

## Looking Back In Amber

### 2004-05 Season



This season was a very exciting time to be a Cray Wanderers supporter. After nearly 50 years of trying, the Wands had finally got themselves promoted to one of the top divisions in the Non-League pyramid. With two successive Kent League Championships under their belt, they took their place in the Ryman Isthmian League. In this season's Looking Back in Amber, we take a month-by-month journey through a hugely enjoyable campaign.

Ian Jenkins resisted any temptation he may have had to make wholesale changes to the playing squad, largely trusting the team that had achieved so much success at the lower level. A number of senior players did decide not to make the step-up, though. Goalkeeper Micky Simmons finally carried out his threat to retire whilst Danny Evans moved to Thamesmead and Ricky Bennett took a break from playing. Andy Silk didn't need to get used to new surroundings: he became Bromley's reserve team manager.

Jenko recruited a new strikeforce of two players who had impressed when playing against Cray: Michael Power from Thamesmead and Leigh Bremner (Herne Bay). Tony Russell (Thamesmead) and Danny Bower (Whyteleafe) added defensive cover, whilst Dean Morris, who had played for Barking against the Wands in the London Senior Cup, and James Millar (Dover) were also useful additions to the squad.

The Wands actually secured a small piece of silverware before the season proper even started. In the Kent League Charity Shield game at Thamesmead, the home side dominated the first-half and took a deserved lead. But Cray began to look the part after the break. Richard Dimmock equalised and a late Matt Woolf penalty secured a morale-boosting win.

And so came the historic occasion of Cray's first game in the Isthmian League. In their new sky-blue away kit, the Wands certainly did not seem to be out of their depth at Burgess Hill Town, as they bossed the opening period but, crucially, couldn't find the net. The home side went ahead early in the second-half but Cray fought back strongly and took the points with two goals in the last 15 minutes. Jamie Kempster cleverly headed home Ross Lover's cross, before Bremner nodded in a David Gray pass for the winner. Man of the match Sam Wood made a dramatic goal line clearance in the last minute to make it a perfect day for all connected with the Wanderers.

The famous Leatherhead club were the first visitors to Hayes Lane and they proved a real test for the Wands, who twice had to come from behind. Power notched a first-half equaliser, shortly after Bremner had been sent off. Things looked bleak for Cray when the Tanners took a second-half lead, but the ten men pushed forward in the pouring rain and were rewarded with a late penalty, that Woolf converted.

The cliché is that a team with 10 men play like a wounded animal. Cray however are the sea urchins of the animal kingdom as when they had a limb cut off they just grew more! At times we thought they had 13 or 14 on the pitch. For most of the second half they controlled the game.

*Match report on Leatherhead website*

Four days later, the Wands entertained Croydon, who were expected to be amongst the weaker teams in the league. Cray pressed forward for almost the entire 90 minutes but found the visiting 'keeper in great form and were disappointed to drop two points. They took out their frustrations in dramatic style in the next two away games, scoring an amazing 11 goals! Bremner took his personal tally of seven as Corinthian-Casuals were beaten 5-0 and Newport humbled 6-0 on a memorable visit to the Isle of Wight. Gray scored three times in these games with Power (penalty) and Robert Browning also netting against the Casuals.

The month ended with more famous visitors: Tooting and Mitcham United. The game marked the return of Jamie Wood, who had started the season with Premier Division Folkestone, and he celebrated with Cray's goal in a hard-fought 1-1 draw. Six games unbeaten, 12 points and 16 goals: what a great start to life in the Ryman League!

Unbeaten in their first six league games, Cray made a sensational start to life in the Ryman League three years ago. As usual, the first Saturday in September brought the first knockout football of the season: the Preliminary Round of the F.A. Cup. Epsom and Ewell from the division below were the visitors. It proved to be a comfortable afternoon for the new signing from Thamesmead, Steve Northwood, who replaced Dean Mann between the sticks. The Wands went four-nil up before half-time, with Michael Power netting a superb hat-trick and Jamie Wood scoring for the second successive game. The only downside for Cray was a nasty ankle injury sustained by Tony Russell.

Such was the confidence in the Cray camp that they fully expected to beat visitors Whyteleafe in the next league game. The arrival of John Myatt from Bromley added extra bite to the Wands' side, who could have been three up within five minutes. James Taylor notched a first-minute goal and moments later Power had the chance to make it two from the spot after a handball offence. Leafe's 'keeper saved the penalty superbly, but watched helplessly when James Millar's 25 yard free-kick smacked against the crossbar. Sadly, Cray did not capitalise on this great start. Whyteleafe came back into the game and equalised before half-time through Mark Tompkins, who numbered the Wands amongst his former clubs. Indeed, the 'Leafe could have won the game at the death as the referee blew the final whistle just as they appeared to be about to score!

Three days later, Cray travelled to Horsham, a big club who were tipped by many for promotion. They had, however, made an indifferent start to the campaign, and the Wands added to their concerns after just five minutes when Jamie Kempster netted with a header from a well-flighted Millar free-kick – an almost identical goal to the one he scored on the opening day at Burgess Hill. However, missing all three first-choice centre backs (Russell, Gray and Rawlings), Cray were always struggling against a skilful home side. Horsham equalised from a penalty conceded by Sam

Wood but were denied the lead by some stout defending from Danny Bower and Danny Whelan, Northwood's agility...and the crossbar!

Midway through the second-half, Cray actually took the lead against the run of play, as Jamie Wood capitalised on the home side's defensive uncertainty. It looked like an unlikely win was on the cards, until Horsham grabbed a late equaliser, which was the least they deserved. The game was probably something of a "reality check" for Cray, as they had been outplayed for the first time. Unfortunately, things then started to go downhill for a while.

At Leatherhead in the next round of the F.A. Cup, Cray could argue that they did not have the rub of the green, as they slipped to a single goal defeat. In an even game, the linesman's flag was the Wands' biggest problem, particularly when it ruled out what would have been an equaliser for Leigh Bremner in the second-half.

Having lost their unbeaten record for the season, Cray slipped to their first league defeat seven days later at Fleet Town, a side who had not previously won at home. This time there could be no complaints from the Wands, whose performance was extremely lack-lustre. Micky Simmons, called out of retirement for one game as Northwood was suspended, was left hopelessly exposed as Fleet's Lee Paul scored a fine hat-trick in a 3-2 win that was not as close as the scoreline suggests. Ross Lover and David Gray scored for Cray, both converting Jamie Wood crosses.

And the Wands sunk to a new low three days later at home to lowly Ashford Town. A shocking first 45 minutes saw Cray go 2-0 behind. Jenko kept the side on the pitch for most of the interval and appeared to read them the proverbial "riot act." This seemed to do the trick as a high-energy second-half performance, inspired by substitute Richard Dimmock, brought about a recovery, with goals from Gray and Jamie Wood. The Wands could even have won it, but had to settle for their fifth successive home league draw.

September saw several of Cray's Kent League winning side leave the club as they were unable to command a regular first-team place. Danny Whelan (to Maidstone), Adam Heaslewood (Beckenham) and John Mayall (Thamesmead) all went with the best wishes of Cray's supporters.

Ian Jenkins responded to Cray's dip in form at the end of September three years ago by turning to experienced Wands old boys to strengthen the squad. He persuaded Mark Tompkins to leave Whyteleafe for another spell at Hayes Lane and Drew Watkins, who had been effective for Cray in both midfield and defence in the past, returned from Folkestone. But the biggest transfer coup saw Phil Collins move across from Welling United, thus keeping his promise to end his playing days with the club. Phil had made a tremendous impact when he joined the Wands as a youngster in the early 90s. He enjoyed an illustrious goalscoring career at the highest levels of non-league football, most notably at Margate in the Conference.

Phil's arrival was a great boost for Cray and he took his place in the side for another historic match: the club's first-ever game in the F.A. Trophy. Aveley were the visitors for a Sunday afternoon game and they were soon under pressure as the new attacking formation immediately 'clicked.' Collins and Leigh Bremner played as a front two,

with Jamie Wood roaming just behind them. After Collins twice went close, Cray took the lead midway through the first-half as David Gray shot home after Aveley failed to clear a Ross Lover free-kick. For the rest of the game, the Wands soaked up sporadic forays from the Essex side, before sealing the win with two late goals. Collins converted a Jamie Kempster cross and Wood made it three in the 89<sup>th</sup> minute. There was even time for Aveley to score a consolation penalty after John Myatt had been adjudged to have handled.

There was another fine display from Cray when they visited second-placed Metropolitan Police in a league game. A powerful attacking performance soon had the coppers back-peddalling and it was no surprise when Wood and Collins combined to set up Jamie Kempster who volleyed the Wands into the lead. In the second-half Bremner headed against the bar before Collins crossed for Wood to double Cray's advantage. The Police, who had been thoroughly outplayed, notched a late goal.

At about this time in the season, someone noticed that Cray had the namesakes of three famous singers in their side: David Gray, James Taylor and Phil Collins. But there was a rather discordant note in Cray's next league game, against lowly-placed Dorking. The Wands were 3-1 up early in the second-half, through Wood, Gray and Kempster, but had been reduced to ten men due to a red card for Collins, after an off-the-ball incident. This allowed the men from Surrey into the game and they pulled it back to 3-3 – a frustrating evening for Cray, who had now drawn all six league games at Hayes Lane.

If there was one team against whom the Wanderers would have loved to have ended that run of draws, it was the next opponents: their landlords Bromley! This was the first league meeting of the sides for 90 years, and for most of that time Cray had lived in the shadows of their famous neighbours. But after a pulsating performance, the local pecking order was overturned for the time being. Bromley dominated the early stages but Bremner opened the scoring for Cray. A penalty levelled the scores before the Wands took control of the game with Gray and Wood netting just before half-time. It was a wondrous sight for Cray supporters to see Bromley vainly chasing the game throughout the second-half, only for the outstanding Bremner to complete his hat-trick with two fantastic strikes. The final score was 5-2. The celebrations were long and lively!

There was another new experience for Cray fans when second division Camberley Town visited for a Bryco (League) Cup tie: the Wands' management made nine changes, just like the Premiership clubs! It was certainly good to give the squad players some action and, though there was an element of "after the Lord Mayor's Show" about the game, Cray played some good football, winning 5-1. Richard Dimmock (pen) and Gray put them two-up. Camberley pulled one back and threatened for a while before Michael Power headed Cray's third and Matt Woolf netted with two excellent strikes in the dying moments.

The month finished with a trip to Hastings United, another club with a big ground and a famous history. Again, though, Cray showed they were no respecters of reputations, as they ran out comfortable 2-0 winners. This time Jamie Wood was the hero, netting two glorious long-range strikes, both set up by Lover's set pieces. The win took the Wands to third in the league, behind AFC Wimbledon (still unbeaten) and Walton &

Hersham (but with a game in hand). Bremner, Wood and Gray were all in the list of the division's top ten goalscorers. Heady days indeed for the Wanderers!

After five wins and a draw in six games in October 2004, it was quite a shock when the Wands lost their first game in November. Croydon Athletic were the visitors to Hayes Lane and they performed a smash and grab raid, scoring at the beginning and the end of the first half and defending deep for almost all of the rest of the time. Their 'keeper played a blinder, denying Leigh Bremner on several occasions. He was beaten only by a long-range Sam Wood strike on 73 minutes. Cray attacked frantically for the rest of the game, but couldn't score again and missed the chance to go second in the table.

Cray's first campaign in the F.A. Trophy continued with a home tie against Premier division Folkestone Invicta, former Kent League rivals of the Wands. Cray looked well in control with fifteen minutes to go as they were two-up and Folkestone were down to ten men. Matt Woolf got the Wands' first just after half-time, with a brilliant volley from Sam Wood's floated free-kick. Bremner added a comical second, lofting the ball into the unguarded net as ex-Cray 'keeper Tony Kessell and a defender made a complete mess of a free-kick forty yards from goal.

But it was no laughing matter when Folkestone scored two in ten minutes, with John Myatt seeing red for disputing the second. Kessell redeemed himself with a string of late saves and Cray had to travel for a midweek replay that should not have been necessary. It looked bleak for the Wands when Invicta scored a breakaway goal on 87 minutes, following a Cray corner, but they were saved in the last minute, thanks to an own goal following a goalmouth scramble. At last, in extra-time, Cray finally sewed up the victory they deserved. Firstly, Bremner converted a Power cross and then became the provider, as he set up James Millar who fired home to complete a 3-1 victory.

["Bremner had been the outstanding player over the two ties."](#)  
[Folkestone Invicta website](#)

It was probably no surprise that the league game at Banstead three days later didn't reach any great heights. On the bleak ground, known to many Isthmian fans as "Ice Station Zero," Cray never got going in the first half and went behind, but Mark Tompkins warmed the hearts (if not the fingers and toes) of the Cray faithful with a neat 72<sup>nd</sup> minute equaliser from Power's cross. This felt like two points dropped, as did the following week's draw at home to Bashley. Cray dominated the first-half but it ended up 2-2! Ross Lover and Phil Collins scored for the Wands in the first period; Bremner got two more in the second, but Bashley also scored twice more and also hit the crossbar on two occasions. The 4-4 scoreline represented Cray's seventh draw in nine home league games. They had, however, won four cup-ties at Hayes Lane and made further progress in the League Cup with a 2-1 win over Croydon. Ian Rawlings and Michael Power scored for the Wands in a victory that was more comfortable than the scoreline suggests.

The trip to the friendly Molesey club brought a very straightforward three points for the Wands. The combination of Collins and Jamie Wood was far too strong for the Moles' defence. Collins opened the scoring after five minutes and David Gray took

his goal tally into double figures as he headed in a corner shortly afterwards. It was 4-0 shortly after half-time as the Cray strike pair both capitalised on defensive uncertainty and Sam Wood completed the rout with a late fifth.

This put the Wands in a good heart for the visit of St Alban's City in the next round of the F.A. Trophy. The game was almost the exact opposite of the first Folkestone game. The Wands found it very hard going against their Conference South opponents and found themselves 0-2 down shortly after half-time. They did get one back when Power followed up a Jamie Wood shot that had been turned onto the post but, as the game reached 90 minutes, Cray seemed to be out of it, only for a 25-yard Ross Lover shot to take a big deflection and loop into the net.

Cray gave a good account of themselves in the replay, too, twice coming from behind with goals from Woolf and Jamie Kempster. After a slow start, the superb workrate of the Wands' midfield began to put St Alban's under considerable pressure. But in extra-time the home side grabbed the winner. It was a sign of just how far the Wands had progressed that they could give a side two divisions above them two very hard games.

In a season of many high points, the absolute pinnacle was reached on December 4<sup>th</sup> 2004; Cray Wanderers achieved one of the most famous victories in their long history, when they defeated AFC Wimbledon. In front of the biggest crowd for a Cray game at Hayes Lane (1,082), the Wands ended Wimbledon's record run of 78 unbeaten league games, with a performance that summed up their strengths perfectly: immense determination, well-organised defence, speed on the break and an eye for goal. Cray temporarily silenced the Dons' huge travelling support when they opened the scoring after just two minutes. Jamie Wood's low shot was fumbled by the Wimbledon 'keeper and, after a bit of a goalmouth scramble, James Millar rammed home the loose ball.

For the rest of the game, Cray's superb centre-backs, Ian Rawlings and Danny Bower, restricted the Dons to very few clear-cut chances, whilst their defensive colleague David Gray, playing as an emergency striker, never allowed the visitors to settle. The highlight of the game came 20 minutes from time. Having received a short pass from James Taylor on the halfway line, Sam Wood ran fifty yards, leaving several defenders in his wake, before netting with a powerful shot. This was later voted "goal of the season" by Cray's supporters in what was "the result of the season."

There was another significant event four days later, when the Wands entertained Chatham Town in their first home game in the Kent Senior Cup for over 30 years. Sadly, the county's top knock-out competition had lost a lot of its sparkle during that period, and the smallest crowd of the season (just 59) were there to see a much-changed Cray team progress thanks to second-half goals from Drew Watkins and Jamie Kempster before the Chats replied nine minutes from time.

A third home game in a week brought Burgess Hill Town to Hayes Lane. It was a largely frustrating game for the Wands as they missed a hatful of chances before their Sussex opponents opened the scoring just before the half-hour, the goal having a suspiciously offside look to it. Two minutes after half-time, Cray equalised. Jamie Wood lashed one of his trademark left-foot shots onto the underside of the crossbar

and Kempster reacted quickest to poke the rebound home. That should have been the signal for the Wands to take control of the game but it was Burgess Hill who went closest to snatching all three points, as they forced goal line clearances from Sam Wood and Watkins.

Three days later Cray travelled to second placed Walton & Hersham for what turned out to be the most exciting game of the season. The home side had won 13 games in a row and took an early lead when Bower conceded a penalty. Taylor equalised on the half-hour after Bower's long throw caused confusion in the Walton defence and a couple of minutes later Watkins rifled home a superb free-kick, after Gray had tempted the defensive two-man wall to disintegrate with a cheeky late decoy run.

Walton got back on terms with a soft goal shortly afterwards but the Wands made in 3-2 early in the second-half with another clever goal. Bower appeared to be winding up for a long throw, but surprised almost everyone by throwing short to Kempster who hooked the ball across the goal for Jamie Wood to nod home at the far post. The Walton defence were totally bemused! Within ten minutes the scores were level when Cray failed to deal with a corner and, as the game entered injury time, it looked as though 3-3 would be the final score. Then, Bremner embarked on a mazy run that was ended by a trip. Millar bravely stepped forward to take the penalty, which he despatched calmly to earn a superb victory for the Wands.

Unfortunately, the next two games were rather an anti-climax. At Leatherhead, Cray played out a goal-less draw that did not live long in the memory. Sam Wood came closest to scoring with a long-range shot that thudded onto the crossbar, whilst Kempster had a shot cleared off the line in a game of few chances. And there was more frustration when Dulwich Hamlet visited Hayes Lane on Boxing Day. After being second best in the opening stages on a slippery pitch, Cray took a first-half lead when Kempster rocketed a shot in off the crossbar. The Wands had chances to seal the game in the second-half, but suffered a blow when Steve Northwood was injured in a collision with Charley Side. Bower took over between the sticks and was well-protected until the very last minute of injury time when Dulwich scored a heartbreaking equaliser. This ninth home league draw in twelve games meant that Cray reached the turn of the year in fourth place, rather than second.

Cray began 2005 with a Bank Holiday trip to Tooting and Mitcham's Imperial Fields ground. In front of a crowd of over 400, the Wands found themselves up against it for long periods, but still managed to take the lead, albeit in controversial circumstances. Tooting's 'keeper grabbed Ross Lover's chip but then appeared to lose his grip on the ball under pressure from Jamie Kempster, who stroked the loose ball home. Referee Ian Crouch allowed the goal to stand. Steve Northwood saved a penalty soon afterwards but was powerless to stop Tooting racing into a 2-1 lead after half-time. But with 90 minutes on the clock, a cross-field ball from Sam Wood found Jamie Wood in space and the Cray striker netted with a left foot shot. Mr Crouch waved away the home side's offside protests.

Cray were a perfect example of a well-organised team who worked hard for each other and played to a game plan which suits their players.

**Posting on Tooting message board**

Five days later at Croydon Athletic, the Wands secured another hard-earned point. It looked like being a straightforward afternoon when superb long-range strikes from Dean Morris and Jamie Wood put Cray 2-0 up within 15 minutes. It was Dean's first goal for the club and Jamie's 76<sup>th</sup>, taking him past manager Ian Jenkins' tally. That, though, was all that was seen of the Wands as an attacking force. For the rest of the match, wave after wave of Croydon attacks rained down on the Cray goal. They scored twice and came very close to taking all three points.

Cray's low-key progress in the Bryco (League) Cup continued when they beat Burgess Hill in a midweek game at Hayes Lane. Drew Watkins and Tony Russell returned to the side after injuries and David Hall made his debut as a substitute. Leigh Bremner scored the only goal of the game in the first-half, whilst Phil Collins received his marching orders in the second.

A home game with lowly-placed Banstead Athletic ought to have been a three point "banker" for the Wands but the visitors, orchestrated in midfield by John Myatt, who had recently transferred from Cray, made life very difficult. After a scrappy first-half, Banstead took a shock lead after 54 minutes and then defended stoutly against non-stop Cray pressure. When Bremner and Collins failed to tap the ball into the empty net from 3 yards, it was clear it was not going to be the Wands' day. They slumped to their first league defeat in 11 games, and slipped out of the play-off places.

There was a quick return to Tooting in midweek, to play Colliers Wood United in the London Senior Cup. Cray, fielding three reserves, made a fine start when Matt Woolf converted Lover's pass, but they were under pressure for much of the rest of the game. The Combined Counties League side finally equalised early in the second-half, Northwood injuring himself in his attempt to save. But the introduction of Watkins pepped up the Wands and Kempster's last-minute strike gave them a 2-1 win.

The away game at Bashley, in the picturesque New Forest, was an important one for Cray, as they only had four draws to show from their last five league games. In incessant rain, they got their promotion push well and truly back on track, winning 5-1. Jamie Wood coolly netted the first after five minutes, before the home 'keeper had a personal nightmare. He let efforts from Bremner and Lover slither through his hands and legs respectively and then conceded a penalty. He saved Woolf's spot-kick, only for Bremner to net the rebound. After Bashley scored a penalty of their own, Woolf completed the rout, having been set up by James Taylor. New signing Luke Anderson had a strong league debut in midfield for Cray.

**Five star Cray outclass Bash**

Bashley were totally outplayed by a very convincing Cray Wanderers side who looked strong contenders for promotion.

**From Bashley F.C. website**

That win took Cray's tally to a remarkable 40 goals in 13 away games. By contrast, at home the Wands had only two wins in 13, and they made heavy weather of making it three with a 2-1 win over Molesey at Hayes Lane. The first goal didn't come until after the break, when Bremner netted with a left-foot shot. But Cray failed to kill off the game and it looked like a case of "here we go again" when Molesey equalised

with 20 minutes left. Fortunately, with five minutes left, the Moles' goalie couldn't hold Sam Wood's 20-yard shot and Bremner pounced to net the loose ball.

The first game of February 2005 was away to AFC Wimbledon in the League Cup. This was a "plum" draw for Cray, as they could be sure of a decent amount of revenue. As one committee member put it, "playing away to Wimbledon is the only good reason for being in the League Cup!" Nearly 800 turned up at Kingsmeadow to see a good cup-tie between full-strength teams. Drew Watkins gave the Wands a deserved first-half lead with a superb 30-yard free-kick. Cray held on until 20 minutes from time when the Dons equalised with a free-kick that was bizarrely awarded after two Wimbledon players had bumped into each other! Although David Gray restored Cray's lead, AFC scored twice in three minutes to seal a narrow 3-2 victory.

Four days later, promotion rivals Horsham visited Hayes Lane. Cray's poor home form cost them again as, after missing several chances, they conceded ten minutes before the interval. Leigh Bremner got the Wands back into the game, following a Danny Bower long throw that James Taylor headed on, and Cray should have gone on to win, but a breakaway goal near the end gave the visitors all three points.

There was further frustration for Cray in midweek, when they travelled to Ashford to take on Margate in the Kent Senior Cup. The Wands shocked their Conference South opponents, by taking the lead on 20 minutes, when Ian Rawlings headed in Ross Lover's free-kick. And Bremner made it two, converting another pass from Lover. A superb touch from Michael Power set up Bremner for a third, and a fine victory seemed on the cards. However, during half-time the fog, which had been hanging around in the first period, thickened to the point where the referee had no option but to abandon the game within just three minutes of the restart. Whilst this was sickening for the Wands, it is fair to record that Margate appeared to have the ball over the Cray line on two separate occasions, but in the gloom the officials were unable to award a goal.

Sadly, Cray didn't build on this good performance and failed to score in either of the next two games. A draw at in-form Whyteleafe was probably not a bad result, especially as ex-Cray striker Mark Tompkins missed a good chance and the 'Leafe had a very good penalty shout in the last five minutes. At Dulwich in the London Senior Cup, the Wands could have no real complaints as an 87<sup>th</sup> minute goal from a corner earned Hamlet's passage into the quarter-final in a low-key game.

The visit of lowly-placed Fleet Town provided a good chance for Cray to get their promotion push back on the rails and to avenge their first defeat of the season. The Wands took the lead when, following a good move, Jamie Wood was pushed over in the area and Phil Collins converted from the spot. Danny Bower added to the lead, with his first goal for Cray, heading in a Wood free-kick. And the points looked secure just after the hour when Collins (who was playing his 100<sup>th</sup> game for the club) scored his 61<sup>st</sup> goal after Tony Russell had flicked on another Wood cross. But there was a twist in the tail! Fleet had always looked dangerous and two quick goals from the Hampshire side made it a nervous last few minutes for the Cray supporters, as the Wands held on for three important points.

A week later Cray were scheduled to meet Ashford but, after plenty of rain and wet snow, it seemed unlikely that the home side's notorious playing surface would be fit for action. However, the redoubtable referee Gary Johnson rolled up his sleeves and helped the ground staff prepare the pitch to his satisfaction. The Wands may have been wishing that Mr Johnson hadn't bothered when they went behind in the first-half that saw Ashford adapt much better to the conditions. Cray played in a more direct style after the interval and equalised with nine minutes left. Wood set up Power for an easy finish only for Ashford to restore their lead immediately, Barry Gardner shooting home. All looked lost for the Wands but in the very last minute, Matt Woolf and Jamie Kempster combined to play in Wood for a point-saving goal.

The draw was Cray's 16<sup>th</sup> in 32 league games but, remarkably, they didn't draw again all season. As February ended, the Wands found themselves in 7<sup>th</sup> place, just outside the play-off slots. But their form was not good, with only three wins in their last 11 Ryman matches. Would March bring them the boost they desperately needed?

March 2005 began with the game Cray wished they didn't have to play. They travelled down to Thanet for the re-staging of the Kent Senior Cup quarter-final with Margate, the first game having been abandoned early in the second-half with the Wands leading 3-0. On this occasion the contest, which was actually played at Ramsgate's ground, was a lot closer. Two Michael Power goals enabled Cray to take the game into extra-time but the "home" side took a commanding 4-2 lead. Late on, Ian Jenkins netted a third for the Wands, which extended his run of scoring to 13 consecutive seasons.

Now out of all the cup competitions, Cray really did have to "concentrate on the league." A home game with 5<sup>th</sup> placed Metropolitan Police provided an ideal opportunity to get back into the play-off positions. The team responded with one of their best performances of the season, making light of a heavy pitch. Matt Woolf and Drew Watkins bossed the midfield, but all the Wands had to show for 40 minutes of one-way traffic was a well-taken goal by Power. The Police equalised against the run of play, only for Watkins to restore Cray's advantage almost immediately. The second-half followed a similar pattern, as the Wands' 3-5-2 formation, with David Hall and Jamie Wood raiding forward as wing-backs, worked a treat. Wood and Power added further goals, whilst the demoralised coppers finished with ten men after one of their number was found guilty of some highly inappropriate violent conduct.

There was more of the same at relegation-threatened Dorking seven days later. Again, Cray's passing game gave them complete dominance, but there was no score at the interval. Leigh Bremner did have the ball in the net after 21 minutes. Both sides lined up for the restart, while an injured player was being treated, only for the referee to make a very late decision to disallow the goal! Fortunately, the Wands soon took command after the break, with free-kicks leading to two goals. Watkins struck a beauty into the top corner and then Wood floated one onto Power's head. The ball came back off the crossbar and Jamie Kempster reacted quickly to net the rebound. Dorking had a little more of the play after that, but Power rounded things off nicely with a clever backheel after Wood's shot had been diverted by a defender.

The next match also involved a visit to a side facing the drop, but Croydon's bleak athletics stadium was in stark contrast to Dorking's picturesque surroundings. Cray

never got going at all in the first-half, but there was a boost just before half-time when Croydon were reduced to ten men. The second-half saw the Wands push forward to break the deadlock, recklessly at times as they were often exposed at the back and needed Steve Northwood to be at his best to avoid a catastrophe. Just when it seemed that a combination of poor finishing, good goalkeeping (and a disallowed goal) would frustrate Cray, Wood thundered in a shot that took a huge deflection on its way into the net. There were just seven minutes left. Power added a fine second in injury time, but the Wands' supporters knew that this had been a close-run thing.

Easter Saturday brought Corinthian Casuals to Hayes Lane. This was another game where Cray would have expected to gain maximum points but again they needed to be patient. On a bumpy pitch, neither side made much headway in the first 45 minutes. There were more glimpses of Cray's passing game in the second-half, whilst the Casuals created some decent chances of their own. In the end, though, it was two pieces of brilliance from Power that sealed the game. First he smashed home a fantastic volley from Wood's corner and then ran onto Bremner's pass to shoot low into the net. These goals took Shaggy's tally to nine in the last six games.

Power didn't score two days later at Dulwich. For the fourth game in succession the first-half was goalless and the Wands again saved their best until later on. Indeed, only a fine Northwood save and the inside of the post saved them from falling behind. But within two minutes of the restart Cray were on their way to a fifth straight victory as Gray flicked on Bower's long throw and Kempster netted. Sub James Taylor added a second with his first touch and, although Dulwich scored in the 90<sup>th</sup> minute, Phil Collins immediately dispelled any nerves with a run from his own half that ended with a calm finish.

Cray were now safely in the play-off zone, with a six point cushion. Sadly, Jenko missed out on the Manager of the Month award as AFC Wimbledon also won five games in March, with a better goal difference.

With Cray's promotion push in full swing, Newport (Isle of Wight) arrived at Hayes Lane on the first Saturday in January with little hope of stopping the Wands taking their winning run to six games. Indeed, it soon became a case of whether the lowly-placed Islanders would do any better than the 6-0 drubbing they'd received on their own ground in August. Within 18 minutes Cray were three goals to the good. Phil Collins scored the first, having been set up by Michael Power, and Jamie Kempster got the next two, the second coming after Drew Watkins' free-kick had been blocked.

Ten minutes before half-time it was 4-0, as Collins returned the compliment for Power to shoot home. The Wands eased up for the rest of the game, although Newport didn't threaten to score. It was a good game for former club captain Phil Turner to make his return to action as a second-half substitute, over a year after what had threatened to be a career-ending injury. Cray did make it five a few minutes from the end when David Gray headed home a Jamie Wood cross.

A week later the Wanderers were back at Hayes Lane, but this time they were the away team, as they were playing Bromley. A win would assure Cray of a place in the play-offs and it would also do serious damage to the landlords' hopes of making a late

surge into the top six. Unfortunately, it was Bromley who earned the local bragging rights this time around, in front of a crowd of over 500.

It might have been very different if Kempster's early close-range shot had gone in rather than hit the post, but Bromley soon took the initiative. After several near misses, the lead came on 31 minutes. You rarely give Colin Luckett time and space 20 yards from goal without regretting it – no surprise, then, that his left-foot thunderbolt flew in off the underside of the crossbar. After half-time a fine counter-attack led to former Wand Mark Tompkins equalling his tally of goals for Cray earlier in the season (one) and a fine volley from Alan McLeod made it 3-0. To their credit, the Wands did not buckle. Collins pulled one back on 73 minutes and Tony Russell set up an exciting finish with his first goal of the season in a goalmouth scramble nine minutes from time. But, as Ian Jenkins admitted, the 3-2 final scoreline probably flattered Cray.

The Wands had another chance to book their play-off berth, at home to Hastings United. This time they took care of business, thanks to Jamie Kempster's double. The first came after just nine minutes, when he nodded home James Taylor's near post flick-on from Wood's corner. Another corner 13 minutes later brought the second goal, this time after a goalmouth scramble. It was then a case of Cray holding firmly to their two-goal lead through a rather uninspiring second-half, with a minor scare at the end when the seasiders netted an injury time penalty. The three points kept the Wands in fourth place and guaranteed a shot at promotion at the end of the regular season.

It was probably just as well that the play-off place was "in the bag" as Cray's last two league games were against the top two sides. The trip to AFC Wimbledon was a great experience, off the field at least. The attendance of 3,358 for the champions' last home game was the biggest in the Ryman League for many seasons and the largest crowd to watch a Cray game since the 1963 Kent Amateur Cup final against Bromley. Unfortunately, on the pitch, the Wands never really got going after conceding a seventh-minute penalty. Steve Northwood pulled off some fine saves before New Zealand international Shane Smeltz added a second before the break. A third followed after the interval and Cray were denied a late consolation when Danny Bower's powerful shot was headed off the line.

There was another defeat seven days later, only the seventh in the league all season, at home to Walton and Hersham, who had secured promotion with a very consistent record after an indifferent start to the campaign. Cray opened brightly and took the lead when Ian Rawlings and Jamie Wood combined to lay on a chance for Sam Wood to shoot home. But the Wands couldn't build on their good start. Their performance dipped alarmingly in the second-half and it was no surprise when Walton scored twice in the last twenty minutes. The defeat dropped Cray to sixth in the table, meaning that they would face an away play-off semi-final with Horsham, rather than a "home" tie with Bromley; there was some lively debate amongst supporters as to which would have been the better option!

In May 2005, Cray faced a play-off game for the first time in living memory as they travelled to Horsham in the semi-final for the third Ryman League Division One promotion place. That season there were two automatic places, which had gone to

AFC Wimbledon and Walton & Hersham. The Wands were in sixth place in the final table, which meant they faced two away games if they were to move up a level for a second season running.

It had been a great first season for Cray in the Isthmian League. Although they only finished ahead of Leatherhead due to far superior goal difference, they had secured their play-off place over two weeks earlier. Throughout the season their hard-working, free-scoring side had met with compliments from their illustrious new opponents. Indeed, their total of 95 goals was the highest in all divisions of the league.

It was probably a bit unfortunate that the fixture computer provided Cray with games with the Dons and Walton for the final two Saturdays of the season. Both were lost. Add to that a narrow defeat to Bromley earlier in April and the Wands entered the play-offs in their worst form of the season. Not that there wasn't plenty of optimism about the trip to Horsham. The Sussex side had only finished five points ahead of Cray. The league game at Queen Street had ended 2-2 and, whilst Horsham had won 2-1 at Hayes Lane, they were somewhat fortunate as the Wanderers strikers had a rare off day.

And Cray could also take confidence from their previous play-off game, albeit that it took place in April 1902! On that occasion, Cray and Sittingbourne had finished equal on points at the top of the Kent League. At that time, the league rules required a play-off to decide the champions, which was just as well for the Wands as their "goal average" (the system then in use) was inferior to the Brickies'. In a game played at Chatham, Jack Moody scored the only goal of the match in extra-time and Cray were Kent League champions for the first time. The gate receipts were donated to the victims and families of the Ibrox stadium disaster earlier that month, where 25 died and 517 were injured when wooden terracing collapsed during a Scotland v England game.

I doubt that the events of 1902 were on the Cray players' minds when they began the game at Horsham, but they certainly started in fine style. Sam Wood fired in a couple of long-range shots that were narrowly off-target, as the Wands' took control and contained the Hornets' attack very comfortably. Their reward came on 36 minutes. Leigh Bremner, always a keen chaser of seemingly lost causes, charged up the Queen Street slope to get to a through ball that looked favourite to roll over the bye-line. His superb pass across goal was rammed home by Ross Lover to the delight of a sizeable travelling Cray support.

The Hornets were finally stung into action but the best chance of the closing minutes of the first half fell to Cray. Tony Russell found himself in space in the box, but his header looped agonisingly past the post. This was probably the key moment of the match as it is doubtful that Horsham would have come back from a two-goal deficit. But the Wands were left muttering "if only" as the home side completely dominated the second period. As Cray defended deeper and deeper, it seemed only a matter of time before the equaliser would come. Steve Northwood made a succession of fine saves, but was powerless to stop Jamie Taylor's low shot that entered the net off the post. This was 11 minutes from time.

Horsham went all out to win the match in normal time, but found Northy impossible to beat. Several of his saves were right out of the top drawer. The post also came to Cray's rescue on one occasion. The break before extra-time proved only a brief respite for the Wands, who finally fell behind after 93 minutes. After that it all went rather pear-shaped. David Gray got himself sent off, following an "off the ball incident." Play became very scrappy and as the ten-men tried to press forward, Horsham got a third goal just before the end.

Defeat was made harder to bear when the news came through that Bromley had beaten Met Police on penalties. Rather than stage a Bromley v Cray play-off final, the Lilywhites travelled to Horsham four days later and took the spoils of victory – promotion to the Ryman Premier Division. The Wands, though, could look back with pride on an excellent start to life in the Isthmian League.

**PETE GORINGE**