

A strengthened Netts A are all set to challenge champions Black Notley A for this year's Braintree Table Tennis League title, a trophy they last won in 2003.

They are the main beneficiaries from the sad demise of Bocking, who drop out of the league after more than 35 years. Bocking won the league title four times, the most recent in 2009, and at one point ran 11 teams.

Kevin Gowlett, Bocking's leading player with a 91 per cent average last year, moves across to the Earls Colne club where he will join Paul Davison, men's singles champion for the past three years, and Nikki Kennard, with Nigel Hodder, also moving from Bocking, and Philip Lawson as back-up.

It is a line-up that is likely to test the mettle of the champions, who field last year's quartet of Peter and Ian Hayden, Terry Dowsett and Trevor Carter but have lost the services of boys' singles champion Scott Dowsett.

In addition to Bocking, Pillar House have also disbanded with around half their players joining Black Notley, enabling the village side to put in an extra team.

Rayne have also added a team, leaving the league with one team fewer than last year.

Bocking's withdrawal leaves an extra place in division one and that means promotion for two Rayne teams, last year's E and C teams, who become this year's C and D.

That means a first crack at the top sphere for Richard Whiteside, Phil Wade and Simon Fleming who ran out clear winners of division two and then held their own in the play-off groups to clinch their place.

The new D team of Keith Martin, Dave Punt, Alastair Brown and Dave Moles had an uncomfortable time in the top division last season but must face it again, although this time they have the support of Ryan Pitt, from the defunct Pillar House A.

The club's B team field their usual cadre of Paul Mitchell, Brian Riedling, Brian Cook and Peter Hance but the A team begin the season with their two longest serving players Ian Whiteside and Dean Andrews on the sidelines, Whiteside with a broken collar bone and Andrews awaiting an operation on a chronic shoulder injury.

Twenty-four-year-old Alistair Hill, who has played very little in Braintree since his junior days, is drafted in alongside his father Jon and Steve Pennell as the mainstays for the early part of the season.

Liberal A and Black Notley B complete the first division of eight teams.

Liberal retain their four from last season, Barry Pritchard, Robin Armstrong, Mike Johnston and Frank Neill, as do Notley, but in addition to Graham Farmer, James Hicks, Rob Stannard and Laurie Sapiano, they bring in Duncan Elloy from Pillar House A and will also enjoy support from former men's singles champion Steve Kerns, back after a year's absence.

Based on last year's positions, Sible Hedingham – Roy Hooper, Graham Cannon and Mark Brown - start as marginal favourites for the division two title as all the teams who finished above them are in division one.

But Rayne E (last year's D team) finished only one point behind them in the play-offs and level on points with them in the initial phase.

The old firm of Cec Butcher, Paul Wellington, Tony Hammond and Mo Hardy, one of the longest standing combinations in the league, will be on the lookout for that extra point from somewhere this year.

The two White Lions teams are the likely front-runners in division three as they were last year when they were separated only by Pillar House B.

In Pillar House's absence they should take the top two spots this time, with the Ascott-Ascott-Perrins team once again slugging it out with the Johnson-Willis-Purslow half of the club.

Rayne G will again not be far away and if John and Ryan Sanderson play alongside Tom Elder more often, as is likely, the H team will be a handful too.