

LOOKING BACK IN AMBER

2003-04



With the Kent League Premier Division title, the League Cup, and their reserve team equivalents, tucked away in the Wands' trophy cabinet, Cray supporters may have spent the summer wondering what 2003-04 would hold. Could the club build on their tremendous success or would it prove to be, in the words of the poet Newbolt, simply "hope of a season's fame?"

For his part, manager Ian Jenkins indicated that, as well as retaining the championship, he would like to add the Kent Senior Trophy to the collection of silverware, after two successive defeats in the final. Many fans hoped for a decent run in the F.A. Vase, which was long overdue, and some of us mused once again over the "P" word. Could this be the year the Wands finally gained promotion?

Two of the championship team moved on to higher status clubs. Player of the Season Mark Willy didn't have to get used to new surroundings as he signed for Bromley, whilst Drew Watkins transferred from Cray's midfield to a right-back role at Folkestone Invicta. Jenko found ready-made replacements in Danny Whelan (VCD) and Jamie Kempster, a prize capture from main rivals, Maidstone. Another key addition was the experienced ex-Bromley and Crawley striker, Matt Woolf. On the negative side, the Wands needed a new goalkeeper to replace the retired Mick Simmons.

The first competitive game of the season saw Cray's debut appearance in the Kent League Charity Shield, against Maidstone at Hayes Lane. There was nothing very charitable about the game, which included two sendings-off. Richard Dimmock scored for the Wands in a 1-1 draw, but the Stones won the penalty shoot-out.

Over the years, Cray's opening day record is not impressive, and it didn't improve in the blistering heat at Hythe. The whole team seemed content to admire Michael Yianni's run from his own penalty area, which ended with a low shot past 'keeper Tony Kessell (signed on loan from Folkestone). Cray equalised on 29 minutes, when the impressive Paul Dimmock crossed for his brother to head home. It was a game of few clear-cut chances and the Wands had to be content with a point.

The next two league games were against newcomers to the Kent League. Cray provided the opposition for Sevenoaks' return to the league after over 100 years and a crowd of 350 was attracted to Greatness Park. It proved to be a comfortable Tuesday evening for the Wands, who scored through a deflected Jamie Wood shot, a James Taylor header and an excellent long-range strike from Phil Turner. The only downside was Richard Dimmock hobbling off with what proved to be a long-term injury.

Four days later at Hayes Lane, the somewhat mysterious Sporting Bengal United suffered a terrible hiding. The Asian side were no match for the Wanderers who reached double figures, with David Gray and Ricky Bennett weighing in with hat-tricks. The 10-0 scoreline was Cray's biggest for nearly 50 years (we beat Chingford 11-0 in the London League in 1956-57). The other talking point was the return of Micky Simmons; he could hardly have asked for a quieter afternoon.

The month ended with the opening rounds of the F.A. Cup, in which Cray comfortably saw off opposition from Sussex. A trip to Saltdean brought a comfortable 4-0 victory. Bennett missed an early penalty before opening the scoring and 17 year old substitute Ross Lover rounded things off with his first goal for the club. Eight days later, Pagham got similar treatment at Hayes Lane, with a Kempster hat-trick the highlight in a 5-0 win. 22 goals without reply in four games. The Wands were back!!

The first Saturday in September brought a visit to Greenwich Borough for a league match, never the most appetising of fixtures. On this occasion, though, the match had a special importance, as Greenwich sat above Cray in the league table, with two wins and two draws to their name. But within ten minutes, the

Wands had taken a stranglehold on the game, as Jamie Wood set up goals for Adam Heaslewood and Jamie Kempster. Heaslewood made it 3-0 with a free-kick on the half-hour. In the second-half Mick Simmons had to make a couple of moderately difficult saves to preserve Cray's fifth successive clean sheet, before young Sam Wood, in only his second appearance as substitute, rounded things off nicely, setting up his namesake Jamie for number four.

The midweek London Senior Cup game at Spartan League Brimsdown Rovers gave the chance for Cray to break their record for the longest spell without conceding a goal. That record (564 minutes) had been set only 12 months earlier, but there was little doubt that it would be beaten as debutant John Mayall (signed from Tunbridge Wells) and Ian Rawlings comfortably kept the home attack at bay. Before half-time Kempster hooked home a Heaslewood corner and a fine run and cross by Andy Silk enabled Ross Lover to put the Wands in control. The 2-0 win set the record straight, for five years earlier, in one of Ian Jenkins' first games in charge, Cray had suffered an embarrassing 3-1 defeat at the same ground.

Sandhurst Town, from the Combined Counties League, were Cray's next F.A. Cup opponents. This was a game the Wands supporters certainly expected Cray to win, but anyone arriving at Hayes Lane at three minutes past three would have been shocked to find out that it was already 2-0! Straight from the kick off Ricky Bennett found a yawning gap in the Sandhurst rearguard and lashed home the opening goal. And barely a couple of minutes later, Lover notched the second. Bennett made it three on the half-hour before a very strange thing happened: Cray conceded a goal! It was the first they'd let in for 656 minutes, and it took a massive deflection from a free-kick to beat Simmo. Any thoughts Sandhurst may have had about mounting a comeback were quickly dispelled when Kempster netted with a glorious 35 yard shot early in the second half and the Wands cruised to a 4-1 victory.

Bennett's superfast goal got a mention on the F.A. website. The only record of a faster one in the Cup was by Vic Lambden of Bristol Rovers in 1951. So Ricky's is the fastest recorded F.A. Cup goal by a non-league player! Cray also set another record, as they'd never before won three F.A. Cup ties in the same season, although because they'd played two preliminary rounds, it had only taken them as far as the second qualifying round on this occasion.

The draw would send Cray to Ryman Premier side Basingstoke Town but before this mouth-watering prospect, there were another three league points to be collected at home to Sevenoaks. The visitors put up stouter resistance than in the game a month earlier and it took a special Jamie Wood goal to open the scoring. Cutting in from the left, he let fly with an unstoppable shot from the edge of the area. It was only five minutes from time when the Wands sealed the win, as Kempster's telling pass enabled Bennett to round the 'keeper for a neat finish.

With eight successive wins and only one goal conceded, Cray went to Basingstoke with a good deal of confidence. They almost scored right at the start when a sublime chip by Phil Turner nearly beat the home 'keeper. The Wands more than matched their hosts from two divisions higher, but learned the hard way that mistakes are more likely to be punished by the better sides. Cray's defence was almost immaculate, but one slip by Danny Whelan (replacing the suspended David Gray) let in Basingstoke's leading scorer McAllister for a clinical finish just after half-time. Jamie Wood had a good chance to equalise in the closing stages, but seemed to hesitate and was crowded out. So the Wands slipped to a 0-1 defeat, but the sight of the home side taking the ball into the corners to run down the clock was quite a compliment to a team from the humble Kent League!

Following their exit at Basingstoke in the F.A. Cup, Cray turned their attention to the rather less exalted London Senior Cup, as they welcomed Hoddesdon Town to Hayes Lane. Despite being situated deep in the Hertfordshire countryside, Hoddesdon are regular entrants in the London Senior Cup. Their main claim to fame is that they won the first F.A. Vase but perhaps of more interest to the spectators was the sight of "Ardiles" on the visitors' teamsheet. Pablo Ardiles was rumoured to be the son the Tottenham and Argentina star Osvaldo, but he made little impact in a game that the Wands dominated. Matt Woolf made his first start for the club and was a focal point of Cray's attacks. The first goal didn't come until the 73rd minute, though, when Jamie Kempster responded quickly after his first shot had been saved. Adam Heaslewood secured the Wands' passage to the next round with two minutes to go, with a somewhat freakish goal. His corner bounced in the goalmouth and spun into the net.

Cray were without a game for the next fortnight as their scheduled opponents were involved in cup-ties. This meant that the "first versus second" clash with Maidstone, who had also made a storming start, had to be put back until later in the season. In fact, it was Beckenham Town who provided the Wands with their next opposition, in a midweek league game at Hayes Lane. It turned out to be another fairly comfortable victory. Kempster continued in his rich vein of form, scoring twice to take his tally to nine in eight games. In contrast, Danny Evans notched what proved to be his only goal for the club. The final score was 3-1 and the three points put Cray on equal terms with the Stones and Herne Bay, with sixteen points from six league games.

Three days later, the Wands set out on the F.A. Vase trail with a rather unappetising trip to Deal. Although the seaside club were third from bottom in the league, Cray had not won there for 14 years. On a terribly bumpy pitch, it looked like this dismal record would be extended when Kempster struck a penalty against the post and shortly afterwards Deal took the lead. But the Wanderers fought back well and their pressure told just before half-time when Ross Lover rammed home a free-kick. Chances fell to both sides in the second period and it was James Taylor who grabbed a dramatic winner as he headed home a Heaslewood corner with just two minutes to go. Micky Simmons made two great saves in the closing moments to preserve Cray's lead.

The following Wednesday night's trip to Tunbridge Wells was the first of four league games in eleven days. With Simmons missing due to a toe injury, Dean Mann made his debut. Apart from a fine early save, he had little to do as Cray won 3-0. All the goals came in the second-half. Kempster grabbed the first two: one a volley from a John Mayall cross and the other a follow-up after the 'keeper parried Jamie Wood's shot. David Gray added a late third with a shot that took a deflection.

Cray's wonderful run continued at Lordswood, with what turned out to be a comprehensive 5-1 success. However there were some anxious moments for the Wands in the second-half when Lordswood pulled back to 2-1, hit the post and forced Mann into some scrambling saves. Cray had taken an early two-goal lead courtesy of Ricky Bennett and Adam Heaslewood and it was 'Heasle' who calmed their nerves with a free-kick that made it 3-1. A Wood penalty and a bicycle kick from Kempster (inevitably) completed the scoring.

After a run of games against sides they probably expected to beat, the Wands anticipated a tougher test at Hayes Lane against fourth-placed Thamesmead. And so it proved as both sides made chances in the first-half. It was Cray who took the lead on 37 minutes when Bennett converted a Lover cross. Bennett almost made it 2-0 when he hit the post just after half-time, but the Mead hit back when Marc Merridan equalised direct from a corner and Mann had to make a fine save from Michael Power. The Wands wrapped up the points in the final 15 minutes with goals from Taylor and Heaslewood. The win put Cray five points clear at the top of the league with a goals record of 34 for and only 4 against!

After six wins in a row in October, the first Saturday in November brought a return visit for the Wands to Deal Town, where they had made rather hard work of winning a Vase match a fortnight earlier. This time it was much more straightforward as Cray cruised into a 4-0 lead by half-time. Ian Rawlings opened the scoring with his first goal for the club after just seven minutes, glancing a Ross Lover corner into the net. After Deal had a couple of near misses, the Wands wrapped things up with three quick goals. First was Adam Heaslewood's low shot and then Jamie Kempster added a brace against his former club. Deal pulled one back midway through the second-half before Ricky Bennett completed Cray's nap hand. The home side's misery was complete when they missed a later penalty.

Three days later, Cray crossed the Thames to take on Isthmian League strugglers Barking and East Ham in the London Senior Cup. Rawlings, Heaslewood and Lover were given the evening off, with Sam Wood, Danny Whelan and David Gray moving up from the bench. Despite their higher status, the home side were no match for the confident Wands who took a two-goal lead in the first-half. Both were the result of errors by Barking's stand-in 'keeper, as Kempster and Andy Silk cashed in. The highlight of the second half was Jamie Wood's 50th goal for the club: a low shot into the corner.

The next three games were all in the league as Cray sought to forge further ahead at the top. Mid-table Ramsgate were on the receiving end of a 4-1 defeat at Hayes Lane. The balance of play was closer than the scoreline suggested, but the seaiders had no answer to two strikes by Ricky Bennett and one each

from Jamie and Sam Wood, the latter being his first senior goal. There was good news, too, from Harrow Meadow, where Greenwich Borough inflicted a first defeat of the season on Maidstone.

Four days later, the Wands negotiated a tricky encounter with Herne Bay, winning 2-1 at Hayes Lane, thanks to another two goals from the irrepressible Kempster. This game saw goalkeeper Micky Simmons return to the side in place of Dean Mann, after missing six matches through injury. And the winning run was stretched to 11 matches, with a 4-1 success at Erith Town. Cray made heavy weather of the first half, after taking an early lead through Kempster (who else?). Erith soon equalised and had good chances to take the lead before the interval, but goals early in the second period from Bennett and John Mayall (another first for the club) calmed Cray's nerves. Bennett added a late second.

Cray's league record was now outstanding. After the draw in the first game of the season, they had now won the next 12 and had a goal difference of 41. Second-placed Thamesmead were eight points behind, and the Wands even had a game in hand! It must have been with some trepidation that Chessington & Hook United, fifth in the Combined Counties League, came to Hayes Lane for an F.A. Vase second round tie.

In terrible conditions, it was business as usual, as Heaslewood opened the scoring with a superb free-kick. Bennett made it two, heading home a cross from the returning Paul Dimmock, before one of the growing puddles contributed to Cray's third goal. A back pass held up short of the 'keeper; his hurried clearance hit Bennett who was able to walk the ball home. Chessington certainly weren't going to beat Cray but the rain might have, for had it not been for some enthusiastic work by the groundstaff at half-time, the game may well have been abandoned. Fortunately the 90 minutes were completed and the Wands doubled their tally, thanks to another Heaslewood free-kick, a Jamie Wood header and a showpiece dribble and strike from substitute Matt Woolf. Final score: 6-0 and the Wands were in the last 64 of the Vase for the first time in 11 years.

A week later, Cray made it a club record 13 successive wins in a low-key game with Sheerness East in the Kent Senior Trophy. The gallant visitors from the Kent County League managed to take a shock early lead but Woolf replied within a minute and Kempster and Gray made it 3-1 at half-time. Heaslewood added a fourth before Sheerness grabbed a late consolation goal.

They say that all good things must come to an end, and so it was for Cray when Greenwich Borough visited Hayes Lane for a Kent League encounter. Over the years the Borough had been one of Cray's bogey sides and their experienced strikeforce of Dean Bowey, who had scored hundreds of goals in local football, and ex-Wands man Matt Norris were a match for any defence.

Cray were off-colour from the start, as Bowey forced Mick Simmons into two early saves before he opened the scoring, latching onto a "route one" ball. Just after half-time, the skilful Wayne Burnett made it two and Cray's 13-game unbeaten was dead and buried when Bowey added a third. Not that the Wands went down without a fight. After Ricky Bennett headed in Adam Heaslewood's corner just after the hour, it was like The Alamo as Greenwich faced an endless wave of attacks. Phil Turner alone saw three shots well saved by the Borough 'keeper, but Cray could not find a way through. Suddenly, the league table seemed a lot tighter. VCD, in particular, were beginning to look threatening. They were only nine points behind with three games in hand. And it was over a month before Cray played in the league again, as they faced a succession of cup-ties.

The first of these was a midweek London Senior Cup tie with Essex League leaders, Ilford. Perhaps with the weekend's F.A. Vase game in mind, Ian Jenkins re-shuffled his side, and the one of the replacements, Sam Wood, secured a quarter-final place for the Wands. He sealed an excellent personal performance with the only goal midway through the second period.

Great Yarmouth Town were the Sunday afternoon visitors to Hayes Lane, as Cray attempted to reach the last 32 of the Vase for the first time since 1981, when they played...Great Yarmouth! The Wands were clear favourites as their Eastern Counties League opponents were having a poor season and they wasted no time in taking the initiative. With just nine minutes gone, the outstanding Phil Turner fed Matt Woolf, who lashed home a powerful shot.

Cray looked to be in control but they couldn't add to their lead, and the match turned on its head in three minutes early in the second half. On 54 minutes, David Gray conceded a penalty that was confidently converted and three minutes later, the Wands again showed susceptibility to the long ball. A goal-kick was flicked on to Gary Gilmore who showed a great eyes for goal as he shot past Simmons. Cray wobbled for a while and Yarmouth had chances to put the game out of reach, but they clung on and got a lifeline when Jamie Kempster put the ball over the line (just!) in a ferocious goalmouth scramble after a corner.

What had turned into a thrilling cup-tie saw both sides going hammer and tongs for the winner, which finally came 11 minutes from the end of extra time in rather fortuitous fashion. Ross Lover launched a free-kick from wide on the right that flew over everyone, including the Yarmouth 'keeper, and into the corner of the goal! The Wands withstood the inevitable late pressure and were relieved to book their passage into the national stages of the competition. There was much head-scratching when the draw came through the following day. Cray had been drawn away to West Allotment Celtic. It turned out that they were based to the north of Newcastle! Many hours were spent weighing up the best way of getting there: road, rail or air?

Meanwhile, the Kent League Cup game with Tunbridge Wells, scheduled for the Saturday before Christmas, was postponed for a week due to a waterlogged pitch. When the game did take place, the Wands saw out what had been a momentous year for the club with yet another victory. Midway through the first-half Kempster volleyed home a half-cleared Sam Wood shot to give Cray the lead. But they made heavy weather of beating the league's next-to-bottom side, who equalised six minutes after the break. It was only in the 87th minute that Kempster drilled home the winner: his 22nd goal of the season.

At the start of a New Year, the prospects for Cray Wanderers could hardly have been brighter. Well ahead at the top of the Kent League, they remained in four cup competitions and were especially looking forward to their trip to the far north in the F.A. Vase. The first game of 2004 was a rather less glamorous assignment, as the Wands travelled to Thamesmead for a Kent Senior Trophy quarter-final.

Bayliss Avenue had proved a graveyard for Cray's hopes in both cup and league on countless occasions, and no-one would have predicted the outcome of the game: the Wands won 6-0! Star of the show was Richard Dimmock, who was making only his third start since sustaining a bad injury in the second game of the season. Dimmo helped himself to four second-half goals, as the Mead, second in the league table, were ruthlessly swept aside. John Mayall and Jamie Kempster scored the others. The strength in-depth of Cray's squad at this time was emphasised by the list of players on the bench: Ross Lover, Ian Rawlings, David Gray, Phil Turner and Ricky Bennett.

In-form Erith Town came to Hayes Lane for a midweek league game and proved a much tougher nut to crack. Indeed, they came closest to opening the scoring in the first-half when Kyle hit the woodwork. In an evenly contested game, Cray secured the three points when Rawlings headed home Paul Dimmock's corner just before the hour.

There was another tight squeeze three days later at Ramsgate. Perhaps with the following week's Vase game in mind, Ian Jenkins made five changes to the Cray line-up. One of these, Matt Woolf, gave the Wanderers an early lead with a 20-yard shot but Ramsgate soon showed they were a much better side than their lowly league position suggested. Takaloo went close twice before Schultz headed home a corner midway through the second-half. As the game entered stoppage time, it looked as if two valuable points would be lost until Jamie Wood set up a chance for Turner to fire home a low diagonal shot. It was a dramatic winner and Phil was immediately submerged under a bundle of team-mates!

This win set Cray up nicely for their trip to Newcastle to play West Allotment Celtic in the last 32 of the F.A. Vase. The decision to travel by plane and make a weekend of it raised excitement to fever pitch. It also probably ensured the game took place, as the playing surface was barely playable after heavy rain and it's likely that, had the Wands not come so far, the match would have been postponed. The game itself was not a classic, but it was settled by a classic goal. After 29 minutes Jamie Wood cut in from the right and sent in a powerful left-foot shot that appeared to be going over the bar, before it dipped at the last moment. The home side put on a lot of pressure in the second-half but found Rawlo and Danny Whelan (replacing the injured Gray) in fine form, whilst Micky Simmons made a couple of great saves. And just before the final whistle sounded to confirm a famous victory for the Wands, Wood was denied a second by a great goal line clearance.

After this high, came a real low just three days later. A midweek trip to Whitstable was always going to be a difficult proposition. The Oystermen's big, strong team was a real handful at the best of times and 48 hours after returning from Newcastle was not the best of times for Cray. It was no great surprise when the Wands went down 4-2; Kempster got both Cray's goals. Even worse was a terrible injury suffered by Turner, which put the influential captain out for the rest of the season and, indeed, threatened to end his playing career.

It almost got even worse when Cray visited East London to take on Sporting Bengal. This should have been a stroll for the Wands; the Asian side had lost 10-0 at Hayes Lane in August and still had not won a league game. But, with 80 minutes on the clock, the ultimate embarrassment was looming. After conceding an early goal on a very heavy pitch, Richard Dimmock had equalised only for Bengal to take the lead again. Cray's blushes were spared by goals in the last ten minutes by Bennett and Sam Wood, in a game in which Ross Lover, unlike most of his colleagues, played superbly well.

The first Saturday in February was another momentous occasion in the history of Cray Wanderers. Three coachloads of supporters made their way down the M4 for the 5th round (last 16) F.A. Vase tie with Keynsham Town. Apart from being away from home, the draw had been kind to the Wands. Keynsham, situated between Bristol and Bath, were fourth from bottom in the Western League; these were opponents Cray expected to beat!

It was soon clear that the Wands were the more accomplished side as they rained attack after attack on the young home side's goal. But they just could not score! Andy Silk and Danny Evans both hit the woodwork, Sam Wood fell when clean through and the home 'keeper made a string of fine saves. In the second half tempers rose and Richard Dimmock, an unused substitute, was shown a red card after a melee. Jamie Kempster missed a clear chance just before full-time so, despite almost total domination, Cray had to steel themselves for extra-time.

At last the breakthrough came, when sub Matt Woolf dived to head home a low Kempster cross after 104 minutes. A few minutes later Jamie Wood converted a one-on-one to seal a quarter-final place for only the second time in the Wands' history. The celebrations were long and noisy and the game was covered by almost two pages in The Non League Paper, which, true to form, credited Cray's second goal to the wrong player and compounded their error by printing a banner headline, "TAYLOR SINKS KEYNSHAM!"

With an mouth-watering home draw with the previous season's finalists AFC Sudbury on their minds, it was back to the bread and butter of the Kent League at Slade Green three days later. After young Dave Martin gave the Green an early lead with a great free-kick, the goalscoring heroes from Keynsham found the net again. Just before half-time, a Ross Lover pass found Jamie Wood who netted and with a quarter of an hour to go Woolf made it 2-1 from close range. But Cray failed to defend an injury time corner and a headed goal robbed them of two valuable points.

An interesting new signing sat on the bench for Cray at Slade Green: veteran prolific scorer Dean Bowey. And a new face made his debut in the League Cup quarter-final at Erith Town. This was Keith Sharman, another former Bromley player. A tight game was settled by a goal from Silk, following up after the Erith 'keeper failed to hang on to a free-kick.

The Vase quarter-final with Sudbury was probably Cray's biggest match since their previous appearance in the last eight of the national competition 24 years ago. As the events of the day unfolded, the parallels with that game against Stamford grew more and more uncanny. There was, of course, a big crowd: 771, the biggest home gate since the Stamford game. The pattern of the game was remarkably similar as well. Cray put on most of the early pressure but failed to score and, as the match wore on, Sudbury became more composed and the chances dried up for the Wands. There was even a shocking flashback when a little crowd trouble broke out, just as it had at Oxford Road in 1980. The players were taken off the pitch for a short period, shortly before the end of normal time.

And, to cap it all, just as against Stamford, Cray lost the game in extra-time, as the visitors from Suffolk fired in two goals in two minutes, midway through the additional period. The Wands could probably have no complaints at the outcome, although they could point to the fact that Sudbury appeared to have targeted Cray's two star youngsters, Sam Wood and Ross Lover, who were both the victims of heavy challenges early on and were far less effective than usual.

Four days later Isthmian League Tooting and Mitcham came to Hayes Lane for a London Senior Cup-tie. Cray tried to put their Vase woes behind them and grabbed a two-goal lead through Ricky Bennett (28 minutes) and Kempster three minutes later. But Tooting were level by the interval and took advantage of the weary Wanderers with two more goals in the second half.

Cray's exits from both the F.A. Vase and the London Senior Cup at least allowed them to re-focus on their main objective for the season - to win the Kent League and gain promotion. Retaining the title, which had looked a formality before Christmas, had suddenly become a much harder task. Whilst the Wands had been engaged in all their cup-ties, VCD Athletic had been winning game after game and had opened up a nine point lead at the top of the table.

Cray had four games in hand, the first of which was a tough one: at home to Whitstable. The Oystermen were also in great form. They had already beaten the Wands once and their boss Matt Toms had been named manager of the month. Their big, strong team made it a difficult evening for Cray but the Wands managed to take a 2-0 lead by half-time. Jamie Kempster bundled home a cross and Ricky Bennett netted with a low drive. To be fair, this was hardly a reflection of the play and the Cray supporters' anxieties were raised when Whitstable pulled a goal back on the hour. 2-1 soon became 2-2 and then, deep into stoppage time, the Wands failed to defend a corner and Whitstable grabbed the winner. This was definitely the low point of the season. Cray had lost the physical battle again and VCD seemed to be heading off into the distance.

The next game offered no respite from the pressure; it was away to VCD! Vickers chose to play this Kent Senior Trophy semi-final at their own Oakwood ground in Crayford, where they weren't allowed to play league games due to a lack of floodlights (they were groundsharing at Lordswood). They were rewarded with a good crowd who witnessed an exciting game of fluctuating fortunes. With well over 90 minutes on the clock, Cray were leading 3-2, thanks to goals from Bennett, Jamie Wood and Richard Dimmock (penalty). VCD then won a corner and, in accordance with tradition, their goalkeeper raced upfield. The corner was partially cleared, only for the 'keeper to whack home a spectacular shot from 25 yards! Cray could have been devastated by this, but they battled well in extra time, when there was no further scoring. And all came right in the end as a 5-4 penalty shoot-out win put the Wands in the Trophy final for the third successive year.

The midweek league game at Beckenham was definitely a "must win" for Cray and the result was never in doubt after Bennett scored twice in the first two minutes, followed by 88 minutes without a goal. It was a different story at Thamesmead four days later. Ian Rawlings gave Cray an early lead but the 'Mead were in no mood for a repeat of their 6-0 drubbing in January. Goals either side of half-time gave them a 2-1 lead, but a Dimmock penalty seemed to have secured a useful point for the Wands. But the injury time curse struck for the third game running, as Cray failed again to defend a set piece and Thamesmead grabbed all three points.

The good news for Cray was that VCD had only gained one point from their difficult away trips to Whitstable and Maidstone, so wins in the next two games at Hayes Lane would put the Wands right back on track. This was duly achieved, as Slade Green (2-0) and Deal Town (4-0) were sent packing. Jamie Wood scored three goals in these games, with Bennett and the centre-back pairing of Rawlings and David Gray also contributing. Robert Browning played so well against Cray for the Green that Ian Jenkins immediately signed him and he played for the Wands against Deal four days later!

Wood maintained his purple patch with two more goals in the first leg of the Kent League Cup semi-final at Herne Bay. Kempster and Matt Woolf also scored in a 4-1 win that appeared to make the second leg a formality. The news that VCD had lost to Hythe added to Cray's celebrations; the Wands were now just four points behind with three games in hand.

Unfortunately, they did not capitalise on their advantage when lowly Tunbridge Wells (the only side to lose to Sporting Bengal) visited Hayes Lane in midweek. After a goalless first-half, the Wells took a shock lead early in the second period. Gray equalised ten minutes later, but Cray couldn't find a winner and two valuable points went begging.

The final few weeks of the 2003-04 season were a crucial period in the history of Cray Wanderers as they sought to retain the Kent League title in order to gain promotion to a higher league; this was something the

club had been seeking, on and off, for nearly fifty years. But strangely, the first game of April had very little riding on it. The Wands were racing certainties to reach the League Cup final, having won the first leg 4-1 away from home.

Mid-table Herne Bay came to Hayes Lane with apparently little but pride to play for, but they ended up making it a difficult afternoon for Cray. The Wands may have had their minds on the showdown with VCD Athletic two days later; they certainly got little encouragement from a very sparse crowd. To be fair, Ian Jenkins rested Danny Evans, Ross Lover and Jamie Kempster, but the star of the show was a certain Leigh Bremner, who found the net twice for the Bay. Rather embarrassingly, Cray were hanging on grimly to a 4-3 aggregate at the end, but they duly took their place in another cup-final.

The VCD game was a completely different matter. There was a healthy attendance (230) for a local derby that could have gone a long way towards determining the outcome of the title race. VCD started the night six points ahead of Cray, but having played three games more. And the clubs ended the evening in exactly the same position! Richard Dimmock's early penalty gave the Wands a lead they hung onto until the "curse of the last minute" struck again. This time it was one Jon Main who grabbed an equaliser for Vickers.

Overall, there was no great damage to Cray's championship aspirations, as the other challengers dropped points as well. Thamesmead managed to lose 4-3 to Ramsgate after being three up and Maidstone needed a late goal to salvage a point against Sevenoaks. But Crays' supporters would have noted that their run-in was particularly tricky, with the return game with VCD and home and away games with Maidstone still to come.

A trip to Herne Bay (who Cray played for the third Saturday running) could not be regarded as straightforward either, but this time a full-strength Wands team put in a professional performance to gain the three points. After Sam Wood and Dimmock netted early on, there was no further scoring as Cray cruised to a comfortable win. And 48 hours later, Lordswood were the victims in an Easter Monday stroll at Hayes Lane. David Gray scored twice and Dimmock made it three in as many games with another spot-kick: 3-0 to the Wands.

In fact, it proved to be a very profitable Easter weekend for the Wanderers. Ramsgate very helpfully held both VCD and Maidstone to draws at Southwood, which meant that the Wands moved to within a point of the league leaders, still with two games in hand. And the icing on the cake came with the news that Cray Reserves had emulated the first team by reaching their second cup final of the season. A 3-0 victory at Sevenoaks took them into the League Cup final, equalling their feat in the Kent Intermediate Cup.

The following weekend the league was briefly forgotten as Cray travelled Ashford Town's ground, Homelands, for the Kent Senior Trophy final. After losing in the previous two finals, the Wands were desperate to win the Trophy, but Hythe Town, supported by their President, Rt Hon Michael Howard MP, proved stiff opposition. On a bumpy pitch, with a strong wind blowing, both sides found it difficult to make goalscoring chances, but Hythe came closest to scoring in the second half, when Micky Simmons denied them with a fantastic double save following a corner.

With extra-time looming, Lover delivered a superb corner that man-of-the-match Ian Rawlings met with a bullet header that flew into the roof of the net. Seconds later, Cray had won the Trophy – their first tangible reward for a great season.

Cray finished the season with a flurry of cup finals for the first team and reserves, but probably the biggest "cup final" of all was the return league match with VCD Athletic, who were groundsharing at Lordswood. It was VCD's last game of the season; they were four points ahead of the Wands who had four games to play. Mathematically, Cray could still win the title if they lost, but with their last two games being against Maidstone, they would much rather sew up the title as soon as possible.

After an even first-half, things looked bleak for the Wands when Vickers took the lead just after the interval, but this only served to spark a superb response. For the final half-hour, Cray played some awesome football and overwhelmed Vickers, particularly with the quality of their set-piece play. David Gray, Richard Dimmock and James Taylor all scored to put the Wanderers within touching distance of the championship. One more win was needed.

They did not have long to wait for their chance. Two days later, Hythe Town visited Hayes Lane and 227 turned up, hoping to see Cray to retain their title. Hythe, though, had every intention of spoiling the party, following their narrow defeat to the Wands in the Kent Senior Trophy final. And things became a bit subdued when the visitors took the lead in the first-half. But it all turned out well for Cray as Jamie Wood converted a penalty and Jamie Kempster took his season's tally to 30 with two more goals. It finished 3-1 to the Wands, who secured their fourth Kent League championship.

This was far from the end of the season's excitement as there was the little matter of three cup finals in nine days. The first of these was Cray Reserves v Whitstable Reserves in the Kent Intermediate Cup, which was played on the Thursday night at Welling. The Kent Inter Cup is entered by the reserve teams of all Kent's non-league clubs, from the Conference down to the Kent League, so it is a prestigious trophy to win. Cray fielded a strong side, containing the likes of Grant Hall and Lewis Wood. Whitstable's younger side started the stronger and took a nearly lead, before an own goal evened things up. Just before the break, the Oystermen were reduced to ten men but they went back in front early in the second period, only for Craig Boyle to snatch an 84th minute equaliser for the Wands. Referee Gary Johnson was the centre of attention during the penalty shoot-out, requiring two saved penalties (one for each side) to be re-taken but Cray eventually won 5-3, with substitutes Joe Francis and Ian Jenkins amongst the scorers and Chris Tuley netting the all-important twice-taken winner.

Cray Reserves made it a win double, when they retained the Kent League Cup at Chatham's ground. This time their victims were Maidstone reserves and again the game went to extra-time, during which David Batt headed the winner. A couple of hours later, Cray met Maidstone's first team in a league match. A game devoid of passion ended 2-1 to the Stones, with Robert Browning scoring the Wands' goal.

The Premier League Cup final at Folkestone should have been a fantastic climax to the season, as Cray sought to pull off the "Kent treble." Maybe it was because several players knew this would be their last big game for the Wands, maybe many supporters were more preoccupied with rumours surrounding the following day's F.A. meeting that would decide the promotion places, but, from Cray's point of view, the day never really got going. Thamesmead, eager and well-supported, took a first-half lead. They also missed a penalty. Sam Wood had the ball in the net for Cray, only for the ubiquitous Mr Johnson to call play back for a free-kick to the Wands. Despite creating a lot of second-half pressure, Cray could not find a way past Steve Northwood and the Mead hung on quite comfortably to win the cup.

But, thanks to the efforts of Gary Hillman and Kent League chair, Denise Richmond, the Wands won the main battle of the weekend, as they convinced the 'Powers That Be' that they should be promoted to the Ryman League. Losing to Maidstone 3-2 at Hayes Lane the following day didn't seem to matter, especially as Jenko's late goal extended his record to having scored in 12 consecutive seasons.

Cray had achieved what they set out to do and their supporters had a great deal to look forward to!

PETE GORINGE