

We are lucky to have amongst us, former Exeter Rugby Club players from the 1950's era and onwards who are still members of the club and who regularly attend matches at Sandy Park. Happily for us, they are willing to share some of their rugby experiences from the amateur days and to "kick-off" we have someone most of you will know very well, Roy Huxtable. We asked Roy how he got into rugby.

"I didn't start playing rugby until I went into the RAF. I was not interested in the slightest at school, because I didn't understand the game to be quite honest with you (and probably still don't!). I started to pick up the game when I joined the RAF and played in the Far East. I found out then that they used to play on Boxing Day morning and I realised there was a place for me in that game, so that's really how I started. I was chatting to a friend of mine the other day, talking about rugby in the services, and because most of the services' sides were officers, he said "it was a good opportunity to punch officers!" When I came out of the RAF I made a short-lived, poor career move in the Police Force and that's where really I got going. When I came out of the Police, I was back here by then and I'm pretty sure it was Roger Pugsley who said "We're short of a player on Saturday over at Cowick Barton – can you come and play"? I did, and that's how I started, I sort of drifted into it through the back door. It took off from there funnily enough and there are still at least seven or eight chaps that go to Sandy Park who played in the team at that time. Was I taught or coached? No, not really. I picked it up as I went along at the level that I'm talking about. I played then for the best part of 15 years; I played a lot of A/B team games and on the odd occasion I was lucky enough to play for the first team. Once I was even selected to play on a Tuesday, obviously away, because that's the way it happened. I must have played on every ground in Devon, although perhaps not so much in Cornwall. We didn't go down to Cornwall so much, we went on tour there or overnight, but we played a lot in Somerset, on every ground I can think of."

"Training normally consisted of running around the pitch with fitness-type stuff on the County Ground, and was usually on a Tuesday evening. Whilst others were out on the pitch training there was often a question mark over whether they should be using the pitch or not, even in those days; we used to train under the greyhound lights because we didn't have floodlights at that time. The committee always met on a Tuesday night whilst the training was going on and it comprised of all ex-players without exception – male only – and they would sit and select the sides for the following Saturday. Occasionally we were told that night, it depended on what time the meeting finished. You would often get sent a card through the post - bearing in mind we are talking about an era when very few people had telephones - which you received on Wednesday or Thursday saying you had been invited to play, with details of where and when. Looking back though, the guy I always felt very sorry for was the person in the organisation who picked up all the bits and pieces, the Team Secretary. On a Friday night, particularly a Friday night, and because he did have a telephone, his phone would start to ring "I can't play" and you would find on Saturday that you weren't playing at so and so, you would be going somewhere else. He certainly was the lynch-pin of the playing side. This was especially so at the bottom end of the organisation. Imagine this at some of the London clubs who were running sixteen to seventeen teams and you can understand the organization required, whereas we were running only four! I really don't remember if we cried off a game because of lack of players although I can recall going with thirteen on occasions. I can remember we turned up at County Ground to play Kingsbridge, I believe. The coach (bus) and captain were there, no committee, we had a head count and we only had thirteen. Well, we had to go so who else could we find? We didn't have any subs then, but this was an "A" team game and someone had an idea – "what about so and so, he lives over in Regent Street, he's played a bit of football!" We drove the coach around to his house,

knocked on his door, he found his old football boots, we found a pair of shorts and off we went to Kingsbridge where he played his first game ever and we lost by the way! Things like that were quite common. There are numerous stories of teams or clubs who would pick up their players from the pub on a Saturday and it wasn't unusual, especially for touring sides, to be smelling of beer – though not our side, of course! I played from 1959 to 1975, so this was during the '60s. The first team would travel to South Wales, Bristol, Gloucester and London whilst the "A" team would go as far as Bristol or Bath and play. We occasionally stayed away in South Wales and if you go back to the era before, they travelled by train. Starkey and Dick Manley went to London by train and there is a lovely story about when they were put off the train at Castle Cary on a Saturday night and somebody came up from Exeter and bailed them out. There were no leagues in those days, these were all friendlies."

"The first team was run in a far more efficient way and Exeter, I would suggest, was better organised than most. We were very much spoilt compared with other clubs. For example, you frequently had a coach. I've come back from places with only seven or eight people on the coach more times than I can think of due to people deciding to stay late and others bumming a lift back. The kit was supplied, which again just turned up; somebody else delivered the shirts, we dropped them on the floor and they were picked up and delivered the next week. At other clubs the players had to do more for themselves. I wonder sometimes how it was all financed; I think indirectly off the back of the greyhounds and the speedway but I'm not sure because we paid a membership subscription which was £5. We paid a match fee, which was maybe £1 or £2 something of that nature. I don't know if the match fee paid for the coach, but looking back I don't see how it could have done. We always got a meal, (supplied by the ladies' tea committee) the condition being that both home and away teams got fed and there were always jugs of beer; certainly the first jug at the County Ground was on the Club which you would share with the opposition obviously. After that there was a tradition that you had a whip round, and bought another jug and vice versa. The first team games were definitely gate-taking but there was no sponsorship, programmes were about 6 pence each. The County Ground was the host for many big games e.g. the South Western Counties v. the All Blacks, the Springboks and County games and these matches were big earners for the Club."

"That's my playing career as such; I've played a heck of a lot of rugby. All of these were wonderful occasions of camaraderie and friendship, sing songs, late nights coming back on coaches, leaving people behind, all these things come back to you".

I understand that the Fixtures Secretary was an important job- I must ask how you ended up with it?

"I believed I was conned into becoming Fixtures Secretary . I agreed to do it late at night! The existing fixtures secretary had resigned at short notice in mid-season. The chairman sidled up to me and asked if I would take over - he bought the drinks as I remember. I said yes, only realising a few days later just what I had taken on! I was the Fixtures Secretary at Exeter for 12 or so seasons and looking back I think I made a reasonable job of it (or perhaps nobody else fancied the role), making friends along the way. We used to run 4 teams, 1st XV, A XV, B XV and Colts at the County Ground, with an additional pitch over at Cowick Barton. Your priority was, of course, to obtain the best fixtures list possible for your club and our ideal arrangement was 2 sides home and 2 away with a good balance of homes/aways. No team appreciated travelling away week after week; it does also seem to upset the treasurer! Working around the local circuit, the above was achievable bearing in mind at the time we were regularly playing Taunton, Torquay, Plymouth etc. and these clubs

also ran 4 teams. So, for example, the 1st and Colts home with the A and B sharing a coach to play away, but then again this didn't work for the Colts when the 1st XV was playing at Bath, Bristol, and Gloucester and possibly further afield in South Wales or the London area".

How did Rugby Union move from "friendlies" to leagues?

"Exeter was a member of the 25 strong Major Clubs association - I think we were the only club this side of Bristol. In the early '80s moves were under way to create two 12 x 12 national leagues with of course no promotion/relegation. In this era our playing strength was poor, we were going through a very bad time on the pitch and it didn't take much working out which of the clubs was going to be pushed out and we were. However we were soon thrown a life line with an invitation to join in the formation of an additional national league; this initiative came predominantly from the north of the country. Plymouth Albion was very strong at the time and their support/influence was critical to us being invited. Two or three of us spent a lot of Sundays attending meetings in the Midlands talking with representatives from the other clubs. Jack Challenger, who was our chairman at the time, used to pick up Mike Cook and myself in his Rolls Royce - you can imagine the impression we gave arriving in a Roller! We did at times share transport with the Albion representatives but never in the Rolls, that is pushing friendship far too far! The initial league consisted of 7 clubs from the north, 2 from the Midlands, 1 from the London Area plus Albion and us. This league became known as the C Merit Table. We eventually obtained the necessary permission from the RFU and we were up and running".

How did the introduction of the Merit Table change the traditional fixtures?

"The first task was to free up some Saturdays to accommodate the new clubs; we of course had existing fixtures with Albion. I had to make some quite difficult phone calls, dropping old friends whilst at the same time trying to hang on to the likes of Bath and Bristol. The financial considerations were considerable with additional travel and overnight accommodation. If possible you did try to avoid travelling to the north of England in mid-winter. On one occasion we travelled to West Hartlepool, only to find on arrival that their pitch was unplayable and with no other suitable alternative. That of course was not the end of the problem as the fixture was required to be re-arranged with us picking up the additional cost. The financial sub-committee's problems were far greater than mine".

How did you get on during the first few seasons?

"Again we had some luck. As I said previously, our playing standards at this time were not great, but to be fair Birmingham were equally as poor. One very wet Saturday, with the County Ground un-playable, we ended up playing Birmingham over at Cowick Barton and sneaked a win. We just managed to keep our head above the water (excuse the pun) and our fortunes slowly started to change. Looking back at some old records I note that by the season '87/88 we were in Courage National 3 league with most of the original 'C' Merit Table clubs; however by '93/94 again in Courage National 3 but now with the company of some famous old clubs. Times were changing with clubs going bust and others coming up through".

Looking back how would you sum up the last few years?

“Changes - massive changes. From the old County Ground to Sandy Park, from playing Birmingham on a wet Saturday over at Cowick Barton to our opening premiership fixture against Gloucester. We did of course win both.”

Roy Huxtable