

# Looking Back In Amber

## 1950-51 Season



*Pete Goringe looks back to a critical period in the history of Cray Wanderers.*

It was a long time ago and it may seem something that should be consigned to the dusty shelves of history, but the 1950-51 season was absolutely crucial in the history of Cray Wanderers F.C. Within a few months the fortunes of the club were turned around completely. It's no exaggeration to say that if this had not happened, the Wands may well have folded and we would not all be here today!

In order to understand the importance of the events of 1950, I need to give some background, so that's what I'll do in the first article in this series.

The late 1940s were a dreadful time for Cray Wanderers. The problems stemmed back to 1936 when the club's benefactor, Mr Joynson, who owned Cray Valley Paper Mills, required the ground on which the club played for redevelopment. This ground was known as Fordcroft, situated on Cray Avenue, and later became the Tip Top Bakery.

This was a tremendous blow to the club, who at the time were doing well in the Kent League, a stronger competition than now, as it included the likes of Sittingbourne, Ashford, Maidstone and Northfleet (now Ebbsfleet). The Wands were left with no alternative but to re-locate to a ground called Twysdens in Foots Cray, behind the High Street.

With little support and no money, Cray slumped to the bottom of the Kent League and dropped down to the Kent Amateur League (now Kent County League). In an attempt to rouse some interest, the club even changed its name in 1939 to Sidcup and Footscray F.C., but war broke out almost immediately and put an end to senior football for several years.

Towards the end of the war, the name of Cray Wanderers was revived, back in St Mary Cray. The details are sketchy, but we think the prime mover in this was George Harland, a Wands player from the 1920s, who based the new team on a paper mill side called Vegpardel. At this time, the Wanderers often played at the Grassmeade Ground, back in St Mary Cray.

In 1946 the Kent Amateur League restarted and Cray took their place, but they soon ran into difficulties. Due to what may have been some shady dealing, they lost the use of Grassmeade, which was leased to a rival club called Orpington Constitutional, and had to be content with using the St Mary Cray Recreation Ground. The Wands were unable to attract good quality players and they soon slipped to the bottom of the

league, which was of quite a good standard, including the forerunners of clubs such as Beckenham and Tunbridge Wells.

For four seasons, Cray suffered defeat after defeat, finishing next to last twice and then rock bottom in 1948-49 and 1949-50. It must have been a hugely dispiriting time for their small band of followers. One example of the results will suffice; in 1948-49, Cray conceded 29 goals in the two league games against Callenders Athletic!

In the closing months of 1949, things were becoming desperate. The committee had dwindled to a handful of people, the club was broke and a meeting was held to formally wind up Cray Wanderers. Somehow, however, the team soldiered on, finishing with just 8 points. Particularly galling was the fact that the champions of the Kent Amateur League were Fooks Cray Social. The Wands weren't even the top team in the Crays!

Then, dramatically, as all seemed lost, something that sounds very modern came to pass. A consortium of local businessmen came forward with a rescue package...

At last, in the summer of 1950, there was some good news. At the AGM, it was announced that the Wands had been invited by the Gas Board Guild to share a new ground at Northfield Farm. The site is now housing – Northfield Avenue and Sussex Avenue cover where football was played. Although far from perfect, it would certainly be an improvement to playing on the St Mary Cray Rec.

More importantly, just before the start of the new season, it was revealed that a consortium of five local men had offered to invest £50 each in the club and to take over its management. Nowadays, when we are used to foreign investors putting tens of millions into football clubs, this doesn't sound like a lot of money, but, make no mistake, it represented an absolute lifeline for Cray Wanderers and led to a transformation of the club.

Some of the newcomers had been associated with a junior club called Sherwood Rangers, but the most significant member of the consortium was Mick Slater, who had been running the highly-successful Cray Tigers cycle speedway team. Mick became the club secretary and was the driving force behind the club for the next quarter of a century. It is my opinion that Mick Slater and Gary Hillman have been the two most important figures in the history of Cray Wanderers since the Second World War.

One of Mick's colleagues, Tom Forrester, became team manager in time for the first home game at Northfield, against Fooks Cray Social. In their programme notes, the new bosses stated their intention "*to take the old club up and regain its former glory.*" They asked supporters to be patient as they rebuilt the team.

Indeed, the season started much like the previous four. Fooks Cray won 3-1 at Northfield; this was the only goal the Wands scored in their first five games, which were all lost. The new committee decided it was time for action and brought in four new players, all of whom had experience of playing at a much higher level. Jack Lansbury had played for Hearts and top pre-war amateur side Nunhead and John

Thompson had represented Bishop Auckland, which is a long way from St Mary Cray! Pat Ridgeway (Redhill) and Frank Nelson (Canterbury) made up the quartet.

The effect of the new players was immediate. Cray drew 3-3 against Orpington Constitutional in a Kent Amateur Cup tie at Grassmeade and won the replay 3-1. All four of the new players scored: Thompson (2) and Nelson in the first game and Howard (2 pens) and Lansbury in the replay.

It is hard to know how Mick Slater and his colleagues managed to attract such quality players to a side playing in a lowly amateur league. Perhaps there was a generous interpretation of "match expenses!" Whatever brought these men to the Crays, they ensured that the Wands were no longer the whipping boys of local football and their results soon commanded respect.

In the next round of the Kent Amateur Cup, Cray almost beat Foots Cray Social, losing 4-3 in a replay. The first league points came with thumping four goal wins against Crockenhill and Thameside Amateurs, two of the better sides in the league.

December saw the debuts of Les Butterfill and Jim Emblen, who arrived from Hayes. Both were to serve the club throughout the 1950s and both had sons (Don and Phil) who played for the club. Jim's grandson, Neil Emblen, played for Wolves and Millwall, amongst others.

It wasn't the case that a completely new team was brought in. Several of the better players from the original team seemed to flourish with more experienced colleagues around them. It must have been very encouraging for the likes of Coleman, Waller and Reg Morfill finally to be part of Cray Wanderers team that was winning at last!

After getting a few wins under their belt, Cray stuttered at the turn of the year, losing 0-3 in successive weeks to Bakers Sports and Chislehurst, but this was followed by one of the best runs of success the club has ever known, as the team reeled off 12 successive wins.

Starting with a narrow 2-1 victory in the return game with Chislehurst, the Wands won every game from mid-January to mid-April, setting what I think was a new club record. Cray's supporters, who had seen the team lose week in, week out for four seasons, must scarcely have believed what they were witnessing. The record was finally broken over 50 years later when Ian Jenkins' side won 13 matches in a row in 2003.

Cray settled a number of old scores in this period. Sidcup United were more than repaid for their 4-0 win earlier in the season, as they were thumped 7-1 at Crescent Farm, also the home of Sidcup Rugby Club. Five different players were amongst the goals for the Wands. And champions-elect Rochester got a good beating, too, as they lost 4-1 at Northfield. They had beaten Cray 6-0 in September.

But perhaps the most welcome result was the 7-1 victory away to Foots Cray Social. The Wands had played their local rivals 18 times in the past four and a half seasons and had never beaten them! The win confirmed that Cray Wanderers had re-established themselves as the top team in the Crays. Indeed, they had recruited a

number of ex-Foots Cray players, including goalkeeper George Price who, along with Tommy Lee, was selected to play for Kent. The following season the Wands beat Foots Cray 9-0 in the Kent Amateur Cup and the clubs never met again at senior level.

Cray's run of success put them in a position to challenge for the Kent Amateur League title, but the 13<sup>th</sup> game proved to be an unlucky one, as they crashed 5-1 in a midweek game at fellow title challengers, Bakers Sports. The Cray committee were most upset that Bakers had recruited players from Erith & Belvedere and Maidstone to play for them in this match.

That defeat put paid to Cray's league title challenge and their last chance of silverware disappeared when they lost in the semi-final of the League Cup, which was known as the Kent Benevolent Cup. Thameside Amateurs beat them 2-1 in a well-contested game at Erith's ground. Thameside were on a great run of 20 wins, which the Wands brought to an end in the final league game of the season, when they won 4-2 at Thameside's ground in Gravesend.

There was some controversy at the end of the season over the top three places in the league. Due to fixture congestion, only Rochester actually played the full 28 game programme. The final points tallies were as follows:

Rochester	played 28	39 points
Bakers Sports	played 24	38 points
Cray Wands	played 27	37 points.

You might suppose that Bakers should be declared champions but whilst Cray were awarded two points by the league management for their unplayed game against Tunnel Sports (they later became Dartford Glentworth), Bakers stayed on 38 points. Rochester were declared champions on goal average, with Cray runners-up. There was an official protest from Bakers, but to no avail. Perhaps their use of other clubs' players had made them unpopular.

So, a remarkable season saw Cray's pride recovered and the Wands re-established as a major force in the area. The club secured entry into the London League for the 1951-52, a good quality league in which they had operated happily between the wars. And there was another change of ground. Northfield had not been an unqualified success, so the Wands moved on to a site variously known as Rowlands Manor or Tothills, close to the River Cray, where the Roman Catholic Church now stands. A benefactor, Mr A.J. Tatham, paid the £500 needed to prepare the site for football.

Mick Slater christened the new ground 'Fordcroft' and four years later moved the club again, back to Grassmeade, where tremendous success awaited.

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