

CROYDON COMMON FOOTBALL CLUB

A Short History

The Amateur Years (1897-1907)

Like many clubs at the time, Croydon Common originally centred on a church; in this instance St Luke's Mission Church at the junction of Boulogne Road and Princess Road in Croydon. The inaugural meeting of the club was held in 1897 and the name was chosen for the simple reason that St Luke's Mission was sited on ground that once formed part of what had been Croydon Common in earlier times. It was decided that the club would play in colours of gold and dark blue, although the next season saw a change to claret and white. At least this is the version of events set out in the professional Croydon Common club's handbook for the 1909-10 season, its first in Division One of the Southern League, but contemporary records give cause to doubt the accuracy of this version. Firstly, the Holy Saviour parish magazines for 1897 make no mention of the club, nor do those of the years following. One may suppose that there is nothing unusual in that, until discovering that the founding of another football club at the mission church in 1896 receives full coverage. The Holy Saviour parish magazine of October 1896, under the heading of "St Luke's Mission Notes", states that a football club has been started chiefly by the young men in the choir and that it was to be called Bensham Rovers, with thirty two matches arranged for the coming season. In January 1897, the magazine reported that this club had played a good many matches that month and had been fairly successful considering the size and strength of their opponents and, the following month, added that the club had greatly increased in numbers and that there were two teams playing every Saturday afternoon.

These reports beg the question as to why Bensham Rovers would receive full coverage in the parish magazine during the 1896-97 season, while Croydon Common went unreported a few months later. The answer will probably never be known, but possibly the club restarted the following year under the name of Croydon Common. This possibility is supported by the fact there are references to Bensham Rovers in the local newspapers during the 1896-97 season, but not to Croydon Common, whereas the next season Croydon Common are mentioned, but Bensham Rovers are not. Given this, it is possible that Croydon Common always played in claret and that the colours of blue and gold were those of the previous incarnation, Bensham Rovers.

The local newspapers of the period show that, in 1897, the borough was already well served by amateur teams bearing Croydon in their name; such as Croydon F.C., Croydon Parish Church, Croydon Adult School, Croydon Carlton, Croydon Excelsior, Croydon Ferndale, Croydon Park, West Croydon and Croydon Glenrose. These various clubs, although of differing strengths, were well reported in the local newspapers, but references to Croydon Common were very limited in the club's early days. One suspects that the three or four line reports of the club's matches only appeared in print because they were provided by the club itself and then possibly only when it won. There is no evidence to suggest that the club joined a league in its first two seasons and it would appear that only friendly matches were played. The Croydon Common club, as opposed to Bensham Rovers, played its first game, or at least its first reported game, of the 1897-98 season at the ground that would be home for six of the ten seasons that it was to hold amateur status. This was the Whitehorse Road Recreation Ground, known to the locals as the "Dust Hole". The opposition for the match was Lindon Reserves and Croydon Common won 4-2 after having led 2-1 at half time. The club's inaugural season appears to have been a very successful one, although it should be borne in mind that the club may have only submitted reports of the better performances to the local newspaper. The Croydon Advertiser carried the results of at least sixteen games that season and the club's record in those was won 12, drew 3 and lost 1, with 52 goals scored and 10 conceded. Although most of the matches were played against opposition from the general Croydon area, often the reserve sides of more senior teams, there were also fixtures against clubs from further away, such as Ashdown from Kent and Pelham from Wimbledon.

It would seem that the club again only played friendly matches during the 1898-99 season, again predominantly against the same local sides as the previous season. However, the following season, the last of the nineteenth century, saw the club finally take the plunge into competitive football when it entered the Croydon Charity Cup; a competition that was a hybrid of league and cup, with the winners of two divisions playing in the final. Croydon Common, with virtually the same players as in the previous season, met with very little success and only came fourth in a division of five clubs. The remainder of the games played that season were friendlies.

The following season, 1900-01, saw the club achieve its first competitive success when it won its division in the Croydon Charity Cup, albeit that the division only comprised three teams. On Easter Monday, 8 April 1901, Croydon Common played the winners of the other division, Greenbroom Athletic, in the final in front of a crowd of more than 1,000 but, despite leading 1-0 after ten minutes and 2-1 a little later, the result was a 4-2 defeat. During the season, Frank Chick became the first Commoner to receive a representative honour when he was selected for the Croydon Charity Cup XI to meet West Croydon, the leading local club of the time. The game ended 3-3 and the Croydon Advertiser said that Chick "had the makings of a fine back" and he later appeared twice for Southampton in the Western League.

For the 1901-02 season, the club made a number of changes to the first team squad and, as a result, had a relatively successful season overall although, in the Croydon Charity Cup, the club just missed out on a place in the final, coming second in its division of six teams. However, the following season, the club went one better and won its division with a 100% record in its 10 matches to book a place in the final against South Norwood Athletic. The final took place on Easter Monday, 13 April 1903, in a blinding snowstorm at the ground of Croydon F.C. at Waddon. A crowd of 3,500 watched the match, although the correspondent of the Croydon Advertiser was roundly scathing about "the considerable number of deadheads who watched the play from the bridge without giving a thought or a copper to the institutions to benefit which this Charity Competition was started." After a goalless first half, Croydon Common scored four goals without reply to give the club its first trophy. The strength of the side by this time can be demonstrated by the fact that five players were selected for the representative match with West Croydon on Christmas Day 1902. Added to which, on 25 April 1903, the club played against a Croydon Charity Cup select team in the annual "Champions v. The Rest" game and won 5-2. Around this time, there was a change at the club which, as will be seen, was to have significant consequences; Frank Worsfold Smith, the honorary secretary since the club's foundation, stood down and was replaced by John William Bartlett. Also, it was around this time that the press began to refer to the club as the Robins. The pieces of the jigsaw were beginning to come together.

Bartlett wasted little time in making changes at the club for the 1903-04 season; an indication of what was to follow in later years. Firstly, he applied for the club to join the Surrey County F.A., thereby allowing it entry to a number of cup competitions; although the club's application curiously stated that its date of formation was September 1903. Next he moved the Robins' home ground to The Crescent, a nearby site on the opposite side of the Whitehorse Road. The one thing that he did not change was the squad which, after playing together for a few seasons, was beginning to achieve results. The first team entered the Croydon Charity Cup as before, but also competed in three junior cup competitions; the Surrey Junior Cup, the Surrey Herald Cup and the London Junior Cup and, in addition to the reserve side, a third team, designated Croydon Common A, made some appearances during the season as well. The first eleven had a very successful season although, in the finish, it was a case of always a bridesmaid and never the bride. In defence of its Croydon Charity Cup title, the club topped its division of six teams, but lost 2-0 in the final against old rivals Greenbroom Athletic. It was also runner-up in both the Surrey Junior Cup (losing 2-1 to Dorking) and the Surrey Herald Cup (losing 3-2 to Sutton United), with the result that no trophy was won during the season despite an excellent record overall.

Bartlett made yet more changes at the start of the 1904-05 season; this time to the leagues in which the club's three sides were to compete. The first team was entered in the Surrey Junior League and the Sydenham & District League, with the result that the level of the reporting of matches in the Croydon newspapers was greatly reduced. The first eleven's place in the Croydon Charity League was taken by the Reserves, an unpopular switch which was described by the Croydon Advertiser as "an insult" to the other clubs in the competition. The club fared well in the Surrey Junior League, a competition which was played in four regional groups with the winner of each progressing to the semi-final stages of a knock-out competition. However, in the end, the club finished second to Carshalton St Andrews, a new regular adversary, in its regional group of five teams and so just missed the final stages. The club actually headed the table for most of the season, but a late 2-0 defeat by Sutton United and a crucial 2-0 defeat by Carshalton St Andrews, ended its chances. As already mentioned, the Croydon press coverage of the club was reduced and so the final table of the Sydenham & District League was not published, although match reports suggested that the club met with mixed success. There was also mixed success in the cup competitions as well, with the club winning the Surrey Herald Cup, beating Beddington Corner 1-0 in the final, but losing 5-1 to Old Tiffinians in the final of the Surrey Junior Charity Shield and being eliminated in only the second round of the Surrey Junior Cup by bogey side Carshalton St Andrews.

The main point of interest during the season was the intriguing friendlies played by the club. Perhaps with a eye on greater things, Bartlett arranged for the season to commence with a game against Chesham Town, then in the Southern League. The side performed well, but lost 3-1. Then, during the Christmas holiday, the club played host to Sheffield Wycliffe who were on tour in the South of England but, in front of 3,000 spectators, went down 1-0. The club was more successful in its next prestigious friendly, when it drew 1-1 with Clapton Orient Reserves; a good result given that the O's first team was about to be elected to the Football League. With hindsight, it seems probable that Bartlett was sounding out the strength of the club with a view to a move up to better things and he must have gained a measure of encouragement from the results. A further example of his vision was the club's last friendly of the season; an away match with Boulogne F.C. The team, together with more than twenty supporters (paying 13s 6d each) travelled to France for the match which was watched by a crowd of 2,000. Despite the home side taking the lead after barely ten minutes, the Robins won 5-1. One wonders whether the idea of going to Boulogne was influenced by the name of the road in which the club was born.

After just one season, Bartlett withdrew the first team from the Sydenham & District League for the 1905-06 season and re-entered it in the Croydon Charity League in place of the reserve side, but kept it in the Surrey Junior League. By now the local newspaper coverage of the club was detailed and, more significantly, it originated from staff reporters and not the club secretary. However, the club was still a lesser light locally when compared to Croydon F.C. and Croydon Wanderers, who both competed in the senior Surrey leagues and cups, but the successes of the 1905-06 season meant that a step up to the senior level could be taken. In the Croydon Charity League, the club won its division with ease and, in the final on Easter Monday, the beat North Croydon 4-0 to win the trophy for a second time.

The club also won its group in the Surrey Junior League and, in the semi-final of the knock-out stage, beat Norwood Granville 6-3 to reach the final. Incredibly, fixture congestion dictated that the final had to be played on the Easter Monday afternoon immediately after the Croydon Charity League final in the morning. The Robins beat Woking St Martha's 5-2 in the final and therefore won two cup finals on the same day. The club also won the Sutton Hospital Cup (beating Sutton United 1-0 in the final), but lost 1-0 to Beddington Corner in the final of the Surrey Junior Cup. The season had clearly been a success and so Bartlett felt that the club could now make the move up to senior amateur football in order to fulfil the next stage of his grand design.

For the 1906-07 season, the club joined both the Southern Suburban League and the Mid-Surrey League. While there can be no doubt that this move suited Bartlett's long term ambition, it was to an extent caused by outside forces. Probably because of its domination of the previous year's junior cup competitions, the club was, to quote the Croydon Advertiser, "practically forced to go senior by the Surrey F.A.". After a number of seasons relatively unaltered, there were several personnel changes to the first team squad. The arrival of Croydon Common as a rival to the established Croydon F.C. caused a great deal of local interest during the season and, although the two clubs did not meet in the Southern Suburban League (as Croydon F.C. was in Division I and Croydon Common was in Division II), they met twice in the Mid-Surrey League and both matches were passionate affairs. However, the side only had moderately successful seasons in the two leagues contested; in the Mid-Surrey League the club finished in a mid-table position and, in the Southern Suburban League, it finished near to the bottom of the table. The club appears to have only entered one cup competition, the Surrey Senior Cup, where it was beaten 5-1 by Guys Hospital in the second round.

Seeing as the club was now playing in a good standard of amateur football, there was a surprising number of matches in which a depleted team was fielded and twice during the second half of the season the Robins only pit out eight men. In each case the players were supposedly ill, but one of the Croydon newspapers suggested that perhaps apathy was the disorder being experienced. So ended the club's first season in senior amateur football and its last in amateur football altogether. Things would change greatly before its next season.

The Professional Years (1907-1916)

It might seem puzzling that a local amateur team that was sometimes only able to field a side of eight players could have even begun to think about the giant leap to professional status, let alone actually manage it. The simple answer is that it didn't. When secretary John Bartlett considered that the borough was capable of supporting a professional club, he did not have Croydon Common in mind; his plan was to form a new club having no connection with the amateur side with which he was currently involved. The 1909-10 Croydon Common club handbook contained an article which related, almost romantically, Bartlett's struggle to convert the club to professionalism. However, examination of the contemporary newspapers shows a different picture. By early 1907 Bartlett had already taken steps to form Croydon's first professional football club and the first indication came in March 1907 when local newspapers reported the possibility of a professional team. The reports refer to Croydon Common F.C. taking the plunge although, as will be seen, this is not how things turned out. The newspapers reported that "... the leading spirits of the movement" had secured an option on ten acres of the Ashburton Park Estate for a ground, which it was estimated would require an expenditure of £2,500. The reports stated that the landlord of the ground, himself a sports fan, had met the promoters in a liberal fashion and that a number of leading Croydon businessmen had promised both financial and moral support although, throughout the venture, there was to be plenty of the latter, but very little of the former.

The next step came a month later when the local newspapers announced that a meeting of interested parties would be held on Thursday 25 April 1907 at the Pembroke Hall. The local newspapers reported that there was a large enthusiastic crowd at the meeting and that numerous personalities from the Southern League scene were present to lend their support and to give their views and advice; John Cameron (Tottenham Hotspur's secretary/manager), Nat Whittaker (honorary secretary of the Southern League), John Robson (former Crystal Palace manager) and Frank Scott-Walford (manager of Brighton & Hove Albion). Also there were J.M. Dick (football editor of the Evening News) and a local businessman, E.G. Bates, one of the wealthiest landowners in Croydon.

Mr Bates took the chair and began by stating that the proposed ground was most acceptable and that it would cost £5,000, with a further £2,000 to be spent on the pavilion. It was anticipated that £125 would be needed for the initial expenses of setting up the new club. Despite favourable speeches from all the persons present, and the unanimous adoption of the resolution, only £60 was donated towards the £125 needed and the press reports concluded with an appeal for donations, however small. Undeterred, Bartlett continued with his plan and, in early July, the Croydon Times newspaper included a prospectus and application form for the share issue in the new club; to be called Croydon Town, not Croydon Common. Applications were invited for the purchase of the 20,000 ten shilling shares designed to raise the £10,000 needed for the venture. The prospectus set out the names of the directors of the proposed company, Croydon Town Football and Athletic Sports Company Limited, and these names included the above mentioned Messrs Dick and Bates. Bartlett was named as the company secretary, but only "pro tem". With hindsight, the claims set out in the prospectus look far too fanciful. It stated that "It may reasonably be expected that the Club will be as successful as ... Tottenham Hotspur, Fulham, Everton, Newcastle United, Bolton Wanderers, Aston Villa, Sunderland and Portsmouth." This grand claim was further bolstered by the statement that "The company proposes to provide accommodation for some 40,000 to 50,000 spectators by means of a well-constructed Pavilion and large covered and open Stands and Banking." The scheme was completed by an anticipation of election to Division One of the Southern League; ill fated as it turned out.

The object of the proposed company was stated by the prospectus to be promotion of such diverse sports as "Amateur and Professional Football, Cricket, Lacrosse, Lawn Tennis, Hockey, Polo, Bowls, Bicycle and Tricycle Riding, Riding and Jumping, Base Ball, Motoring and Physical Training ..." The prospectus also considered that the popularity of professional football in the South of England would make the club an assured success. Season tickets were to be priced at £1; with a 2.5% discount for each share held, with forty shares meaning a free season ticket. As can now be seen, the new club was to have no connection whatsoever with Croydon Common; it was to bear a different name, play at a different ground and be founded on a completely different footing.

The next step in the scheme was the hearing of the club's application for election to Division One of the Southern League. In early June 1907, the League met at the Holborn Restaurant to decide who should fill the vacancy caused by the election of Fulham to the Football League. Also seeking to fill the vacancy were Bradford Park Avenue, Oldham Athletic (Southern teams?) and Southend United who, despite winning the championship of Division Two the previous year, were not automatically granted promotion. The outcome of the voting was Bradford Park Avenue 36, Oldham Athletic and Croydon Town 2 each and Southend United, with undoubtedly the best claim, 0. Nevertheless, Croydon Town was elected to Division Two of the Southern League and also to the South Eastern League in preference to Brighton & Hove Albion.

The first problem encountered was that Croydon F.C., the established local amateur club, for some reason objected to the use of the name Croydon Town and this led to a change to Croydon Common; the name to which Bartlett had ready access. Next, and far more seriously, the subscriptions to the company failed to reach the necessary target. This meant that the plans had to be toned down greatly, with the principal change being that the new ground could not now be afforded. However, Bartlett and his fellow would be directors grasped the nettle and proceeded on a smaller scale. The plans for the company were shelved in the hope that success on the field would stimulate interest in the venture when it was later refoated. As for the issue of a ground, Bartlett resolved it the same way as he had with the name problem; he used that of the "old" Croydon Common. The Crescent became home for the "new" club.

The result of all this activity was that the professional club had the same ground and secretary as the amateur one, and even the same Croydon Common name, but there the similarity ended. One wonders what the existing amateur players thought of Bartlett's use of the club in this way, especially as it finished the first team careers of most of them; albeit a small number made occasional first team appearances. On the other hand, it must be said that the local press had earlier in the year made reference to the apathy of several of the players of the amateur club when finding eleven willing men was proving difficult. Finally, Bartlett had to find a squad to fulfil the commitments of the forthcoming 1907-08 season. Given his limited budget, his only option was to buy established professional players who were coming to the end of their careers and augment these with promising newcomers. The players signed, and the principal clubs for whom they had played, as stated in the local press, were:

Goalkeeper:	John Eggett (Tottenham Hotspur)
Backs:	Sam Meston (Southampton) William Taylor (West Ham United)
Half Backs:	John George (Leeds City) George Hunter (Maidstone) Alfred Scollard (Woolwich Arsenal)
Forwards:	Percy Barnfather (New Brompton) George Hammond (Clapton Orient) Ernie Hayward (Swindon Town) William Reynolds (Grimsby) Frank Everist (Southampton)

George Hammond had been a director of the ill-fated Croydon Town company a few months before. Sam Meston was a full back with a sound pedigree who had played regularly for Southampton for more than ten years and had appeared in both F.A. Cup Finals that the club had recently contested. George Hunter was a reputedly quick tempered half back who, after leaving the Robins during the club's first professional season, would have a successful career with a number of clubs, including Aston Villa, Chelsea and Manchester United. He returned to Croydon Common in 1915 and so featured in both its first and last seasons. However, the best signing was certainly Percy Barnfather. Although he did not have an illustrious career, he would be a great servant of the club and, during his three spells with the Robins, he amassed some impressive statistics. When the club finally folded, he held the record for total league appearances (246), total league goals (81), total F.A. Cup appearances (19), total competitive appearances (276) and total competitive goals (88). He too played for the club in both its first and final seasons and he also married the daughter of one of the club's directors.

1907-08

Croydon Common was now ready for the 1907-08 season, which represented a major step; its first as a professional club. The first team was entered in Division Two of the Southern League, Division One of the South Eastern League and the United League. The wage bill for the club was to be £20 p.w. and Bartlett was appointed as secretary/manager. By mid-August the new fencing around the pitch was in hand and a stand to hold 300 spectators was under construction.

The professional club's first competitive match took place at The Crescent on Monday 2 September 1907 when West Ham United Reserves visited in an South Eastern League fixture. The kick-off was set at 5 pm "in order to give the workers a chance of seeing the play", but only 1,000 turned up. Centre half John George was selected as the Robin's first professional captain and, under his leadership, they were heading for their first league point when Meston handled and the visitors converted the penalty for the game's only goal. However, the club's first win came a week later when Norwich City Reserves visited The Crescent in the same competition and the Robins secured a 3-0 win. However, any euphoria following the win was promptly cut short when the Robins visited Hastings & St. Leonards United the following week. At the end of a fairly even first period the Common trailed 1-0, but by the final whistle, they had been humiliated by conceding a further nine goals for a 10-0 drubbing. This was to prove to be the worst defeat in the club's history, although it was unfortunately matched two seasons later away to Northampton Town.

The season saw the club's first appearance in the F.A. Cup when, in the 1st. Qualifying Round, it visited Nunhead for what, on paper, looked to be an easy tie; however, the amateurs hustled the Common out of their stride and achieved a 3-1 win. Shortly after this disaster, the club suffered another when, during the night of Friday 8 November, the stand at The Crescent burned down after an oil stove set it alight. One wonders whether it was an indication of Bartlett's abilities as an administrator, but the stand was not insured. However, it could not have been much of a structure as it cost only £100 to replace and, even then, that was quite a small sum; about one month's wages bill. Nevertheless, it was still more than the club could afford and, as a club director ruefully explained, the Robins did not have "the resources of a Chelsea exchequer behind them."

At the end of the season, a run of seven wins between 19 February and 27 April had boosted the club to a creditable third place in its first Southern League campaign. Added to this, the club also achieved sixth place in the South Eastern League; a league comprised mainly of the reserve sides of clubs in the Football League and the top flight of the Southern League. However, in the United League, it needed two late wins for the Robins to avoid the wooden spoon, although it is difficult to evaluate performances in this league, as the strength of the sides put out by the clubs varied greatly from game to game. All in all, it had been a successful first professional season. At the end of the season, the club sought election, as opposed to promotion, to Division One of the Southern League and, in an effort to demonstrate the validity of its claim, two end of season home friendlies were arranged against clubs from Division One; Crystal Palace and Watford. The Robins lost 3-2 to Crystal Palace in front of a crowd of 6,000, but made amends the following day by comprehensively beating Watford 5-1. In March, the Croydon Guardian had reported:

The burning question in local football circles is "Will the Robins gain admission to the First Division of the Southern League?". The directors are preparing for admission and the definite promises of support already obtained make things look very rosy. The directors are anxious to provide Croydon with an up-to-date athletic ground where first class football, cricket and kindred sports may be witnessed. To this end, the directors have secured the option to purchase a freehold site in Whitehorse Road at £4,500, of which there is building land to the value of £1,300, making the price of the football ground £3,200. It is proposed to form a limited liability company, with a capital of £7,500, divided as follows: 4,500 debentures and 6,000 ordinary shares at 10s a share. The directors at present are Messrs G.T. Hall (chairman), G. Rose, W. Harris, F. Ward, F. Field and Dr Scott, with three others to be elected. Prospectuses will be issued shortly and it is absolutely necessary that no time be lost in proceeding to allotment. Any further information may be obtained from Mr. J.W. Bartlett at 69 Limes Road, Croydon, who will be glad to hear from anyone interested in the scheme.

It is unclear whether the subscription was any more successful than that for the previous ill fated Croydon Town venture; however, The Croydon Common Football and Athletic Company Limited was registered in July 1908.

1908-09

The 1908-09 season began with a major setback when the application to join Division One of the Southern League was unsuccessful. There were five vacancies available; three arising from the resignation of Tottenham Hotspur, Queens Park Rangers and Bradford Park Avenue to join Division Two of the Football League and two created to replace Leyton and New Brompton who had finished in the bottom two places the previous season. Seven clubs had originally applied for the five places; Leyton, New Brompton (now Gillingham), Southend United (the reigning champions of Division Two), Coventry City, Exeter City, Croydon Common and Hastings & St. Leonards United, although the last of these withdrew its application prior to the AGM at which the vote would be held. At the Southern League's AGM at the Charterhouse Hotel in London on 29 May 1908, Queens Park Rangers withdrew its resignation, but was nevertheless expelled from the League; with the press reporting that the reason was that the Southern League "were determined that their body should not be made a nursery group or stepping stone to other competitions". When the votes were cast, the result was Exeter City 33 votes, Leyton 32, New Brompton 31, Southend United 26, Coventry City 26 and Croydon Common just 10. The Athletic News reported that Bartlett had not assisted the Robins' cause by his comment that "matters were not very well advanced at the club" but, in a reply published the following week, he denied that he had said such a thing. He went on to strongly hint that the election of what he called "strangers" at the expense of a "loyal Southern League team" was due to the Common's interest in the proposed Division Three of the Football League. The club had earlier applied to join the proposed new third tier, along with thirteen other clubs, but by 17 June it had withdrawn its application with the stated aim of utilising all of its energies to gain admission to Division One of the Southern League and, in the end, the new division was not introduced until several years later.

On 22 June, the Southern League held a special general meeting at the Charterhouse Hotel to consider the possible expansion of Division One and the applications from Queens Park Rangers and Croydon Common to join the expanded division. The meeting decided that the division should be expanded to 21 teams, with a separate motion to expand it to 22 teams being lost, with the result that only one of the applicants could be successful. Croydon Common opposed the election of the West London club, but it was elected 32 votes to 1. However, also in June, the club was paid the compliment of election to the Western League in direct competition from New Brompton, Exeter City and Brighton & Hove Albion; with the place having arisen as a result of the expulsion of Tottenham Hotspur. As the club proposed to also compete in the same three leagues that it had contested in 1907-08, it was faced with a fixture list of mammoth proportions as a result. As it turned out, the club was to play a total of more than eighty games during the season and, on several occasions, two fixtures fell on the same day.

During the close season the club took over its new ground in Selhurst Road, immediately opposite Selhurst Station, which was promptly nicknamed The Nest. The lease was signed on 15 September 1908; the parties being The Croydon Common Football and Athletic Company Limited, The London Brighton and South Coast Railway Company and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners for England. The reason for three parties to the lease was that the Church Commissioners actually owned the land and the Railway had leased it from them; therefore the club was subleasing it from the Railway. The lease stipulated that the ground could only be used for soccer or athletics or for "the holding of Flower Shows and School treats". As the ground was owned by the Church, the lease also prohibited its use for any purposes on Good Friday or Christmas Day and so the club played only away fixtures on these particular days and therefore missed out on the increased level of revenue that matches on these days provided. Prior to the new season, the banking around the ground was enlarged and a small stand built. The Croydon Advertiser reported that the playing area was 120 yards x 75 yards, although these measurements must have included the space around the pitch as well. Once the work had been completed, it was reported that the ground was able to hold 15,000, although another report suggested it could comfortably accommodate 8,000 to 10,000. Simultaneously, the club was being floated as a limited company, although not on the large scale of the previously unsuccessful Croydon Town company.

Before the season started, Bartlett took steps to strengthen the squad and several new players were brought in, including four former internationals; half backs Sam Wolstenholme (from Blackburn Rovers) and Harry Hadley (from Southampton), goalkeeper Robert Evans (also from Blackburn Rovers) and John Lewis (from Southampton). The first two had each been capped for England and the other two had appeared for Wales.

The highlight of the season turned out to be an F.A. Cup run that saw the club defeat Farncombe, West Norwood, 1st. Grenadier Guards, Nunhead and Northfleet in order to earn an away tie at Bradford Park Avenue of Division Two of the Football League in the 4th Qualifying Round. A small band of Croydonians made the journey north for the game, paying an all-in price of 11 shillings. This was advertised as a special price but, when compared to the average working man's wage at the time, it seems expensive, although a win would have made the trip worthwhile. A crowd of 4,500 saw Croydon Common score in the first half, but an injury reduced the team to ten men and the home side levelled after a spell of heavy pressure. However, the Robins refused to give in and, shortly before the end, Nixon scored a second to secure a memorable victory. Even allowing for the fact that Bradford Park Avenue only finished sixteenth out of the twenty clubs in Division Two that season, the win was a fine achievement and it showed what the first choice side was capable of doing. Apparently, a fair sized crowd gathered to meet the team on its return to East Croydon Station that evening, although one wonders how news of the win got around given that there was no radio or television. The reward for the win was a home tie with Woolwich Arsenal of Division One of the Football League in the 1st Round Proper. The club had arrived in the big time. Shortly before the trip to Bradford, again on a November evening, the stand at The Nest burned down and the locals must have wondered whether this was to be an annual event. Whether or not it was insured is not recorded, but hopefully the club had learned its lesson from the fire at The Crescent the previous season.

Following the win at Bradford Park Avenue, the club deliberated whether or not to hold the upcoming F.A. Cup tie with Woolwich Arsenal at The Nest, as an attendance in excess of the ground's maximum capacity of 15,000 was anticipated. Woolwich Arsenal were keen to host the game, and they even made an offer of £200 for the opportunity, but the offer was rejected. Finally, it was decided to stage the match at the Crystal Palace, the venue for the F.A. Cup Final itself, and the decision was shown to be correct when around 20,000 turned up on the day. When the match took place, the Robins took a surprise lead, only to see their opponents strike back almost from the kick off. In the end, no more goals were scored, but the Robins had their chances to clinch the game and were well worth the 1-1 draw. The fitness of goalkeeper Evans had been in doubt right up to the start, as he was suffering from 'flu, and at half time, Dr. Scott, the club's medical officer, apparently gave him a dose of strychnine to keep him going. After the match, the neutral press, and the Arsenal officials and team, were full of praise for the quality of the Robins' play. The replay took place the following Wednesday at Woolwich Arsenal's Plumstead ground before a crowd of 15,000 and, for the final seventy eight minutes of the match, the Robins again held their own. The only problem was that Woolwich Arsenal had scored twice in the first twelve minutes and so the dream was over for the club and its fans.

Overall, the season was very successful. In addition to the cup run, the club comfortably won the Southern League Division Two title and, as a result, gained promotion to the top tier. In addition, and despite fielding reserve sides in numerous matches, it had also come a creditable sixth in Division One of the South Eastern League. It also managed to achieve mid-table placings in the United League and Western League, in which clubs often put out strong sides. The club had endeavoured to put out full strength teams when playing at home, with the result that its composite league record at The Nest that season was impressive; played 35, won 26, drew 6 and lost 3, with 123 goals scored and only 30 conceded.

Towards the end of the 1908-09 season, the Football League again considered the creation of a Division Three and an approach had been made to the Southern League to ask it to nominate eighteen clubs to become the newly created division. However, the Southern League clubs met formally and adopted a resolution that the Football League should be requested to accept all twenty clubs from Division One of their league and, as Croydon Common had just won promotion, they would have been included within that number.

The proposal to create another division was discussed at the Football League's meeting in Manchester on Friday 7 May 1909. Under the rules of the league, the plan required acceptance by three quarters of its membership of forty clubs. However, it appeared that acceptance of the plan would be a formality as, only a year before, all forty clubs had unanimously requested the Management Committee to take steps to form another division. Shortly before the meeting, sixteen clubs in Division One of the Southern League met unofficially, and in secret, and voted to nominate themselves to the Football League as sixteen of the eighteen clubs originally requested. This would have left the Football League to decide who should be granted the other two positions, with both Stoke and Lincoln City as keen applicants. The four clubs left out in the cold by this move were New Brompton, Southend United, Watford and Croydon Common. One of the reasons for the exclusion of the Robins from this select group was said to be the poor condition of the playing surface at The Nest, supposedly at the instigation of Crystal Palace. This caused the Croydon Advertiser to write "It is said that the opposition to the Common's ground originated with the Palace Club, the directors of which ought surely to have known that the present pitch was only a temporary one ... Palace have found a lot of support in Croydon, and if the rumour of their opposition be correct they have certainly returned evil for good." The Surrey Echo's opinion of the action of the other clubs was well illustrated by a cartoon entitled "Marooned!" which appeared on its front page on 26 April 1909; it showed a robin standing on a rock called "second rate football" and waving goodbye to a well manned dinghy called "Southern League" heading out to a ship anchored offshore. The caption explained to readers that "The Clubs of the Southern League propose to join a Third League from which Croydon Common is excluded".

Croydon Common sent two directors to the Football League meeting to oversee the club's interests, but in the end the plan for another division failed to receive the necessary number of votes and so it was dropped. Following the failure of the Football League's plan, the Southern League reverted to its usual format and Croydon Common took its place in Division One. The club was no doubt mindful of the fixture congestion of the previous season, as this was the full extent of its league commitment. During the close season, a number of key players left the club, although the local press did not record the reasons for this exodus in advance of the club's first season in Division One of the Southern League. Bartlett set about finding replacements and brought in a number of experienced professionals, including former Bolton Wanderers F.A. Cup finalist William Yenson from West Ham United and Welsh international winger Albert Hodgkinson from Southampton. As Welsh international goalkeeper Robert Evans was one of those who left the club, Bob Hewitson, who had assisted Tottenham Hotspur to achieve promotion from Division Two of the Football League the previous season, was brought in as a replacement. The club was to have a strange record with goalkeepers; for the first six seasons of its professional life it changed its regular goalkeeper each season, even though the local newspaper reports suggest that each of them played satisfactorily. It was not until future Arsenal and England international goalkeeper Ernie Williamson arrived in 1913, and played for the final three seasons of the club's life, that any degree of goalkeeping stability was achieved.

1909-10

The club's first campaign in the top flight of the Southern League started with a 5-1 defeat away to Leyton and this set the scene for the season, although two wins in the next two matches against Exeter City at The Nest and away to Millwall flattered to deceive. Ten games without a win followed, including the previously mentioned 10-0 defeat at Northampton Town, before another win was achieved in late November; 2-0 over Norwich City at The Nest. The Robins failed to score in seven of those ten games without a win and so it was clear that the side was proving to be too lightweight up front. Added to which, the defence was not covering itself with glory either, with the result that those ten games produced a record of scored 5 and conceded 37. During the poor run, the club also lost 7-1 at Tottenham Hotspur in the London Cup, with pioneering black player Walter Tull scoring one of the Spurs' goals. The week before the win over Norwich City that ended the poor run of performances in the league, the Robins commenced their F.A. Cup campaign with a 2-2 home draw with Northfleet and then won the replay 3-1 four days later. However, they were eliminated 1-0 by Leyton in the next round; with the local press incensed that two apparently good goals had been disallowed. It was around this time that the same newspapers were reporting that the club was about to appoint a full time manager and then it was announced that Nat Whittaker, who had just resigned as Honorary Secretary of the Southern League, had been given the role.

It appears that the poor form on the pitch was being matched by the club's financial position. In December, the Croydon Common Football and Athletic Company Limited held its AGM in the presence of 138 shareholders. A number of them complained that the company's accounts, which had only recently been sent to them in preparation for the AGM, showed such a poor financial position that they should have been made aware of it much earlier. Later in the meeting, there was a curious altercation between Mr Rose, one of the company's directors, and Cllr. Peet of the company's auditors, Brown Peet and Tilly. Mr Rose asked how Cllr. Peet could have satisfied himself as to the proof of receipt of the income due to the company and the resultant discussion grew quite heated. Reading the comprehensive press accounts of the meeting, one draws the distinct impression that he was implying that fraud had occurred. Finally, Mr Rose asked the board to accept his resignation, but he was persuaded to stay in office. The meeting first passed a resolution that Nat Whittaker should be given full authority to select the club's sides and then, after further discussion, the shareholders voted to accept the accounts. However, clearly all was not well with the company.

At the turn of the year, the club was languishing in penultimate place and there it was destined to stay, as results did not improve. Things were not much better off the pitch either and, in February, following a 3-2 home defeat to Luton Town which was played in gale force winds, and which saw scuffles around the referee after the game because he had disallowed what would have been a last minute equaliser, the roof of the main stand was blown off and it ended up 200 yards further down Selhurst Road. Strangely, the same gale blew down the bell tower of St. Luke's Mission Church, the birthplace of the amateur Croydon Common club. It was around this time that the Croydon press reported that the club was seeking a new manager and an advertisement appeared in the Athletic News inviting applications for the post of manager, or player manager, as from the start of the next season. A few days later, it was announced that full back Dave Gardner would be taking over the role from Nat Whittaker on an interim basis for the remainder of the year. This appointment was well received in the local press; Gardner, who had won an international cap with Scotland and had been a former member of the all conquering Newcastle United side of the early 1900s, was a popular player with the crowd at The Nest. Unfortunately, his appointment did not change the club's fortunes on the pitch and it ended the season in penultimate place.

With two sides being relegated, it appeared that the club was destined to spend only one year in the top flight; however, there was one last hope of staying in Division One. The penultimate place in the division had only become a relegation place because the Southern League had proposed the reduction of Division One from twenty two clubs to twenty. For obvious reasons, the proposal did not meet with the approval of Reading, who had finished in bottom place, and they had proposed a motion that the plan be dropped. However, at a meeting of the league's Management Committee at the Imperial Hotel in May 1910, this alternative motion was defeated and the original plan accepted. Croydon Common were back in Division Two.

It was a shame that the club could not manage to avoid the drop. Had it done so, it may have consolidated its position and thereafter remained in Division One, possibly even attained Football League status along with the other clubs then in the Southern League top flight. The club was struggling to survive from season to season and the additional revenue derived from the larger gates in Division One would most probably have made the difference in the long term, given that all the other clubs, except Leyton, in Division One of the Southern League that season became established Football League clubs. The financial benefits of playing in the higher division were clear to see. Despite an unsuccessful season, the average attendances at The Nest were still larger than in the successful previous season. The Christmas game with Reading produced the largest recorded crowd at the ground (12,000), while other large crowds saw the matches with Crystal Palace (10,000), Queens Park Rangers (9,000) and New Brompton (8,000), with several other games attracting crowds of over 5,000.

1910-11

By the start of the 1910-11 season, the advertisement for a new manager had seen the appointment of Alexander Tait, the then manager of Leyton. Sandy Tait, as he was known, had been the left back of the Tottenham Hotspur side that, as a Southern League club, had won the F.A. Cup in the 1900-01 season. He was also a former Scottish international. By all accounts, he was none too pleased to arrive at the club and discover that the directors had committed the Robins to a season of virtually eighty matches. No doubt keen to maximise gate revenue, the directors had enrolled the club in Division Two of the Southern League, Division One of the South Eastern League and Division One of the London League, although one would have thought that the fixture congestion of 1908-09 might still have been fresh in their minds. Fortunately, some of the pressure on available dates was removed when Burton United and Hastings & St. Leonards United withdrew from the Southern League.

Sandy Tait soon set about recruiting new players, with the result that yet again the Robins began a new season with a team bearing little resemblance to that which ended the previous one. One of his first signings was Arthur Box, a goalkeeper who had previously played for Birmingham and Stoke, and so the curious habit of changing the custodian every season continued. Also signed were outside left Fred Fenton (Swindon Town), inside forward William Silor (West Ham United), half back Sidney Morrison (Leyton) and inside forward Sam Bacon (Norwich City). The best news for the supporters was that old favourite Percy Barnfather had returned to the club after his one season away with Norwich City. However, as it turned out, the best signing was relatively unknown local boy Robert Thomson. Thompson, who only had one eye following a firework accident as a child, went on to score 51 goals for the club in 62 appearances that season. Unfortunately, his scoring prowess came to the attention of Chelsea where, following his transfer at the end of the season, he had a very successful career, including an appearance for the Blues in the 1915 F.A. Cup final. In fact, Chelsea didn't stop there that season and also enticed Jack Harrow from the Robins. Harrow, also a local boy, had joined the Robins three years previously and had made over 70 appearances in that time. He was to prove a significant success with the Blues; he captained the club for several years from left back and, when he retired after 15 seasons at Stamford Bridge, he had made over 400 appearances for the club, including playing in the 1915 F.A. Cup final. He also played twice for England in 1923. One wonders what Croydon Common might have achieved had it be able to hang on to such players, but its parlous financial position meant that it needed to listen to offers for its best players.

The season was not a particularly successful one, in that the club only achieved middle of the table finishes in all three leagues that it contested. However, the club enjoyed a run in the F.A. Cup, where a 7-0 win over London Caledonians, followed by a 3-1 victory over Workington, earned an away tie at Grimsby Town in the 1st Round Proper. According to the Croydon newspapers, not the most impartial of sources, the Robins outplayed Grimsby Town on the day, but were beaten by the over-physical play of their opponents. Whatever the truth of the matter, Grimsby Town won 3-0.

However, the tie was far from over. On returning South, the club submitted a protest to the Football Association on two counts; firstly that the Robins had to wait out in the cold for a full ten minutes after the second half was due to start while the home team restudded its boots and secondly because a linesman had handed over his flag to a Grimsby Town official twelve minutes from the end of the match because he had to catch a train. The appeal was considered by the Football Association at a special meeting and the game was ordered to be replayed, although it would appear that the appeal succeeded only on the aspect of the unauthorised extension to the half time interval. Unfortunately, the Football Association instructed that the tie had to be replayed on or before the following Thursday, which not only left insufficient time to get some key players fit after their injuries in the first match, but also caused a problem as there was a scheduled league fixture on the Wednesday. In the end, the club must have wished that it had not appealed as the replayed game resulted in an 8-1 defeat.

When the season had finished, the local press reported that Sandy Tait would be leaving the club, although no reason was given for his departure, and that either Dave Gardner would be taking over or John Bartlett would be returning. In the end, it was the second of these scenarios that occurred. Bartlett quickly set about finding new players and, by the time that the 1911-12 season had started, the first team bore little resemblance to that of the previous year. Once again the goalkeeper was changed, with Ted Price arriving from Stockport County, and also joining the club was William Wooldridge, a centre half who had captained Wolverhampton Wanderers to victory in the 1908 F.A. Cup final. No doubt learning from the previous season, the club only entered the Southern League and the South Eastern League.

1911-12

Once again, the season was hardly successful; the club was in eleventh place out of 14 teams in Division Two of the Southern League and only mid table in Division One of the South Eastern League. Its cause was not helped by putting out unsettled sides which saw 38 players used in league matches before the turn of the year. One high spot of the season was the club's record away win, 12-2 at Chesham Town in the southern League, which was apposite given that the club's record home win of 14-0 had been achieved against the same team in the same competition the previous season. In the F.A. Cup, the Robins entered at the 4th Qualifying Round stage and were trailing 2-0 at New Brompton when the match was abandoned due to bad light. Taking full advantage of the second chance, the club won the replay 2-1 four days later to set up a home tie with Ripley Town Athletic, which was won 4-1 to put the club into the 1st Round Proper for the third time. The opponents on this occasion were Leicester Fosse, then in Division Two of the Football League, and when the tie was played at The Nest, the Robins let a two goal lead slip and the match ended in a 2-2 draw. The Robins were made to pay for missing their chance first time around when, in the replay played in fog, Leicester Fosse won 6-1.

By the time that the season was drawing to a close, the club's desperate financial situation had grown worse and the full extent of the problem was revealed when the club admitted that the players "have had very little money recently" and it publicly thanked them for their patience. Apparently, some of the directors had been lending money to the club to keep it going. Adding to the club's problems, or perhaps because of them, rumours started to circulate about Crystal Palace's interest in acquiring The Nest. Around this time, it was announced that John Bartlett would be stepping down as manager at the end of the campaign and that he would be succeeded by John Bowman. Bowman, had both played for, and managed, Norwich City and he had also played four seasons for Queens Park Rangers, a club he would also later manage. As it turned out, he would manage Croydon Common for the remainder of its life.

1912-13

At the start of the new season it looked as if Bowman might not have a club to manage. The Daily News and Leader dated 8 August 1912 stated that unless £200 could be found immediately "there would be no Croydon Common F.C. within 24 hours". Fortunately, the club was able to survive until a public meeting could be held on the following Tuesday at the Pembroke Hall; site of the professional club's inaugural public meeting back in 1907. Many personalities from the football world were present and the roll call read like a Who's Who of the Southern League scene. In addition, numerous local politicians and dignitaries attended. The club chairman told the meeting that £300 needed to be raised immediately and that most of that amount was required for players' salaries which were in arrear. As before, he made a plea to the local transport companies and shopkeepers, begging them to consider the extra trade that the club brought to Croydon. There then followed many fine words from those on the platform, often not to the point judging by the reports in the local press, and then finally the hat was passed around. A number of the other clubs in the Southern League, such as West Ham United and Crystal Palace, donated £5 each and John Bartlett sent a telegram promising £3 from Leicester Fosse, where he was now manager. The final total raised at the meeting was £86. Although this figure was well below the £200 supposedly required, the club somehow managed to continue into the new season.

Despite its financial worries, John Bowman took a squad to Sweden for the club's first pre-season tour, during which six matches were played during just nine days; with three wins and three draws being achieved.

A number of new players had been signed for the new campaign and, once again, the squad had changed greatly during the close season; with the annual change of goalkeeper bringing in both Thomas Newton (from Blaydon United) and F. Matthews from Queens Park Rangers. One significant signing was Billy Bushell, the former Norwich City and Luton Town half-back, who would play regularly for the club for the remainder of its life. Also returning for a third spell with the club was Percy Barnfather. Once again, only two leagues would be contested; the Southern League and the newly formed Southern Football Alliance.

In the end, the 1912-13 season proved to be successful in that the club came a creditable fourth in Division Two of the Southern League and were champions of the Southern Football Alliance. Given that the latter league was contested by clubs of the calibre of Cardiff City, Portsmouth, Southampton, Brighton & Hove Albion and Brentford, amongst others, winning it was no mean feat. In the F.A. Cup, a 3-0 home win over Oxford City and a 2-0 home win over Luton Town, meant that the Robins again reached the 1st Round Proper ... and a rematch with Woolwich Arsenal of Division One of the Football League. Unlike four seasons earlier, the tie was not switched to another venue, but was held at The Nest. Although it is impossible to say whether or not this was the reason, the attendance was only 7,500 as compared to the 20,000 that had watched the corresponding tie four years before. However, what had not changed was the fact that the Robins were not outplayed by their illustrious opponents and thoroughly deserved the 0-0 draw that was achieved. The replay took place four days later and by all accounts the Arsenal pitch was in a very uneven condition. By half time Arsenal were two goals up, but a second half rally nearly saw the Robins salvage a draw. The turning point of the match came when, with the score still at 2-0, Croydon Common had the ball in the net only to see the effort ruled out for offside. Even then the Robins were not finished and goalkeeper Newton scored one from the penalty spot to set up a thrilling finish, but Woolwich Arsenal hung on for a 2-1 win.

An interesting side note is that, in March 1913, the club signed Herbert Kingaby from Peterborough City; he was a much travelled player and had been the subject of a legal test case less than a year before. In 1906, he had signed for Aston Villa, but had failed to settle and so wished to move on. Understandably Aston Villa wished to recoup its £300 investment, but no other club wanted him at that price. However, as long as Aston Villa paid him the maximum £4 per week he could not move to another Football League club, so instead he joined Fulham in the Southern League. This course of action was possible because at that time there was no reciprocal transfer agreement between the two leagues and therefore Aston Villa received no transfer fee from Fulham. A little later he moved to Leyton at a wage of £2 per week, but at least he was playing. However, in 1910, the Football League and the Southern League reached agreement on the recognition of transfers and Kingaby found that he was still on Aston Villa's transfer list at £350. He could not now stay in the Southern League and so he moved to Peterborough City in the South Eastern League, at a weekly wage of only thirty shillings. Finally, the matter became a legal test case between the Players' Union and the Football League and it went to court in March 1912. Kingaby claimed that Aston Villa had deprived him of his livelihood by their "preposterous" valuation but, after hearing his side of the story, the Judge threw out the claim without even hearing Aston Villa's defence. It was a bitter blow for the Players' Union, which had to bear costs of £1,000, and it was not until fifty years later that someone else challenged the "retain and transfer" system.

Another interesting side note is that, during the season, 10 of the 13 clubs in Division Two of the Southern League were based in Wales; along with Croydon Common, only Luton Town and Southend United were from England. This situation was repeated the following year when 12 of the 16 clubs in the division were from Wales. This geographical bias caused excessive travelling costs for the English clubs and so the Southern League reputedly met a share of their expenses, with each club receiving £100 per season plus £15 per month to help defray the costs; money that was doubtless vitally important to perennially cash strapped Croydon Common.

1913-14

If Bowman's first season was a success, his second would prove to be even more successful. Prior to the start of the season, the club announced that it would be again undertaking a foreign pre-season tour; this time to Bohemia, which is now part of the Czech Republic. However, the tour did not take place, most probably due to a lack of funds. This subject was high on the agenda at the annual meeting of shareholders held at The Nest in early July 1913. The press report of the meeting included some interesting items; for example: the players had been paid every Wednesday from money lent by the directors against the gate on the following Saturday, the club had insured the life of John Bowman, and that the deficit of £691 on the year could have been turned to profit if two particular players had been sold, but the Board did not wish to do so. Who were these two such valuable players? Alas, it was not stated at the meeting.

For once there was no wholesale change of personnel during the close season and the stability of the squad from the old season to the new would pay dividends by the end of the campaign. The most significant signing was that of Ernie Williamson (from Wingate Albion), given that his arrival ended the annual "goalie-go-round" at the club. He would remain for the final three seasons of the club's life and his abilities between the posts are evident not only from the reports of the Robins' matches, but also his later appearances for Arsenal and England. The club again elected to take part in just the Southern League and the Southern Football Alliance.

In the Southern League, the Robins' started well and soon hit the top of the table, where they remained until the end of the season. The closest challenge came from Luton Town and, with just four games left, it looked like the Robins would not be caught; however, they nearly managed to let it slip. The 27th match of the campaign was an away fixture on Good Friday at Abertillery and, with the Welsh club in the bottom half of the table, it did not look a daunting one. However, the Welsh side scored from a penalty after just three minutes and eventually won 3-1 to take the club's unbeaten record. Nevertheless, the Robins held their nerve and won the next two matches to take the title with a game to spare and earn the club another chance to play in Division One of the Southern League. These two wins, including a victory over third placed Brentford, must have been a great relief given that the final game of the season was ... away to Luton Town. Mathematically, the Hatters could still have won the title but, given the significant difference in the goal averages of the two clubs (not goal difference in those days), they would have needed a 42-0 win to do so. In the end, they managed a 2-1 win to condemn the Robins to only their second defeat of the campaign. Ironically, if the title had been decided on goal difference, Luton Town would have been the champions.

The club also had a moderately successful campaign in the Southern Football Alliance, but three defeats in the final six matches meant that it had to settle for third place behind Brighton & Hove Albion and ... Luton Town. The season's rivalry between the Robins and the Hatters did not end there either, as they were drawn together in the 4th Qualifying Round of the F.A. Cup; a match that ended in a 3-0 away defeat for Croydon Common.

Although the defeat to Luton Town in the Southern League was the club's final competitive fixture for the season, it was not the last game. On 2 May, the club visited northern France to play a friendly against Rouen, then known locally as the Little Red Devils. With a display described by the local French newspaper as "a complete demonstration of good football" Croydon Common, playing in unfamiliar pale blue, overwhelmed Rouen 6-0. A translation of the French match report appeared in the Croydon Advertiser and it was prosaic in the extreme, giving the impression that the Robins were the epitome of footballing skill.

A few days later, a celebratory dinner was held at The Greyhound in Croydon, which was attended by the board of directors, club officials, the players and a number of guests. Included within this last category were officials from Tottenham Hotspur and Reading and the Mayor of Croydon who led the proceedings. As one might expect, there were many congratulatory speeches, much back slapping and copious talk of the success that would be achieved in Division One, although it is interesting to note that the £275 bonus promised to the players had not been raised in time and they had to be content with the promise of future payment; however, it was never reported as to whether the money ever materialised. John Bowman had certainly made his mark at the club and the season was to be the most successful in the professional club's history. There is no doubt that his practice of fielding a settled side in the Southern League, with only 15 players used for 30 matches, had paid dividends and was a major factor in the championship win. In defence, the full back partnership of Arthur Hutchins (later of Arsenal) and Jack Little (later of Arsenal and Crystal Palace) played a significant part in the club's success, although it was the arrival of goalkeeper Ernie Williamson that was the final piece in that particular jigsaw. The half back line of William Yenson, Billy Bushell and Bob Nash was solid yet constructive and all the forwards proved to be effective; with Percy Page's 29 goals making him the first prolific leader of the attack since Robert Thomson. As virtually all of the first team squad had immediately re-signed for the forthcoming season, John Bowman had good cause to feel confident about the return to Division One.

1914-15

Just three weeks before the new season was due to start, Europe was plunged into war and the conflict was to hang over the whole season. With hindsight it seems unbelievable that the fixtures were allowed to continue but, at the start of the war, it was widely thought that "it would be all over by Christmas". At a meeting shortly before the season was due to start, the Southern League adopted a resolution stating "We are unanimously of the opinion that it would be advantageous for the games to go on during the coming season in the ordinary way."

Following promotion the Robins would once again contest Division One of the Southern League and, given the exploits during the previous season, the side must have looked forward to the new campaign with confidence. John Bowman had signed several extra players to the squad during the close season, although Sam Downing (from Chelsea) and Jack Peart (from Arsenal) were the only seasoned professionals who had played at a senior level; the latter having played against the Robins in the titanic F.A. Cup ties two seasons before. However, the greatest effect on the composition of the squad was to be caused by the enlistment of several players. After the first month of the war, the club reportedly had more players in the services than any other professional club in the country; these included Thomas Ellison who was to become the only Robin to be killed while with the club. When the Footballers' Battalions were formed in 1916 (initially the 17th Battalion Middlesex Regiment and later the 23rd Battalion), a number of Croydon players joined up, including Percy Barnfather, Cyril Smith, Charles Stewart, Ernie Williamson, Dick Upex and Albert Tomkins. Percy Barnfather was to have a distinguished war record, rising from the ranks to being an acting Captain and also winning the Military Cross.

At the start of the season the supporters were given cause for concern by a rumour that the London Brighton and South Coast Railway had given the club's directors notice that it wished to take back the site of the ground, although John Bowman denied that this was the case. On the other hand, the landlord did decline to give permission for improvements to the stand designed to allow accommodation for 5,000, but events were to prove that this was probably for the best anyway.

Football began in earnest with a preseason practice match in front of 3,000 spectators at The Nest. The proceeds were donated to the Prince of Wales' Relief Fund; the then princely total of £26.11s.5d. After the game, Councillor Peet of the club's Bonus Fund Committee distributed the balance of the previous season's fund to the players; the hoped for sum of £250 had not been raised and the figure available for distribution was just £114, with first team regulars receiving £9 each and the principal reserves just £2. The jingoistic feelings of the period are amply demonstrated by Councillor Peet's speech thereafter, in which he mentioned the absence of some players who had joined up, saying that it was "more than a pious hope that, if they could not shoot goals for the Common, they would shoot Germans instead." Apparently this wish was met with much applause.

The season was not a successful one. Only Division One of the Southern League was contested and it was not until the seventh match that the club registered a win; 2-0 at home to Southampton. Shortly after, an 8-1 win over Gillingham suggested that a corner may have been turned, but it was not to be and it was followed by a run of two draws and six defeats.

The season carried on in the same vein, with only periodic wins interrupting the run of defeats and occasional draws; although a 5-1 win away at local rivals Crystal Palace in March doubtless temporarily raised the mood. In the F.A. Cup, a 4-0 home win over Barnet Alston, following surrender of home advantage by the junior club, in the 6th Qualifying Round resulted in a home tie with Oldham Athletic in the 1st Round Proper. The Lancashire club was, at that point in the season, leading Division One of the Football League and it eventually finished the season in second place behind Everton. Given the gulf in status, it was not surprising that the Robins went down to a 3-0 defeat and, to make matters worse, the attendance for the match was only 7,000. The club had hoped for a money-spinning gate of around double that size, but torrential rain prior to the match probably put many off attending.

In the end, the club finished in penultimate place in the league and so the second campaign in the top flight of the Southern League had ended in relegation ... or had it?

1915-16

When the 1914-15 season ended, it looked as if the club had been relegated back to Division Two of the Southern League. However, during the close season, it appeared that the club was to be thrown a lifeline in that the Southern League was considering expanding Division One to 22 clubs, which would have meant both Gillingham and Croydon Common remaining in the top flight. In the end, the proposed expansion was not effected until after the war. By the time that the new season was ready to begin, all the major leagues had bowed to public pressure and discontinued their programmes. However, it was felt that some football should be played, if only as a general distraction and public morale booster. Given the difficulties that travel caused in wartime, the general consensus of opinion was that regional competitions were the answer and so, in the capital and home counties, the London Combination was begun. This new league initially started with five clubs from the Football League and seven from the Southern League although, in the second half of the season, two further Southern League clubs (Luton Town and Reading) joined the competition. The club ran no reserve side in 1915-16.

At its meeting in mid-July, the Football Association resolved that organised wartime football could go ahead, but only in accordance with the following: that there should be no cups or medals awarded in any competition; that all games should take place on Saturday afternoons, early closing days or established holidays; that players should not be paid for appearing; and that all player contracts should be suspended. Every professional club was allowed to nominate which of its players it wished to consider as retained and Croydon Common named 84 players on its retained list. Given that it also placed 18 others on the transfer list, one wonders who the 102 could have been. The club's action in putting quite so many on the retained list drew a fairly strong comment from the Athletic News, which said "Reluctant as we are to offer any comment at this time on the action of the clubs, Croydon Common's figures are startling. The action of the leagues ... gave clubs the right to put on the retain list the players in their employ without offering terms. How can a club justify placing 84 names on the retain list? The figures returned by some clubs are a scandal." The war and the new rules meant that there was little transfer activity during the close season.

The newly formed London Combination comprised two separate competitions; the Principal Tournament with the original twelve clubs playing in one league, which ran from September 1915 to January 1916, and the Supplementary Tournament with the, by now, increased number of clubs playing in two leagues of seven. The latter tournament, which ran from February 1916 to the end of the season, was odd in that each club only played the seven in the other group; i.e. they did not play against the clubs in the league table in which they themselves appeared. Croydon Common fared badly in the first tournament and finished in last place with just 11 points from the 22 matches played. Worse for the long term future of the club was that the home matches were only watched by small crowds; for example, only 500 turned up to see the game with local rivals Crystal Palace. It was also strange that, given that the club had apparently retained 84 players, it appeared to have difficulty fielding eleven men – with this problem coming to a head when only eight players made the trip to Watford, with the result that the side had to be completed by manager John Bowman, trainer Dave Gardner and assistant trainer Charlie Hollidge.

However, the club fared better in the second tournament and finished in the middle of the table. The season finished with an incredible 10-1 win over Reading at The Nest, with Albert Goodman scoring five goals, and a 1-1 draw away at Clapton Orient. Little did the players and supporters know, but the final match of the season was to be the club's final match ever.

The End

As the summer of 1916 passed by, the Common's supporters must have wondered what was happening. In previous years the local newspapers had kept them informed, albeit not very well, about the comings and goings at the club during the close season. Yet in the summer of 1916, the press made no mention of the Robins.

The first indication that all was not well came in August, with the press reports of the annual meeting of the London Combination held on 4 August at Winchester House in Old Broad Street. All fourteen clubs were due to be represented at the meeting, but only thirteen were present. The absentee was Croydon Common, who sent a telegram of apology. In reporting this, Nestor, the Croydon Advertiser's football correspondent, asked the directors to explain what was happening and pointed out that a conspiracy of silence was having a bad effect on the club's supporters.

However, worse was to come and, on 26 August 1916, Nestor announced that he had heard that the club was folding. In a scathing article that roundly criticised the directors for repeatedly wasting the opportunities that came the club's way, and for often taking decisions on the basis of selfish motives, he explained that the club had lost The Nest, although it was only later that it became clear that this was because of defaults in the rent payments. While the major elements of his attack might have been based upon fact, it is difficult to see how Nestor could state that "Financially the Common has had much better support than accorded to many other Southern League teams. Shortly afterwards, Nestor received the following letter from the club's Chairman, Robert Clark:

You will no doubt have heard that the club do not intend to take any part in the London Combination this season, and perhaps you would like to know the reasons. The directors carefully considered the matter, and came to the conclusion before referred to, on the following grounds:

- *Mr. Bowman is engaged on work which makes it very difficult for him to give any time or attention to football, and it would not be right of the directors to request him to give up his present occupation.*
- *There will be great difficulty in raising a good team, not only in this particular instance but in other cases. It would be no use playing unless an attractive game could be guaranteed.*
- *With so many of the club's players fighting for their country, and some having been killed and wounded, there is no inclination to enjoy football at the moment.*
- *It would be necessary for the directors to raise considerable funds, and they feel it would be useless for them to appeal for the same under existing conditions when money is required for purposes other than sport.*

I hope that it will be possible to commence the season 1917-18 under normal conditions, and that we shall again enjoy good sport at The Nest. I may mention that several of our well-known supporters have remarked that the directors have adopted the proper course.

Whilst points 3 and 4 were possibly valid, although no first team player had been killed, the first two were patently spurious. Firstly, if John Bowman was unable to spare time to manage the club, then another manager could have been appointed. Secondly, it was nonsense to say that it would have been difficult to raise a good team for most of the club's first choice squad immediately found regular first team football with other London Combination clubs.

Any hopes of a resurrection were finally dashed on 15 February 1917, when a builder named Harry Jerome petitioned for the winding up of the Croydon Common company as it owed him £160. The court adjourned the case so that a shareholders' meeting could be held on 2 March, but only six of them turned up. Consequently, on 15 March, Justice Harington approved the order and the club was no more. Apparently, the owners of The Nest, the London Brighton and South Coast Railway, were also represented in court as they were owed £400 by the club in respect of unpaid rent, but it neither opposed nor supported the application. The company, which was represented at the hearing by chairman Robert Clark, did not oppose the application either. In fact, he stated that he felt that it was best for all concerned. He had earlier stated that the company had not carried on for nine months as the club's players were either at the front, or on munitions work, which was hardly the exact truth.

All in all, it was a sad end to the club's short, yet eventful, life.