

7th Season 1878-9

Under the captaincy of Henry Wilson for the fourth and final time, the club enjoyed what was deemed to be the most successful season yet. A full programme of fourteen matches had been arranged of which four were classed as “probable”, namely return matches against Torquay and Taunton. The games against the south Devon team did take place but the games against Taunton did not materialise. Of the twelve games played Exeter won nine and drew two. Drawn games had become less frequent once games could be won by a majority of tries if no goal was kicked.

The playing season started in mid-October and continued until early March. Exeter often did not arrange fixtures when Devon played a county match, probably because of the number of their players included in the XV and because most of the home matches were played in Exeter.

This season Exeter staged all their home games bar one on the Barrack field by kind permission of Colonel Drewe. The return match against Blundell’s was played, by courtesy of a Mr. Sampson, on a field adjoining Polsloe Road.

Following a practice game that was described as a “scratch match”, the opening fixture was played a week later against Blundell’s at Tiverton where, in drizzling rain and on a slippery pitch, Exeter achieved a comfortable victory. Next in line was Paignton but the game was postponed owing to “the inability of the Paignton captain to get a team together”. Exeter played a “pick-up” match instead.

After three weeks without a full game Exeter was then due to meet Wellington, probably the strongest opponents on the fixture list. The result was a victory for Exeter, their best of the season. The decisive score came in the second half when Carter, an Exeter three-quarter, managed to “wriggle in close to the boundary flag”. G.S. Saxton, one of two “quarter-backs”, landed the conversion with “about the best kick ever made on the Exeter ground”.

Draws against Torquay and United Services College sandwiched a win against Newton College before the club lost at Sherborne School in early December – the only defeat of the season. Against Torquay an Exeter try was disputed and a compromise was agreed. The try was allowed to stand but Exeter conceded the conversion attempt and thereby an opportunity to win the match. At Newton what appeared to be a legitimate Henry Wilson try was disputed as the College team claimed he had crossed the touch-line. Exeter again conceded but from the resulting scrum Carter scored the winning try. There was no scoring despite a vigorous game against the United Services College at Westward Ho! Exeter held Sherborne School up to half time then in the second period had to concede two tries as well as having to touch-down in defence on four occasions.

On resuming their season after Christmas Exeter met Paignton “amid pouring rain” on the Barrack field that was “sloppy and muddy to the last degree”. So bad were the conditions that Paignton arrived one player short and three Exeter men failed to turn up for this home match! The game went ahead 12 against 14 and Exeter won. Prominent were the captain, H.C. Wilson, and his brother, R.P., the latter scoring the only try of the game.

Five straight victories completed the successful season. Against Torquay the superior weight of the Exeter forwards told in muddy conditions. Teignmouth, Blundell's, the United Services College then followed. At Paignton for the final game of the season play was very even in the first half but a break out of defence by Carter led to a try by Summers for Exeter just before half time. Facing the wind in the second period Exeter "had some difficulty in protecting their goal" but again a break-away, this time by the captain, Henry Wilson, led to a second try that settled the match.

A significant event of this season had taken place early in September 1878 at Marsh Barton where "a numerously attended meeting of young men" decided to form a football club. This club, Rougemont by name, after a few years became strong enough to challenge the senior team in the city. Other clubs had existed in the city since shortly after the formation of the Exeter club. Some had semi-classical names such as Exonia, Isca and Clarence. Others were parish based like St. Thomas' and St. David's. A few of these teams were to meet Exeter occasionally on level terms in the future.

During this season a number of football matches were played under electric floodlighting in many parts of the country. In the south-west such matches were staged at Weston, Redruth and in south Devon. In mid-December at an Exeter committee meeting a letter from the ever enthusiastic W. Massey was read by James Hutchings. Massey proposed that the Exeter club should arrange a floodlit match. The scheme was agreed in principle providing the costs of installation were moderate. No further action was reported.