

# THE TRIANGLE DEVON

As footballing giants rose in England's major cities, a quiet football rivalry was brewing amongst a trio of teams in Devon

WORDS BY ALEX WAITE  
ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM FORSTER





**F**ootball is the secondary sport in Devon. The formation and growth of three professional football teams (Plymouth Argyle, Exeter City and Torquay United) lagged behind other clubs across the UK.

Plymouth Argyle didn't become a professional club until 1903, Exeter, 1901, and Torquay, 1921. By comparison, the Exeter Chiefs, the region's biggest sport team, formed in 1871.

The Devon footballing trio spent their formative years playing in local and regional leagues. Argyle and Exeter joined the Football League Third Division as founder members in 1920. Twenty-two years after the Football League was established and featured 12 clubs from the Midlands and North of England.

Football in Devon played catch up to the rest of the nation and struggled to attract fans from the already established rugby supporting community.

Former Torquay player, Craig Easton, who played and coached at the club between 2012 and 2015, noticed how this impacted football in the region.

"When passing Exeter, you would see huge crowds going across the bridge to watch the Chiefs. We would get 1,500, if we were lucky 2,000, at Torquay. Most people go to see the Chiefs rather than the football teams. You see more rugby pitches. There's not a lot of flat ground and we struggled at Torquay to level the ground. There's not a lot of excellent football facilities in the county."

The identity of football in Devon was founded on the battle between football and rugby. Plymouth Argyle was formed when two friends, F Howard Grose and Mr W Pettybridge, believed locals needed a football team to show pride in which led to the team's initial establishment in 1886.

Exeter's establishment in 1901 already made them the flagship football team in the city. Their links with the former teams, Exeter Wesleyan United and St Sidwell's School, gave the fans and players a united team to support in the city. Exeter remained a rugby supporting city though and this has affected the popularity of football. The Chiefs boast some of the highest rugby attendances in Europe, while Exeter City FC rarely fill the 8,696 allocation at St James Park.

Desperate to join their Devonshire adversaries in the Football League, Torquay Town merged with Babbacombe FC in 1921 to form Torquay United and the embers of the triangular rivalry sparked.

Torquay would not enter the Football League until 1927 and, coincidentally, played their first match against Exeter in August 1927 where a massive crowd of 11,625 watched at Plaimoor. The clubs' rivalries deepened due to their location in the south-west corner of England. The fact that Plymouth and Exeter

rose together into the Football League also meant regular fixtures between the two teams. A healthy rivalry blossomed between Argyle and Exeter, who are regarded as the main rivals in the area. Until recently, the battle has been confined to the pitch, but there have been a number of violent clashes between fans recently. Most notably in November 2018 when Exeter and Plymouth fans clashed outside a pub in Exeter – the teams weren't even playing each other.

However, due to their later development and playing catch up to their local rivals, Torquay United have almost become the outcast within the Devon rivalry. Torquay have regularly faced Exeter and Plymouth in league and cup fixtures since the late 1920s. Older Torquay fans will see Plymouth as their main rival, due to a few fierce fixtures in the late 1960s. But the new generation of United fans regard Exeter as their foe, possibly due to regular meetings in League Two in recent years.

None of the teams have ever been promoted above England's second tier, or reached a major cup final, meaning that the footballing achievements and failures remain adrift within the national coverage of football.

A recent match between Exeter and Plymouth in League Two highlights the lack of coverage nationally. The teams hadn't met since October 2017 and were competitors at the top of League Two this season. The game was only covered by the local media while some national media outlets didn't even post previews or reports of the game, showing how the rivalries in the region are still confined to a local scale.

Craig Easton feels the lack of coverage doesn't impact the rivalry though: "It's a proper derby. That's when you get the biggest crowds. For the fans it's definitely the biggest game of the season."

However, he acknowledges some of the difficulties football faces in the region: "You're so far away from everything. You're really out on a limb"

"It's tough for these clubs, it's not a big football place. They don't get the big crowds, it's not like living in a big city and you don't get that same intensity."

Despite the rivalry, there are benefits to the trio co-existing amicably. In 2003, Torquay met Exeter City in a pre-season friendly. City were struggling financially at the time so Torquay's owners waived the gate receipts in support of their rivals. Twelve years later, the favour was returned when Exeter hosted Torquay, who themselves faced financial pressures.

On how the Devon clubs are perceived in football's hierarchy, Torquay United's chief executive Steve Breed told the BBC, "It is important for the people of Devon to support all our local sides because we are very much a football outpost here in the West Country" 📍

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