

## Season's Review

After the experiment of splitting the Reserve section last season, sense prevailed and the countywide division was restored together with a knockout League Cup competition. Bass Brewers remained as league sponsors.

### Pre Season

Unusually there were only two pre-season friendly matches, and both were played at home. The season commenced in an encouraging fashion with a 3-0 victory over Tilbury Reserves on 29th July. The goals were scored by newcomers Robert Phelps (Thamesmead Town), Andy MacPherson (Cray Wanderers) and fringe player Dhilan Vithane. The second game resulted in a 2-2 draw with Tonbridge AFC Reserves. Dartford's goals came from Glenn McTaggart and Frank Cole (Bromley). Other new players included Richard Usherwood (Barking), Fraser McManus (Cray Wanderers), Matt Longhurst (VCD), Ben Roostan (West Ham United) and Steve Sallas (Grays Athletic and Swanley Furness amongst others).

### August

And so it was straight into the real thing. Due to the expanded league programme this season, an effort was made to cram as many games in as possible before the clocks went back to mitigate the possible effect of a harsh winter.

The season proper started on 12th August with a trip to Greenwich Borough on a hot and humid summer's afternoon. Dartford twice took the lead through Glenn McTaggart but twice Greenwich came back to rescue a point in a 2-2 draw.

It always takes something of a miracle to get eleven players on the pitch for early evening kick offs. On this occasion it was Swanley Furness' turn to struggle and they had to sign on a goalkeeper in order to complete their team. In the first half, Swanley coped rather better with the dry, bumpy pitch and took the lead when a speculative lob bounced awkwardly over Matt Longhurst in the Dartford goal. Dartford improved after the break and two more goals (including one penalty) for Glenn McTaggart and a last minute goal from the impressive Richard Usherwood secured the points.

A third game in six days saw Dartford playing hosts to their landlords on a Thursday evening. Much against the run of play, Dartford took the lead through Tony Kyle who had acres of space in which to control Willie O'Sullivan's floated free kick and crash the ball into the net. Cray deservedly equalised early in the second half when Andy Frith drilled home a loose ball from the edge of the box. Whilst a draw might have been a fair result, Dartford grabbed a late winner when Matt Fagan glanced home a right wing cross from Steve Johns.

There then followed a run of three consecutive defeats. The first was a typically competitive game at home to Ramsgate. Despite going 0-1 down to a Louis Crow goal after only six minutes, Dartford fought back to lead 3-2 with goals from Matt Fagan and another two from McTaggart before slack defending allowed Michael Ward to score a hat-trick and win the game for Ramsgate.

The beautiful evening sunshine was not matched by the standard of football served up in the home match against Beckenham Town. The visitors controlled the match from first to last and deservedly won 2-0.

The final match in the sequence was at Dover where McTaggart's goal was not enough to stop the home side winning 2-1.

The month was rounded off with a 1-0 home victory over Ashford Town. Glenn McTaggart scored again to add further weight to his claim for a chance in the First Team. It was Paul Johns however who had a brief run in the Southern League whilst Luke Morrish was out injured and Frank Cole started a long stint of inactivity on the substitute's bench.

P. 7 W. 3 D. 1 L. 3 F. 12 A. 12 Pts. 10 GD 0 Pos. 6th

### September

The position of goalkeeper was to prove problematic throughout the season, so with Matt Longhurst unavailable, Joe Kitson stepped in for a few matches just as he had the previous season. Unfortunately he never once finished on the winning side. His first match though produced an exciting 4-4 draw away at Hythe United.

A midweek trip to Hastings Town resulted in a 0-2 defeat. Two goals down within ten minutes, and finishing against only nine men, Dartford were unable to break down a stubborn Hastings rearguard.

The mid-table clash with Margate resulted in a 2-2 draw. Wayne Grizzle scored his first goal of the season seventeen minutes into the game when he connected with Willie O'Sullivan's pass and chipped the ball over the advancing goalkeeper. Margate stormed back after the break to score two goals in the first two minutes including one from out of favour Mark Greatorex. Glenn McTaggart pounced eight minutes from time to earn a draw with his tenth of the season.

The next game was at home to league leaders Chatham Town who, although looking good going forward appeared a little suspect at the back. This defensive frailty was exposed just before half time when Ben Roostan's cross was headed in at the near post by Wayne Grizzle. Chatham were on level terms within a minute through Lee Crow whose shot went in off the left hand post. The Chatham winner came halfway through the second half from Jimmy Vause.

The last Saturday afternoon in the month was spent visiting the First Division whipping boys Whitstable Town who were firmly rooted to the bottom of the table. Dartford made a lively start against poor opposition and opened their account after seven minutes when Willie O'Sullivan's thirty yard drive flew into the top left hand corner of the net. Two goals from Robert Phelps and one from Matt Fagan created by Phelps gave Dartford a comfortable 4-0 lead before Matt Longhurst's failure to gather a right wing cross gifted Whitstable a consolation goal.

P. 12 W. 4 D. 3 L. 5 F. 23 A. 23 Pts. 15 GD 0 Pos. 10th

October

October started with the return fixture with mid-table Greenwich Borough. The kick off was brought forward to 11.00 a.m. by virtue of the England versus Germany match being shown live on television in the afternoon. Greenwich took the lead early on somewhat against the run of play, although a fine move involving Stuart Nicholson and Glenn McTaggart soon led to Wayne Grizzle tapping in the equaliser. Greenwich again took the lead after twenty two minutes and Grizzle should have equalised again fifteen minutes later but his header was handled on the line. McTaggart scored with the penalty.

In the second half, Dartford took the game to Greenwich and a rare Reserve team appearance by Shane Holbrook was capped with a goal as he headed in Ben Roostan's cross. The scoring was completed by Curtis Williams whose looping effort from the right wing deceived everybody including probably Curtis himself!

The following Tuesday evening Thamesmead Town, currently placed second in the table, presented tougher opposition. The home side took the lead after seven minutes with a thirty yard shot from Marcus Perona. Dartford equalised inside a minute when Glenn McTaggart chased a long ball forward and just beat the goalkeeper to it, chipping the ball into an unguarded net from the edge of the box. Halfway through the first half, poor defending allowed Anthony Weir to break down the right wing and shoot low under Matt Longhurst. Dartford were straight back on terms when Wayne Grizzle latched onto a ball in behind the Thamesmead defence to finish with a hard driven, low shot. A couple more defensive errors in the second half allowed Weir to go on and complete his hat-trick.

The match at Lordswood was played in light rain on a slippery pitch. Dartford took the lead with a fortuitous goal from Matt Fagan who crossed from the bye-line only to see the ball sail over the goalkeeper and drop into the goal. Lordswood recovered sufficiently well to go in at the break leading 2-1. Firstly Longhurst found himself pulled way out of his goal before the ball was squared for Lordswood's substitute to score with a low shot from the right hand side. Just before half time, a break from the half way line led to a shot being beaten away by Longhurst only for the same substitute to put away the rebound.

Dartford left their comeback late. Eight minutes before full time following a move initiated by Stuart Nicholson, the ball played out to Grizzle on the right. He beat two defenders and squared for McTaggart to strike the ball home from six yards. With two minutes remaining, McTaggart was pulled down in the box and stood up to take the resulting penalty himself and score the winning goal.

This turned out to be Dartford's last match for over two months as a result of the appalling wet weather during the late autumn and nine consecutive Saturdays were lost. During the month, Greenwich Borough had eight points deducted for fielding ineligible players in a number of league matches and Dartford profited to the tune of two points.

P. 15 W. 6 D. 3 L. 6 F. 32 A. 31 Pts. 23 GD 1 Pos. 7th

## November

No reserve team football was possible during the month of November. The cup draws saw the Reserves being awarded a bye in the First Round of the League Cup with a home tie against Dover Athletic in the Second. Similarly in the Kent Intermediate Cup they were given a bye in the First Round with a home tie with Erith Town in the next.

Having scored fourteen goals in fourteen games for the Reserves, Glenn McTaggart finally forced himself into the First Team during November and remained there for the rest of the season clocking up twelve starts and numerous appearances on the bench.

A testament to the youth development policy at the club came at the end of the month when Nicky Barnes signed with Leyton Orient. He was first selected for the Reserves in the squad that travelled to Canterbury City in September 1998 and just over a year later became the youngest player to represent the First Team when he was included in the starting line-up against Burnham at home on 30th October 1999. He subsequently established himself in the Southern League side and was chosen to represent England at under 19 level.

P. 15 W. 6 D. 3 L. 6 F. 32 A. 31 Pts. 23 GD 1 Pos. 7th

## December

Football finally returned on 23rd December with an away league match at Erith Town. This game saw the welcome return of Steve Marriner from America and a Reserve team debut for Nick Bone. A poor defensive performance resulted in a 3-0 victory for Erith. The last goal came on ninety minutes when Longhurst failed to hold a free kick, the loose ball being stabbed home from close range.

Although a home fixture, because of the impossibility of staging football at Oxford Road, the League Cup match with Dover Athletic was played at the Crabble on 27th December. Dartford won 2-1 with two more goals from Glenn McTaggart. This should have resulted in a home Third Round tie with Whitstable but Dartford were removed from the competition for fielding an ineligible player.

P. 16 W. 6 D. 3 L. 7 F. 32 A. 32 Pts. 23 GD 0 Pos. 7th

## January

Form dipped at the start of the new year and the first win was not forthcoming until the second week in March.

For the first game of the new Millennium away at league leaders Margate, Dartford were handed a footballing lesson. Margate powered into a 5-0 lead taking advantage of Dartford's poor attempt at an offside trap before taking their foot off the pedal for the last five minutes. Dartford took advantage as Matt Smith who had returned from Cray Wanderers broke down the right wing and beautifully squared the ball for Nick Bone to side foot home from close range.

There followed a midweek trip to Sittingbourne Greyhound Stadium for a league fixture. This dull match on a cold, misty evening was enlivened only by Frank Cole's second half twenty yard shot that hit the angle of bar and post before bouncing across the face of the goal, and a total eclipse of the moon. Local boy Steve Williams filled in in goal and kept a clean sheet.

Dartford's entrée into the Kent Intermediate Cup was a completely different affair. With only the bare eleven players, manager Willie O'Sullivan had to deputise in goal following Matt Longhurst's failure to navigate the few miles from Dartford to Foots Cray. Even the officials struggled to raise a 'team' with Erith providing a club linesman.

The game got off to a flying start when in the second minute Wayne Grizzle crossed for Steve Marriner to head in at the far post. Celebrations had hardly subsided when within thirty seconds of the restart Erith had drawn level as Joe Pressney provided the cross that Mick Tilbury steered past O'Sullivan. Erith then obtained the lead five minutes later through Eric Dussard.

The second half was characterised by a tremendous collective performance from Dartford's midfield trio of Nicholson, Kyle and Marriner and justice was done on the stroke of full time as Tony Kyle headed in Steve Johns' corner to level the scores.

Dartford dominated the extra half hour without managing to pierce the Erith defence. An injured Rogers replaced Willie O'Sullivan in goal for the final fifteen minutes, plus a penalty shoot out. With each side having missed one spot kick, Rogers saved Erith's fifth attempt leaving O'Sullivan to stroll up and casually score to guarantee a trip to Margate in the next round.

Dartford's goalkeeping difficulties were temporarily alleviated at Ramsgate by the presence of Marc Brown for his one and only appearance of the season. An action packed game ensued with Stuart Nicholson bidding farewell prior to his departure for the Antipodes with the opening goal midway through the first half. Martin James' looping shot cancelled this out in the second half.

P. 19 W. 6 D. 5 L. 8 F. 34 A. 38 Pts. 25 GD -4 Pos. 11th

## February

The league programme was further curtailed during February with three more blank Saturdays. Only two matches were played and then only one of those was for league points.

The first match was the Kent Intermediate Cup Third Round match at Margate where the home club was busy making improvements to their ground in anticipation of promotion to the Conference at the end of the season.

Starting late because of the tardy arrival of some of the visiting players, Willie once again found himself in goal but notwithstanding this disadvantage, Dartford were firmly in the driving seat for the first half an hour until Margate made a tactical rearrangement of their formation. Almost immediately they took the lead. A poor clearance by the stand-in goalkeeper was picked up by Shaun Brown who ran on and drilled his shot past O'Sullivan's left shoulder. Margate maintained the pressure throughout the second half and doubled their score with a good shot from the edge of the box by Ricky Draper. Margate went on to contest the final of the competition losing 1-4 to Thamesmead Town.

In the league Dartford received Hythe United for the return game and went down 0-1 despite a fine performance in goal by Jimmy Etheridge.

P. 20 W. 6 D. 5 L. 9 F. 34 A. 39 Pts. 25 GD -5 Pos. 14th

#### March

Steve Williams' brother Gareth arrived from Herne Bay at the start of the month to fill the vacant goalkeeper's jersey. His first appearance, strangely enough, was away at Herne Bay where he distinguished himself inside thirty minutes by saving a penalty. At the other end Matt Smith was bundled over off the ball and Matt Fagan's penalty was also saved. Dartford deservedly took the lead four minutes before half time when Smith found space on the right wing and sent over a looping shot that fell into the far corner of the net.

Fifteen minutes of expletive ridden pep talk from Herne Bay's manager had the desired effect as they controlled the second half scoring three goals in the process.

Dartford suffered another defeat on their midweek trip to Folkestone. The home side's first goal was scored by First Team regular Paul Chambers on his way back from injury whilst Steve Johns was the last player to touch the ball before it hit the roof of Dartford's net for the second, .

There followed a satisfying 3-0 victory over Lordswood at Oxford Road. The third goal was scored by young Curtis Williams who walked through their defence before rounding the goalkeeper.

One more match was played before the weather again interceded and caused another hiatus in an already much disrupted season. This was the away match at Ashford where the entire game was played in driving snow. Twice going ahead through the tricky Richard Usherwood, Dartford let it slip in the final fifteen minutes as Ashford salvaged a point.

P. 24 W. 7 D. 6 L. 11 F. 40 A. 46 Pts. 29 GD -6 Pos. 14th

#### April

When the fixture list for April was issued it showed that fifteen games were still to be played, and losing the home game with Herne Bay on 7th April did absolutely nothing to help ease the backlog. Little advantage was taken of the long Easter weekend with only one fixture being completed, and yet another, that away at Beckenham Town, being postponed.

The completed game was the return, home match with Swanley Furness. Matt Smith opened the scoring before a late flurry from Wayne Grizzle - four goals in a fifteen minute spell - secured the points.

Normal service was resumed at VCD where Ian Colley became the ninth goalkeeper to start a match for the Reserves. Another late start resulted in a truncated first half with the teams turning round with no goals having been scored. On a freezing cold evening with the odd shower of rain, Dartford took the lead ten minutes into the second half when Steve Johns went on a run down the left wing before cutting inside and hitting the ball just inside the post from twenty yards.

Dartford thought that they had moved further ahead when Willie O'Sullivan took the ball to the goal line before squaring the ball for Usherwood to bundle home at the near post but this effort was mysteriously ruled out for offside. Inevitably VCDequalised when former Dartford Youth Team player Chris O'Connor headed in a right wing free kick with two minutes to go.

Byron Beard became goalkeeper number ten for the 'away' game at Cray Wanderers. The Cray team, which contained a number of familiar faces including John Allwright, Gary Fiore and Danny Fearnley, took the lead after fifteen minutes when MarkHammond's left wing cross eluded both Beard and Matt Fagan on the goal line. Cray's more experienced players attempted to intimidate and frustrate the younger Dartford players but safe in the knowledge that skill will always overcome, Curtis Williams and Matt Fagan scored the necessary goals to secure the points. Both Curtis and Richard Usherwood proved too hot for the Cray defence to deal with.

With the difficulty of staging fixtures at Oxford Road becoming a feature of the season, the home match with Herne Bay was hurriedly arranged for Thursday 26th April at Winch's Field. At first sight the pitch appeared unplayable with much water laying on the surface in puddles. However the ground was firm enough underneath and held up well over the ninety minutes.

Dartford rode their luck throughout the match and Herne Bay carved out a number of good chances which were either dealt with by Willie O'Sullivan in goal or rebounded off the woodwork. They finally broke through a minute before half time when Kieron Turner was handed a free header on the six yard line. Dartford did better in the second half and were rewarded with a goal five minutes from time when Richard Underwood's right wing cross was stroked in by Curtis Williams.

The last match of the month was the home league game with Erith Town. An industrious first half performance from O'Sullivan culminated with a clever ball in behind the Erith defence that was carefully stroked under the goalkeeper by Curtis Williams, Curtis had now scored on each of his last three appearances. Erith were gifted an equaliser halfway through the second half when Tony Kyle was wrongfooted and allowed Joe Pressney in to score. There were good performances all round, particularly from Richard Usherwood, Curtis Williams and Byron Beard. With this result, the Reserves had passed through April unbeaten with two wins and three draws.

During the course of the month, both Paul and Steve Johns were making regular appearances for the First Team.

At the end of the month the *Kentish Times* announced that the Directors had signed an agreement with Gravesend and Northfleet United to play First Team fixtures at Stonebridge Road next season. This decision was in part influenced by the declining level of attendances at Purfleet. The Directors may well wish to consider making alternative arrangements for the Reserves in the near future as the facilities at Oxford Road continue to deteriorate at an alarming rate.

P. 29 W. 9 D. 9 L. 11 F. 50 A. 50 Pts. 38 GD 0 Pos. 14th

May

May! And the end of the season is in sight. Or is it? Nine matches (a quarter of the season) still to go with the last game to be played on 19th and one further game still to be scheduled. With both teams present on the ground, the home game with Thamesmead Town was called off about thirty minutes before the 6.30 kick off. Had it been down to the players, the match would have at least been started.

The accent was on youth for the visit of Hastings Town on Thursday 3rd May with Willie O'Sullivan probably being the only player outside his teens! Lian Xureb, Ross Baker, Lee Sales and David Johnson all had their first full games for the Reserves tonight, with Daniel Cross on the bench. This situation was precipitated by the fixture backlog being experienced by the First Team who were having to play five Southern League games in eight days. On the same evening they were away at Witney Town where Jamie Rogers, Tony Kyle, Paul Johns, Frank Cole, GlennMcTaggart, Matt Fagan and Steve Johns started the game and Richard Usherwood and Wayne Grizzle were on the bench.

Dartford took the lead as early as the fifth minute when Paul Gilchrist played in David Johnson who expertly placed the ball under the goalkeeper. Hastings equalised just before half time and added three more goals late in the game to record a 4-1 victory. None of the youngsters let either themselves or the side down but seemed to tire as the game progressed.

The games were coming thick and fast now and another younger than average team, missing the steadying influence of the unavailable O'Sullivan in midfield, surrendered rather tamely 0-3 to Chatham.

On a sunny but cold Bank Holiday Monday a larger than usual crowd was treated to a splendidly entertaining match, though whether the management team viewed things in the same light is open to speculation. Sittingbourne were the visitors and at the time were sitting proudly atop the First Division table.

In an open game, Dartford took the lead after a quarter of an hour with a move started by Lee Sales. He pushed the ball forward to Wayne Grizzle who chipped the ball over the goalkeeper into the far corner of the net. Seemingly unable to retain a lead this season, an equaliser was conceded a minute before halftime through Michael Holden.

In a busy ten minute period towards the end of the second half Dartford twice more secured the lead only to allow Sittingbourne back into the game. First Matt Fagan beat a defender on the bye-line and crossed for Grizzle to head in; the ball seeming to travel in slow-motion before dropping into the net. Bradley Spice headed the visitors level before the goal of the game gave Dartford the advantage again. Jamie Rogers timed his run to perfection to head Steve Johns' corner into the top right hand corner of the net. This was all in vain though as Spice scored with another headed effort to make the score 3-3.

In the last week, despite playing the first twenty minutes with only ten men, the Reserves fought out an entertaining 0-0 draw with Dover Athletic. The following day an augmented Youth Team went down 0-1 to Whitstable Town, gifting them a goal midway through the first half. The penultimate game only burst into life in a second half where five goals were scored. Although dominating for long periods, Dartford managed to hold out for a 3-2 victory. And so to the last game.....