

## **THE MASS EXODUS**

The Wands' 1971-72 season will always be remembered for the infamous 'walkout'.

Manager Jack Payne walked out in mid-season after a disagreement with the Club. The players all departed too.

Why did this happen? On the face of it the 1970-71 season had ended strongly. The team had won the Metropolitan League Cup. And, although the Club was being forced out of its home at Grassmeade, the committee had announced that a new ground at Oxford Road would be ready for occupation in 1972-73.

Problems soon began to surface as the 1971-72 season got under way. All the players had stayed but the Club had taken a reluctant step backwards by joining the newly-formed Metropolitan London League. A step up to the expanded Southern League had been the Committee's aim, but the notice to vacate Grassmeade had reined in their ambitions, and the Wands had to settle for the lesser option of joining the Met London League instead.

Cray's ambitious manager and players felt that they needed a higher standard of football than the Met London League could offer. There was a feeling of anti-climax as the team rattled off some easy wins against the likes of Chingford, East Ham United, Hatfield, Ulysses and other lowly status clubs.

Cray and Epping Town were expected to be the championship contenders. But by Christmas the Wands had lost home and away to their deadly rivals. The score was 1-0 in both games. The season seemed to be a let-down already.

Cray's goalkeeper Terry Smith recalls how matters came to a head:

"The Committee informed us that we could only train once a week, instead of twice. They wanted to cut costs. Jack wasn't happy with this, and neither were we. We all decided to leave. They brought in Jim Paris, manager of Woolwich Town, to form a new side. He signed some players from Sunday football."

Terry's memory is absolutely right. The hastily assembled new team did their best but they lost every game bar one. It was a bad time for the Wands but in hindsight the Committee's insistence on saving costs was the right one in the long term. Funding the move to Oxford Road was expensive and the Club might have folded if the ground improvements had not been completed in time.

The big walkout at Cray Wanderers was a sufficiently unusual and dramatic event that some of the daily newspapers picked up and printed the story! They reported that the players had fulfilled two last fixtures, winning 8-0 at BROB Barnet and 3-1 at Willesden, before the mass exodus.

Terry Smith played as an outfield player in that last game at Willesden. After the squad dispersed, joining other clubs, Terry was one of four ex-Wands players who signed for Willesden. He later moved to Leicester for a while, and played in goal for Oadby Town.

**JERRY DOWLEN**