

## **“SING WHILE YOU’RE PLOUGHING”**

### **How did local football start in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in the Borough of Bromley and its adjoining areas?**

Frustratingly for those of us who would like to know more about the early activities of Cray Wanderers FC after they were founded in 1860, and to know about other local football activity that sprang up at this time, very little information exists.

Local newspaper archives have been an obvious place to look. Other than some valuable fragments of information between the years 1886 to 1891 there is a common theme that very little can be found further back than 1892. There are two main reasons for this. One is that very few newspaper archives exist for the years 1860 to 1892. The other is that even where they do exist it was evidently not the custom of the local newspapers at that time to mention local sport very much if at all.

The following note from Cray supporter Ian Fordyce gives us a perspective on this:

“My research of the history of Cray Wanderers and Kent football has taken me to libraries from Ashford to Woolwich, the two most useful being Maidstone Borough, and Chatham. I began this work in 1960.

Football information pre about 1892 is almost non-existent.

The fact that results cannot be found is not surprising as most football clubs were an arrangement between members to meet weekly in a local farmers field and choose teams amongst themselves. (Beards v Cleanshaven, Married v Unmarried etc.) The exact type of football played would depend on who brought which shape of ball, and the local rules. In the summer the same group would be hitting a ball with a bit of willow.

Membership of the FA or a County FA would not have been necessary, and entry to the FA Cup would be expensive, and time-consuming because of the difficult journeys involved. It was a competition for the wealthy.

Even today there are tennis, badminton and other local sports clubs who mainly play within their own membership and are never reported in the local papers.

The nearest known club to St Mary Cray that I have found playing in those early days were West Kent who played on Chislehurst Common cricket ground. I believe a member of the Berens family was playing for them circa 1870 as well as an Eric Lubbock, ancestor of our local MP who was also president of Cray Wanderers FC in the 1960s.”

To validate Ian’s finding that very little information about local football exists before 1892, let me now refer to the leading book on local history in our borough. I refer to ‘Bromley’ by Mr E.L.S. Horsburgh (Hodder & Stoughton, 1929).

This is not just any old local history book but the local history book for anyone who wants to find out about the former life and times of Bromley and district. The book – available at Bromley Reference Library with several copies that can be borrowed - is still today the most informative authority on this period of our local history.

Here is Mr Horsburgh on local sport and recreation:

“... The enormous popularity of football today [*the author was writing in 1929*] is in striking contrast to the almost complete indifference of the general public towards both forms of the game some 40 years ago. It was a game associated in the public mind with the great Public Schools and Universities. Outside these privileged centres no form of football exercised any general attention. The national newspapers ignored it, and even the local press seldom contained more than cursory and intermittent notices, with the result that it has been difficult to secure authentic records or information, earlier than 1892, on which to trace the development of the game in the Bromley area.”

It is worth noting that when Bromley FC engaged the expert local historian Muriel Searle to produce their centenary history book in 1992, Ms Searle relied one hundred per cent on Mr Horsburgh's account of the pre-1892 local football scene. I don't know whether she tried to enlarge upon his findings by searching other archives than he possibly might have had to hand, but, whatever Ms Searle did or did not do, the outcome was that she too had to concede that very few records of local football could be traced prior to 1892.

This will perhaps emphasise the important influence of Herbert Berens and the Berens family upon the growth of Cray Wanderers from a village team into a fully-fledged senior club during the late 1880s and early 1890s. This took place because Herbert was a leading player in the team. It seems certain that the local newspapers took more notice of the Wands when the rich and newsworthy Berens family became associated with the club in 1887. Match reports began to be published every week, along with news and information about the club. It is from this point on that we have been able to compile a detailed history of the Wands, but the earlier activities of the club are destined, it seems, to be forever shrouded in mystery.

#### 'The Bromley Record'

In our search for information about Cray Wanderers FC early history, our eyes lit up when we heard that the Bromley Central Library holds copies of an old local newspaper called the Bromley Record. The reference library holds copies from 1858 to 1900 in bound paper volumes, A5 size and in excellent condition. It was a monthly newspaper that covered Bromley and its adjoining towns and villages.

You can imagine us swooping eagerly upon these volumes, in the expectation of finding precious information about the Wands and about local football during 1858 to 1900.

Alas, we found that any mention of sport was very rare. Also the amount of coverage given to the St Mary Cray district was very small. The town of Bromley received the most coverage, and localities such as Hayes and Keston were featured in some detail, but in most editions there was usually just a page or half page of news from St Mary Cray.

The volume dated 1860 was packed with advertisements, railway and bus timetables, reports of the petty assizes and council meetings, reports of accidents and fatalities, and plentiful mentions of popular entertainment such as the visit of Mr George Hodson “the celebrated Irish comedian, vocalist and polyphonist.”

One of the rare mentions of sport was found in the September 1860 issue - an

account of the staff of the Footscray and St Mary Cray libraries playing a cricket match at Crowhurst's Field. Earlier that year, in May, a letter from a gentleman signing himself "One of the Old Ones" set forth a plea for local people to take up cricket instead of belonging to rifle clubs!

An indirect mention of sport came in a report of a fire that broke out in 1874 at the Bromley Common racecourse! The night-watchman evidently made up a fire and set alight the shed and stables behind the stand.

From 1883 to 1885 there were fragmentary mentions of a Kent Rovers football team and also a West Kent FC.

Kent Rovers v Sydenham produced "one disputed goal and three touches down to nil." What rules were they playing?

West Kent played "football" against Old Chiltonians but no details were given.

Sport vanished from the Bromley Record after that – not being mentioned again till 1889 when a cricket match pitted the women's team of Miss M Noakes against the menfolk of Mr HS Smith's team. The males triumphed despite the requirement to bat and bowl entirely left-handed! Hockey and tennis activities were also mentioned in the Bromley Record during 1889, but no football.

And so from the Bromley Record we found nothing of the early history of Cray Wanderers FC. If only those labourers building the railway embankment across the Cray Valley and kicking a ball up and down Star Lane had decided to take up ploughing instead! History would have been changed! In the September 1860 issue of the Bromley Record there was a detailed report of a ploughing competition at Hither Green, with 53 teams taking part!

**JERRY DOWLEN**