**82ndt Year 1953-4**

The club's entry in the Playfair Rugby Football Annual was somewhat self-effacing. "The season on was fairly successful more than half the matches being won out of a powerful fixture list." The record showed that out of 38 games played 21 were won and four drawn. What may have tempered the overall view could well have been the unusual way performances on the field panned out. Only five wins were registered in the first fifteen games but from the end of November until the beginning of April a further fifteen games were played without a single defeat. During the tough end to the season that included Easter only another three games out of eight ended in favour of Exeter.

For the opening fixture Exeter succumbed to Blackheath at the County Ground. "Exeter must not be discouraged by defeat" was the encouraging report in the Express & Echo" (3-13). It does appear that the team was not dispirited as, three days later, the visiting Bristol team was held to "a creditable draw" (9-9). Four days after that at Torquay Athletic, Exeter went one better with a comfortable victory in which winger John Stark scored two runaway tries and also dropped a goal. Outstanding amongst the forwards was Dick Manley who was on leave from National Service (19-0).

A week-end tour to Wales at the end of September saw a reversal of fortunes. Two defeats was the outcome - on Saturday against Bridgend (6-12) and versus Ebbw Vale on Monday (0-12). Against Bridgend, Exeter field three 17-year olds in the back division. Despite the losses Exeter received praise from opponents and local press for their style and approach to the games.

Back in Devon, defeat at The Rectory followed when Devonport Services proved to be too strong for the visitors (0-15). A victory did follow at home against Barnstaple but the margin was almost as narrow as it could get. Roy Pike and John Stark were absent playing for the county (3-0). A journey to Redruth brought a return to defeat (0-24).

More unexpected would have been the prospect of losing at home to Teignmouth but with Roy Grace joining Pike and Stark in the Devon XV, the sea-siders won a close match (6-8). Respite came when facing the Royal Marines XV in a mid-week encounter despite an injury to skipper Jack Harrison (15-0). However playing form fell away again with a defeat at home to St. Luke's College (3-12) that was followed by another at Taunton (3-23). For the former match Exeter fielded Ron Bolt. A recent recruit for the Exmouth club, Bolt was seen as an answer to the club's goal kicking problems but he was unable to make any difference to the result. The outcome was heralded in the Somerset town as "Taunton's greatest triumph for years".

Two successive home wins over London based clubs broke the sequence – St. Bartholomew's Hospital (22-6) and Old Blues (13-3) – before defeat at Weston super Mare (3-6) finally ended the poor start to the season.

At the beginning of December the City of Exeter held a Sports Day for its adopted Royal Navy ship H.M.S. Eagle, Soccer and hockey matches were arranged and Exeter Rugby Club fielded what was described as "A Wednesday XV" to face the ship's team. After a civic presentation at the County Ground the Navy men were comfortably defeated (45-6). This result was not included in the official record for the season.

The four month unbeaten run began with a narrow win at home over Torquay Athletic (3-0) and an equally hard fought victory at Paignton (10-6) before revenge for the defeat by Weston super Mare was easily achieved on home soil (19-6). Just ten days earlier Johnny Stark learned that he had been selected as a non-travelling reserve for an England trial. As he was not called upon Stark was able to appear in the latter fixture and the winger demonstrated his worth to the team by scoring four tries.

Five games against Devon opponents followed. There was no slip-up on Boxing Day this year as Exmouth went down at the County Ground despite Exeter having to play a full-back, Alf Hunt, at

scrum-half (15-0). The New Year started well when another potentially hazardous fixture at Teignmouth went Exeter's way (13-5). At Barnstaple an amusing incident before the game drew the headline for the Express & Echo report. It related to the 71 year old George Selley, the first team trainer, who refused to allow Colin Paul to act as touch-judge in place of Stan Havill who had to cry off the duty after falling ill. Selley reasoned that Paul would have to perform wearing ordinary clothes whereas he, as trainer, was already wearing track-suit and boots! There was no further problem for Exeter during the actual game (8-0).

The return match at Exmouth did not halt Exeter's progress (13-8), but the trip to Plymouth Albion a week later nearly did. With the score line standing all square Bill Jones missed a penalty from in front of the posts that would have won the game (3-3). Ironically, it had been reported a few weeks earlier that Jones had been practicing by kicking a ball over apple trees in an orchard behind his father's inn at Alphington. Perhaps he should have been practicing his goal kicking instead!

A nationwide freeze that lasted for two weeks caused the cancellation of home fixtures that would have further tested Exeter's mettle – those against Bath and Clifton. Play resumed with a home game against Penzance & Newlyn. The club programme notes the following week commenced with "First of all let me congratulate the 1st XV for their splendid display of Rugger in the second half" stating that the match was "enjoyed notwithstanding the weather and ground" (12-3). A visit by London Hospital provided another victory (6-3).

Scrum-half Michael Keogh was on honeymoon in London when he received notice of selection for the game with Guy's Hospital at Honor Oak Park. Both sides opened up the game at every opportunity which suited Exeter who scored three spectacular tries (13-3). A home game with Plymouth Albion ended in another hard fought draw between the two rivals. This was a fortunate result for Exeter as the forwards were badly beaten in both scrum and line-out but the following week's club programme criticised the opposition for continually kicking to touch (3-3). Exeter recovered to win the next three matches – all played at home – against Devonport Services (8-0), Redruth (6-3) and St. Ives (11-0).

The unbeaten run that had started in early December was now, at the start of April, brought to an end by three consecutive defeats. Facing Wasps at a muddy Eton Avenue, Exeter "did fairly well but missed many good opportunities of winning the game" (3-8). A close encounter with the strong visiting Newport team could have produced a more positive result had the Exeter tackling not been "too high and scratchy" and there was "too much shadowing instead of going in for a deliberate tackle". Exeter led at half time and towards the end of the game Harrison was stretchered off with a knee injury (13-14). Then came what must have been a surprise home defeat by Old Cranleighans. Only two years earlier after Exeter had won this fixture by over thirty points the press called into question the value of playing London Old Boys teams. A year later Old Cranleighans had reduced their losing margin to two points and now they went a step further. A week later the Exeter programme notes described the defeat as "a lapse" (3-10).

The writer of those notes, Jack Coombes, was proved to be correct as all three games over the Easter period ended in favour of the home side. The easiest of the three victories came on Easter Saturday when new visitors, Universities Athletic Union, succumbed quite readily (25-6). On Monday Moseley presented a more difficult hurdle to overcome. The fast open game actually produced only a single score and that came about when Roy Pike, playing at stand-off, employed his oft used tactic of a cross kick to John Stark on the wing who went over for a try. Both teams threw the ball about and each line was threatened in turn but there was no further scoring (3-0).

In contrast the Tuesday game with Leicester was more of a battle between the forwards. By half time the visitors were five points in front, a lead they failed to hold. In the second period the home team, took the lead by means of two tries and a penalty goal (9-5). After achieving a hat-trick of wins over

the holiday period Exeter then played host to Gloucester for the final match at the County Ground for the season. After a close game the visitors prevailed (9-13).

As the season had been extended for a week by the Rugby Football Union, Exeter visited Sidmouth to play its first fifteen-a-side game in May. That was probably the only noteworthy comment about a game for which the score-line possibly reflected the tired end of a hard fought campaign (0-0).

On New Years' Day the death of William Ashford at his home in Topsham was announced. He was 82 years of age. Only six months earlier he had announced that he was standing down from his position as club President. As a player he made his debut for the club in March 1888 at the age of sixteen playing at full-back alongside his brother Lee Ashford. He soon converted to playing as a forward appearing over the next ten years as and when his studies permitted. He also frequently for Devon even after moving to London. When a medical student he played for St. Thomas' Hospital before going on to represent Richmond, Surrey and the Barbarians. He was capped four times by England during the period 1897-1898, twice against Wales and once each against Scotland and Ireland.

Returning to Devon as a medical practitioner, William Ashford became President of the Exeter Club in 1921 and remained in office until his decision to stand down at the end of the 1952-3 season.

At the July Annual General Meeting, the assembly stood in memory of Dr. Ashford. His successor was the long-serving secretary Jack Coombes to whom Peter Steele-Parkins paid tribute. Jack Coombes captained the soccer XI during his time at St. Luke's College and then went on to play the occasional game for the Exeter 1st XV. He joined the committee in 1911 and became secretary in 1920 during the club's crisis days when the County Ground was lost to rugby football. He had been a member of the teaching staff of the Exeter Education Authority for 41 years.

At the A.G.M. the new President called for more attacking rugby. The Annual Report said the backs were as good as any in the West with Jack Harrison, in his sixth season as captain, a tower of strength. It was the pack that gave the committee its most anxious times during the season. Prop forward Sid Sharp was congratulated on having played in all 1st XV matches for two seasons.

The financial position was reported to be sound but disappointing. It was thought that more benefit would have been derived from the exemption from Entertainment Tax. Chairman Steele-Perkins also drew the meeting's attention to the effects on finances of competition from television.