

Looking Back In Amber

1894-95 Season



This was a significant time for Cray Wanderers F.C. as it was the first time ever that the club played in a league.

“The first league game”

For the first thirty years or so of their existence, the Wanderers did not have any cup or league competitions to take part in. All of the matches were what we would now call “friendlies”, although with local pride at stake, this was not always an appropriate description! In 1889, the club felt strong enough to enter the Kent Junior Cup and, after reaching the final in 1892, moved up to the Kent Senior Cup for a couple of seasons.

Then, a very strange thing happened. The Kent County Football Association decided that it was time to introduce a league competition for the county. No surprise there, as leagues had been springing up all over the country since the establishment of the Football League in 1888. The odd thing was that they decided that the new ‘Kent League’ would replace the Senior Cup and that the winners of the league would be awarded the cup!

Even odder was the decision to have nine teams in the league/cup. A ballot was held to decide who the nine clubs should be. Cray Wanderers were clearly not considered as strong as the likes of Chatham, Dartford and Sittingbourne. We came 11th in the voting and were placed in a second division.

Nonetheless, the prospect of league football meant this was an exciting time for the Wanderers. The pitch at St Mary Cray Rec. was reported to be in great condition and its dimensions (110 yards by 66) were well in excess of the minimum demanded by the League. The team colours for the season were “chocolate jerseys” and “orange, red and black girdles.” The girdles were presumably a form of belt. It sounds like a hideous combination of colours that could hold its own with some of the bizarre kits we have seen in the Premier League in recent seasons, but the club seemed to be quite proud of it. The nickname was “The Chocolates” and their reporter in the *Kentish Times*, signed himself “Chocolate!”

The jerseys and girdles made their first appearance of the season in a friendly game against St Albans. This didn't go entirely as planned. Three of the visiting team failed to catch the train. Those that did managed to get on one that didn't call at St Mary Cray and so had to get off at Swanley and catch another back!

Of course, this delayed the kick-off, but the assembled crowd were well entertained by the Cray Temperance Brass Band ("Temperance", incidentally, meant "total abstention from alcohol!"). When the game finally did take place, Cray won 7-1. Harry Hutchins, a famous forward from previous years, played in goal and there were three players called Harling in the side. The St Albans goal was scored by a Cray player, Falvey, who they had lent to the somewhat depleted visitors.

After a much more satisfactory game the following week (4-5 against Westminster), Cray travelled to Chatham for the historic occasion of their first ever league game. Chatham were a very strong force during the latter part of the nineteenth century. They had teams in the Southern League and both of the Kent League Divisions, and although I doubt if they ever had fixtures in all three leagues on the same day, it would certainly have been a second-string side Cray had to face.

It was an even game. The Wanderers took the lead, but ended up losing 2-1. The referee came in for a good deal of criticism and there were clearly a lot of acrimonious feelings and great disappointment that The Chocolates had not got off to a winning start.

The supporters had plenty of time to lick their wounds, as the next two fixtures were friendly games. With only nine teams in the league, there would be only 16 matches. The club did not enter the F.A. Cup or the Amateur Cup and, of course, there was no Kent Senior Cup. So, with the league games spread throughout the season, there were plenty of spare dates.

After losing their first match at Chatham, Cray had to wait three weeks before resuming fixtures in the Kent League. In the meantime, there were a couple of friendlies at St Mary Cray Rec., the second of which brought an excellent victory over Forest Swifts of Leytonstone. The visitors were described as a "London Senior Cup side", which presumably meant they were considered strong opposition.

A couple of incidents from this game indicate just how much the game has changed since the late 19th century. During the course of the match, Cray's Spencer was injured and Forest Swifts "kindly allowed a substitute to play." This was considered noteworthy as normally teams would be expected to carry on with reduced numbers. And football was certainly a more dangerous game in those days. Cray's third goal (they won 3-0) came when the visiting goalkeeper hesitated, Russell "downed him" and Smith scored.

The following week brought the excitement of Cray's first home Kent League game. Swanscombe were the visitors and expectation amongst the people of

the Crays was running very high. So it was a big let down when Cray crashed to a 2-0 defeat. The *Kentish Times* reporter (“Chocolate”) commented that he could “Never remember a defeat that more hurt the feelings of people in this district.” In fact, as things turned out, it was not such a terrible result, as Swanscombe went on to win the league.

Cray did not have long to wait for their first league victory, as the following week they travelled to Folkestone Harveians and won 2-0 against poor opposition. And the first home win followed, as Faversham were beaten 3-1 at the Rec. Harling, Cardwell and Cockle were Cray’s scorers in a game in which the refereeing was greatly admired. Mr Leckie, who was also the Secretary of the County FA, controlled the game “in a quiet, dignified style that held our crowd in awe”! The attendance was around 900, which gives an indication of the popularity of the club and the interest that league football was generating.

Cray were running three sides in 1894-95. The reserves were carrying all before them, as they won their first nine games (all friendlies, of course). These included a 16-0 home victory against Denmark Rangers and a 7-0 win at Bromley Reserves. The third string, known as the “B” Team, also made a winning start. Their first defeat came away to a club called “Crayford Young Mens Friendly Society”!

The match reports for Cray games in the *Kentish Times* for this season are extremely lengthy. As well as a blow-by-blow account of the action, Chocolate provides a wealth of other information. For away games, this includes details of the journey to the opponents’ ground which, in those days, could represent something of an adventure.

The visit to Sevenoaks, for example, was not a pleasant one. The ground was miles from the station, so there was a long walk for everyone. The pitch itself was very poor and a gale blew throughout the game. It was just as well that Cray won 3-2.

Things were even worse a fortnight later when The Chocolates made the long trip to Dover. The train journey was terrible and was followed by “bad meal at a temperance hotel near the Priory Station.” That was only the beginning of Chocolate’s troubles. He then could not find the ground. He walked for miles in what he thought was the general direction and found himself out in the countryside, completely lost. It is the case that The Crabble Ground is a long way from Dover Town Centre, in what was probably a rural location in Victorian times.

Fortunately, he overheard two ladies discussing football. Apparently they were going to the game, so he followed them. His mood improved as Cray won 2-1, with Harling scoring both goals and there was some very nice “real home-made Dover lemonade” to drink at half-time. They don’t write match reports like that any more!

With four successive Kent League wins under their belts, Cray Wanderers (nicknamed “The Chocolates”) no doubt confidently expected to beat

Sevenoaks in a Kent League fixture on 17th November 1894. But no-one could have anticipated the final outcome: Cray 15, Sevenoaks 0.

It was a complete mis-match, which "Chocolate" writing in the *Sidcup Times* described as "a farce." Cray were winning 5-0 at half-time and would have added more than 10 after the interval were it not for some off-side decisions that may well have been rather generous. Sevenoaks were described as "a flock of sheep without a shepherd!" To their credit, Sevenoaks did soldier on and completed their Kent League fixtures, and they didn't even finish bottom. But they resigned from the league at the end of the season and didn't return for over one hundred years!

For Cray, things took a turn for the worse after their demolition of Sevenoaks. In the game at Sheerness against Sheppey United's reserve team, this time it was the Chocolates who were on the wrong end of a hiding, as the Islanders won 5-0. On the same day Cray's reserve team beat a side called Champion Hill 7-3 at the Rec, watched by a crowd of 400. This maintained their record of having won all of their friendly games but, sadly, they had lost their only competitive match, 3-5 at Greenhithe in the Kent Junior Cup.

The first Saturday in December brought the biggest crowd of the season to the St Mary Cray Rec. as Bromley were the visitors. The long-term rivalry between the two clubs was then in its infancy, but the game promised to be an interesting one, as Bromley were playing in the newly-formed Southern League. 1,500 spectators, probably more than the number who attended any of Cray's league matches, witnessed a hard-fought contest, which the visitors won 2-1. This appears to have been the first time that Bromley ever beat Cray; all of their previous encounters had resulted in comfortable victories for the Wanderers.

Although Cray won their next match, 3-0 at Old Castle Swifts in a friendly, "Chocolate" was not in a good mood, as he had had to endure another unpleasant train journey to the opponents' ground in Canning Town. He also reported that an evening concert, intended to raise funds for the club, had not been well-attended.

This was one of a series of events that suggests that all was not well at the club at this time. For example, two successive games of the "B" (third) team had to be abandoned. Admittedly, against Sidcup Star Rovers, the Wanderers were 7-0 up at half-time, but the following week at New Town Rangers, who played in Dartford, the Cray team walked off after a dispute with the referee over a goal. On leaving the ground they were attacked by the crowd. The score at the time was either 2-1 to Cray or 2-2, depending on who you supported!

There was trouble at the first team Kent League match with Sittingbourne, too. Cray won 4-0, in a game that saw three players sent off, though "Chocolate" was keen to point out that the Wanderers man who was dismissed, Munro, was responding to a challenge that broke his arm.

To cap it all, Cray were forced to replay a Chatham Charity Cup match with Sheppey. This was a prestigious competition at the time; in fact, it was the only Cup the club entered. Cray had won the first encounter 4-3, but Sheppey had protested "on a technical point." The re-match took place in an unpleasant atmosphere on the last Saturday of the year and the Wanderers' misery was complete, when they lost 3-4.

It appears that behind the scenes there was unrest as well. "Chocolate" reported, somewhat mysteriously, of "differences of opinion" amongst the committee, which "for the most part, ceased operations on behalf of the Wanderers." Only the sterling efforts of stalwarts Herbert Berens and Harry Hutchins kept the club afloat during this period.

The second half of Cray's first season of league football was less eventful than the turbulent period before Christmas. Owing to poor weather, the first game of the New Year did not take place until January 19th – a Kent League fixture at Sittingbourne. This involved another expedition on the London, Dover and Chatham Railway. The Wanderers were grateful to Mr Cookson, stationmaster at St Mary Cray, for arranging for half-price fares for Cray's supporters, and they came home happy as "The Chocolates" won 2-1, with Cockle and Carlow scoring.

Apart from a friendly match the following week, there were no more first-team games until the very end of February, as the bad weather took a firm grip. *The Sidcup Times* reported that the pitch at St Mary Cray Rec. was suffering as "every Tom, Dick and Harry roams around in his spare time."

Up until this point in the season, Cray had run three teams, but after the end of January, the reserves played no further games. It appears that the vast majority of the reserve players stepped up to the first team. It is difficult to be absolutely certain why this happened but, reading between the lines of the local press, it seems the club had employed a number of players from outside the district at the start of the season, but had decided to dispense with their services.

The club correspondent "Chocolate" was fiercely critical of this practice, describing the imports as "the hundred and one nobodys 'whose grandmother used to play for Sunderland.'" He went on to say, "Cray Wanderers must be sickened by new faces, and this is their worst failing of the present season, and the lesson obviously to be drawn from it is to rely more on those men who reside in the locality."

It is almost certain that these outsiders were paid for their services, as Cray did not participate in the F.A. Amateur Cup in 1894, having done so the previous year. No doubt, this was a major factor in the criticism. There was also a suspicion of some dodgy practice, as club officials were summoned to appear before the Kent F.A., facing a charge of fielding unregistered players, but they were found innocent.

Having played only two games in eight weeks, you might suppose that Cray would be facing end-of-season fixture congestion. This wasn't the case, however, because as the Kent League only consisted of nine teams, there were only a few matches left to play. The reserve players took the step up very much in their stride with two draws, followed by three straight wins.

The opening Kent League defeat at Chatham was avenged with a 4-1 victory at the Rec., whilst there was great delight when Sheppey United were finally defeated good and proper; the score was 3-1 with Falvey, Carlow and a player simply referred to as "Billy" getting the goals. Cray's new side was clearly very popular and became known locally as "The Berens Boys." One imagines Herbert Berens, captain of the club and a member of the gentry, taking great pride in the performances of his young charges. Meanwhile the "B" team continued to do well. A home game with Hextable Rovers ended with a 13-5 scoreline – great entertainment for the 300 spectators.

The climax of the season was the final Kent League game at Swanscombe. The Swans were all but confirmed as champions, whilst Cray needed to win to have a chance of finishing runners-up, which would secure them a promotion Test Match (the equivalent of a modern-day play-off). Some 200 Cray supporters made their way to the game. The team had horse-drawn transport whilst 80 souls went by train to Southfleet (on a long since abandoned railway) and walked the remaining three miles! Sadly, the Wanderers were well beaten 4-0, their first defeat since December.

Nevertheless the club ended the season in good spirits and, during the summer made the momentous decision to dispense with the Chocolate colours and replace them withAmber and Black!

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