

## 10<sup>th</sup> Season 1881-2

If the previous season was scant of match details then season 1881-2 proved even more barren. A fixture list of eighteen matches was published but reports of matches played number only nine, of which three were won and six lost. Even two matches against Blundell's appear to have been unreported, if they were in fact played.

The only new name among the regular games was that of Devonport Engineering Students, variously referred to as Keyham Students and Royal Naval Engineering College in seasons to come.

Where results are known victories came in games against Wellington at home plus away matches at Teignmouth and Newton College. Exeter was defeated by Tiverton (both home and away), Torquay Athletic, the Engineering Students, the United Services College and Taunton all at home.

The season did not start in an auspicious manner. The opening fixture took place on the final Saturday of October but even this late date might have been too early for some members as Exeter could muster only eleven players for a game at Tiverton. Four substitutes were recruited but the weak team lost heavily by two goals and three tries to nil.

In wet conditions Exeter, at home, faced Torquay Athletic. Choosing to play up the slope Exeter held out for some time before the visitors found their feet and scored two tries. After the turn round Exeter managed to get one try back before the visitors touched down for a third score. Exeter managed a second try but had to concede defeat by two tries to three.

In a home game against the Keyham Engineering Students, Exeter spent much of the match in defence though the game was closely contested. The Students registered three tries and forced Exeter to touch-down in defence on several occasions.

At the end of November Exeter was due to send a team to Weston to play Weston Rangers, a club strong enough to arrange fixtures with Cardiff. A possible indication of the problems Exeter was facing this season can be gauged from a report in the Western Mercury. The Weston secretary had received a letter from the Exeter secretary. "In consequence of the fact that the majority of their players being University men, they would not be able to play Weston until the vacation" was the wording used in the press report. No game between the two sides took place this season and it was not until November 1888 that Exeter played against a team from Weston super Mare.

After the explanation given to Weston Rangers it would seem to be contradictory for Exeter to field a team at Newton College just a week later. Perhaps the College was seen to be somewhat a less demanding opponent. Play was described as being exceptionally fast and only ended when it got "too dark to play". Exeter gained a first victory of the season by a goal and a try to nil.

In mid-December, Exeter lost to Taunton having failed to respond to two tries by the visitors. Both Taunton scores were touched down by Hancock the Wiveliscombe

captain, who had been enlisted for this game. On the day he was described as “the backbone of the Taunton team”. It was not uncommon at this time for clubs to borrow players for certain games, especially away fixtures. Exeter was known to do the same.

A second victory for Exeter came on Christmas Eve when to warm home supporters Wellington was beaten by a try, the only score of the game. Fortunes appeared to have changed when the team travelled to Teignmouth on New Year’s Eve. Included in the side was Fagan the Tiverton and Devon full back. He kicked a decisive drop-goal to help win the match.

No records of any games appearing on the fixture list for the next seven weeks can be found. However a team described as “Mr. F.C. Clapp’s Exeter Team” lost by two tries to nil at Budleigh Salterton. Clapp was an Exeter player as were at least seven other members of his team. The status of this game as far as the Exeter is concerned is uncertain. It could have been a privately arranged match, a club scratch team but given the problems raising team this season it is not likely to have been a second XV fixture.

On resuming activities at the end of February Exeter entertained the United Services College from Westward Ho! In drenching rain and high wind. The College scored two goals and a try without reply from the home team. Selection problems appeared to remain for Exeter as only fourteen players were fielded for this home game but in the tradition of the fixture both teams dined together at the Bude Haven Hotel.

The last reported game of the season also ended in a home defeat. Tiverton Club & School “brought down a very fast and heavy team” whereas the Exeter side was described as “unusually weak behind and very light forward”. Much of the game was played in the Exeter 25 despite the efforts of leading players F. Swabey and “Happy” Harris. The visitors won by two goals and three tries to nothing.

During March fixtures against Taunton and Blundell’s School were not reported and may not have been played. 1881-2 appears not to have been an easy time for the club secretary.

It is possible that the club elected joint-captains for this season, something they would repeat two seasons later. In an early match the captain was J.S. King, a former committee member, who played full back. Amongst the forwards was W. Wakeham who is listed as captain when King was not playing. However full team lists for only six matches have been discovered. King, son of a partner in the engineering company Garton & King, in later years was to be found occasionally refereeing club matches. It was not uncommon for ex-players or even current players to referee home games.

Many years later a former player recalled that 1882 saw the introduction of club caps. The initial design of the cap was said to have been black with a white peak and a white badge. By the end of the century first team caps made of a velvet like material and were all black with a metallic braided tassel with the award season applied to the peak and a pressed metal badge of the city coat-of-arms attached to the front of the cap.