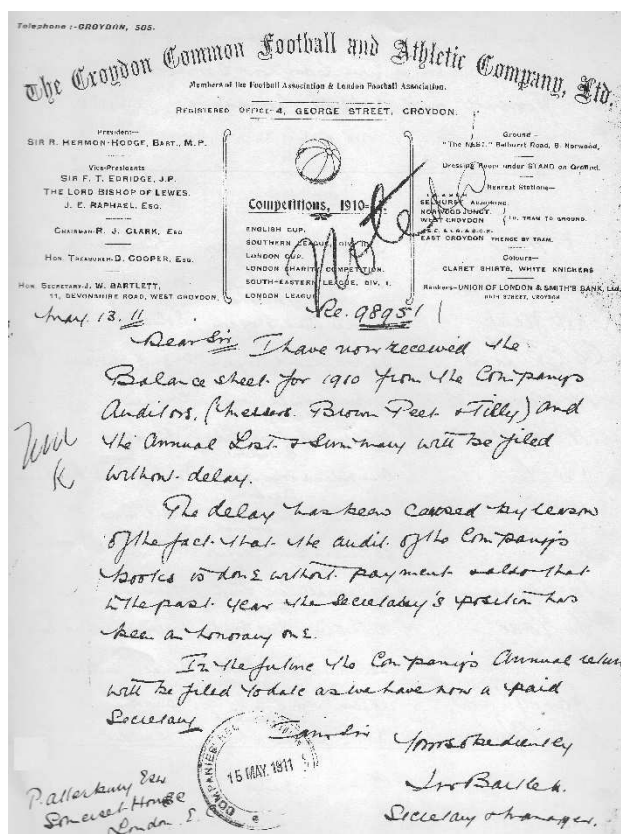


NOT JUST ONE JWB (Season 1911-12)

As predicted by some local newspapers, Bartlett became the club's manager for the second time upon the departure of Tait. He immediately set about the task of strengthening the squad for the coming season and by now it went without saying that the first choice squad would bear little resemblance to the old. As in previous seasons there was a change of goalkeeper, with Ted Price coming in from Stockport County to replace Box, thus making him the fifth regular goalkeeper in just five seasons. This change was apparently not brought about by Box seeking a move, as it seems that he was without a club for a few months before joining Crewe Alexandra.

As for outfielders, Bartlett obtained the services of full backs Arthur Hutchins (Royal Navy), William Balmer, who re-signed after missing all the 1910-11 season, and Thomas Leigh (Queens Park Rangers). He also signed half backs James Ramsay (Cardiff City) and William Wooldridge (Wolverhampton Wanderers) and, to augment the attack, forwards Harold Dawson and Albert Scanes (both West Ham United), James McDonald (Brentford) and Norman Wood (Plymouth Argyle). Former amateur player Charlie Sawyer also returned after having played for North Croydon. As previously, the local press was none too informative about those players who departed from the club, but Colpus transferred to West Ham United, Barnfather returned to his native North East for another spell at West Stanley, Thomson was bought by Chelsea and Fenton retired to become a licensed victualler in his home town of Gainsborough. Then, shortly after the new season started, Rouse transferred to Brentford. Meanwhile, the close season saw the club's finances still in a parlous state and the letter seen on the right, sent by Bartlett to the Companies Registration Office to explain the late submission of the company's final accounts, shows a distinct whiff of delaying tactics. Nevertheless, the club was ready for another season.



The season began with three practice games; the first on Wednesday 16 August, and the next two on the following Saturday and Wednesday. The sides in all three matches were composed primarily of amateurs bidding for a place at the club, with the proposal that the best of them would make up a side to play the first eleven in the final pre-season game. In the first game the Reds beat the Whites 4-0 with goals from Sawyer 2, Mason and Raw, the first two of whom would later appear for the first team. In the next match the Whites won 3-2, with goals from Fordham, Mason and Gilbert and in the last game the Reds won with a single goal from Sawyer. In this last game, the two Yenson brothers, William and George, were joined by another brother, Harry, and goalkeeper Furr, playing on the left wing, opposed his brother George who had recently appeared for Watford. The final practice match took place on Saturday 30 August and, despite Balmer playing in goal because of a slightly sprained ankle, the first choice eleven won 1-0 with a goal from McDonald. No doubt learning from past experience, the club opted to only enter the Southern League and the South Eastern League for the season, although this still represented a significant number of matches. Once again no reserve side was run.

The new season started with the visit of Norwich City Reserves for an SEL match played in a temperature of 30°C in the shade, although the heat obviously suited the Robins more than their opponents, as they comfortably won 4-1. The centre forward for the match was Scanes, who would be the first of twelve to appear in that position before Christmas, with a number of others doing so in the second half of the season.

Sawyer replaced McDonald just before the game due to the sudden death of the latter's sister; not the first bereavement of the season, as goalkeeper Price had lost a young child two weeks before. A crowd of 3,000 watched the game, which must have encouraged the directors in the face of the club's continuing financial problems. The photograph below was taken during the game, with the Robins in the darker shirts.



After scoring two goals in the first match, Wood scored a further brace on the following Wednesday when West Ham United Reserves were beaten 3-1 in front of a crowd of 2,000. Unfortunately he was injured in the game and was absent for a month as a result. The match saw the debut of Hutchins, who would play for the club for the remainder of its life. An added interest for the crowd was the appearance of Colpus in a West Ham United shirt, but he was kept well in check by the Robins' defence. Three days afterwards, Luton Town Reserves were beaten 1-0 by a Balmer penalty to give the Robins the full six points from their first three SEL fixtures, but admittedly all had been played at The Nest. Another encouraging crowd of 3,000 saw the game and afterwards the Supporters' Committee gave the directors a cheque for £120. One problem was a dispute regarding the signing of Harold Dawson, whom the F.A. apparently considered had been taken on without a legitimate transfer. The local newspapers provided no further details, but the matter was obviously resolved in the Common's favour as Dawson continued playing regularly. Two days following the win over Luton Town Reserves, the Robins surrendered their unbeaten record when they lost their first away fixture, although it was very much a reserve side that went down 3-0 in the SEL at Clapton Orient Reserves; for example, Hollidge, who played for the amateur club and was now the groundsman at The Nest, made an appearance.

On the following Saturday, the side began its SL programme with a visit to Ton Pentre. Given that this competition was the club's main priority, things could not have begun more disappointingly as four second half goals gave the Welsh side a clear win; although a series of misfortunes beset the side even before it set out for the journey. First of all, Balmer injured himself three days before the game and the Royal Navy refused Hutchins leave of absence to play in his place. Secondly, the F.A. refused to sanction the transfer of William Clarke to the Robins, so he too had to be omitted from the proposed eleven for the match. He had previously played for Bradford City but, at this particular time, he was on loan to Lincoln City who had just dropped out of the Football League and so the Robins had signed him. Unsurprisingly, Bradford City considered that he was still under contract with them and the F.A. supported this view; however, the local press did not report how the matter was finally resolved. Added to this, Bartlett gambled by playing Wood even though he had an injured ankle, which was to receive a further knock after only a few minutes. The only redeeming feature of the match was that it saw the debut of Arthur Pace, who had just moved from Rotherham Town, and who would become a regular in the side.

On the Monday after their return from Wales, the Robins visited Clapton Orient in the London Professional Cup and suffered a 4-0 defeat. However, it was back to SEL action for the next three games; a 1-1 home draw with Swindon Town Reserves, a 3-1 away victory at Bristol City Reserves, with 2,500 watching each time, and a fine 5-2 win in the return match at Swindon Town Reserves, with Tye scoring in the first minute. Gardner appeared at full back in this last match and, in doing so, became the only player to have made a first team appearance in each of the club's first five professional seasons. Given that, during this period, he also had spells as first team trainer and as acting manager, his commitment to the Robins was significant. Balmer scored from the penalty spot in the match at Swindon, his second success of the season, so he had clearly assumed the role vacated by the departed Bacon. The match also saw the return of inside forward Davidson after spells with Partick Thistle, Glentoran, Belfast Celtic and Distillery.

It was back to SL action four days later when Southend United came to The Nest and won 2-0. This was to be the first of several SL matches to be held during the week although, as the SL represented a better attraction, the club was attracting slightly bigger crowds for SL games on Wednesdays than for SEL games on a Saturday. It would have seemed logical to maximise potential gate receipts by playing all SL fixtures at the weekend, but perhaps it was felt that the probable dip in the support for the SEL games if they were moved to midweek would mean that no overall advantage would be gained. Southend United turned up late for the game and were fined 10/6. Apparently, after the game, the directors sacked Pace because of his poor display, but then later relented and reinstated him. However, two losses in the first two SL fixtures meant that the club already had an uphill task if it was to gain promotion. Three days later, the side lost at home once again, this time 2-1 to Northampton Town Reserves in an SEL match played in pouring rain. The Robins played in white shirts because of a colour clash with their opponents who also regularly sported claret shirts. Clarke at last made his debut in this match as his transfer had finally been sorted out. A few days later, SEL leaders Coventry City Reserves visited The Nest and were beaten 4-0 by a Common eleven with a number of reserves on show. Despite the fact that it was a top of the table clash, only 1,500 turned up, thereby illustrating the lack of support for games in the SEL. The following Saturday the side managed a 2-2 draw at Luton Town Reserves, despite being without Leigh, who was assisting an SEL representative eleven to beat their counterparts from the NEL by two clear goals. Another draw was achieved a few days later when Watford Reserves visited The Nest. In this match the centre forward position was filled by full back Hutchins, already the eighth player to have led the attack since the season began, and he scored the goal. The point from this game put the club on top of the SEL for the first time; with 15 points from 11 games, one point above Coventry City Reserves.

Ironically, the Robins were now top of the SEL and bottom of the SL, but this situation was brought about in part by the fact that the club had played fewer matches than the other SL teams; for example, Welsh club Treharris had played thirteen SL matches before Croydon Common had even played their third. Three days later, Peterborough City were beaten at The Nest 2-0 in the SEL. Appearing at centre forward this time was debutant Harry Sparrow, who had just arrived from Sittingbourne. The Robins were awarded a penalty during the match and, in the absence of regular penalty taker Balmer, Yenson took the kick and, according to newspaper reports, hammered the ball "yards over". Included within the Peterborough side were future Commoners Rayner and Kingaby.

The Robins next visited Brentford to play in the London Professional Charity Fund, but were beaten 4-1 in a match which the Sporting Life reported as "... fast and vigorous enough to please the most enthusiastic spectator for twenty minutes or so, but afterwards the exchanges were the reverse of exciting, and at times were only relieved from absolute dullness by the clever goalkeeping of Price ..." Rouse, who had just moved to Brentford from the Common, appeared for his new club, but did not score. A week later, Hutchins took over responsibility for taking penalty kicks and he hit the target in the following SEL match at Leyton Reserves, but the Robins still lost 2-1. Thereafter, Hutchins would be the first choice penalty taker for the remainder of the club's life.

Next came a 0-0 draw with Bristol City Reserves at The Nest, with the Common playing in green and Pace making a return to favour. The following Saturday, a crowd of 2,500 saw the side gain revenge over Leyton Reserves with a 1-0 win and, two days later, the revenge was for Coventry City Reserves who won 2-1 at home as the Robins completed four SEL games in just nine days. Clearly, although the club was competing in only two leagues, fixture congestion was still an issue. During the season, it played 63 league matches, with the odd number arising from the withdrawal of one of the SL clubs in mid-season, together with five F.A. Cup matches and two minor cup games, giving a total of 70 games. Not the 80 of the previous season, but still far too many. There is surely no doubt that, had the club played fewer games each season, it would have been more successful. The directors were doubtless keen to maximise the number of games in order to increase the revenue derived from gate money; however, gates for the matches in the leagues perceived to be less important were small when compared to those in the SL. If a reduction in the number of matches had resulted in the club being more successful, perhaps the aggregate attendance money would have been higher, given that a more successful side would have surely attracted larger crowds.

Bizarrely, given the fixture congestion, the club arranged a friendly for two days after the Coventry trip. It was against local Croydon club North End Rovers and the Robins won 4-3. Admittedly, it was very much a reserve side that the club put out, with Gardner at centre forward and Hollidge on the right wing, but it still seems an odd thing for the club to have done in the circumstances. The next two matches were in the SEL and four more points were gained by home wins over both Tunbridge Wells Rangers (2-1) and Clapton Orient Reserves (1-0). In the latter game, wing half Ramsay took over the centre forward's role and scored the single goal. The match also saw the debut of former Burnley player John Cretney at right half.



*Back: Bartlett (manager), Tye, Romain, Ramsay, Scanes
Middle: Gardner (trainer), W. Yenson, Balmer, Price, Leigh, Hollidge (groundsman)
Front: Davenport, McDonald, Wooldridge, Wood, Dawson*

On the following Saturday, the Robins started their annual F.A. Cup campaign with a visit to New Brompton in the 4th. Qualifying Round. The match was played in torrential rain and, just after the hosts had added a second goal shortly after the interval, it had to be abandoned due to bad light with the home side leading 2-0. Just four days later, the Robins returned to Kent for the replay and took full advantage of the second chance that fate had given them. With the match seemingly heading for a 1-1 draw, Wooldridge moved upfield to score the winner with just five minutes left. This was to be the Robins' last match against New Brompton as, before the sides played each other again, the Kent club changed its name to the now familiar Gillingham. However, despite what was an excellent win against opposition from Division One of the SL, a few supporters still had a complaint. Apparently the club had advised supporters wishing to make the trip to take the 1pm train from London Bridge, but it turned out that this particular train only ran on Saturdays and this was a midweek match; the next train would have only got them to the ground at half time. On the Saturday following the F.A. Cup win, the Robins entertained Reading Reserves and won 3-2 in front of a crowd of 2,500. However, in another SEL fixture two days later, the side were well beaten 5-0 at West Ham United Reserves, although it was not a full strength side given that both Gardner and Hollidge played. To add insult to injury, in the absence of Hutchins, Ramsay missed a penalty in the final minute.

It was back to the F.A. Cup for the next fixture and the visit of Ripley Town & Athletic to The Nest in the 5th. Qualifying Round. The Robins were clear favourites to win and they did so comfortably. After Wood had opened the scoring in the first minute, three further goals from Ramsay 2 and Davidson saw the Robins home, although the visitors scored a consolation goal from a penalty after a foul by Wooldridge. Balmer missed the match because of a bout of influenza and the crowd of 4,500 produced gate receipts of £120. For the remainder of December the Robins were mainly involved with SL fixtures, with Aberdare the visitors to The Nest on the following Wednesday. The Welsh club hardly gave itself a decent chance, as the side travelled all day to reach the ground just in time for the start. The Robins won 2-1, but apparently did not play that well. During the match, a spectator and one of the Aberdare team squared up to each other on the touchline and the police had to separate them; another example of crowd trouble at The Nest. A crowd of 2,500 saw the Robins score all three goals; the Aberdare goal coming from an own goal by Leigh.

The side was without a fixture on the following Saturday but, instead of giving the players a well deserved rest, the club arranged a friendly match with Ilford and the first choice eleven was fielded. Not surprisingly, the amateurs were easily beaten 3-0, with the goals scored by McDonald, Davidson and Sparrow.