

# LOOKING BACK IN AMBER

## 2002-03



Season 2001-2002 had been a good one for Cray Wanderers, but they hadn't won anything. There had been several near-misses, not least defeat to Thamesmead in the final of the Kent Senior Trophy. The Reserves had missed out on the Division One (North) simply due to points deducted for fielding an unregistered substitute.

The Wands' management were determined that 2002-03 would bring some silverware, after a gap of ten years. During the pre-season period, six impressive new signings were brought in to bolster manager Ian Jenkins' squad. Strikers Ricky Bennett and Richard Dimmock joined from VCD Athletic, last season's long-time league leaders, along with Phil Turner, who was installed as club captain. Meanwhile, from Bromley, Jenkins snapped up defensive stalwarts Ian Rawlings and David Gray, and utility player Andy Silk, all of whom had been Ryman League regulars for Cray's landlords. There was further good news when Mark Hammond, who at one time seemed set to join the Lilywhites, decided to remain a Cray player. On the minus side, two of the previous season's leading scorers, Chris Tuley and Jamie Wood, opted to join Thamesmead Town.

After a series of friendly matches that included the now-traditional trip to Suffolk to play Woodbridge Town for the Kerry Phillips Trophy (Cray won on penalties), the Wands lined up for the toughest of opening day encounters, away to reigning League Champions Maidstone United. The game possibly came a little too early for the new-look Cray side, who relied on 'keeper Micky Simmons to keep the score to 1-0, before Pietro Cirillo silenced the vast majority of the crowd of 355 with a 75<sup>th</sup> minute equaliser. Sadly, Maidstone's outstanding players Sinden and Kempster combined to score a late winner for the Stones.

There was better news for the Reserves, who also opened with a game against the previous year's champions, as Dartford visited Oxford Road. A Lewis Wood goal on the stroke of half-time secured all three points and further wins over Erith Town and Corinthian (Wood scoring four) made it a 100% start for Sam Wright's team.

Tunbridge Wells were the first visitors to Hayes Lane and Cray had little difficulty in gaining their first three points. In a game in which Ian Rawlings made his debut, Dimmock (2) and Bennett opening their accounts for the club, with Mark Tompkins and Mark Hammond also contributing to a 5-1 victory. A week later, a close range Adam Heaslewood header earned a 1-0 victory at Hythe Town. Even though Cirillo was sent off in the second half, the margin of victory could easily have been greater.

The two victories put Cray into a positive frame of mind as they faced the tough trip to Ryman League Oxford City in the preliminary round of the F.A. Cup. It was a fabulous performance by the Wands and it is no exaggeration to say that they played their hosts off the park. Drew Watkins' stunning strike was scant reward for a wonderful display of passing football.

***“A lacklustre City exited at the first FA Cup hurdle to a much more experienced and committed Kent League outfit. The visitors’ goalkeeper, Micky Simmons, was a virtual spectator throughout.”***

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### ***Drew’s thunderbolt fells the giants***

**Oxford City 0 Cray Wanderers 1**

**F.A. Cup Preliminary Round, 31<sup>st</sup> August 2002**

A stunning 74<sup>th</sup> minute goal from Drew Watkins was enough to seal one of the shocks of the Preliminary Round of the F.A. Cup as Cray Wanderers forced a famous victory at Ryman League Oxford City.

Latching onto a skilful lay-off from Richard Dimmock, Watkins unleashed a ferocious angled drive from just inside the box that gave City ‘keeper Steve Benbow little chance of seeing the ball, let alone saving it.

But this was no one-strike wonder for the Wands, as they controlled almost the entire game. Their crisp passing and movement was in stark contrast to the pedestrian efforts of the depleted home side, who took an hour even to win a corner.

Cray almost took the lead in the very first minute, as a Mark Hammond cross found Ricky Bennett whose acrobatic shot brought a fine save out of Benbow.

Hammond was a constant torment to the City defence throughout the first-half, as he repeatedly beat his man on the right flank.

On 18 minutes, the Wands looked certain to take the lead, as Watkins burst into the box with only Benbow to beat, before inexplicably putting his effort the wrong side of the post.

Mark Tompkins and Adam Heaslewood kept Cray going forward with a string of incisive passes from midfield and on the stroke of half-time Heaslewood went close when he was narrowly wide with a header.

The second-half followed a similar pattern, with City, several rungs above the Wands on the non-league ladder, generally on the back foot. They managed to carve out only one clear-cut opening when their substitute shot wide when well-placed.

And after Watkins’ superb goal, the Cray defence, with Ian Rawlings and Phil Turner outstanding, saw that there were no serious alarms and secured an act of giantkilling in the best traditions of the Wanderers’ long history.

**Cray:** Simmons, Turner, Rawlings, Cirillo, Willy, Tompkins, Heaslewood, Watkins, Dimmock, Bennett, Hammond. Subs: Silk, Woods, Gray.

After the euphoria of the F.A. Cup victory and the prospect of entertaining local Ryman League side Whyteleafe in the next round, it was essential that the Wands did not get distracted and continued to pick up league points. They went into the midweek game with Beckenham missing three key players. Phil Turner, Drew Watkins and Richard Dimmock all started suspensions relating to offences committed last season. This gave Andy Silk and David Gray the chance to make their full debuts and James Taylor got his first start of the campaign.

Mark Hammond was in top form, notching two goals in a comfortable 3-0 victory, with Mark Willy adding the third. Three days later, at Herne Bay, Cray had to work harder but, not for the first or the last time, the defence held firm and a second-half Mark Tompkins strike from a Ricky Bennett

cross secured all three points and second place in the table, level on points with Maidstone, who maintained their 100% record.

“Cray underlined their own credentials with a solid, well-organised performance...[their] marking was tighter, their tackles better-timed and...it was almost inevitable that Cray would ride their good fortune and win the match in the best smash-and-grab style.”

Herne Bay Times

The Whyteleafe game was played on a Sunday afternoon and attracted a good crowd of nearly 300 to Hayes Lane. The visitors were unbeaten, but could not break down Cray's defence, who kept their fifth successive clean sheet. The only goal came in the 84<sup>th</sup> minute when Tompkins headed home Hammond's perfectly-flighted free-kick.

If the Cup was providing lots of excitement, it was the F.A. Vase that offered a more realistic prospect of success in a national competition. Godalming & Guildford provided the first hurdle and goals from Tompkins and Bennett ensured a fairly routine victory, with the visitors grabbing a late consolation that ended 564 minutes without conceding a goal.

And so to the next round of the Wands' F.A. Cup adventure. By a remarkable coincidence the visit to Hemel Hempstead Town, also from the Ryman League, marked Cray's 100<sup>th</sup> game in the premier cup competition **and** took place almost 100 years to the day since their first F.A. Cup game against Deptford Town in 1902.

Sadly, disaster struck in the days preceding the match as Willy sustained an injury and Bennett suffered an accident at work. With Pietro Cirillo suspended, along with Turner and Dimmock who were still banned, this meant that five of the first-choice players who played at Oxford were missing.

If this were not a big enough handicap, Cray's task became impossible when, after going a goal down on the half-hour, they were reduced to 10 men by Hammond's dismissal. Only a brilliant performance by Mick Simmons and a great goal by Tompkins kept the score to a fairly respectable 1-3 defeat.

After seven successive victories, with only two goals conceded, the defeat to Hemel Hempstead in the F.A. Cup seemed at the time to be little more than a minor setback in Cray's excellent start to the season. But, as it turned out, the game marked the start of the side's worst period. The next few weeks were a worrying time for the management and supporters.

With Cirillo and Bennett returning to the fray, the Wands might have expected to brush aside Slade Green, who were without a league win, in the first round of the Kent Senior Trophy. It wasn't that simple. With 89 minutes on the clock, they were 2-1 down and facing an embarrassing early exit. At this point, Ian Jenkins, in his accustomed role of substitute, grabbed a dramatic equaliser. He went on the break Green's hearts with the winner in extra-time. These goals extended Jenko's scoring run to 11 successive seasons and got Cray out of jail in a game they barely deserved to win.

The Wands were back at full-strength for the trip to Whitstable, as Turner and Dimmock at last completed their suspensions and Willy recovered from injury. Dimmock celebrated his return with a goal, but two precious points were dropped when a defensive mix-up gifted the Oystermen a soft second-half goal.

In the next round of the Vase, Cray travelled into the unknown to meet Hampshire League side Winchester City, a club going places. Plenty of money had been pumped into both their ground and their team and they had won every match so far this season, scoring an average of five goals per game. A good crowd gathered to see the Wands make an excellent start with Cirillo's goal, but they faded badly after falling behind just before half-time and crashed to a 5-2 defeat. It was a shame that the national press witnessed the heaviest defeat of the season.

“Anybody who doubted the quality of the Winchester City side that had racked up 15 wins in 15 matches to dominate the Hampshire League this season need only ask any of the 231 spectators at the City Ground on Saturday. Victory No16 was over a Cray Wanderers side that lies second in the Kent League. Winchester simply swept them aside.”

Walter Gammie writing in The Times

On a poor day for the club, the reserves, who had slipped to third in the league, after home defeats to Thamesmead and Danson Furness, crashed out of the London Intermediate Cup 4-2 at Erith Town. Winchester, incidentally, went on to reach the quarter-final of the Vase.

It was a case of “out of the frying pan, into the fire” as Cray's next game was at VCD Athletic. Despite losing several of the players who had gone agonisingly close to winning the league the previous year, their young side had made an excellent start to the season. Bayliss Avenue had become a real bogey ground for the Wands and their performance never reached any heights, not helped by Cirillo's dismissal. VCD seemed to have more appetite for the fight and they fully deserved their 3-1 victory. They rubbed salt into the wounds with their final goal, an excellent individual effort from Paul Dimmock, Richard's younger brother.

Cray had the perfect opportunity to put behind them the disappointment of the previous three weeks as they entertained Greenwich at Hayes Lane. The Borough, who had signed Adam Woods from the Wands, were next-to-bottom in the table. They had started the season with six straight league defeats, before recording a solitary win.

It should have been straightforward for the Wands, but they put in a performance accurately summarised in Greg Mann's programme notes below and allowed Greenwich to pull off the shock result of the season. A Dean Holness goal ten minutes from time earned all three points for the visitors, shortly after Tompkins had been sent off.

“For a team supposedly aiming for one of the top spots this year we were downright awful. A complete lack of commitment was evident and I'm sorry to say that if that attitude continues the players could well be playing in front of an empty ground cause sure as hell nobody is going to pay to watch it.”

Club Notes, Cray v Faversham programme

Without doubt Cray had run into a crisis. Their title challenge looked a bit of a joke. They were now in the bottom half of the table, 15 points behind Maidstone, who had dropped just two points in 10 games. Greg's prognosis proved right as the smallest league crowd of the season turned up to see the Wands take on Faversham, another lowly-placed side.

In a way, the game was one of the turning points of the season, as Cray rattled up a morale-boosting eight goals without reply. David Gray and Mark Willy both netted twice and the Wands registered what at the time was their highest score at Hayes Lane.

A couple more straightforward wins followed and Cray were back on track. Andy Silk notched his first goal for the club in the 3-1 success at Lordswood, where Cray played in all blue for the first time, and Ricky Bennett grabbed four in the 5-0 demolition of Erith Town at Hayes Lane. With Maidstone drawing their last two games, the Wanderers reduced the deficit to eight points.

“We played reasonably well, but they were experienced, well-organised and overall deserved to win.”

Lordswood manager, Barry Zillwood

Another mini-break for cup action followed, starting with a home League Cup match with Thamesmead Town. An entertaining encounter stood at 1-1 when the floodlights refused to come on after the interval and, in the gathering gloom, there was no prospect of completing the fixture. This was the first time a Cray game had been abandoned for this reason.

Four days later, the lights were shining brightly and they had to work overtime as Cray again made heavy weather of an apparently routine Kent Senior Trophy tie. Adam Heaslewood's two strikes put them ahead in the second-half but Tunbridge Wells equalised to force the game into extra-time. Mark Hammond's 101<sup>st</sup> minute goal appeared to have won it for the Wands, only for the Wells to earn a replay at the death.

Cray dominated proceedings in the replay at Culverden, but had to wait until the 89<sup>th</sup> minute until a James Taylor shot took them into the quarter-finals.

The Wands faced a run of cup matches at this time three years ago, which continued with a return visit to Wingate and Finchley in the London Senior Cup. Five years earlier Cray had won here 2-1, with goals from Ian Jenkins and Richard Palmer, and there was another old-timer, Sean Cooney, returning after a spell at Beckenham, on target as the Wands repeated that scoreline. It was their third victory over a Ryman League Division One side in little over three months.

The Wingate game had been put back several weeks due to storm damage to their floodlights and bad weather put paid to the next scheduled league game with Slade Green. The reserves, though, were able to play, making their third visit of the season to Erith Town. Lewis Wood scored a hat-trick in a 5-1 Kent Intermediate Cup success. When added to the previous week's 6-2 league win which took Cray equal top with Thamesmead, this represented ample revenge for the earlier defeat at Erith. In fact, the reserves were enjoying a real scoring spree, as they had beaten Folkestone Invicta 10-2 on aggregate in the League Cup. Wood had scored eight in the last three games!

The next first team game was another London Senior Cup tie as Uxbridge visited Hayes Lane. When Richard Dimmock put the Wands ahead with 10 minutes to go, it looked as though another Ryman League scalp was about to be gained, but the visitors struck in the dying seconds and scored the winner in extra-time.

It was six cup matches in a row as Thamesmead returned to Hayes Lane for the second attempt to stage the Kent League Cup first round successfully. Another close game ensued. Curtis Williams, whose goals had won the Kent Senior Trophy final between the clubs the previous season, struck again midway through the second half. This time, though Cray responded, as David Gray headed home a corner, before Mark Willy nodded home a Mark Hammond free-kick in the final minute. The Wands' ability to score from set pieces was becoming a key feature of the season.

The last game before Christmas saw Cray return to league duty with a home game against Whitstable Town, who were three places ahead in third spot. No-one could have forecast the result. The Oystermen were simply overrun as the Wands ran in seven goals without reply, Ricky

Bennett bagging his second four-goal haul of the season. It was a performance that really made the rest of the Kent League sit up and take notice. Cray had now scored 20 goals in their last three home games. It certainly made for a Happy Christmas!

***"TOWN LOSE IN TURKEY SHOOT"***

As often happens, the player who was most instrumental in a game, in this case Cray's Mark Hammond, did not manage to add his name to the goal tally as his side slaughtered Town in the pre-Christmas 'six-pointer.' He was however involved in at least four of the goals, two from corners and the other two via his superb delivery of balls into Town's beleaguered penalty box at pace, from either flank.

***Micky Simmons had hardly a speck of mud on his body... "I've never had so little to do, maybe years ago in a Sunday morning game, but in the Kent League, never. We were just unbeatable today."***

[www.whitstabletownfc.co.uk](http://www.whitstabletownfc.co.uk)

The New Year began with most of the football grounds of Kent rendered unplayable by torrential rain, followed by snow, which entailed a three and a half week lay off for the Cray first team. When the elements finally relented, Herne Bay were able to visit for the Kent Senior Trophy quarter-final.

The KST is one of those competitions where the draw for all the rounds is made at the outset, so it is possible to track your club's likely route to the final. On this basis, Cray supporters could work out that in all four rounds the Wands would be at home, that they would avoid the "big guns" such as Maidstone, VCD and Deal, and that the first three games would be against teams in the lower half of the table, which they could expect to win comfortably.

If only life were so simple! After coming within an ace of losing to Slade Green and needing 210 minutes to dispose of Tunbridge Wells, Cray huffed and puffed to no great effect against the Bay and needed extra-time yet again, with the game goalless at full time. At this point, things changed completely as Richard Dimmock came off the bench and rammed home three goals in just ten minutes. It was the fastest hat-trick ever recorded by a Cray player and set up an eminently winnable semi-final against Whitstable.

Maidstone's first league defeat of the season, to Deal, had put the Wands back in striking distance of the top of the table, 11 points behind with three games in hand, but the next two results made a severe dent in their title aspirations. Firstly, Hythe Town escaped from Hayes Lane with a point from a 2-2 draw, in a game in which Cray had more than enough chances to win.

Then came a visit to Deal, who themselves had just suffered their first league loss, a surprise 6-3 defeat to Lordswood. The Wands dominated proceedings for more than an hour on a poor surface and took the lead through Phil Turner. But they allowed Deal back into the game with an equaliser and then were made to rue their missed chances as the Kent League's leading scorer, Steve Jones, netted a late winner for the home side.

January was a very good month for the reserves. A striking result was the 7-3 demolition of a very strong Deal second string at Oxford Road, which sealed a 9-5 aggregate win in the League Cup. They also won 3-1 at Ramsgate in the Kent Intermediate Cup, but the highlight was a 2-0 midweek victory at Bayliss Avenue against Thamesmead, a result that made the Wands slight favourites to capture the Division One North title.

More snow led to the postponement of the complete Kent League programme on February 1<sup>st</sup>, including Cray's visit to Maidstone in the League Cup. Four days later, although still bitterly cold, the pitch at Sittingbourne was playable and the Wands put in a sterling performance. The league leaders were thoroughly outplayed and second half goals from Dimmock and Gray were no more than Cray deserved.

Cray had faced two of the league's top teams, Thamesmead and Maidstone, in the League Cup, and had progressed to the semi-final without requiring extra-time in either game. A two-legged tie with Tunbridge Wells seemed to offer a reasonable route into the final.

Having played only two league games in six weeks (gaining only one point) the Wands had slipped back to eighth place in the table. Even by winning their games in hand, there were four teams they could not catch, one of whom were their next opponents, Ramsgate.

The Rams had been putting together a good young side and they soon took control of midfield, converting their dominance into a 1-0 interval lead. In a classic "game of two halves", Cray ran the show after half-time, equalising through Bennett and then having a seemingly legitimate winner disallowed near the end. It was definitely a case of two more points dropped by the Wands, now 16 points (with three games in hand) behind Maidstone.

It was the Stones who were the next visitors to Hayes Lane and their marvellous travelling support produced a record crowd for a Cray home game at Bromley. They were soon disappointed as the Wands, playing superbly well, took a two-goal lead through Dimmock and Bennett. Sinden pulled one back in the second-half and Simmons made a great save near the end, but the Wands deserved their second victory in ten days over the league's top team.

An extremely challenging run of fixtures continued as Thamesmead, themselves in a rich vein of form, visited for an evening game. With the pitch hardening rapidly due to a severe frost, there was some doubt as to whether the game should start. When play was held up after 35 minutes for a serious injury to the 'Mead goalkeeper, Steve Northwood, it was obvious that it was too dangerous to continue. The referee abandoned the game; remarkably this was the second abandonment of a Cray versus Thamesmead game within three months!

Dimmock and Bennett were on target again at Greenwich in a rather dour game. At least the three points were secured, along with some measure of compensation for the awful home defeat against the Borough earlier in the season. But things took a turn for the worse for the club two days later.

Whilst the Reserves gave an excellent performance, before going down to Gravesend in the Kent Intermediate Cup in a controversial penalty shoot-out, the first team were playing one of their games in hand, at lowly Erith Town. It was one of those nights when the ball did everything but go into the net. Erith withstood a non-stop siege in the second half, their 'keeper made some blinding saves and Cray missed chance after chance. Maidstone were slipping away over the title horizon.

Erith's manager Fabio Rossi wore a relieved smile after the game, admitting that Cray put his team under great pressure...for the Wands the dropped points must surely mean that the last lingering hopes of winning the championship have now gone?
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Match report in the Cray programme

Still stuck back in sixth place, 13 points behind Maidstone (but with three games in hand) Cray welcomed Herne Bay to Hayes Lane. The Bay again proved doughty opponents, and three times took the lead. For most of the game the Wands looked anything but championship contenders. Ricky Bennett and Mark Willy (twice) struck equalisers, before Bennett secured his hat-trick, and a 5-3 victory, with two goals in the last ten minutes.

With their 7-0 thrashing in the memory banks, Whitstable could not have travelled to Bromley seven days later with a great deal of hope of winning the Kent Senior Trophy semi-final. They made a better fist of it this time, though, and when they pulled back to 2-1 midway through the second-half, they threatened to make life difficult for Cray. Then Richard Dimmock scored

the goal of the season, a strong run culminating with a ferocious 35-yard shot, and he sealed the Wands' place in a second successive KST final with a late penalty.

Ian Jenkins had been adding a few new faces to his squad during the early part of the New Year. Jamie Wood, always likely to get goals, had returned from Thamesmead, whilst Paul Dimmock came from VCD to join his brother. These two players tended to warm the bench in March, whilst the experienced Danny Evans, signed from Dartford, proved a versatile performer in midfield or the back four. On the debit side, Mark Tompkins moved on, to Croydon, and Mark Hammond, who had been attracting the interest of larger clubs for some time (he nearly joined Bromley in the close season), made a big move to Aldershot, to help their promotion push towards the Conference. A small fee was involved. Hammond's departure provided the chance for James Taylor to claim a regular starting spot.

Cray now faced five league games in 18 days. Realistically, only maximum points would keep them in the title hunt. And that was precisely what they achieved, and what's more they kept five clean sheets in the process!

The first of these wins was at Thamesmead, four points ahead of Cray, having played two games more. Bayliss Avenue had been a graveyard for the Wands' hopes for longer than anyone cared to remember, but an Adam Heaslewood free-kick and a sound defensive performance laid that particular hoodoo to rest and earned a priceless three points.

At Tunbridge Wells, Cray left it late, in a game that mirrored the earlier KST match at Culverden. Drew Watkins scored the only goal, after 85 minutes. The opposite was the case at Beckenham, when the points were effectively sewn up in the first five minutes, with goals from Willy and Phil Turner. VCD, whose form was fading fast, were outclassed at Hayes Lane, as the Wands cruised to a 3-0 success and a tricky encounter at Slade Green was negotiated thanks to two goals from the unlikely source of Sean Cooney, playing at right-back.

So March had brought seven wins in a row, Ian Jenkins won his second successive "Manager of the Month" award, and Cray found themselves up to second place in the league, seven points behind the Stones, with just one game in hand. Having lost their two most creative players, the Wands relied on experience, organisation and rock-solid defence, in which Rawlings, Gray and Willy were outstanding. It may not have been the flowing football of earlier in the season, but it was really effective.

The Reserves suffered the slightest of stumbles in March. By a remarkable coincidence, they travelled to Erith Town for the third time in a cup-tie (the League Cup this time) and were trailing until the 90<sup>th</sup> minute, when Sam Wood (2) and Ian Jenkins suddenly hit three goals! Two disappointing league draws followed and Cray finished the month four points behind Thamesmead, with two games in hand.

Deal Town came to Hayes Lane for an evening game on April Fools' Day and Cray had every reason to be confident. Deal had slipped back badly in the title race and were now said to be concentrating their efforts on the League Cup. They faced VCD in the first leg of the semi-final the following Saturday and were rumoured to be sending a weakened team to Bromley. In fact, although there were one or two absentees, it was a perfectly presentable Deal side that faced the Wands and, despite being under pressure for most of the game, they shocked Cray by taking the lead (thereby ending the run of clean sheets) and then hung on for a draw after David Gray's equaliser.

It was a bitterly disappointing waste of two points, but Cray bounced back well, with a comfortable 2-0 win in the League Cup at Tunbridge Wells. Again, both the goals came from set pieces, with Mark Willy and Ricky Bennett scoring, to make the second leg appear to be rather a formality. Another solid defensive performance made it seven away games without conceding a goal. A

good day became even better with the news that Maidstone had crashed to a 4-2 defeat at Whitstable. The gap remained at six points, but the Wands had regained their game in hand.

“Should they falter again, we are ready to pounce....” said Greg in his programme notes for the key midweek game with Thamesmead, who were level on points with Cray having played a game more. It was the Mead’s fourth visit to Hayes Lane, although only one of the previous three encounters had actually been completed. Going into the second half, the game was stalemated when one incident changed the game, and threatened to change the course of the season for the Wands. Ricky Bennett, Cray’s leading scorer, was the victim of a dreadful foul that caused serious knee damage and prematurely ended his season. The culprit received only a yellow card from referee Gary Johnson, a decision that incensed David Gray, who promptly received a red card for his protests!

Cray’s ten men played superbly and even took the lead, through an excellent goal by Phil Turner, but two late strikes proved their undoing. A run of fourteen games without defeat came to an end and, more importantly, the title dream finally appeared to be over and the Wands prepared to “concentrate on the cups.”

Jamie Wood replaced Bennett for the League Cup second-leg against Tunbridge Wells, and made an immediate impact, scoring in the third minute and going on to complete a hat-trick. The Wands were safely through to their second final, as VCD awaited them in a game scheduled to be played at Folkestone. Meanwhile, Maidstone dropped two points at home to Herne Bay.

Cray were supposed to be visiting Faversham in midweek but the game was postponed as Faversham remained under suspension by the KCFA. It was generally accepted that they were unlikely to play again and that their record would be expunged. This would benefit Cray slightly in terms of goal difference, in the unlikely event that this proved relevant, although another draw for the Stones, at home to Lordswood, did provide a glimmer of hope. The Stones were now eight points ahead with two games left, and Cray had two games in hand.

Cray visited Chatham on Easter Saturday for the Kent Senior Trophy final with high hopes. There was talk of Maidstone having lots of injuries and not taking the game seriously as their main priority was the league title and promotion. On a cold and windy and windy day, Cray did well for an hour, but after Richard Dimmock missed a sitter, Maidstone took control. Sinden scored an excellent goal and they got two more on breakaways.

The Stones looked thoroughly committed, strong and well-organised with pace and skill up front. It was impossible to imagine them not winning their last two league games, so it was a great surprise two days later to hear that Maidstone had only drawn at home to Hythe. Assuming that the league expunged Faversham’s results, Cray could now finish on equal points with the Stones (and Thamesmead) and could take the league title on goal difference.

The following night, the Wands beat Ramsgate 4-2 in an exciting game. Jamie Wood scored another hat-trick and Mick Simmons made some fine saves. Many now made Cray favourites for the title as we they had two home games to go and Maidstone had to travel to Ramsgate on the Saturday. Cray and Maidstone’s goal differences were about the same.

The League Management Committee met on the Friday night to decide Faversham’s fate. The club had effectively folded but, rather than the normal practice of expunging their results, it was decided to apply “Rule 14b” - *“The Championship will be decided on average points per games played.”* This bizarre decision had potentially desperate consequences for Cray. Because the Wands wouldn’t be playing Faversham, they couldn’t achieve an average as good as Maidstone’s (or Thamesmead’s) could be. Through no fault of their own, it looked like the Wands were going to be denied the championship that was rightly theirs.

The following day's match with Slade Green looked like being of only academic interest. Cray played well in the circumstances and won with goals from Wood and Dimmock. The real drama, though, was still to unfold. Shortly after the final whistle the news filtered through that, against all expectations, both Maidstone and Thamesmead had drawn. A win for either of them would have given them the title, but they had both blown it. If the Wands could beat Lordswood on the Tuesday, they would be champions after all!

That evening at Hayes Lane will live long in the memory. There was a large crowd, including a number of Maidstone fans, still hoping for an upset. The tension grew as one of the linesmen failed to show up and a replacement had to be summoned hurriedly. Cray made a reasonably promising start and won a lot of corners, but the early goal didn't come. Lordswood gained in confidence and their 'keeper Piggott made a great save from a Watkins shot just before half-time. As the second-half wore on, Cray's play became increasingly disjointed. Then, with only 15 minutes to go, David Gray swivelled in the box and lashed the ball into the net. There was a massive outpouring of relief from the Wands fans, and then a few anxious moments as Lordswood put on sustained pressure for the first time in the match. It took a fabulous solo goal from Richard Dimmock to clinch Cray's first league title for 22 years. The celebrations were loud and long, and the bar takings were a record!

Three days later, the League Cup final at Folkestone was a fairly routine affair. VCD seemed overawed as Jamie Wood scored two early goals to take his tally to nine in five games. That was the only scoring as the Wands achieved their first Kent League double. It was a wonderful ending to a wonderful season.

### POSTSCRIPT TO THE 2002-03 SEASON

So probably the most remarkable season in Cray's long history came to a dramatic and wonderful conclusion. The accolades were shared all round, with special mentions to chairman Gary Hillman, who made it all possible, Ian Jenkins, who won the last three "Manager of the Month" awards, his coaching team of Joe Francis, Frank Coles, John Allwright and physio Jon de Palma. Mark Willy was deserved "Supporters' Player of the Season" and the incomparable Mick Simmons completed two years without missing a game. Greg Mann's programme won the Wirral Programme Club award for the Kent League for the third year running.

The Reserves finished the season in cracking style. A stunning 9-1 aggregate win over Sittingbourne Res put them into the League Cup final and when Thamesmead Res lost to Corinthian the path to the league title was clear. This was duly achieved with Lewis Wood (who won the Golden Boot award) and Paul (Charlie) Vines scoring bagfuls of goals. A splendid 3-2 win over Dover Res in the League Cup final secured the "double double" for the club. In the play-off between the winners of the North and South sections, Cray reserves narrowly went down to Deal Res (2-3 after extra-time), their first defeat (excluding a penalty shoot-out) in 26 games. A great achievement for manager Sam Wright and his assistant John Fellows!

Finally, a word for the Cray Youth Team, who did well to finish fourth in the Kent Youth League and narrowly lost in the final of the London Cup to Thamesmead at the Mile End Stadium.

#### Quotes from the end of the season:

"Cray deserved to win the title because they have been the best team."

*Thamesmead Town manager Paul Blade*

“Football in the County Town of Kent could have been set back years by Maidstone United’s failure to win the Kent League title...Don’t be fooled by the fact that Cray left it until 13 minutes from the end of their game with Lordswood to secure the championship. Despite a brave performance by the Lords, Cray dominated this game and although there was a mounting sense of frustration, Cray always looked strong enough to get the win they needed to take the title.”

*Kent Messenger*

“Cray Wanderers have a long history – a very long history in fact, which dates back to 1860, making them the second-oldest football club in the world. Throughout those 143 years, the club has enjoyed many highs but, arguably, none to match the events of the past few days.”

*News Shopper*

“A League Championship being decided on averages rather than points won’t ever be acceptable; looking at a table in which a side with a greater amount of points finishes second brings a new meaning to being second best. It’s not the ending that one would have chosen or perhaps this season’s Kent League even deserved. From the ashes of Faversham Town’s demise, and its damaging effect on the credibility of the Kent League, has risen in triumph one of the country’s oldest clubs – Cray Wanderers as not only worthy Kent League Champions but immensely popular ones. Watching one of the triumphant Cray players climbing the steps of the Hayes Lane stand to present his wife with his Championship medal was a nice and personal moment amongst the noisy scenes that greeted Cray’s Championship success. It was a moment which perhaps underlined the meaning and significance of winning the Kent League Championship. It’s a League which is much maligned but through it all still has an unfailing ability to create moments of magic. If uncertainty clouds the League’s future as numbers decline, I hope that Tuesday night’s gathering of the Kent League community at Hayes Lane to pay its respects to its new Champions will inject new life and enthusiasm amongst the clubs for next season.”

*Peter Denton writing on the Beckenham Town FC website*

**PETE GORINGE**