

57th Year 1928-9

“A fairly good record” was the verdict of the Annual Report at the end of the first XV season. There were the usual highs and lows but performances demonstrated “a considerable improvement on the previous season”. By the beginning of March the playing record did not look at all encouraging but a “splendid recovery” saw the team win ten games in a row before experiencing defeat in the final game of the season.

Douglas Patrick Wilcocks, son of J.M. Wilcocks a notable three-quarter for the club in the late 1880s and early 1890s, was elected captain. His brother J.F. (John) originally played for Exmouth but later played several games at full back for Exeter. D.P. Wilcocks made his debut for the club in 1919 but then went to Canada. He returned for the 1924-5 season. He was a free scoring wing three-quarter who would often fill one of the centre positions when required. He took up a business appointment at St Austell in March 1928 but led the team for much of the season until dogged by injury late on. He was to leave the city to return to Canada after playing his last game for the club in October 1929.

As well as injury to the captain both Eddie Munt, who later returned to play for Honiton, and E.N. Morgan were incapacitated for long periods. Nevertheless the season started brightly.

To open their programme Exeter entertained a team from France for the first time. Les Primevères (The Primroses), the team run by the renowned Paris department store “Printemps”, had won the Championship of Paris in 1923. Two recent former international players were included in their team namely Edouard Bader (scrum-half) and Robert Levasseur (second-row). The visitors had been paid a guarantee to fulfil the fixture that amounted to more than had been paid to any other team. They stayed at the Rougemont Hotel and were entertained with a Friday evening civic reception at the Guildhall followed on Saturday morning with sightseeing motor-car trips and later a post-match smoking concert at the Globe Hotel.

The contest was described as “a bright, fast and often thrilling game in which both sides showed cleverness and resource — but there can be no question as to Exeter's superiority this time.” (21-8). Eddie Munt and J. Embleton, who went on to captain Cambridge University, each scored two tries whilst Tom Browning added another. In their previous tour match Les Primevères had drawn with Torquay Athletic. The tourists went on to Bridgewater & Albion where they lost by a single point.

After a midweek win at Tiverton (18-0) Exeter’s next opponents had travelled from London for another guarantee fixture. Old Dunstonians led by five points at the interval but the home team scored a further thirteen points without reply (16-8). During this match Munt damaged a leg and played out the game on the wing. The following Saturday it was Exeter’s turn to travel to London. The game against Edgware was evenly contested but with four players appearing for Devon in a friendly fixture, Exeter was not at its best (5-9).

A midweek game against Plymouth Albion clashed with the Exeter Carnival and so the attendance was not as large as hoped. The Exeter team was understrength and on a hard ground the visitors scored seven tries to three (15-31). Exeter did no better in the rain at Exmouth three days later though the score was much closer. Munt again went off injured but returned to play on the wing (4-9). The following Saturday saw a re-arranged team defeat Sidmouth at the County Ground (13-6). A midweek team containing half-a-dozen reserves

found itself down by nineteen points at half time at home to the R.N. Engineering College. The team rallied but could not overtake their opponents score (11-27).

At Barnstaple, Exeter went behind by eight points before registering five points in reply only to lose E.N. Morgan with an injury shortly after the second half started. According to the North Devon Journal in the last quarter of an hour Exeter “crumpled up” (5-24). This pattern was repeated at home against Taunton. This time it was Exeter that built up a substantial lead only to see the visitors overhaul them in the second half (13-14). It was now the turn of Frank Buckland to leave his post and play out the match on the wing due to a damaged shoulder. “What is required now is a couple of sturdy 14 stone (88 kg) men who would use their full weight and strength in the scrums” was one press verdict. There also appears to have been a “lack of generalship” on the field.

Another rally that came too late to save the game occurred in a midweek game against the Royal Artillery when thirteen unanswered points in the second half failed to match their opponents’ first half tally (13-19). Normally a regular forward playing out of position on the wing J.K. MacFarlan scored one of Exeter’s tries. He was to drop out of the team later in the month due to appendicitis. A trip to Beacon Park without eight leading players meant Exeter would be no match for Plymouth Albion. To make matters worse Munt again injured a leg just after the start of play (0-24).

The first day of November found a party of Exeter officials and first team players in Paris for a return match against Les Primevères. Exeter, according to “La Presse”, “crânement – acceptant leur défit” (8-26). The game was staged at the Stade Colombes as a “lever de rideau” for a match between Paris and Berlin which the Parisians won 41-0. Two days later the party was in Rouen for an encounter with Elbeuf (5-24). The official club view was that “the tour was enjoyed by all but both games were lost though the displays given were very creditable”.

Meanwhile at the County Ground a team containing only two regular first team players (T.R.K. Jones and J.F. Wilcocks) took on Wellington’s first team. Displaying keenness and determination the home XV actually held the lead but two late tries earned the visitors the victory (3-10). Evidence suggests that this result was not included in the final first team record.

Visiting Old Blues from London managed to master not only the Exeter team but rain, heavy going and mud (4-9). Both teams finished with fourteen men, E.N. Morgan injuring a shoulder. A midweek meeting with Blundell’s brought some respite. Fielding makeshift combinations at half-back and in the three-quarters a victory was registered. S.E. Lane, a winger from Teignmouth, scored three tries on debut (13-3). Meeting Wellington again and missing some regular forwards Exeter away from home resumed losing ways (0-17).

By this time, discounting the game against Blundell’s School, Exeter had lost ten consecutive matches. On the 21st of November a special meeting was attended by some sixty players to discuss new methods of training with a view to improvement in play. The services of F.J.C. Marshall, a published author of books on physical education and well-being, were engaged to lead the training.

The effects of this meeting were not immediate. A home defeat by Newton Abbot followed (4-7). The back division was re-arranged “but there was no great improvement”. However the

forwards “held their own for the whole 70 minutes” – 35 minutes each way being the norm for club games at that time.

Exeter should have won a lively home game against Bridgwater & Albion at the start of December. An equalising try was scored under the posts. A reporter and many of the crowd were of the opinion that the ball was placed “too far back” for a straightforward conversion attempt and the ball went under the bar (6-6).

At Torquay Athletic “unpleasant incidents” spoilt a game the referee would want to forget. Firstly he ordered two spectators to leave the ground for barracking him. Apparently there were shouts of “Play the game ref”. Then he allowed a mark made by one player to be turned into a goal kicked by another when the legality of such a combination had long since disappeared from the law book. Finally he sent off a home team player for fighting though most of the crowd saw no infringement. With another player injured Torquay finished the game with thirteen men on the field yet they still managed to win (3-14). At a Devon R.F.U. hearing one of the banished spectators presented himself and convinced the committee that his was a case of mistaken identity. Scourfield, the Torquay player dismissed, was merely cautioned. Finally the home club was ordered to take steps to prevent barracking, though no advice was given as to how this might be achieved!

The new approach to training began to bear fruit. By mid-December both the “A” and “B” teams remained unbeaten and in the home game against Brixham, made possible by “liberal application of boiling water on frozen ground”, the forwards were “impressive yet again withstanding the pace until the end” and “eight pushing all the time” (14-3).

A pre-Christmas game with Weston super Mare was described as being as dull as the weather (5-5) but the Boxing Day encounter with a team comprising R.A.F. personnel gathered from various clubs and styled the “Owls” was in contrast a lively encounter. A morning game against the Devon Nomads had been cancelled to save the pitch for the afternoon. The heavy surface hampered the weightier R.A.F. forwards and Exeter won comfortably (32-3).

The next day at Teignmouth the game was spoilt by rain (8-3). Two days later no game took place as Devonport Services had advised that they were unable to raise a team to send to Exeter, a decision that greatly disappointed the Exeter committee. In place of this fixture the Reserves faced an Old Heleans XV. To start the New Year the Chiefs met a Combined Colleges & Public Schools XV. In a one sided match, Exeter scored nine tries (39-3).

Some literally last minute changes disrupted the team that was to face visitors Edgware (5-14). A week off due to a county match on their home ground meant that Exeter next travelled to meet Bridgwater & Albion somewhat underprepared. The result of a closely matched game was a narrow win for the home team (10-14).

At last E.N. Morgan returned to the team and fortunes changed. The outside half, “the mainspring”, dropped a remarkable goal when surrounded by opponents in a deserved victory over Torquay Athletic (12-5). “A considerable time has elapsed since the citizens got the better of the seaiders” and this they achieved with “concerted action and determination” – and Morgan.

Paignton's Queens Park was sodden and unplayable in parts for Exeter's visit. "On a dry pitch Exeter would have won" but the outcome was a draw (3-3). An understrength team went to the R.N.E.C. and conceded seven tries (0-21). At home to Barnstaple, Exeter had been hit by a 'flu epidemic. Frank Buckland was valiant in defence but the visitors won (0-6). After a blank Saturday due to frost at Sidmouth, Exeter was still below par for a visit by Cheltenham who won by a single conversion kick (6-8). The return match the following week was cancelled due to frost.

From the second Saturday in March Exeter remained unbeaten until they fell at the final hurdle on the last Saturday of the season in April. The first victim was Devonport Services at the Rectory. The Services had sent their "better" team to Redruth, Exeter played with "delightful style" and their forwards "took command". Morgan was again heavily involved and was now joined by captain D.P. Wilcocks returning after injury (17-0).

What was described as a surprise win followed as Exmouth was defeated. The referee was said to have ended the game four minutes early leading to speculation as to what might have happened had full time been played (11-8). Next came another disappointment when Devonport Services again was unable to raise a representative team for a mid-week fixture at Exeter. At Newton Abbot the play was described as being bright and open in the first half and a monotonous scramble in the second (7-6). Tiverton arrived at the County Ground with fourteen players and enlisted the services of Frank Buckland to complete the numbers for a pre-Easter match. He was unable to stem the Exeter tide (35-3).

For once Exeter enjoyed a successful Easter programme. On the Saturday under a blazing sun and no breeze against Nottingham, Exeter left all the scoring to a period of five minutes towards the end of the game (10-0). The play of E.N. Morgan was described as "wonderfully smart". Easter Monday visitors Old Millhillians played a full part in "a game that thrilled spectators" (11-8). Confidence continued to grow with a win at Taunton (8-0).

At last Devonport Services turned up at the County Ground for the long delayed mid-week meeting. Neither team was at full strength but, with Morgan as orchestrator, Exeter prevailed (17-11). The fly half was again the pivot for a home victory against Paignton (16-3). A Thursday game at Sidmouth replaced the cancelled February match. "Exeter lucky to beat Sidmouth" declared one headline (9-6). Not so lucky were six Exeter players who were fined 5/- or 10/- (£8.50/£17) for leaving their cars in a narrow road outside the ground during the game.

The unbroken run of victories over nearly two months came to an end at Weston on the last Saturday of the season. Facing the wind in the first half Exeter conceded only six points but was unable to recover in the second period. Indeed the team was penned in their own half for much of the time and conceded eight more points (0-14).

The Annual Report recorded that the Chiefs had played 43 matches 20 of which were won and 20 lost. Yet again these figures do not tally with published reports. Both the "A" and "B" XV's were unbeaten up to Christmas but tailed off slightly. Still the records for the season were very creditable. The "A" won 19 and drew two out of 25 games played and the "B" won 17 of its 20 matches. An "Extras" XV played with fair regularity and won half its games.

Tom Browning was congratulated for again playing in all 43 1st XV matches.

The financial situation was deemed satisfactory though the club was in need of better support at home matches. The balance in hand on the years working was £58 (nearly £2,000).

On the 16th March Henry Rew was capped as a front row forward for the first time by England against Scotland. Born into an Exeter family Henry, like his brother Robert Godfrey the Exeter wing three-quarter, was educated at Exeter School where they both learned to play rugby football. Henry made his debut for Exeter at the age of 17 in 1924 and immediately made his mark as a forward of quality. In his early days he proved to be a useful goal kicker as well. He was a regular player for the club and an automatic choice for Devon before he joined the Tank Corps early in 1928. He represented The Army in the annual services tournament and also played for Blackheath. He won ten caps in all between 1929 and 1934. Rew also represented the Barbarians and in 1930 was a member of the British team that toured New Zealand playing in all four tests and eleven games in all.

Serving with the Royal Tank Regiment holding the rank of Major, Henry Rew died of wounds received whilst fighting in North Africa on the 11th of December 1940. He is buried at the El Alamein War Cemetery.

After the end of the rugby season the County Ground was given over for speedway riding. At a local event in July some 5,000 spectators were thrilled by the riding of Frank "Buster" Buckland, the Exeter rugby club full-back.

Frank Buckland made his debut on the rugby field for Exeter in March 1920 at what must have a very tender age. He became a regular for the Chiefs from 1922 onwards making something approaching 200 appearances up to the first half of the 1929-0 season when he moved to Torquay and appeared for Torquay Athletic as a wing-forward. During season 1930-1 Buckland reappeared in Exeter colours playing occasionally for two seasons. He made one appearance for Devon during the 1927-8 season.

His parents were the caretakers at Rougemont Castle and Frank became an electrician. He helped install floodlights for the speedway at the County Ground. After watching the riders at practice he decided to join their ranks and very soon became a star rider and local favourite. He later rode for the Crystal Palace team in London. On resumption of the sport in 1947 "Buster" Buckland was appointed Speedway Manager for the company promoting the sport in Exeter. In 1948 he decided to leave Exeter for Australia for health reasons.