

37th Season 1908-9

Yet again the seasonal playing record flattered to deceive. At first glance the first team appeared to have achieved just over parity by winning 19 and losing 18 in a programme of 38 matches but Exeter's victories included the opening season romp against Sidmouth which was followed by two games which were initially labelled "unofficial" but the victories appear to have been included in the final tally. Two wins against Blundell's School were also included.

Moreover the fixture list had an even more parochial look than before. Games against Newport and Northampton were declined and neither Bristol nor Gloucester were included. The furthest "out games" were those against Cheltenham and Cinderford.

Against local opponents Exeter again struggled to do themselves justice. The team won only one of five games with Newton Abbot, one out of four games against Plymouth and one of three matches with Exmouth.

The season promised more with the election of Fred Carter to the position of 1st XV captain. At fly-half he was the outstanding player of the previous season. A Cornishman, Carter started his career with the Newlyn club before progressing to Redruth and Penzance. He regularly played for Cornwall in county championship games. He arrived in Exeter on enrolling at St. Luke's College where he played for the college and captained the team for the 1904-5 season. He first played for Exeter the following season often playing brilliantly at fly-half and creating many tries for the three-quarters.

Unfortunately Fred Carter's reign as captain lasted only three matches after which he reluctantly resigned to further his career by enrolling at the newly opened Chelsea College of Physical Education in London. While in the capital he turned out for London Devonians for a couple of seasons before deciding to retire from the game.

Back at Exeter, Carter's place as captain was taken by centre-three-quarter A.E. Harris who had been a contemporary of Carter at St. Luke's College. He remained in post until having to miss the last seven matches owing to a hand injury.

Practices began as usual though one scheduled for early September did not take place when the Exeter Sports Day timetable over-ran causing the rugby practice to be cancelled. New players arrived on the scene. One, a winger named G. Smith, was said to be a former boxing champion. He soon showed his try scoring abilities but too often he frustrated home supporters by his lack of handling skills. Another player to appear regularly was centre-three-quarter W. Atkins who bucked the trend having switched from playing association football to rugby.

A comfortable win over Sidmouth opened the season (26-0). All the scoring came from two players, the aforementioned Smith who, faced with a weak opponent ran in five tries, and the ever available vacation player G.D. Roberts who landed four conversions and a penalty goat. Exeter had placed a full strength side in the field to face inexperienced opposition.

Then came two “unofficial” fixtures. The first, a mid-week game, was styled a “Carnival Match” against Tiverton Heathcoat – the lace factory based team. This time Exeter included only three or four senior players (14-5). On the next Saturday Exeter were due to face G.D. Roberts’ XV but it would appear that he was unable to raise a team. The gap was filled by a team under the name of Mr. Huggins’ XV or Paignton Scarlets. The press referred to the opponents simply as Paignton as a full Paignton team was fielded led by Huggins, the club captain. Sid Kerswill scored three tries in a comfortable victory (23-3).

At the end of the month Newton, at home, brought Exeter down to earth by winning (0-8). October started with two victories, one at home against Bridgwater (8-3) and a very satisfying away display against Torquay Athletic (9-0).

See-saw results continued until the end of the year. An away defeat at Paignton (0-13) was followed by a narrow home win over Plymouth (5-3), a game that attracted 4,000 spectators. Away defeats by Devonport Albion (0-19) and Plymouth (0-7) followed.

In November Newton Abbot came to the County Ground with their reputation under a cloud. Earlier in the season in a match at Paignton one of their forwards struck the referee following which he was arrested for assault. Subsequently the player was sentenced to one month’s imprisonment. In addition the Devon R.F.U. suspended two other Newton players following the incident. Dispirited though the opposition might have been Exeter nonetheless deserved their victory (8-3) especially as they played much of the game with only fourteen players. One of the forwards named Rowe turned up late and then had the misfortune to be taken off injured early in the second half.

A win at home against Torquay Athletic (3-0) was pleasing especially as the game was said to have been spoiled by the kick and rush tactics of the visitors. The following week saw Exeter’s unbeaten home record for the season being taken by Plymouth (3-7). Despite players being missing on a county match day 4,000 spectators turned up and the Exonian Band was present to provide entertainment.

Defeat at Cheltenham (0-14) was followed by three wins to end the first half of the season, the victims being Exmouth (7-3), Old Edwardians (18-4) and London Devonians (13-12). The latter game was played in snow after unemployed men had been enlisted to clear the pitch. The visiting team included in their ranks two former Exeter captains, Tom Kelly and Fred Carter, as well as Alf Manning a much travelled forward.

The New Year began with three away defeats. The first of these came at Torquay Athletic by a narrow margin on a “sodden midden” (5-6). Half-back Sid Kerswill was en route to Torquay when he was “plucked off the train” to play for Devon in place of James Peters who had missed his train.

Whilst 6,000 spectators watched Exeter City play Watford, the Exeter rugby team was losing at Newton Abbot on another sodden pitch (3-11). This was followed by a predictable defeat by Exmouth (5-26) Played midweek to replace a previously cancelled game Exeter as usual found it difficult to raise a representative team. The side included three players who were to make their sole appearance for the club.

A home cup tie against Paignton saw a return to winning ways (10-8). This preceded two more wins, one at Sidmouth (12-0) when Exeter turned up late and the game ended in semi-darkness, and a satisfying win over Torquay Athletic at the County Ground (11-0).

On the first Saturday of February, Plymouth Argyle met Exeter City at home in an F.A. Cup match before a reported crowd of 20,000. On the same day Exeter were at home to Devonport Albion before 3,000 spectators. Unfortunately the Exeter half-backs played well below par. Even so Exeter were thought to be unlucky to lose (3-8).

A home draw against Cinderford (3-3) was achieved before a side containing half a dozen Reserves plus a debutant in G. Parsons formerly of Bath went down at Plymouth (0-18). It could be suggested that Exeter senior players did not relish trips to the city of Plymouth as, on the next Saturday, the team suffered an unexpected severe defeat by the R.N.E.C. There had been eight refusals and the match was described as a "fiasco" (0-29). Perhaps the better players took to the field at home as the Reserves beat their college counterparts more than comfortably (48-0)

There were no cry-offs for the Devon Cup semi-final match at Newton Abbot. The only missing player was W.J. Pike who had damaged a finger. Before the match the local fire brigade were engaged to pump water off the pitch into a nearby leat. The match turned into a scrabble in the mud. As the Newton forwards were in better condition than the Exeter eight, the home team prevailed (0-9).

Reluctance by members of the 1st XV to travel was again soon evident when only six players accepted the invitation to play at Cinderford. Perhaps it was just as well for Exeter that the match had to be cancelled due to an unfit ground. At home the following week against Cheltenham there was no shortage of players as both G.D. Roberts and W.E. Mann were included in a strong team (13-3).

A first encounter with a representative Royal Navy team also ended successfully (14-4). G.D. Roberts appeared in this match also and suffered the agony of three conversions attempts rebounding back into play from the cross bar. A fourth attempt did earn the extra two points.

At the end of March club President, P.C.M. (Peter) Veitch, of the local family of seedsmen, entertained some sixty committee and playing members to dinner at Palmer & Edwards' Restaurant in the High Street. Mr. Veitch said he wanted to meet the men who played "such a sportsmanlike" game. He stated that Exeter played with pluck but not a lot of luck and he acknowledged that the club played not primarily to attract good gates. They played for the love of the sport. Clearly his comments were made in reference to the rise of professional soccer in the city. In reply, F.G. Towill, a long serving committee man said that the club was at a turning point and they would not let rugby football die in the city. All these remarks suggest that the gathering was an informal crisis meeting but in fact it was a statement of the club's loyalty to the game. However from a distance of time the inference could be taken that within the club complacency prevailed.

If the dinner had been intended to be a morale boosting exercise for the players, it did not go to plan as the 1st XV lost five of the six remaining fixtures.

On the Saturday following the dinner, the Royal Naval Engineering College visited the County Ground for the last time. The College was soon to be disbanded. The first match between the two teams had taken place in 1885 and the collegians provided popular opposition. The home fixture was held on what came to be known as “Ladies’ Day” at Matford and the students were described as the “Ladies’ Pets”.

Exeter must have been annoyed by their defeat (11-15) as three tries were scored, one of which was converted, whilst the college scored but one unconverted try. Three dropped goals (then worth four points each) provided the winning margin.

A few days later Exeter placed a motion before the Rugby Football Union proposing all goals be reduced to two points in value (which was then the case in the professional Northern Union game). Bath submitted an amendment proposing that a reduction only apply to dropped goals (4 points to 3). In the event the proposals were not carried as the “old stagers cling to the value of dropping”.

At the club A.G.M. in June the season was declared to be satisfactory despite gate takings at home matches dropping by £300 (£17,000) and the deficit increasing from £10 (£570) to £34 (£2,000).

The Reserve team more than held its own again winning 14 and drawing five of its 27 matches.