

# Looking Back In Amber

## 1930-31 Season



The 1930-31 season is an important one in the club's history, as Cray Wanderers won their first-ever cup at senior level. It was a campaign with a peculiar series of ups and downs and unusual incidents, as well.

During the 1920s and early 1930s, the Wands played in the London League Premier Division. Although it's difficult to make comparisons, I would say that this league was on a par with the present-day Ryman League Division One. Many of Cray's opponents had names familiar to us, including Carshalton Athletic, Grays Athletic, Tooting Town and Mitcham Wanderers (this was before they amalgamated) and the predecessors of Whyteleafe, Dagenham and Chelmsford.

Cray had struggled in this company the season before, finishing third from bottom and failing to make much impression in the cup competitions. It didn't look as though things would be much different in the early weeks of 1930-31. The first two games were the home and away league matches with Erith & Belvedere – a very strange arrangement by the fixture secretary! Honours were shared with the home side winning on each occasion.

A 6-2 win at Woolwich Poly got the F.A. Cup campaign off to a good start, with Harry Utz scoring a hat-trick, but Cray crashed out 8-0 at Ashford in the next round and also fell at the first hurdle in the F.A. Amateur Cup, losing 5-2 at home to Royal Marines (Chatham). The Wands' cause was not helped by two own goals. Before the game there was a period of silence in memory of the 48 people who had died earlier in the week when the British Airship R101 had crashed over France on its maiden voyage.

So, not a very auspicious start for the Wanderers but then, as occasionally happens in football, something "clicked" and the side won six matches in a row and shot to the top of the league. Like all good teams, the success was based on strong defence and lively forwards. "Con" Aldridge was an excellent goalkeeper, supported by defenders Harry Reeves and Frank Terry, who were both chosen to represent Kent. Up front, wingers Clachan and Tommy Allchorne provided a regular supply of crosses for the likes of Harry Utz and Alf Banks, as well as chipping in with plenty of goals themselves.

The good run started with a 2-1 victory over Tooting Town at Cray's Fordcroft ground, but the highlight was the 5-0 thrashing of unbeaten Chelmsford, with Utz grabbing another three goals. I doubt if there was a "Manager of the Month" award in 1930 but the Wanderers' team manager, Mr F. Knott, would surely have won it for November as Cray won all their games.

A goalless draw at Carshalton on the first Saturday of December ended the succession of wins. Remarkably, the Wands didn't win another league game until 21<sup>st</sup> March! It is difficult to be sure as to why there was such a massive turnaround in Cray's form, but there is a hint in the match report of the next game, a 4-2 home defeat to lowly-placed Whyteleafe Albion. A number of changes were made to the side, amongst which were the inclusion of R. Rudd, who had been playing for Halifax Town Reserves. Although Rudd showed some nice touches and scored a goal, he was considered too slow for London League football. Certainly the old adage, "never change a winning team" was never more true.

The club's management made another costly mistake shortly afterwards. They accepted an invitation to play a friendly at Bromley on Boxing Day, but could only field a weak team and lost 9-0. Worse was to follow when Fooks Cray F.C. complained that the Wands had signed a contract to play friendlies with them on both Christmas and Boxing Days. A Kent F.A. Commission found the Wanderers guilty and ordered them to pay Fooks Cray £8 and 6 shillings in compensation for lost gate receipts.

After their very promising start to the 1930-31 season, Cray's fortunes took a turn for the worse around the turn of the year.

The day after Boxing Day Cray squandered a two-goal lead to allow Bostall Heath to escape from Fordcroft with a London League point and there were two disastrous results in January. Bottom of the table Walthamstow Grange were expected to be swept aside, but it really was "one of those days" for the Wands. The pitch was barely playable due to frost, fog came and went, and the referee failed to show. Eventually, a 40 minutes each way match was played, in which Cray somehow contrived to lose 5-0 to the league's whipping boys!

With no fixture the following week, the committee arranged a friendly game between the first team defence and reserves attack on one side and their opposite numbers on the other. Whatever this was supposed to achieve, it was not immediately obvious as Cray's next result was a 9-0 defeat at Tunbridge Wells Rangers in the Kent Senior Cup. In fairness, the Rangers were then a top Southern League side, who many believed were of Football League standard.

The only bright note in this depressing period was a 5-1 victory over Royal Naval Depot in the first round of the Kent Amateur Cup. Cray had reached the final of this competition in both 1927-8 and 1928-9, losing on each occasion, and were very keen to go one better this time.

In contrast to the first team, Cray Reserves were continuing to enjoy success, albeit in the Kent Amateur League Division Two. A real feather in their cap was beating a team called Pioneer Athletic, who had not lost for two years. They also made good progress in the Kent Junior Cup competition, and were involved in a remarkable divisional semi-final with Welling F.C. in a game played at Danson Park.

The first noteworthy incident came when Welling, who were already down to ten men, had a second player given his marching orders by the referee. Welling's goalkeeper was so incensed by the decision that he took off his jersey and voluntarily sent himself off, much to the annoyance of his remaining team-mates! Worse was to follow when Cray, who were 5-1 up, were awarded a penalty. The Welling right-back clearly disagreed with the decision and, as the spot-kick was about to be taken, he ran into the box and kicked the ball away. It was put back onto the spot only for the same player to intervene again as the penalty-taker began his run up. This time he thumped the ball out of the ground and onto the adjoining road!

The referee had no option but to send him off too, but, unlike his goalie, the right-back refused to leave the pitch for a long time. After scoring the penalty, Cray didn't add to their tally, despite having 11 men against 7. All four Welling players were, of course, suspended by the Kent F.A., but the powers that be also, very unusually, criticised the referee for his mishandling of the game.

Cray Reserves put up a good show in the divisional final, against Clarence Guild, a side from Gravesend. The game was played at Millwall's Ground, The Den, in front of a remarkable crowd of 3,500. Clarence scored very early on and there were no further goals. Jack Pink played brilliantly in goal for the Wands, as did his opposite number, who made a wonderful save from "Jumbo" Collins. Interestingly, both sides played in Amber and Black, but with different shirt designs.

There was some consolation for Cray Reserves as they won the Kent Benevolent Cup (League Cup). They had to work hard to get to the final, beating Pioneer again and Millwall Loco, who won the league (Cray were third). The final itself was a relatively straightforward 4-0 win over Orpington Crusaders.

Finally, it is interesting to note that a new team to the Kent Amateur League were Sidcup Constitutional, who played at Oxford Road. Cray Reserves beat them there 4-1, probably the Wanderers' first appearance at a ground that was to become their home 40-odd years later.

From the end of January 1931 until the close of the season, the only concern for Cray Wanderers was to try to win the Kent Amateur Cup. Their prospects of challenging for the London League title were already fading fast, before successive home defeats to Grays Athletic and Mitcham Wanderers put to bed any chance of a high position in the final table.

So the quarter-final trip to Whitstable on Valentine's Day assumed great importance. Cray had reached the Kent Amateur Cup final twice in the previous three years but had never won the cup (which was, in fact, a shield!). An indication of the prestige of the competition was that attendances of over 4,000 were recorded for those two finals.

In fact, it was Kent League Whitstable who had defeated the Wands in the 1929 final, so there was a score to settle at the Belmont Ground. Cray duly had their revenge with a comfortable 3-1 victory, with Clachan, Harry Utz and Tommy Allchorne the scorers.

Allchorne was missing the following week as Cray crashed to yet another home defeat in the league: 4-1 to Dagenham Town. It was a family bereavement that caused Tommy's absence, which also robbed the Wands of his uncles, Tom and Alf Banks, who were also first team regulars. The fact that these three players were local men was considered very important by Cray's supporters and they were very popular with the fans.

Another native of the district, Harry Reeves, scored two goals in the next league game at Tooting Town as Cray stopped the rot as they achieved a 3-3 draw. Reeves had come to the club as a centre-half, but he moved up to centre-forward with some success in the latter part of the season. The Wands were indebted to their goalkeeper, Con Aldridge, who saved a last minute Tooting penalty. The Aldridge family ran a fish and chip shop in Old Bexley.

The semi-final of the Kent Amateur Cup looked to be a daunting proposition for Cray, as they faced the Royal Marines from Chatham, who had beaten them 5-2 in the F.A. Amateur Cup. There was a crowd of 770 at the neutral venue of Stonebridge Road, Northfleet (now Ebbsfleet!). After a rather dull first half ended 1-1, with Allchorne scoring for Cray, the Wands got the better of the "Leathernecks" as Utz and Clachan scored unanswered goals.

Cray celebrated by registering their first league win for four months, beating Romford 2-1 at Fordcroft; Reeves scored the winner. But all eyes were firmly focused on Easter Monday at Dover's Crabble Ground, the traditional date and venue for the Kent Amateur Cup final.

The Wands were up against Aylesford Paper Mills. This may not sound like particularly formidable opposition, but they were the holders of the cup (having beaten Maidstone in the 1930 final) and had a very strong record. Cray, though, took an early grip on the game. Utz shot home after the Aylesford 'keeper had failed to get sufficient distance when punching away Allchorne's centre. 39 year old Alf Banks made it 2-0 early in the second-half and Reeves sealed victory ten minutes from time, bravely getting his shot away after he was charged to the ground by two defenders.

There were, of course, tremendous celebrations, as Cray Wanderers had won a cup competition for the first time in their history. It must have been a particular pleasure for Frank Terry and Tommy Banks, who had appeared in

both of the two previous finals for Cray and captain George Miles, who had a loser's medal from the 1929 defeat to Whitstable. The crowd numbered 3,073.

The remainder of the season was, inevitably, an anti-climax, and Cray lost five of their last six league fixtures. The only win came at home to Carshalton Athletic (3-0, with Reeves scoring twice). However, as was the practice in those days, the Wands took their trophy to the away matches at Chelmsford and Romford to parade it in front of their opponents' supporters.

That may strike us as rather odd, but they certainly had every right to be proud of their achievement!

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