

IT CAN HAPPEN IF YOU WISH HARD ENOUGH...

By Trevor Mulligan, 18 March 2010

It's quite strange what can be uncovered just by reading through some old articles. In recent weeks, I've been perusing some old copies of 'Cray Chatter', kindly lent to me by Jerry Dowlen. I wasn't around when these fanzines were in full flow, so I've had a bit of catching up to do.

Running the Cray Wanderers website as I currently do, I thought that it would be a good idea to update some of the articles from the 'Cray Chatter' publications and include them as printable items on the website. That way, supporters old and new can either read them onscreen or print them off for sticking in their scrapbooks.

Please don't scoff at the idea of keeping a scrapbook. Several Wands supporters do collect newspaper clippings and the like and place them between the covers of exercise or scrap books. Even I used to do so in my youth, but then along came wife number one who promptly threw my meticulously kept record onto one of her brother's bonfires. Fortunately, I'd hidden my stash of programmes so that she never got her hands on them.

Anyway, last night I was reading through a copy of 'Cray Chatter' from 2002, when I came across the following article by Pete Goringe. I have reproduced the article (below) in its entirety, but what I want to say first is how much hope has been with the Club since Mick Slater took over the reins of a struggling Cray Wanderers with a dream back in 1950 (or thereabouts) of putting them back on the footballing map.

Although Mick Slater almost achieved his dream, he was beset by problems along the bumpy way. The door to the next level always seemed to be slammed in his and the Club's face, time and time again. Then Grassmeade was ripped away from under the Wands' feet and we ended up at Oxford Road, resulting in an unforeseen backward step along the road to greater things. Then the sad demise of Mick, coming along in Cray's first year of tenancy at Oxford Road, meant that he didn't take his dream to fruition.

The facilities at Oxford Road, which limited the Club to a modest level of football, was never going to see Cray proceed up the pyramid. But, it's sometimes quite strange what time can do. As you will read in the final part

of Pete's article below, the dream was still alive in 2002, but it was just a dream.

TO TRAVEL HOPEFULLY...

By Peter Goringe, March 2002

This season the tantalising possibility has emerged of Cray Wanderers seeking promotion to the Southern League. To those of us who have been following the Club for many years, it may not be a possibility that we take too seriously. After all, the last thirty years have seen us lose one good ground (at Grassmeade), lose the chance of developing a fine new stadium (in Rectory Lane) after getting planning permission, and fail to get floodlights erected at another ground (Oxford Road). During much of this recent period, we have been enduring season after uninspiring season in the lower half of the Kent League. It's hardly a sound platform on which to base a massive step up to the more exalted reaches of Non-League football.

But there's nothing wrong with dreaming dreams. This year's performances have come as a very pleasant surprise and have certainly made us think about what promotion might involve. Most people's immediate reaction is to worry about the extra travelling. We have become used to a very localised fixture list, with as many as half of our Kent League opponents coming from the suburban corner of north-west Kent. We regard a trip to Whitstable as a long haul. In the Eastern Division of the Dr Martens Southern League it would seem like a local derby!

Chatham Town are the most recent team to be promoted from the Kent League. They have had to get used to travelling to far-flung places such as Rugby (Warwickshire), Wisbech (Norfolk) and Dorchester (Dorset). A small club like Cray, so people say, can't ever be expected to journey on a regular basis so far away from our traditional homeland of Kent and South London.

The fact of the matter, though, is that we have done so before...

Between 1966 and 1971, the Wands played in the Metropolitan League. It was a peculiar competition, which would never be sanctioned nowadays. It was started in odd circumstances in 1949. Dagenham FC had just been formed and, rather than have to work their way through the senior amateur

football leagues that already existed, they decided to set up a league of their own!

They only managed to persuade eight other clubs to join them and a really motley crew they were, including Hove on the south coast, Headington United Reserves from Oxford, St Neots and District, Chipperfield (a village team from Hertfordshire) and Callendars Athletic, a works team from Erith who Cray had met on numerous occasions.

This doesn't sound like a very promising set-up. The trip from, say, Hove to St Neots or Oxford to Dagenham must have taken many hours over 50 years ago, but this was the time immediately after the war when football was at the height of its popularity and, remarkably, this new league did become properly established.

The following year, several new teams joined, including Dunstable, Hastings Reserves, Vickers (the Byfleet version, not our own VCD) and the 'A' (third) teams of Brighton and Luton. There must have been 2,000 to 3,000 miles of travelling for each club for their fifteen away games, but the league thrived. Dagenham were the champions and promptly joined the newly-formed Delphian League, which would approximate today to one of the lower divisions of the Ryman League.

Although Dagenham, its founding father, had done a runner, the Met League, as it became known, continued to attract a wide range of clubs, many of whom stayed for only a season or two. Southwick, who we beat in the F A Cup at Hayes Lane earlier this season, had two fairly unsuccessful years of membership in the early 1950s.

Gradually the Met League began to settle into a pattern. It consisted of the 'A' teams of Football League clubs, reserve teams of Southern League sides (Dartford, Gravesend and Tonbridge for example), other professional clubs who aspired to join the Southern League (e.g. Stevenage) and a handful of amateur clubs who fancied a new challenge.

Cray fell into the latter category when they joined in 1966-67. Trips to places like Oxford, Northants (Wellingborough) and Suffolk (Bury Town) held no fears for the Wands' club officials, even though these matches generally ended in heavy defeats. In the days before the M25, journeys around the infamous South Circular Road and through the Dartford Tunnel would have

been regular features of Cray's seasons in the Met League (what was on the other side of the Dartford Tunnel before they built the M25?).

Cray stuck with the Met League until it merged with the Greater London and, later, the Spartan League. Today, now that the Non-League pyramid is in place, there is a more logical pattern and a league like the Met League won't occur again. Cray will only travel those sorts of distances on a regular basis if they are promoted out of the Kent League.

And, who knows, one day it may happen...

Although the above article was published in March 2002, within two years the dream was made a reality. But, instead of the Southern League, Cray were promoted to the Ryman (Isthmian) League. Current Chairman, Gary Hillman, pulled out all of the stops to ensure Cray Wanderers earned their right to finally get onto the next rung of the Non-League pyramid ladder.

It has taken Cray Wanderers over 40 years to achieve the 'overnight success' that Mick Slater envisioned all those years ago. The problems the club faced, then and since, would have killed off many a club, but not Cray, proving that it can happen if you wish hard enough...