

### 101<sup>st</sup> Year 1972-3

Having completed 100 years of existence, the club nominated this season for its centenary celebrations. Several special events were organised. On Friday 1st September a Sherry Party in the Memorial Clubhouse was attended by many former players who came from all parts of the country. In March a Centenary Dinner and Ball, held at the Rougemont Hotel, was attended by Lord Wakefield of Kendal, The Lord Mayor of Exeter, The Sheriff of Exeter, the President of the Devon Rugby Football Union as well as representatives from many counties and clubs. The latter event was reported at the A.G.M. to have been "a great success and the highlight of the centenary celebrations". A further dinner was held at the St. George & Dragon Hotel, Clyst St. George, for the committee and players after the close of the season when presentations of trophies and badges were made to players.

On the field Exeter arranged a unique series of matches against representative county XV's from Cornwall, Somerset and Devon as well as The Army. It could be argued that at this time the first XV was at its strongest since the club began and during the 1970s was probably at its highest peak in the pre-professional era. This season's record stood at 45 games played with 30 won and two drawn. The number of points scored increased to 981, a club record. The new captain for this celebratory season was A.P. (Paul) Baxter, younger brother of second-row stalwart John. Paul, a member of the teaching profession, had made his debut for the senior side in March 1967 and became an automatic choice from the 1968-9 season onward. Occasionally deputising at hooker, his specialist position was at prop forward, a position he also filled for both Devon, whom he captained in 1978-9, and Regional XV's. After retiring as a player at the end of 1978-9, he acted as club coach for two seasons, 1980-1 and 1981-2.

As many as eleven players represented Devon at one time or another and the county side was captained by Bob Staddon.

The first Saturday of the season was blessed with heat-wave conditions but the visiting Cornwall team probably did not view it as a blessing. The coach trip from St. Ives to Exeter took twice as long as anticipated because of dense holiday traffic. By the end of the afternoon the visitors found themselves outplayed by Exeter for whom a rampant John Baxter had scored a hat-trick of tries. "Cornwall XV crash to Exeter club side" ran the headline in the "West Briton" (25-7).

Friday evening found Exeter welcoming Rosslyn Park to the County Ground. It took some time for the London visitors to get into their stride but when they did a thirteen point lead was built. Exeter gradually came back into the game and scored eight points. Time was running out when, from a scrum on the Park twenty-five yard line, Milford's pass allowed fly-half Phil Holman to ghost through the defence to score under the posts at the score-board end of the ground. Occasional kicker John Jenkins added the extra points to win the game. This was a pleasing victory for Exeter followers but rather oddly one reporter summed up the game by saying "The final 20 minutes wiped out the memory of the rest of the game which was as miserable as the weather" (14-13).

On the following afternoon came the first set-back of the season when, rather unexpectedly, Esher downed Exeter who had made four changes to the team that had won fifteen hours earlier (12-16). Exeter recovered in time to defeat St. Ives in the preliminary round of the R.F.U. Knock-out competition. The game was "a scrappy affair, with a little too much skull-duggery in the loose and over enthusiasm". Twice the referee had need to call the two skippers to one side to get the players to calm down or suffer the consequences. The young St. Ives pack had the better of Exeter early on but eventually ran out of steam. The home side made certain of the game with four second half tries (29-13).

Mid-week Somerset came to the County Ground missing its Bath players who were engaged in a cup game. Nonetheless the visitors fielded a strong team that included a number of Bristol players but, after a close game, Exeter came out on top (16-9). Four days later it was the full Bath team that faced Exeter at the Recreation Ground for what was Exeter's first away match of the season. "Exeter were altogether too good for Bath although they only led by a dropped goal at half-time". The main architect of the victory was full-back Bob Staddon who contributed eleven points to the total. The only score for the home team came in the form of a penalty try when a player was fouled in the act of touching down. "Exeter were full value for their win" (19-6). Back at home again, Exeter then met the Army for a Tuesday early evening fixture. The visitors fielded an experimental XV for its first game of the season but still included seven of the side that had won the Services championship and one international. In the first half the Army pack got on top and the Exeter backs were haphazard in attack. The second half saw the home side improve to draw level. Exeter came close to scoring twice just on the stroke of full-time but the determined Army defence held out (15-15).

Saturday's game at the County Ground against Streatham-Croydon was described as entertaining and action packed with the result in doubt until the closing stages. "Exeter appeared to have the game sewn up by half time" and when another converted try was scored shortly after the resumption, the home team led by nineteen points. "Tension fairly crackled in the last 15 minutes of the game" after the Surrey visitors had reduced the lead to four points but in injury time Staddon landed a penalty goal that made the game safe (25-18). On the first Saturday in October Exeter played only its second away game of the season, travelling to Bedford for the first time. The pattern of the game was nearly a mirror image of the previous week's match. Exeter went behind by fourteen points but managed to reduce the deficit to three points. "There was plenty of excitement in this match, and plenty of scrappy play to off-set it" that led to "some quite casual scores". Three penalty goal attempts in the last ten minutes that could have equalised the score went adrift and Exeter went down to a second defeat in the season (23-26).

At home again, Exeter then had to face Redruth when Devon was playing in the County Championship. In consequence John Snell captained a team that included seven second-choice players. The team raised its game and narrowly defeated the Cornishmen (18-14). Again there were seven reserve players, including two making a first team debut, again in the team that went to London to face Saracens but this time the outcome was entirely different (6-49).

A recovery was made when a near full strength team defeated Sidcup on the Kent club's first visit to Exeter (22-12). A mid-week evening game at Bridgwater & Albion was cancelled due to fog before Exeter registered two away victories against Taunton (21-10) and Exmouth, on a County day, (48-0). Two home defeats then followed, St. Luke's College (6-9) and Cheltenham, when once again the home side suffered from County calls (3-11).

December began with a narrow victory at Torquay Athletic (9-6) but a week later at Barnstaple, Exeter, with a weakened team, again failed against their bogey team (6-12). An away game against Glamorgan Wanderers was cancelled before a full strength Exeter XV faced Teignmouth at the County Ground on the Saturday before Christmas. The result was annihilation for the visitors, Exeter achieving its highest score to date. It was reported that the disgruntled Teignmouth committee was not best pleased by Exeter's approach to the game by fielding ten county players (80-3). On Boxing Day at the County Ground, Exmouth, facing a similar strength Exeter side, did rather better (30-3). Still at home, Exeter started the New Year in confident fashion with another resounding win, the victims this time being Taunton (45-3).

At Clifton, the Exeter team was well on top when the home side lost a player with an eye injury after twenty minutes but it was not until after the visitors had lost Phil Holman with a knee laceration that the Exeter team scored most of its points (20-4). At the County ground against Bridgwater & Albion both teams played most of the second half with fourteen men. The visitors lost a prop through injury

whilst “Exeter’s ginger giant of the second row”, Neil Diment, was sent off for fighting. Exeter’s victory was hard fought in difficult conditions but it was not a dirty game (24-0). Remaining at home Exeter then drew with Cross keys (10-10).

For the second round of the National Knock-out Competition, Exeter was again drawn to meet Penryn. In the previous season’s game between the two sides, Exeter had missed a lot of chances but this time Penryn, at home, won more convincingly despite Exeter’s forwards being dominant. John Jenkins scored Exeter’s try but then had to leave the field with a leg injury. Rather oddly, the Sunday Times commented “Exeter in fact proved more successful in the advertising department than on the field” (4-13). Another disappointment soon followed with a defeat at Weston super Mare. The Somerset team snatched victory in the last minute though they well deserved the win, scoring five tries to one (18-22). Competitive rugby returned with a Devon Cup match at Tiverton where the home side, although playing courageously, was overwhelmed by an Exeter scoring machine that ran in eleven tries. Six of these were touched down by winger Russell Lee thereby establishing a club scoring record (58-0).

In a typical morning game in London before an International, Exeter made many handling errors against Guy’s Hospital and without the injured Holman, the backs lacked fluency. It was not until the final three minutes that the game was made safe (13-4). Back at home Plymouth Albion came to Exeter. Club matches between these two opponents had always been keen but on this occasion “This Derby fixture between Devon’s two top rugby teams was a big disappointment. A dreary encounter, it produced little in the way of excitement or football”. The correspondent who penned those words did own up to the fact that play improved in the second half (15-0). About ten minutes from the end of the game centre Mike Maynard had to be taken to hospital with a dislocated shoulder. This was the second time this type of injury had happened in the season and it marked the end of Maynard’s career which had begun with Exeter in 1962. He became a regular in the second half of the 1964-5 season. He was the club’s main goal kicker and leading points scorer for a number of seasons.

A Devon Cup tie at home against Bideford did not result in as narrow a win as had been the case in previous years (37-3) whilst a mid-week game at Paignton was a much closer contest than that of twelve months before (18-9).

Bridgend came to the County Ground with an impressive record to their credit but, as Paul Huddart reported in the Express & Echo, “The first twenty minutes were rather drab and one member of the crowd was forced to shout out, “Come on, let’s see some rugby””. Exeter went behind early on but a late rally brought victory over Bridgend for the first time since March 1969 (20-16). This was to be the last meeting between the two clubs as Bridgend severed the fixture due to the pressure domestic competitions place don the fixture list. The first meeting between the two clubs had taken place in March 1894 since when they had met on 46 occasions.

An injury hit St. Luke’s team could not penetrate the Exeter cover in the customary late season mid-week meeting. Although not firing on all cylinders, the Exeter forwards took control and the team won by a wider margin than usual in this fixture (30-12). The Birmingham Post commented that justice was done on the occasion of the first meeting between Exeter and Birmingham. At the County Ground, Exeter led after half an hour but then lost winger John Jenkins. Up to that point Birmingham had disappointed but against a seven man pack the visitors’ forwards began to dominate. Ten minutes into the second half Birmingham took the lead but 14-man Exeter rallied and won through a penalty awarded for a crooked scrum feed in front of the posts (15-13).

Exeter then faced Devon in the third of its special centenary celebration matches. Without its County Ground contingent, Devon fielded seven new players. Exeter went into an early lead, only to lose momentum for a time. Ten minutes into the second period, the home forwards reasserted their

dominance leading Exeter to the third of a unique treble of victories against county opposition. Outstanding for Exeter were full-back Bob Staddon and scrum-half Graham Milford (24-12).

More success followed with a win against Penzance & Newlyn at the County Ground, Tony Vinnicombe on his first senior appearance of the season scored three tries (41-3). A home Devon Cup semi-final match against Crediton followed. The visitors held Exeter to a solitary try in the first half but the tide turned when Crediton lost two players through injury whilst another was a virtual passenger. Exeter then scored freely (52-3), both matches being played at the County Ground. At St. Ives, Exeter won again but only through a last minute try from John Baxter (9-7). The punishing schedule continued and the two following games proved to be hurdles too difficult to overcome though the team performed well in both encounters. At the Memorial Ground, Bristol overcame a game Exeter performance (10-21) and four days later, at Kingsholm, Exeter put in an even better display against Gloucester (15-18).

The Devon Cup Final took place at the County Ground where the home team met Plymouth Albion. "It was a manly game", commented one observer. Of Exeter he added "They had five scoring chances and took them. Albion had twenty-five and botched them". For the entire first half, Exeter was struggling in its own territory. But in the second period the home team "pulled themselves together" and a Staddon dropped goal began the recovery to which Albion had no answer. For his calm play in defence and his attacking flair, Bob Staddon was proclaimed "Man of the Match" (17-3).

On Easter Saturday Exeter rested before meeting Moseley for the regular Monday encounter but still had to take the field without the services of three leading players. "Defeated but not disgraced" was said to be a fair description of the home team's performance. "The Moseley side were frightening to look at, let alone play against" but the forwards did not give up and the backs gave the visitors some of their own medicine (12-20).

A big disappointment followed when Exeter again failed in an attempt to lift the Westward Trophy in a play-off against the Cornwall cup winners at the County Ground. Penryn, yet again, got the measure of the Devon champions by a single point (11-12). For the final game of the season a trip to Cornwall to face Redruth was required. Exeter putting the mid-week defeat behind them signed off the season with a win. In a game of bright rugby the lead changed hands several times. The home side held the advantage at half-time but the heavier Exeter pack ensured possession for the backs to pull back the deficit and forge ahead (27-22).

The "A" XV played 38 games of which 23 were won and one drawn. The "B" XV showed a distinct improvement by winning thirteen of 22 games played whilst the Extra "B" won six and lost eight games. A considerable amount of effort was put into the development of the Colts XV and this was rewarded with success in the final of the Devon Colts Cup. Overall the side played 24 games and won 17 of them.

Bob Staddon, John Baxter and 18 year old John Scott were all selected to play in an R.F.U. Area Trial, whilst the latter represented England Schools (19 Group) and attended England Under-23 training sessions.