

95th Year 1966-7

In his second spell as club captain Keith Hopper and his team did well but, playing four more games than in the previous season, had to concede four more defeats than before. Twenty five games were won and three drawn to set against 15 losses. A feature of the campaign was that only four of these defeats came before Christmas and the other eleven after the holiday period.

Exeter kicked off with a game at Moseley, where twelve months before they had been heavily beaten. Although losing again the difference between the two teams was much closer. Against a somewhat disjointed Moseley team, Exeter took the lead with a try engineered by Hopper following a high kick from Bob Staddon. The try was scored by Tony Vinnicombe and converted by Derek Atkins. In the second half a fortuitous bounce allowed the home side to reduce the lead but a try from second-row M. Jones put Exeter five points ahead again. Finding their feet at last the Moseley backs built a try to level the score and five minutes from time Moseley won by means of a penalty goal (8-11).

At home on the first Saturday of the new season Exeter played host to Plymouth Albion in a fixture that had been rearranged due to a cancellation the previous season when the County Ground was unfit for play. Albion had beaten Exeter twice during the previous campaign but this time the result was a win for the home side was the result after (21-8). Four days later Exeter could only manage a draw against touring Esher (6-6) and followed this with a routine win at Newton Abbot (14-6). Two days later Exeter did slightly better against Torquay Athletic (17-5). On the final Saturday of September a trip to Glamorgan Wanderers ended in a narrow defeat (0-5). Seven days later came another defeat, this time at home, against a stronger than usual Devonport Services team (3-14). This was Services first success against Exeter since October 1961. The following week the Exeter team bounced back with a home win over Redruth Exeter scored three tries and Atkins kicked thirteen points (22-3).

The game with Saracens in London was notable for two reasons. After his appearance in the final match of the previous season, this game saw the full-time return of Dick Manley to Exeter colours. He had spent two years in retirement during which time he had been building up his cabinet-making business. Secondly the game saw the referee, Jack Walne of the London Society, send the Exeter prop Mike Faulkner off the field for alleged biting. The result was a narrow defeat (5-9). Faulkner decided to stand down from the team until his case had been heard by the Devon R.F.U. In the event he did not return to the first team until the first game of 1967.

Exeter then entered a period when the team went undefeated up to New Year's Eve, a run that included eleven wins and a draw. A meeting at home against Weston super Mare was back to its usual close encounter (6-3) whilst at Clifton the home team gave way more easily (22-11). At home to Taunton, Exeter registered another win (8-0) and another followed against Exmouth at the Imperial Ground (19-0). The next home win, against St. Luke's College, would have been welcomed (13-6). This was followed by a mid-week floodlit match at Bridgwater & Albion that Exeter won quite comfortably (26-3).

The blip in the sequence came three days later when Exeter could only manage a draw at Paignton (11-11). The balance was redressed with two further away victories – at Torquay Athletic (11-3) and at Barnstaple (6-3). This latter meeting was described in a later club programme as “not a spectacular one and on no occasion reached any great height as a game of rugby football”. Opposition for the home game on the Saturday before Christmas came from London Hospital. One wonders if the medical students were focussed on the game of rugby as the programme notes apologised to spectators for the scheduled early kick-off of 2.00 p.m. The reason given was that the visitors had to travel back to London by an early train as members of the XV were appearing in the hospital's pantomime that evening! (28-5).

On Christmas Eve Teignmouth called and went home defeated (23-0) whilst Exeter also won the Boxing Day fixture at Exmouth (9-0). On the last day of the year Exeter travelled to meet Plymouth

Albion who put an end to the long sequence of unbeaten games. This game saw the debut at prop of Paul Baxter, brother of second row John Baxter (3-9). In the next match Exeter defeated Taunton by the same score as earlier in the season, but this time at Priory Park (8-0). On a firm surface at Streatham-Croydon the rugby was said to have been of high quality "but neither side could establish a real superiority", a surprising comment considering Exeter won by ten points (16-6). Remaining away from home Exeter could not match Bristol in a high scoring game where the visiting pack was outplayed (14-33).

At home against Cross Keys, after a slow start, Exeter proved to be the more enterprising side despite fielding a reserve half back pairing. On a muddy surface it looked like the Exeter forwards would be dominated for a second week running by a bigger pack and it took Exeter the best part of half an hour to break out of the visitors' half of the field. There was no score by half time but Exeter managed to open the game out and went ahead in the second period without reply from the opposition (8-0). At home to Penzance & Newlyn, Exeter chalked up another satisfying victory after containing a fight-back by the visitors (19-8).

Exeter then made the journey to Weston super Mare with a team that included five reserves. To make matters more difficult, the team was reduced to fourteen soon after the start when John Radford had to leave the field with concussion. David Hughes was taken from the back row to fill the gap in the three-quarter line. Under these handicaps, Exeter was not able to play its usual bright game but nevertheless did well. Tomlinson, on debut, scored a try as did Tony Vinnicombe and Derek Atkins landed a conversion. As pointers to the future it was noted that young Graham Milford was a lively scrum-half and Bob Staddon "looked a most competent footballer" (8-3).

Remaining at home, Exeter defeated Barnstaple "on a vicious day of heavy rain driven on by a bitter gale" when "playing must have been even less agreeable than watching". In these conditions accurate football was difficult but Exeter's better organisation allowed them to record a double over the team from North Devon. Bob Staddon scored the first try mid-way through the first half. He damaged a muscle in the process yet gamely stayed on the field more or less as a passenger (14-3).

Away in London Exeter lost to Guy's Hospital (6-15) before facing Plymouth Albion in the return game at the County Ground. As the first meeting between the teams early in the season had been arranged because a cancellation the previous year, this was the third meeting between the two rivals. So far each team had one win to its credit. Exeter lacked the services of John Baxter, the main line out jumper, but the pack managed to hold its own and continued to do so when David Hughes had to leave the field for a while after a knock on the head. Described as a "rough, tough and scrappy game" the intensity of the struggle between the close rivals caused the referee to halt the game on a couple of occasions to warn players and to settle matters down. Exeter scored the only try of the game and might have been considered unlucky not to have won (6-6).

Exeter then took a backward step winning only two of the next ten games. A revived Devonport Services team achieved a rare double over Exeter at The Rectory (4-8) and St. Luke's College won the local battle with the city team (6-11).

The next team to visit the County Ground was Bridgend who gave a brilliant display of attacking rugby. The Exeter defence was often scythed open but the home side gave a good account of itself against the team that had been proclaimed Welsh champions for three seasons running. Exeter took a short lived lead before Bridgend scored thirteen points in seven minutes. Exeter closed the gap to five points by half-time but in the second half the visitors scored four more tries to two by Exeter (19-35).

Without a win in five games, Exeter then faced Old Cranleighans to start the traditional Easter programme. Exeter returned to winning ways but it was noted that the attack lacked thrust and the team had played better in the last two defeats than they did in this game. The return of John Baxter to the pack was the highlight for home spectators (14-3).

For the first time in ten years Moseley managed to achieve a “grand slam” of victories on its Easter tour by defeating Exeter on Easter Monday. At one point Moseley scored eighteen points in twenty minutes playing accomplished football. Reading the Birmingham press reports it would appear Exeter was hardly ever in the game (12-21). The following day after the game with Leicester, the press was a little more charitable saying the home side was “unlucky to lose this one”. Exeter had chances but could not turn them into points. Indeed, it was said that Exeter played the better football. At the end Leicester went clear to win on the County Ground for the first time in three attempts (8-12).

The losing streak continued with a defeat at Cheltenham (5-13). At the Recreation Ground, Bath, the outcome was the same. Exeter was compelled to make late changes to an already weakened side. Level at half-time, Exeter had to give way to Bath’s further eleven unanswered points (3-14).

When it might have appeared that Exeter had given up on the season, the team bounced back with a resounding victory. Admittedly the opposition on the County Ground was not one of the strongest teams faced during the season but Exeter achieved their highest match points all of which came in a shortened game. The referee got his timing wrong blew the final whistle ten minutes early! Old Blues came with only a handful of wins all season. One report summed up the afternoon thus – “as a game it was too one sided to be of much interest to the spectators”, Exeter registering nine tries in all (34-3).

A foray into Northern Ireland to play Belfast Royal Academy Former Pupils was a new venture. The party departed from the County Ground on Friday 21st April and travelled by coach to Holyhead where they boarded the overnight ferry to Dublin. A further coach trip took the group to Belfast to meet their hosts. Tony Vinnicombe and David Hughes scored Exeter’s points in a narrow defeat (6-11). The party stayed overnight in Belfast before making the return trip arriving back in Exeter at 10.00 a.m. on Monday Morning.

At 8 p.m. that same evening a fixture had been arranged with Gloucester. “We expect our players may be a little tired after their week-end in Ireland especially seeing that there has been a lot of overnight travelling” commented Jack Challenger in the match programme. In the circumstances it may have come as a surprise to spectators that Exeter had won the game through a try by Graham Angell and a penalty goal by Terry Hempton (6-5).

There was more to come. Exeter went to Redruth needing to score two points to top 500 for the season. By the end of the end of the game they had scored 59. Against a good Redruth side, Exeter was inspired by half-backs Hopper and Carless. Staddon notched a personal tally of 23 points. By half-time Exeter were 31 points ahead and came near to doubling that score. Redruth claimed the first and last tries in the second half. “Redruth Humbled” said the West Briton (59-6).

Despite missing a dozen games through injury, Derek Atkins ended as the season’s top scorer with 124 points all via the boot. Top try scorers were Graham Angell with 19 closely followed by Tony Vinnicombe with 18.

The other club teams experienced mixed fortunes. The “A” XV won only 12 out of 40 games played; the “B” XV won 15 and drew three out of 31 games played; the Extra “B”, in its first season, lost only seven out of 29 games played; and finally the Colts lost only six out of 30 games played.