own right, Arthur Ernest Brock was another prominent member of Exeter's pack of forwards. He was also an automatic choice for the Devon XV for a number of seasons. A member of the family firm W. Brock & Co. manufacturers and suppliers of household furnishings and upholstery whose shop was situated on Fore Street Hill, he was appointed Sheriff of Exeter in 1921 and was elected Mayor of the city in 1927. In this latter role he followed his elder brother Willie Brock who had played rugby for the Exeter club as a back in the period 1891-1893 and who became Mayor in 1925.

The fixture list saw a return to more local opposition as only one team from Wales was included. Weston returned but Crediton and Exmouth dropped out. Four games were arranged with Torquay Athletic and Plymouth.

Before the season began it was noted that players were "not attracted to practices at the Drill Hall" and the committee gave consideration to installing electric lighting at the County Ground. This idea came to naught. In recent seasons the team had lacked the consistency that would be "better than occasional flashes of brilliance with intervals of utter mediocrity".

Thought had also been given to the reintroduction of a third team and when forty players turned up for the first practice match this idea soon became a reality. By the end of the season the committee had to think otherwise.

There was a familiar pattern to results during the course of the season. An encouraging start was followed by a mixed batch of results, two wins at Christmas and then a New Year slump with only two victories in ten matches. Another strong finish saw six of the last eight games being won.

A disappointing first match defeat at Bridgwater Albion (0-8) was followed by a well merited victory over Leicester (6-3) at home. One of the Exeter forwards D. Parsons suffered a shoulder injury during the game but played on. It was later discovered that he had broken his collar bone. A try scorer for Exeter in this match was W. Tuckett a former Friernhay player. He also played in the next match, a draw at home against Plymouth (0-0), before departing the city to play for Devonport Albion Reserves.

Exeter then resumed their winning ways at Bath (5-3) before losing at home to Barnstaple (3-8) for the first time in four years. For the next match at Torquay Athletic Alf Vosper was called out of retirement to fill a gap at half-back but he could not prevent the side being defeated (0-13). He played in fifteen matches before disappearing off the scene again.

This season saw a number of come-backs by former and retired players. The next match at home to Tiverton (6-0) saw the return of Harry Escott It was rumoured that some players would resign if he was selected because of his "in-out status" with the club. He had at times played for Exmouth and Friernhay as well as Exeter. He played out the remainder of the season and half the following season too. The rumours of resignations appear not to have materialised.

Due to very heavy, incessant rain that turned the pitch into a sea of mud the Tiverton game (6-0) was restricted to half-an-hour each way. In fact this proved to be a very wet season which had financial consequences for the club.

A comfortable home win against Bridgwater (26-0) was achieved whilst missing Nicholas, Tosswill and captain Brock who were assisting Devon. Former captain Maurice Parson scored two tries and kicked a conversion in this game but shortly after developed pneumonia and dropped out of the team for the rest of the season. About the same time his brother, Donne Parsons, because of the injury sustained in the encounter with Leicester, retired from the game.

At the beginning of December only fourteen players travelled for the return match with Bridgwater. A substitute was found and the game won (13-0). The following week a full team faced Leicester in front of 6,000 of their supporters. Another creditable performance by the Exonians saw them being defeated by only a single score (0-3).

A home defeat by Torquay Athletic (4-8) preceded two victories at Christmas – Old Edwardians (19-0) and Belfast Collegians (18-0), the first time the club had faced opponents from Ireland. Christmas saw other reasons for celebration. Harry Escott was married on Christmas Day, Boxing Day spectators were given a photo of the 1902-3 team as a Christmas present and the corps of pressmen were promised accommodation in the grand-stand to replace their touch-line table.

For the first scheduled game at the County Ground in the New Year, Bath did not put in an appearance. Despite assurances that playing conditions were good only five Bath players assembled at the station there because of a widespread frost in their area. A mid-week match was arranged for March to help Exeter make up lost revenue.

Defeat at Bristol (3-13) started a run of ten games of which only two were won. An unexpected and disappointing loss at Weston (0-3) was followed by a narrow win over Newton (7-3). A defeat at Devonport Albion was expected but the margin was not as wide as predicted (3-9). A week later at home Exeter was able to inflict the first defeat of the season by a Devon club on Plymouth. A vacancy in the Plymouth ranks was filled by Bates, the former Oaks player. As the ground was in “wretched condition with pools of standing water” it was decided to restrict play to 35 minutes each way. Plymouth was the architect of its own defeat being penalised for off-side play on a dozen or so occasions. As a consequence Exeter won by two penalty goals to a try (6-3).

Defeats at the hands of Devonport Albion (3-13) and Torquay Athletic (5-10) resumed the slump. For the latter game, a mid-week encounter, Exeter travelled one short and enlisted the services of Dobson, a forward from Newton Abbot, who played in his ordinary walking boots. During the game Friend of Exeter was injured and so the team played most of the match with fourteen players anyway.

A draw at Newton (6-6) saw Force, the Exeter half-back, having received a kick on the head, being replaced by Ernie Morgan, the former club captain who briefly reappeared for three games. John Symes was taken out of the pack to take the place of Force. Then Friend was in the wars again having to retire with a broken nose, Exeter

finishing the game with fourteen players on the field again. It was said not to have been a rough game.

Another drawn game followed but Exeter was lucky not to lose a second time to Weston. Each side scored a try with Weston's equaliser coming near the end of the game. As the try was scored under the posts the conversion appeared a formality. The requirement of the laws at that time meant that the ball had to be held off the ground by another player for the conversion and then placed down when the kicker was ready to take the kick. In this instance the placer accidentally allowed the ball to touch the ground whereupon the Exeter players, quite correctly, charged the kick. Weston appealed but the referee decided in favour of Exeter (3-3).

Winning ways were resumed with a visit by Bridgwater Albion, another side turning up one short. The former Exeter half-back, "Johnny" Escott, made up the full complement for the visitors. Honours were more or less even when in the second half the ball went into touch and an Exeter half-back, as was the custom of the time, threw the ball into the line-out and the forwards took the ball over the try line to score. The referee awarded the try but the Bridgwater Albion players, in protest, refused to charge the conversion attempt, which failed in any case. In the meantime the Bridgwater Albion touch-judge stood resolutely on the touch-line with his flag raised maintaining that the wrong team had thrown the ball in. He was overruled by the referee but he refused to accept the decision and would not take down his flag whereupon the Albion players left the field. Their captain implored his team to resume play and eventually thirteen of them did so. There was time for Exeter to register another try to win comfortably (11-3).

Torquay Athletic came to the County Ground for the fourth meeting between the two teams. The visitors had won the first three matches in the series and had recorded an advantage of 31 points to nine. Exeter was determined to win in front of 3,000 of their supporters. The team from south Devon had other ideas and introduced some very rough play. At one time or another four or five Exeter players were incapacitated. Centre Skoines was knocked out twice and winger Finnimore was knocked on the head resulting in his retirement from the field for twenty minutes. He reappeared in the second half to support his beleaguered colleagues. Torquay showed another unsporting trait by throwing away the ball on having to surrender possession. Nevertheless Exeter prevailed with John Symes scoring a try and Harry Escott dropping a goal (7-0).

Bath came to Exeter to fulfil their commitment in the city following their January fiasco. Exeter captain, Arthur Brock, dropped a goal from the half-way line in the home victory (9-5).

First up for the Easter fixtures was Hartlepool Old Boys (3-0), followed by Old Merchant Taylors (0-10) and Pontypridd (11-5). Strangely what caught one correspondent's attention was the state of the jerseys worn by each team. Those donned by the men from Durham were described as "dingy" whilst in contrast those of the London visitors were "pristine white". There was a colour clash with the team from Wales who wore black and white hoops similar to those of the home team. Instead the Exeter players "or at least most of them" donned white jerseys.

The final defeat of the seasons came at South Devon Place when facing Plymouth and 5,000 supporters. The Exeter team was well beaten (11-24).

For the final fixture Bristol came to the County ground where only a moderate crowd had gathered. This disappointing attendance may have been due to other attractions taking place in the city but poor prospects for the home team may have contributed. Bristol may not have sent their strongest team but the end result came as a complete surprise – an Exeter victory by a substantial margin (19-0). The Exeter half-backs, Scoble and Force registered three of the five tries scored.

The final record of the First XV continued to show improvement with 17 wins and four draws in 35 games played. The Reserves won 18 and drew two of their 27 matches. The second string reached the final of the Devon Junior Cup at Newton Abbot where they lost to Dartmouth Athletic.

There was concern about the reinstated Third XV. Playing 21 games the team ended all square with seven wins and the same number of draws and losses. It was not the playing record that called the existence of the team into question but the cost of running the side for a club struggling financially. It was decided at the A.G.M. to concentrate on the Schools R.F.U. that had been recently established in the city following an initiative from the governing Rugby Football Union.

Partly due to the wet grounds encountered at home, gate receipts were down for the season and the overall deficit had increased to an “unsatisfactory” £112 (approx. £6,500).

The dispute with Devonport Albion rumbled on. The Devon R.F.U. following another appeal from Exeter ruled that as well as fulfilling the additional game at Exeter as originally directed, Devonport should now pay Exeter a further fifteen guineas (£15 15s / approx £900). Devonport Albion did not accept this ruling and referred the matter to the Rugby Football Union. The R.F.U. in turn referred back to the D.R.F.U. for further information!