83rd Year 1954-5

Despite the fact that the season was summed up as being "the most disappointing since the war", the First XV achieved a narrow credit balance of twenty victories and two draws from a total of 41 games played, scoring 314 points and conceding 304. The cause of the disappointment was said to be largely due to injuries to key players and the departure of regular scrum half Michael Keogh.

As a prelude to the season a practice game was played between XVs comprised of Old Heleans and the Rest of Exeter for which an admission charge of two shillings (about £2) was charged to aid club funds. The preparations appeared to have paid off when, according to the Sunday Times, "Exeter seized their chances" to defeat visitors Blackheath. The report went on to say that the team from London "were easily the better side in this match yet nothing went right for them, Exeter had perhaps half-a-dozen chances in the whole game to score and three of them were seized". Ron Bolt, although said to be erratic at times, was successful with a conversion and two penalty goals. Later a brief shower of rain caused the visiting full back to slip on wet grass and John Stark seized the ball and sent Dick Manley in for a try. In the opinion of The Observe correspondent "Exeter did not appear at any time to be a very impressive team" (11-0).

A mid-week game against Torquay Athletic went scoreless (0-0) before Exeter set off for Bath. The home side took an early lead before Exeter retaliated with two converted tries to go ahead before half time. The visitors could add no more to their score and just before the final whistle, Bath, then leading by four points, caught Keogh in possession near his own line, gained possession to add a last gasp try. The result represented Exeter's first defeat at Bath since the war (10-17).

The next two games, both at home, did not provide much satisfaction for supporters and committee alike. Barnstaple was only narrowly defeated (6-5) whilst defeat by Ebbw Vale caused the local reporter to declare his frustration with the headline "Exeter Need A Kicker Now!" Exeter, fielding a number of reserves rallied in the second half to score three tries (9-17). A narrow away win at Devonport Services was welcomed (16-14) but then St. Luke's College won at the County Ground despite having their scrum-half sent off the field for the unusual offence of persistent illegal scrum feeding (6-12).

The team did well in London to restrict Saracens to a one score margin of victory (3-6) but then came a heavy defeat by the Royal Marines XV in the regular mid-week encounter (9-20). It was during this game that Jack Harrison suffered a cartilage injury and before the next game had been played he decided to retire from playing and resigned the captaincy. He had been appointed captain for, what was at that time, a record seven consecutive seasons. His influence on Exeter's progress on the field of play was considerable and his legacy was perpetuated by the stream of talented players that emerged following his years of coaching at Hele's School. Roy Pike assumed the captaincy.

After a Saturday with no game due to a county match being played in Exeter, the new captain soon saw his team back to winning ways, firstly against Exmouth (9-0) and then Old Cranleighans (20-3), both games being home fixtures. It was noted that for the match against their local rivals, Exeter fielded four former Exmouth players Roy Grace, P. Soper, Peter Mair and Ron Bolt.

The run up to Christmas and into the New Year produced a mixed-bag of results. A defeat at Bristol might have been expected but the margin was respectable (0-11) and home wins against Old Blues (3-0) and Royal Naval Engineering College (17-0) were predictable. Weston super Mare again proved a difficult hurdle for visiting Exeter at the end of November (0-6) but a run of four consecutive victories restored the balance. A narrow win at Torquay Athletic (9-6) was followed by Exeter, at home, taking revenge on Taunton for the heavy defeat the previous season (14-6). Teignmouth succumbed at the County Ground (17-0) before another Boxing Day dog-fight at Exmouth ended with a narrow win for the visitors (6-0).

A visit by Redruth on New Year's Day did not go Exeter's way (6-13) but another victory at Taunton would have been satisfying (14-0). Such was Exeter's continuing problem with goal kicking that after a home victory against Paignton (12-3) the Express & Echo went into detail describing the technique of Tony Lee whose kicking for goal was said to be "steadily getting surer". "Digging a deep pit in the miry ground just outside the Paignton 25 near the touch line … he lofted the heavy ball which hit the near upright and bounced inside".

At Barnstaple it was estimated that Homer won 92% of possession from set scrums and thereby eased his team to victory (11-3). A week later the comment was made that the pack was gaining confidence with the return of hooker Homer, as the forwards expended less effort in scrums thus allowing them to be more effective elsewhere. Even so the team lost at Clifton (5-9). After narrowly avoiding a second defeat by Weston super Mare at the County Ground (3-0) Exeter had no game due to frost in the south-east causing the cancellation of a fixture with London Hospital. Back at home Exeter lost to Guy's Hospital for the first time in five meetings (3-11). For this match Exeter gave a first game to 16 year old Malcolm Gardner on the right wing. Another defeat by the same score the following week came against Plymouth Albion at Beacon Park (3-11).

A home win against Bath (6-0) began an unbeaten run of five matches. A narrow home win against Devonport Services (9-8) was followed by a comfortable win at Falmouth (24-0). Cheltenham again provided tough opposition but Exeter held out for a draw (11-11). A narrow home win over Wasps (missing four players representing Middlesex at Twickenham) avenged a defeat in the fixture a year previously (3-0). Both of these latter games were played at the County Ground.

The Easter programme began with Broughton Park appearing at the County Ground for the first time, the Lancashire team proving the better on the day (10-17). For the second successive year Exeter defeated Easter Monday visitors, Moseley. The selection of Derek Atkins, newly promoted from the "A" team, proved decisive. The visitors monopolised possession, especially after second-row Henry Drew had left the field after breaking a collar-bone. The visiting backs were weak and Atkins kicked a penalty from half-way and completed Exeter's scoring with two more successful efforts (9-0). This proved to be Exeter's final victory of the season.

On the following day it was the Exeter back-line that was weak and Leicester, by playing brilliant football, won with ease (0-11). A week-end trip to Cornwall brought no relief as both games, against Camborne and Redruth, where the crowd numbered 2,000, ended in defeat. The following Saturday Exeter and Bridgend figured in a dull match at the County Ground with hooker Brian Homer suffering a recurrence of an old injury (6-11). On Tuesday, the customary end of season game at the County Ground with Newport predictably, as the home side was not a strong one due to several injuries, ended in a loss. Despite having to field substitutes the Western Mail praised Exeter "as they did not try to keep the game tight (3-14).

The final game of the season took place at Gloucester where the home team failed to take full advantage of a disrupted visiting XV. The home forwards put in a good performance but the backs displayed many faults and failed to take advantage of an Exeter side that was further weakened losing two more players during the second half. One centre had to leave the field whilst replacement hooker Ivan Loosemore, a former England Schoolboy International, suffered an injury that made him a passenger. Exeter's only score was a Derek Atkins penalty goal (3-16).

The July Annual General Meeting pronounced the season as financially sound but again drew attention to the effects that poor weather and competition from television were having on match gates. The balance in hand stood at £40 (just over £700).

On the playing side the 1st XV record just showed a credit balance whilst the "A" XV was deemed very satisfactory with 23 wins and 2 draws from the 33 games played. The "B" XV won ten and drew

one out of 18 fixtures whilst the Colts XV appeared on 28 occasions winning 14 times and drawing three games.

The main weakness of the premier team was a poor defence. It was also noted that injuries to Jack Harrison, Brian Homer and others disrupted the team. Alf Hunt, Les Davies and Gerry Brown announced their retirement but on a positive note the return of Dick Manley from National Service was welcomed.

Prior to the game against Old Blues in November the presentation of a silver salver was made to Jack Coombes in recognition of his 33 years of service as club secretary.