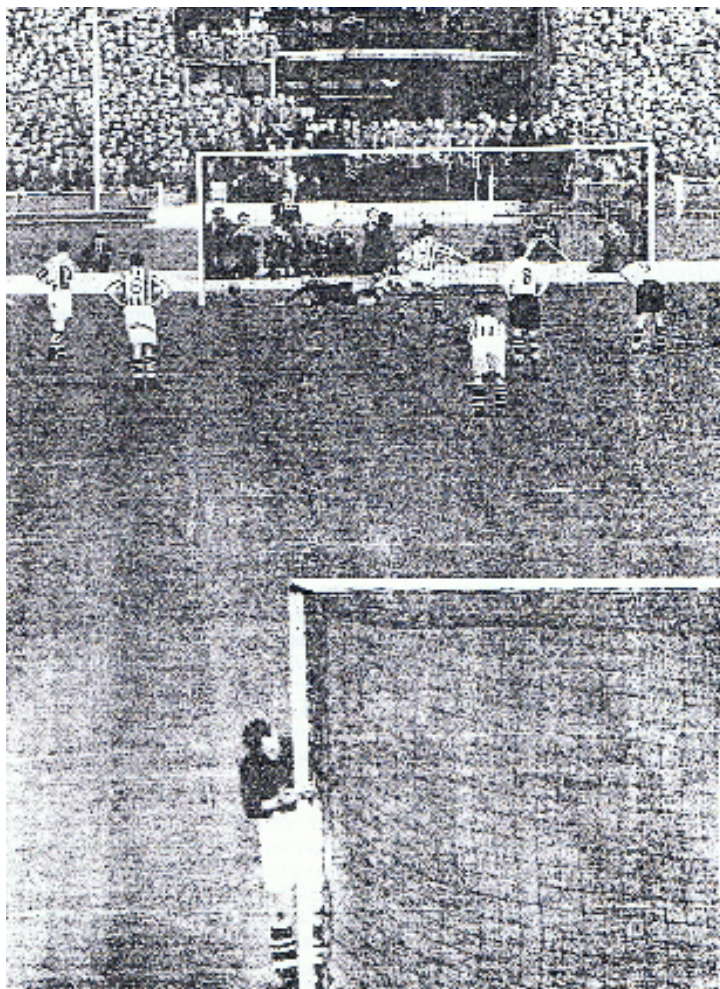


# FROM ST. MARY CRAY TO WEMBLEY – JIMMY SANDERS

By Peter Goringe

It's the F A Cup final, a penalty is awarded, the tension mounts and 100,000 pairs of eyes are fixed on the striker approaching the penalty spot. The goalkeeper at the other end can't bear to watch, though, as his team equalise. And if you haven't worked it out already, yes, there's a Cray Wanderers connection. Ten years earlier that 'keeper had played for Cray.



Jimmy Sanders must be one of our most famous players and certainly deserves an article to himself! Born in 1920, he attended Hackney Grammar School, but he became known in our neck of the woods in the first months of the Second World War. He was a young goalkeeper for Sidcup side Longlands, who actually beat Cray 8-6 in a Kent Amateur Cup-tie that season (1939-40).

Jimmy was obviously a great prospect, for at the end of the season Charlton Athletic snapped him up. He went straight into their wartime First Division side when the legendary Sam Bartram joined the R A F. Jimmy also went into the R A F, by my reckoning probably in late 1941. He was an Air Gunner and flew on 120 operations, mainly in the Middle East (Persia, Arabia and Iraq). Eventually he was shot down. He sustained neck and back injuries and endured terrible pain. He was invalided out of the RAF and told he would never play football again.

But this is a true fairytale and Cray Wanderers had their part to play. On 25 November 1943, Jimmy Sanders turned up to keep goal for Cray in a friendly against an Anti-Aircraft Battery (the

Wands won 4-2, with their regular 'keeper Kain scoring one of the goals). Clearly, the period of recuperation did him the world of good, because his next appearance was sensational. Cray were drawn away to Millwall Reserves in the Kent Senior Cup. The game was played at the Den on 8 January 1944 and the Wands were totally outclassed, except in the goalkeeping department. Jim made all manner of wonderful saves and secured a 1-1 draw for his side.

According to Reg Morfill, who scored Cray's goal, the dressing room was invaded by Millwall officials who wanted to sign Sanders. It seems, though, that he was still on Charlton's books. It may even be that they had arranged for him to have a few games with Cray to see how he fared. Jimmy played in the Wanderers' next three games and they didn't concede a goal – almost unheard of in those days when goals were very plentiful. No doubt this encouraged Charlton to try him out at the higher level and he was picked to play against Portsmouth on 12 February 1944. It must have gone well, as he

was re-signed on professional forms, although his next match was actually for West Ham. Charlton 'lent' him for a game with Watford (lost 1-2).

Charlton went on to win the War-Time F A Cup in 1943-44 and brought Bartram in for the final after Sanders had played in several of the earlier rounds. This may have caused something of a bust-up and Jimmy played for a number of other clubs as a guest during the rest of the war. These included Southampton, Chelsea, Fulham, Liverpool and West Bromwich Albion. When things got back to relative normality in 1945, it was clear that Bartram would be number one in the goalkeeping pecking order at the Valley and Jim agreed to a transfer to West Brom. The fee was £2,250.

Jim Sanders made 391 appearances for 'The Baggies'. He helped them to win promotion back to the First Division in 1948-49, saving nine penalties that season. Although he is described as a steady, rather than acrobatic, 'keeper, Jimmy had a reputation for keeping out penalties, saving 25 in his career.

His finest hour came in that cup final in 1954. West Brom were playing Preston and Ronnie Allen's penalty made it 2-2. With his record for saving penalties, maybe Jim had good reason not to look! He said afterwards, "I was praying and touching the goalpost for good luck. I just daren't look. Then I heard the crowd cheer and I thought 'That's it!' ". Frank Griffin went on to score the winner for Albion with three minutes left.

An interesting contrast with his Charlton days was that Jim had lost his place to another 'keeper called Heath. But he was injured in a League game with Sunderland just after the semi-final and Sanders got the chance to play in a cup final that Charlton had denied him.

Jimmy stayed at West Brom for four more years, before having a season with Coventry City and a final year with Hinckley Athletic. He retired from football in 1960, just before his fortieth birthday.

Like many ex-footballers, he went on to be a publican, first in Derby and later in Birmingham. He was known as 'Jovial Jim' and always sported a bow-tie, with his Cup winner's medal on a gold chain round his neck. On retirement he settled in Tamworth.