

LOOKING BACK IN AMBER

1903-04 SEASON



On the face of it, the records of Cray Wanderers' performances in the 1903-04 season do not look to be anything special. Yes, the Wands won the league, but it was only the "West Kent League", and they reached the semi-final of the Kent Senior Cup. That doesn't sound like much to compare with recent years, which have seen us progress to the Ryman Premier League. But, having looked into it more closely, I've come to realise that, during this season, Cray supporters saw one of the strongest sides the club has ever produced.

Don't be misled by what sounds like a minor league the Wands were taking part in. Over 100 years ago, leagues were smaller and locally-based, as travel was so much more difficult than it is nowadays. The Football League had only two divisions then. There was no Conference or even an Isthmian (Ryman) League. The top professional sides in the south all played in the Southern League, which included Tottenham, Fulham, West Ham and Southampton. Below the Southern League, there was no pyramid structure, such as we have now, but simply a host of local leagues of which the West Kent was one.

Cray had some impressive league rivals, for amongst their opponents were Dartford, Bromley, Gravesend and Northfleet (then separate, now Ebbsfleet United). The Wands were certainly run on semi-professional lines with, we believe, a close connection to Arsenal. Woolwich Arsenal, as they were then before their move to Highbury, were one of the few southern teams in the Football League; they gained promotion to Division One in 1903-04.

It has been suggested that Cray Wanderers were a sort of "nursery" club for Arsenal. There is no firm evidence for this, but there was certainly a flow of quality players between the clubs. Cray's star centre-forward, Jack Moody, was ex-Arsenal, and a key signing for the 1903-04 season also came from the Gunners. The Wands recruited Arsenal's reserve goalkeeper Tommy Wilcox. Wilcox was also the world champion at "Punchball," apparently a sort of cross between boxing and gymnastics! He received rave reviews from the Cray supporters and, after two seasons with the Wands, moved on to play for Norwich City, Blackpool and, believe it or not, Manchester United!

Two other new signings contributed a lot of goals for the Wands. Harold Lee came from Erith as a seventeen year old. He later moved to Sittingbourne, before transferring to Arsenal and then moving north to Bury, where he played 50 games in the Football League First Division (now the Premier League). Another newcomer, Hawkins, made a big impact at Cray. He was snapped up by, you've guessed it, Arsenal!

Cray's first competitive games of the season were in the F.A. Cup. A trip to Dartford was highly successful as the Wands won 7-2, with Lee scoring four and Moody three. The Darts played then at "Summers Meadow." This is the pitch behind the swimming pool in Lowfield Street, where Cray played several times in later years against Dartford Glentworth in the Kent League and F.A. Vase.

The following week brought a visit to Sittingbourne in the next round and a narrow 3-2 defeat. Meanwhile, Cray's reserve team, who played in the second division of the West Kent League, beat Crayford Athletic Reserves 6-0, despite only having eight players on the pitch until half-time!

The first league games of the season were also away from home. Eltham F.C., as we will see, had built a strong side, but Cray would have been disappointed not to have beaten them as Lee, Hawkins and an own goal gave the Wands a 3-0 lead, before the "village side (!)" scored three of their own. Lee (2) and Moody were on target the following week at Northfleet as Cray won 3-1.

With only eight teams in the West Kent League (four had dropped out before the season began), Cray had to supplement their league fixtures with friendlies. In October they welcomed London Welsh and Tait Institute to the Fordcroft ground and sent them both packing, 6-1 and 9-2 respectively. "Inveterate," writing in the *Kentish Times*, commented that he "had never known the Wands so strong" and wished that they could take on some of the top London amateur clubs, such as Dulwich Hamlet.

This didn't come to pass, but there was a prestige friendly for Cray at the end of October, as they visited Woolwich Arsenal, to take on the Gunners' reserve side. A crowd of 3,000 attended, including 50 from St Mary Cray. But the visitors went home disappointed as Arsenal's second string won 4-0.

Cray made a good start in their Kent Senior Cup campaign. The Senior Cup was considered the highlight of the season so, after losing in the first round in the previous two years, the Wands must have been pleased to see off the 3rd Kent Artillery and then Swanscombe, both at Fordcroft and both with a scoreline of 5-2.

Not so pleasing was the visit to Tunbridge Wells for a friendly on the Saturday before Christmas. Cray were only able to field nine players and ended up losing 11-0. This appears to have been the pattern for friendly matches; the home team always seemed to win, usually by a wide margin. I suspect the visiting side simply turned up to get a share of the gate receipts, whilst the homesters wanted to impress their fans.

By coincidence, Cray finished the next game (on Boxing Day) with nine men as well, but this time due to injuries to Lee and Jordan. The numerical advantage was no help to Gravesend United who lost the West Kent League game 8-1.

Attention switched back to the Kent Senior Cup for the early weeks of 1904. Cray would have expected to win again at Dartford, but had to be content with a 3-3 draw, after leading 3-1 at half-time. Seven days later, they finished the job in no uncertain fashion, winning the replay 7-0 at Fordcroft, with Lee and H. Moody both notching hat-tricks.

The quarter-final presented the Wands with a really hard test: Chatham, unbeaten leaders of the Kent League and favourites for the Cup, were the visitors to Fordcroft. It was a hard-fought game with Hawkins scoring the only goal to put Cray through. The "*Kent Messenger*" saw this as a shock result, describing it as "hardly credible." But, with Eltham beating another top Kent League side, Maidstone, 4-0, it seems more a case of the mid-Kent press not realising just how strong the West Kent League sides were.

The Wands followed up this win with a 3-2 victory at Bromley; 200 Cray supporters travelled to the game, which was played at the former Plaistow cricket ground (Bromley moved to Hayes Lane later in the year). This match was followed with three home West Kent League victories, the key one being a 1-0 win against Eltham, Hawkins again scoring the vital goal.

And it was Eltham who were Cray's opponents in the biggest game of the season: the Kent Senior Cup semi-final. The match was played at Gravesend in front of a crowd of 2,000. Another close game

ensued, but this time Eltham were the victors, thanks to a second-half penalty. This must have been a big disappointment for the Wands, as Eltham won the final 4-1 against Kent League Sittingbourne, further rubbing in the superiority of the West Kent League.

But there was a happy ending to the season for Cray. After drawing 2-2 with second placed Crayford Athletic, the Wands finished their league campaign with six straight victories, to take the title by the wide margin of eight points. The reserves almost made it a double, as they finished just one point behind local rivals Orpington F.C.

This really was a high point in a very strong period for Cray Wanderers. It's taken 100 years for us to reach this level again!

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