

60th Season 1931-2

This proved to be a classic season of two halves. With an unbeaten home record the Chiefs lost only four matches up to the half way point. Thereafter from the New Year onwards only four matches ended in victory and at one stage the club endured a run of twelve games that saw nine defeats and only three draws. According to the Annual Report the team “delighted spectators with a successful start to the season” but then fell away due to injuries and as it enigmatically added “unforeseen circumstances”.

Leader for this topsy-turvy year was Tom Browning, son of former club captain and prominent figure in Exeter civic life Alf Browning. Both joined Exeter from the Exeter Oaks club. Alf from the original organisation and Tom from the post-war reconstituted but short lived Oaks team. He made his first appearance for Exeter in the 1924-5 season and became a first team regular from the following season. So regular was he that he appeared in every first team game during 1926-7 (42) and 1928-9 (43). Though once described as a “giant forward” Tom was usually to be found in the back row of the scrum where he played until 1933-4. He also made a couple of occasional appearances in holiday games in the following season.

Prospects were again bright with several promising young players turning up for practice sessions but the need was still for heavier forwards to compete with Devon rivals. The first Saturday of the season found a team raised by T.S. Kelly, comprising mainly first fifteen standard players, being taken to Paignton to participate in a local Carnival game against an invitation XV. Meanwhile at the County Ground a full scale trial match took place.

Playing host to Wellington in the opening fixture Exeter won by scoring three tries to two despite light rain making the ball slippery. Both teams showed over eagerness whilst finding their feet (9-6). After a mid-week victory at Sidmouth in summerlike conditions (6-0), Exeter went to Wellington for an early rematch against the local fifteen. Exeter again scored three tries but the opposition could only manage one even though the Taunton Chronical judged Wellington to have been on top for three-quarters of the game. R.G. Rew on one wing scored two tries whilst on the other wing J.W. Danton ran two-thirds of the length of the pitch for his touch-down (9-3).

Another mid-week evening encounter, this time at Tiverton, saw Exeter concede an early penalty try. Exeter deserved the narrow victory though the home team missed two penalty attempts towards the end of the game (6-5). The last Saturday in September saw a home encounter with a Royal Naval Engineering College team that had been deprived of six leading players who were appearing for Devonport Services. Exeter scored five tries, one of which involved Denton again covering two-thirds of the pitch (19-6).

When Torquay Athletic came to call both teams were unbeaten but the visitors “with victory in their grasp, sustained a severe shock when Exeter turned the tables in the closing minutes of the game”. After a scoreless first half Exeter turned to face the sun and soon conceded a try to the visitors. Near the end of the game Tom Browning headed a dribble that led to stand-off Turner feeding winger Rew who touched down the equalising try in the corner. At a time when Exeter goal-kicking was a lottery hooker Tom White converted the score from wide out “amid tremendous enthusiasm”.

Barnstaple was another Devon opponent whom Exeter found difficult to beat even when at home. The Exeter match programme expressed the “hope to hang the scalp of Barnstaple also

to their girdle". It was not a very spectacular game as there was much difficulty in getting the ball into the scrums and there was a lot of whistling from the referee. The sides were well matched and both employed spoiling tactics. Exeter led by six points before Barnstaple replied. A second try was scored under the posts by the visitors but, unlike Exeter's effort the previous week, this much simpler conversion was missed (6-6).

Fortune took a dip on a two match excursion to Wales. "Exeter came a bit of a cropper" against Bridgend who possessed one of the best packs in Wales and who dominated possession (0-23). Two days later against Neath, Exeter fielded S. Roberts of Bridgend to make of the team. The visiting forwards did better but the backs lacked cohesion. London newspapers were "loud in their praise of the fine game the Exonians put up at Neath" but the Western Mail described the encounter as "A Poor Game". The home team scored three converted tries in the later stages of the game (3-18).

After a blank Saturday due to a county match, Exeter faced the daunting prospect of entertaining Plymouth Albion who included three international players in their line-up. Exeter's pack adopted aggressive tactics against heavier forwards and after a hard fought game a draw was a fair result (4-4).

From London came another strong side in the form of Old Blues. Unfortunately the game was spoilt by constant rain but nevertheless both sides produced some good football. Old Blues led at half-time but lasting better the home forwards turned the game (9-6). The rain continued during the week and in "depressing conditions" at Taunton the two teams fought out a scoreless draw (0-0).

Bridgwater & Albion had been beaten only once up to their visit to the County Ground where Exeter achieved a "creditable victory". The outstanding player was the Reverend K.L. Waights, a Wesleyan Minister at Topsham, who had a hand in all three tries and played in brilliant style. "The attempts to convert a couple of the tries were not very good" (13-3). At Bath the following week Waights was "damaged" before the end of the game. The home team scored a try following an interception after Exeter had gained possession from the first scrum of the game and was soon seven points to the good. Nevertheless "Exeter created a favourable impression" though they could not make up the difference in the score (3-10).

Still defending an unbeaten home record Exeter experienced some good fortune against Sidmouth. On one occasion centre Charles Beer fouled a Sidmouth player who had kicked over his head and many thought a penalty try should have been awarded. Beer was later warned by the referee for a second offence. In light rain and with a slippery ball Exeter managed to defeat their opponents who were the better team in the first half (6-3). After this narrow win a visit to Exmouth ended in a narrow loss. The game was fast and furious yet "thoroughly sporting". Exeter lacked the services of four regulars, two of whom were playing for Devon, but the team did include scrum-half Frank "Joey" Summers, "a pocket Hercules" who was a recent recruit from the Exmouth club (3-6).

Saturday 19th December 1931 proved to be a day with a difference in the annals of Exeter Football Club. Opposition was to be provided by Bridgend but by the time the party from Wales had reached Bristol the weather had closed in and fog was to delay further progress. A phone call to the Exeter club gave assurance to most of the party to continue its journey. However it appears that some turned back for home. When the remaining players reached

their destination they discovered that a 4.30 p.m. kick-off had been arranged and the match would be played under floodlights.

Plans had already been put in place to play rugby by artificial light at the County Ground as four additional searchlights had been erected on either side of the ground to augment the ten arc lamps already in place for speedway and greyhound racing. The system that produced 23,000 watts had been installed by Brooking Brothers.

Because of the delay some spectators had left the ground but many returned, even though it was the coldest day of the year, when news got around that the game would go ahead. The visitors fielded a full fifteen that included Exeter's Gerald Pincott on the wing.

Visibility was better for the players than the spectators who found difficulty in following the play. On the field the main problem occurred when the ball was kicked high. The players were said to have thoroughly enjoyed the experience. "No one who saw the game was disappointed" even though there was no scoring which meant that Exeter was able to maintain its ground record (0-0).

On Boxing Day Exeter entertained Glamorgan Wanderers. With the forwards showing to advantage Exeter were "too strong for Glamorgan" (22-6). A further holiday fixture was arranged with Old Heleans, a game that appears to have been included in the official record. Exeter fielded a team that included two county players as well as international Henry Rew at hooker. Exeter scored all their points in the first half and thereafter Old Heleans, who included a number of Exeter club players, fought back strongly (9-3). Exeter had enjoyed their best half-season since the war.

The first game of the New Year saw the start of a decline in the club's fortunes. A visit to Torquay Athletic resulted in a heavy defeat after a disappointing performance. One bright spot was the play of a very young S.A.W. (Sid) Waller who was tried at full-back where "he did not do so badly by any means" (0-20). Sid Waller, who rose to the rank of Chief Inspector with the Exeter City Police Force, went on to serve both Exeter and Devon as a player and administrator for over fifty years.

Handbills issued by the club advertised "A Unique and Novel Attraction" when Teignmouth was invited to try out the new floodlights. Luck still did not favour the club for the first floodlit game had been spoilt by fog and frost and now this fixture suffered from rain and high wind. However the artificial lighting had been improved. Lamps were better focussed and more had been added making it "much better for following the ball". For this game Exeter wore the green and white of Devon presumably to aid the identification of players. Both sides were understrength and the pitch was ankle deep in mud by the end. The game ended in a dour draw (3-3).

There was widespread interest in the use of floodlights and secretary Jack Coombes thought the trial to be a "qualified success". The experiment was to continue after the completion of alterations to the grand-stand later in the season.

Three days later the County Ground was still in a very poor state and with the absence of five regular players Exeter surrendered its unbeaten home record to neighbours Exmouth. The only notable feature of the game was the "gallant attempt to play football in a gale of wind and rain on mud that made it almost impossible to gain a footing on almost two-thirds of the

field". In these conditions the referee curtailed loose scrums and formed set scrums. It was "a cheerless sort of afternoon and a miserable game" (0-3).

Two consecutive wins cheered matters for a time. A guarantee fixture with St. Thomas' Hospital was played the County Ground where the pitch was still in a very bad state. Exeter had the better scrummaging side and both tries were scored by forward, the captain Tom Browning and R.G. Rew now playing at wing-forward (6-3). Conditions were different at Newton Abbot where the first half produced "as delightful an exhibition of open rugby as one could wish for". The Exeter victory was said to be worth more than two points (5-3).

From the last Saturday in January there followed a sequence of twelve games during which only three draws could be set against nine defeats. Bridgwater & Albion on their home ground avenged an earlier defeat. Exeter was unable to hold the home forwards and the backs lacked thrust (3-12). At home matters ended all square with visiting Newton Abbot who proved to be a surprise package. Exeter held the advantage in set scrums whilst the visitors held sway in the loose. All the scoring took place in the first half (8-8).

At Barnstaple the game was "not so one sided as the score suggests" and Exeter suffered their usual defeat in north Devon (4-20). Another heavy defeat, this time at Weston super Mare, followed despite Exeter fielding five county players. Their sole score came when opponents mishandled behind their own try line (3-15).

For the visit by Bath Exeter was unable to avenge an earlier defeat when the visitors staged a late rally and managed to draw level (6-6). At Plymouth Albion Exeter found their opponents "at the peak of their form" and had to concede six tries against which they managed only two penalty goals (6-26).

On the 10th March the third experimental floodlit game was staged with Barnstaple providing the opposition. The lighting was thought to be better as the lamps had been sited twenty feet nearer to the pitch though there were still patches of shadow in mid-field and the crowd of 2,000 continued to have difficulty in identifying individual players. The players themselves had no problems and were aided by another innovation in the form of a white ball specially made for the occasion and donated by Jack Rushmere. Jack as team "physio" was kept busy as he "extracted his first tooth under floodlights when one of Roy Yendell's was loosened".

One report read "Excellent rugby was seen in the floodlight game" which Exeter managed to lose (6-11). The match was to be filmed for showing in picture houses throughout the country though no further details of this production have yet been uncovered.

Two days later in London Woodford's heavier pack took its toll of the visiting pack and a headline declared "Three-quarters fail Exeter" (3-8). "Disappointing football" prevailed in a home game against Weston when there was a "tendency to toughness towards the end of the game" (0-12).

Weakened by injuries Exeter did not do themselves justice in an Easter game against Brixham (3-3). On the Monday the Burton forwards were too good for Exeter. A Derbyshire newspaper declared a "Brilliant display by the backs" led to the visitors' victory (6-17).

An old but now rare problem arose on the trip to play Devonport Services. Exeter turned up one player short and had to recruit one of the local players who had played for Gloucester.

The game was played at a fast and furious pace and Exeter made a second half rally that came too late (9-21).

At last another victory was registered three months after the last one when another trip to Plymouth saw the Royal Naval Engineering College go under (11-3). A mid-week defeat at Teignmouth then followed (0-8) before Exeter and Taunton fought out another scoreless draw, this time at the County ground (0-0). Finally, still at home, the club defeated Devonport Services (13-3)

The June Annual general Meeting at The Guildhall could report fourteen victories to set against seventeen defeats in a programme of forty matches leaving as many as nine games drawn. The continued experiment of running two "A" XV's was considered justified. The Senior "A" won nineteen and lost ten out of 31 games played whilst the Extra "A" managed fourteen wins and a draw out of 25 games. The "B" was not so successful winning seven and losing twelve of nineteen games. More teams could have been run but this would have involved congestion with facilities and the difficulty of finding pitches meant the club was unable to give all players a regular game. The club was prepared to help the formation of a new junior club within the city to provide rugby for more players.

As part of its plan to promote the game in Exeter, during the course of the season the club agreed to a request from the University of the South West to play its more important games at the County Ground.

Improvements to facilities had been accepted by the County Ground Company. An extension to the stand provided roof cover for the enclosure at the front of the stand. Recognising improved support at matches, improvements to the terracing of the "popular side" were also undertaken. The changes cost in the region of £600 (over £20,000).

The speedway had closed due to lack of support but greyhound racing continued. Receipts from these activities was £516 (approx. £17,250).

The overall trading account showed a positive balance of £23 (nearly £800).

After three experimental first team games under the augmented floodlights a fourth and final match was played by the Reserves against Crediton in April. Plans were announced to extend the programme of floodlit games for the next season but it was not to be. Following Exeter's example Plymouth Albion planned to stage games under artificial light in 1932-3. A request for permission to do to the Rugby Football Union was met with the response that "Matches by floodlighting shall not be permitted where gate money is charged".

The cost of electricity at the County Ground stood at around 10s (£17) per hour but this increased to 17s (£29) per hour for floodlit matches. Without charging gate money the club could not afford the extra cost of floodlighting matches and so the experiment came to an end. After the single match by artificial lighting in 1911 and the matches during 1931-2 partial floodlighting at the County Ground was used only for training sessions until the erection of modern floodlighting nearly fifty years later.