

## 12<sup>th</sup> Season 1883-4

This season was a significant one for the Exeter club. In September members of the Isca club received a deputation from Exeter with a proposition that the two clubs be amalgamated. It was apparent that Exeter had experienced problems fielding a team to fulfil its fixture commitments over the previous two seasons. Isca was one of the many football clubs operating within the city; at a peak in the years before the turn of the century. There were as many as sixteen of them.

Amalgamation was agreed at the Bude Hotel meeting and it was further agreed that management would be shared between the two clubs. This resulted in joint captains and joint secretaries being appointed, one from each club. The name Exeter was retained for the revised organisation but the colours were changed from black and white to blue and white “in very small stripes”.

One of the joint captains was Cecil Robert Mainwaring Clapp who, alongside several other players with the same surname, had played regularly for a number of years. He was a solicitor and in 1894 was appointed Sheriff of Exeter. He also held office as Treasurer to both Exeter F.C. and the Devon R.F.U. Scant information has been unearthed relating to W.F. Coombe, the joint captain, other than the fact that he had played with some regularity for Isca.

Two immediate effects resulted from the amalgamation. Firstly a full fixture list for two fifteens could be published before the season commenced. This included 26 first team games. Unfortunately records of only sixteen can be found but at the end of the season, for the first time, a comparative table of season records for some local clubs was published. This showed that Exeter had played 24 games of which ten had been won, ten lost and four drawn. Two matches did not take place - one due to an error by the Barnstaple secretary and the other a game against new opponents Chard Rovers. As a consequence of the combined fixture lists, Exeter faced four new opponents during the season – St. Sidwell's, Crediton, Rougemont and Exmouth.

Secondly Exeter now had eighty members. The season began earlier than usual with a trial being played on the last Saturday in September followed by another trial a week later. However, as the season progressed, the increase in numbers did not always provide the advantage expected. In November the club played two men short against Wellington, narrowly losing, and one man short against Crediton, winning convincingly. For the first game against Blundell's only 13 players turned up and the low point came in a return game against Tiverton when Exeter travelled with only nine players. In these two latter games substitutes were found but both games were lost. The fact that all these matches where Exeter could not field a full team were away games may point to reluctance on the part of players to travel, a fact that dogged the club in the years up to the end of the century.

For the initial fixture against Chard Rovers in January Exeter did not turn up at all and, according to their opponents, had given no notice. However the Somerset team went on to admit that had Exeter turned up the game would not have taken place because of adverse pitch and weather conditions!

There were problems at home games as well. Following a draw in November, criticism was voiced by Tiverton about crowd control. Spectators, they said, should be restrained and not allowed to wander across the playing area at their own free will and hamper play. Clearly the St. Thomas ground was not yet fit for purpose. A change of the Exeter home venue was to come in the following season.

Judging by the match reports available, this was a season of two halves. All seven known victories occurred before Christmas, only the defeat at Wellington early in November interrupting the sequence. At the end of December against Bridgwater, Exeter suffered their first home defeat. Four more losses then followed including one against their now close city rivals, Rougemont, before Blundell's School was held to a scoreless draw in March.

The season proper opened with an easy win over Exmouth at the St. Thomas cricket field. This was the first time the two clubs had met. Exmouth "was soon overmatched and could seldom keep the ball out of their goal", Exeter scored two goals and nine tries without reply. Another easy home victory was to follow in a first and only game against St. Sidwell's, one of the many parish based city teams. The margin this time was two goals and four tries to nil.

At the beginning of October the first away match of the season took place at Newton College with Exeter travelling with a full team. Playing with the slope in the first half, Exeter, who also had weight and pace advantage over the College pupils, scored all their points, a goal and three tries. The College played well in the second half but was unable to register a score.

Away at Wellington, Exeter, with only thirteen players and substitutes, kicked off at 4.10 pm against an unbeaten home team "in glorious weather before a large crowd of spectators". Play was fast and surprisingly even, despite Exeter's handicap. Eventually Wellington's better combination enabled them to win by two tries to nil.

Still playing away from home, Exeter then managed to defeat Crediton by the comfortable margin of seven tries to nil. Tiverton proved to be a stronger proposition when visiting Exeter two weeks later. "A capital match" was witnessed by a large gathering of spectators who saw play regularly switch from end to end. Both teams were compelled to touch down in defence on several occasions but no tries were scored and the game was declared to be "a draw in favour of Exeter". Despite the absence of any scoring the match was reported as being "perhaps the best game ever seen on the ground".

A first meeting with city rivals Rougemont in Polsloe Park in early December ended in "a complete victory" for Exeter even though only one try was scored from which S.J. Baker kicked a conversion. Two weeks later Exeter travelled to Westward Ho! To meet the United Services College. The reluctance of members to travel was again in evidence as Exeter had to enlist the services of three substitutes. Nevertheless Exeter won by a solitary try to nil. A full team was mustered for a home meeting with Newton Rifles. A try in each half, one by G. Helmore and the other by Baker accounted for the visitors who failed to score.

For the last game in December Bridgwater came to play on the St. Thomas cricket-field. The game ended in disappointment for Exeter being defeated for the first time in the season. The defeat was doubly unfortunate as Exeter actually scored four tries to two by the visitors but Bridgwater managed to convert one of their efforts whereas all four Exeter conversion attempts failed. By the laws of the time the Somerset team won by a goal and a try to four tries.

The New Year did not start well either when Exeter turned up at Tiverton with only nine players. Six substitutes were found and a competitive game took place on a muddy pitch. "The efforts of the men in rolling each other in the mire caused much amusement" to the moderate attendance that included "a fair sprinkling of ladies" despite recent rain. The weak Exeter team played well enough but the home side won by a goal and three tries to nil.

The next recorded game did not take place for another six weeks. The weather and a country game accounted for two blank dates but it is not known why there is no record of other fixtures being played. At least home support had not deserted the team because it was reported that "a goodly number of spectators" witnessed a visit by Wellington on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February. The Somerset team won by two tries to nil. Four days later thirteen players went to meet Blundell's School at Tiverton. Once more substitutes were found but even with a weight advantage the team could manage only one try, scored by half-back "Jack" Tombs to two touched down by the scholars.

The return match against local rivals Rougemont was also lost. This time Exeter failed to register a single try to counter three touched down by the opposition. The encounter was said to be "one of the best contested and most dashing games to be seen for some time". Tombs of Rougemont was the outstanding player. He had appeared for Exeter three days earlier and was later to become a regular half-back for the club.

A week later Exeter played host to Blundell's School before "a good number of spectators ... and the weather was very pleasant". Another well contested game ensued but neither side was able to score a try. As the Exeter team was obliged to touch-down in defence more often than the opposition the result was declared to be a draw in favour of Blundell's.

Few details have come to light relating to a home game against the United Services College other than the fact that the College won by a goal to a try.

The amalgamation with Isca had increased playing membership significantly. As many as seven second XV games were covered by reports in the local press.