

LOOKING AT BROOKING

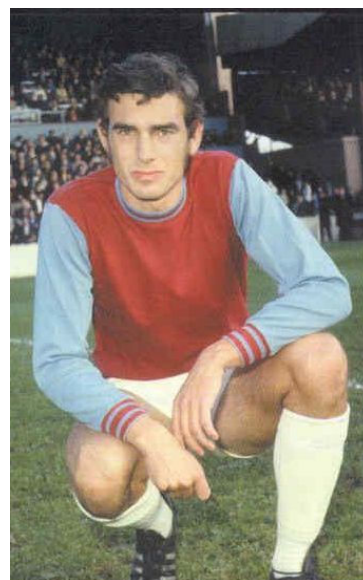
Who is the most famous footballer ever to have played against Cray Wanderers, *asks Jerry Dowlen?*

I was pondering this question whilst watching Liverpool v Toulouse on the television. If we restrict the choice to current players, the answer surely must be the Liverpool wing-back **Steve Finnan**. He has made more than 170 first team appearances for the Reds and he holds winners' medals for the European Champions Cup and the FA Cup. He is also a Republic of Ireland international.

At age 18 Finnan played for Welling United against Cray in a Kent Senior Cup tie in 1994-95. It was a midweek evening at Park View Road. He was a Welling youth apprentice, and it didn't take long for Cray supporters to start saying "Wow! Who is he?" - clearly a great prospect with his breathtaking speed along the right wing.

Welling cruised into a 2-0 half time lead as Finnan ripped the Wands apart with his runs and crosses. To their credit, Cray came back strongly in the second half, and after a good spell of play they pulled back a goal when the skilful Paul Burke set up Ian Jenkins to score. The game hung in the balance for a while, before the Conference side forced a late goal to wrap up a 3-1 win.

Steve Finnan, then ... but Cray supporters of a certain age might remember, as I do, the afternoon of 15 October 1966 when a young **Trevor Brooking** stood out a mile when he scored a hat-trick against the Wands?



I need to put that game into its full context. Cray had joined the Metropolitan League in 1966-67. This put several new place names on the Wands' fixture list - for example Bedford Town, Brentwood Town and Bury Town (Bury St Edmunds). But it was the prospect of playing the "A" teams of Arsenal, Tottenham Hotspur and West Ham that held the biggest thrill for Cray supporters. In those days, these three giant clubs from the First Division of the Football League ran a reserve team in the Football Combination but they also fielded an "A" team (usually a mixture of reserve players and youth players) in the Met League.

It so happened that the fixture list served up a visit to West Ham "A" as the first of these eagerly-awaited games for Cray.

And so I made my way by public transport to Chadwell Heath in Essex, having learned that the venue for the game would be the Hammers' training pitch there.

Friends at work had given me ground directions that sounded all right in theory but failed me when I alighted at the tube station on the District Line. After a while I asked a passer-by for help. My heart sank when I started to hear long-winded instructions that involved catching a bus. Then it dawned on me that I was being given directions to Upton Park and the Boelyn ground!

No one locally seemed to know that there was a training ground of West Ham United in the vicinity of Chadwell Heath. After a few more minutes of wandering around I spotted some familiar faces – other Cray supporters who were likewise looking lost. I joined them and we decided to enquire at the local police station. The desk-sergeant greeted us with an amused if rather weary smile. He informed us that loads of people had been in before us to ask for directions to the Hammers' training-ground "What's going on over there – are they playing the FA Cup final or something?"

When we did arrive there was nothing special about the ground. It was simply a roped-off flat pitch with a hut where the players changed into their kit. There were no match programmes and no tea or food on sale for spectators.

None of us were sure how the Wands would fare against the young Hammers in their claret and blue colours. After ten minutes Billy Thornton gave Cray the lead with a rasping shot, and we began to feel relaxed. But we hadn't reckoned with the outstanding player in the opposing number four shirt who was dominating the midfield and making strong runs towards the Cray goal.

He scored twice for the home side before half time and completed his hat-trick with a first-time shot that put West Ham 3-1 up after 57 minutes. "Who is that player?" we called down the touchline to a group of Hammers officials who were watching the game. "Booking" came back the reply. Not quite correct – and it was all too much for the Kentish Times whose match report the following week contained three different spellings of the player's name (Brooking, Booking and Brooks!).

Cray ended up with a 4-1 defeat and I can still picture that game, with the young Trevor Brooking single-handedly demolishing the Wands. His second goal seemed effortless in its execution, but the ball flew into the Cray net with tremendous force.

Born in Barking in October 1948, Brooking had already won an England schools cap in 1964 and had been tried as a right back, right half and a striker before his career at West Ham saw his first team debut arrive a year after the game against Cray.

Sir Trevor Brooking, as he is now, went on to play 521 games for the Hammers, scoring 88 goals. He won 47 England caps. In the statistical section of his autobiography (published 1981) his hat-trick against Cray is listed as the first one that he ever scored in senior football.



During their five year stay in the Met League there were several more encounters for Cray with the "A" teams of Arsenal, Spurs and West Ham. The away games were played at the respective training-grounds in London Colney, Cheshunt and Chadwell Heath.

It was a baptism of fire for Cray in that first season 1966-67, fo after the 4-1 away defeat at West Ham they were trounced 7-0 and 6-0 at Arsenal and Spurs! However, when the return fixtures were played at Grassmeade right at the end of the season versus Spurs and West Ham the Wands won two exciting games 2-0 and 2-1.

In hindsight, looking at my old match programmes and noting the line-ups of the young Arsenal, Spurs and West Ham teams that

came to Grassmeade, I can see that quite a few budding stars played in those games – for example **Charlie George** and **Jimmy Neighbour** (both of whom were to play in FA Cup winning teams at Wembley) and also **Clyde Best**.

I have to say though that none of these players made any particular impression on me at the time, and it was only in hindsight, after they had become established Football League players, that I checked back to find that I had once seen them play against Cray. Trevor Brooking was the exception because he definitely did catch the eye on that afternoon in Chadwell Heath versus Cray. I am sure

that I was not the only Cray spectator who afterwards kept an eye on Brooking's career, and charted his progress with great interest.

Brooking cropped up again when I went to Upton Park in November 1967 to see West Ham score two (Peters, Hurst) but Manchester City score three (Lee², Summerbee) in a Football League match. Consulting my copy of the match programme I am reminded that I handwrote the name of Brooking as substitute, wearing the number twelve shirt.

Post-retirement as a player, Brooking became a television and radio presenter, moving eventually into administrative office at the FA where he is nowadays in charge of youth development in the England football set-up.

Incidentally, John Dorey, skipper and centre half for Cray in the 1960s, told me in 1981 that he remembered playing against Charlie George when the young Arsenal team came to Grassmeade towards the end of the 1967-68 season. "He was brash and he kept arguing with the referee. I told him he was wasting his time, but he wouldn't listen, you could tell that he had a very competitive attitude!"

To see Cray playing against a Football League club was not a complete novelty to me in 1966-67 because Charlton Athletic "A" had played against the Wands for a few seasons in the Aetolian League in the early 1960s. In 1961-62 the away game was played at The Valley, with **Mike Bailey** (later an England international) in the young Charlton line-up. Normally, however, Charlton played all their "home" fixtures at their opponents' grounds. This was good business for the Wands' treasurer because there were always bumper gates at Grassmeade for the two visits by Charlton Athletic "A" each season. I see from my match programme that **Keith Peacock** played against Cray there in the 1961-62 return fixture. A few years later Peacock gained his unique moment of everlasting fame when he became the first ever player to appear as a substitute in a Football League match. This was for Charlton at Bolton Wanderers in August 1965.

So far, in this article, I have only cited examples of famous players playing against Cray while they were still unknown young starlets whose fame lay ahead of them. However, there have been some occasions when an already-famous player has turned out against the Wands. The foremost one to come to mind is **Ron Henry** who was the Spurs centre-half in their famous double-winning side of 1960-61. He played for Spurs "A" in one of the Met League games against Cray at the end of the 1960s. By that time, his first team

career at Spurs was over. He played 247 games from 1954 to 1965, and was capped by England once.

One of my most ridiculous bits of remembered trivia is the very first time that I saw an ex-Football League player in action versus Cray. When was this, and who was he? The answer is that Charlton Athletic "A" came to Grassmeade to play the Wands in an Aetolian League match in 1960-61, and one of the Cray supporters pointed out to me their full back. "That's **Don Townsend** – he is in their first team!" I can recall gazing at Townsend in awe. Anyone who had actually played in the Football League was automatically, in my schoolboy mind, up there with the deity or supreme superheroes! Townsend made 249 first team appearances for Charlton between 1954 and 1961. Not long after that game against Cray he moved to Crystal Palace and played 77 games.

As you can see, I am concentrating upon the 1960s in my search for famous-name footballers who played against the Wands. It is the logical era for me to think of, because it contained those regular fixtures against the "A" teams of Arsenal, Charlton, Spurs and West Ham in the Aetolian or Met League.

There was also a comparable period in Cray's history, just before the war. Gordon Wallis of Margate FC has kindly explained to me that the Kent League at that time contained two member clubs, Margate and Northfleet, who were the respective nursery teams of Arsenal and Spurs. So when Cray competed in the Kent League for four years, from season 1934-35 onwards, they were effectively playing the Arsenal and Spurs youth teams, every time they met Margate or Northfleet.

Some of the scorelines suggest that Cray were out of their depth against this class of opposition. Take for example the afternoon of 28 November 1936 when the Wands played their first ever match at Twysdens in Footscray. Having lost their ground at Fordcroft, their home since 1898, the Wands used Twysdens as a makeshift home from November 1936 till the start of the war. But their first match there resulted in a 6-0 defeat by Margate Reserves in a Kent League fixture. **Jack Lambert**, the old Arsenal inside forward and England cap, played for the visitors in that game.

Cray had lost 11-0 to Northfleet a few weeks before that game. In the 1937-38 season when Cray were beaten 4-0 at Northfleet the opposing team contained two young Spurs who would later achieve great fame. These were **Ron Burgess** and **Billy Nicholson**. Burgess played at left half and Nicholson at left back versus Cray. Both played in the Spurs side that was very successful under

manager Arthur Rowe after the war. Burgess was capped many times for Wales, while Nicholson of course became the most successful and popular Spurs manager in living memory.

Cray have not played a competitive match against a Football League club since 1970-71, their final season in the Met League. It is hard to imagine when this might next happen. The FA Cup 1st round proper, hopefully! The other possibility is the Kent Senior Cup. If Charlton, Gillingham and Millwall were to enter again, as they did for a while during the 1990s, it might produce a cup-tie versus Cray.

Other than that, it has only been pre-season friendlies in recent years that have offered Cray the chance to play against any big-time star players. In 1986, to mark the club's 125th anniversary, the Wands played three special pre-season matches at Oxford Road against Arsenal, Charlton and Wimbledon. The former England and QPR skipper **Gerry Francis** played in the third of those fixtures.

JERRY DOWLEN