

Good Friday Record.

Twelve thousand to see Stoke at Luton.

Blues' lucky winning goal after an unlucky mishap

Those whose knowledge of Southern League Second Division football is limited to what they read in the London newspapers would have been agreeably astonished at the gate drawing capabilities of this competition in a keen football town if they could have looked in at the match between Luton Town and Stoke on the Luton Town ground on Good Friday afternoon. In the days when Luton occupied the position to which they are about to return as members of the First Division of the Southern League, Watford constituted the popular holiday attraction, and provided the record League gates, but Good Friday's match furnished the Town Club with the largest sixpenny League gate they have experienced during the whole of their association with the Southern League. The record figure previously was £286 in the match with Watford on Boxing Day of 1908, and in the same season Luton shared an even larger gate, viz. £317, at Watford, but on Good Friday the takings reached the magnificent sum of £321 8s. 8d. This is not, of course, the highest amount of gate money Luton have taken, because the cup-tie record, achieved on the occasion of Sunderland's visit, stands at over £500, but that represented a shilling gate with various extras for stand accommodation, and everyone paying irrespective of season tickets. It is, therefore, pretty safe to assume that the crowd present at the Good Friday game was the largest there has ever been on the Town ground. This, at any rate, was the opinion of several of those having a long experience of the Town Club, who looked out upon the scene from the commanding view point of the Press gallery. It was well in excess of the attendance on the occasion of the Sunderland cup-tie, and the only question is whether it beat the attendance figures represented by the Watford record. In view of the extra price put on for reserved seats in certain bays of the

large stand, and the fact that full price was charged for ladies, and the ninepenny stand was more full than it has ever before been seen on a fine afternoon, there are some who argue in favour of the Watford match as furnishing the record attendance, but allowing for all these factors the balance still seems likely to be rather in favour of the Good Friday match constituting a record in the one respect as well as the other.

At any rate, the crowd was over, rather than under, twelve thousand, and it was unique for a record crowd in that it was almost wholly a gathering of Luton's supporters. There was no strong contingent from the opposition to swell the numbers, as was always the case in the days of the Watford visits. There was an arrangement when the holiday fixtures with Stoke were made that the Stoke Supporters' Club were to run an excursion similar to that which the Luton Supporters' Club promoted for Easter Monday, but it did not materialise. The visiting contingent, judging by the red and white favours there were to be seen, could scarcely have numbered more than a score, outside the players, and it speaks volumes for the interest and enthusiasm excited by the prospects of Luton's promotion, not only in the town itself but for many miles around, that many hundreds of visitors were attracted from all parts of the surrounding district—even that part of the district which is nearer and is supposed to be more favourably disposed to Watford. Half-an-hour before the match commenced there was not a seat or an inch of standing room from which the game could be viewed in comfort on the grand stand side of the ground, and there must have been hundreds of people who paid for admission to the shilling side and then took up their position on the sixpenny terraces, or secured passports to permit their transfer to the ninepenny stand. There was not a single part of the ground that did not seem to be packed as tightly as it could be. Young fellows clambered on to the roof of convenient lean-to buildings near the lane, four or five perched themselves on the top of an advertisement board above the terraces near Kenilworth-road, and before the game was far advanced there were quite a number comfortably seated on the ground on the playing pitch side of the barrier which ordinarily is supposed to keep the crowd from the sacred precincts of the playing enclosure. The recognised favours of the Strawhatters were very much in evidence, and altogether the scene made the occasion one of the landmarks in the history of the Town Football Club.

The record crowd was all the more significant in its testimony to the interest aroused, in that it was a case of risking very uncertain weather. "Stormy" was the unanimous prediction of the weather prophets for Good Friday, and stormy it most certainly was. There were two sharp storms in the morning, and another heavy shower in the early part of the afternoon prepared one for the possibility of a wetting at any unexpected moment, but fortunately for the game and for the thousands of spectators who were without shelter the watery clouds gave place permanently to brilliant sunshine of genial warmth, which made an ideal setting for the fixture. The pitch, too, was in first-rate condition, although the fact that it was on the soft side and the presence of pools of water in the most worn places demonstrated the wisdom of the step taken in postponing the annual match which the Postmen and Policemen were to have played on the Town ground in the morning.

If the crowd were keenly expectant, the players were equally so, for a victory for Luton meant making the Blues almost certain of promotion, while defeat would have given Stoke more than a sporting chance of attaining this envied distinction. Everything, therefore, pointed to a dour struggle for supremacy, and both sides had the satisfaction of being able to concentrate full strength on the contest. Luton were able to rely on the team that has not met with a single Southern League defeat. Stoke, unlike Luton, have recently been trying a lot of chopping and changing, but still the team representing them was their choice side, so that it may be regarded as the best they have available. Mr. L. Bullmer, of Northampton, was the referee, and I do not remember a game in which he has officiated at Luton where his decisions have met with such general favour. Keenness was admirably restrained all round, and the referee had no difficulty in keeping the players well in hand. This was how they lined out:—

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Luton:—Mitchell; Elvey, Robinson; Fred Hawkes, Frith, Bob Hawkes; Durrant, Wileman, Simms, Rollinson, Hoar.

Stoke:—Gadsden; Turner, Milne; Jones, Parker, Bradley; Hargreaves, Herbert, Smith, Ellis, Tempest.

Taking advantage of the sun and giving their opponents the wind, the Blues early assumed the aggressive in rousing fashion, the right wing giving the visiting defence cause for a good deal of anxiety. Simms made good use of the wing, and Durrant was prominent in the picture. From a free kick in his favour Rollinson had the first pot at goal, a smart first-timer rising too high, and then from a delightful passing movement on the right the Stoke goal underwent its first narrow escape. Simms was favourably placed from the centre, but as the route to goal was barred he transferred to the left. Hoar was not so prompt as usual in making his centre, but still it was marked by unerring judgment, and Simms was able to head in. Gadsden ought not to have been unduly troubled, but he fumbled the ball, and it was quite a toss up as to whether he or Rollinson lifted out of the sawdust. Mitchell was similarly faulty on the first occasion that the visitors got within shooting range, and although the shot he had to deal with from Herbert did not appear a difficult affair he only just controlled it in time. Stoke became even more dangerous than this a minute later, and it was fortunate for Luton that Wileman dropped back and came to the rescue twice in quick succession. His first clearance was not effective, but following up he beat down a sharp drive from Ellis, and a hands award was given against him on the verge of the penalty area. The free kick also afforded some anxiety, but Bob Hawkes used his head to concede a corner, and this resulted in the siege being raised.

Altogether, the opening ten minutes were very exciting, and promised a game with plenty of incident. Stoke were doing a big share of the pressing, but they lacked finish, and only twelve minutes had slipped by when Luton penetrated the visiting defence and netted. It was a lovely movement from which the goal resulted, and the crowd did not relish it being disallowed, but the decision was palpably correct. Durrant and Wileman completely swept the opposition before them by the bewildering rapidity of their passing and re-passing, but when Wileman was about to make his final effort, the ball rose awkwardly, and the most he could do was to pass on the chance. This was accepted like a shot by Simms, for he only had the goalkeeper to beat, but, as has already been said, there was little doubt about his being off-side. The Blues, however, continued to look the more likely scorers, and the half was only mid-way through when the crowd were compensated for their early disappointment. Rollinson was the hero, and it was a case of poetic justice that it should have been so, for a minute or two before he must have been a scorer, had it not been for a deliberate piece of handling by one of the opposition just outside the penalty line. Simms and Hoar shared with Rollinson the credit. The centre suddenly dashed away from mid-field play, and planted the ball nicely out to Hoar. The local wasted no time in centring, and his centre was so magnificently placed, that either Rollinson or Simms could have done the trick, because the Stoke goalkeeper was helpless. Rollinson's head was the first to come handy, and he made no mistake—and there was no one on the ground more excited than the line of reserve players, who were anxiously watching developments from a plank form in front of the grand stand.

Hoar and Simms were within an ace of again bringing about the downfall of the goal a minute or two later. Hoar sped away in beautiful style, and Simms smartly gathered up his centre. Quick as he was, however, he was tackled as he shot, and the back took a good deal of the force off the effort which nevertheless caused Gadsden to go full length to keep the ball out. The Luton men had now completely settled down, and were playing with marked confidence, but just when goal scoring promise seemed likely to develop, misfortune came their way. Durrant, who had been associated with Wileman in some of Luton's best forward work, hurt himself in a flying encounter with the opposing back, and was compelled to retire for attention. He was only missing for about five minutes in the first instance, but when he returned he was quite unable to whip up even a return, and after vainly endeavouring to be of some service he retired again just before the interval. His loss was severely felt as the forward work became quite disorganised, and only once more before the change of ends did the Blues get anywhere near dangerous. This was when from a free-kick Simms rushed the defence. Had he have realised at the instant where the ball was, he must have been a scorer, but he was in a maze for the minute, and although the ball lay handy for Wileman as he dashed in, somebody's foot also came across handy just as he whizzed in one of his very own, and turned aside a shot which Gadsden would have been lucky to have even seen. Stoke, on the other hand, took charge of the game in very threatening fashion, and had one or two really good chances, but they were woefully wanting in finish. Still Luton had one very lucky escape. The left wing outwitted Fred Hawkes and Elvey, and Ellis ran to the line, and squared the ball across the goal. Mitchell dived for the ball at the same moment that Herbert made for it, and both missed with the result that Robinson unexpectedly received the ball. It simply struck him and rebounded towards goal, and it was one of the luckiest things in the world that the rebound fell into Mitchell's hands. Everyone was immensely relieved, when half-time came with the score still:—

Luton 1, Stoke 0.

During the interval it transpired that the

cause of Durrant's breakdown was strain in the groin, and when it became known that he was not to return, it was recognised on all hands that the Blues were up against a very stiff proposition. While the play was eleven a side it had been materially in Luton's favour, but it was evident that their superiority was not so pronounced as to comfortably admit of the handicap of a player short. It was therefore a matter for general rejoicing, when to compensate for their ill luck in losing Durrant, Luton were favoured in the first two minutes of the second half with a two-goal lead as the result of one of the luckiest goals imaginable—certainly the luckiest the Blues have registered on the Town ground this season. Wileman, being alone on the right wing, had been rather neglected by the visiting defence, and running the ball down, sent across the goal to Simms. The centre was very well placed, but he was so eager that he never once got the ball under control, and the backs seemed to have every chance of clearing. One muddled, however, then the other joined in, and only made things worse. Finally, Gadsden dashed into the scrimmage only to miss the ball, which came to Simms' foot, and the centre shot out his foot, and had the delight of seeing the ball make for goal with no one there to stop its progress. Milne instantly rushed back and kicked the ball out before it reached the net, but it was clearly well over the line, and the referee had no hesitation in allowing the point.

This made things much more hopeful, especially as immediately afterwards Gadsden made rather a mess of things in dealing with a centre from Hoar, and was somewhat fortunate not to be rushed off the ball by Simms, but it very soon became apparent that a two goal lead would be none too much. Faulty shooting gave Luton a welcome let off, when some muddling by the backs let Smith through, but the second half was only eight minutes old when Stoke made the state of affairs as at half-time. Fred Hawkes headed on to Ellis, who ran through very fast, and centred close in for Smith to snap up the chance with a first timer, which kept low and gave Mitchell no chance. It was quite the best goal of the game, and from this point it was a terrifically uphill fight for Luton. The visitors took advantage of the absence of Durrant to the full, and concentrated play on their left side of the field, with the result that the Blues found it difficult to make anything like a prolonged incursion into their opponents' territory. Wileman was a dejected figure on the wing alone, with no opportunities to use his energies, and try as they would the halves could not get the ball across to the other side of the field. Bob Hawkes was repeatedly trying to lend the forwards a hand, but this only threw a greater strain on his colleagues in defence, and it was a trying time for all. Still every player in the defence put up a sterling exhibition, the backs in particular doing yeoman service, and considering the pressure the visitors exerted, they gave Mitchell comparatively little anxiety. Corners they gained in number, and these provided the greatest danger, there being several very exciting scrimmages, but the nearest thing Luton experienced was when Frith rather suspiciously hauled up a forward on the fringe of the penalty area, and the referee disregarded it.

opponents when they materialised. Gadsden had to go full length to save one surprise shot from Simms, and another from the same player, although directed from an awkward angle, completely beat him and was only inches wide of the mark. Wileman would most certainly have been a scorer if a bouncing centre from Hoar had not got up too high at the critical moment, for Gadsden was again nonplussed, and a touch with the head was all that was needed to beat him. Wileman on another occasion got away from a fine pass by Simms, and reaching the ball near the line, smacked it into the goalmouth. Simms was right on the spot in readiness, but Gadsden dived out in the nick of time, and with a splendid effort just touched the ball out of danger. Simms also brought off a brilliant individual effort, which stood out as one of the greatest things of the match, and thoroughly merited success. It was a long range effort from the right wing, and as the ball sped on its journey, Simms jumped into the air, evidently confident he had found the mark, but once more he beat the goal as well as the goalkeeper, the ball just swerving over the bar.

"First time Luton" was a pretty general direction to the players, when the last ten minutes were entered upon, but it proved to be quite unnecessary. Stoke had shot their bolt, and for the first time during the second half the Blues had them under complete control. Their final spurt promised more than once to bring success, especially in the last minute, when a centre from Rollinson was missed by one of the backs, and Wileman was left with a glorious chance. As Wileman ran in, however, Simms ran out to the wing, and intercepted his colleague. He made a capital effort, but he was not so favourably placed as Wileman, and the most he could do was to force a corner. This Wileman sent behind, and so the final result was:—

Luton 2, Stoke 1.

As the game ran, it cannot be denied that Luton were rather lucky to maintain their unbroken sequence of home League victories, but the Stoke officials were the first to admit that it would have been hard on the Blues if they had been denied a victory under the circumstances. Stoke, as I have ventured to prophecy over and over again, proved the strongest opposition Luton have encountered at home this season, but the Blues were so thoroughly on their mettle that there is little doubt but that they would have won comfortably had it not been for the unfortunate loss of Durrant. Up to the time of his breakdown, the bulk of the aggressive work had come from the right wing, and Wileman and Durrant were displaying masterly combination, but Wileman was lost without his partner, and rarely figured in the picture afterwards. The attack was largely dependent upon Hoar's centring and Simms' fearless dash, and both these players won almost universal praise. It says much for the home forwards that, in spite of the handicap under which they laboured, they were the more deadly in front of goal, but, as at Swansea, it was with the defence that the honours mostly rested. When the home team were one short Bob Hawkes was rather prone to attempt too much in making up the deficiency on the forward line, but his colleagues set themselves determinedly to the task of defending, and there was not one who did not shine. Frith was most valuable in emergencies, and the backs were simply splendid.

Of the Stoke team only one derogatory thing can be said, and that was the lack of finish which marred an otherwise sound forward line. Smith in the centre was always a source of danger, and Herbert also did splendid work. Jones and Bradley were both prominent in the half-line, and Turner played a magnificent game at back. Gadsden was not altogether certain, but as a whole the Stoke defence was the best seen at Luton this season, and one cannot but have the impression that it is the lack of opportunism among the forwards that necessitates for them another season in the Second Division.