

39th Season 1910-1

By winning 17 games and drawing four of 40 matches played Exeter appeared to return to parity over the full season. Indeed there were improvements but there also appeared to be endemic problems within the club.

After the season was over the President, at the July A.G.M., yet again implored the players to attend practices and to turn up on time. On a number of occasions the first team travelled to away matches with less than a full complement. Even at home games Exeter played short before the remaining members of the team turned up.

There were comments about the commitment of some senior players who appeared reluctant to take their place in the team, especially when playing away from home. Apart from weakening the team, an extra burden was placed on the Reserves from whose ranks players were enlisted to fill the last minute gaps. The seasonal record for the Reserves was disappointing with only nine games being won from a programme of 23 matches. Regular changes in the senior team meant often no settled side could be fielded and the team was yet again erratic in its performances. This was no better illustrated than in consecutive matches against Torquay Athletic towards the end of the season.

The club committee was also responsible for a loss of morale. Selection of guest players for "important" matches still persisted. This led to the disaffection of two players who left to join Teignmouth in October to play alongside two others who had left the city club during the close season.

The low standing of Exeter compared to other Devon clubs can be gauged from the selection of two teams for a Devon trial game at the start of the season. Of the 30 players chosen only one came from the Exeter. Devon went on to win the County Championship in March 1911 by defeating Yorkshire (12-3) and there was no Exeter player in the team.

After a season under one captain, the club was again unfortunate in its selection of a leader for 1910-1. During the summer utility back E.H. "Michael" Hill was elected to office but after the opening match of the season press reports referred to the ex-Northampton centre, M.M. Mann, as captain. Hill continued to play until the end of October when it was announced that he had left to join the Barrow Northern Union club. In mid-February Mann moved away from the city and the captaincy for the remainder of the season fell on the shoulders of half-back Peter Fry. A native of Tiverton, Fry was officially recorded as Frederick Fry but while resident in Exeter he was known as Peter for some unknown reason. He worked as a pattern maker for Mssrs. Willey & Co. in the city. Before the start of the following season he had left Exeter to pursue his career in the Midlands where he played for Wolverhampton and became a founder member of Dudley Kingswinford in 1920. For the latter club, he was still acting as touch-judge when over 70 years of age.

Following victories over Teignmouth (3-0) and Paignton (5-0) in the opening games a cartoon appeared in one of the local newspapers warning Exeter City that it was likely to lose ground to the rugby team after defeat in its first Southern League game of the season. With all due respect neither Teignmouth nor Paignton were top-class teams

and when Exeter lost its next match at Plymouth (6-25) it was evident that the association club was under no threat.

The next dozen games leading up to Christmas saw the team break even with five victories and a draw set against six defeats. One win came against United Services (15-5), a new title for the team previously styled Royal Navy. Amongst the Services ranks was T.S. Kelly playing as a substitute. A draw at home to Teignmouth (0-0) was followed by a home defeat by Exmouth (6-9) in what was described as “an unpleasant game”. Against Blundell’s T.S. Kelly made his return to the Exeter team to help with a comfortable victory (21-6).

Variable form continued. Mid November saw the first appearance of Brixham on the County Ground. Expecting an easy game Exeter again failed to perform and “even the staunchest supporter was sickened by the poor Exeter display” (8-13). Three weeks later the tables were turned at Brixham where Exeter won (11-6). Early season Exeter at home had defeated Taunton (3-0) but in the return game at Taunton at the end of November, what must have been a weak Exeter team, suffered an embarrassing defeat (0-35).

The Christmas holiday games began with an away loss to Newton Abbott (0-11) before a Boxing Day match against a scratch team called Kellonians, raised by T.S. Kelly from London Devonian players and others returning to the city on vacation (6-0). The next day found Exeter splitting their resources to play two first team matches. A home game was arranged with Clifton who found themselves with no game after being let down by intended opponents. Making a welcome return to Exeter’s list, the visitors won an enjoyable game (9-20). Meanwhile, Exeter’s other first XV went to Exmouth where the team managed a draw (3-3) in what must have been another unpleasant game. An Exmouth player was sent off for kicking Exeter winger Street. The Exmouth player was suspended for two months but the hearing rumbled on as players from both sides said that the referee had misidentified the culprit.

The New Year started with a decisive win at Sidmouth (19-0) in a cup match. However Exeter yet again failed to make any more headway in this competition. This match saw the last appearance of a regular forward, Youlden, who left to head north to play for Barrow like his former colleague “Michael” Hill. A run of four defeats came before the next victory which came against the newly resuscitated Tiverton club. Exeter did not make matters easy for themselves by travelling short of two player but with the assistance of T.S. Kelly the team achieved a narrow win (8-6). The Tiverton crowd had not changed while the club lay dormant as there were “unedifying exhibitions of temper by Tiverton supporters who jostled the referee”.

After this game came further demonstrations of erratic form. Two trips to Plymouth resulted in a draw with United Services (8-8) and a heavy defeat by Devonport Albion (4-31). Then in consecutive weeks Paignton provided the opposition. At home Exeter engaged the services of centre Willie Davies, a student at St. Lukes who had opted to play for the Plymouth club. Exeter won this match (20-5) but then travelled to Paignton with much the same side, except that Davies was replaced by T.S. Kelly, only to lose (3-8).

Defeat at Bridgwater (3-6) was followed by a new mid-week fixture against the Combined Colleges of St, Lukes and Exeter University College who included their star players Davies and Rees. Included in the Exeter XV were T.S. Kelly, H. Snell, an England triallist who was a regular with the Seaton club, and former full-back W. Atkins who had been playing for Newton Abbot. Atkins contrived to get himself sent off during the game but the D.R.F.U. dismissed the charge against him due to “a conflict of evidence”. Exeter won the match (24-5).

The next two games were against Torquay Athletic. Travelling with only fourteen players Exeter conceded eleven tries in an abject display (0-43). Seven days later Torquay found Exeter a different proposition on their own soil. The home team’s margin of success did not counter the deficit of the previous week but the performance was described as “beyond comprehension” by one reporter. Billy Pike scored a try and former schoolboy international H. Campbell kicked a penalty and a goal from a mark to seal a victory (9-0).

This latter match marked the start of a successful run to the end of the season in contrast to the closing stages of recent previous seasons. Of the last seven games five were won and only two lost. One loss came in a mid-week game against Devonport Albion who fulfilled an obligation in compensation for a match they had cancelled earlier in the season and to aid Exeter’s ailing coffers. Exeter included guest players yet they still had to kick-off with only thirteen men on the field. Snell did not arrive until the game was ten minutes under way (8-17). The other defeat came against Easter tourists Penygraig, a team of miners on strike, from South Wales (3-14). The following Day Old Edwardians were the visitors. The team from Birmingham had previously been regular Christmas tourists but the change did not improve their fortunes in fixtures with Exeter (30-8).

Of the victories, one against Newton Abbot came as a surprise especially as T.S. Kelly missed the second half because of his old knee injury (5-3). Three previous games against the mid-Devon team had been lost. Perhaps the most satisfying win came in the fifth meeting for the season with Exmouth in the final match. Of the previous four meeting Exmouth had won three and one had been drawn. The margin may have been narrow but it was enough with Lenoir scoring a try which Campbell converted (5-3).

Despite fund raising activities the season saw a rise of £7 (approx. £240) in the club’s financial deficit but there was “no cause for alarm” according to the club President. Also during the season the County Ground Company held talks with Exeter F.C. and Exeter City A.F.C. with a view to the two clubs sharing the ground. The rugby club put paid to the idea by stating that they required to use the County Ground every Saturday in the season for use by both the First and Reserve XVs.

Of former players, T.C. Pring was re-elected to serve a second term as President of the Rugby Football Union and William Edgar Mann who played regularly for the club between 1907 and 1909 while serving as a Lieutenant with the Royal Field Artillery at Topsham Barracks, won three caps for England. After a distinguished military career Mann became a well respected dairy farmer.