

## **Merstham FC: History of the Club**

In the early years of Merstham FC, matches were played on a pitch situated at the old Merstham Lime Works known as Limeworks Meadow which was accessed via Jolliffe Road, Lime Works Road or Quarry Dean Lane. At first changing facilities were non-existent and the players had to make do with the hedgerows to shield their modesty. After some time, accommodation was made available at the Jolliffe Arms (now the Vojan Indian Restaurant).

The level of football played in the first five years is unclear. However by 1897 the club were founder members of the Redhill & District League although the Surrey Mirror reports that they 'opened their first season with a friendly match against Redhill Gas Works' on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> October 1904 having been elected as an affiliate of the Surrey FA in the previous September; so this may only relate to their first match as members of the Surrey FA. It is certain though that they were playing in the Redhill & District League Division Two in the 1905/06 season along with, amongst others, Redhill Gas Works, Holmethorpe, Whyteleafe and Bletchingley.

It was not until the early 1920s that the club moved to its present location in Albury Road, although it is also believed that for a period of time around 1911, under the Presidency of Reverend Reginald Woodhouse, the club occupied a ground at 'The Weir' adjacent to the existing Merstham Cricket Club ground.

The club's first major success was winning the league in 1927 and in 1930 added the East Surrey Junior Cup to their trophy cabinet. 1935 and 1936 saw Merstham record a remarkable double by winning the Redhill League Premier Division in consecutive years; a record later repeated in the post World War II years of 1950 and 1951. It was at this time that the decision to apply for intermediate status was taken and Merstham FC was duly accepted into the Eastern Section of the Surrey Intermediate League. The move to the new league could hardly have paid more rapidly a reward, for in the 1952-53 season the club proved their readiness for the test by claiming the title at their first attempt.

Major achievements were also in progress off the field and in 1960, through the devotion and hard work of club officials and members, in partnership with the local authority, the changing room and tearoom were constructed and training lights were erected. This was followed some years later in 1974 by the construction of a small stand with a modest capacity of some 90 people. Although unable to win the league again, Merstham continued to play in the Surrey Intermediate League until they gained senior status in 1964 and joined the Surrey Senior League. In a fourteen year phase in the Surrey Senior League Merstham managed to win the title only once in the 1971/72 season. In 1978 they again switched leagues joining the London Spartan League and attaining a creditable third in their first two seasons. Those first two seasons proved to be amongst the club's best as in addition to their pleasing league positions they claimed the Surrey Senior Charity Cup and the London Spartan League Challenge Cup in the first season, adding the East Surrey Charities Cup the following year.

By the 1984/85 season Merstham had decided that the travelling involved in the Spartan League was proving too much on the club's resources and they applied to join the Combined Counties League, partly reformed from the Surrey Senior League. This new league encompassed teams from Surrey, Berkshire, Hampshire and Middlesex. 1984 also saw the completion of the new clubhouse replacing the portable shelter that had been in use since 1975.

Merstham were runners-up in the Combined Counties League in the 1987/88 season and the following year proved to be the club's best season in senior football by reaching the fourth round of the FA Vase losing, to Billericay Town at home 2-3 after throwing away a 2-0 lead. They then won the Dan Air Class Elite Cup beating local rivals Chipstead 2-1 after extra time. This came as some

consolation as Chipstead had just pipped Merstham to the league title by a single point.

The 1990/91 season saw the erection of floodlights at the Weldon Way ground and an official 'Floodlight Opener' against Crystal Palace whose side included the current Middlesbrough United Manager Gareth Southgate. Merstham's defence of the League Cup saw them again reach the final where this time they had to settle for the runners-up spot as Frimley Green defeated a tired Merstham side 1-0, after extra time, in a replay.

The next few seasons saw Merstham generally settle for mid-table anonymity; 1991/92 (14th) 1992/93 (4th), 1993/94 (17th), and 1994/95 (15<sup>th</sup>).

The 1995/96 season brought some success to Merstham, finishing fourth in the League, but it was the reserves that brought the silverware home in the form of the Reserve League Challenge Cup, defeating Godalming at Ashford Town.

The FA Cup of 1996/97 saw, historically, Merstham's biggest defeat when they crashed out in the 1st Qualifying Round at home to Aldershot Town. Aldershot ran riot with an impressive eight goals to which Merstham could only reply with a token one.

The next two years saw some improvement in their fortunes, 11th in 1998/99 and 13th in 1999/2000; after a disastrous start which saw them bottom at Christmas.

In 1998/99 the Reserves reached the final of the Challenge Cup at Farnborough Town, but narrowly lost 0-1 to Ashford Town in a hard fought game.

The 2000/01 season was Merstham's most successful for nearly a decade. They reached the 2nd Qualifying Round of the FA Cup, their best showing, and finished eighth in the league after being in the top six for most of the season.

The 2002/03 season brought AFC Wimbledon into the league and their visit to Merstham attracted 1,582 fans, the club's record home attendance. Unfortunately the visitors won 2-0. A successful application to the FA Stadia Fund enabled the club to build the new changing rooms and add a perimeter fence.

'Silverware' returned to Merstham in the 2004/05 season when they beat AFC Guildford (now Guildford City) 3-0 in the final of the Premier Challenge Cup held at Woking FC and they also won the East Surrey Hospitals Charity Cup with a victory over local rivals Redhill. Despite this a poor run of results as the season drew to a close saw them finished in 16<sup>th</sup> spot in the league.

The 2005/06 was their best all round season for twenty years; Beaten finalists in the Premier Challenge Cup and ESHCC and runners up in the Combined Counties Premier Division. Also Merstham's regular goalkeeper Colin Harris (now with Corinthian-Casuals) kept an incredible 19 clean sheets in the league making him the league's top 'keeper. However disappointment followed when they were denied promotion to the Ryman League because their stand was delivered two weeks late.

Many of the players moved on during the close season all with the good wishes of the club; notably Captain Chris Boulter who joined promoted Godalming Town. For the 2006/07 season manager, Mick Sullivan, along with two new assistants Micky Stratford and Rhys Williams had to form a new line up for the team with the previous season's Vice-Captain Craig Vernon stepping up as Captain and the addition of several new players, notably Michael Morgan from Redhill and the very promising Kwabena Agyei. However, despite the upheaval in the club and against many of the beliefs of management and supporters alike, Merstham surpassed their 'best all round season for twenty years' again finishing second in the league but this time with the added bonus of winning the Premier Challenge Cup by beating North Greenford Utd 4-1 in a hard fought final. In the league they notched up their highest tally of goals in living memory - a fantastic 100, nearly a quarter of which were scored by striker Kwabena Agyei. The Southern Combination Cup was shared between Merstham and Staines Lammas when a fixture date for the final could not be agreed. The final of the ESHCC against Redhill at Kiln Brow was put off until the start of the 2007/08 season when Merstham won 3-2. All in all an excellent and record breaking season for the club

and for manager Mick Sullivan who will go down in the history of Merstham FC as their most successful manager to date.

However, when many thought Merstham may have peaked, the 2007/08 season, Mick Sullivan's seventh year in charge, brought the Club into a new era with a treble winning side, a fantastic run in the FA Vase and promotion to the Ryman sponsored Isthmian League South Division as they finally finished top of the league after two seasons as runners up. Despite losing on the opening day of the season away at Cove Merstham went on undefeated in the league for the rest of the season winning 35 times and drawing six for a total of 111 points and 114 goals with Kevin Lock and Kwabena Agyei scoring 53 between them. The dream of a Wembley final in the FA Vase fell short on the 1<sup>st</sup> March in the Quarter Final when they lost at home to Needham Market 2-3 in extra time in a game watched by a crowd of 841. Merstham successfully defended the Premier Challenge Cup beating Bedfont Green 4-2 in the final at Woking FC with two goals from Kwabena Agyei and one each from Chris Boulter and the 19-year-old Matt Francis who proved to be a real asset for the club. Probably the icing on the cake came when Merstham were re-instated into Surrey Senior Cup after Tooting & Mitcham and Kingstonian were removed for fielding ineligible players. In the semi-final they were pitched against local rivals Redhill, who had been winners on two previous occasions, at Moatside where they won 4-3 with the help of a hat-trick from Mark Simmons. The final was played at Imber Court, home of the Metropolitan Police FC, against Ryman League side Whyteleafe. On a top quality surface Merstham's passing skills paid off and they won 3-2 in extra time after being behind on two occasions. With promotion officially confirmed on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2008 Merstham left behind them many friends they have made during the 24 seasons they have spent in the Combined Counties League but with the hope of not returning.

Adding to the success of the senior side the newly reformed 'A' Team were entered into the Redhill & District League Division Three and they won the league title at the first attempt.

2008/09 saw Merstham's first season in the Ryman League Division One South and after the euphoria of the previous season many thought that this would be a tough test for them and feared they may not survive at this level. Happy to disappoint these pessimists Merstham had an extremely good season finishing in a very creditable eighth place narrowly missing out on a play-off position. Perhaps the biggest disappointment of the season was in the defence of their Surrey Senior Cup title where they went out to Conference side Woking in the semi-final. The Merstham Ladies side had a great season winning their League and League Cup and finishing Runners Up in the Ryman sponsored La Senza Ladies Cup. The Merstham A Team gained their second promotion on the trot as Runners-Up in the Redhill & District League Division Two. However it was not until May that the club suffered a real shock when Manager Mick Sullivan announced that, after eight seasons at the helm, he was leaving the club for rival Ryman side Leatherhead citing that *'he had taken Merstham as far as he could and needed a new challenge'*. After several applications for the vacant post the Merstham Board announced that former Banstead Athletic manager Graeme Banyard would be appointed as the new manager with immediate effect and that he was looking forward to the challenge. Further 'bad' news was to follow as Michael Morgan, Chris Boulter, Kwabena Agyei and Mark Simmons announced that they would be joining Sullivan at Leatherhead and Gavin Gordon would be joining his former Crowborough Athletic boss at Worthing. So it will be a new look team at Moatside for Merstham's second season in the Ryman League.

*Kevin Austen July 2009*