

66th Year 1937-8

“Last season was a fairly good one for Exeter” read the modest opening comment of the club’s entry in the Rugby Football Annual. A number of new opponents had been added to the fixture card so the record of 21 victories and two draws from a programme of 41 games played might have been regarded as satisfactory. In truth the performances of the first fifteen were patchy with some brilliant displays interspersed with poor games. Exeter was still regarded as a popular opponent because of its attempts to play open rugby whatever the conditions.

Indeed after the opening fixture of the season at home to Paignton it was reported that on the form showed the club “could be one of the brightest in the county” (18-6). However four days later in the return game at Queens Park, Paignton showed more aggression and a dropped goal near the end of the game gained a victory for the home team (6-7).

Matters did not go well on a visit to Redruth. A “by no means full strength” team was soon behind but Exeter rallied to score eight points before the home team became “irresistible” in the second half (8-34).

An away fixture against Barnstaple was cancelled by the north Devon club as the date coincided with the Barnstaple Carnival and the Devon R.F.U Jubilee celebration game against W.W. Wakefield’s International XV at the County Ground. The Devon XV played well but could not match the skill of the opposition. Exeter’s only representative in the home XV was scrum half Dick Madge though A.A. (Alan) Brown ,who made occasional appearances for Exeter during the season and was representing St. Luke’s College, was also in the team. Included in the International XV was once capped Irish international C. O’Neill Wallis who had played two games for Exeter in 1932-3 whilst stationed in the city as a serving army officer.

After the one week layoff three wins followed in the space of six days. A mid-week game at Sidmouth saw the debut of centre three-quarter N.M. (Norman) Humphries, a recruit from Worcester and East Midlands, who made openings for two of Exeter’s tries in a hard fought game (11-3). A first encounter with the Trojans club from Southampton saw Exeter at home fade after a brilliant start (16-6). A second mid-week game against Sidmouth, this time at home, saw Exeter field a side missing five first choice players. The disappointing game was “a patchy affair” (5-0).

The first Saturday in October found Exeter travelling to Bath for the first time in five years. Handicapped by forward J.V.M. Thomas being off the field with a leg injury for most of the second half Exeter succumbed to their hosts though headlines suggest a stern resistance was mounted. “Rousing Play By Exeter” and “Score Flatters Bath” were two of them (6-15).

Yet another home game in mid-week saw a half-strength team, with Dick Madge playing centre, defeat the Royal Naval Engineering College (13-3). Remaining at home Exeter then faced another new opponent in the form of Old Paulines (former pupils of St. Paul’s School, London). After a fast paced first half play deteriorated in the second but Exeter remained on top (10-3).

Disappointingly the next three games ended in defeat. Weston super Mare was at this time still one of the strongest clubs in the country. On their own ground they easily defeated Exeter (11-31). At the County Ground after meeting Devonport Services it was claimed that “Rarely has an Exeter side given such a lethargic display” (0-12). Exmouth had enjoyed eight straight victories when Exeter came to call. The result meant that the home club’s run extended to nine wins (3-14).

Fortunes changed for Exeter on a visit to Clifton when, in an exciting game, the lead changed hands four times. The visiting team was seen to be “putting much more spirit into their game” (19-11). The improvement did not last as for the second time in three weeks Exmouth defeated their city rivals at the end of “one of the hardest struggles seen on the County Ground for many years”. Fred Job scored

first with a try after collecting his own kick ahead but Exmouth won with a penalty goal kicked from just inside the Exeter half (6-8). To follow Exeter went to Newton Abbot and again met with defeat. During the second half the crowd was said to be astonished when the referee dismissed Percy Thomas and one of the home forwards for "fighting". Later the official confessed "there was cause but it was not of a serious nature" (3-12). This game saw the debut for Exeter of P.M.S. (Peter) Gedge, a Scottish International, who had joined the staff at Blundell's School.

At last "Exeter found their true form for the first time this season" when entertaining Bath on the last Saturday of November. The visitors were completely outmanoeuvred by the Exeter backs but such was the tenacity of the defence that only one try was scored and that came near the end of the game. Colin Paul scored all the points with a try and two penalty goals (9-0). At half time in this match a collection was taken in aid of the Princess Elizabeth Orthopaedic Hospital in recognition of the efforts of the surgeon who had saved the life Dickie Lee who had broken his neck some four years previously. Lee was playing for Exeter Harlequins against Plymouth Albion second string when the incident occurred. Lee actually played on. The surgeon, Norman Capener, eventually brought Lee back to a full recovery so much so that he is said to have resumed playing.

Further successes came away against the Royal Naval Engineering College in a fast open game where the Exeter forwards dominated (14-3) and at home against Blundell's School (20-13). So well did the scholars perform in this latter game that the Exeter players joined the crowd in giving them a rousing ovation at the final whistle.

Just when it appeared that Exeter had regained confidence the team managed to lose four out of the next five matches. Against the visiting Middlesex Hospital team Exeter missed several chances whilst attacking for three-quarters of the game in atrocious weather conditions. The backs tended to over-elaborate and Exeter "had only themselves to blame for the defeat". The visitors went five-nil up before the conversion attempt of a try by Exeter hit an upright and there was no scoring in the second half (3-5). Another two point defeat in poor conditions was to follow against Devonport Services. Neither team was at full strength for this mid-week fixture (5-7).

Breaking a sequence of defeats came a narrow win at Taunton in what was described as a featureless game (6-0). Exeter winger Passmore scored both tries but was described in the press as "an ineffective finisher"!

Before a crowd of 2,000 home spectators Exeter tried to open up play but met with a stubborn Exmouth defence in the Christmas holiday fixture. Much of the action took place in mid-field but the visitors had two chances and took them both (0-8).

On New Year's Day Exeter suffered a blow before kick-off at the County Ground when Charlie Ford failed to turn up. His place was taken by "Bunny" Turner, the former club captain who was back in the city on holiday. Already understrength Exeter was dealt another blow when Dick Madge had to leave the field with an injury in the second half. He did return to hobble through the remainder of the game. Torquay Athletic won "in uninspiring fashion" (3-9).

A mixed strength team defeated Blundell's Squirrels mid-week in what appears to have been regarded as an official first team fixture (15-8).

The unbeaten Weston super Mare team came to the County Ground on a day when Exeter was deprived of the services of Dick Madge who was on Devon duty. His deputy, Peter Davis, an undergraduate at Oxford University, put in a brilliant display. In deplorable conditions with the pitch ankle deep in mud the Somerset team was fully extended but still went home with their record intact (0-8).

It was then the turn of another Somerset side with a formidable record to visit the County Ground. Bridgwater & Albion had been beaten only once all season (and that defeat was by Weston). Exeter at

full strength for the first time in many weeks gave its best performance of the season. The crux of the battle lay between the visiting forwards and the home backs. Fred Job and Charlie Ford each scored two tries and Colin Paul added a brace of conversions (16-7).

At Beacon Park, Exeter had not only to contend with Plymouth Albion but fog and a heavy ground but the challenge was met by some brilliant rugby. Fred Job again scored two tries. The home team was lucky to draw by scoring near the end of the game (6-6). Barnstaple posed less of a problem for Exeter when the team from north Devon was outplayed on a sodden County Ground. With Peter Gedge again available for selection Exeter had the problem of who leave out. The former Scottish International played on the wing and scored two tries. Exeter again played fine open rugby despite the rearrangement of the back division (19-0). A mid-week game against Blundell's School saw Exeter enjoy a lucky escape in a drawn game at Tiverton (6-6).

"Newton Allow No Open Play" was the critical observation of one press reporter after a game in perfect conditions at the County Ground. The Newton Abbot tactics rattled Exeter for a time but in the second half the home side did everything but score despite Madge, Steele-Perkins and Gedge being absentees. Two visiting forwards were warned by the referee in what was "a most unsatisfactory affair" (0-5).

For some undiscovered reason the Exeter first XV had no fixture on the 12th of February but the Harlequins, at home, defeated Wiveliscombe by over forty points and the third team lost at Axminster.

A week's rest appears to have paid off as, on the next Saturday, Exeter gained their first victory over Plymouth Albion for five years. Charlie Ford opened the scoring just after five minutes with a penalty goal kicked from near half-way. Exeter increased the lead with a try shortly after the resumption. The visitors did not reply until near the end of the game (6-3). "It was good to see something approaching a real rugby crowd at Exeter". Attendance was estimated at 1,500.

The month ended with an unlucky defeat when facing Woodford in London. Exeter scored three tries to two by their hosts but went down by a single point (15-16).

March began with a home encounter with Clifton. Headlines displayed differing views of the game. "Clifton Shock Exeter" ran the Bristol version whilst the local view was "Clifton Swamped By Scoring Spate". The shock came when the visitors went five points up after two minutes. Exeter replied with fourteen points in fifteen minutes before half-time. Charlie Ford contributed eleven points to his team's winning total (22-13).

Another victory at the County Ground came when Exeter, with a weakened pack, twice came from behind to defeat Teignmouth. Play was mainly confined to the forwards but both Exeter tries were scored by their wingers (11-6). A heavy defeat was to follow on a visit to Torquay Athletic regarded as being possibly the strongest team in the Devon. Exeter without their first choice half-backs lost to their south Devon opponents for the second time in the season (13-27).

At the same time as Exeter was losing at The Recreation Ground, Alan Brown was winning his sole international cap by appearing for England against Scotland. Locally it was said that Brown "has hidden his light under a bushel". After playing rugby in the north of England, including appearances for Lancashire, he had accepted a lectureship in physical education at St. Luke's College, for whom he played much of his rugby. He made occasional appearance for Exeter and came into prominence representing Devon in the County Championship. At the age of 36 he was to be elected captain of Exeter for the season 1947-9.

A batch of mixed results drew the season to its close. From London came regular opponents Old Blues (former pupils of Christ's Hospital School). Exeter did not perform at its best and a disjointed

game in ideal conditions disappointed the spectators. Despite opportunities Exeter's second score came only in the last minute. A light ball was said to have been a handicap (10-0). Even without their first choice half-backs the Exeter three-quarters performed better at Weston super Mare but the lighter pack could not match the home forwards. Second row G.T. Palmer scored the Exeter try after a "twenty five yard dash" (3-12). At Teignmouth the play of Charlie Ford was a feature until he injured a shoulder near the end of the game. The first half lasted forty-five minutes because the referee's watch had stopped (12-6).

The following Monday saw the eagerly anticipated first visit by Richmond on a week-end Devon tour. After defeat at Torquay the London club borrowed a Barnstaple player to fill a gap in their ranks that included former Exeter player Ken Wreford. Bill Sprake returned from Honiton to play for Exeter in place of the injured Ford. This was the last game that Peter Steele-Perkins played for Exeter following the announcement of his retirement a week or so earlier. "Richmond Overwhelmed" might have been an over exuberant headline but Exeter's victory was well merited. The team was clearly motivated and forward Frank Gibbings played on despite receiving a head injury (13-6). The teams dined together at Bobby's Restaurant after the match.

An understrength fifteen went to Tiverton three days later and lost the unofficial fixture to the home club (3-9).

On Easter Saturday Ken Wreford made a reappearance in the Exeter side that defeated King's College School Old Boys in what was to be the biggest margin of victory of the season. The visitors actually scored first but then Wreford displayed unstoppable form scoring two tries and making two others. Dick Madge again played in the centre (31-3).

Easter Monday visitors Moseley were a different proposition being too fast for Exeter who nonetheless showed a fighting spirit. The home team opened the scoring then led again before putting in a late rally to score the last eight points in the game but it was too late to affect the result (16-25).

On Wednesday evening an unofficial fixture at Exmouth completed the season. Exeter lost the game which was played in aid of Exmouth Hospital (0-3).

After the "fairly good" season Exeter would have taken heart from the fact that the club did not lose to Plymouth Albion but would have been dismayed by the fact the club lost to Torquay Athletic, Exmouth and Newton Abbot both home and away. Exeter's style of play prompted Torquay Athletic to request four fixtures in a season. It was recorded that Colin Paul scored 103 points during the course of the season representing just over a quarter of the total points scored.