

CRAY WANDERERS IN THE METROPOLITAN LEAGUE 1966-67 to 1970-71

By Jerry Dowlen

If you happen to mention the five years when Cray Wanderers played in the Metropolitan League, it's more than likely you'll spark off a lively conversation on the touchline or behind the goal. Many Cray fans remember the period with great interest and enjoyment.

It was the ambition and foresight of Cray's secretary Mick Slater that launched the Wands - still remaining an amateur club - into the mainly professional ranks of the Metropolitan League. Mick finally lost patience with the 'closed shop' of the senior amateur football community, which since 1953-54 had consistently denied Cray a place in a higher league such as the Corinthian or Athenian, even though Cray could point to a very successful record in the London, Aetolian and Greater London Leagues.

The Metropolitan League had been founded in 1949-50 to take some clubs such as Dagenham, who were hoping the Southern League was going to form an extra section, but learnt at the last minute that this would not happen. Throughout its 22 year existence, the Metropolitan League was largely made up of professional clubs and was often described as an unofficial lower Division of the Southern League. However, there were always a few amateur clubs competing in the Metropolitan League. In the early days, these included some interesting names such as Eastbourne United (managed by Ron Greenwood for a while), Haywards Heath, Horsham, Newbury, St Neots, Windsor & Eton and Wokingham.

In 1966-67, Cray became one of four amateur clubs who were members of the Metropolitan League. The others were Braintree & Crittall Athletic, Met Police and Woodford. The League awarded a shield each year for the highest placed amateur team.

By 1966-67, the Southern League had in fact expanded - it had a Premier Division and a Division One and was regarded as the strongest professional competition outside the Football League itself. Some of the top sides entered their reserve teams in the Metropolitan League. In 1966-67 these were Bedford, Chelmsford, Hillingdon, Stevenage and Wimbledon.

In addition, the Metropolitan League in 1966-67 contained five professional clubs who reportedly were all interested in obtaining entry to the Southern League. Two of them, Brentwood

and Bury, did not have long to wait. Chatham and Sheppey waited a lot longer - until the 1980s in fact. And Hatfield never made it at all - they ran into financial and ground problems and folded after a brief spell as an amateur club (although they have re-formed).

Undoubtably the most exciting aspect of the Metropolitan League in 1966-67 was the participation of the 'A' teams of Arsenal, Tottenham Hotspur and West Ham. The players they used were all full time professionals on their staff - mainly the youth players but sometimes including a famous first team player who was perhaps recovering from injury, or was there to lend his experience to the youngsters. Home matches were usually played at their training headquarters - London Colney, Cheshunt and Chadwell Heath respectively. But there are one or two rare occasions when the first team's stadium was used.

Cray had some cracking games against the three 'A' teams and there was always an extra spice in the air at Grassmeade for these fixtures. Some of Cray's young fans who also followed one of the big three clubs found their loyalties were divided! Cray fans can look back and remember that they saw some very famous players in their very early days, before they became stars. Examples were Charlie George, Terry Naylor and Trevor Brooking. Even those who didn't make the first team were in many cases successful with Third or Fourth Division clubs later on.

Now for a brief summary of each of Cray's five seasons in the Metropolitan League.

1966-67

Cray's first-ever game in the Metropolitan League was a 0-0 draw at home to Met Police on a scorching hot afternoon. Cray had two wins and two draws from their first four matches and were then plunged into so many cup fixtures that they virtually forgot about the new League until November! When regular League fixtures were resumed, Cray had a rude awakening as to what they had got themselves into. One after another the top professional sides handed Cray some really crushing defeats.

By the end of 1966, the players were well and truly demoralised. Worse still, Mick Slater's arithmetic told him that the gates at Cray's home games had increased nowhere near enough to convince him that the new League was going to be a worthwhile venture. Indeed, Cray had enjoyed better gates in

previous years for some of their local derbies in the London, Aetolian and Greater London Leagues.

So, after a particularly awful 9-0 defeat away to Bury on Boxing Day - a remarkable fixture for the Metropolitan League to arrange for a holiday - Mick Slater posted Cray's resignation, announcing that the Wands would return to the Greater London League for the following season.

Mick went on to express his bitter disappointment that the public of Orpington and the Crays had not responded better to his bid to bring a high standard of professional football to Grassmeade. Plenty of comment came back to Mick, not only in and around the ground, but also via the correspondence pages of the 'Kentish Times'. It was suggested that Cray never had any realistic hope of establishing themselves in such a strong League as the Metropolitan, without first securing the necessary finances to pay the extra travelling and entertaining expenses, to equip themselves with floodlights and to acquire professional players of the required standard.

True, Cray were relying on the same amateur players who had been very successful for them in the Greater London League in the two previous seasons. Cray did have a few permit professionals, such as Norman Golding, Johnny Hayes, Carlo Nastri and Derek Razell. But only Golding was a regular first team selection. And, when he was made manager at the end of 1966, he more or less gave up playing.

A wonderful transformation came over the Wands in the second half of the season. The same team that had looked so hopelessly outclassed in the first half of the season suddenly struck form. One by one, nearly all of the humiliating defeats were avenged in the return fixtures at Grassmeade. It must have given Mick Slater and Norman Golding enormous satisfaction to see the attendance figures swell, as Cray's young local discovery Barry Diggins at centre forward led the team to some very exciting and satisfying wins such as Brentwood 1-0, West Ham 'A' 2-1 and Spurs 'A' 2-0. Cray's epic games against Folkestone and Dartford in the Kent Senior Cup also had a very uplifting effect on the players and supporters.

In the end, Cray finished ninth and won the amateur shield. Barry Diggins was second highest scorer in the whole of the Metropolitan League and headed Cray's list with 42 goals in all games.

Mick Slater had no qualms about changing his mind by keeping Cray in the Metropolitan League. It was just as well he did, because 1967-68 was to be a memorable season indeed.

1967-68

Wembley fever came to Cray in 1967-68, for the first time ever in the Wands' long history. Cray came within a whisker of reaching the quarter final of the F A Amateur Cup! It was their best ever run and they had a number of chances to beat Barking in the 3rd round tie at Cray that ended 0-0.

Barking won the replay 2-0 and ended a dream that kept the whole Cray district buzzing throughout the winter months, including some improbable stunts such as a local tradesman promising the team a paid holiday in the USA if they won the Amateur Cup!

Cray also had their first ever decent run in the F A Cup before going out 1-0 at Dagenham in the third qualifying round. So it was that amidst the exceptional cup activities of 1967-68, Cray's excellent achievements in the Metropolitan League almost went unnoticed. Cray finished fourth and retained the amateur shield. Bearing in mind the standard of the opposing teams in the Metropolitan League, 1967-68 must surely count as one of Cray's most outstanding League performances ever, until more recent times.

The Metropolitan League was slightly smaller in 1967-68, but even so it was extremely strong by Cray's standards. Hillingdon and Stevenage withdrew their reserve sides and Woodford went off to the Greater London League. Brentwood entered their reserve side, having gained election to the Southern League for their first team.

The Metropolitan League introduced an extra competition called the Autumn Shield, to give their member clubs some more fixtures. Cray in fact never completed their Autumn Shield fixtures, due to a big backlog which eventually led to two Metropolitan League games being played on Sundays at Grassmeade (see the article ['Sunday Opening At Grassmeade'](#)) right at the end of the season. This was apparently a new entry in the record books of the Metropolitan League. Bumper crowds came to Grassmeade for the two games, a 4-0 win against Hatfield and a 2-2 draw with Bury. The latter, an absolutely marvellous game, had a direct bearing on the championship. Bury were left needing to win both their last two games by an overall margin of five goals. They beat Spurs 'A' 3-0 but were then held 1-1 by Cray at King's Road in the last game of the

season, meaning that Chelmsford were champions. The 'Kentish Times' headlined their report 'Cray's name is mud in Bury!'

Who were the Cray players who did so well under Norman Golding during the latter part of the 1966-67 season and all of 1967-68?

It was a tribute to Cray's network of talent spotters that many of the team were home grown players from the local area. Most indeed were young players who had never played senior football before, but they made the grade for Cray in the Metropolitan League on sheer ability alone.

The most experienced men in the side were full backs Peter Clark and Alan Howe, right half Ray Hutchins and centre half and skipper John Dorey. All had been part of Cray's previous successes in the Aetolian and Greater London Leagues.

Johnny Walker in goal had a baptism of fire when given his chance a few weeks into the 1966-67 season, but he emerged as a very competent keeper, before moving on to Southall.

Howard Styles was effective both as a full back or a forward, where he grabbed some useful goals at times. Alan Bishop established himself in the half back line, as did John Faulkner, signed in 1967-68 after previous trials with Charlton and Bromley. John had two tremendous seasons with Cray before joining Sutton United and then finding fame with Leeds and Luton, where he played more than 200 games.

In the Cray forward line, Barry Diggins continued to attract a lot of attention and even drew an England amateur international selector to Grassmeade at the height of Cray's FA Amateur Cup run. After Cray were knocked out, he signed for Brentwood in the Southern League.

Diggins was one of four local youngsters who came into the Cray forward line and did extremely well. The others were right winger Colin McGannon, whose stocky frame contained deceptive speed and skill and an ability to score goals as well as lay them on with good crosses. Inside forwards Billy Thornton and Norman Lawrence had skill and bravery and scored some good goals.

On the left wing was Tex Wiltshire, formerly with Horsham, who also liked to roam inside and prompt the Cray attack with his fluent passing and crossing. Tex became a great favourite with the Wands supporters and was particularly effective with dead ball kicking - free kicks and corners.

After Diggins left, Cray signed some experienced cover for the last few weeks of the 1967-68 season. Micky Harrington came back for a second spell with the club and Ray Hutchins - nephew of Cray's right half Ray Hutchins - came to Cray amidst a career spent mainly playing for Bromley and Maidstone.

In retrospect, we can see that 1967-68 was a very high point in the history of Cray Wanderers. Perhaps one of the highest points ever, for the club's prestige both on and off the field. Some of the national newspapers, including the 'Daily Express' and the 'Daily Mail', wrote short profiles of the club, during their F A Amateur Cup run. A longer article appeared in 'Amateur Football' magazine.

Ground improvements, especially from 1964-65 onwards when Mick Slater had additional roofing and lighting installed, led to Grassmeade looking very smart and attractive headquarters for the Wands, where officials from visiting clubs were likely to be sufficiently impressed to recommend the club for admission to other Leagues.

'Amateur Football' was an early publication by Tony Williams who, in more recent times, has published the excellent 'Non League Football Directories' each year. In 1967-68, 'Amateur Football' announced their end of season awards and Cray Wanderers found themselves bracketed amongst the top ten amateur teams in the whole of England!

This list of the top ten teams is as follows:

Dagenham
Chesham
Slough
Leytonstone
Cray Wanderers
Enfield
Wealdstone
Cheshunt
Wembley
Bishops Stortford

The closest poll of all was for Manager of the Year and, again, Cray were listed in the top ten:

John Reardon (Chesham)
Ted Hardy (Dagenham)
Bob Gibbs (Slough)
Peter Gleeson (Dulwich)
Tommy Lawrence (Enfield)

Freddie Mann (Leytonstone)
George Taylor (Wembley)
Tommy Harris (Tilbury)
Norman Golding (Cray Wanderers)
Vince Burgess (Wealdstone/Hitchin)

In addition, Cray also had a representative in the top ten 'Player of the Year' list:

Les Burgess (Chesham)
Billy Hadlow (club not given)
John Delaney (Slough)
Andy Williams (Wealdstone)
Howard Moxon (Enfield)
Dave Morris (Dagenham)
Tex Wiltshire (Cray Wanderers)
Larry Pritchard (Sutton)
Les Tilley (Leytonstone)
Dennis Moore (Dagenham)

1968-69

Cray had another memorable F A Amateur Cup campaign in the 1968-69 season, bringing more excitement and publicity for the club. Thrilling wins against Lewes and Torpoint brought a never to be forgotten second round encounter with Leytonstone, the Amateur Cup holders. A sparkling game at Grassmeade ended in a 2-2 draw and the Essex club won a hard fought replay 2-0.

This tended to gloss over the fact that Cray took something of a slump in the Metropolitan League, finishing twelfth. The Metropolitan League was boosted by the addition of Bletchley, Stevenage and Wellingborough. All were strong professional clubs and they all beat Cray home and away in 1968-69.

Despite Cray's widely broadcast ambition to join the Athenian League, the Metropolitan was to remain their home, as the Athenians decided not to increase their numbers in 1968-69. Romford Reserves were a fourth new club to enter the Metropolitan League in 1968-69, but Brentwood Reserves pulled out and Chatham departed to the Kent League.

Cray's new signings included Ian Hook, an agile and fearless goalkeeper who became very popular during his two year stay. Also, there was wing half Tibor Harcos, a Hungarian player signed from Chatham and centre forward Danny McDermott, signed from Bromley.

1969-70

This was the least successful of Cray's five seasons in the Metropolitan League. Cray finished thirteenth - third from bottom - and had no notable cup successes to compensate for their poor league form.

A big disappointment for the Metropolitan League was the withdrawal of the Arsenal and Tottenham 'A' teams. West Ham kept their 'A' team in, however, and Oxford United entered their 'A' team for the first time. Epping, an amateur club, also entered for the first time. But the withdrawal of Chelmsford Reserves and Wimbledon Reserves meant that overall the Metropolitan League was depleted in 1969-70.

1970-71

After a slow start, Cray ended 1970-71 with the triumph of winning the Metropolitan League Cup. But life, which had looked so promising for Cray towards the end of the 1960s, suddenly became rather unsettled at the start of the 1970s. Not only were Cray threatened with the loss of their Grassmeade ground, but it also became likely that the Metropolitan League would fold.

As things turned out, Cray held on to Grassmeade for a further three years. But 1970-71 was indeed the last season of the Metropolitan League. Only twelve clubs took part in 1970-71, some of whom were strongly rumoured to be ready to join the Southern League in 1971-72. When the rumours were confirmed to be true, Cray rather reluctantly found themselves included in the proposed merger of the Metropolitan League and the London League - a new league to be called the Metropolitan London League, to start in 1971-72.

This was a backward step for the Wands, but the Grassmeade situation left Mick Slater in no position to consider applying for the Southern League, or the Athenian. The owners, St Philomena's School, had notified Mick of their decision to sell the Grassmeade site for a private housing development.

Despite these problems, Cray had plenty of success to savour in 1970-71. Fourth place in the Metropolitan League was a fine achievement, for the league was still very strong, even though reduced in number. Brentwood Reserves, Crittall Athletic, Oxford United 'A', Stevenage and Wellingborough were the clubs who pulled out, but Chelmsford Reserves and Woodford Town returned to the fray.

Cray were fortunate that the first two months of the season were devoted almost entirely to the Autumn Shield. Cray fared very badly in the early games but, by the time the regular league fixtures started, Cray were a much improved side.

History repeated itself in remarkable fashion when Cray beat Bury 3-2 in the final game of the season, at Grassmeade. As had happened in 1967-68, this meant that Cray prevented the East Anglians from winning the championship! Epping were the champions and, with Cray carrying off the League Cup, 1970-71 was a good year for the amateur clubs in the Metropolitan League. Cray beat Bletchley in the two leg final, 4-1 at home and 1-1 away.

Jack Payne, formerly Norman Golding's assistant, took over as manager during 1969-70 and made most of his opportunity. He cast his net near and far to find players to rebuild the team, keeping only John Dorey and Colin McGannon from the 1967-68 side, plus Alan Howe as coach. As 1970-71 wore on, the Grassmeade spectators began to realise that Jack had reared an increasingly skilful and effective side and they gave their vocal support willingly.

How would one summarise the 1960s as a whole, for Cray Wanderers? Ironically, although the Wands had a lot of success in the 1960s, it was a very frustrating decade for Mick Slater's efforts to advance the club.

When taking Cray into the Aetolian League in 1959-60, Mick hoped he was climbing out of the rather low-ranked London League, where Cray had done very well in the 1950s. The Aetolian had some professional clubs and, in theory, it had the potential to make its name in the football world. Alas, it dwindled and died in just five years and Cray found themselves back in the London League again.

Then, in the second half of the 1960s, Cray had much the same experience in the Metropolitan League. The Metropolitan was of course much stronger than the Aetolian. In fact, exasperated as Mick no doubt was to be back at square one again after five years in the Metropolitan, he must have been pleased at the great heights Cray attained during their stay there. Some might say that Cray's 1967-68 side was the strongest ever to represent the club.

At the end of 1970-71, the headline "**CRAY SAVED!**" announced the good news that Mick Slater had successfully negotiated with Sidcup Conservative Club for Cray to move to Oxford Road.