

40th Season 1911-2

With a seasonal record similar to that of twelve months before, Exeter rugby seemed to have settled into a pattern. Even so the record of 18 wins and 22 losses in a programme of 40 matches was described in the Annual Report as “not what should nor might have been” suggesting disappointment at the achievements. There were the now customary heavy defeats away from home and some unexpected victories. Not much else changed. Players still did not train regularly and would sometimes turn up late or not at all.

Luck was not always what the club would have wanted. At one stage the names of seven senior players were to be found on the injured list. The elected captain, half-back Sid Kerswill, was one of these, his name not appearing on the team sheet after the second game of the season. Yet again Exeter had to find a replacement skipper and S.A. (Stan) Havill, a forward, was the popular choice. On the credit side both W. Atkins (full-back) and Percy Kerswill (wing three quarter) returned to the Exeter fold after having played for Newton Abbot.

The opening fixture took the team to north Devon to face a newly resuscitated Barnstaple club. The home team relished the importance of a new lease of life and had arranged for the Town Clerk to kick-off before a large crowd at the Newport ground. Inexcusably Exeter did not see the occasion in the same light and managed, for some unexplained reason, to arrive almost an hour and a half late for a 3.30pm kick-off. Barnstaple were to complain to the D.R.F.U. In unusually hot weather for September Exeter managed a narrow victory by a solitary Gordon Lenoir try (3-0).

Of the next 17 fixtures up to Christmas only six games were won. Amongst those victories, were two cup matches against Tiverton (13-3 & 11-6) but yet again Exeter failed to make much progress in this competition losing to both Exmouth and Barnstaple at the league stage.

There were low points in this run. A home defeat to Newton Abbot by an alarming margin (3-39) led the “Express & Echo” to declare that this was “time for something to be done” and that “only those players who train should play”. In all probability nothing of note happened. At the beginning of November, Exeter travelled to Devonport Albion who, because of County calls on their players, fielded what was almost a Reserve XV. The outcome was similar to previous recent seasons (0-20). Billy Sprague missed his train and Exeter played only fourteen men at Exmouth and the team suffered in consequence (0-11). The two games just before the Christmas holiday also saw Exeter on the road to play Plymouth and Newton Abbot. The score-line was the same in both matches (0-24).

On the 13th of December a unique match was staged on the County Ground. A midweek evening game was arranged under the artificial light of acetylene flares against the United Colleges (Exeter University College and St. Luke’s). Twice previously, in 1877-8 and 1888-9, matches to be played by artificial light, as had taken place in various parts of the country, had been suggested for Exeter but the club demurred on the grounds of lack of funds.

Nine flares were supplied by Stansells Acetylene Co. but the weather conspired to detract spectacle from the novelty. Despite the poor weather, several hundred spectators enjoyed the game although players could be seen only dimly at times. Rain fell in torrents in the second half and in the mud the ball, which had been especially whitened for the occasion, soon reverted to its original colouring. However not only did Exeter secure victory (19-0) but the event was declared successful financially as well.

Boxing Day visitors came from Ebbw Vale. With former captain Billy Goff appearing alongside G.D. Roberts and A.E. Harris, Exeter won through a try by the latter (3-0). Three defeats against Exmouth (0-15), Torquay Athletic (3-20) and Plymouth (0-14) followed. George Bickley from Lyme Regis appeared in each of these games. Apparently he had been selected by his London club, Harlequins, but chose instead to play for Exeter against Plymouth. Roberts, another Harlequin, was also due to play but withdrew owing to a damaged knee. Plymouth adapted better to what were described as “deplorable conditions”.

A home cup match against a resurgent Barnstaple provided a narrow victory (6-5) before the first of the resumed regular fixtures with Clifton. The match was completely spoilt by rain and mud, play being mainly confined to the forwards. Exeter managed to score three tries to secure victory (9-8).

One of the largest crowds to gather at Sidmouth saw their team successfully defend their ground record for the season. Exeter led by six points at the interval but then both Billy Pike and Tod Kerswill had to receive attendance from the ambulance men. Effectively reduced to thirteen players Exeter could not maintain the lead and lost (6-17). The next Saturday was to see the return match but due to a heavy frost Sidmouth did not travel. Exeter assembled a Scratch XV to provide the opposition at the County Ground and managed to lose (0-6).

A trip to Clifton brought another defeat (6-11) as did a visit by Devonport Albion (3-21). This result was seen as a foregone conclusion as the Albion side was composed mainly of county players, Exeter did have the honour of scoring first – a try by Gordon Lenoir.

Willie Davies from Aberavon was a student at Exeter University College but had chosen to take his talents further west where he became the subject of dispute between the Plymouth and Devonport Albion clubs. This dispute continued until near the end of the season having been referred to the D.R.F.U. In December Davies wrote to both clubs to inform them that he would confine his playing activities to College games. He was captain of the E.U.C. XV. In January he gained International honours on selection by Wales. Early in March Exeter enlisted the services of Davies for a meeting with Exmouth at the County Ground.

Amongst the crowd were a large number of Davies' fellow students who “entertained the crowd with English and Welsh ditties before the late start”. The game however took an ugly turn. “Rain, wind and heavy ground conditions” led to a game “in which players are inclined to fight” and where there were several “displays of bad temper”. The “game” was won by Exmouth (0-9). What once induced friendly rivalry had descended into “dog fights” and “rough play”. The rivalry was now too intense both

among players and spectators. The correspondent for the Exmouth Journal did not agree with comments made and thought his Exeter counterpart needed a new pair of spectacles!

The two clubs fell out over this match and Exeter then decided to cancel all fixtures with Exmouth for the coming season. Given the likely adverse effect on Exeter's future finances, this decision would not have been taken lightly.

Possibly with morale at a low ebb Exeter then took a very weak team to Newton Abbot and suffered their biggest defeat of the season (0-39) a score-line similar to that recorded earlier in the season. Veteran former skipper Charlie Morgan, who had just resumed a place amongst the Reserves' forwards, was selected to play fly-half in this match where Exeter were more disposed to fly-kick rather than fall on the ball. Exeter were "simply swamped".

A return to winning ways came with a victory over Taunton (11-3) in wretched conditions. A visiting three-quarter was sent off for disputing the referee's decisions. Next to visit the County Ground would be Newton Abbot.

Defending an unbeaten record Newton began the game by scoring two tries in the first ten minutes. Exeter had to call up Charlie Morgan again, this time at the last minute, to complete the forward complement. The pack included two new forwards, W. Snell from Cullompton, and Culverwell from Taunton. There followed the "greatest surprise in Western Football". Tries by Lenoir and Culverwell and a conversion by Snell were enough to take Newton Abbot's unbeaten record (8-6). "It was like the golden days of old" wrote one commentator. Half-back Force, the best man on the field, was carried off shoulder high and Lenoir received a bottle of champagne from an admirer. For their part Newton Abbot were disgruntled and thought the referee showed bias.

After this victory Exeter had hoped to do better at Plymouth but failed (8-27). This game started an hour late but it was not the fault of the Exeter team. The delay was due to industrial action on the railways.

At home Exeter won an open game against Paignton (5-3) in the first of the Easter matches. Pill Harriers from South Wales called off their tour due to the restricted railway service during the strike. A juggling of fixtures saw Bridgwater take their place on Easter Monday and in high wind with a number of reserves in the team Exeter won (16-3). The very next day Exeter travelled to Bridgwater where the home side won (8-10). Exeter were considered to be unlucky as the second half lasted 47 minutes and the home side scored their winning points near the end of the game.

"If only Exeter had started like they finished" was the verdict after a welcome home win over Torquay Athletic (10-6). Apparently Exeter took their chances whereas Torquay did not.

To finish the regular season a game had been organised with United Banks, an irregular Exeter team, to fill a gap left by the reorganised Bridgwater fixtures. Captain Stan Havill led the way by landing five conversions and a penalty goal in a predictable victory (31-3). Havill was not a regular goal kicker!

However the season was not yet over. Special permission was granted by the D.R.F.U. for the club to play on the last day of April after the official season was over. Newport, described as the Welsh Champions with a team containing six internationals visited the County Ground. Exeter fielded the Newton Abbot full-back, Bunclarke who gave “a sparkling display of Rugby Football”. Down by only six points at half time, Exeter “played in commendable style but were outclassed” (0-19).

At the A.G.M. it was reported that the financial deficit now stood at £84 10s (approx. £4,900). In June the D.R.F.U. had agreed to grant Exeter £10 (£570) provided the club raised another £30 (£1700). The club continued to raise money by other means including once more organising concerts and entertainments at the Barnfield Theatre. The proceeds from programme sales at the Devon v Somerset game at the County Ground were donated to Exeter’s funds.

The Reserve XV had another below par record winning twelve and drawing three of 31 games played.

Devon won the County Championship again by defeating Northumberland (29-0) but the team included no current Exeter players. The side did however include two players who had appeared for Exeter on occasions – winger Percy Baker and the Seaton forward H. Snell.