

Looking Back in Amber 1974-75



The 1974-75 season was a time when non-league football was going through a lot of changes, and Cray Wanderers shot to prominence with a series of stunning cup performances in the first half of the season and prolific goalscoring in the league after Christmas.

The league was the Metropolitan London League. It was an ailing competition. When it started some 25 years earlier as the Metropolitan & District League, it had been quite innovative, a competition for both semi-professional and amateur clubs in the London area, at a time when generally “pros” and amateurs were kept apart. But the F.A. had recently abolished the distinction and the Met. League was losing its better clubs to the Athenian League and the fast-improving Kent and Essex Leagues.

Having operated with two divisions for many years, the league was down to 20 member clubs, two few for two divisions and really too many for one, especially as very few of the clubs had access to floodlights. But the decision was made to go for one division, which meant that there was a wide variation in the standard of play, with some very small clubs, such as Brentstonians and RASRA, meeting the Wands.

It was Cray’s second season at Oxford Road. Following the loss of Grassmeade, the club had not had time to develop the ground. Apart from the dressing rooms, turnstiles, and the pitch surrounding rail, there was little by way of facilities. But on the pitch, hopes were high. Manager Johnny Biddle retained almost all of his squad from the previous season, when the Wands had finished fourth in the league and had won the end of season Harry Sunderland Memorial Trophy.

The first game was an interesting friendly against Dutch League side, NEC Nijmegen, who Cray had met during their summer expedition to play at a tournament at Uden in Holland. The visitors fielded a strong side of professional players but only just managed to win an entertaining game 3-2.

The competitive action started with four successive home games. One of last season’s lower division sides, Muirhead Sports, were not expected to put up much resistance, so it was an almighty shock to the system when they left Oxford Road with the points after a 2-0 victory. It was a desperately disappointing start for Cray, as their pre-season optimism evaporated.

Three days later, Bexley FC felt the backlash, as the Wands got off the mark with a 4-0 victory. Davy Waight (2), Terry Smart and Paul Martin scored the first goals of the season. Essex side Eton Manor, third in the top division last season, were a much sterner test. They led 1-0 at half-time, but a superb second-half performance from Cray swept them to a 4-1 victory. Waight and Smart both converted penalties, with Martin and Bob Scott completing the scoreline.

Early season league tables rarely give a very good guide to how the season will develop, but this result put Cray into sixth place. Top were Canvey Island with a 100% record, whilst Alma Swanley had lost both their games.

Isthmian League Aveley were the visitors to Oxford Road for the preliminary round of the F.A. Cup. In a thrilling game, the Wands soon went one behind, but Smart equalised and Waight wove his magic, as he was to do so often throughout the season, scoring two brilliant goals before half-time. After the interval, Aveley got it back to 3-2 and Cray’s commanding defender Phil Emblen had to leave the field with migraine, but Martin headed home a late corner to secure an excellent victory.

Cray’s first away game of the 1974-75 season took them to the well-appointed Motspur Park sports

ground, used by the London University old boys' club, Ulysses. It was a game the Wands would have expected to have won comfortably, but they made heavy weather of victory by the odd goal in seven. Their scorers were Paul Martin, Terry Smart (2, one a penalty) and Phil Emblen.

There was a much more commanding performance on the Wednesday night against Penhill Standard. Gravesend and Northfleet's vast Stonebridge Road stadium was somewhat inappropriate for such lowly opposition, but Cray certainly found it to their liking. Martin hit a spectacular hat-trick, the fifth successive game in which he had scored. Dave Fiander and John Scott opened their accounts for the season in a 5-0 victory that would have been even greater but for some great saves from the home 'keeper.

Five successive wins, scoring 21 goals in the process, set Cray up nicely for a truly big home game. Walthamstow Avenue were the visitors for an F. A. Cup tie. One of the "greats" of Amateur football, the Avenue had won the F. A. Amateur Cup twice since the war and had achieved a famous draw at Manchester United some twenty years or so earlier.

It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between Old Trafford and Oxford Road, but the Wands did what the Red Devils had failed to do, and beat Walthamstow Avenue! On a lovely sunny afternoon, the Isthmian Premier side didn't give Cray much of a look-in during the first-half. Mal Sutton made two great saves in quick succession, after no-one had realised there had already been an offside flag. The second period saw the Wands come more into the game, as they played up the slope towards their fans on the "mudbank" behind the goal.

And those fans were celebrating after 73 minutes, when Cray scored a strange goal. Paul McCarthy's corner eluded everyone and finished up in the back of the net. The Avenue goalie claimed to have been impeded, but in fact it was one of his own players who got in his way. Walthamstow were now facing an embarrassing giant-killing and battered away in search of an equaliser. But Cray's defence, marshalled by Emblen, alongside the fierce-tackling Fiander and Billy Hennessey, stood firm. On one occasion, Micky Taylor got a clear run on goal for the visitors, only to be stopped in his tracks by a superb tackle from behind (they were allowed in those days!) by Fiander.

It was the tricky McCarthy who relieved the pressure for Cray. He was described in *The Daily Telegraph* as a "constant thorn in the side of the Avenue defence." His long run ended with him being upended in the box. After the centre-half was booked, Tony Smith took the penalty, and slotted it home to seal a great victory. Incidentally, Walthamstow are one of the clubs that amalgamated a few years ago to form Redbridge Forest, now in turn part of Dagenham and Redbridge.

The following week saw a "bread and butter" league game at home to East Thurrock United. It was a relatively straightforward afternoon for the Wands, who won 4-1. Phil Lawrence opened the scoring with his first of the season, Martin and Waight (2) adding the others.

Then it was back to the cup-ties, as Cray sought a hat-trick of Isthmian scalps, this time in the shape of Barking in the London Senior Cup. There was a score to settle here, as some six years earlier, the East London side had ended Cray's best-ever run in the F. A. Amateur Cup in a last 16 replay. Barking were sure to prove a tough test, having recently beaten Walthamstow 5-0.

And "tough" was a good description of the game. Afterwards, both sides accused the other of roughhouse tactics, but it was Cray who wore the smiles, winning 3-2. It was certainly true that Barking, like many highly-ranked sides, failed to cope with the Wands' physical approach. The visitors took the lead on 20 minutes, before McCarthy was tripped in the box and Waight converted from the spot. A great run from Lawrence set up Martin to put Cray ahead, with a cheeky back-heel from out two yards. It seemed there would be heartbreak for Cray when, with just five minutes left, Emblen conceded a penalty that was converted by former Chelsea player, Joe Fascione. But the Wands were not to be denied, as Smart converted Martin's cross in the last minute.

Cray's breathless start to the season continued into October, as they prepared for the biggest game at Oxford Road to date. The visitors were Sutton United, another Isthmian side, who were famous for their progress to the fourth round proper of the F. A. Cup five years earlier, and their heroic effort against the top team in the land, Leeds United, who beat them 6-0.

This was only a second qualifying round tie, but it drew a ground record crowd of 700. Sutton's side included four England Amateur internationals. Two of them, Ted Powell and Larry Pritchard had almost 100 caps between them and were amongst the six most-capped players of all time. Indeed, Pritchard ran the game from midfield, unleashing Sutton's fast wingers who made a mockery of the Cray offside trap, which had been so effective against lesser opponents.

After Ricky Kidd had given the visitors the lead, the Wands had a chance to equalise when they were awarded a penalty. There had been some debate over who should take spot-kicks for Cray, with Davy Waight, Tony Smith and Terry Smart all having converted penalties earlier in the season. This time Waight took responsibility, and he shot wide.

It didn't really matter, as Sutton went on to win 5-1. Kidd completed his hat-trick, with Alan Ives and Graham Dennis adding the others. Ives was also an international, as was centre-half Micky Preston, whose defence allowed the Wands few chances, although Dave Fiander did net a rather soft consolation goal with just two minutes left.

There was a much lower profile cup-tie the following week, as Cray travelled to Beckenham to take on Muirhead Sports in the League Cup. They were seeking revenge for Muirhead's shock win the first game of the season. Mission was duly accomplished with a 6-1 victory. Waight netted a hat-trick (including a penalty), with Smart, Phil Lawrence and Paul Martin also getting their names on the scoresheet.

Heathside Sports, from Darenth, were new visitors to Oxford Road, for a league game. After the heady heights of meeting top Isthmian clubs, on this occasion Cray plumbed the depths and suffered a dismal 0-1 defeat, which left them adrift of pace-setters Eton Manor and Canvey Island.

They made amends on the Tuesday night when they visited Walthamstow Avenue's ground, where Eton Manor were tenants. The league leaders soon went ahead, as Cray's offside trap failed again, and they threatened to overrun the Wands. A scrappy Paul McCarthy goal got Cray back into the game and within two minutes they were in front, Smart heading home a free-kick. Another free-kick routine secured the points in the second half. This time Smart's header found McCarthy who half-hit a shot that trickled over the line.

The visit of Swanley Town to Oxford Road four days later was an historic occasion, as it was the first match in the very first F. A. Vase. The Vase had replaced in the F. A. Amateur Cup when the F. A. abolished amateur status at the start of the season. Sadly, it was not a very auspicious day for the Wands, as they succumbed 0-1, their third successive home defeat. To rub salt into their wounds, the goal was scored by one of their former players, Junior Crooks. Swanley lost 4-0 at Crockenhill in the second round.

The month was rounded off with the relative rarity of another midweek game, again at a top non-league ground, Underhill, the home of Barnet. Cray's opponents were the rather less famous BROB Barnet, and the game was over as a contest by half-time, as Waight, McCarthy, Smart and Phil Emblen all netted. BROB (it stood for Byng Road Old Boys!) got a second-half consolation direct from a free-kick.

After three home defeats in a row, Cray were keen to make amends when St Alban's City visited Oxford Road for a London Senior Cup second round tie. The home supporters knew that their team faced another hard challenge as the visitors played in the Isthmian League. And the 7-0 drubbing they had given the Wands at Grassmeade in the same competition seven years earlier was still fairly fresh in the minds of many.

It proved to be another exciting game. Tony Smith gave Cray the lead but after half-time St Alban's pressed forward and Mal Sutton produced some great saves. As often happened, it was Paul McCarthy

who made the decisive impact for Cray, snatching the all-important second goal in the dying minutes. The result meant that the Wands had beaten four of the five top Isthmian sides who had visited Oxford Road.

The rest of the month brought three away games in the league and three straightforward wins. Lowly Barkingside were brushed aside 6-0 with all the goals coming in the second half and five different players getting their names on the scoresheet, whilst a second visit to Muirhead Sports brought a 3-1 success. Finally, a 4-1 win at Swanley Town was sweet revenge for the Vase defeat. Paul Martin got two, whilst Phil Lawrence and Dave Waight scored for the third successive game.

Four victories in November put the Wands truly back on track after their wobble in October. The club were reaping the benefit of a settled side that had seen few changes for the two and a half years that Johnny Biddle had been the manager. Indeed, many of the players had been with him at his former clubs Battersea Utd, Merton Utd, Vokins and 279 Chislehurst. For much of the season, a core of about 14 players was used (there was only one substitute allowed at this time) and they stayed remarkably free of injury.

So who were the players that were providing such success for the Wanderers? The last line of defence, Mal Sutton, was an agile and reliable 'keeper. The back four was built around the commanding figure of Phil Emblen at centre-half. Phil went on to play at a higher level for Bromley and later managed Tonbridge. His son Neil played in the football league for Millwall and Wolves.

Another regular was Billy Hennessy, who generally played at left-back. Gerry Collier often played on the right of defence and by this stage of the season, Terry Smart had moved into the rearguard having started the season up front. The fearsome Dave Fiander was an uncompromising, but skilful player who could fill in anywhere in defence or midfield, while Bob Scott took up a central defensive role later in the season.

In midfield, Cray were blessed with the rich talents of Dave Waight, a player of immense ability. Slight of stature, he dominated games on the basis of pure skill, and he scored brilliant individual goals. He remains the club's second top scorer over the past 40 years. The other jewel in the Wands' crown was Paul McCarthy, whose speed and trickery on the wing unlocked even the best of defences. And when he cut inside, he was almost impossible to dispossess, the main reason why Cray won a remarkable number of penalties.

Even the most talented of midfields needs a hard man, and for Cray this man was John Scott, never one to shirk a 50-50 challenge. John was a versatile player who joined the Wands as a centre-forward and later moved to left back. In attack, both Phil Lawrence and Paul Martin were big, strong strikers who were always a handful for defenders, whilst Tony Smith was more in the old "inside forward" mould, a nippy player who got his fair share of goals.

Over the years, the manager had put together a well-balanced side, allying power and skill and with a tremendous team spirit. They certainly deserved the nickname "Biddle's battlers."

With a good run of league victories under their belts, December offered Cray the chance for further cup glory, as another top Isthmian side, Hitchin Town, visited Oxford Road in the third round of the London Senior Cup. The Wands made a good start and shortly before half-time Dave Fiander gave them the lead.

Hitchin immediately hit back in search of the equaliser. Neil Bunker surged forward in an attempt to latch onto a through pass and arrived at the ball at exactly the same time as the onrushing Cray goalkeeper Mal Sutton. There was a sickening crack and it soon became clear that Sutton was seriously injured. Wisely, he was not moved and the referee took the players off the pitch until an ambulance arrived and took him to hospital.

It transpired that the Wands' popular and brave 'keeper had broken his right leg in two places. His season was, of course, over, although Cray fans were delighted when he returned for several stints between the sticks for both first team and reserves later in the 1970s.

The stoppage took some 20 minutes and the rest of the game was played in the shadow of this incident. Terry Smart went in goal and it looked as though the Wands would bag another Isthmian scalp when Fiander headed home his second goal. But Howard Kettleborough notched two goals of his own to bring "The Canaries" back on terms, as night began to fall, with no floodlights to lighten the gloom.

Eventually, with the time way beyond the scheduled finish, the referee, probably rightly, deemed it was too dark to carry on, although there were only five minutes remaining. It's possible he may have let play continue if one side had been well ahead. Technically, the game was abandoned, which meant it had to be re-staged at Cray, rather than a replay at Hitchin.

At first, Johnny Biddle struggled to find a replacement goalie. Dave Coulstock and Jim Surtell played a couple of games before Kenny Baker took over the green jersey for the rest of the season.

There was a fortnight before the Hitchin re-match, and the following Saturday Cray travelled to St Mary's Road for their first-ever game in the Kent Senior Trophy. This was a direct replacement for the Kent Amateur Cup, in the same way that the F.A. Vase replaced the F.A. Amateur Cup. By a strange coincidence, the Wands were drawn against Swanley Town in both competitions, the Trophy game requiring a trip to St. Mary's Road.

It was a typically bruising encounter between fierce local rivals. Tempers were frayed and two Cray players, including Phil Lawrence, a former Swanley favourite, were stretchered off. The Swans finally won through 3-2, with Waight and Smart (penalty) the Wands scorers.

The result was a great disappointment for Cray, whilst the final outcome of the first Kent Senior Trophy was a great surprise. Sutton Athletic of the Kent Amateur League somehow managed to win the competition, beating three Kent League sides on the way. Crockenhill were their victims (1-0) in the final as they caused one of the biggest upsets in Kent football history.

Hitchin's return to Oxford Road just before Christmas was a much more low-key affair. They showed their class, winning very comfortably 3-0. This meant that Cray had just the Met. London League and League Cup to play for.

The last game of 1974 was a league game at Royal Arsenal's ground in Plumstead. Gerry Collier and Dave Waight's goals secured a straightforward 2-0 victory, which cemented the Wands' third place in the table. All the cup games meant they had seven games in hand on Eton Manor, who were eight points ahead. More significantly, Canvey Island had six points more and, with three games in hand, Cray could just catch them.

Cray's first fixture of the New Year was a second round tie in the Metropolitan London League Cup at home to Bexley F.C. The Wands had never enjoyed much success in this competition, having won only one match in the three previous seasons.

This was the third time in four years that Cray had been drawn against Bexley in the league cup. In 1971-72, Cray struggled to a 3-3 draw on the roped-off pitch on Old Bexley Rec. just before Christmas. Shortly before the New Year replay, the entire Wands team had walked out following a disagreement with the committee. Cray hastily had to put together a scratch side in order to fulfil the fixture, and lost 2-0 at Grassmeade.

Two years later, Cray won 3-0 at Bexley and this time the visitors were again no match for the Wands. Making their second visit to Oxford Road (they had lost 4-0 in the league back in August) they succumbed 6-1, the same score by which Cray had beaten Muirhead Sports in the first round. The Wands scorers were Phil Emblen (2), Dave Waight, Paul McCarthy, Tony Smith and Phil Lawrence.

A week later, Cray travelled to north London to take on mid-table Highfield for a league game. This was the scene of their last away defeat in the league some 13 months earlier. Top scorer Waight was

unavailable, so Johnny Biddle gave a debut to Phil Emblen's younger brother, Simon, in midfield. Billy Hennessey was back in his familiar left-back role after a long suspension.

Both McCarthy and Hennessey had early chances to open the scoring and Lawrence shot over when well-placed but the first half ended goalless. Cray appeared to have taken the lead just after the break, when John Scott's superb pass found McCarthy who netted. The referee awarded a goal, only to spot a linesman's flag and disallow it for offside.

But the Wands did not have to wait too long to break the deadlock. Gerry Collier was tripped in the box and a penalty was awarded. Terry Smart's spot-kick was turned onto the underside of the bar by the home 'keeper but, fortunately for Cray, bounced over the line.

Just after the hour, Cray took a firm hold on the two points when McCarthy robbed a defender on the edge of the box and slotted the ball home for a fine opportunist goal. Kenny Baker ensured there were no late alarms when he foiled a home striker in a one-on-one situation and, indeed, had substitute Paul Martin shown greater steadiness in front of goal, the final scoreline would have been even more conclusive.

It was a good day for the Wands as several of their rivals lost, including Alma Swanley, who went down 3-2 to lowly Barkingside. Cray were fifth in the table, but the teams in second, third and fourth had played several games more. The real battle for the title seemed to be between the Wands and leaders Canvey Island, seven points ahead having played four games more.

Still with 24 league games to play (and no floodlights), there was frustration for Cray when the home game with Chingford was the victim of a late postponement. Frustration, too, for programme editor Trevor Mulligan, who had laboriously printed and collated the infamous "gatefold" programmes for the game that didn't take place!

The following week play was possible, though, as the Wands breezed past third placed Penhill Standard at Oxford Road. Making a rare appearance, Albert Hutcheson scored the opening goal, the one and only time he appeared on the scoresheet for the club. Further strikes from the two Phils – Lawrence and Emblen – secured Cray's eighth successive league victory.

With eight successive league victories under their belts, Cray continued their assault on the Metropolitan London League Championship with a visit to lowly placed Thames Polytechnic. However, this was an away game that did not require any travelling! The Poly's ground in Eltham was unplayable so, at short notice, the match was switched to Oxford Road, whilst still counting as an away game for the Wands.

With only three months of the season to go, a big fixture backlog and no chance of evening games until the clocks went forward, Cray could ill afford another postponement, although I wonder if any supporters who turned up at the wrong ground were very happy!

By the end of the 90 minutes, the Poly must have wished the game had not taken place after all, for Cray registered a 9-0 victory, their biggest winning margin since a similar scoreline at Whitstable ten years earlier. The score was 6-0 at half-time and five players got onto the scoresheet, led by Paul McCarthy with a hat-trick. Tony Smith and Dave Fiander both netted twice, whilst Terry Smart and Dave Waight converted penalties.

The following week the Wands travelled to Essex for the vital game with their main rivals for the title, Canvey Island. Canvey are now, of course, in the Ryman Premier, but in those days their glamorous-sounding Park Lane ground was a humble affair with just a "bus shelter" construction to protect the fans from the elements. The game was a hard-fought one, with Tony Smith's goal earning Cray a valuable point. Still all to play for, with Canvey due to visit Sidcup three weeks later.

In the meantime, the Wands faced two tricky local derbies, with maximum points a necessity. Swanley Town had already beaten Cray twice in cup-ties, but they were hit by a whirlwind start when they visited

Oxford Road. Terry Smart, who was playing in the back four, showed his old striker's instincts by twice coming forward to head home free-kicks from Gerry Collier. Sandwiched between his goals, Phil Lawrence, playing against his former club, turned home a low cross. Three goals in seven minutes, and it was only halfway through the first half.

To their credit, Swanley did not buckle. Derek Brown headed a goal and almost got another when he hit the bar. Early in the second half, Dave Waight settled Cray's nerves with a trademark effort. Making light of the heavy pitch, he weaved his way past a defender and goalkeeper Geoff Parsons (later a Cray player) and slotted the ball home from a narrow angle. The goal was so good that even Parsons applauded as he picked the ball out of the net!

Brown got his second for Swanley to make it 4-2 but almost immediately Paul McCarthy restored Cray's three goal advantage. Smith almost made it six when his shot struck the post and the two 'keepers remained busy right to the end. Indeed Kenny Baker was beaten when Paul Hedges notched the Swans' third, but this proved to be a mere consolation strike.

A week later the Wands made their first-ever trip to South Darenth to take on Heathside Sports. Heathside earned a surprise victory at Oxford Road back in October and they again proved very tough opposition. Two penalties, scored by Smart and Waight, secured Cray a 2-1 win. These spot-kicks took the total for the season to 12.

These hard-earned points took Cray into second place in the table, five points behind Canvey with three games in hand. The Islanders' visit to Oxford Road was eagerly anticipated!

Two months or so of the season left, second versus first at Oxford Road – this was to be the defining point of the 1974-75 season. When Canvey Island visited Oxford Road it was the biggest league match Cray had played at the ground they had moved to some two years earlier. A win would take the Wands to within three points of the Essex side, with three games in hand.

This did not look very likely as Canvey raced into a two-goal lead by the midway point of the first half. Manager Johnny Biddle's gamble of replacing combative midfielder Dave Fiander with the more attack-minded Paul Martin seemed to have backfired horribly.

Cray responded by pouring into attack. Dave Waight and Paul McCarthy both went close before two goals in under a minute brought the Wands right back into the game. Martin went some way to justifying his selection when his free-kick was only parried by the visiting 'keeper Brown, and Tony Smith followed up to score. And straight from the kick-off, McCarthy pressurised Canvey defender Bishop into lobbing over Brown. The ball fell nicely for the Cray winger to tap the ball into the unguarded net for the equaliser.

The momentum was now very much with the Wanderers and they pummelled the Canvey rearguard throughout the second-half. For a while, it seemed it wasn't going to be their day. Smith's long-range shot crashed back off the bar and Phil Lawrence hit the post when he latched onto a Phil Emblen free-kick. Then Terry Smart was injured and had to be replaced by Fiander.

With 20 minutes to go, the Cray supporters behind the goal could hardly believe it when McCarthy hit another shot against the post, but on this occasion Lawrence was on hand to convert the rebound: 3-2 to the Wands.

But if Cray thought that was the end of Canvey, they were mistaken. Kenny Baker had to be on top form to turn a powerful shot onto the bar and Billy Hennessey cleared off the line as the pulsating entertainment continued. The Wands finally secured the points on 78 minutes. Waight intercepted a back pass and, though his shot was blocked, the ball fell to Martin to slam home the clinching goal.

The result gave Cray a decisive advantage, but there were still 18 matches to play. The first of these was a relaxing afternoon at Bourne Road Rec. where Bexley were swept aside 7-0. McCarthy and Waight both scored twice with Lawrence, Martin and Emblen adding the others.

Martin and Emblen both struck twice in the next game at Oxford Road, which also ended 4-2, mid-table Highfield being the victims, as the Wands went to the top of the league. The following week, Cray made heavy weather of seeing off mid-table East Ham United, fighting back with late goals from Fiander and McCarthy to snatch a 2-1 victory.

Throughout this period, Canvey had not played a league game so Cray were now three points clear. The Good Friday trip to Brentstonians was postponed due to waterlogging, but the following day's clash with Alma Swanley got the go-ahead.

This was the first meeting between two sides who were to become keen rivals over the next 20 years. Alma were in only their second season of senior football and had made a sensational start, winning the second division without losing a game and thrashing the division one champions Epping Town 4-0 in the League Cup final. They were doing well at the higher level, lying in fourth place. Their team included former Wands' star, Ron Wissenden, one of many players who played for both clubs. In a keenly-contested battle at Oxford Road, honours were even, so local pride stayed intact. Cray's goals were scored by Waight (penalty) and Martin.

As April began, Cray still faced 14 league fixtures. Top of the league, they just had to keep on winning, throughout the long home straight. A further complication was the Met. London League Cup which had only reached the quarter-final stage. Lowly-placed Ulysses visited Oxford Road in a futile attempt to end the Wands' 13 game unbeaten record. They were sent packing 7-0, taking Cray's goal tally to 19 in the first three rounds of the competition. Phil Lawrence and Paul McCarthy both grabbed hat-tricks with Phil Emblen adding his ninth of the campaign.

Cray's supporters were expecting another goal-fest when Thames Poly were entertained three days later. Two months earlier in the first league meeting, also played at Oxford Road, the Wands had won 9-0. But on this occasion, the Poly proved much sterner opponents and it was only two Dave Waight penalties that separated the sides.

Waight was on the scoresheet again when Cray battled to a narrow victory at East Thurrock the following Saturday. McCarthy was the other scorer in a 2-1 win. And there was another narrow squeak in the midweek game at Brentstonians, who played in the Dartford area. Remarkably, Waight netted two more penalties and McCarthy and Tony Smith also scored, but the Wands' defence had an off-day, conceding three, and Cray had to be content with victory by the odd goal in seven against the next-to-bottom placed side.

No-one expected rock-bottom Royal Arsenal to cause any problems when they came to Oxford Road. It was a huge embarrassment for the Wands that the game ended 3-3. Admittedly, Cray had to field an inexperienced goalkeeper, Dave Boucher, who had a nightmare game, but the league's whipping boys should have been swept aside. Waight (pen), McCarthy and Smith got Cray's goals.

Cray's title charge was spluttering and their unconvincing display at Chingford the following week did nothing to calm the supporters' nerves. True, the Wands played well in the first half. Smith forced a fine save from the home 'keeper and a Terry Smart header came back off the crossbar, before they took the lead eight minutes before half-time with a clever goal. Waight made one of his trademark jinking runs into the area, before back-heeling the ball for Phil Lawrence to drive home.

The warning signs soon appeared, though, with Kenny Baker saving well on two occasions to deny Chingford an equaliser. In the second-half the home side took control of midfield as Cray put in a very flat performance from which only John Scott and Gerry Collier emerged with any credit. Fortunately, Chingford's finishing was poor and the lack-lustre Wands escaped with another two points.

Two days later Johnny Biddle made changes for the visit of Alma Swanley who, as Canvey Island faded, had emerged as Cray's closest challengers for the title. Eddie Webb made his debut and Billy Hennessey

returned to the side, replacing Smith and Paul Martin. This livened up the Wands considerably as they put in their best performance for several weeks in a thrilling local derby.

With Baker unavailable for midweek games, Cray tried another debutant 'keeper, Steve Pateman, who made an immediate impact when he saved Ron Wissenden's penalty after Hennessey handled. But Alma's early dominance soon paid off when Janaway gave them the lead on 16 minutes. The Wands equalised five minutes later as McCarthy, whose trickery was too much for most defenders he encountered, was brought down to earn yet another penalty, Cray's 19th of the season, which Waight converted.

In an end-to-end second half, Waight and Janaway both scored again, but it was Alma who should have won with the last kick of the game. John Kane was left with only Pateman to beat, but pulled his shot wide. It was a remarkable miss by one of the most consistent local goalscorers, ensuring that Cray kept their comfortable cushion at the top of the table.

With the cricket season in full swing, Cray still needed five wins from their last eight league fixtures to make sure of taking the Metropolitan London League title. They had found it difficult to put away lowly-placed sides during April, but the first two games of May were a different story. Bottom of the table Brentstonians conceded four and BROB Barnet six, both without reply, on their evening visits to Oxford Road. Phil Lawrence got two and John Scott one against Brent and Paul Martin grabbed a hat-trick against BROB to take his tally to 20 for the season, with Dave Prountzos notching his only goal for the club. Dave Waight scored three over the two games.

The semi-final of the League Cup brought a trip to Chingford. After an even first half, the Wands put in a brilliant second-half performance, banishing memories of their lack-lustre display on the same ground two weeks earlier. Phil Emblen, Paul McCarthy, Tony Smith and Bob Scott were the scorers in a 4-1 victory.

On the same afternoon Alma Swanley had a stunning 5-1 win over Canvey Island, leaving Cray needing just two wins and a draw. The Wands were aided by the fact that most clubs had absolutely nothing to play for at the end of a very long season. Ulysses, with only three wins to their name, were brushed aside 3-0 at Oxford Road. Waight rapped in a shot from the edge of the area and Smith and Lawrence added goals before half-time.

A visit to Hatfield Town was usually a tough proposition, and Cray might have expected a struggle to break down the team with the best defensive record in the league. On this occasion, however, the home side seemed to have little stomach for a fight and were swept aside 6-0. This was Cray's eighth six goal (or better) haul of the season; the scorers were Waight (2), Lawrence (2), Smith and Terry Smart.

So a draw against Chingford would bring the championship to Oxford Road. The result was never in doubt on a memorable evening. An own goal set Cray on their way, Smith made it two and a McCarthy shot took a big deflection to put the Wands in an unassailable position. Bob Scott made it four before the break and Lawrence added a fifth in the second half. Cray's supporters and management celebrated their first league title for nine years, a tremendous achievement having lost their ground at Grassmeade just two years earlier.

Three days later, Lawrence (2), Martin and Smart scored in a 4-2 success at East Ham whilst on Whit Monday Hatfield, clearly with no desire to suffer another trouncing, failed to field a side at Oxford Road and the Wands took both points by default. The final league game was at home to Barkingside, who had lost 3-1 in the League Cup semi-final to Alma. Johnny Biddle included only five of the side who would start in the cup final three days later, but the makeshift team won 2-1, with regular scorers Lawrence and Martin finding the net. This extended Cray's winning margin to nine points.

Chingford was not the most glamorous or convenient venue for a cup final between sides from Sidcup and Swanley, but a large crowd was present on the sunny afternoon of the last day of May. The game proved a fitting showcase for two talented teams. After just eight minutes Emblen, whose captaincy had

been a major factor in Cray's success, rose majestically to power home a McCarthy corner. The Wands continued to dominate proceedings and added a second just before the break, Bob Scott lashing home in a goalmouth scramble that left Alma keeper Martin Dillnutt injured.

Three minutes after half-time, John Kane brought Alma back into the game when he eluded the Cray offside trap and the Wands wobbled for a while before they sealed victory with a trademark goal. Dave Waight weaved his way past challenge after challenge on the edge of the box before finding enough space to fire home into the corner. It was his 39th and Cray's 170th goal of a remarkable season and, all these years later, I can still recall it very clearly!

PETE GORINGE