

A BRAVE NEW WORLD!

***Jerry Dowlen* has turned back the clock to revisit season 1997-98 for Cray Wanderers. Here are the memories of a landmark season that was one of the best of the 1990s for Cray in the Kent League, but the most sensational headline story surrounding the Wands was the exit from Oxford Road and the move to Hayes Lane, to become groundsharers with Bromley FC.**

For season 1997-98 the Wands brought in Johnny Roseman as manager, assisted by Charlie Pooley. Roseman could demonstrate a successful track record as a Kent League manager after piloting Sheppey United to the championship in 1994-95. He had a Cray connection dating back to the mid-1980s when he briefly assisted Alan Payne and Peter Gaydon during their time as manager of the Wands.

The Wands committee and fans must have been rubbing their eyes with disbelief when it dawned on them that the Kent League's three leading goalscorers of the 1996-97 season were all lined up to kick-off the 1997-98 season as Cray players.

It was evidence of Roseman's clout that he had attracted top strikers Steve Marshall from Sheppey United and Jamie McCarthy from Chatham Town. Add the Wands prolific young goalscorer Tunde Utsaja, stir and shake, and a veritable cocktail of goals was promised for Cray in 1997-98, it seemed!

As things turned out, Roseman was to bring the Wands their most successful season for seven years, finishing sixth in the Kent League and reaching the semi-final of the League Cup. The credit for this belonged to several members of his playing squad, not just the strikers.

As regards the strikers, what is that phrase? "The best laid plans ..." Marshall played five games, scored three goals, and then decided to return to Sheppey. Utsaja didn't impress Roseman and was soon on the transfer list, joining Erith Town. On the other hand, Jamie McCarthy was a huge success in his one and only full season at Cray. Many would nominate him as one of the most gifted and skilful players seen at Cray in the last several years.

Cray opened the season with an away game at Deal Town. I can vividly picture that afternoon for two particular reasons. One is the extreme heat. The sun was beating down, the temperature was in the nineties, and there wasn't a gasp of fresh air. Correction – there was some fresh air if you went to the beach at Deal, because freakishly, about twenty yards out to sea, there was a cool mist – known as a "fret" – and hundreds of people had paddled out to stand in it!

The other surreal thing to happen to me that afternoon was that Cray supporter Fred Anderson – sadly no longer with us – got chatting to me during the game about his showbiz career of singing Gene Autry cowboy songs. Fred then serenaded me and all the other spectators within earshot by singing one of the songs from beginning to end! It was a different way of watching a Cray match, let's say that!

Cray dominated the game but had to be content with a 1 – 1 draw after conceding a late equaliser. Inevitably the Cray goal was not scored by any of the three star strikers but came instead from midfielder Perry Weedon with a long-range shot that zipped into the net.

In many ways 1997-98 was a landmark season for Cray. After six years in the doldrums, always finishing in the lower half of the Kent League table, Cray had upped the stakes by bringing in a new manager Johnny Roseman who offered them promise of a successful and competitive season. Cray were even whispered to be potential contenders for the

championship.

On a more sinister note, however, the Red Indians were circling the wagons. The Kent League had notified its member clubs that floodlights would be mandatory from season 1998-99 onwards in order to join the new Premier Division. This was a huge threat to Cray and to neighbouring clubs Beckenham Town, Crockenhill and Swanley Furness whose home grounds didn't have lights.

The rumour-mill began to spin at Oxford Road. Would the Wands be installing lights? Would they look for another ground? Would they drop into Division One of the Kent League (effectively the reserve team competition) or even the Kent County League?

In the circumstances it was a brave decision by Roseman to join the Wands. He faced the possibility that a successful Cray team might be demoted the following season. Indeed they had already become victims of a new rule in 1997-98 that prevented them from continuing to enter for the FA Vase because their home ground had no lights.

Despite these obstacles Roseman made some excellent signings for Cray and injected a lot of quality into the playing squad.

Micky Simmons joined from Dartford to play in goal, while the brothers Billy and Jamie McCarthy from Chatham Town added class at right back and centre forward respectively. Also boosting the defence was the stocky Lou Robinson, ex-Crockenhill. The back line also included Mark Twiner, Adam Woods and Sam Wright whom Roseman had inherited from the previous year's team at Cray.

For the midfield positions Roseman had raided his former club Sheppey United to bring in Jason Bragg, Paul Evans and Perry Weedon. Up front, Ian Jenkins from the old Cray team kept his place in the team alongside new signing Jamie McCarthy. Paul Burke, Marc Cook and Tunde Utsaja were selected for some early games but eventually moved on when they weren't selected regularly.

Hopes were high when the new-look Wands began their campaign. After a 1 – 1 draw at Deal Town on the opening Saturday of the season the Wands were at Oxford Road the following Tuesday when local rivals Greenwich Borough provided the opposition.

A 2 – 0 defeat was a big let-down for the Cray camp. Jamie Kempster scored the first of Borough's two early goals. We didn't know it then, but the Wands were to become sick of the sight of Greenwich Borough by the end of the season!

For the anoraks among us there was the small consolation that during part of the game against Greenwich Borough the Wands had two sets of brothers on the field at the same time. These were Billy and Jamie McCarthy and Mark and Paul Twiner. No one could remember such a thing ever happening before!

A few weeks into the 1997-98 season, Cray fans were purring in unusual delight as the Wands established themselves near the top of the Kent League table. This was a pleasant change after several years of struggle.

Johnny Roseman had certainly brought some quality to the team. This was evidenced by results such as the 3 – 0 home win versus Ramsgate that put the Wands in fourth place at the end of September.

Cray nearly followed this with a home win against the reigning champions Herne Bay. Jamie McCarthy headed in a pinpoint cross from Ian Jenkins but the Bay scrambled a last-gasp

equaliser to draw the game at 1 – 1.

Unfortunately there were some occasional setbacks. Sean Cooney scored the only goal when Cray lost at home to Beckenham. Greenwich Borough completed an early season win double against Cray home and away.

If it was realistically a bridge too far for the Wands to win the Kent League championship there was at least the prospect of winning the Kent League Cup, the Kent Senior Trophy or the London Senior Cup.

Cray made a decent start in all three of these competitions. The first round of the Kent League Cup brought a 5 - 0 rout of Slade Green at Oxford Road. Erith Town fared no better at Oxford Road in the first round of the Kent Senior Trophy, although the victory margin for Cray was a narrow 2 – 1. Tunde Utsaja played for Erith in this game.

In the London Senior Cup, to comply with competition rules the Wands had to hire the Erith Stadium to play their home tie versus Cockfosters under lights in midweek. A 2- 0 win earned a midweek trip to Wingate & Finchley in the next round.

Johnny Roseman looked like a very worried man in the car park at Summers Lane in Finchley just before 7.30pm when there was no sign of any of the Cray players. A phone call came through. “We’re lost. Can you give us some directions?” (JR was a London cabbie). “We just passed Big Ben a few moments ago”. JR’s comments were unprintable – the more so after he put the phone down and half a minute later the Cray players’ cars all arrived at the ground. They had been 100 yards away when calling JR and pretending that they were still in London!

Cray were worthy winners 2 – 1, with Jenko and Richard Palmer netting the goals.

New faces in the Cray team in mid-season included defender Tom Warrilow, who had a short stay with the Wands before joining Folkestone Invicta who were neck-and-neck top of the Kent League table with Herne Bay at the halfway point of the season.

The Wands meanwhile were involved in three cup competitions and they were holding a mid-table place in the Kent League, with games in hand on the clubs above them.

Having brought several new players to Oxford Road at the start of the season, manager Johnny Roseman continued to make occasional new signings. Paul McCarthy was a powerful new forward – the third player of that surname to appear on the Wands teamsheet because the brothers Billy and Jamie McCarthy were already there!

Also competing for a place in the forward line were Graham Lane ex-Crockenhill and the much-travelled Rashid Short ex-Tunbridge Wells. Steve Sodje arrived from Erith & Belvedere to play at left back or in midfield.

January brought mixed fortune for Cray in the county cups.

First up on 10 January was the quarter-final of the Kent Senior Trophy away to Greenwich Borough who had already beaten Cray twice in the Kent League.

A dramatic and controversial game at Harrow Meadow ended 2 – 2. Three penalty-kicks were awarded. Ian Jenkins missed one for Cray but Jamie McCarthy put Cray one up when the Wands were given a second spot-kick soon afterwards.

Cray were two up but Borough came back to make it 2 – 2. Cray ‘keeper Micky Simmons protested loud and long that he had been impeded and the equalising goal should not have

stood. He and Jenko pursued the ref to the halfway line where a heated discussion ended with Jenko being sent off.

Late on it was Borough's turn to get a penalty-kick, but Dean Giddings fired his shot against the bar!

And so to Oxford Road for a replay the following Saturday. A 3 – 0 win for the visitors was explained by Borough taking their chances while Cray missed theirs in a game that was fiercely and evenly contested.

Cray had home advantage in their Kent League Cup quarter-final tie on 31 January but their visitors Swanley Furness were tough opponents. They were above Cray in the League and it was a good few years since Cray had last beaten them in any competition.

A thrilling cup-tie saw the Wands battle to a 1 – 0 win thanks to Ian Jenkins heading in from a corner-kick and Micky Simmons making a fantastic double-save from Ricky Bennett in the very last minute.

Perversely, just three days later on Tuesday evening, the Wands made a tame exit from the London Senior Cup. In a 3rd round tie they travelled to play Southall, struggling in the Ryman Division Three and groundsharing at faraway Tring Town in Herts. On a very icy pitch, with an official attendance of 19, the Wands lost 2 – 1.

Cray's cup hopes for the 1997-98 season now relied on the Kent League Cup, where the two-leg semi-final would require them to play ... wait for it ... the dreaded Greenwich Borough!

Towards the end of February the Wands were tenth in the Kent League table with games in hand on all of the clubs above them.

It might be said that Cray were not Setting the League on Fire ...

Until, on 21 February 1998 ...

Fire Stopped Play was one of the strangest incidents that I have ever seen during a Cray match! The venue was Central Park at Sittingbourne. Sheppey United and Cray had been playing for forty minutes when the fire alarm sounded. Play was halted and everyone was ordered to evacuate the stadium.

It transpired that someone had failed to extinguish a cigarette properly, and the smouldering butt had eventually triggered the smoke alarm. It only took a few minutes to deal with, whereupon play recommenced. The final score was 1 – 1.

Johnny Roseman was clearly doing well for Cray in his first season as manager, and although no one really thought that the Wands could win the championship, they did make a few people sit up when they beat leaders and hot favourites Folkestone Invicta 2 – 0 at Oxford Road on 28 February.

Playing out of their skins the Wands took a deserved lead through Jamie McCarthy after 5 minutes. Brilliant individual skill by McCarthy set up young substitute Mark Hammond to secure victory with an 89th minute goal. Visiting manager Neil Cugley was not amused. He complained bitterly at the state of the Oxford Road pitch and the big slope! Nor was it the debut for Folkestone that defender Tom Warrilow would have wanted, after joining the seaside club from Cray earlier in the week!

Having thus raised everyone's expectations the Wands inexplicably lost 4 – 0 at home to Deal

Town, sixth from bottom, in a League match the following Saturday!

It was clear that if Cray were to win any silverware in 1997-98 the only remaining hope was the Kent League Cup. Cray had reached the semi-final and were to meet Greenwich Borough over two legs on 21 and 28 March.

The omens were not good. Borough had twice beaten Cray in the Kent League and had also knocked them out of the Kent Senior Cup after a replay.

Even so, no one was expecting that the first leg at Harrow Meadow would see Greenwich win 6 – 0! What a disaster day for the Wands. Naturally enough the second leg was a complete anti-climax. For the record, the game ended 1 – 1.

The final six weeks of the season saw Cray work their way through a large backlog of Kent League fixtures – but the most important action was to take place off the field!

A poignant memory of Cray Wanderers in season 1997-98 is the final Kent League match that Cray played at Oxford Road, and the circumstances that caused the switch to Hayes Lane as a venue for the Wands' first team home matches from season 1998-99 onwards.

The announcement came in early April. Pressure had been building up on the Wands committee during 1997-98 to deal with the ultimatum from the Kent League that floodlights would be mandatory from 1998-99 onwards.

It was a tough decision to make, but the groundsharing arrangement with Bromley FC secured the Wands' future in senior football and forestalled the almost unthinkable prospect of dropping into a lower status League or folding altogether.

Canterbury City provided the opposition on an emotional afternoon at Oxford Road on 2 May 1998 where the Wands signed off with an emphatic 4 – 0 win. Rashid Short scored the last goal on the hallowed turf that had been Cray's home since 1973.

A good run of late season results lifted Cray to a final placing of sixth in the Kent League. In his first season in charge, manager Johnny Roseman had “delivered the goods”. Or had he? Some might argue that sixth place was nothing to shout about when you considered how far the Wands lagged behind the top three clubs! These were the points totals from 42 games:

Herne Bay (champions) 107; Folkestone Invicta (runners-up, promoted) 97; Sheppey United 91; Swanley Furness 75; Greenwich Borough 74; Cray Wanderers 71 ...

To be fair to Roseman, although he was given a bigger budget than the Wands managers who had only achieved low or very low final placings in the Kent League since 1991, his own prediction had been that he would hope to mount an outside challenge for the championship, and maybe make a splash in a cup or two.

Greenwich Borough were the biggest spoilers of Roseman's hopes. They took six points off the Wands in the early season League matches and later knocked them out of the Kent League Cup and the Kent Senior Trophy!

In the voting for Player of the Year the Wands supporters chose Billy McCarthy. Effective on the right as an overlapping full back or a midfielder, Billy was one of Roseman's most successful new signings. His brother Jamie was leading scorer for the season with 19 goals. No one else reached double figures.

Change was in the air as the 1997-98 season drew to a close. The Kent League was

immediately to lose three of its member clubs (Corinthian, Folkestone and Swanley Furness). The fall in numbers was to continue in subsequent seasons as the floodlight rule took its toll and quite a few clubs abandoned unsatisfactory groundsharing arrangements.

Johnny Roseman was not re-engaged for Cray after his first season in charge in 1997-98. Ian Jenkins stepped willingly into the role of player-manager for 1998-99 as the Wands moved all their goods and chattels to Hayes Lane in readiness to start their Brave New World!

JERRY DOWLEN