

DOWN MEMORY LANE

BEN HAYES REFLECTS ON HOW DIFFERENT IT COULD ALL HAVE BEEN AS HE LOOKS AT SOME OF THE SOUTH-EAST'S CLUBS THAT HAVE COME... AND GONE.

Why do you support the team you do? The question hit me as I was driving past the ground of my local non-League side, Bromley FC. The Lilywhites, as they are known, are currently allowing another local side to use the ground.

There is nothing strange in that; the Charlton Athletic women's team play there as well. But what really surprised me was the sign advertising this to be the home of Cray Wanderers—"The Second Oldest Football Club in the World".

And of course they're right. Sheffield FC were formed in 1857 and are the oldest side in the world. Cray Wanderers were formed only three years later in 1860 but that still makes them two years older than the oldest professional League club, Notts County, and a whole three years senior to the Football Association itself.

But why, I started to think, are Charlton the biggest club in South London, rather than Cray?

It is a little-known fact that South-East London and Kent were the cradle of English and, therefore, world football, and both the finalists in the first-ever F A Cup final in 1872 were from the area.

The Wanderers played on Clapham Common and the Royal Engineers played out of that regiment's Chatham depot. The final itself was played at The Oval.

So we now know that Cray are the second oldest club in the world, and the oldest rugby club in the world is Blackheath. What's rugby got to do with this? Well, in 1858 when Blackheath were formed as the first open membership club, they were actually a football club. At that time there was no distinction between the two codes of football. Everyone played to their own rules, which did make friendlies between clubs a little difficult.

Twenty clubs tried to codify one set of rules in 1863. Some favoured the kicking game, others the handling version. Blackheath walked out when they learned that the F A would not allow 'hacking' and so missed their chance to be top dogs in South London.

So that should have left the way open for Cray, the team formed by

railway workers, to dominate. They were even a professional side between 1895 and 1907, but by then they had been overtaken by Woolwich Arsenal, a side for whom Cray were briefly a feeder club.

For our part, Charlton were only just starting out in 1907, but our time would come. As the Addicks grew, the Wanderers reverted to amateur status and moved to the London League. Arsenal left for Islington and then South London was all ours.

Some might ask what about Palace or Millwall? Did you know that they were both founder members of the Fourth Division? Like F A Cup wins, this proud achievement is often missing from the honours boards of the Glaziers and the Dockers.

So if history had turned out different, if Blackheath hadn't walked out of that meeting, if Cray had stayed a pro side, if Arsenal had stayed put, today you might have been supporting anyone of those instead.

A big scary, isn't it—but it could have been worse. If Newton Heath hadn't re-formed under a new name when they went bankrupt in 1902, there would have been no Manchester United!

*This article is from the Charlton Athletic -v- Manchester United programme dated 13 September 2003.
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