

## 89<sup>th</sup> Year 1960-1

Consistency was paying off for Exeter with Tony Lee now in his fourth year of captaincy. Much of the club's continuing success was based on two outstanding units – the half-back combination of Keith Hopper and Barrie Carless and the back row of Ted Bonner, Dick Manley and John Rew. The playing record was remarkably similar to that of the previous season. Again 45 matches were played but this time one less game was won and one more drawn. The number of defeats stayed at ten. The points balance improved with 640 being registered and 303 against.

The season began with two tough fixtures both of which ended in defeat. Exeter had arranged extra training sessions during the summer and an improvement in fitness was shown against a full strength Bristol team at the Memorial Ground. The score did not reflect the run of the play and the home side scored eleven points while second-row Terry Hempton was off the field receiving treatment (8-23). Two days later against Lansdowne, touring with a team containing six Irish international players. Exeter suffered another defeat (6-14). Defeat did not come again until the second Saturday in December. But victory did not come easily at Newton Abbot in the next Saturday match dominated by kicking by the half-backs of both teams (8-0). An even closer win was achieved against the touring Esher club in a mid-week match (9-6). Over eagerness cost Falmouth the game on their own ground. Backed by a strong wind, Exeter could only manage to score one penalty in the first half but Atkins kicked a further two in a niggly second period (9-0).

Three home wins against local opposition followed. "Exeter had enough of the ball to score 40 points before the interval" at home to Devonport Services (27-0). Even at home and with several county players in the team, Exeter had to fight hard to beat Royal Naval College, Dartmouth (28-12). According to the Sunday Mirror "Flood-ravaged Exmouth had difficulty in raising a team" for the game at the County Ground. The services of four players from St. Luke's were enlisted but the visitors could only offer a valiant defence (20-0). In London a heavyweight Saracens pack "did not make much impression on the well-drilled Exeter side" (6-0).

After a blank Saturday Redruth came to play at Exeter on a pitch still sodden from recent flooding. "Exeter launched a grand-stand finish" during which a converted try was scored to win the game (13-8). In a home game against Taunton, the visiting backs, even with a fair amount of possession, could make no headway against the home back-row (11-0). After another blank Saturday, on this occasion due to a county game being staged at the County Ground, the Royal Marines XV was entertained for a Wednesday afternoon encounter. The Marines did not field a full strength side and Exeter ran up their highest score yet registered (74-6).

Buoyed by this success Exeter travelled to Clifton where the team had not won in four attempts since November 1938. The elusive Clifton backs hit Exeter, who included seven county players, hard early in the game. Settling in the second half, Exeter dominated the closing stages to return home victorious (14-8). At home to Weston super Mare, Exeter was unable to make use of a monopoly of possession due to "a ball that was like a piece of greasy lead" (6-0). Next Torquay Athletic, switched from the unplayable Recreation Ground to a muddy County Ground where they were beaten (11-0). The sequence of thirteen straight victories was broken with an unexpected defeat by visitors, London Hospital (5-8).

Exeter then remained unbeaten for the remainder of the calendar year starting with wins over Barnstaple away (14-0), at home against Teignmouth (26-0), and away at Exmouth (?-?). On New Year's Eve Exeter was "in command almost throughout against visiting Old Blues, scoring three tries despite a greasy ball" (13-3). The opening fixture of the New Year was cancelled due to a waterlogged pitch at Taunton's Priory Park. Of the three matches that were played in January, all took place away from home. Two games against local rivals Torquay Athletic and Plymouth Albion were both tight affairs. Torquay Athletic scored eight points in the closing minutes to overtake the

opposition (17-20). Of the game at Plymouth, which ended all square one reporter wrote "This was, indeed, a poor game between, what should, on current form, have been the best two club sides in Devon" and of the players he said "They did not even seem to be trying". Perhaps tension between the two rivals was too intense. Trailing by three points at the end of the game, Exeter was awarded a dubious try during seven extra minutes play allowed by the referee. "This was a fair result" commented another observer (11-11). The final January fixture saw victory at Streatham where "Tempers got out of hand" and the referee warned both teams "But it made little difference and fists still flew in the loose scrums". Even so, it was said to be a game full of good rugby with Exeter showing superior skill (11-0).

With Keith Hopper playing for Devon, Exeter then faced Penzance & Newlyn, on form the strongest club in Cornwall, Barrie Carless filled the scrum-half berth and proved to be the man of the match. A dour struggle in the mud in the first half was followed by Carless engineering open play in the second period (8-0). At Weston super Mare, Exeter, with ten county players, performed well below par. One local reporter commented "Exeter, lucky to snatch a lead in the second-half, ended up luckier to escape defeat" (3-3). A Wednesday home meeting with the Royal Naval Engineering College proved to be a closer encounter than might have been predicted (9-8). Two relatively undemanding encounters on the County Ground followed. Old Millhillians played the first fifteen minutes one player short as one their number missed the train and with hooker Brian Dyer gaining 100% possession from scrums, the Old Boys were hard pressed to offer anything but a brave defence (30-0). Guy's Hospital fell by a narrower margin (19-6). Still at home Exeter found Plymouth Albion to be stiffer opposition (6-3) but a trip to The Rectory proved to be less testing with a win against Devonport Services (22-6).

The next seven games were all played at the County Ground starting with the final game of this unbeaten sequence which provided probably the most meritorious win, that against Aberavon. Exeter took what chances were on offer against the Welsh club that was on a two match tour of the West Country. Attacking whenever possible, Exeter was rewarded by a hat-trick of tries from winger Tony Vinnicombe. The visitors came to life in the final twenty minutes, scoring two tries in three minutes, after which the Exeter defence held firm (16-8). The first defeat since the middle of January came at the hands of another visiting Welsh team, Bridgend, who handled in a more accomplished fashion than their hosts (5-23).

This reverse was followed three days later by another, this time after a tense struggle with St. Luke's College in "a match that did not live up to the star billing it had received". Although dominating the first half, Exeter could not produce the final thrust to score. The College went ahead in the second period and again Exeter was unable to score (0-5). March ended with a drawn game with Cheltenham (14-14) and a victory at Taunton in a match rearranged following a cancellation in January, due to a waterlogged pitch at Priory Park. Taunton was on the brink of victory being a point ahead after conceding ten early points. In the dying seconds winger Tony Vinnicombe had a clear run in but was brought down short of the line. However Barrie Carless then gained possession to score the try which Derek Atkins converted to win the game (15-11).

Good Friday saw Exeter defeating traditional visitors Old Cranleighans (14-3). The next match witnessed what is likely to have been one of the main highlights of Exeter's playing season – the defeat of Moseley (16-5). The Birmingham Daily Post ran the headline, "Exeter Too Good Behind the Scrum for Moseley". "In a fast and open game" ... "Exeter's superior skill behind the scrum on a greasy ground turned the scales". A try by winger Tony Marks opened the scoring but just after the interval Moseley went ahead with the conversion of an interception try. The game swung Exeter's way again with a second Marks try to which Derek Atkins added the extra points. Centre W. Redfern, of St. Luke's College, and wing-forward J.V. Rew scored further tries for Exeter and Atkins added a second conversion (16-5).

“For the first time since the end of the last war, Leicester had to contend with a wet ground on their visit to Exeter and before the muddy pitch became virtually unplayable they had scored all their points” reported the Birmingham Daily Post. The visitors opened the scoring after fifteen minutes and soon went eleven points ahead. Just before the interval Redfern made a break that led to a try by Tony Vinnicombe. Although Exeter enjoyed much more of the ball in the second half they could add only an Atkins penalty goal to the total (6-11).

A visit to the Recreation Ground to meet Bath brought another defeat. The home team applied consistent pressure in the second half when most of the points were scored. Bath recorded the outcome as “a good win” (0-20). On this day Devon was contesting the County Championship Final against Cheshire at Blundellsands. The northern county won by five points to three. Assisting Devon were three Exeter players – scrum-half Keith Hopper, wing-forward Ted Bonner and No.8 Dick Manley.

The losing streak extended to four matches. At home against Newport, Exeter took the field with only fourteen men as late replacement hooker, Peter Nelson of Withycombe, was held up by traffic jams. Try as they might Exeter could not break through the visitors’ defence whereas Newport managed to score five tries (6-17). On the week-end tour to the Duchy, Exeter and Redruth stood level at the interval before “a fast and furious second half display” by the home team took the game away from the visitors (3-14). The second game of the tour, against St. Ives, involved Exeter having to make enforced late changes to the team whilst the home side included guest players. After being on the defensive for most of the first half, Exeter went ahead with a breakaway try by Tony Marks to which Derek Atkins added the extra points on the stroke of half time. St. Ives maintained pressure in the second half but could only manage a penalty goal (5-3). The final three games of the season, all against local opposition, were easier hurdles to overcome – Barnstaple (14-9), Sidmouth (21-6) and Paignton (56-10).

During the summer of 1961 back-row forward Ted Bonner, who had played 12 times for Devon, signed for the Rugby League club Hull Kingston Rovers.