

LOOKING BACK IN AMBER

1980-81



Cray Wanderers embarked upon their second season under Harry Richardson in this month as a Club with a mission. The previous year their football had won a host of friends and admirers. They had reached the quarter-finals of the F A Vase and were runners up in both the Kent League and Senior Trophy. The reputation of Kent's oldest club stood at a high level. But this year they were determined to win something.

Two of the stars of the last campaign had departed the Club. Terry Elphick returned to Crockenhill. His replacement on the wing was Dave Wadhams from Swanley Town, a tricky but more slightly built player. The Wands needed a new goalkeeper too, Geoff Parsons stepped up to take over from Steve Biggs, with Dave Jackson as an able deputy when required.

The other big signing was Alan Walker. An accomplished striker with a lot of experience at a higher level, Walker had played for the Wands some ten years earlier, at the beginning of his career when their home ground was at Grassmeade, St Mary Cray. He later sponsored the Club, through his builders merchants business, and may well have taken us to a brand new ground in Rectory Lane had it not been for the recession of the early 1990s.

Cray maintained a 100% record through the pre-season friendlies. Mind you, they did not take on any glamorous or demanding opposition. The closest was away to Cray Valley Paper Mills where the margin was only 3-2.

In fact, it was a fairly low-key start to the season. Faversham Town were the visitors to Oxford Road on the opening day and Cray squeezed home 3-2 with goals from Walker, Kenny Edwards (equalling his tally from the previous season) and Kevin Walsh.

In midweek there was another home game, this time against Tunbridge Wells. The Wands had tremendous fun against them in 1979-80, scoring 17 goals in four matches, but this time their defence proved far more resolute and the result was a very disappointing goalless draw.

Cray hadn't started in championship form but there was some good news in the first week of the season. Title holders Chatham Town, who were again expected to be the main rivals, had lost at home to Crockenhill, who were third from bottom last time round. As the season wore on, this proved not to be quite a shock result, as the Crocks had a much-improved side. It certainly gave the Wands an early boost in the title race.

The following Saturday night it was Cray's supporters who were in need of a boost, after witnessing "disaster at Darent". The Wands visited Horton Road for a first round Kent League cup-tie and early in the second half seemed on course for a routine victory after Walker and Eddie Jones had scored. Then the floodgates opened... and Cray's defence was deluged. Heathside scored five goals in 24 minutes. For the first time ever, Harry Richardson's Wands looked in complete disarray. It was an inexplicable, and hugely embarrassing, defeat.

It was important that Cray could show that this was just a blip and they went some way towards making amends three days later with a win at Slade Green. Alan Walker notched his third and fourth goals of the season and a Mick Kelly penalty sealed a 3-1 win.

And Kelly was the hero as the Wands took on Isthmian League Dorking Town in the F A Cup. Trailing to a first half goal, Cray did all they could to equalise kicking up the Oxford Road slope. In the end, though, they had to rely on another spot-kick four minutes from time to earn a replay in Surrey.

Still looking for some consistent form, Cray made the midweek trip to Dorking Town after the first F A Cup meeting between the sides had ended 1-1. Dorking were new members of the Isthmian League. They should have joined the previous year, but had been involved in a remarkable dispute when, at the start of the season, both the Isthmian and Athenian Leagues had claimed them as members! Dorking had wanted to play in the Isthmian but due to a technicality they had to spend one more year in the lower league.

Dorking were clearly very excited about finally becoming Isthmians and their programme was full of information... about Worthing! They clearly hadn't expected to be taken to a replay by Cray and had already printed their programmes for a pre-arranged league match.

They were in for another shock soon after the kick off when Alan Walker put the Wands ahead. It was a commanding performance by Cray, easily their best of the season so far. Walker doubled the lead early in the second half and the defence, marshalled by Glen Cooper who was making a rare appearance in place of Alan Payne, kept a clean sheet. Dorking's coach Tex Wiltshire, a popular Cray player from the 1960s who had enjoyed several exciting cup runs in the Amber and Black, readily accepted the better side had won.

Next stop was Wested, home of Crockenhill who, along with Erith and Belvedere, were riding high at the top of the table with a 100% record. The local derby excited a lot of interest. The *Kentish Times* remarked on 'that strange sight of a queue at the turnstiles', but the game turned out to be rather one-sided after Walker kept up his goal-a-game record with a first minute strike. A Kelly penalty and a third from Walsh put Cray in complete control. Despite a late consolation, the Crocks' bubble had been well and truly burst.

The following Saturday saw the next round of the F A Cup. After two good results, the Wands' fans were beginning to believe that the consistent high levels of performance of the previous season had been reached again.

The draw sent Cray to another Isthmian club, Tilbury, who played a division above Dorking. They were old London League rivals from the late 1950s. So, a chance to renew some old acquaintances, but no one expected to be playing someone who had appeared in those games over twenty years before. But Tilbury fielded John Brennan who had appeared at Grassmeade in a League Cup semi-final way back in 1959!

The old man was actually Tilbury's top scorer with just two goals, but if Cray thought they were in for an easy ride they were to be mistaken. The home side dominated the first half and only Kelly's fourth penalty in five games kept the Wands on level terms. Any hopes that this might inspire a better showing after the interval were soon dispelled. Tilbury continued to make Cray look very ordinary and the final 4-1 scoreline accurately reflected the balance of play.

The next match was a fortnight later when Sittingbourne, in an unaccustomed lowly position with just one point, visited Oxford Road. Cray again struggled to gain the ascendancy and all looked lost when they fell behind with six minutes to go. Four minutes later, Eddie Jones unleashed a tremendous drive that crashed against the crossbar. It was an almost identical effort to the one in the F A Vase quarter-final against Stamford a few months earlier. This

time though, luck was with Eddie. The ball rebounded onto the back of the 'keeper's head and bounced into the net! Own goal? No way! Eddie deserved that one, which saved the Wands' unbeaten league record.

Going into October 1980, Cray boasted the only unbeaten record in the Kent League, but they were still a few points behind the early pace-setters, Erith & Belvedere, Crockenhill and Hythe Town who had all played more games.

The first game of the month was at Whitstable. The Belmont Ground was one of the few places where the Wands had not yet won since their return to the Kent League two years earlier. And despite dominating the game, they seemed unlikely to change this as the scoreline remained goalless with only five minutes remaining. Fortunately, Alan Whitehead chose this moment to grab his first goal of the season. Alan Walker doubled the lead in the last minute.

In fact, the three strikers available to Harry Richardson were causing something of a dilemma for the Cray boss. Whitehead, Walker and Kevin Walsh were all top quality performers but it didn't really work when all three played together. Whitehead and Walsh had scored over 40 goals between them the previous season, but the first ten games had brought them a total of only three, whilst Walker had notched an impressive eight.

Walsh had missed the last couple of games, so it was something of a shock that Alan Walker left the Club. The trusted partnership of the previous season was restored. Whatever lay behind this, it proved successful as the Wands hit a staggering 32 goals in their next eight league matches, having averaged barely two a game thus far.

Herne Bay were on the receiving end of ten of these. They were to have a very poor season, but actually only conceded five goals in their first six matches, before they met the Wands. Whitehead took them apart at Oxford Road, with four goals and Micky Kelly added two more from the spot, to take his tally of penalties to six in eight games.

It's interesting to note just how many more penalties successful teams seem to win than mediocre ones. Cray had now won 18 spot-kicks in a season and a bit. Back in 1978-79, when they finished near the bottom, they got just two. The same thing happened a few years earlier. When they won the Met London League in 1974-75, the Wands converted a staggering 19 penalties. The following season, which ended in mid-table, there were only eight.

Another pleasing statistic that was developing was the time that Cray had gone without conceding a goal. They stretched it to three games in a 0-0 draw at Sheppey United. It was an even game and another good performance from the solid Wands rearguard of full-backs Alan Payne and Kenny Edwards, and centre-backs Andy Bushell and Tony Pamphlett.

Although Cray came back from Botany Road with only one point, they did gain a new player. Winger Glyn Steele was signed from Sheppey after the match. He didn't play many full games, but was a useful back-up member of the squad, which was actually quite small in number as the Club had dispersed with its Reserve side at the end of the previous season.

Steele didn't have to wait too long for his chance. The following weekend Cray's young winger David Wadhams broke a toe which put him out of action until the second half of the season. Wadhams actually suffered his injury in a Sunday game. Ironically, the previous day he had scored his first goal for the Club in another easy win over Herne Bay, 4-0 this time. Micky Kelly scored his first goal of the season from open play, with Walsh and an own goal completing the rout.

The Wands now had the impressive league record of seven wins, three draws and no defeats, and the defence had not been breached for over 360 minutes.

Unbeaten in the Kent League and looking forward to their first F A Vase game of the campaign (they had been exempted until the second round proper having reached the quarter final the previous season) Cray Wanderers were full of confidence.

Kent Police were the first visitors to Oxford Road. Cray already had a good record against the boys in blue. Four victories had been won and fifteen goals scored in the 1979-80 season and the Wands carried on in the same vein with a comfortable 4-1 victory. A Whitehead double took his tally to seven in four games, with Eddie Jones and Tony Pamphlett also contributing to the scoreline. Pamphlett, the youngest player in the Wands' side, was interesting a lot of bigger clubs with his commanding displays in the heart of the defence.

The goal the Police scored was the first Cray had conceded since September. The following week Darenth Heathside netted twice at Oxford Road, but the Wands 'went nap' as old football reports used to say. In other words they scored five! This time Kevin Walsh led the way with two and Don Butterfill scored his first of the season. Micky Kelly and Alan Whitehead completed the scoring, both joining Alan Walker as top scorers on the eight-goal mark.

With 19 points out of a possible 22 and a goal tally of 31 against 8, Cray were now roaring along towards the league title. Unfortunately they hadn't really caught the imagination of the local public. Attendances were hovering around the 150 mark, considerably down on the previous season when Sidcup and the Crays had been in the grip of 'Vase fever'. It was only later in the season, when the next Vase run started, that league attendances began to exceed 200 on a regular basis.

A mere 137 turned up at Oxford Road for the next game, the third in a row. Dartford Glentworth were the visitors another routine two points were expected by all and sundry. What a shock it was that the Wands ended up on the wrong side of a 3-2 scoreline! It was probably complacency that caused such a poor result and the first league defeat seemed to be just the kick up the backside that Cray needed.

They responded in awesome fashion. The next ten games up to the beginning of February brought three F A Vase wins, progress in the Kent Senior Trophy and five league victories. The only game the Wands didn't win was away to their main challengers for the league title, champions Chatham, which wasn't a bad result at all.

The first Vase game came at Fisher Athletic. After seven home draws the previous season, Cray were made to travel for their first three Vase ties this time round. Fisher were then playing at their old ground in Mitcham, in the London Spartan League which the Wands had left three years earlier. During that last Spartan League season, Cray had come a cropper at Mitcham, losing 3-0 in a Kent Senior Trophy quarter-final tie. This had been a shock result as Fisher were in a lower division.

Fisher included several players with Cray connections, including John Duffy and Billy Parry. They had a good side, which went on to become London Spartan League champions (and to reach the Conference at their new Surrey Docks ground just six years later). So the Wands were delighted to leave with a 2-1 victory, in front of a crowd of 250. An Eddie Jones penalty and an Alan Whitehead winner did the trick.

The last game of the month brought an equally welcome win. Cray travelled to Hythe Town, a bogey ground where their unbeaten league record had ended after 25 games back in April. The Wands earned a narrow 3-2 victory. Their scorers included former favourite Dermot Trainor, who had returned after a couple of years away. Cray only ever won once again in nine visits to Hythe Town, who came to grief after a short spell in the Southern League.

The Kent League fixture computer must have been having a bad time in 1980 for, after three successive home matches in November, the Cray team didn't grace the Oxford Road turf at all during December, as they made four away trips in a row.

The first was to Ramsgate, who were having a truly awful season at the bottom of the league. The Wands had little difficulty in running up their biggest victory for nearly six years with a final score of 8-2. More remarkable was the fact that seven different Cray players found the net. Glyn Steele scored his one and only goal for the Club and amongst the others on the scoresheet were defenders Kenny Edwards and Tony Pamphlett, and Alan Whitehead with two.

With only three outfield players drawing blanks, this is probably a Club record. It is impossible to be certain as reports of games in post-war years didn't always list every goalscorer.

Encouraged by this success, Cray travelled to Southall for a third round F A Vase clash. The home club had a huge stadium in West London with vast terraces on two sides. They have a proud history in amateur football, but had fallen to the second division of the Isthmian League (they have lost their ground and fallen a good deal further since then).

Nonetheless, it was a tough proposition for the Wands. Southall had recently had a run of six successive wins and it was only in the second half that they succumbed to two Alan Whitehead strikes. Whitehead, described by manager Harry Richardson as his 'pocket battleship', had a knack of scoring vital goals and these two proved crucial, especially as Southall pulled one back with a last minute, twice taken penalty.

A routine league game at Faversham the following Saturday, the week before Christmas, proved a little more difficult than most were expecting, and only an early Mick Kelly penalty separated the two sides.

Christmas came with just three points separating the top six teams in the League. Cray were top of the table with 25 points from 15 games. Hythe and Sittingbourne were within a point, but had played more games, with Chatham, Sheppey United and Crockenhill tucked in just behind. Erith were only seven points behind the Wands, with three games in hand. But it was the Chats who everyone at Oxford Road saw as their main rivals.

And it was the reigning champions who entertained the Wands for their Boxing Day match. The game was featured in live reports on Radio Medway (now BBC Radio Kent). Although the goals were nothing special, there was plenty of good football on view. The prolific Dennis Housden put the hosts in front from the penalty spot just before half time, with Alan Whitehead netting yet another vital goal, equalising from a goalmouth scramble, with 15 minutes remaining.

It was a well-earned point for Cray, and left them two points ahead of Chatham, from the same number of games. All to play for in the New Year.

Cray entered the New Year full of confidence; top of the Kent League and with Wembley very much on their minds as another F A vase run was taking shape.

After six Saturdays away from Oxford Road, the treasurer must have been pleased that the first match in January was at home. Slade Green were the visitors and the biggest gate of the season so far (223) turned up. There was a routine 2-0 victory for the Wands, the goals coming from Don Butterfill and Ken Edwards. After the game, the Green manager Pat Meagan commented that Cray were far and away the best side in the league. He suggested that they

should be awarded the title already and the other teams could fight it out without them for the rest of the season!

As finalists the previous season, Cray had received a bye into the latter stages of the Kent Senior Trophy. Their first match looked simple enough, a trip to Sevenoaks of the Kent Amateur League. In fact, Sevenoaks weren't to be taken lightly. They had won at Alma Swanley in the previous round and no doubt fancied themselves as giant-killers.

The home side even went to the unusual length of having a programme printed! They gave quite a good account of themselves, but goals from the reliable Kevin Walsh and Alan Whitehead saw the Wands through to the quarter finals fairly comfortably.

So Cray were putting together a nice run of form in time for their next F A Vase match. For the third successive round, the draw had been unkind, and this time the Wands had to travel to Great Yarmouth. It might have been a nice trip in August, but the winds off the North Sea were another matter in January!

Manager Harry Richardson was absolutely determined that his side would reach Wembley this time and he put in place meticulous preparations. In an unprecedented move, the team travelled to Norfolk on the Friday night. The following morning a full coach of supporters set forth from Oxford Road, with many others making their way under their own steam.

Cray's reputation had preceded them. The previous year's victory over Yarmouth's neighbours, Eastern Counties League champions Gorleston, had earned the respect of the locals. The local paper dubbed them "The Cosmos of Kent". But the Bloaters had also beaten Gorleston, in the previous round, and they were very keen to succeed where their local rivals had failed.

Sadly, the game did not live up to expectations. Yarmouth, racked with injuries, had to put out a much-weakened team. Cray, despite the preparation, played poorly, adopting an over-physical approach. The *Kentish Times* reporter, who had never been to Oxford Road, but obviously fancied an expenses-paid day out, asked at half-time whether Cray usually played this badly!

Tony Pamphlett eventually netted from a goalmouth scramble in the second-half. The Wands won few friends as they held out for victory. For this they had Geoff Parsons to thank for some important saves.

Cray celebrated reaching the last 16 with a straightforward 2-0 win over Whitstable in the league the following Saturday. They thus completed the month without conceding a single goal, the second time in the season that this feat had been achieved.

After three away draws, F A Vase fever finally came to Oxford Road at the beginning of February when Irthlingborough Diamonds visited for a fifth round (last 16) clash.

Like Cray, the Northants side had reached the quarter-finals the previous season. They had started this season badly, though. Back in September they had briefly appeared on 'Grandstand' when 'Football Focus' featured a game from the First Qualifying Round of the F A Cup (they lost 3-0 to Histon).

Unfortunately for Cray, by the time they came to Sidcup, the Diamonds, who played in the United Counties League, were in good form. Like their colleagues, Stamford, who had won the Vase the previous year and ended the Wands' hopes, were a very big, strong side, well-organised in defence.

A crowd of nearly 700 saw a tight game with the most memorable incidents in the final couple of minutes of extra-time. Cray were awarded a free kick just outside the box. Everyone, including the visitors, was expecting an Eddie Jones pile driver. But taking us all by surprise, Eddie chipped the ball delicately over the wall and Mick Kelly ghosted in on the blindside with only the keeper to beat. Unfortunately the Oxford Road slope took the ball away from Mick and he couldn't connect properly with his shot.

Almost immediately, Irthlingborough counter-attacked and Geoff Parsons pulled off a blinding save to keep the scoresheet blank. Both sides were left thinking about what might have been.

Cray suffered an awful build-up to the replay the following Saturday. Several players were either ill or carrying injuries. With a very small squad and no reserve side, the Wands were hardly able to raise a side and requested a postponement from the FA. This was turned down and so the walking wounded had to take to the field at Nene Park in front of another 700 crowd.

Half the Cray players should never have been on the pitch. They held out bravely for half an hour but eventually succumbed 6-0. But there was heartbreak for the Diamonds too, as later in the season they missed out on their Wembley trip, losing in the semi-finals.

When Cray played at Nene Park, it was a typical non-league ground with a small stand and 'bus shelter'. Now it is a state-of-the-art stadium, home to Rushden & Diamonds.

Cray had another chance of cup glory in the Kent Senior Trophy, a competition in which they were clear favourites. A 2-2 draw away to Slade Green in the quarter-final was a satisfactory result, but the replay at Oxford Road was a disaster. The Wands crashed 4-1 against a side they had totally outclassed only a few weeks earlier.

Shortly afterwards, however, it was discovered that Green had played an ineligible player. The penalty for this is usually severe – loss of league points or expulsion from a cup competition. The Kent F A in their wisdom chose on this occasion to administer a £25 fine, allowing the result to stand.

There has rarely been such a lenient punishment, before or since, and it only went to reinforce the views that 'the powers that be' had it in for the Wands. Now Cray could concentrate on the league, as they say, and they were very determined to clinch the title this time around.

Cray entered March without a win in four games, easily their worst run since Harry Richardson took over as manager. Licking their wounds after their exits from the F A Vase and Kent Senior Trophy, the Wands' sights were firmly set on claiming their first Kent League title since 1902.

They put their bad run of form behind them with a comprehensive 6-1 victory at Darenth Heathside. This could have been a tricky fixture for a side short of confidence, especially as Cray had lost 5-2 at Horton Road in the League Cup earlier in the season. But an own goal set the Wands on their way and five different players added their names to the scoresheet.

Ramsgate visited Oxford Road the following week. Rock bottom of the league, the Rams had lost 19 games in a row, including an 8-2 defeat to Cray at Southwood. They must have come expecting a hammering... and they were not disappointed. By the 12th minute, Eddie Jones had notched a hat-trick! Mick Kelly and Kevin Walsh added further goals by half-time. Many would have expected double figures by the end, but strangely, there were no more goals. Ramsgate played pluckily in the second period and the Wands certainly took their foot off the pedal conscious, no doubt, of some sterner tests to come.

The first of these came with the visit of Chatham Town. The Chats had cruelly denied Cray in the title decider the previous season, but this time around the Wands were only four points behind them, with five games in hand. If they could avoid defeat, Cray's path to the title would be relatively straightforward.

And avoid defeat was exactly what Cray did. The league's two meanest defences – they had both conceded less than one goal per game – held firm. The 0-0 scoreline was a much better result for the Wands than for Chatham. Many supporters thought that we had one hand on the championship trophy already.

But in football things are rarely quite so straightforward, especially considering the next visitors to Oxford Road were Erith & Belvedere. The Deres were having a good season and their team included Glen Cooper's brother, Gary. To add extra spice at least six of the Cray team were ex-Erith players.

If the Wands thought this was the start of their stroll to the title, the first-half shattered their illusions. It was a disaster! Erith went 3-0 up, with goals from Brian Morrison and two from Tony Clary. Big Tony had a long spell with Swanley and always seemed to score against Cray.

The Wands came back strongly in the second-half and pulled back to 2-3. With 86 minutes on the clock, and pushing hard for the equaliser, all hell broke loose. There was a scramble in the Erith box with the Dere's goalkeeper, Martin Dillnutt and Wands' sub David Wadhams were injured. Tony Pamphlett then headbutted Gary Cooper and a mass brawl ensued. Even a spectator tried to join in. The incident brought back bitter memories of the same fixture two years earlier when the Wands had had four players sent off and a supporter had laid out the referee with a punch from the touchline.

On this occasion, the referee sensibly took the players back to the dressing rooms to calm down. Eight minutes later, they returned, with ten on each side. Pamphlett had been sent off and Cooper taken to hospital for stitches in the head wound he had sustained (Erith had already used their substitute). The Deres held on comfortably for the final four minutes of the game.

Despite their setback against Erith, Cray were still in pole position to clinch their first Kent League title for nearly 80 years. They had games in hand on the three teams above them, one of whom, Hythe Town, visited Oxford Road on Boat Race day. The Wands got the show well and truly back on the road with a 3-1 victory. Goalscorers were Tony Pamphlett, David Wadhams and Eddie Jones.

Three days later, Cray faced a tricky trip to the Bull Ground to face Sittingbourne, who were too far behind to mount a title challenge, but were always a difficult proposition on their own patch. The first half was very even but Dermot Trainor broke the deadlock with a brilliant shot from outside the area five minutes after the break.

Trainor had been a star of Jimmy Wakeling's London Spartan Championship winning side three years earlier, but was more of a squad player under Harry Richardson. This, though, was a priceless goal, which Alan Whitehead added to in order to ensure the three points.

Three more away games followed. Cray went to Lowfield Street, home of Dartford Glentworth, with a point to prove, as they had inflicted a shock home defeat on the Wands earlier in the season. There was no mistake this time, as Cray cruised to a 4-0 victory, with four different scorers finding the net.

In fact it was a feature of Richardson's teams that almost all the players were capable of scoring goals. Apart from right-back Alan Payne, every regular member of the team scored at least three goals during the season. Andy Bushell, for example, was an accomplished centre-

half for the Wands, but he had played as a striker for his former club, Erith & Belvedere. So it was no great problem for him to be asked to play up front at Tunbridge Wells when Wadhams was unavailable. And after a goalless first-half, Bushell found the net twice early in the second period to set up a comfortable 3-0 win. Glen Cooper took over competently in the back four.

The series of away matches finished with a trip to Deal in midweek (the sort of fixture that only league administrators seem able to explain!). Wadhams opened the scoring with a magnificent diving header and Jones netted from the spot in the last minute after a Pamphlett header had been punched off the line. Sadly, Kevin Walsh was sent off for "something that he said."

Four away wins in a row, and not a single goal conceded. The Wands now simply had to hold their nerve. Back at Oxford Road after a three week break, Sheppey were the visitors. They had been title contenders a month earlier, but had won only one of their last six matches. It was another comfortable Cray win, 4-1, again with four different scorers.

The news came through that Chatham, now the Wands' only rivals for the title, had been held 1-1 at Hythe. Two wins in the last four games would now be enough. A Thursday evening trip to Kent Police brought the first of these with a resounding 7-2 victory. This time there were five scorers for the Wands, with Walsh notching a hat-trick.

Chatham had a 3-0 midweek win over Deal, which was their last game of the season. The Chats were only one point ahead of the Wands, who still had to play Deal at home, followed by more difficult games against the third and fourth placed teams, Crockenhill and Erith.

As Cray prepared for the visit of Deal Town on the first Saturday in May, they knew the arithmetic was simple: two more points and the Kent League title was theirs. And even if they failed against Deal, there were two more matches to come.

The Wands fielded their first choice eleven: Geoff Parsons in goal, a back four of Alan Payne, Ken Edwards, Tony Pamphlett and Andy Bushell, which had virtually been unchanged for two years, as had the midfield of Mick Kelly, Eddie Jones and Don Butterfill. The three Ws – Kevin Walsh, Alan Whitehead and David Wadhams – were the strikers.

Deal were stuck in the midtable mud, but certainly hadn't come to Oxford Road to lie down. Indeed, the first 45 minutes were very frustrating for the Cray supporters, who made up the bulk of the gate of 221. Half-time came with the scoresheet blank. Playing up the slope towards their fans on the mudbank, the Wands continued to struggle, until a crucial incident in the 60th minute. Cray were awarded a questionable penalty, which Mick Kelly dispatched with his customary efficiency – his 17th spot kick success in two seasons.

Deal were so incensed by the decision that one of their players continued to argue with the referee after the final whistle, and was promptly "sent off." By then, Cray had added to their lead, with a Kevin Walsh goal after 82 minutes. At last, the waiting and hoping was over, the Wands were Kent League champions.

Obviously expecting this result, the League officials were in attendance and presented the championship trophy to the Wands straight after the game. There were jubilant scenes as players and supporters joined together in the celebrations.

On the same day, Aston Villa won the Football League title for the first time in 70 years. But, as Radio Medway pointed out later in the evening, Cray had had to wait even longer – they had last won the Kent League in 1902!

On the Bank Holiday Monday, there was a large crowd at Park View for the local derby with Erith & Belvedere. This time there were no ugly incidents as the Wands won 1-0 thanks to a Mick Kelly goal.

No-one knew, of course, that the Deres would be the next Kent League champions and that they would be promoted to the Southern League, something denied Cray by the poor facilities at Oxford Road. And later in the 1980s, one of their managers would be Harry Richardson.

Richardson and coach John Stevens announced their resignations after the final game of the season, a disappointing 1-3 reverse at home to Crockenhill, for whom former Cray man Terry Elphick was in sparkling form. The Wands management duo felt they had taken the club as far as they could, and this was probably fair comment.

They had built their success on continuity, using the same 11 players for their two seasons in charge, except for losing 'keeper Steve Biggs and bringing in Wadhams to replace Elphick. Whitehead and Walsh were reliable strikers (they notched 22 and 16 respectively in the championship season) but the contribution of the midfield was perhaps the key. Kelly, Jones and Butterfill scored over 80 goals in two years.

Alan Payne took over as manager, but most of the side departed. Pamphlett went to Dartford and eventually played in the Football League for Maidstone, Jones joined top Isthmian side Leyton-Wingate and Whitehead and Kelly moved to Sheppey.

PETE GORINGE