

68th Year 1939-0

Due to the international situation that existed during 1939 the impending rugby union season was in jeopardy. By the end of August the Exeter committee had cancelled the opening two fixtures as “practically all the first fifteen are mobilised including the captain Job and vice-captain Colin Paul”.

War was declared on the 3rd of September and some ten days later the Rugby Football Union issued a statement that “all fixtures already arranged for 1939-40 shall be considered as cancelled until further notice”. It went on to say “It is hoped that some games will be played which do not interfere with national duties or Government regulations”. In response the Devon R.F.U. expressed its hope that games would be played in districts where there were troops or naval men anxious to take part in a game. It was suggested by the Devon R.F.U. that Exeter might be the only place in the county suitable, as the County Ground would be available for matches.

The initial game of the season duly took place at the County Ground on the 16th of September. The opposing teams were Mr. J. Coombes Exeter & District XV and the 4th Battalion Devonshire Regiment, a team that included several Exeter players. Jack Coombes, the club secretary, was largely responsible for keeping rugby alive in the city at this time. It was not long before the press was referring to the teams he raised as “Exeter” rather than a hybrid name. A good crowd assembled to watch the match. The first try for the home team was scored by R.E. (Bob) Hook, formerly of Gloucester who had come to the city earlier in the year to take up the post of Assistant Secretary to the Devon & Cornwall branch of the National Fitness Campaign, a body set up in response to the country’s poor performance at the 1936 Olympic Games. After trailing by eight points at the interval the Devons replied with five points of their own (8-5).

A return match was played a week later when the pattern of scoring was very similar. Registering all their points in the first period Coombes’ Exeter XV conceded eight in the second half (13-8).

By the end of the month the club officially suspended its activities and all previously arranged fixtures were cancelled. However the committee decided to carry on and arrange fixtures wherever possible despite potential difficulties with transport.

On the last day of September the Exeter team travelled to Crediton to face a team representing Wessex Signals in front of another good crowd. The Army side lacked team practice and found Exeter in scintillating form. W. Sanders supplied the ball from most of the set scrums and Bob Hook scored a hat-trick of tries (38-5). Appearing for Exeter in this match was J. Candler brother of the international Peter Candler.

Games were often arranged on an ad hoc basis. When a fixture between Exeter and former captain Bob Rew’s Army XV was cancelled, Exeter travelled to Tiverton to play Blundell’s School (27-3). A week later a scheduled meeting with a Royal Engineers XV did not take place. Three significant games followed beginning with a trip to Bath. During war time Bath rugby club players combined with naval personnel stationed in the city to field a “Bath & Admiralty XV” which was more often than not simply referred to as Bath.

The local press took the view that “It was good to see serious rugby at the Recreation Ground again”. An Exeter report was more prosaic detailing “How Exeter Smashed Bath”. The visitors, with Madge and Ford supreme at half back, possessed greater thrust that resulted in Exeter’s first victory at Bath since 1905 (20-9).

Playing at home Exeter found Weston super Mare a different proposition. The Somerset club, who had beaten Bristol at the Memorial Ground the previous week, were able to field two fifteens on this day. Before a big crowd the visitors led by a dropped goal at half time. The only score in the second half came when Charlie Ford, who had now been appointed club captain in place Fred Job who was

engaged on military duties, kicked a lone penalty. The Western Daily Press commented that “It was a game notable for the strong defences of both sides” and “Weston deserved victory on the balance of play” (3-4).

Victory at Newton Abbot was the close run outcome of a game spoilt by wet conditions and a slippery ball. The home team were better up front and held Exeter in a scoreless first half. On the resumption the visiting three-quarters persevered allowing Norman Humphries the chance to cross for two tries (6-3).

Two home games, against a Welsh Regiment XV and Sidmouth, were cancelled. Both of these encounters were scheduled to be played on Hele’s School Ground which was described as “adjoining the County Ground”. No admission charge was to be made but instead spectators were encouraged to “put something on the plate” to help defray expenses.

At Paignton the home team lacked penetration whilst Exeter’s four tries were touched down by players outside the pack (14-6). The first three matches in December were staged on the Hele’s School sports ground. An unfamiliar looking Exeter narrowly accounted for Wessex Signals (6-3). Exeter then proved too powerful for Blundell’s School scoring twenty points in the first half. Thereafter the scholars’ fitness allowed them to become more competitive (25-9). In the next game Exmouth heeled the ball from nearly every first half scrum but the home backs again displayed their superiority (17-4).

Prior to Christmas an away match against Torquay Athletic ended in a draw (3-3). Just as sparsely reported was the Boxing Day encounter at Cranford with Exmouth (11-6). The following day Exeter, on home soil, faced a Devon Public Schools XV. With a heavier pack providing an ample supply of the ball, the backs displayed “sparkling form”. Seven tries were scored in all including two from Ford and three from Dick Madge (30-6).

The weather then took a band. The final match of 1939 was due to be played against an Army XV who had to cancel. Jack Coombes raised a Nondescripts team as replacement opposition but on the day the frozen pitch proved unplayable. Four days later a similar fate befell another game with the 4th Devonshire Regiment. However a supper at the Chevalier Inn to entertain the local military team went ahead.

Being without a match for ten days was not likely to be the best preparation for a visit to Weston super Mare – and so it proved. The Bristol press hailed the home team effort as “Weston Gain Brilliant Victory”. The victory was a narrow one. “Exeter Stage Rousing Recovery” ran the “Express & Echo” headline as the visiting team “spent the final twenty minutes battering the home team’s line” (3-6).

Two more consecutive games were cancelled, both for unspecified reasons, one at Sidmouth and the other at Bath. January ended with a game at Exmouth when the home team played one short. Exeter registered six tries, all by the backs, but not one was converted (18-0). Another cancellation, this time at home to the Royal Naval Engineering College (Devonport), followed.

Facing Royal Naval College (Dartmouth) on the students’ ground, Exeter scored four tries to two (18-6). A week later Exeter was due to face the University of the South West but there is no record of this game being played. Action was resumed when, in a brisk game on the County Ground, Wessex Signals Regiment was defeated (21-3). The first Saturday in March might have been another blank day as Sidmouth cried off the fixture but the University College of the South West stepped into the breach. The offer to provide opposition was probably much appreciated by Exeter but the home team found little difficulty in penetrating the College defence, with young winger T.F. Petherick registering four tries (32-3).

Another substitute fixture had to be found for the following week as well, when Bath cancelled again. An Army XV, possibly mainly recruited from the 4th Devonshire Regiment, took the field instead and provided worthy opposition. Two international players featured in this game, Peter Gedge for Exeter and Alan Brown for the Army XV, and both scored tries (16-5).

On the County Ground, Royal Naval College (Dartmouth) fielded J.K. Watkins who had represented England at wing forward in a Red Cross International match at Twickenham a week earlier. Charlie Ford, however, had the measure of the war-time international eluding him time after time. All Exeter's points were scored by players outside the pack (30-3).

Easter was celebrated with two home victories. Easter Saturday saw Exeter fall behind to a United Services team but B. Heppenstall, a pre-war player who had joined from Barnstaple, ran in from half way to restore the balance after which the home side did not look back (21-3). At the County Ground on Easter Monday opposition was provided by a services side raised by Alan Brown. The home side gained a narrow victory. It was reported that Exeter deserved to win as the team was superior behind the scrum whilst the visitors' strength lay with its "dour pack" (22-20). A.A. Brown's XV included both Paul brothers and Fred Job.

After a run of eight victories Exeter came a cropper at Devonport against the Royal Naval Engineering College. During a game of much open play the visitors were handicapped by a knee injury to their talisman Charlie Ford. When he went to play on the wing his team was not nearly so effective. Despite his handicap the skipper managed to score a try near the end of the game (6-13). Making amends the Exeter team, at home, comfortably accounted for Torquay Athletic against whom they had struggled to a draw just prior to Christmas. Obviously recovered from his injury Ford was said to have been the star of the show. After going behind to a penalty goal in the first minute, Exeter recovered and after fifteen minutes the result was never in doubt (24-3).

To finish the season Exeter was scheduled to play host to Paignton but the sea-siders could not raise a team. A week later six Exeter players combined with Exmouth to play a Services XV in aid of Exmouth Hospital. Finally, on the last Saturday in April, Exeter retained the Devon Sevens trophy at Devonport beating Plymouth Combination in the final (21-3).

Of 25 reported matches Exeter had won 21 with one drawn and three lost. Charlie Ford was credited with a tally of 147 points for the season. Financially the club paid its way and a pre-war balance of £59 (£1,700) was maintained.

Whilst the city of Exeter may have been fortunate to stage rugby matches during the opening months of the war, there were reminders for those still at home of the more serious conflicts taking place elsewhere. A stark indication came towards the end of July 1940 when news of the first fatality of an Exeter rugby player was received. Charles Marten Osman was a former head boy at Hele's School. He had a gift for languages and went on to study at Oxford University. As a centre-three-quarter he made some half-a-dozen appearances for Exeter first team when on vacations between September 1933 and January 1935 scoring at least six tries. Captain Osman died in hospital at Sidcup from wounds received at Dunkirk. He was 28 years of age.