

52nd Year 1923-4

This was the season during which the club held its Jubilee celebrations. At the time of the Jubilee Dinner founder members did recall that the club had been formed in October 1872 but were of the opinion that, as no formal records existed, organised matches did not take place until a year later. Press reports however do show that organised matches against other teams had taken place during the 1872-3 season and at least ten players that took part in the first game of 1873-4 had appeared in matches during 1872-3 suggesting strong continuity between the seasons.

Whenever the birth date the fact that the club had survived recent vicissitudes and had now completed over fifty years playing Rugby football was indeed due cause for celebration.

A special season deserved a special captain and Exeter already had one on hand in the imposing form of Dr. H.L.G. Hughes. First appearing for the club at the start of the 1921-2 season Glyn Hughes was soon to establish himself as an automatic choice for both club and county. Born in South Africa and spending his early years in south Wales Hughes, like his father, pursued a medical career. In rugby terms he first came to prominence playing for University College Hospital and the United Hospitals. He then joined Blackheath and played for the Barbarians before the outbreak of the First World War.

During the war Hughes was awarded the Military Cross, the Croix de Guerre and was several times mentioned in Despatches. He was also seriously wounded on three separate occasions.

After the war Hughes returned to his medical career and on obtaining a general practice through the late incumbent's executors he became a G.P. at Chagford. During the 1920-1 season he appeared in the Torquay Athletic XV before switching allegiance to Exeter with whom he continued to play for six seasons.

His distinguished career in rugby football is best known for Hughes' association with the Barbarians Football Club for whom he made twenty appearances between 1913 and 1926 all of which came when the club was on its traditional Easter tour in south Wales. He captained the side on four occasions. As an administrator he joined the Barbarians committee as treasurer in 1928 and by the time of his death in 1973 he had served as their President for eighteen years.

Additionally he travelled to Argentina with the 1936 British team where he acted as referee in matches wearing his Barbarians jersey.

At the outbreak of the Second World War Hughes was mobilised in 1939 and was sent to France. By 1944 he had been promoted to Brigadier and became Chief Medical Officer in the allied advance in Europe. In April 1945 he was the first Allied Medical Officer to enter the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen where he took command organising the control of disease, the distribution of food and care of the camp victims.

Practice for the new season began on the 1st September but the first match was not scheduled until the 15th with the first home game following four days later. The late start was due to the fact that the County Ground, in its role as a multi-sport venue, would be in use by the tennis club for the first two weeks of September.

After the usual start of season practices a strong team was sent to meet Cullompton for what was classed as a final trial during which centre Carah was injured (24-3). Despite its declared status this game appears to have been included in the official playing record.

To lose at Taunton in a game “full of exciting incidents” came as a disappointment especially as Exeter “should not have lost” (6-11). Displaying the see-saw nature of the season as a whole two victories (both at home) were followed by two defeats.

In a midweek evening game an aggressive Crediton team was overcome (6-0). After a fast paced game Barnstaple succumbed more easily (13-0). Exeter was accused of being too orthodox at Sidmouth (4-14). At the County Ground Exeter rallied too late to overcome Brixham in a Devon Senior Cup encounter (0-6). In the cup competition Exeter performed much better than in recent seasons but still did not qualify for the knock-out stages.

Although the Newport club did not figure on the fixture card this season a team from the same neighbourhood was entertained for a mid-week match. Newport & Monmouthshire Police sent a strong team by whom Exeter was “beaten but not disgraced” (5-11). Exeter playing with the wind scored their points in the first half but the visitors took command after half time. The Exeter team was said to be “not at full strength” and it was further hampered by injuries to George Liddle and full-back Frank Buckland who broke an arm.

Student bodies provided the opposition for the next three matches which resulted in mixed fortunes for the city team. An away game against Royal Naval Engineering College saw Exeter score six tries in a close encounter (20-19). Making his debut for Exeter was Lionel Paget Hedges a county cricketer with Kent and later Gloucestershire. He made several promising appearances for Exeter at stand-off half or centre until he left the district early in 1924 to pursue his career as a teacher at Cheltenham College.

At the County Ground in a first meeting with Bristol University the home forwards failed to apply their weight advantage in either set or loose scrums in a “scrambling” game and so the advantage was lost (11-14). Four days later victory came relatively easily against Blundell’s School (20-6) in a game that was included in the programme of events for Carnival Day the proceeds from which were donated to the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital.

As usual defeat came at Plymouth Albion (0-11) but then at home Exeter overcame Bridgwater & Albion, the Somerset club thereby losing its unbeaten record (6-3). Both Exeter tries were scored by winger Harold Pidgeon during one of which he covered three-quarters of the length of the field. Wellington provided the next opposition and redressed the balance for Somerset clubs (0-8). Exeter, making the journey with a good team, was disrupted after five minutes play when well-travelled stand-off J.R. Illingworth injured a knee and left the field. Hedges took his place and a forward was withdrawn from the pack.

It was said that Exeter had not beaten Albion (be it Devonport or Plymouth) for fifteen years and the result of the next match was not to break the sequence even though Exeter led at half-time. In hail and rain at Plymouth the home side proved to be “a little too clever for Exeter” (3-7). Before the next home match a similar claim was made that Exeter had not beaten Exmouth for fifteen years though this claim can be disputed. The issue was settled by a penalty goal kicked by Dr. K.S. Dick that enabled Exeter to overcome their seaside neighbours despite playing George Liddle on the wing (3-0). Evidence of the effects of the

war were still very evident as at this match a collection was made in support of blind servicemen.

Continuing the run of games against local sides Exeter narrowly lost in driving rain at Newton Abbot where recovered full-back Frank Buckland was the outstanding player (0-3). Revived form saw Paignton defeated despite four players (Lammert, Woodrow, Jones, Hughes) being on duty for Devon against the Royal Navy (9-5). Paignton lost their scrum-half through injury early on but the offer of a substitute was not taken up until after half-time.

Again at home the team comfortably defeated Devonport Services (30-6) but on this date the "other" Services XV was entertaining Bath. Away to Torquay Athletic Exeter then came down to earth by their largest margin of defeat during the whole season (3-20).

Boxing Day opposition came from south Wales in the form of Ebbw Vale. Exeter was able to field Cambridge University Blue and future England International W.E. "Bill" Tucker in their team. When on his way to London to play for Blackheath, Tucker missed his rail connection at Exeter and turned up at the County Ground to see if he could get a game. Jack Marley, one of the home forwards, sportingly stood down to accommodate the visitor. Tucker played a prominent role in the drawn game (3-3). Then to follow, rounding off the holiday fare, a Past Players XV was beaten (18-6).

For the last game of 1923 when Taunton was the visiting team Exeter, for no obvious reason, adopted the New Zealand formation of seven forwards and eight backs. As it turned out the playing conditions dictated that the game be played almost entirely among the forwards. As Taunton arrived late the game lasted only thirty minutes each way. Nevertheless it was said that "Exeter were well satisfied with a draw"! (3-3).

The opening game of 1924 found Exeter making the short trip to Exmouth. The gap between the two sides was now beginning to narrow and after winning at home by one score Exeter lost away by a similar difference (0-5). Reverting to a standard line up with Hedges having left and T.D. Yeo being injured a new fly-half was found in G.D. Clarke captain of Exeter University College. In this game the Exeter forwards were heavier but could not dominate the game.

With Devon facing Somerset at Wellington Exeter did not commit to a fixture on the second Saturday of the year. H.L.G. Hughes and T.R.K. Jones were included among the county pack. Two away wins came next. Against Bristol University in driving rain on a sodden pitch Exeter avenged the earlier home defeat (3-0). Making his debut for Exeter was one Henry Rew a future England International and British Lion. On the same day at Exeter former international T.S. Kelly aged 41 appeared at centre for the Reserves in a defeat of the University College.

The second away win came at Teignmouth where W. E. "Billy" Braddon scored a try from the half-way line (6-3). Back at home Exeter held Newton Abbot, at that time unbeaten in the Devon Senior League, to a draw (0-0). Despite recent successes the attendance was not as good as anticipated. A similar comment was made about the next game, a mid-week special fixture against the Royal Air Force arranged as part of the Jubilee celebrations. The R.A.F. scored four tries without reply (0-12). Both teams attended the Jubilee Dinner at Deller's Café in the evening.

A victory away against Devonport Services with a team that included five reserves due to injury and influenza was welcomed. As usual Services fielded two senior teams on this date, the other facing Guys Hospital, but the home side was said to be stronger than Exeter usually faced as it included four county players. Given the weak composition of the Exeter side the win was even more meritorious (8-0).

Defeats at Brixham, where in contrast to normal form the Exeter forwards matched their opponents in the loose but not the tight (3-8), and at home against Wellington when Exeter was said to be "off form" (6-10) preceded a run of four games of which Exeter won two and drew two. At Paignton without four leading players a draw was a satisfactory outcome (3-3). Exeter very nearly won the game. Henry Rew, who was gaining a reputation as a goal-kicker as well as a top-class forward, made a "brilliant attempt to kick a penalty goal from half-way, the ball dropping inches short". Alf Woodrow and his brother Sid formed the half-back pairing against R.N.E.C. and winger Harold Pidgeon scored three tries (19-0) then before a meagre mid-week crowd the Combined Colleges were also defeated (9-0). In contrast a record crowd assembled at Barnstaple for a Devon Senior Cup game. After a close struggle with plenty of back movement honours ended even (6-6).

The season at home ended with four games in a row of which three were won. The loss came in the first game of this sequence against Torquay Athletic who won by the margin of a conversion kick and a forward pass missed by the referee in a try scoring move. (6-8).

Mid-week saw Sidmouth go under by the only score of the game (3-0). Play was keen against Teignmouth but the spectators were not satisfied as open play was difficult for Exeter owing to the "spoiling tactics" of the visiting pack hampering scrum-half Alf Woodrow. It was pointed out that these tactics were legitimate but did not make for an attractive game. A Teignmouth forward was sent from the field by the referee and when asked by a spectator what the cause was the player was said to have replied "It was just what I wanted"! The press called for the player to be suspended into for part of the following season.

The last home game produced a fine display by a depleted team against Redruth (12-7). Another home game had been scheduled but as Sidmouth was engaged in a cup semi-final at the County Ground the fixture was scratched.

As the County Ground was then to be prepared for tennis and other summer sports Exeter finished the season with an Easter tour. All three games were lost. The heaviest defeat came in the first game against Bridgwater & Albion who scored five tries (6-15). A bright fast game saw a Blaenavon victory. The Western Mail drew attention to a "very unusual number of penalty goals". Five were registered in total, Henry Rew kicking three of them (12-20). The season finally ended at Ebbw Vale where "The tackling and defensive work of the visitors was very fine" (0-5).

For this celebratory season the teams achieved a playing record worthy of the occasion. The 1st XV won 18 and drew five of the 41 games played whilst the Reserves played 26 games winning fourteen and drawing three of them. John Wisden's Rugby Football Almanack contained a review of the first fifteen season that commented "they had a pack, rather ragged and uncertain in actual scrummaging but splendid in the loose", whilst "their backs rather lacked determination as well as speed". Over all the verdict was that "Exeter fulfilled a very heavy programme with a fair amount of success".

Financially all was not so rosy. Although there was a balance in hand in the General Account the Revenue Account showed a serious loss. Despite a press report at Christmas stating that gates had trebled, attendance at home matches fell away in the second half of the season. T.S. Kelly reported that because of financial restraints he was experiencing difficulty in arranging better fixtures. Presumably the club could not offer enticing guarantees.

The club was still attempting to gain more control over the County Ground. By the end of the season some 1500 shares in the County Ground Athletic Company were held but the club was not able to purchase the ground. The Rugby Football Union was unable to grant a loan for this purpose because it would not benefit rugby football alone as the ground was used for other sports. The Supporters Club's efforts raised significant sums of money and more financial help was to be sought from local residents.

Two major events were held to celebrate the club's Jubilee. The Jubilee Dinner at Deller's in February was attended by nearly 200 members and guests and was full of speeches, reminiscences and musical entertainment. A Jubilee Ball was held in March at the Rougemont Hotel where music was provided by the "Blue Lagoon" dance band from Torquay and dancing went on until 2 a.m.