

# TILBURY FOOTBALL CLUB

Chadfields. The home of Tilbury Football Club.



## THE HISTORY OF "THE DOCKERS"

**FOUNDED:**

**1889:**

**FULL MEMBERS:**

**The Football Association:  
The Isthmian Football League:**

**AFFILIATED TO:**

**Essex County Football Association:**

## **The Formation of Tilbury Football Club:**

Football at the Junior and Intermediate levels had existed in the Town of Tilbury since the early 1870's, albeit on a very local basis. Tilbury was an even smaller town in those days than it is today, and the clubs that were competing then were all either neighbourhood based or the works teams of local companies, most of them being based in the Docks. This meant that all had a limited base, with no chance of ever bringing Senior status Football to the Town, or even of establishing any kind of superiority at County level as Juniors. A few of the Clubs competing at this time were Tilbury Swifts, Tilbury Invicta, Tilbury United and Tilbury Athletic.

The more committed in the Footballing community in the Town began to talk of forming one major club bearing the Town name, with the aim of climbing through the Junior rankings and bringing Senior Football to Tilbury. The initial idea was that these smaller clubs would merge to form the new entity, but this soon fell through as it became apparent that none of them were willing to give up their identity and independence. However, despite this opposition, the formation of the new Club went ahead, and one by one all the others quickly fell by the wayside. Except, though, for Tilbury Athletic, who became very strong rivals of Tilbury F.C. and remained so until they too folded, in the 1920's.

Until recently it had been believed that Tilbury Football Club had been formed in January 1900. I say "believed", because three times in it's History the Club's records have been destroyed. This happened during both World Wars, and again in the 1990's when Fire destroyed the old Clubhouse, where the records were kept. From the memories of former Officials and older Supporters, it seemed that 1900 was the starting point of the Club. However, in 2011, a new date came to the fore when, while conducting unrelated research, I came across a reference to Tilbury F.C. competing in the Gravesend League in 1890, with a Fixture List.

Further research failed to come up with anything that would allow the Club to confirm this officially, but then in 2012 we got confirmation that the 1900 date was wrong. Enquiries were made with the Essex County Football Association, via it's Chief Executive, Philip Sammons, a former Tilbury player, and he looked through their archives and was able to confirm that they had records of Tilbury F.C. competing in the Essex Junior Cup as early as 1895. Spurred on by this, further extensive research was undertaken and finally, in September 2013, Tilbury discovered concrete documented proof that the Club had been formed in 1889, and had entered the Gravesend League in 1889 - 1890. This makes them, officially, the oldest surviving Football Club in Thurrock.

Tilbury's nickname has always been "The Dockers", and the reason for this is blatantly self-evident. At the time of formation, Tilbury Docks and the various Companies located within them were virtually the only employers of any size in the Town. Many of the Officials, Supporters and Players of the Club were employed by or within the Docks, and it was natural that the Club nickname would reflect this. These days, of course, the Docks are owned and operated by Forth Ports Ltd. and known as the Port of Tilbury. The connection with the Club remains, though, and the Club still obtains much sponsorship and help from Port of Tilbury, for which it is very grateful.

Once formed, and a Committee elected, the first big obstacle faced by the Club was that of obtaining a "home" ground. Once again, the connection with the Docks came to the fore, when one of the companies based there, Green & Silley Weir Ltd., offered Tilbury the use of their Sports Ground and Facilities. Since then, Tilbury have had several home grounds in the Town, including Tilbury Fort, King George V (Daisy) Field and the Orient Field, but have been settled on their present site at Chadfields since 1950. Right from the start, Tilbury adopted the playing colours of Black & White. Over the years they have used many varieties of these, including Stripes, Halves, Quarters, Hoops and plain White Shirts with Black Shorts. The stripes have been dominant for the last 25 years or so.

## **The Early Years. 1889 - 1912:**

Unfortunately, coverage of Tilbury Football Club's fixtures in these "Junior" days was extremely poor and, at times virtually non-existent also, with the repeated losses of the Club's own records, it has been impossible to compile a complete record of this period in our History. The records and information that we do now have has come in very large part from the archives of the local newspaper, the Thurrock Gazette, which took many years to research and compile.

From the initial season of 1889 - 1890, Tilbury competed regularly up until 1898 - 1899, when they lost the use of their home ground which, by this time was at the Tilbury Fort. They returned to action in 1900, when Green & Silley Weir once again came forward to offer their facilities. In 1901 - 1902, Tilbury joined the Grays & District League, and won the Championship at the first attempt, winning all twelve games and conceding only one goal. In the season prior to this, Tilbury had played only Friendly fixtures, against clubs from both sides of the River Thames, and the contacts and friendships made from these were to prove beneficial to the Club in future years.

In those days, travelling was nowhere near as easy or normal as it is today and, at Junior level, the Leagues were very much locally based and small in size. It became the normal practice for clubs such as Tilbury to enter two different Leagues each season, and in 1902 Tilbury also entered the South Essex League, and they remained with this competition all through the remainder of their time at the Junior level. Tilbury made no secret of the fact that their ambition was to gain Senior status, while being realistic enough to know that this was for the long rather than short term.

Given the local and small nature of Leagues at Junior level, success in these was never, on it's own, going to provide the impetus needed to achieve Senior status. To do that, a Club would need to make a real and consistent mark on a County wide basis, and the only vehicle available for this was the Essex Junior Cup. Tilbury didn't wait long to make their initial mark on the competition, and reached the Final for the first time in 1903 - 1904, where they were defeated in a replay held on the Chelmsford City ground by the Chelmsford Arc Works club. In the next five years, Tilbury were Champions of the Grays & District League each season, but it was not until the 1908 - 1909 season that they made their second appearance in the County Final. This time, the outcome was more to Tilbury's liking as, at the home of local rivals Grays Athletic, they secured the Trophy thanks to a 1-0 win over Saffron Walden Town, the oldest Football Club in Essex.

Unfortunately, this was not to be the fore-runner of a period of further successes that would achieve the Club's aims. In fact, in many ways, it was something of an end to an era. Apart from their Cup matches, Tilbury had been struggling to attract the necessary support, and were now experiencing financial difficulty. In 1910, local rivals Grays Athletic had been granted Senior status, and progressed into the London League. Also in Grays, another Senior outfit, Grays Thurrock United, were playing Semi-Professional football in the Southern League, against the likes of Tottenham Hotspur, Queens Park Rangers, Millwall, Reading and Southampton. It was this quality of Football that was attracting the majority of local fans.

Matters eventually came to a head at the end of a very unsuccessful 1911 - 1912 season. Financially, the Club hit rock bottom and, to make things worse, they also lost the use of the Green & Silley Weir facilities. With no home ground, and with little prospect of securing one in time, plus the parlous state of the finances, the Committee of the Club decided that they had no option but to withdraw from both the Grays & District and South Essex Leagues, and forego entry into the various Cup competitions. It was agreed that the Committee would continue to operate and that the Club would remain in existence until solutions could be found.

## **The Return To Action:**

What the Club Committee had intended as a short break while securing a new base became a much-extended absence from the field of play due to two factors. Firstly, the search was more difficult than expected, and then the First World War came along in 1914, holding things in abeyance for a further five years.

It was in the 1919/1920 season that Tilbury were able to return to the field of play. The Committee had worked hard throughout the War to keep the Club alive, and had finally managed to secure a new home base, at the King George V Playing Field, which still occupies the space bordered by Feenan Highway and St. Chad's Road to East & West and Stephenson Avenue and Gainsborough Avenue to South & North. This area has always been known locally as The Daisy Field.

With the advances made in methods of transport over the years, Football was becoming less local in nature and Leagues were beginning to expand both in size and area. Tilbury now abandoned the practice of entering two separate Leagues per season, and decided to concentrate solely on the expanded and higher status South Essex League, where they remained until gaining Senior status in 1927.

The aims of Tilbury Football Club had not changed, bringing Senior status Football to the Town remained the over-riding priority. They were now able to attract the levels of support and finance to make this a realistic goal. These improvements enabled the Club to now embark upon their most successful spell of their days as a Junior status club. The success was not immediate, however, as that first season saw them achieve only a mid-table finish in South Essex League Division Two.

Progress really began in the following, 1920/1921, season as Tilbury won Promotion to Division One. Within a further twelve months, they had captured the League Championship and had re-established themselves as one of the top Junior ranked clubs in the County. Further League successes followed and, in 1924/1925, Tilbury were not only League Champions again but also winners of the Essex Junior Cup, for the second time.

This "double" was completed by the defeat of 3-1 Wellington Athletic in the Cup Final, played at Grays Recreation Ground, and confirmed Tilbury as the dominant Club at this level. This was recognised by the Essex County Football Association, who now invited them to enter their Reserves into the Junior Cup and the First Team into the Essex Senior Cup instead. This was eagerly accepted by the Committee, who realised that success at this level could be crucial in their bid for Senior status.

Tilbury's initial foray into the Senior Competition was not spectacular, though it was a Senior Club, in the shape of Brentwood & Warley, that knocked them out. Twelve months later, though, in 1926/1927, Tilbury's exploits stunned all concerned, and made their elevation to Senior status inevitable.

It started off unremarkably, with a comfortable win in Round 1 over a fellow Junior ranked club, Tate Institute, which slightly overshadowed the record set of being the first Junior Club to reach Round 2. In this round, Tilbury made the County's Football community sit up and take notice. Drawn against mighty Walthamstow Avenue, nobody gave Tilbury a chance of progressing further. Except, maybe, Avenue themselves. They made several cash offers for Tilbury to switch the tie from Tilbury to Walthamstow, all of which the Tilbury committee rejected.

The insistence on retaining home advantage paid real dividends, as Tilbury pulled off a major shock, defeating the Avenue 3-2 and becoming the first Junior status club to knock a Senior status opponent out of the Essex Senior Cup. In the next round, Tilbury were drawn away to Barking, and once again were serious underdogs in most eyes. Barking ended the season undefeated on their home patch, and also reached the Final of the F.A. Amateur Cup. Tilbury gave them a real test, however, and all Press reports indicated that the "Dockers" were extremely unlucky to go down 2-3, having dominated the game for long spells.

At the season's end, the Committee wasted no time in submitting their application for Senior status, and this was immediately granted by the Essex County F.A. They then quickly made applications to several Senior Leagues, including the Isthmian, Athenian, London and Kent competitions. After attending all the relevant Annual Meetings, they could only sit and wait. As time wore on, the situation became dire, as one by one the rejections came in.

With a very short time remaining until the 1927/1928 season opened, Tilbury were without a League to compete in. There was no option of a return to Junior status, and there was a very real danger of the Club being left high and dry, with no option but to fold. Thankfully, that scenario was avoided at the last minute, when the Kent Football League stepped in and offered Tilbury a place which was eagerly and gratefully accepted.

It was no secret that the Kent League had not been Tilbury's preferred option, for two reasons that had nothing to do with Footballing matters at all. The difficulties of having to continually cross the River Thames by Ferry to Gravesend and then proceed onwards either by Train or Coach, and the expenses incurred in having to do so, were the cause for concern. Also, the Kent League was a Semi-Professional competition. It contained the Reserve sides of several Southern League clubs and all were allowed to field their Professional players.

Tilbury entered the League as a fully Amateur club, and retained this status throughout their stay. They were one of only five clubs to do this and, as a result, knew that they were going to face a very tough task on the field of play. It came as no surprise that Tilbury remained in the lower reaches during their four season stay, though on one occasion they did climb into mid-table with an 8th place finish. Despite this, all at the Club enjoyed the standard of Football in the Kent League, and the friends they made during their stay, and it was with real regret that they came to the decision, in 1931, that it was necessary for them to leave and move on.

In each season of their membership, the Kent League had expanded in size, eventually reaching a total of 19 member clubs. In each of their last two seasons, Tilbury had suffered an end of season fixture pile up that had led to two or three games per week in the month of April. Many of these were midweek away games. In those days, of course, there were no Floodlights, and these games were required to kick off at 4.30pm. This caused not only transport difficulties, but Team selection problems, as it proved impossible for players to continually get time off work to play, and forced Tilbury into repeatedly fielding weakened teams.

The Committee decided, reluctantly, that the Club could not continue in the Kent League under these conditions, and again made applications to several other Leagues. This time, the process was much quicker and less stressful, as the London League soon accepted Tilbury into it's ranks.

## **World War Two, and Inactivity:**

1931/1932 kicked off with the Club now members of the London Football League. This move solved Tilbury's transport and fixture congestion problems and so, on that score, was a success. Although the majority of clubs in the League were Amateur, regulations did allow Clubs to field up to two "permit" (Professional) players per game. The use of this allowance was unused by most, but the overall standard of play was the equal of the Kent League and, on the field at least, Tilbury's record in the years up to 1939 can only be rated a "qualified" success.

They were usually to be found in the lower reaches of the League Table, though they did enjoy two good seasons in the League and one in the League Cup during this eight year spell. In 1935/1936 and 1937/1938 Tilbury rose to 4th position in the Table, and in the first of those also reached the Final of the London League Cup. In all likelihood, Tilbury would have won the Cup had it been played in that season, having already achieved the League "double" over opponents Streatham Town. However, the Final had to be held over to the following season, by which time the fortunes of the two clubs had reversed, and Streatham took the honours.

The biggest bonus of the switch into the London League, was the renewal of regular rivalry with local neighbours Grays Athletic. These games created enormous interest, and tensions, in the area. It became the tradition that these games would be played on Christmas Day and on Boxing Day, and they drew huge crowds to both grounds, the Recreation Ground in Grays and the Orient Field in Tilbury. This tradition continued well into the 1950's, before Christmas Day Football became a thing of the past.

This was to be the first of Tilbury's three spells in the London League, and came to an abrupt end in September of 1939. Only one League fixture had been played when World War Two broke out. One consequence of this was the restrictions placed on both travel and fuel rationing. This meant that most Senior Leagues were forced to disband for the duration of hostilities, and Football was once again restricted to a local base. No time was wasted though. Negotiations quickly took place, and the War Time South Essex Combination was formed and consisted of Tilbury, Grays Athletic, Romford, Ilford, Leyton, Leytonstone, Walthamstow Avenue, Barking, Dagenham Town and Clapton. Unfortunately, Tilbury were only able to complete the one season in this League, before circumstances forced them to cease activities for the remainder of the War.

Tilbury started the campaign well, but as the season wore on they found things getting increasingly difficult. They began to lose players who either volunteered or were called up into the Armed Forces. Where other Clubs were able to supplement their numbers by calling upon "guest" players from the Forces stationed in their areas, this option was unavailable to Tilbury, as only Canadian and American forces were stationed in the area.

They were able to carry on thanks to the efforts of several older former players, who were happy to come out of retirement, and some promising youngsters who were not yet eligible for the call-up. Many of the latter were to make big names for themselves in the post-war period. All at the Club were quite happy to carry on in this way, but the final blow fell when the Orient Field was commandeered by the Armed Forces and used as a site for Anti-Aircraft Guns brought in to protect the Docks and Town. This left Tilbury with no option but to disband until the resumption of peace.

## **The Post War Years:**

Senior Football had returned to its prior state in time for the 1945/46 season, but two major problems prevented Tilbury from resuming at this time. The Club's home, The Orient Field, named so due to its owner being a Director of the Leyton Orient Football Club, was seriously damaged by German Bombs, and needed a great amount of work to get it fit for Football. The London League generously confirmed Tilbury's membership and allowed them a year's grace in which to repair the damage and make the ground fit for Football. This was no simple task, but thanks to the assistance of a huge number of volunteers and assistance from many local Businesses, the work was successfully carried out. The Ground passed inspection, and Tilbury were able to resume their London League career in the 1946/47 season. The London League, like the Kent League, allowed Clubs to field "Permit" (Professional) Players, so once again Tilbury found that by remaining as Amateurs they faced some stiff challenges.

They made light of this, however, and embarked upon the most successful period since attaining Senior status, and their exploits in both the F.A and Amateur Cups drew regular mentions in the National Press, with the Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail and the Daily Express giving the Amateur Game extensive coverage. It is a tribute to Tilbury and the standard of the London League that these Papers tipped Tilbury as genuine contenders for the F.A. Amateur Cup, and pushed for several of the Players to be given County and/or Amateur International honours. Those honours never came, and Tilbury are convinced that this was due to the snobbery prevalent within the game, as several of those players did get selected when they left to play for other clubs. At the end of 1946/47, the Club was given the ultimatum of becoming a Nursery for Leyton Orient or lose the use of the Orient Field. The Committee were unanimous in their decision that Tilbury should retain its independence, so rejected the ultimatum. They acted very quickly indeed, and obtained the use of the present day Chadfields site which, prior to the War, had been a Greyhound and Whippet Racing arena.

In the four seasons between 1946 and 1950, Tilbury finished as London League Runners Up on three occasions. Twice they were denied by the Professionals of Chelmsford City, while on the third occasion the title was lost on the last day of the season, when they visited Cheshunt for what was in effect the Title decider, the Hertfordshire club winning on the day to be crowned as Champions. In 1946/47, drawn away to Wimbledon in the Amateur Cup Quarter Final, the Club and Press were convinced that it was only being reduced to nine men through injury on the day that stopped Tilbury going on and possibly winning the Trophy. Instead, Wimbledon won through after extra time and went on to win the Cup themselves.

In that season, and again in 1947/48, Tilbury reached the Final of the Essex Senior Cup. Both games were played at the old Lynn Road home of Ilford F.C. and drew crowds in excess of 15,000. Unfortunately, the "Dockers" were unable to capture the County Cup for what would have been the first time, going down Romford and Leytonstone respectively.

The Club's proudest achievement of the time came in the 1949/50 season. Starting in the Extra Preliminary Round of the F.A. Cup, Tilbury fought their way through to the First Round Proper of the competition for the first time in their history. Drawn away to a Notts County side containing three England Internationals, including legendary centre forward Tommy Lawton, Tilbury went down 0-4, but gave a fine display that earned them a standing ovation from the home crowd. 28,584 people witnessed that game, which was more than attended the nearby Division One game between Nottingham Forest and Charlton Athletic.

At the end of the 1949/50 season, Tilbury decided to try and move higher up the Amateur Football ladder. As a result, they applied to and were accepted by the Corinthian League. At this time, Tilbury were not the only club to leave the London League, which was greatly weakened by the loss of some of its strongest clubs. Sadly, this caused a strong feeling of resentment from those clubs remaining, and these feelings were to cause some real problems for Tilbury further down the line. The Corinthian League was ranked as the third strongest Amateur League in the South of England, behind the Isthmian and Athenian Leagues, making this jump in standard with an ageing squad that was soon to break up was a big gamble for the Committee to take, but was considered worth taking. They had, in fact, also applied to both the other Leagues, but had been rejected.

Unfortunately for Tilbury, the gamble did not pay off. As the successful squad gradually broke up, they were unable to recruit replacements of equal quality, and as a result they struggled against the much tougher opposition. Despite the lack of on field success during the seven season spell in the Corinthian League, it was not this that led to Tilbury's departure from the League, but rather it was off the field matters that will be explained later. In their spell as members of this League, it was in the lower reaches of the Table that Tilbury were mostly to be found. They did manage a sixth place finish in 1953/54, but that was easily the best they were able to manage.

One small measure of success did come to the Club when, in 1955/56, they reached the Final of the League Cup. That match was played at the Hampden Oval home of Eastbourne United, and Tilbury went down 0-2 to Maidstone United, who with that win clinched the "double" of Championship and League Cup. Maidstone were to feature in a curious sequence in the following season. They were one for the first Amateur Clubs to install Floodlights, and Tilbury visited Maidstone for a Tuesday night Floodlit match. Never having even trained under Floodlights before, Tilbury cited the strangeness of the experience as being responsible for the 0-10 defeat they suffered. Many people were sceptical about that but, just three weeks later, on a traditional Saturday afternoon, the return fixture at Tilbury ended in a comfortable 3-0 win for Tilbury, causing many to reconsider.

Tilbury's membership of the Corinthian League ended in 1957, in very controversial circumstances. League meetings were held on a weekly basis in those days and, for the past 18 months, the Tilbury Secretary, Mr. John Taylor, had been in constant poor health and had not been attending. All of this was unknown to the Club at the time, as he had assured them that all was satisfactory. It came as a huge shock when the League made them aware of this and informed them that they were going to propose that Tilbury be expelled at the upcoming Annual General Meeting.

The Club immediately appointed a new Secretary. However, this move came too late. Despite the improvement in Tilbury's administration of League matters, and their apologies for the previous situation, the League refused to accept their assurances and the motion to expel was put to the AGM. Tilbury were disgusted to watch as several clubs who had been thought of as friends now voted in favour of expelling them, including local rivals Grays Athletic, which left a sour taste and a legacy of near hatred that lasted a very long time. Tilbury's committee now acted quickly, and made an application to rejoin the London League.

As soon as news of Tilbury's application to rejoin broke, serious problems arose. The ill-feeling that had arisen back in 1950 now came back to the fore, and the hostility shown towards Tilbury looked likely to see them rejected. Fortunately, vital support came in from three sources. The first was the London League's own secretary, Mr. Harry Hawke, who was firmly on Tilbury's side, arguing forcefully that no club should be penalised for having tried to improve its standards, he campaigned vigorously on our behalf. A second source was former League Secretary and now F.A. General Secretary, Sir Stanley Rous, who went on to become Secretary-General of FIFA. He had been a frequent visitor to Tilbury in his time with the League. The third source was from a direction that surprised the Club. Back in 1935, Tilbury had visited Hitchin Town for a pre-Season Friendly, but there had been no contact between the clubs since. Hitchin now circulated an "Open Letter" in which they strongly condemned the attitude of the hostile clubs and urged them to accept Tilbury back into the London League.

These interventions on Tilbury's behalf proved successful, and the Club were eventually accepted back for the 1957/58 season. After the break up of the successful 1940's squad and the mediocrity of the Corinthian years, the return to the London League now, ironically, coincided with the coming together of another bunch of extremely talented local players, who were to form a side that saw the start of the most successful period in the Club's History. The period from 1957 - 1979 was without a shadow of a doubt the Golden Era for Tilbury, as they won Trophy after Trophy and fought their way up to the very top ranks of the Non League game.

Tilbury's rise through the ranks started slowly, in 1957/58, as they finished third in the London League. This proved to be their lowest placing in what was to be a final, five season, spell in this competition. In each of the next four seasons, they finished as Champions and, on three occasions, achieved the League and League Cup "double". One piece of ironic coincidence was that, back in 1950, Tilbury's last London League fixture was against Cheshunt, now as they resumed in that League their first fixture was also against Cheshunt.

In 1958/59, Tilbury won the London League Championship by finishing two points clear of runners up, East Ham United. They were also League Cup winners, and again Cheshunt were to feature, being the team Tilbury defeated 3-2 in the Final. In the following season, Tilbury won a second London League title. The runners up were again East Ham United, but this time the margin had increased to ten points. So, as the 1950's came to an end, Tilbury found themselves in a similar situation to ten years previously, riding high and full of optimism for the new decade, having come through some tough and disappointing times.

### **The Final London League Years:**

In 1960/61, this order of Champions & Runners Up was repeated for the third time. However, the margin now increased to a massive Fifteen points. When you consider that, in these days, it was only Two points for a win, it shows just how dominant Tilbury had become. Also, they once again managed to "double-up", by winning the League Cup.

For Tilbury, though, the most notable success for the Club came with their first ever Essex Senior Cup triumph. On the way to the Final, they had faced hard games against Wapping Town, Leytonstone and Harwich & Parkestone, but the Final was, on paper, the hardest of all. Tougher opposition could not have been hand-picked, and came in the shape of the mighty Walthamstow Avenue who, only a few weeks previously, had won the F.A. Amateur Cup, at Wembley. Nobody gave Tilbury a chance, as Avenue were made the firm favourites.

Prior to the kick off, in a tactic surely meant to intimidate them, Tilbury's players were made to stand and watch while the Walthamstow Avenue side paraded the Amateur Cup around the ground, the game being played at the old Lynn Road home of Ilford F.C. However, the tactic did not work. In scorching heat, Tilbury dominated the first half, and went in 1-0 ahead at the interval. When Avenue equalised midway through the second period, even the most optimistic Tilbury fan thought that the Cup had disappeared. The team, though, thought otherwise. They first held on to take the game into Extra Time, and then just ran riot, scoring three more goals and demolishing the Isthmian Leaguers by 4-1. Credit to the Avenue Players and Fans, who were very generous in their applause and praise of Tilbury, despite their obvious disappointment.

1961/62 proved to be the last ever in membership of the London League for Tilbury, and they marked this milestone with a remarkable achievement. Back in 1931/32, the now long defunct Park Royal F.C. had taken the Championship by going the entire League season undefeated. Tilbury now emulated that feat, and did likewise. 19 of the 24 fixtures were won, and just 5 drawn, 105 goals were scored, with 52 of them coming from the prolific Ross Livermore, a club record I am confident will never be beaten. This time, though, it was not to be East Ham finishing in second place, but Chingford, 7 points behind Tilbury. For the third time, Tilbury also captured the League Cup. The Final, at East Ham United's ground was something of a farce. Opposition was provided by Chalfont National, who had finished rock-bottom of the League. Quite how they reached the Final is a mystery. The final score in Tilbury's favour was, for a Cup Final, a ridiculous 10-1. This was no one-off, as in the next fortnight these two clubs played their two League fixtures, and Tilbury won 11-2 and 13-2. They must have been sick of the sight of Tilbury !

## **The Delphian League and The “Big Freeze” of 1962/63:**

Tilbury once more felt that they had clearly outgrown the London League and needed to move upwards. The next rung on the ladder was the Delphian League, to which they applied and were accepted into. This time, the move was made with a squad that was still in its prime. Nothing is ever straightforward though, and this proved to be not only a season decimated by the awful Winter, but also the last in the history of the Delphian League.

By the time the New Year came in, the Delphian League committee foresaw a situation in which the severe weather would make it impossible to complete the League Fixture Programme, and began to make contingency plans for this. When the thaw set in, a few games were played, but nowhere near sufficient. The League was divided in to two Emergency Sections (1 & 2), on an East-West basis. Each Section consisted of 8 clubs, each playing the others just the once. This meant that some clubs, Tilbury were one, were unlucky in having to play 4 games away and just 3 at home.

The winners of each section would then play-off for the overall Delphian Championship. Hertford Town won Tilbury's (East) section, but were then defeated in the Final by Edmonton. One thing that this season did provide was the evidence that Tilbury's decision to make the move upwards had been the right one, and that they were fully capable of competing and thriving at this level.

Now that the 1962/63 season ended, even more momentous events were to take place. The Isthmians had long been seen and acknowledged as the top Amateur League in the South of England. The Athenian League now decided to challenge this. They initiated talks with the Corinthian and Delphian Leagues with a view to a massive expansion, into a three-division set up, with full promotion and relegation, under the name of the Athenian League. The original Athenian League now became the Premier Division of the new set up. The Corinthian League became Division One and the Delphian League formed Division Two. So, Tilbury now found themselves nominally competing in their third different League in successive season, albeit against the same opposition. It was to be the start of the next rise in status of Tilbury Football Club.

## **The Athenian League Years:**

In 1963/64, by virtue of the series of mergers previously explained, Tilbury now lined up as members of the Athenian League. Unlike their 1950's move into the Corinthian League, they proved their ability at the higher level by carrying off the inaugural Championship of the new Athenian League Division Two. Unsurprisingly, this proved to be no London League style canter, but a much tighter and harder fought campaign. In the end, the Title was only secured on the final day of the season, and even then only on goal average, having finished level on points with Harrow Town.

Going into the final game, with Harrow having already completed their fixtures, Tilbury knew that only a 5-0 or better win, at home to Windsor & Eton, would suffice to bring the Title to St. Chad's Road. There was no sign of nerves, as Tilbury hit superb form from the start, and took a 4-0 lead. However, as time went on, and the 5<sup>th</sup> goal would not come, the tension increased and the play became a bit ragged. Then, almost at the very end, Andy Wingham popped up to net the clinching goal, sparking big celebrations both on and off the pitch.

There was one sour, but none the less amusing incident after the match. As both sets of Club Officials were enjoying a drink and talk in the Board Room, some 15 minutes after the final whistle, the telephone rang, and was answered by my Father, who was Treasurer at the time. After a brief pause, he was heard to say “ Oh, dear ! tough luck, enjoy the Summer”. When asked what that was all about, he said that the call had come from Harrow Town, and when he told them the score their response had been “You don't deserve it.” Even the Windsor contingent enjoyed a laugh at that.

It was not only League success that Tilbury enjoyed that season. They went on to also win the Essex Senior Cup, Essex Elizabethan Trophy and the Stanford Charity Cup. The Final of the Essex Senior Cup was the first ever to be contested over two legs. Our opponents were Ford United, and proved very tough opposition. In a very close tie, it was only a late Extra Time goal at Rush Green that gave Tilbury the victory. Given that they were also our victims in the Elizabethan Trophy Final, Ford must have been fed up with Tilbury by the time the season finished. The Stanford Charity Cup, with all matches being played at the Billet Ground, home of Lathol Athletic, was much more prestigious in those days, with all the local Senior clubs entering their first elevens. In that Final, we defeated Bowers United.

1964/65 found Tilbury competing at a higher level for the third time in four seasons, and the next three seasons were ones of consolidation for the Club, who now found themselves back among their former Corinthian League adversaries, as that League had formed Division One of the Athenian League. With the immensely successful team that came together in the London League now beginning to age and break up, manager Tommy Harris was faced with the task of rebuilding and bringing in new blood. There proved to be plenty of available talent, and Tommy was successful in bringing much of it to Tilbury.

In the Summer of 1965, the Club made its first and so far only Tour to the Continent, when they undertook a 6 day tour to Holland, over the Whitsun period. Two nights were spent in the holiday resort of Zandvoort, which at the time was the home of the Dutch Formula 1 Grand Prix, and also the first major Casino in Europe outside of Monte Carlo. The final three nights were spent in the capital, Amsterdam. Two matches were played on the trip, against CSV. Castricum and Uithoorn F.C.

After a few seasons of consolidation, Tilbury made a push for further Promotion in the 1967/68 season, only narrowly missing out. Going into the final game, away to Chesham United, a win would have seen Tilbury promoted. Unfortunately, they now gave their worst display of the season, in going down 0-4, and this meant that the second promotion place went instead to Wembley F.C.

Tilbury only had to wait a further twelve months for Promotion, as they went on to clinch the Championship of Division One and therefore a place at the top level. As late as Easter, it looked certain that they would have to settle for the runners up spot, behind Eastbourne United. The Sussex outfit had come to St. Chad's Road on Easter Monday, and defeated Tilbury by 4-2, a scoreline that could easily have been bigger, as they totally dominated the game. After that, amazingly, they collapsed, and could not win a game, and a 2-1 victory over Hertford Town on the final day gave Tilbury the Championship.

This was a remarkable achievement by the Club as, back in October, they had been rocked when manager Tommy Harris and several players walked out on them to join local rivals Grays Athletic. He was quickly replaced, by another former Tilbury player, Tony Oakley, who brought in just three new players and recalled two from the Reserves, and the bandwagon just rolled on. The two players recalled from the Reserves proved to be inspirational, and the Supporters had always wondered why they were not in the side to begin with. Willie Flood was the creator in Midfield, while Dai Evans went on to score no fewer than 31 goals. Tilbury also won the Essex Elizabethan Trophy and the Essex Floodlight Cup that season, and reached the Final of the Mithras Cup.

In 1969/70, Tilbury finished a creditable 8th in their first Premier Division campaign, and reached two Cup Finals. Sadly, defeat was the result in both Finals, at the hands of Barking in the Essex Senior Cup and to Dagenham in the Essex Floodlight Cup. The next season proved to be remarkably similar. A 7th placed League finish, was accompanied by another two defeats in Cup Finals. This time, Ilford were the victors in the Essex Floodlight Cup and Lowestoft Town in the East Anglian Cup.

1971/72 saw Tilbury climb to 4th position in the Premier Division, but the recent "tradition" of reaching and losing in two Cup Finals was continued. Walthamstow Avenue denied them another Essex Senior Cup triumph, while the Mithras Cup was won by St. Albans City. Twelve months later, Tilbury had climbed a further position in the League, to 3rd, and again reached two Cup Finals. This time, the complex re-Cup Finals was laid to rest, as Tilbury claimed both Trophies.

Ironically, they were the same two in which they had been beaten the year before. In the Essex Senior Cup Final, a two leg victory over Dagenham brought the Cup to Tilbury, and the Mithras was then captured, also over two legs, by defeating Ilford. At the end of the season, as a result of some momentous events, Tilbury were again to move into a new Competition. Almost ever since organised Football had begun, the Isthmian League had been recognised as the pinnacle of Amateur Football in the South of England. It was the competition that every ambitious club wanted to join, and Tilbury were no exception, having made numerous applications over the years. However, the Isthmians had become very insular, and their single division format had never changed.

### **Into The Isthmian League:**

The foresight of the Athenian League, back in 1963, had seen a remarkable lifting of standards in that League, to a point where Isthmian superiority was under severe challenge, and they now realised they had to act to maintain their position as the number one Amateur League. They decided to expand, by adding a Division Two and establishing Promotion and Relegation. 16 clubs were elected to form this new Division, nearly all of them from the Athenian League, and Tilbury were one of them. Not one club refused the invitation. This move signalled the start of the end for the Athenian League. It carried on until into the 1980's, but a further expansion of the Isthmian ranks depleted it even further, and it was eventually to cease to exist.

It also signalled a massive change in the fortunes and outlook of the Isthmian League. From being a staid, insular and slowly declining competition, it changed almost immediately to become probably the most forward looking and innovative League in the Country, being the first anywhere to introduce Sponsorship and 3 points for a win, and they have never been afraid to give new ideas consideration and/or experimentation. Much of the credit for this belongs to the Clubs, but also to two very good Chairmen, Mr. Barry East and Mr. Alan Turvey, who were never afraid to ask their clubs to embrace something new.

For once in their history, Tilbury's move into a new League did go smoothly, with no crises or obstacles presenting themselves. They were very happy with their 6th placed finish in 1973/74. This season was also the one in which the Isthmian League became the first in the World to adopt the Three Points for a win system, several years before it was accepted by any other competition. The Summer of 1974 saw a change of Manager, when Terry Matthews was recruited from Aveley, with the man he replaced, Larry Hutson, making the reverse move.

Promotion to the Premier Division was narrowly missed in 1974/75, as Tilbury finished in 3rd position, but some compensation came with the winning of three major Cup competitions. By defeating Croydon over two legs in the Final, Tilbury became the first ever winners of the Isthmian League Cup, and they followed that up by defeating Barking on their own ground to capture the Mithras Cup. The best of all, though, was the winning of the Essex Senior Cup. By now, this had reverted to a one-off Final on a neutral venue and, at the old New Writtle Street home of Chelmsford City F.C., a thrilling game saw Tilbury come from behind to triumph by 3-2 over Dagenham, thanks to an all-headed hat-trick from Steve Scudder.

1975/76 was the most successful season during this period for Tilbury. The Division One Championship was won, and three Cup Finals reached, of which two were won. In the League, a then record total of 102 points won the Title for Tilbury, but they had had to overcome a magnificent challenge from Croydon F.C., who went the entire League season undefeated. Their downfall was too many drawn games, and they finished 4 points adrift of Tilbury's total.

During the previous Summer, the Essex County Football Association had decided that all clubs above a certain status should now compete in the Essex Professional Cup, with the Essex Senior Cup left to those below the dividing line. This elevation of status made no difference at all to Tilbury, who went on to win the Competition at the first attempt. They certainly had to do it the hard way, having to beat both Romford and Chelmsford City on their own grounds and then face the Football League side Southend United in the Final, which was played at Tilbury. Southend had just changed managers, and new boss Dave Smith now brought along almost his entire First Team squad for his first game in charge. Again, Tilbury were unaffected by the size of the task on hand, and Mr. Smith could only sit and watch as his side of full-timers was totally demolished by a rampant Tilbury, who recorded a 3-0 victory. As Mr. Smith graciously remarked afterwards, the scoreline actually flattered Southend !!

Tilbury were involved in two more Cup Finals. Shortly before the Southend game, they had to travel to the home of Hayes F.C. to face Slough Town in the Final of the Isthmian League Cup. Unfortunately, on the day Tilbury were poor, and Slough romped to a comfortable 4-0 success. Victory, and another Trophy, did come their way in the Mithras Cup Final, when they overcame the challenge of Cheshunt F.C.

Tilbury's first season in the Isthmian League Premier Division turned out to be their best. They recovered from a very poor start to end up in a very worthy 5th position, the highest Isthmian ranking they have yet earned. That season was also memorable for the involvement with the Barrassi Cup. For several years, this was competed for by the winners of the Italian Amateur Cup and the Champions of the Isthmian Division One, over two legs. Tilbury were faced with an excellent U.S. Soresina side, and two superb games ended 1-1, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Leg in Italy after extra time, and it was the Italians who took the Cup by winning the Penalty shoot out. That match, in any other circumstances, would not have been played, as Northern Italy had suffered heavy rain for several days, and the pitch was virtually a Lake. However, I can honestly say that I don't think I've ever seen a better game in such bad conditions.

At the end of the 1976/77 season, manager Terry Matthews left to take over at Walthamstow Avenue, and several of the club's players went with him. He was replaced by the return to the club of Tommy Harris. In the League, it was a fairly miserable campaign, as Tilbury slumped to 18<sup>th</sup> position. In the Cups, though, it was a much different story. By defeating Hertford Town over two legs in the Final, Tilbury again won the Mithras Cup, and they reached the Final of the Essex Floodlight Cup, going down 0-2 away to Billericay Town.

It was in the F.A. Cup that Tilbury really made their mark on the season, achieving National recognition along the way. After starting in the Preliminary Round, they became the first and so far only Thurrock club to fight their way right through to the 3rd Round Proper. Kingstonian, Bracknell Town, Witney Town, Feltham, Tonbridge, Kettering Town and Nuneaton Borough were beaten, all except Feltham and Tonbridge had to be beaten on their own grounds. The Kettering tie provoked great controversy and went to three games before being decided. Kettering had, in fact, won the first game, at Tilbury, but were found to have fielded an Ineligible Player, in the shape of former Charlton Athletic and Leicester City winger Len Glover, for whom they had failed to gain the necessary International Clearance following his spell in the North American Soccer League.

The Football Association ordered the game replayed. A 2-2 draw at Tilbury was followed 48 hours later with a thrilling 3-2 win for Tilbury at Kettering, in which they had to come back from being 0-2 down inside the first 10 minutes. The reward for these victories came in the shape of an away 3rd Round tie at Stoke City F.C. A crowd in excess of 16,000 turned up at the Victoria Ground, including some 2,500 who had journeyed up from Thurrock by Car, Coach and Special Train. There was to be no Fairy Tale ending though, as Stoke City capitalised on a first minute goal, and went on to record a comfortable 4-0 success.

This was to be not only the high point for Tilbury, but also the start of a long gradual decline for the Club, which would eventually lead to them losing their Isthmian status and dropping to County League level, though fortunately for only the one season. Tilbury was a club that had been living beyond its means for several seasons now, and had run up massive debts which would soon come back to haunt them. In 1978/79, they finished 14th in the Premier Division, but did reach the Final of the Essex Senior Cup, losing 0-1 to Harlow Town. This is the last time Tilbury have reached this Final to this date.

The storm clouds were hovering directly overhead by now, and the storm broke in 1979/80. It is no surprise that, under severe financial restrictions, Tilbury ended the season bottom of the Premier Division, and relegated back to Division One. Only by the narrowest of margins was a further relegation avoided in the next campaign. At the end of the 1980/81 season, it was by no means a certainty that Tilbury would be able to start the next season. The club was now existing on a day to day basis, and at any time could have been closed down had any of their creditors taken them to the Courts. Fortunately, that did not happen. A new Committee was formed, relations with creditors were repaired and, despite many sleepless nights, their hard work over the next few years finally served to return the Club to a secure footing.

Following the 20th placing in 1980/81, life in Division One didn't get much easier for Tilbury in the next campaign, and Relegation was again missed by a very narrow margin. Only once, in 1984/85, did Tilbury climb into the top half of the League Table, finishing 7th, being mostly involved in desperate relegation battles. Surviving in such a manner cannot last forever, and the inevitable happened in 1986/86, when they were relegated to Division Two North on the final day of the season. A 3rd place in the first season in the lower Division proved to be a false dawn for Tilbury, and the 1980's ended with Tilbury firmly stuck in the lower Division.

In 1990/91, the Isthmian League changed its format, ending the regionalised Divisions Two. They now initiated a Linear System, of Premier, One, Two and Three. Sadly, by ending the previous season in the bottom half of the table (17th), Tilbury were one of the teams "relegated" to form the new, bottom, Division. This demotion was, however, limited to just the one season, as they immediately earned a return to Division Two, by gaining Promotion. They managed to hold on to this status for 5 seasons, though they could do no better than the 11th place finish in 1995/96.

In 1997/98, Tilbury were relegated back to Division Three, and this time it took them two seasons to fight their way back up, doing so by winning Promotion in 1999/2000. In this season, Tilbury achieved their best ever run in the F.A. Vase, which was ended by a defeat in Round 4 away to Cowes Sports. In Round 3, they had earned a remarkable success over Falmouth Town. A draw at Chadfields was followed by another draw, after extra time, down in Cornwall. Falmouth had had a glorious chance to win in normal time, but Tilbury keeper Mark Hardingham made a great Penalty save. The tie now went to Penalty Kicks, and Falmouth amazingly missed them all, a further three of them being saved by Hardingham. I wonder how many keepers can say they saved four Penalties in one game ?

## **Into The 21st Century:**

The next two seasons saw Tilbury finish 10th & 16th in Division Two, and at this point the total reorganisation of the Non-League game was imposed by the Football Association. I have to say, it was poorly thought out and done at the time, and even 10+ years later, still isn't ideal. The Isthmian League would now only have three Divisions, and Tilbury now found themselves in Division One North, as regionalisation now made a comeback. Further placings of 20th and 22nd (out of 24) saw Tilbury continue to struggle.

Now, another reorganisation was imposed by the Football Association, and again I have to say it was seriously flawed. This saw Tilbury, and many other Isthmians switched against their will into the Southern League, with many of their clubs making the reverse journey, equally unwillingly. Tilbury's struggles continued, and by finishing bottom of Division One East now found themselves dropping into the Essex Senior League.

To their great relief, their stay at this level lasted just the one season, as they immediately achieved Promotion. Yet another F.A. imposed reorganisation had come about in the meantime, and this one corrected some of the earlier mistakes, meaning that Tilbury now returned to the Isthmian League Division One North. The old pattern of struggle at the higher level was now resumed, as seasons 2006/07 and 07/08 saw finishes of 19th & 20th respectively. Confidence was not high, going into 2008/09, but a new Management Team brought League safety and a measure of Cup success to the Club.

The Isthmian League Cup was won in this season. Three Premier Division sides were knocked out en-route to the Final, at Staines Town F.C., where Tilbury triumphed 2-0 over another Premier side, Harrow Borough. The Final of the East Anglian Cup had to be held over to the next season, but Tilbury eventually won this Trophy also, defeating Halstead Town in the Final. Tilbury are still, technically, the holders of this Trophy, as no competition for it has ever been completed since, and at the time of writing, the competition no longer exists.

Fortunes in the League, though, were only marginally improved, and in this and the following season Tilbury could do no better than 11th position on both occasions. The end of the 2009/2010 season saw the departure of the Management Team and most of the Players. Tilbury acted quickly to replace them, appointing UEFA "A" Licence holder Paul Vaughan to his first Managerial post at Senior level.

Initially, which came as no surprise, Vaughan found things at this level very hard, and at Christmas a relegation looked likely. Vaughan, though, proved a very quick learner. He made some astute signings and gradually transformed his squad, and an excellent second half of the season saw them climb quickly up the table to ensure safety. Tilbury were much more confident going into the 2011/12 season, but even they were slightly surprised at how well they did. They challenged in the higher reaches of the Division all season, and were rewarded by achieving a 3rd placed finish to earn a place in the Promotion Play Off matches. Unfortunately, in a thriller at Chadfields, they were denied a place in the Final as Needham Market, held on to win 4-3.

In each of the three following summers, Vaughan had to rebuild after a number of players moved to clubs with bigger budgets. A comfortable top half placing in 2012/13 was followed by a slip down to 16th twelve months later, a good top half finish being taken away by the Football Association who penalised them with a severe points deduction, in what the club felt was a harshly unfair decision. Tilbury, however, still entered their 125th year in optimistic mood, but a combination of injuries and poor form saw them struggle and, Vaughan stepped down as Manager in October of 2014.

The Club acted quickly, and appointed Club skipper, long serving Gary Henty as the new Boss, and he brought another long serving "Docker" in Danny Smith back to the Club as his Assistant and as a Player. It took them a couple of games to get going, but they soon improved the squad and performances, which also led to a great improvement in results. This upturn, saw Tilbury climb quickly out of the relegation battle and into comfortable mid-table security. The upturn in fortunes inspired by Henty and Smith continued in the 2015/2016 season and, as the New Year got under way, Tilbury found themselves in 5th position and challenging very seriously for a place in the end of season Promotion play offs.

They also enjoyed some good moments in Cup football. Good runs were had in both the F.A. Trophy and the Essex Senior Cup, during which no fewer than three National League sides were defeated. Sadly, as the season progressed, some injuries and many suspensions due to the Team's very poor disciplinary record, brought about an inevitable decline in form over the last six weeks of the season, and Tilbury slipped down to a final position of 11th. However, disappointing as this late slump was, it is fair to say that, at the start of the season, Tilbury may well have settled for an 11th place finish, that being an improvement upon the previous campaign.

2016/17 followed a very similar pattern. By the end of November, the Club was occupying a place in the Play-Off zone, but then a disastrous run of 22 matches with just 3 wins saw them plummet way down to 17th position. The season was, in part, rescued in the final month, when of the 5 League matches played 3 were won and 2 drawn, which saw them climb back up to a more respectable 12th position. Another good Essex Senior Cup run was enjoyed, taking Tilbury all the way to the Semi-Final, where they only narrowly went down away to National League side East Thurrock United. The recent 2017/18 season again saw the club make a poor start, and once again October proved the decisive month for the Manager, as Henty and Smith resigned their posts. Once again, the Committee looked to a former player, in Joe Keith, to take over the reins, and he led the club to safety.

As 2018/19 got underway, the good form from the previous campaign deserted the Club and, in October with Tilbury sitting second from bottom, Joe Keith was relieved of his duties and Marc Harrison came in from Basildon United to replace him, bringing Liam Wallace as his assistant. The new men brought an immediate improvement, making several good signings. From being 19<sup>th</sup> (second from bottom) at the time of Joe Keith's departure, Tilbury rose to an incredible season high of 7<sup>th</sup> place, before final day defeat way to Champions, Bowers & Pitsea, saw them drop back to a final 10<sup>th</sup> place. 2019/20 saw even more improvement. After a slow start, Tilbury got into a position where they were certain to feature in the Promotion Play-Offs, only to suffer the disappointment of the season being cancelled in March, due to the Covid 19 Pandemic.

2020/21 was even more disappointing for all at the Club. The team made a superb start to the campaign and found themselves as League Leaders almost from the start. All at the Club felt that this time it was a real challenge not only for Play-Offs but for the Title itself. However, it was not to be. As the season entered November, Lockdown had to be introduced across the Country once again, as the Covid Virus really took a hold on the Nation. As time went on, the situation did not improve and eventually the season had to be abandoned. The disappointment and frustration felt by the Club at being denied the chance to achieve Premier Division status, for the second consecutive "non" – season was immense.

During this time, the efforts of all connected with the running of Tilbury FC were focussed on keeping it healthy and viable. That they succeeded is a great credit to them. With restrictions lifted in mid-July 2021, it is to be hoped that a full season will now be played out. The management team have done well in being able to keep the majority of the very good squad, and make a couple of quality additions, so will be aiming to maintain and even improve upon the level of the challenge they mounted in the previous two truncated campaigns.