

103rd Year 1974-5

“Once again the season has been very successful” pronounced the Annual Report. Even though the senior team played four more games the number of victories returned remained at 27. The number of defeats increased to 12 while the remaining four games of the 43 played were drawn. Initially the team’s performance was affected by long-term injuries to leading players but then, after Christmas, much improved combined play was seen. The highlight of the season was said to be a narrow defeat by Moseley on Easter Monday when the Midlanders took the game with a late try. Again Exeter was not successful in the Devon Cup. Bob Staddon, the captain, described the season as “rather inconsistent”.

R.C. (Bob) Staddon was regarded by many as the outstanding Exeter player over his fifteen year playing career with the club. Whilst at St. Luke’s College he made his debut for Exeter as a winger in October 1964 becoming a regular selection during the 1966-7 season as a full-back. He was also to appear on several occasions as a fly-half. His reputation was built around not just his defensive play but also his ability to turn defence into attack. His value was increased by accurate place kicking and opportunist dropped foals. He featured in many games for Devon but, to the surprise of many, was not always an automatic first choice. In representative rugby he reached his pinnacle in the 1970-1 season when he was selected to play in an England trial. He announced his retirement at the end of the 1979-0 season but was persuaded to lace up his boots again for several matches during the 1980-1 season.

Bob’s close association with the playing side of the club continued when he acted as coach and became a valued member of the committee. His active involvement has lasted into the professional era and he is now President of the club. It is typical of the man that during his season as captain of the club he appeared in all 43 games played and amassed 317 points as well!

September was usually a crowded month for the senior side and this season proved no exception when four matches were played in the first week. On Monday 2nd September the Manchester club, on its first visit to the County Ground, was defeated (14-6). Two days later Exeter went to Teignmouth to open the South Devon’s Centenary celebrations. When the two teams had last met, and indeed when they were to next meet, Exeter registered 80 or more points but on this occasion Teignmouth was determined to prove that they could match the city side (24-13). After a rest of another two days Exeter faced Richmond in a Friday evening encounter at home. The London team won by six points (9-15). The following afternoon it was Exeter’s turn to win by six points when defeating the visiting Esher tourists (18-12).

After a week to recover, Exeter could not find the combined play to defeat another first time visitor to the County Ground, Terenure College from Dublin (10-23). Two narrow home victories then came on consecutive days, against Cheltenham on a Friday evening (19-16) and Torquay Athletic the following day (7-6). On the last Saturday of the month the next opponent was scheduled to be Bath but in the early days of national knock-out rugby scheduling fixtures was not always easy. The Rugby Football Union deemed that Bath should play Falmouth as winners of the Somerset and Cornwall cup competitions and so Exeter, as reported in The Times, “sportingly consented to be left high and dry”. Having played seven matches already in September the Exeter players might have welcomed the rest.

Devonport Services came to Exeter a week after defeating St. Luke’s College but an altered team proved to be no match for a refreshed Exeter team that ran riot. Skipper Staddon kicked 22 points in a resounding victory (70-6). The next visiting team was Redruth, another club enjoying its centenary but Exeter did not allow the team from Cornwall any cause for celebration by ending its run of twelve matches without defeat (22-6). It was on the third Saturday in October that Exeter played only its second away game of the season. A visit to London to face Saracens brought the third defeat to date (12-30).

First time visitors Birmingham for much of the game looked to be clear winners of the next contest. Exeter, without its entire first choice front row who were playing for Devon, left it until the last twenty minutes to establish a hold on the game and to draw level. The final try came from a brilliant solo effort by centre Phil Holman. The Birmingham Evening Post summary of the game was “Birmingham Pipped” (16-16).

A mid-week trip found Exeter playing a match to mark the inauguration of Brixham’s floodlights. The game was as tight as might have been expected (12-3). Two more away matches brought two more victories – against Taunton (17-12) and Exmouth (28-3). The next home game saw a return to first team duty of hooker John Lockyer after a long injury lay off. The opposition came from St. Luke’s College and honours ended even (10-10). Sidcup then visited the County ground and went away defeated (26-12).

Having drawn with St. Luke’s College a fortnight earlier, Exeter might have had well founded hopes of defeating the students when the two teams met again in the Third Round of the Devon Cup but it was not to be. The margin was decisive (9-21). St. Luke’s went on to win the trophy. A week later at The Recreation Ground against Torquay Athletic, Exeter lost again (16-25). Equilibrium was restored when Barnstaple was defeated at Pottington Road (13-3) and Glamorgan Wanderers held to a draw in Wales (16-16). Then Exmouth was defeated at the County Ground on Boxing Day (28-8). The year did not end well however as Plymouth Albion won the meeting at Beacon Park (7-13).

As if to highlight the team’s inconsistent form, six matches were won on the trot to start 1975. A home meeting with Taunton resulted in an easy victory (29-0) before the next two games, away from home, proved to be slightly closer encounters – Clifton (12-4) and Bridgwater & Albion (17-13). The County Ground was unfit for play and so the next match, against Cross Keys, had to be cancelled. An improvement in the weather enabled the meeting the following week with London Hospital to go ahead (24-0). At Weston super Mare, Exeter once again had difficulty in mastering the home team and the victory was achieved by a just single point (7-6). Beating Barnstaple at the County Ground proved to be a less difficult task (21-3). A visit to London to meet Guy’s Hospital provided Exeter with its largest away win for some considerable time (39-8).

The winning sequence came to an abrupt end at home when Plymouth Albion again beat their local rivals by the margin of just a single point (13-14). After the runaway victory against Devonport Services earlier in the season, a visit to The Rectory should have held no fears for Exeter. The game was duly won but the contest was much closer (14-9). For the team’s first visit to Beeston to face Nottingham, Exeter agreed to a Saturday evening kick-off to avoid a clash with the televised England v Scotland International. The outcome did not work in Exeter’s favour and a heavy defeat was sustained (4-33).

By mid-week Exeter had recovered sufficiently to hold St. Luke’s College to a draw for the second time in the season. Exeter staged a come-back in the second half to take the lead but Phil Arbourne went off with a dislocated shoulder and the College drew level with five minutes of play left (12-12). Four days later in a home encounter with Penzance & Newlyn, Exeter rushed into a seven point lead in as many minutes but the men from the Duchy came back strongly after taking time to settle. The visitors missed five penalty attempts at goal before registering their only score in the second half. Exeter made the game safe when centre Phil Holman touched down after a break-away movement. The game was described as “colourless” being spoilt by incessant rain (13-3).

Illustrating Exeter’s inconsistency came the three games arranged for the Easter period. Good Friday saw a visit by Wilmslow for an evening kick-off. The visitors from Cheshire, on their first appearance at the County Ground, won without too much trouble (10-21). However the following day the Avon & Somerset Police XV were easily despatched (38-3)

The contest between Exeter and Moseley at the County Ground on Easter Monday was described by Bill Fenwick of the Western Morning News as a “David and Goliath struggle”. The Midlanders fielded three full internationals and thirteen county players. After taking an early lead the visitors were faced by a terrier like Exeter fight back. Exeter scored a try just before the interval and, four minutes after the break, registered a second. Started by Staddon in his own 25 the move was taken up by Holman and finished off by winger Steve Evans who dived in under the posts. At this point Exeter led by eight points but then “petulent displays” of temper went unpunished by the referee and Moseley came back into the game in the last fifteen minutes scoring a try near the end of the game to win (22-24).

Of the remaining six fixtures Exeter won five. The first of these victories came on a visit to Streatham-Croydon (16-13). Entertaining Hertford (formerly known as Old Hertfordians) on a first visit to the County Ground, Exeter fielded a full strength team though The Sunday Times recorded the side as an “Exeter XV”. The result was included in the official playing record for the season. The visiting team, coached by former Exeter player Gerry Edmonson, made the home side work hard for victory. As Paul Huddart reported in the Express & Echo, “After a bright start, the game turned into a contest between the forwards, and the crowd was treated to little open rugby”. Exeter managed to get on top in the second half and scored four tries to add to the brace touched down in the first period (33-4).

A mid-week victory at Withercombe, in a match to celebrate the local club’s 50th Anniversary also appears to have been included in the official playing record.

In Cornwall , the Exeter pack dominated the Redruth eight despite losing Neil Diment with a leg injury shortly before half time. Staddon kicked seventeen points and England Under 19 wing Simon Perry gathered a kick ahead near his own line and raced 95 yards to score at the other end of the field. Man of the match, however, was said to have been No.8 John Scott who also scored a try (25-3).

Mid-week at the Memorial Stadium, Exeter lost for the last time in the season. After a bright start against Bristol the visitors could not maintain the impetus and did not make the most of the opportunities that presented themselves even when the home side lost a forward through injury. The score was even at the break but Exeter then conceded three tries in the second half (3-15).

The season at the County Ground should have ended with a mid-week meeting with Gloucester but for the second time in this campaign Exeter conceded a fixture because of opponents’ commitments. On this occasion Gloucester had received an invitation to compete in the Jedforest Seven-a Side Competition.

The final game of the season took place at Wellington where the local club was celebrating its centenary. The two teams had been regular opponents for nearly 60 years but had not met since the 1935-6 season. Exeter duly won and the victory was included in the official club playing record.

The “A” XV recorded 21 wins and ten losses in 31 games and the “B” won six and drew two of 18 games played. The Colts record was disappointing with only seven games being won out of 20 played.

During this season there were perhaps early signs of things to come when the club started placing advertising boards around the County Ground and introduced the sponsoring of match balls for the first time.