

CRITTALL WITHAM

In the years when Crittall had factories all over the place and social facilities to match, a club was formed at the Witham social club. Matches were held in fairly cavernous surroundings in what was basically a dance hall with a highly polished floor and very little heating. It took about four tables and at its height they were in full occupation on a Sunday morning for practice.

In the late sixties and early seventies the club concentrated their energies on the Chelmsford League and at their peak took players from most Braintree League clubs – Fred Sheldrake, Tim Mullane, Tony Guy, Rob Milne, Ivan Palmer, Roy Foster, Kevin Howard and Ron Fosker all played for them at some stage – as well as attracting some of Chelmsford's big names like Mark Sweeting and Charlie Wheeler.

They had a more modest record in the Braintree League apart from a couple of brief spurts.

They first entered the league in 1971 when they won division three but it was in 1974 that it all came together. Colin Hughes, a high class player from the Romford area, moved to Wickham Bishops, looked for a table tennis club and found the nearest one down the road at Witham. He joined Wheeler, who had previously confined his activities to Chelmsford, and Dave Willoughby, already on Crittall Witham's books, to form a championship winning team.

It was a combination that only stayed together for that season. The players went their separate ways and it was left to the B team to keep things together.

In 1974 that team struggled with a collection of players until John Archer, Brian Cook and Ted Purnell came together and won their last eight matches. They finished mid-table in division two, but did not stay together and after two more mid-table division two finishes disbanded after the end of the 1976 season.

They came back again in 1977-78 when Paul Whybrow, George Earle and Ian Rumsey finished fourth in division two. They were fourth again in 1979 but then lost Whybrow and Earle and dropped into the relegation places for the next two seasons without actually suffering their due fate.

Then came another revival. They recruited Andrew Wadling, from Colne, and Phil Gower, from Ingatestone, who ironically was later to become his father-in-law, plus Neil Sweeting, then a promising Essex-rated junior. They found a spare berth in division one and finished fifth.

The B team, a collection of new names – Bryan Speller, Barry Lummis and George Sabiniak – were in division two mid-table while the C team, mostly the previous year's A team, again found themselves in the relegation zone.

For the first time in the club's history, they managed to enter four teams and the D team of John Mills, John Archer and Tony Murray won division three.

All looked rosy until the bill for the next season came in. They faced a massive hike in charges and decided to call it a day. Most of their players joined Witham FC but some, inevitably, were lost.

As was their venue shortly afterwards when it was demolished to make way for Safeway.