

DIVINE INTERVENTION...?

Many years ago, in May 1975 to be exact, I was requested to prepare and supply the Metropolitan London League Cup Final programmes for the game between Cray Wanderers and Alma Swanley. The final was being held at Chingford FC on Saturday 31 May, 1975 and a bumper crowd, made up of supporters from both Kent clubs, was expected to attend the Essex ground.

I can't recall now why the cup final programme was given to one of the teams involved to arrange, but I received the news from Micky Hunt, the then Cray Wanderers secretary, that I had been nominated to do it (mainly because I produced Cray's matchday programmes anyway, and at the time I don't think Alma were into producing programmes). "Just a single page with team names will do," Micky had said to me on the evening of Thursday 29 May – less than 48 hours prior to the big kick-off.

But I went one better than that. Not to show off my communication skills, but because I felt the supporters of both clubs should have a little bit more to read than just two lists of players. So I made a telephone call to Alma's then secretary (somebody called Doherty, I think) and asked for a bit of history on the Swanley-based club. Alma were quite new to the non-league scene and 1974-75 was their first season in the top flight (Premier Division) of the Metropolitan London League. In fact, their previous season had seen them win the Division One title to gain their promotion – and they rounded off that season nicely by hammering newly-crowned Premier Division champions Epping Town 4-0 in the 1973-74 Metropolitan London League Cup Final at East Ham United's Manor Road ground.

The game at Chingford was anticipated to be a corker. Both sides had battled through a long season. The Wanderers had taken the title in style, amassing 128 goals in their 37 league games (the 38th game, against Hatfield Town, was cancelled and the Wands were awarded the points when the Hertfordshire club failed to turn up on the scheduled day) and conceded only 36. In all competitions that season, Cray scored a spellbinding 170 goals, which is still a Club record. Alma, meanwhile, had finished as deserved runners-up, scoring 91 goals and conceding 42. The points difference between the two clubs at the end was ten, but for a while the title could have gone to either of the two teams.

So, the scene was set. All I had to do was turn up at Oxford Road on the Saturday lunchtime, bundle of one-page programmes in one hand, warmed up steak and kidney pie in the other hand and get on the players' coach for the trip to Chingford. What could be simpler...? For one, I should have read the tell-tale signs from a few weeks beforehand. The Roneo duplicator that I used for printing out hundreds of matchday programmes each week (both First Team and Reserves had programmes when they played at home) had been playing up and I had twice required the attendance of 'Roneo Man' to come and look at it in as many weeks. All he could do was service the machine but hinted that 'somewhere down the line' it would have to be pensioned off.

Both Micky Hunt and I felt that the Rep was angling for some commission by flogging the Club a new machine, something the coffers couldn't stretch to. It was ostensibly a case of keeping the old thing going for as long as possible and worry about it later.

In those days, the most cost-efficient way for non-league teams to produce matchday programmes was by having the covers pre-printed (usually to include a few ads from local tradesmen) for the season and then to run off the 'inner' pages on a duplicator. Some clubs managed it better than other clubs, whilst many clubs didn't even bother at all. Only the most affluent clubs 'went posh' and had their programmes properly printed for every game, but this was really limited to teams mostly within the likes of the Isthmian, Athenian and Southern leagues.

I used to print Cray's matchday programmes on the Friday evenings before the Saturdays of the games and the cup final programme was no exception. After speaking with the Alma representative on the phone, I typed the wax stencil and set it onto the big duplicator drum. I had nothing to worry about, or so I thought. I prepared the ink and was ready to roll.

Two hours and some mega-swearing later, I'd not managed to get a single decent copy of a programme out of the archaic machine. So I scrapped the stencil as by now it was beyond usefulness. Back to the typewriter I went and thumped the keys, in annoyance because of the time wasted, as I produced another stencil. A short while later I was back at the duplicator, new stencil and ink in place, about to roll again. End result? A very tired me swearing at a clapped out piece of metal.

Micky Hunt got a very late call that Friday! His suggestion was to leave it and we'll have no programmes for the cup final. The reason just why the league couldn't supply programmes has long since been lost in the ether, but I wasn't going to be defeated. There had to be a way of getting that monster of a machine to make one final departing gesture before being consigned to the breakers yard in Cudham (is that place still there?!) and I was to try to get the Roneo to see sense on the Saturday morning. I figured that if I slept on the problem (but not on the duplicator!) then everything would sort itself out by the morning.

Aaaagh! Who was **I** kidding? I rose from my pit nice and early. Had breakfast and went into my parents' dining room, where the duplicator and the typewriter were situated. I sat down and typed out a third stencil. O, Lordy! I didn't have a clue about what I was going to do if the duplicator didn't work this time. But I was soon going to find out, when the Roneo once more bit the hand that fed it. More swearing, following which I went into the kitchen for a cup of coffee and a ciggie (oh, yes I did, in those days).

The time was fast approaching 11 a.m. and I had absolutely nothing to show for my hard graft. I was crestfallen. I had let everyone down and by then I was on a massive guilt-trip. I was even contemplating the unthinkable... not bothering to show my face and to stay at home. Miss

the cup final. Avoid coming into contact with all those people. I had run out of options.

Or had I?

Now, my old man and old dear (God rest their souls) used to frequent the local Baptist church at the top of Poverest Road. The vicar was an amicable kind of bloke, when he wasn't trying to increase his flock by giving unscheduled sermons to those whom he thought of as 'likely candidates', including me. So, my Dad said on that Saturday morning, as I sat dejectedly at the kitchen table: "How about turning to the church?". That's all I needed. I was in crisis over what to do about no programmes and I get a suggestion to go and sit at the right hand!

Anybody who had the good fortune to know my Dad would recall that he had a mischievous, impish sense of humour and it was this that was being displayed, rather than him wanting me to be a born-again hallelujah trailblazer. Anyway, his comment had a serious purpose, as he revealed that the vicar possessed a duplicating machine.

I couldn't believe it! I'd not asked the Big Fella with the white beard for a favour, yet from up among the billowing white clouds I suddenly got the nod.

I would have virtually done anything at that time, even perhaps considered selling my soul to the devil, but in the Friday night and Saturday morning build up it seemed like Old Nick didn't want to buy it. Well, that was some good news, at least. So I agreed to my Dad's suggestion and he called up the vicar on the phone. Within ten minutes I had typed up yet another stencil and was in my car headed towards the church. The vicar was there when I arrived and welcomed me into his office. Fifteen minutes later I was proudly holding around 300 (perhaps more, my memory from over 30 years ago sometimes fails me) perfectly printed programmes on grey duplicator paper and the church was a couple of quid richer in it's 'poor box'.

Somehow, I had 'help' with meeting the deadline for the cup final programmes. Yes, there was plenty of leg-pulling by Micky Hunt and John Biddle when I mentioned to them about the difficulty I had faced. But the buzz I got was when John Biddle thanked me for going to so much effort to ensure supporters got something to remember the game, by way of the programmes. However, as I was later to witness, even that 'inner glow' couldn't come anywhere near the elation I felt as Phil Emblen, Bobby Scott and Dave Waight rattled in goals against Alma that afternoon to secure a 3-1 victory and seal the 'double'.

Was it all 'divine intervention'? You decide!

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