

LOOKING BACK IN AMBER

1906-07 SEASON



As the 20th century began, Cray Wanderers had a very prominent place in Kent football. In 1901 they reached the final of the Kent Senior Cup, when that really meant something. The following year they were Kent League champions, which was another great achievement, as there was no Ryman League in those days and the teams behind them included Sittingbourne, Maidstone, Ashford, Folkestone, Chatham, Dartford and Gravesend.

Cray entered the F.A. Cup for the first time in their history and fielded a number of players who had, or would go on to gain, Football League experience. Two Wands players, Robert Turner and Tommy Wilcox, even appeared for Manchester United!

But, as the decade wore on, a decline set in. By 1905, Cray had withdrawn from the Kent League and no longer played in the F.A. Cup. Although they continued in the West Kent League, which was of a better standard than its title might suggest, the Wanderers were no longer in the front rank of Kent's football clubs. One reason for this may be that an arrangement whereby Cray were a "nursery club" for Football Leaguers Woolwich Arsenal had come to an end, but we cannot be certain about this.

To make matters worse, new rivals for Cray had appeared on the scene. Eltham F.C., for example, appeared as if from nowhere in 1902 and sensationally won the Kent Senior Cup in both 1904 (beating Cray in the semi-final) and 1906. Even closer to home were Orpington F.C. who were elected to the West Kent League in 1905 (Cray had tried to keep them out!) and finished above the Wanderers in the league table. But most important of all were a team called "New Crusaders."

The story of New Crusaders is a remarkable one. They were founded in 1905 by Samuel Farnfield, who came to Sidcup as Headmaster of a secondary school called Sidcup College, situated in Longlands Road. Mr Farnfield had eight sons, six of whom played football for Cambridge University. New Crusaders were formed for the benefit of them and their friends. There are big parallels with the formation of Corinthian F.C. by Mr Ronald Billings in the late 1970s.

They were clearly exceptionally good players, for in their first season they reached the semi-final of the F.A. Amateur Cup and the 1st round proper of the F.A. Cup itself. A crowd of 2,500 gathered to see them play Plymouth Argyle at Longlands Road on what was just a roped-off pitch. The Devon side won 8-3 against a New Crusaders side with five Farnfields included. This is the only match in the F.A. Cup proper that has ever been played in the Sidcup / Cray / Orpington area.

New Crusaders dominated the sports coverage in the local papers. They didn't play in a league in 1906-07, but their exploits in various cup competitions and in prestigious friendly matches were reported in great detail. Cray, on the other hand, did not get much of a look in.

Perhaps to raise the club's profile, it was decided that the Wanderers would re-enter the Kent League in 1906, whilst continuing in the West Kent League. Nowadays, of course, it is impossible to have your first-team in two different leagues, but one hundred years ago leagues were much smaller. With only nine teams in the Kent League and eleven in the West Kent, Cray faced a schedule of 36 league games. With no floodlights to help, this was a large number, but just about possible, particularly as the only other competition they entered was the Kent Senior Cup.

In their pre-season analysis, the *Sidcup Times* described the Wanderers as "*a shadow of their former self*" and wrote of the "*disarray into which they had fallen.*"

Perhaps the new season would see a step back in the right direction...

The season got off to a disappointing start for the Wanderers as they succumbed to defeats in their first matches in each of the two leagues in which they were competing. They could hardly have faced a tougher start in the West Kent League, as they visited Eltham, who had had a 100% record in the previous campaign. Cray duly lost 4-1. The following week, Northfleet visited Cray's Fordcroft ground for a Kent League fixture and won 4-2.

The first win came against Swanscombe (3-1 in the West Kent League) but the attendance at Fordcroft was very poor. The local press commented darkly, "*it would be a shame if the club went to the wall.*"

Things did improve, though, with good results in successive weeks. Arch local rivals Orpington were beaten 2-0 at Fordcroft and the following week Cray gained their first Kent League victory of the season, defeating Faversham 3-0. Encouragingly, a bigger crowd was present and the *Sidcup Times* was more upbeat, reporting that "*the committee is seeking to restore the club's former lustre.*"

What proved to be the only cup-tie of the whole season took place at the start of November. Cray had new opponents in the Kent Senior Cup, and they were rather odd (literally). The Wanderers travelled to the Erith area to take on a team called Northumberland Oddfellows. I understand the Oddfellows are a friendly or social society that still exists. Rather embarrassingly for Cray, they lost 3-0, and their cup exploits were over almost before they started.

A clear pattern soon developed. Cray would do well at home, but were hopeless on their travels. For example, during the rest of 1906, the Wanderers had two draws at home in the West Kent League and two good wins in the Kent League, beating Ashford 2-1 and Royal Naval Depot (Chatham) 3-1. Away from home, they lost every

match, including a 4-1 defeat at the Naval Depot and another reverse against the Oddfellows, 2-1 in the West Kent League. The final Saturday of December brought a trip to Gravesend United and the worst defeat of all: 7-0.

In fact, from the beginning of October until Easter, Cray were unbeaten in home matches, but during the same period they lost 13 of their 15 games away from Fordcroft. Their only away win during this period was a 3-0 victory at Ashford in the Kent League, but even that result doesn't appear in the final table. Ashford resigned from the league shortly afterwards and their record was expunged. Perhaps losing at home to Cray was the final straw for them!

Of course, we should bear in mind that getting to away matches 100 years ago was a much more complicated business for local football clubs. Horse-drawn transport would presumably have been used, with train travel for the longer journeys into Mid and East Kent. Players who worked on Saturday mornings, as many did, might be able to get off work for home games, but not in time for a long away trip. It is surely no coincidence that Cray's dreadful run of away defeats ended with a 1-0 West Kent League victory at nearby Footh Cray on Easter Monday.

Many of the away matches received little or no coverage in the local press. Sometimes it is hard to find the score, let alone the report, whereas the home games are often reported in great detail. This probably helped to create the impression that the Wanderers were doing rather better than was really the case, Nonetheless, by the end of the year, when considering the position of Cray Wanderers, it was reported, *"the clouds appeared to have dispersed, but there is not the previous deluge of success."*

Meanwhile, New Crusaders F.C. continued to compete at an altogether higher level. The Sidcup side beat Ilford in the first round proper of the F.A. Amateur Cup before losing to Oxford City and went out to Hastings in the fifth qualifying round of the F.A. Cup. They achieved a lot of success in other competitions as diverse as the Middlesex Senior Cup and the Eastbourne Charity Cup.

The second half of the season started in the worst possible fashion for Cray as they slumped to a 2-0 defeat against Orpington in the West Kent League. The pattern of heavy defeats away from home continued. The Wanderers had to take what was described as *"practically a reserve side"* for a Wednesday afternoon game at Northfleet at the end of February. This was a strange fixture to have been arranged (perhaps it was Early Closing day?) and the outcome was inevitable: Cray were thrashed (9-0).

But there were some decent results in the early months of 1907. One of the best was a 1-0 victory over Metrogas. This club are now occasional opponents for our reserve side. One hundred years ago they were one of the top senior clubs in the area, with a good record in the F.A. Amateur Cup. They went on to play in the prestigious

Athenian League. Their ground was next to the gasworks in Devonshire Road, off the Old Kent Road.

A player called Martin got the goal against Metrogas. He seems to have been the star of the Cray side. Despite playing out on the wing, he scored the majority of the goals that are described in match reports. He did, however, have a nasty experience in the West Kent League game with Northumberland Oddfellows at Fordcroft. In the first-half he was kicked in the head and had to leave the pitch. Later in the game, Cray's veteran right-back 'Sack' Taylor injured his shoulder "in a scrimmage" (whatever that was!) and, as substitutes had not yet been invented, the Wanderers finished the game with nine men. They must have been quite pleased with a 1-1 draw.

Two games at Easter brought contrasting fortunes for Cray. On Good Friday, a large crowd of 700 at Fordcroft saw the Wanderers defeat Gravesend United in the Kent League. The following day, champions-elect Sheppey made the trip to St Mary Cray. This was not such a happy occasion for the locals. The Islanders won comfortably 5-1, but the main talking point was the sending off of Cray's goalkeeper, Boone. The press reported "*some disorder followed*" and after the game the referee had to be escorted to the station by two constables! The following week it was stated that Cray's secretary contradicted this version of events.

We believe Cray must have had at least some semi-professional players as they did not compete in the Kent Amateur Cup. Bromley, on the other hand, had a good run in this competition and played both their semi-final and the final at Fordcroft. 1,500 were present to see Bromley beat Rochester and there was an even bigger crowd for the final against Royal Engineers, including 700 soldiers in uniform. The Army side won 1-0.

Towards the end of the season, the Wanderers welcomed the renowned New Crusaders to Fordcroft for a friendly match. New Crusaders won 4-2, a scoreline that scarcely reflected their dominance. I will reprint the full match report in the final article in this series next time.

Cray completed the season moderately placed in both of the leagues but overall it appears to have been a satisfactory season. Eltham F.C., however, declined dramatically. The Kent Senior Cup holders slipped down below Cray in the West Kent League table and ended the season in complete disarray. When Dartford turned up for an end-of-season fixture at Eltham's Westfields ground, they found there were no committee members present and only three of the home club's players appeared. Eltham's last two league games were never played and they did not re-surface for the following season.

As for Cray, some important decisions were made at the end of the season. The Wanderers became a purely amateur team and withdrew from the Kent League after just one campaign. It was decided to concentrate efforts on the West Kent League and

additional cup competitions, the F.A. Amateur and Kent Amateur Cups, which they were now eligible to enter. Unfortunately, the move backfired somewhat as Cray were knocked out in the opening round of all the cups in 1907-08!

I am reproducing the *Sidcup Times* report of a friendly match between New Crusaders F.C and Cray Wanderers. New Crusaders had been recently formed by the Headmaster of Sidcup College, Samuel Farnfield, mainly for the benefit of his seven footballing sons! The new club immediately played at a much higher level than Cray. In the report, the various Farnfield brothers are referred to simply by their initials.

“There was a meeting of the old and new when Cray Wanderers entertained the New Crusaders on Saturday. For years before the Crusaders were thought of, the Wanderers upheld the standard of football in this district, and were the acknowledged superiors of the surrounding clubs. A little of their old lustre has departed from them now, and they can no longer claim to be the cocks of the walk. Other teams have arisen in their vicinity, and the most important of these is the New Crusaders, and therefore a meeting between them was of great interest locally, as was witnessed by the large attendance.

The old club had to bow the knee to the vigorous youngster, who, in his two years of existence, had made his name known through the length and breadth of the country, and the score does not represent the difference between the two teams. The Wanderers appeared to me not to infuse such energy into their play as usual and, as the Crusaders were saving themselves for their Eastbourne Cup Final, the game was of a very “friendly” description.

But, notwithstanding that they took things easily, the Crusaders played pretty football and had chances innumerable, but when they got over the difficulty of shooting in the long grass they found that they had something else to get over, and that was Boone.

The Cray goalkeeper played a brilliant game, and shared the honours of his side with Rogers and Martin. “Jack” is older than he used to be, but he keeps his form marvellously, and he defended well. The Wanderers’ attack appeared to consist of disorganised units, and the best thing they did was to assiduously feed Martin whenever they got the chance.

Cray had very few chances, probably half a dozen in all, but they took two of them. If the Crusaders had achieved the same percentage there would have been some tall scoring. Martin was chiefly responsible for both the Wanderers’ goals. The first came as a result of one of several good centres which he put in, Davis returning the ball in front of goal where, in a melee, it was fumbled through somehow.

This was the first goal of the match, and was unexpected. But soon H.V. scored from a corner, the Cray team appealing for offside, a claim which, however, the referee

disallowed after consulting the linesman. Early in the second half H.V. scored another, the ball screwing off an opponent's back, out of the reach of Boone.

The Crusaders' third goal was a very comic affair. The ball was pushed through for B.S., and darting between the backs he had only Boone in front of him. The goalkeeper ran out to meet him, and B.S. gently turned the ball past him. Boone fell, but quickly recovered, and started in pursuit of the ball, which was rolling slowly into the vacant net. It did not appear to have enough pace on it to enable it to reach the goal, and it seemed likely that Boone would reach it first, but the ball won, and Boone found himself in the corner of the net, after making an unavailing plunge after it. He was hurt in the process but soon recovered.

Martin scored Cray's second goal by the grace of the referee, who appreciated the fact that he was off-side, but anticipated that Cook would clear easily, which he did not. However, Tabernacle negated this by putting his side further ahead with a very clever goal, and the end came shortly afterwards with the Crusaders winning by 4-2."

New Crusaders continued to hog the limelight locally in the years before the Great War. But they did not re-appear afterwards and Cray Wanderers soon resumed their position as the top local football club.

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