

25 YEARS AT OXFORD ROAD – A FAN'S EYE VIEW

By Peter Goringe, 16 March 2010

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So today may well mark Cray Wanderers' last competitive first team match at Oxford Road¹ for a while whilst we temporarily ground share over at Bromley. A 25 year period in our history is about to come to an end. Mind you, back in 1973, no-one expected the Wands to stay in the Sidcup Conservative Club's back yard for a quarter of a century.²

Cray moved to Oxford Road after being evicted from our previous ground at Grassmeade in St Mary Cray. The original plan was to re-locate to Brow Crescent in Orpington but, when this fell through, a hasty move to Sidcup was arranged. The Oxford Road ground had been used by a Kent Amateur League team called Sidcup Constitutional before the war, but when the Wands arrived it was in a rough state. Cray's President, Mick Slater, who had rescued the Club before in 1950, certainly saw Oxford Road as a stop-gap, whilst a site for a more permanent ground was found.

The Cray committee got to work and a pavilion was constructed but, on arriving for a London Spartan League match against Chingford in August 1975, we found it had burnt down. By 1976 the current changing rooms had been built along with the first half of the stand. For the next 16 years, the stand remained unfinished, the lower half a mixture of weeds and rubble. This was because the site for a new ground had eventually been identified, in Rectory Lane.

Late 1977 saw planning permission granted for a new stadium. Our hopes rose, but nothing happened. A major attempt to put together a financial package was made in 1985, but the sums still didn't add up. Even grander plans were revealed in 1989, but then our sponsors were hit by the recession. And, by the early 1990s, it was clear that Cray Wanderers would never play at Rectory Lane. Kent League ground grading rules meant we had to finish the stand and put in 100 seats. Dartford shared with us in 1993/94 and left us the shelter on the far side, and new Chairman Gary Hillman provided the excellent tea bar and club room in 1995.

Despite the disappointments off the field, I've enjoyed supporting the Wands for 24 of those 25 years. For the first seven years, we enjoyed almost constant success, winning four league titles: Metropolitan London League (scoring 170 goals in a season), the London Spartan League (twice) and the Kent League in 1981. We reached the F A Vase quarter final and dreamed of Wembley, we disposed of giants Maidstone United in the F A Cup. These were the glory days and the skills of Dave Waight, Eddie Jones, Alan Whitehead and Glen Cooper in their prime made me a firm fan.

It's been much quieter since. A couple of cup wins, a good season in 1990/91 (when we played lovely football and were runners-up to Sittingbourne in the League) and some isolated highlights. Phil Williams was our record scorer at Oxford Road – 126 goals, including six in a 10-1 win over Ramsgate. We enjoyed our win over Deal Town on our way to Kent Senior Trophy glory in 1993 when Jenko scored twice, and there was a good atmosphere here last May when Herne Bay clinched the title. There have been lows too: four players sent off in one game against Erith when a spectator also punched the referee and various dreadful defeats, including 0-5 against Corinthian last year (1997)!

Oxford Road has never been a ground to get too enthusiastic about. Its faults are easy to see: cramped, poor access, sloping, and a playing surface that has never been among the best in the area. It's been described as *'boasting as many blades of grass as hairs on Yul Brynner's head'*, *'like a darned sock'* and *'the graveyard of dreams'*. But, it's been home for 25 years, and I guess in a way we'll miss it.

Finally, a quick word of thanks for the stalwarts who have kept the Club going through some difficult years. Jacko (Dave Jackson) was in goal for our very first game here and is now our Vice-Chairman with most of the family giving us practical support. Of our other committee men, I remember Keith (Reeve) encouraging the Wands over 20 years ago (and he doesn't seem to have aged!), Jerry (Dowlen) can boast nearly 40 years following Cray and Greg (Mann) must have been about nine years old when he first came to Oxford Road – he had more hair then! Here's to a rosy future for our Club and its faithful supporters.

Anorak Corner

Cray have played nearly 550 games here, with plenty more wins than losses. Our 1000th goal came (I think) against Faversham Town earlier this season.

Our biggest wins here were 10-1 v Ramsgate (1980), 9-0 v Sheppey United (1991) and v Thames Poly (1975). Worst defeats were 1-6 v Greenwich (1987 when we even scored first) and v Ramsgate (1994), 0-5 v Ramsgate (1985) and v Corinthian (1996).

Biggest gates were 1,523 versus Stamford and 856 versus Newbury in the F A Vase run of 1980. We also had 719 for the F A Cup win against Maidstone United in 1976. Conversely, in 1990, the attendance against Whitstable was recorded as 22!

¹ The last competitive Kent League match at Oxford Road was a 4-0 win against Canterbury City at the end of the 1997/98 season, although there was one Kent Senior Trophy match (-v- Whitstable Town, won 5-4) played there in December 1999, prior to the KCFA introducing revised grounding standards. Pete's article was originally written just prior to the Canterbury game.

² The original agreement with the SCC was for seven years' tenancy for Cray Wanderers to play at Oxford Road.