

29th Season 1900-1

The season that took Exeter into the 20th Century began ominously with a players' revolution. Many refused to play, some actually left the club. Spokesman for the players was former captain Alf Browning who declared that the club was not being run on democratic lines. The rift began when players claimed they did not receive proper notification to attend the meeting at which the committee had been elected. In its defence the club stated that due notification had been sent to those players who had paid subscriptions.

The issue was resolved in early October by which time the club had played five matches of which four had been lost. Disruption to the senior team continued and a settled side was a rarity during the season.

This disruption probably had greater effect on the new captain, the young Maurice Harry Donne Parsons, a wing three-quarter, who had made his debut at the start of the 1898-9 season. A product of Sherborne School he had moved to Exeter when his father settled his business interests in the city. Parsons entered the business becoming a Land Valuer. He also played a leading role with the 1st Volunteer Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment becoming a Lieutenant at the age of 19 shortly before being elected captain of Exeter Football Club. He continued to play with some regularity until the end of season 1903-4. As a Captain in the Royal Horse Artillery he was to die in northern France in July 1916.

Merefield Donne Parsons, younger brother of the captain, featured as a forward in many matches for three seasons. Like his sibling, he was an all round sportsman and was at one time captain of the Exeter swimming club. He left the city to take up an appointment in India and died in an accident in Lahore in 1908.

After only one season at the Era Hotel, the club decided to move its headquarters to the Half Moon Hotel in the High Street and to utilise changing facilities at the Seven Stars in Okehampton Street for matches at the County Ground. A decision was also made not to enter the newly reconstituted Devon Cup competition on the basis that there would be more risk of injury to players and that it would involve playing junior clubs not on the fixture list thus necessitating playing extra games mid-week.

Four fixtures against each of the three other leading Devon teams were again played. In fact Barnstaple was met five times as in addition they filled a gap left by the withdrawal of Castleford at Christmas. Exeter won four of these games and Barnstaple one. Against Plymouth two draws and two defeats was the outcome. It was a different story when meeting Devonport Albion, at the time one of the strongest clubs in the country. After four encounters Exeter had managed to score only one solitary try to set against 88 points registered by Albion.

During the dispute a mere ten players had turned up for a pre-season practice and a week later there were only 20 for a trial game. Strangely, there were some three hundred spectators to witness this ten-a-side game.

For the first game the team included only five regulars from the previous season. In conditions regarded as "too hot for football" Exeter went down at Bridgwater by a

narrow margin (3-4). The following week Wellington, who were also experiencing organisational problems, were defeated (23-3).

By the 12th October the dispute was over but three more games had been lost including heavy away defeats at Leicester (0-23) and Devonport Albion (0-28). In this latter game Exeter fielded amongst the forwards E.W. Roberts a former R.N.E.C. player and a Devon regular. Now a serving officer on a naval vessel he was required to play for a club in order to retain his Devon qualification. He joined Exeter but played one match only. Roberts went on to gain six caps for England.

Two home victories followed. A crowd of only one thousand watched a victory over Barnstaple at the County Ground (10-0). In recent previous seasons this match would have attracted two or three times this number. Two predictable away defeats came next – Plymouth (6-10) and Bristol (0-11). The Reserves match against their Plymouth counterparts saw the captain, W. Oliver, sent off the field for striking an opponent in retaliation. He was suspended for two months but he decided to give up the game altogether.

In the best spell of the season, of eight games played up to and including the holiday period five games were won, two drawn and only one lost. The margin of defeat in the game at Barnstaple (13-16) was much less than predicted. In contrast, of the next seven games at the turn of the year six were lost and one drawn. Two Saturdays were lost on the death and funeral of Queen Victoria.

This disappointing run of form included two defeats by Tiverton and heavy losses to both Leicester and Torquay Athletic. On tour, Leicester enlisted the assistance of two Plymouth players to fulfil the fixture with Exeter. In contrast to crowds at home Exeter played in front of an estimated 8,000 people at Devonport Albion (0-28). Tiverton won in Exeter for the first time for fourteen years (6-12). In recognition of this new success Tiverton held a celebratory dinner.

Amid this poor patch came “the best thing Exeter has done this season”, a draw at home against Bristol (3-3). The satisfaction was even more justified as Exeter scored a try by winger Harry Shooter to a penalty goal by their opponents. The gate however was described as “miserably poor”. The local press commented that J. Peters a visiting half back was “a man of colour”. Later James Peters went to work as a carpenter in the dockyards and joined the Plymouth club. In 1906 he became the first black player to represent England at Rugby Union Football.

The see-saw form of Exeter continued to the end of the season, three wins being followed by five losses before two wins and a draw completed the campaign. A defeat at Sidmouth (0-4) could be explained by the loss of two players through injury early in the first half, Exeter having to play out the game with thirteen men.

Despite the disruptive start to the season the final record of 13 wins and four draws in 35 matches nevertheless was described as “not very prepossessing.” Defeats outnumbered victories for the first time in six seasons. The Reserve team also lost the majority of its matches. There was a drop-off in receipts and special fund raising events were organised including a concert in Northernhay at which a bicycle supplied by the Rudge Whitworth Bicycle Co., and a watch were raffled.

Devon had won the County Championship again by defeating Durham (14-3) at West Hartlepool. The Exeter involvement was marginal. Only one player, Leonard Tosswill, was credited to the Exeter club. Tosswill, who first played at Easter 1900 and again during the Christmas period later that year, was a medical student at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London. Also in the team were A.J. Roberts (Barnstaple) and P.L. Nicholas (Honiton) both of whom were to become Exeter players.