

BOXING DAY SURPRISE.

Northampton's First Home Defeat for Two Seasons.

Northampton is one of the few clubs Luton have not visited since they went down previous to Boxing Day, and in consequence, with the exception of Bob and Fred Hawkes, none of the Luton team had appeared on the County ground before as Luton players. In the old days this match was always looked upon as one of the big functions of the season, and the Lutonians present have run into thousands. Practically all the season Boxing Day has been looked forward to as likely to tax the ground to the utmost, and therefore it was a big disappointment to the officials of both Northampton and Luton to find the "gate" of modest dimensions. To this various causes contributed. The truly atrocious atmospheric conditions were probably the greatest factor, but unfortunately for Luton the 25,000 Territorials who have made up 80 per cent. of the gates at Northampton this season were moved in the early part of the week, and as the Supporters' Club excursion from Luton was also affected by the weather and only about 400 made the journey, the takings were about 30s. less than at Luton the previous day.

Although there was just a doubt about one or two of the team it was found possible to turn out the same Luton side as the previous day, and only one personal change was made by Northampton, Lockett, who had stood down from the Christmas Day match, being in the centre, and thus allowing Lessons to fall back to centre-half, Manning being dropped to make room for him. The going was altogether different from that at Luton the previous day. In places it was very muddy, while it was slippery all over the pitch, and it was evident the players would be severely tested before the finish. The ball became extremely heavy, and the majority of the players felt the effects of it coming into contact with their heads quite early in the game, and were observed to put their hands up pretty frequently after they had met its force on this part of their anatomy. Indeed once or twice they appeared quite dazed for a moment or so when it was headed with force.

The opening movement came when Hoar slipped away past Clipstone and centred the ball. Simms tried to push his way through, but was too hampered by the defence crowding in upon him, and he could only kick the ball forward for a goal kick. A minute later Simms shot in from a right wing centre, but again the effort was quite a tame one, although it brought about the first corner kick of the match. This was well taken, and Rollinson headed the ball nicely into goal, but Thorpe caught the ball and saved his charge in fine style. After this promising opening Luton fell away for a bit, and the Cobblers' forwards were more in the picture, Hughes in particular being very dangerous when he got a chance. After about ten minutes he was working nicely into goal when Elvey met him just inside the penalty area, and although from the stand it appeared a fair charge the referee awarded a penalty kick to the Cobblers. Clipstone came up to take this, and the writer was promptly informed it was a sure goal as he had never missed scoring from the twelve yards mark. But, fortunately, for once he managed to kick wide, the ball just missing the upright as it shot along the ground at a good pace. After this let off the Cobblers continued to put on the pressure, and Lockett almost netted with a sharp shot just under the bar which Mitchell did well to save. Mitchell also used fine judgment in coming out quite thirty yards to intercept a punt up the field before Bellamy was able to get settled on the ball, and thus relieved a somewhat threatening opening. At this stage the Cobblers were decidedly the more dangerous looking set, and Mitchell's charge had numerous lucky escapes, but the ball, as previously remarked, was very weighty and difficult to control in the mud.

Although on the whole Northampton had most of the promising openings, Luton also had quite a number, but their finish was very tame, and it was not often Thorpe was seriously employed. Still he was well beaten by a shot from Bob Hawkes, which struck the upright near its junction with the cross-bar and rebounded to Simms. The centre promptly headed it back, but Thorpe managed to catch it just in time, and pulled it down from almost under the bar, and thus relieved the situation. This was the nearest Luton came to scoring before the interval, and they must be considered to have done well to have been on an equality at half-time, with the score standing:—

Luton 0, Northampton 0.

The game still went mostly in favour of the Cobblers for a few minutes following the restart, and they took three corners in quick succession, but all were disposed of. An even more serious chance arose as a consequence of a foul on Tull by Simms just outside the penalty line, but again fortune favoured Luton, and the shot was cleared. For a spell the play was chiefly in midfield, and Luton were at least holding their own. Hopes of a draw were in the air, and the Lutonians at one end of the stand began to make themselves heard a trifle more than had been the case in the first half.

The second half had run over half its length before the first goal came, and then, to the delight of the excursionists, it was Luton that scored. When it came it seemed a rather tame affair, and undoubtedly the Cobblers' defence was caught napping. Hoar was fouled somewhere near the corner flag, and Rollinson for some reason or other was left unmarked, and as the ball came along he managed to "nod" it just inside the goal. It was laughable to see Rollinson's face, for it bore distinct marks of its contact with the muddy ball, but his comrades soon wiped these away. There was still nearly twenty minutes to play, but this goal put new life into the game, and the exchanges were pretty stubbornly contested. Twice it looked likely that the Cobblers must equalise, but each time the ball just missed the target, while at the hotel end Simms had hard lines with a shot. Thorpe appeared to pick the ball from over the line and turn it round the post for a corner kick, and at the finish the Luton players were very confident they should have been allowed a goal.

As it happened it did not matter a deal, for ten minutes before the finish Roberts slipped clear of all opposition, and placing the ball finely to Rollinson, the inside left neatly planted it into the net. This, of course, quite settled matters, and the

Cobblers went all to pieces. Luton were practically attacking for the rest of the game, and Wileman managed to increase the score with an individual dash through in his well-known style, and thus gave Luton a three-goal victory. As one Lutonian stated, if there had been another ten minutes they would have scored half-a-dozen goals so dead beat did the Cobblers appear to be in the closing stages. However, it was quite satisfactory to win by such a clear margin as:—

Luton 3, Northampton 0.

It was a remarkable result, particularly when it is remembered that neither this season nor last have the Cobblers been beaten at home. It is not often a team falls away quite so much as the home team did during the final quarter of an hour of this match. Indeed it was not until this period that they were a beaten side, although under the conditions both sides had missed glorious looking chances.

Mitchell did not have a deal to do, but Elvey and Dunn both played a strong defensive game, while all the halves did well. Bob Hawkes stuck to his work in the mud in a surprising manner, and Frith did some remarkable things at times, almost scoring a goal on one occasion with a sharp drive just over the bar. The inside forwards were naturally handicapped by the mud in the centre of the field, and the most showy work was done by Roberts and Hoar, both of whom at times left their opponents standing. Clipstone indeed at the finish quite gave up the idea of trying to stop Hoar, and thus the ex-Clarence winger had a fine time in what was the best patch of turf on the field.

Freeman was the Cobblers' most dangerous forward in midfield, but he finished very poorly when clean through on two or three occasions. Lessons made very poor use of several good chances in the first half, while he, like Clipstone, was well "whacked" during the closing stages.

Luton's achievement is voted on all hands as the best Southern League performance of the holidays, and it should do much to remove the anxiety there has been as to the possibility of relegation once more. As a result of the holiday games they have climbed up three places in the table, and are now fourteenth with seventeen points for twenty games, and a goal average of 30 against 37. Curiously enough they have lost fewer points away than at home, and although their away matches have been two less they have produced eight out of the seventeen points.