

48th Year 1919-0

The first full post-war season had not been long underway before it was apparent that Exeter would struggle to hold its position in Devon rugby. The reasons why Exeter lagged behind other local clubs is not altogether clear but one suggested by the club at the end of the season was that there were few players from whom to choose teams week by week. Early practices showed that there was some "fine talent" at Topsham Barracks but although several officers did appear for the Chiefs they were not available on a consistent basis. Selection, therefore, would show little consistency.

The forwards were in need of more weight. The Exeter eight was described as the lightest in the county and difficulty was found in winning enough ball to feed some promising three-quarters. The forwards too often lacked combination and the pack was said to be "wanting science".

An old problem with the team reoccurred on a number of occasions leading to accusations of lack of interest and commitment by the players. Too often the Chiefs travelled to away matches with less than a full complement and at home the start of matches was delayed by Exeter players arriving late. This latter problem improved after press comment drew attention to the annoyance of paying spectators who could not be certain of the time a match would end.

Another notable feature was the growing reliance on a pool of experienced players who would have been regarded as veterans. The elected captain, Stan Havill, had made his debut in 1908 and his deputy, Sammy Lawrence, two years earlier in 1906. During the course of this season it appeared that Lawrence may have assumed the captaincy of the team even when Havill was playing. Outside the scrum Percy Kerswill (1906) and Sid Kerswill (1905) were regulars. There were occasional appearances by Billy Pike (1905), Bert Isaac (1907) and Joe Weeks (1909). In October both W.J. Lutley, who was captain in 1913-4, and R.S. Read were demobilised after five years service in the Army. On their return to Exeter they were both immediately drafted into the senior team.

On the other side of the coin appearances were made by young players with strong club connections. D.P. Wilcocks played regularly at wing three-quarter. His father was J.M. Wilcocks, an Exeter crowd favourite some thirty years previously. W. Brock, lately of Exeter School, was the son of Willie Brock and nephew of Arthur Brock a former club captain. Sons of another earlier club captain, J. Walton Hussey, made fleeting appearances. When Exeter travelled to Portsmouth the brothers were in opposition, Jack for Exeter and Lieut. Thomas for the United Services.

One major cause of concern for the club was the lack of a grandstand and dressing rooms for home games at the County Ground. An appeal was made for funds to replace the burnt out buildings was made. The estimated cost was £3,500 (£75,000) of which £900 (£19,000) would be covered by insurance. There was a fear that the ground might be sold for building.

Troubled times were evident on the field of play. Only one creditable victory was achieved in fifteen games up to Christmas. Two other wins were registered (against Blundell's School) as was one draw. The other eleven games were lost. A press

review of the season to date at Christmas highlighted the fact that “Exeter is on a very rough road” but it added that there was a “dogged determination to carry on”. The exasperation of one spectator at a particularly inept performance was expressed in a call of “Get out, ye girt vools!” There were large defeats but the margin of loss in many games was small and Exeter was praised for trying to play open rugby in adversity.

The opening fixture was against a team that had been strengthened following the war. The Bridgwater club had joined forces with Bridgwater Albion to form a new organisation entitled Bridgwater & Albion. A hard game in Somerset was expected but Exeter fell away and the margin of defeat was disappointing (3-23). At home, Exeter then faced an Exmouth team that had been strengthened by the inclusion of two Newport players who were on holiday in the town. A delayed kick-off caused by the home team meant the game ended in a downpour. The visitors were worthy of their margin of victory (0-10).

Industrial unrest caused the cancellation of the next fixture. The Royal Navy team from Plymouth were unable to travel to Exeter due to a national railway strike. Instead a game with “another strong local team” was arranged. The opposition could not have been all that strong as Exeter defeated a “Scratch XV” by a wide margin, a result that was unlikely to have been included in the official record.

The following week Newton Abbot II failed to turn up at the County Ground for a Reserves fixture and entrance money had to be refunded. Meanwhile the Chiefs were defeated by Torquay Athletic in front of 3,000 spectators. The margin of defeat again disappointed Exeter followers (0-24). Exeter full-back Sid Chudley by brave play probably prevented further Torquay scoring. Play was open and fast and “the referee took off his coat owing to the pace”.

Exeter at home escaped defeat for the first time in the season by managing to draw with Weston (8-8). The result might have been different had not centre Colin Hoare suffered a knee injury that handicapped him for the last quarter of the game.

At Bath, missing at least three first choice players, Exeter achieved one of their best results of the season. They did not win but “Exeter succeeded in giving Bath a fright” according to the Western Daily Press (8-11).

True to character, just when it seemed that form had been regained, Exeter suffered an embarrassing, heavy and disappointing home defeat at the hands of Plymouth (6-35). Plymouth was another club to flourish in the immediate post-war years. The original Plymouth club suffered as a result of pre-war investigations into professionalism. Devonport Albion was to lose its ground to the military during the war. The result of these set-backs was the emergence of a new club that became known as Plymouth Albion, a team that would continue to be a scourge on Exeter rugby.

Entertaining the Royal Naval Depot from Plymouth, Exeter, without the services of skipper Stan Havill, registered their first win of the season (18-0). This score line was almost reversed on a visit to Exmouth where defeat was said to be “no disgrace” (0-17). Though defeated, Exeter employed open tactics leading to a comment that “It will pay them to lose matches by the style of play they adopted rather than to attempt

to win by adopting inferior and less attractive methods". From this comment it might appear that the press expected Exeter lose however they tried to play!

In a match lasting 35 minutes each half, Exeter defeated Blundell's School (9-5). Less than a month later at Tiverton the scholars were again defeated (6-0). In between times Exeter lost three matches. The first of these at home to Paignton saw the return to the team of Lutley and Read after demobilisation. The margin of defeat came through a single score (0-3). Apparently the referee, Exeter committee man Bert Isaac, used a new whistle for the game and used it to good effect in awarding some 40 free-kicks! Due to the delayed arrival of Exeter's train at Newton Abbot the game started 45 minutes late. This did not help Exeter's cause and a heavy defeat ensued (0-27).

"Exeter did quite well at Weston" commented a reporter. The game was played in a high wind when a successful home team conversion kick was the margin between the teams (3-5). Problems with railway travel reared up again, this time for the return journey to Exeter. A delay meant that Wilcocks had to cycle to Woodbury while others had to walk home – Joe Ryan to Ide, Sam Lawrence to Countess Wear and Paddon to Wonford.

Two home defeats by Somerset clubs came next. Bridgwater & Albion were the better side (3-12) and against Taunton the main difference between the teams was in the packs of forwards. Exeter showed weakness in the loose and scrums. There were good individual efforts but there was an obvious lack of combination (3-9).

Despite the perceived paucity of player numbers, the club arranged to play two first team fixtures on Boxing Day. At Cranford, where there was a good gate, Exmouth ran out easy winner by six tries to nil (0-18). In contrast to some pre-war seasons there was now a good relationship with the "Cockles". A commitment had been made to their neighbours and Exeter honoured the fixture. Meanwhile a team containing several reserve players, plus Douglas and Reed from Blundell's, faced Glamorgan Wanderers at the County Ground. Exeter had attempted to arrange a morning kick-off but the Welshmen declined. A "splendid game" ensued in which Sid Chudley and Percy Kerswell scored the tries that won the match (6-0).

The following day another home victory was recorded in front of a better than usual crowd. The Royal Naval Depot, Plymouth was the defeated opponent (18-0). Improved form shown in two victories in two days promised better things for the second half of the season but it was not to be. Nine straight defeats were to follow.

The first game of 1920 saw Sidmouth visiting the County Ground. This was another game in which Exeter did well but not well enough (3-6). Two days later it was the turn of Newport to provide the opposition. The leading team from Wales was so far undefeated in the season and fielded a team containing nine international players. The Exeter side was almost an invitation team as it comprised ten Exeter players, four from Exmouth and one from Torquay Athletic. This combination proved to be no match for the visitors who ran in nine tries (4-33).

Exeter gave themselves no hope of victory by sending only twelve players to face United Services at Portsmouth. Three substitutes were found, one of whom proved to

be the outstanding player for the visitors. Jack Hussey was included in the Exeter ranks to face his brother T.D. appearing for the Services. "The players were covered in mud after a game of many thrills". The thrills must have all been provided by the home team (0-24).

Against Newton Abbot the Exeter forwards "came out of their shell" and this led to a five point half time lead. Thereafter the game was typical of many during the season with much open play only for Exeter to lose by a narrow margin (5-6). Newton was thought to have been lucky to win as Exeter did not take their chances.

The return fixture with United Services, Portsmouth, meant another daunting task for Exeter. The visitors included W.J.A. Davies and C.A. Kershaw, the famous England half-back pairing. Despite facing a heavier Services pack, the light Exeter forwards helped the home team to a four point half-time lead whilst playing with the wind. After the interval roles were reversed and the Services ran out victors (8-23). Lieut. G.H. Moxon scored a try from full-back for Exeter.

A first visit to Taunton for eight years brought defeat though Exeter did make a fight of it in wind and rain during the second half (6-25). Following this game it was observed that "Exeter wants a leader". This game was followed by a hard tussle at home to Torquay Athletic but the visitors prevailed (0-6). The next home game proved to be a disappointment. At Bath Exeter had played one of their best games of the season but at home the display was below par and the back play described as slovenly (3-19).

The comments on the next game revolved around the "lack of interest" shown by Exeter players. Only thirteen players travelled to Plymouth to fulfil one of the strongest fixtures on the list. Two substitutes were found, one of whom dropped a goal for his adopted side but the scale of the defeat was inevitable (7-38).

In typical Exeter fashion of old this heavy loss was followed by a run of five matches without defeat. On the face of it this was quite an achievement in such a poor season but on closer inspection only one of the games added much merit to the playing record. This came in the first game of the sequence when Exeter held Exmouth to a "surprise draw" at the County Ground (3-3).

For the next four games Exeter faced only moderate opposition. Sending fourteen men to the Royal Naval Engineering College, the depleted team managed another draw (3-3). A mid-week game against the 14th Brigade Royal Field Artillery hardly tested Exeter's mettle (30-8). In the return with the Royal Naval Engineering College Exeter's forwards enjoyed the rare advantage of weight superiority over the students (14-3). Another mid-week game with several reserves being fielded led to another draw, this time against Exeter University College (3-3). There the sequence ended and Exeter lost seven of the final eight games of the season.

At Paignton the Exeter team was led out onto the field by one of their supporters carrying the team mascot decorated in city colours. There is no record of what form the mascot took. Lacking the services of two or three first choice backs Exeter nonetheless played a fast and open game yet lost by the game's solitary score (0-3).

At Devonport Services the forwards again played well in adverse conditions but to no avail (8-22).

The Easter programme started with a defeat by the Risca club from Wales after a close game (9-11) to be followed by the regular loss to Old Merchant Taylors (0-16).

On Easter Tuesday the visiting Civil Service Wanderers from London played a very gentlemanly game. Before kick-off the team agreed that the throw from touch should travel five yards instead of line-out players standing up to the touch-line. When an Exeter player touched down for a try the home touch judge held up his flag but he was ignored by the referee who awarded the try. On another occasion the movement leading to a further Exeter try involved a blatant forward pass. Again the referee awarded the score. On neither occasion did any of the visiting players dispute the decisions. Even if these scores had been ruled out Exeter might still have squeezed home (14-6).

Exeter must have exhausted its luck for the season because in the last three matches, all away from home, the citizens lost to their three nearest rivals – Exmouth (0-28), Crediton (0-3) and Sidmouth (3-17). Against Exmouth “Exeter could do nothing right” and they started the Sidmouth game with only thirteen players on the field.

A July meeting recorded “much anxiety in many parts as to the future of Exeter Football Club” but despite the poor season “the committee look forward to the future with confidence”. No official playing record was reported but the 40 games played contained only eight victories and four drawn games.

If this had been a tough season for the club then the following season was to be even tougher.