

THE ORIGINS OF CRAY WANDERERS FC

THE SECOND-OLDEST ASSOCIATION FOOTBALL CLUB IN THE WORLD

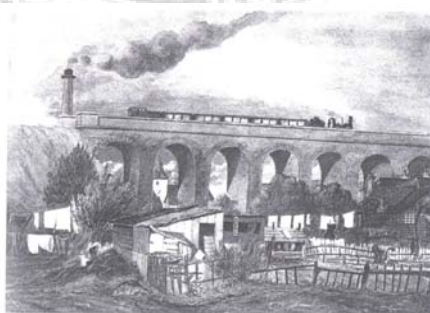
Founded in 1860, Cray Wanderers FC is the second-oldest association football club in the world. Sheffield, in 1857, is the oldest. They play in the Unibond Division One South League. Notts County, founded in 1862, is the oldest Football League club.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

HOW DID THE CLUB START?

The building of the London, Chatham and Dover Railway holds the key. Local villagers and labourers (including Irish workers) from outside the St Mary Cray village built the huge earth banks and laid the railway tracks that soar across the Cray Valley. This construction took place from 1858 to 1860, and the first train ran in 1860.

In their leisure time, the workers kicked a ball around, and that was how the team started. Today, if you want to check out the site, you need to locate the nine-arch red brick viaduct that carries the railway line over St Mary Cray High Street.



The Viaduct, painted in watercolour by George Wollaston, in 1860.

A nearby landmark is St Mary's Church (13th century but heavily restored in the 19th century). But, to find the precise location of the origins of the football club, you must go to Star Lane cemetery. The cemetery is the site of the first football pitch where the team played.



The Blue Anchor (foreground) with The Old Star pub sign visible (circled) at the far end of the street.

At the foot of Star Lane, on the corner, stands the former Old Star public house. On an Ordnance Survey map of 1862, the Old Star is clearly marked, and you can trace the path that the Cray Wanderers players and their opponents would have walked, past the old cottages, to take the field at the Star Lane pitch. The players changed into their kit at the Coffee Tavern, two doors along from the Old Star. Today, the Coffee

Tavern (7 to 9 High Street) is next door to the headquarters of The St Mary Cray Labour Club.

On the other side, the Blue Anchor public house no longer serves any ale and has been converted into a community centre. Up until World War Two the Blue Anchor was a big social centre for Cray Wanderers Football Club, as was another nearby pub, the Black Boy.

One reference to the old pitch at Star Lane gives the name Tyrersfield. This appears to have been the name of the site before the cemetery was built there.



Star Lane
Cemetery Chapel

TELL US ABOUT THE TEAMS, THE PLAYERS & THE MATCHES?

The first definite reference that we have found of the Club using the name Cray Wanderers is January 1887, a 1 – 0 win versus St John's Institute at the Recreation Ground, St Mary Cray.



The former Coffee Tavern
changing rooms in the
High Street

The name may have been in use earlier, but reports in the local newspapers referred to the team as simply St Mary Cray. For instance, there are reports of games in 1883, and then in 1886 versus Hawks (apparently a team from Bromley). The team line-ups contain many of the same names that played under the name Cray Wanderers from January 1887 onwards.

A frustration for us is the lack of any local newspaper archives or records for the 1860s and 1870s. Wherever any publications from this era have been traced, they contain no information about any local sport, although they do tell us the corn and poultry, etc., prices at market!

As far as the Cray Wanderers team was concerned, and their various opponents from nearby villages or from the militia, it is evident that they played different codes of football. One account has it that they were quite happy to agree to play rugby rather than soccer, if that is what their opponents requested.

Opposing teams came from other villages, from the army, or had names like the Hawks or the Swifts.

The word 'haphazard' seems to be apt, to describe fixtures and activities, until the late 1880s when the first official county competitions saw the light of day.

WHERE DOES THE INFORMATION COME FROM?

A key source is the minute book of 1905, which records the recollections of George Wheeler, and other Club officials, regarding the Club's beginnings.

One gem of information is the origin of the name 'Wanderers'. This is attributed to one Arthur 'Bowser' Price, who remarked after a game: 'You look like a bunch of wanderers!'

Another important source was a Club history booklet that appeared in 1951. Evidently it had dipped into the Club's record books and had also captured the memories of many of the older people connected with the Club. The late Ernie Harman was one such person who gave us a wealth of information.

Last, but not least, the local newspaper archives have yielded some articles published between the wars, containing various reminiscences from the past.

One, by an anonymous author in 1932, recalled considerable detail of the Club's activities in the 1890s and early 1900s. This prompted Nat Mercer, a Cray player of that era, to write in the following week with some more memories.

WHEN DID OFFICIAL COMPETITIONS START?

The first of these appears to be the Kent Badge, in 1886, won by Chatham Town for its first three years. Chatham were F A Cup quarter-finalists in 1888-89, losing to West Bromwich Albion after earlier wins against Blackpool and Nottingham Forest.

There is no evidence that Cray took part in the Kent Badge. Their first ever competitive fixture appears to have been in 1889-90 when they entered the Kent Junior Cup.

But the large majority of Cray's fixtures were just friendly matches until the 1894-95 season saw them become one of the 14 founder members of the Kent League. Several of those friendly matches would repay further research, if only the local newspaper archives of those days were more complete (there are several gaps).

We have some enticing titbits of results of Cray Wanderers matches versus, for example, Cowes, Crouch End Vampires, E T Budgen's XI, Southall and Westminster.

DID THE CLUB STAY AT STAR LANE?

At some point between 1860 and 1886 the Club began to play its home matches at Derry Downs, in St Mary Cray. This may be the location also referred to as the Recreation Ground.

Then, in 1898, the Club moved to a ground called Fordcroft, on Cray Avenue. The site is marked today by Allied Bakeries (a listed building). The old wooden stand at Derry Downs was dismantled and transported piece-by-piece to the new ground, where it was re-erected.

The Fordcroft ground was closed in 1936 and the Wands moved to Twysdens Meadow at Foots Cray till the outbreak of the war. During the 1940s the Wands resorted to several temporary grounds including Grassmeade in Chelsfield Road and St Mary Cray Recreation Ground. After a brief stay at Northfields Farm in 1950, the Wands played for three years at Tothills, also known as Fordcroft, at the top of Kent Road where the Roman Catholic Church now stands.

Grassmeade became the home ground in 1954, but the Wands had to leave in 1973 after St Philomena's Convent (the landlords) sold the land. Cray moved to Oxford Road on the borders of Foots Cray and Sidcup. This ground remains their headquarters today, and the reserve team plays there, but since 1998 the first team has ground-shared with Bromley Football Club at Hayes Lane.

WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE CLUB COLOURS?

A reference in 1890 gives the colours as 'chocolate'. The now-familiar amber and black colours were adopted in 1895 and have remained ever since.

Phil Wheeler's excellent photos (1997 to 2002) of some of the sites mentioned in this article can be found on pages 1 and 8 of the following website: www.photos.orp.org.uk/StMaryCray.



**St Mary's Parish Church in the heart of St Mary Cray
(an 1830 drawing by Rev J Berens)**

Our thanks to John Blundell of the St Mary Cray Action Group, the source of the pictures shown in this article.

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