

16th Season 1887-8

Still on an upward course the playing record showed an improvement over that of the previous season with 16 wins, two draws and only two defeats in a programme of 20 matches. However, by the end, the season this record might have been seen as something of a disappointment at the time.

After stepping into the breach following the hiatus a year earlier, Robert Attwood Glass was appointed captain but by the end of the season he is recorded as having played in only five games. An interview with him was printed some seven months before his election in which Glass suggested his allegiance probably lay outside the city. He was educated at Cheltenham College and the Royal Agricultural College. He played for the Gloucester club and Gloucestershire before moving to Wiveliscombe. He soon became a prominent member of a successful Somerset county team. During his season captaining Exeter he appeared in two games for the South in England trial games against the North.

At the end of the interview, when asked if he had a preference playing for Wiveliscombe or Exeter, he admitted that he would prefer to play for the Somerset club. Exeter was more convenient for where he was based at the time! He did not appear again for Exeter after this season and all told over his two year stay with the club he appeared in no more than about a dozen games.

His deputy, B.W.L. Ashford, appeared in the same international trial matches as his captain. He also played for Somerset and another oddity of the season was that Exeter scratched two fixtures when Somerset was playing a county match. Ashford, unlike Glass, appeared very regularly for Exeter and during 1887-8 scored 20 tries as well as kicking seven goals in one match.

In addition to Ashford and Glass, Exeter could boast other county class backs like W.J. (Walter) Pring, brother of T.C. Pring, and Jack Tombs. Together the three-quarters were usually more than a match for most teams. In addition Exeter could now field a settled combination of forwards throughout the season which was to benefit team play. Mudge was still there with regulars Down, Biddell, Randall, Harding, Westcott, Wallis, Thompson and the Milton brothers.

Alf Milton did not appear much during this year but he and his brother Horace had been regulars for five seasons. Horace played in all but two or three games. An employee of St. Anne's Well Brewery Co. before becoming landlord of "The Seven Stars", he died at the early age of 34 in 1895.

Technically Exeter remained unbeaten until March. Their mettle was fully tested in October when the strong Albion XV from Devonport was beaten at Cowick Fields (the Matford lease was not renewed until the end of the month). Exeter had won by a goal to a try (three points to one) after a tense match. The Exeter try was obtained by means of a powerful run by Ashford who beat several defenders on his way to the line. Such was the enthusiasm of his team colleagues that they shouldered him back to the centre of the field to the repeated cheers of nearly two thousand spectators. Even the Albion players applauded. The game, however, was not yet won. A conversion by full-back Underhill provided the winning points.

This year saw the introduction of the county knock out cup competition. In November Exeter travelled to Crediton for a first-round match. At the end of the game that was marked by “the utmost determination, yet with all in good humour” the visiting team narrowly won. In the absence of Ashford it was left to W.J. Pring to score the only, and therefore decisive, try of the game. It was his turn to be shouldered by his team mates. On the team’s return to the city Pring was again shouldered but this time from Queen Street Station to the Exeter club’s headquarters at the Bude Hotel.

Exeter drew a bye in the next round of the cup and, on so doing, reached the semi-final to face old rivals Tiverton. This tie took place in March on the St. Thomas ground and was an occasion of great celebration. There were “hundreds upon hundreds” of spectators along with several civic dignitaries, all patrolled by members of the local constabulary. No untoward incidents were reported.

Exeter was able to field its strongest team and Tiverton were likewise favourably placed. The main difference between the teams was Tiverton fielding four three-quarters against Exeter’s three. The game, which was reported at great length, ebbed and flowed and by the end no major points had been scored. Under the laws of the time this constituted a draw but as Tiverton had scored several “minor” points they were deemed to be the victors. One report stated that it was a “decisive victory”.

Much rejoicing took place in Tiverton when the news reached the “factory town”. In contrast Jack Tombs, the Exeter half-back, was taken to the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital at Southernhay where he was diagnosed as suffering “severe nervous prostration consequent upon severe excitement and exertion”.

Two weeks later the final was played on the same ground and Tiverton were victorious over Newton. Immediately following the final Exeter took the field for their scheduled match against R.N.E.C. Keyham, a game that was won by 14 points (four goals and two tries) to nil.

After the disappointment of the semi-final “defeat”, two of the last three games of the season were played against Newton. Earlier in the season Exeter had won a home game by a single point but in the return match on the Teign Marshes the defeated cup finalists inflicted the first actual defeat of the season on Exeter.

As a conclusion to the season the Devon R.F.U. arranged for a tournament to be played at the St. Thomas ground. Two matches and a final were to be played each game lasting an hour. Exeter again managed to lose to Newton. Albion, the growing force in the county, defeated Crediton and went on to take the medals in the final against Newton.

Although a number of important matches had taken place at St. Thomas, Matford continued to advance as Exeter’s home venue. An enclosure, boarded with a platform plus some seats and bounded by canvas sheeting, was installed and a primitive stand erected. For a game against Bridgwater it was advertised that busses would leave the Bude Hotel at 2.30 and 2.50 for Matford.

The home match against the United Services College from Westward Ho! in March was proclaimed "Ladies Day".