

CRAY WANDERERS IN THE AETOLIAN LEAGUE

By Jerry Dowlen

The Aetolian League had only a brief life, from 1959-60 until 1963-64, but the period is of interest to Cray Wanderers, who were members throughout.

Most of the founder members of the Aetolian League were refugees from the Kent League, which had folded at the end of the 1958-59 season when the Southern League increased its numbers and took in some of the Kent League's top clubs. Cray were one of four London League clubs who switched to the Aetolian, although this did not turn out to be a long term situation for the Wands. The founder members were:-

Kent →	Chatham, Deal, Faversham, Herne Bay, Sheppey, Snowdown, Whitstable.
London →	Cheshunt, Cray Wanderers, Eton Manor, Willesden.
Kent Amateur →	Crockenhill
Spartan →	Ford United (now Redbridge)
London Midweek →	Charlton Athletic 'A'

Ford Sports had finished bottom of the Spartan League in 1957-58, and withdrew in 1958-59, but their revival as Ford United in 1959-60 saw them carry off the Aetolian League championship at the first attempt.

Having been very successful in the London League during the late 1950s, Cray were expected to be a force in the Aetolian, but their first season was very disappointing, and they only finished ninth. 1959 was a long, hot summer and Cray had numerous injury problems on the bone hard pitches in the early weeks. Cray were outclassed in their early games against the fitter and faster sides who had come from the Kent League, especially Chatham, Deal and Snowdown who were semi-professional.

Of the eleven players who lined up in Cray's opening game, a crushing 5-2 defeat at Faversham, only outside left Johnny Stevens was still in the side at the end of the season. He was in fine form all season, and was watched by Crystal Palace.

Cray's 9-0 win at Whitstable was their record win in the Aetolian League. There was also a 9-1 home win against Sheppey in the Kent Amateur Cup, with Ken Collishaw netting seven. But Cray also suffered some shattering cup defeats in 1959-60, for instance 6-2 at Chatham in the Aetolian League Cup and 7-3 away to Bromley in the final of the Kent Amateur Cup. Cray's secretary, Mick Slater, commented after the Bromley debacle: "We were shocking. Several of our players were not properly match fit and should never have played!"

On 16 March 1960, Cray were one from bottom in the Aetolian League, but they finished the season well. The line-up against Crockenhill in the last home game of the season, a 1-1 draw in midweek, was: Ron Reynolds, Alan Howe, Dave McCree, Benny Cheeseman, Roy Daly, Roy Bowyer, Ted Saunders, Ken Pottle, Mick Ackland, Roy Bithrey, Johnny Stevens.

I suppose you could say that Charlton Athletic 'A' were the 'glamour' team in the Aetolian League. They basically fielded their youth side and were undoubtedly the fittest side in the League. But they were not ideally suited to the robust style of play. They also had to play nearly all their games away, although there was one occasion on the opening day of the 1961-62 season when Cray were privileged to play them at The Valley, winning 3-2.

A glance at the full Aetolian League honours list shows that Charlton were the first winners of the Aetolian League Cup and that Chatham had a truly remarkable record in this competition!

Season	League Champions	League Cup Final
1959-60	Ford United	Charlton 'A' 4 Chatham Town 2
1960-61	Snowdown CW	Ford United 1 Chatham Town 0
1961-62	Ford United	Snowdown CW 4 Chatham Town 3
1962-63	Cray Wanderers	Chatham Town 3 Herne Bay 1
1963-64	Chatham Town	Cray Wanderers 4 Chatham Town 3

Season Rowland Taylor Cup (Champions -v- League Cup Winners)

1963-64	Cray Wanderers 4 Chatham Town 1 (at Herne Bay)
1964-65	Cray Wanderers 0 Chatham Town 1 (at Grassmeade)

Cray Wanderers Reserves finished fourth in the Aetolian League Division Two but, after one of their home games at Grassmeade when they beat Herne Bay Reserves, Mick Slater complained: "The attendance was only 150 - it is obvious that reserve team

football is not wanted in this district." Sure enough, Cray did not run a reserve team in 1960-61!

Whitstable quit the Aetolian League at the end of the 1959-60 season, due to financial difficulties, and they played in the Kent Amateur League and the Seanglian League before returning to the Aetolian in 1963-64.

During Cray's 1960-61 season, Cray's Dave McCree and Ken Collishaw were capped by Kent, in the Southern Counties Amateur Championship.

Cray's first six games included some in the League Cup, played on a group basis, and produced an astonishing total of 42 goals, 21 for and 21 against! By the time the first home game in the League, when Charlton 'A' were beaten 4-1 on 24 September 1960, Cray were starting to put together a useful combination. The team was: Brian Boys, Tony Cella (ex-Sutton United), Dave McCree, Ivan Maunder, John Miles, John Driver (ex-East Ham), Arthur 'Whippet' Tear (ex-Sutton United), Micky Thompson (ex-Maidstone United), Ken Collishaw, Ron Gould (ex-Chatham Town) and Ken Pottle. The referee was Ron Challis, who was a regular Aetolian League referee, and went on to the Football League and International matches.

Other interesting signings included goalkeeper Brian Martin (ex-Dulwich Hamlet), full back Freddie Sells (ex-Bromley) and half back Jock Cameron (ex-Deal Town). Cray had a much better season in 1960-61, finishing third in the League, and reaching the semi-finals of the Kent Senior Cup and the Aetolian League Cup. They were also beaten finalists in the Southern Combination Cup, losing 5-4 away to Windsor & Eton after extra time.

Cray became trendsetters in 1960-61 when they changed from amber shirts and black shorts to an all amber kit. This was verging on the outrageous in the still very traditional days of the early 1960s. In fact, when Willesden came to Grassmeade for a London League match at the end of the 1958-59 season, 'their fancy new red shorts brought howls of derision from the home spectators'.

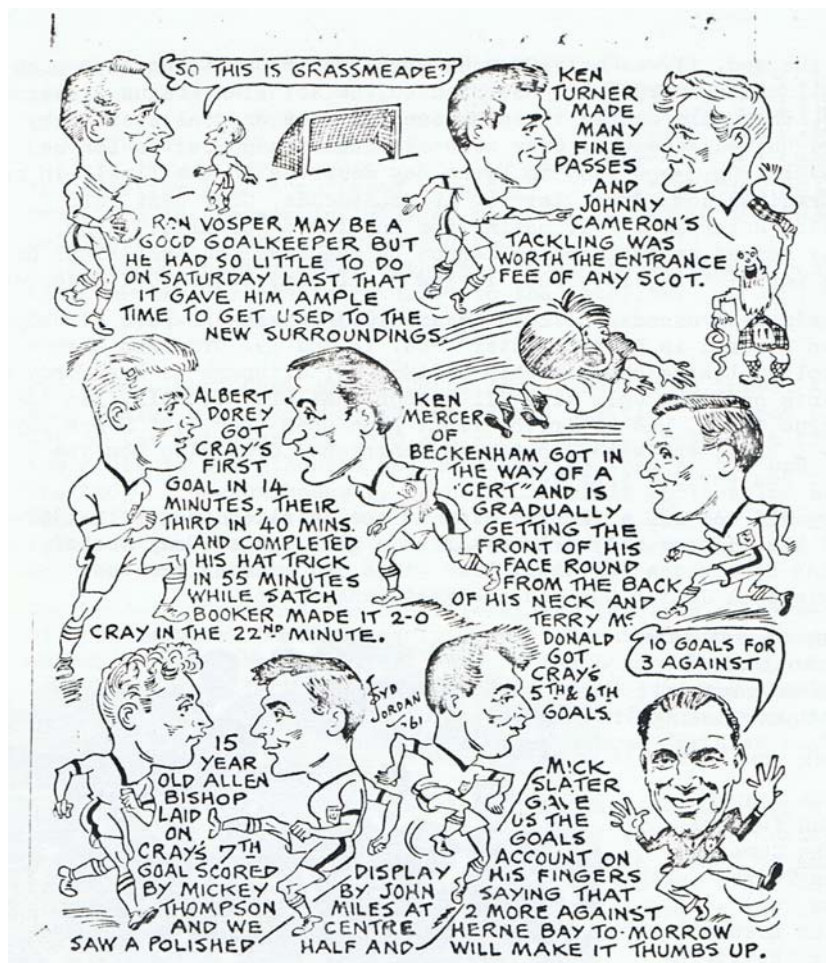
It was not until later in the 1960s that football clubs generally became more adventurous and colourful with their playing kit. It was quite a while before Wolverhampton Wanderers copied Cray and wore amber shorts instead of black!

Although 1960-61 was the centenary season for Cray, it would not appear that the Wands' officials made any publicity-

seeking celebrations of this. It is, however, worth noting that twice during the 1950s the officials rejected a proposal at the A G M that the Club's name be changed to Orpington and Cray FC. Mick Slater, in particular, was adamant that the historic name of Cray Wanderers should be preserved.

1960-61, in fact, saw the arrival of some potentially strong local rivals to the Wands. Orpington Athletic, based in Southborough Lane, Petts Wood, were elected to Division Two of the Aetolian League. They won the League Cup in their first season, beating Ford United Reserves 1-0 in the final. But, during the next few years, they never came anywhere near earning promotion to Division One.

Beckenham Town left the London League to play in the Aetolian in 1961-62 and were hammered 7-1 by Cray in the first match of the season at Grassmeade. Cray paraded some interesting new signings such as Ron Vosper (ex-Dover) and Terry McDonald (ex-Snowdown CW).



In the end, it was only Cray Reserves who brought the Club much distinction in 1961-62. Restored to the Aetolian League Division Two, they were denied the championship only on goal

average by Ford United Reserves. Cray were also runners-up in the League Cup, losing 3-0 away to Herne Bay Reserves in the final. In an incredible semi-final first leg at Grassmeade, Cray beat Ford United Reserves 8-1, making the second leg a formality. Also, Cray capped an outstanding season by reaching the semi-final of the Kent Intermediate Cup, losing 3-1 away to Ashford Reserves.

Cray won the Aetolian League championship in 1962-63, although the only time all season that Cray actually led the League table was after the final game when they beat Herne Bay 3-1 away and were crowned as champions! Cray also won the Kent Amateur Cup that year.

Cray didn't run a reserve side in the Aetolian League in 1962-63, but the players stayed together as a club called Cray Social, using Grassmeade for their home games and winning the Kent Divisional Junior Cup and the Kent Benevolent Cup.

Charlton Athletic 'A' withdrew from the Aetolian League in 1962-63, and Cheshunt left to join the Spartan League. East Ham joined from the London League.

The Aetolian League suffered a further reduction in numbers in 1963-64, when Deal Town left for a short-lived and disastrous spell in the Southern League, and Willesden went into the Spartan. Whitstable returned to the Aetolian but, at the end of the 1963-64 season, it was announced that the Aetolian League would cease.

Two more clubs, Chatham and Herne Bay, were set to leave. Also, Mick Slater was making no secret of his ambition for Cray to get out of the Aetolian and join a higher league. Cray again found the doors to the Athenian League closed to them at the end of the 1963-64 season, however, even though their application was backed by another excellent playing record in 1963-64. They were third in the League, they won the Aetolian League Cup and they won the Kent Amateur Cup again.

For 1964-65, Cray and the other remaining Aetolian clubs were offered membership of the newly founded Greater London League, embracing also the remaining clubs of the London League, which was also struggling to survive. Indeed, in 1963-64, the Aetolian and London Leagues formed a joint League Cup competition to supplement the ever-shrinking number of League fixtures each could offer its member clubs.

And so, the Aetolian League faded quietly away, after just five years. It was originally going to be called the South

Eastern League but, ironically, there was a last minute change of name to the Aetolian, reflecting the names from ancient Greek history that were given to other amateur football leagues in the south of England.

The 'Leagues' in Greek history were organised town and village communities who banded together to wage war. The Athenians were the first to prevail, but were overturned by the Spartans. The Aetolians came much later, after the death of Alexander the Great. They were the last and the greatest of all the leagues, ruling from 275 to 150 BC - somewhat longer than the footballing version lasted!

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