

118th Year 1989-0

Consolidation of the club's position as a National Division side was the aim for this season "and in that we have been successful" said the Annual Report. All home league games were won but "our away record will need to improve".

Sadly, part-way through the season, skipper Dave Hartland had to retire from the game. He was a great motivator in Exeter's revived performances on the field of play. Young scrum-half Andy Maunder stepped up to fill the post, whilst, in turn, his role as vice-captain was taken by Paul Westgate.

The club eased into the new season with a comfortable victory at home over a Royal Marines XV. Twelve tries were registered of which two were awarded as penalty tries and four were touched down by winger John Davies.

No such success awaited in the first Division 3 match at Sheffield where the club, faced with the reality of competitive rugby, lost (3-7). A week later came another tight result in a different competition. High Wycombe came to the County Ground for a first round tie in the Pilkington Cup. Exeter had to draw on their resolve to gain the win (12-7).

Victory in the opening Division 3 game of the season at the County Ground was more easily achieved when Askeans were beaten by a wide margin (30-3). To end the first month two games were played against teams from higher divisions and the gulf in standards was apparent. Away at Gloucester the team could not repeat the success of the previous season (8-37) whilst, a week later, visitors Saracens won by a wide margin (3-45).

October began with a Monday night visit to Totnes, to help celebrate that club's centenary. Exeter duly won (?-?), but it proved to be the club's sole away win until the end of December. Glamorgan Wanderers, on their own ground proved, to be too much to handle (7-25) as did Nuneaton, in a Division 3 game, the following week. Exeter had a flanker cry-off on the morning of the game. He was replaced by a back, one of the travelling replacements. In addition three more forwards were injured during the game. The reorganised pack won its fair share of possession which the team was unable to turn into points (14-27).

A home victory over Clifton (33-16) was followed by a trip to the north-east for a league game against West Hartlepool. For all but five minutes of the game Exeter trailed their opponents, in a hard struggle for the forwards against a heavier pack. Skipper Hartland had just conceded a penalty to give the home side the lead when, in the dying moments, he was stamped on it a ruck. Exeter kicked the resultant penalty to earn a draw that was reported to be "fitting reward for Exeter's grimly determined forwards" (15-15).

The November fixture list comprised five successive competitive matches. At home, Exeter disposed of Streatham-Croydon by the largest score of the Pilkington Cup second round (44-7). A Division 3 defeat at Lydney (6-16) was followed by two home wins in the same competition. Against Roundhay the selectors took the gamble of playing half backs Maunder and Green in the centre positions. The experiment was not entirely successful but both players gave 100% "in unfamiliar surroundings". It took a touch-line conversion by Green of a Dovell try to win the game. "I'm greatly relieved" said Bob Staddon (9-7). By defeating Fylde, Exeter moved into the top half of the table "after producing arguably their best performance of the last three months". The appointment of Paul Westgate as pack-leader "was an inspired move" (22-17). A depleted Barnstaple side was defeated in the Devon Cup second round at the County Ground (43-7).

December began with two dispiriting defeats – at home to Cheltenham (3-30) and away at South Wales Police (3-37). The latter was not a pleasant game. The Police accused Exeter of a nose-biting incident, two Police forwards were sent off and Graham Bess was also sent off for fighting.

By Boxing Day Exeter had recovered enough to defeat Torquay in a dour game at the County Ground (19-6). In the last game of the year, at Pottington Road, Barnstaple had hoped to have fielded a stronger team than they had done for the earlier cup game, but Exeter still won by a distance (44-12). This was only the second victory Exeter had gained away from home in the season. The first game of the New Year saw Exeter defeat Okehampton on the County Ground, in the Quarter Final of the Devon Cup (11-0).

The next Division 3 game raised national press comment for a rather unusual reason. Exeter was due to travel play London Scottish, who at the time stood unbeaten at the top of the table. However Richmond, co-tenants of the Richmond Athletic Ground, had subsequently been drawn to play Liverpool St. Helens in the Pilkington Cup on the same day. Richmond, who had preference on this particular Saturday, refused to allow two games to be played on the main pitch. Exeter had already declined the offer to have the game played on the Sunday, so the League match took place on a second team pitch.

London Scottish could not have been more apologetic in the match programme notes. “The problems we have encountered regarding the time and the venue of this fixture are unforgivable and we must ask Exeter to excuse the unsporting and selfish attitude shown by our neighbours”.

For the game itself, London Scottish included in their team Jeremy Macklin, who had played for Exeter in the early 1980s. The home team scored three tries to one to remain at the top of the table (7-16). On the main pitch Richmond suffered defeat in their cup encounter.

A fortnight later the Exeter team was on its way to the north-west to meet Vale of Lune, in Round 3 of the Pilkington Cup. In four previous meetings Exeter were without a victory against their northern rivals, but on this occasion the club achieved a notable win (18-13).

Exeter’s reward was a fourth round tie at Bristol, to be played two weeks later. Preparation for this game was hampered when Exeter was unable to fulfil a fixture with Blackheath at Rectory Field. Many pitches in London were waterlogged but Exeter’s game was to go ahead. The party set out but only got as far as Swindon before having to telephone to tell their opponents that they would not be able to make it, due to traffic and weather conditions.

Against Bristol at the Memorial Ground, Exeter took the lead with an Andy Green penalty but by half time Bristol had responded by scoring four tries, despite what were described as “dismal conditions”. Rugby World magazine reported “the game became a slippery forward tussle, but Bristol’s superiority was never in serious question”. Chris Tucker, in the Bristol Evening Post, paid tribute to “the unstinting defensive commitment of Exeter for whom flanker Paul Westgate, hooker George Meldon and muscular scrum-half Andy Maunder, were all outstanding”. The following week’s club programme expressed Exeter’s viewpoint with the comment that the “second half performance in atrocious conditions left a feeling of pride in our players” (3-26).

Bouncing back, Exeter then enjoyed eight significant victories, starting at Bridgwater & Albion (?-?) and then, at home versus Launceston (35-6), Brixham in a Devon Cup semi-final (22-9) and London Welsh in a Division 3 match (15-7). This latter win ensured that Exeter would avoid relegation and the Welsh would be demoted. In Spring-like weather away at Camborne, Exeter achieved their first success since 1983-4 scoring five tries to their opponents four (31-25) and followed this win with wins at home to Crediton (20-10) and away at Stourbridge, in friendly fixtures (15-7). On the last Saturday in March at the County Ground, Wakefield was defeated in a Division 3 game (18-13).

A comfortable home win against Havant (43-10) preceded a mid-week floodlit meeting with Bristol. The visitors again took the spoils but the margin was a lot closer than in the earlier Pilkington Cup encounter (9-18). On Easter Saturday Exeter sprung a surprise by fielding and almost their strongest line-up whilst Torquay Athletic rested players due to the up-coming Devon Cup Final between the two teams (18-6). Lichfield, who included four players making their first team debuts, succumbed to a last minute try on Easter Monday (12-8). At Tiverton, Exeter won (16-6) but away at Vale of Lune the last Division 3 match of the season proved a disappointment, when the game was lost (10-25).

The highlight of the last month of the season was the retention of the Bass Devon Cup, which Exeter won for a record ninth time. At the Recreation Ground against Torquay Athletic, Exeter dominated possession from the line-out and loose play and had the opposition back pedalling for much of the game. The outcome of this was that "there was little to set the crowd of 2,000 alight and the match was often a subdued affair". The home team actually took the lead before half-time but Exeter equalised within minutes and scored three tries in all (26-10). "The Cup was a great reward for a lot of hard work put in this season by the entire club" commented Bob Staddon.

In National Division 3 Exeter finished respectably in mid-table, with five wins, a draw and five defeats from the eleven games played. Top scorers for the season were Andy Green with 333 points and John Davies with 19 tries.

The "A" XV played 29 matches, winning 23 and losing six, whilst the "B" XV also did well, winning 23 and drawing one game out of the 27 played. The Extra "B" played 13 games, winning 11 of them and losing the other two. On the Youth side the club unfortunately often struggled to field a team. The Women's team played 12 games, winning seven and losing five of them.