

F.A. Cup Tie.

SATURDAY, JAN. 8th.

On the Town Ground.

LUTON

V.

BIRMINGHAM.

Kick-Off 2.15 p.m.

FROM THE FOOTBALL FIELD.

TOWN FINISH THE YEAR GOALS TO THE GOOD.

Although Luton's supporters were not able this Christmas to exult over a repetition of the holiday success on foreign soil of twelve months ago, the playing record for the holiday programme was, as a whole, one to give abundant cause for satisfaction. Four points from three games was a really fine achievement after the undesired loss of a point at home on Christmas Day and what was more gratifying still the Town all through the holiday played well enough to have fared even better. From all accounts the slightest bit of luck would have given them both the points and on Tuesday they would up the holiday with their heaviest win of the season. Incidentally this enabled them to reverse their deficit in goal average for the rest time this season. It has taken half the season to wipe out the consequences of the 2-1 defeat sustained in the very first match at Winton, but the forwards are at present playing well enough to speedily bring the goal average into harmony with the position the club occupies in the Third Division table.

Gillingham's position at the bottom of the League table and their two Christmas defeats at the hands of Northampton were scarcely calculated to make them a "draw" and with rain threatening it was an agreeable surprise to find over 11,000 spectators present to see them soundly trounced. The Town relied on the same side that drew at Southampton, Simms thus making his initial appearance at home with the first team, and Gillingham also made no changes in their Boxing Day side which was: Branfield; Robertson, Sissons; Baxter, Waugh, Thompson; Wood, Howard, Needham, Hall, Wright. Mr. L. E. Vickery, of Birmingham was the referee and his handling of the game was extremely pleasant and a vast improvement on what we saw on Christmas Day, the game being entirely free from any marking features.

The ground was, if anything, heavier and more treacherous than on Christmas Day, but the Town players make very light of this difficulty, and although the quagmire in the goalmouth naturally had an ill effect on shooting efforts the standard of combination among the forwards could scarcely have been higher if the playing conditions had been ideal. The defence were equally successful in rising to the top of their form, and Gillingham were simply wrecked after in all departments with the solitary exception of goal. It frequently happens that when a team is outplayed in the field their goalkeeper catches every other player, and it was certainly the case with Branfield. His work all through was brilliant in the extreme, and he had as many opportunities of displaying his brilliance that he would not have been disgraced if the first score had been twice 2-0.

Gillingham's goalkeeper, a sturdy pair of backs and a useful left half in the open were the only redeeming features of a very poor side, and the feebleness of their display made the more pronounced by the ease with which the Town players took things. There was just a fear in the early stages that they might make the mistake of treating the opposition too cheaply, but there was never any danger of this after the ice had been broken, and by half time the ball had been netted five times.

The left wing were responsible for the first goal after fifteen minutes. Bookman reeled away from the halfway line entirely on his own, Mathieson reached out with his right and just got his boot to the centre, and Branfield had no chance whatsoever with a lovely goal. Another came seven minutes later, and was more warmly welcomed because it was the first goal of the season from Higginbotham, for which Harry's admirers have long been sighing. It was a success Higginbotham has worked strenuously and even magnificently for, but all the same it was distinctly a lucky one. The inside right got the ball on the bounce from a throw-in close to the corner flag and lifted it into the goalmouth with no seeming intention of scoring himself. Waiting for the bounce, Branfield seemed to have it well covered, but the mixture of mud and snow gave it a bit of a shoot, and by the time the goalkeeper gathered it it was well over the line. The referee was right on the spot, and so there was no room for argument.

Ten minutes later Simms also netted, but the point was not allowed to count. He failed to negotiate a centre from Hoar, and when Mathieson with a back header, got the ball back into the goalmouth for Simms to head in the centre was clearly offside. Previously Simms had shot straight into the goalkeeper's hands from a perfect centre by Bookman and had fired outside after cleverly beating both backs, and it fell to Higginbotham eight minutes before the change of ends to make Luton's number of real for tally with those against for the first time this season. Hoar hooked the ball into goal, had it returned and repeated the dose. Simms, who was right in front, drove it in and hit the goalkeeper. Bookman did not, and from the rebound Parker mis-kicked, and Higginbotham then dashed on and crashed the ball high on in the net. He had but luck to be credited with the hat

trick directly after. He and Simms were rushing through in company, and when the centre was pulled up Higginbotham followed it up and drove the ball in with a bang only for the referee to whistle for a foul against Simms.

The only time Bailey was in really serious trouble during the first half was when after half an hour's play a muddle by the defence allowed Wood to get right close in. Gillingham ought to have scored on that occasion, for although Bailey dived into the mud and saved Wood's shot he was so pressed that he could only throw away, and Howard was wonderfully well placed when he shot wide. Bailey also made a great save from a corner soon after the change of ends, but generally his role was to look on at Branfield earning the applause in the other goal. Two saves from terrific drives by Parker at close range bordered on the ridiculous, and Higginbotham and Hoar were also sufferers. It was entirely due to Branfield's brilliance that twenty two minutes spent by before Luton increased their lead. This goal came from a real lovely forward movement, perfect in every detail. Higginbotham emerged from a scramble with the ball, transferred to Simms, the centre planted out to Bookman, and Mathieson met the centre and netted with a great first-time shot. The fifth and last goal came eight minutes later, Hoar dashing in after Branfield had saved from a corner and sending the ball in at such a lightning speed that the goalkeeper could never have seen it.

The two factors which contributed to Luton's failure to score more goals were the splendid anticipation with which Branfield met everything that was dangerous, and the evident desire of the forwards to help Simms to get in the scoring list. The Gillingham defence appeared to be quite content if they could spoil the centre, and in his efforts to evade their attentions Eric frequently lay too far up, and was pulled up for offside. When this was not the case there was nearly always the centre half or one of the backs waiting for him, and the goalkeeper had an eagle eye for every shot he got on the target.

Simms thoroughly deserved to be among the scorers, for he opened up the game in masterly fashion, and in every respect did well. Chief honours must, however, again go to Higginbotham, who proved that he is a tip-top heavy ground player and an adept at baffling a defence. Most pleasing, too, was the success of the left wing. Bookman demonstrated that it pays to feed him well, and Mathieson's two goals were of a character that suggest great possibilities for their partnership. Molyneux was once more the pick of the halves, and played a really clever game with Lamb a most useful second. Simms' presence in the team did not weaken the defence in the slightest. He was not as shrewd as Tirrell, but he displayed the same clever anticipation of the enemy. Scot that Lennon has accustomed us to, and if his kicking was restrained it was marked by admirable accuracy as a rule.

NEW YEAR BRINGS FIRST HOME DEFEAT.

New Year's Day should have seen the Town at Bristol, but as the City team had a Second Division game at home, the Rovers considered it advisable to transfer the venue of their Third Division fixture to Luton, instead of deferring the visit to Easter Tuesday. Luton sustained their heaviest defeat of the season when they visited Bristol last Easter Tuesday, and the Rovers also picked up a point at Luton, but they finished the season only two places above Town, and they have not shown the same improvement as Luton this season. Their Christmas games with Swansea furnished them with only one point, and caused them to drop among the bottom eight clubs.

Luton were in a position to command the services of the same team that operated in the last two of the Christmas games, but with the Cup Tie in view it was considered advisable to give Cockerill another trial at left in place of Lamb. Injuries and sickness caused the Rovers to make several changes, the teams lining up thus:-

Luton Town:-Bailey; Simms, Tirrell; Molyneux, Parker, Cockerill; Hoar, Higginbotham, Simms, Mathieson, Bookman.

Bristol Rovers:-Whitley; Hall, Panes; Howes, Sims, Crompton; Walter, Morgan, Beasley, Leigh, Norton.

Referee, Mr. F. Todman, Choydon.

A thoroughly wet afternoon caused the terraces to bear an unusually deserted appearance, but the lane stand has probably never before been so densely packed, and the attendance ran to 7,000, and looked even larger. The effect of the incessant rain was to render the heavy pitch exceptionally treacherous, and the players were frequently indulging in unexpected slides, while the ball chugged along the greasy surface at such a speed as to upset all calculations. In spite of these obstacles the game was quite the reverse of dull, a ding dong fight right up to the final whistle being unusually full of exciting incidents.

Bristol Rovers have followed Luton's example of changing their colours to white this season, and it therefore became necessary for the Town to turn out in old shirts which looked like crushed strawberry in colour—a change which certainly brought them very bad luck. The Rovers looked anything but "whites" long before the finish, but generally they appeared to keep a much better footing than the homesters, and in the early stages of the game they were altogether superior in adapting themselves to the conditions. It was not until they were a goal down that the Town players showed any appreciation of the fact that close ground passing and manipulating the ball on a sixpence were not the tactics calculated to pay on such a day, especially against a ferreting wedge like Crompton, and big-made fellows like the backs and centre-half. The Rovers wasted neither time or energy in finesse. They simply booted it hard and often, kept their wingers going with swinging passes, made every possible use of their weight and pace, and shot whenever a ghost of a chance presented itself.

The home defenders were frequently in difficulties in dealing with these movements. Bailey was no leisurely in dealing with a dropping shot from Norton that Leigh was able to dispossess him and land the ball on the top of the net, and offside saved Luton when Cockerill, in attempting to clear in the

goalmouth, drove the ball on to Leigh, and Beasley netted from the rebound. Twenty minutes had elapsed before Luton really got dangerous, and then they were distinctly unlucky, for dashing in to meet a centre from Hoar, Cockerill had the goalkeeper hopelessly beaten with a header which hit the bar and went over. From this point, improvement was noticeable in the home attack, and the forwards were much more successful than the Rovers in working the goalkeeper. Whitley saved a beauty from Hoar just under the bar, Parker twice found somebody's foot in the way of terrific drives, and Simms was just a foot too high with a first-time shot and found Whitley waiting for a better one on the ground.

Just as Luton seemed to have recovered from their unpromising start, the Rovers sprung an unwelcome surprise. A fast break-away on the right brought the ball across to Leigh, unmarked about twenty yards out. He shot without hesitation, Simps made a lunge at it, and deflected it from its course very slightly, but enough to upset Bailey. In shaping for the shot he slipped, and as he fell the ball just slipped underneath his arm. For the remaining quarter of an hour of the first half, the Town did pretty well all the attacking, and rousing attacks they were, too, but their luck was dead out. Hoar had a brilliant time of it, and from three of his magnificent runs and centres Simms had good cause to complain of his bad fortune, two beautiful efforts being just out of direction, while the other was magnificently saved close against the post.

A minute before the interval, it looked as if the Town really had equalised, and the crowd gasped with amazement when it was found that a terrific drive by Mathieson had passed the wrong side of the post. To make matters worse, Bristol straightaway took up the running, and increased their lead from practically the last kick of the half. It was a glorious solo effort by Leigh, who got the ball inside his own half, and showed wonderful control in side-epping opponent after opponent and drawing close in before he consummated a fine effort with an unstoppable shot.

Leigh was within an ace of repeating this feat early in the second half, Bailey making a great save in the mud after the big forward had raced clear of the opposition. Twice also the homesters were rather lucky to ward off threatened danger by the speedy Walter. Once he got so clear away that Bailey had to advance out of goal, but Cockerill, with a great sprint, raced in front just as he shot and took enough pace off the ball to enable Bailey to make an easy clearance. The Rovers made an appeal for hands, and there was a suspicion about it, but the referee did not allow it.

Apart from these breakaways, Luton, had all the second half, and it was little short of miraculous how the Rovers managed to hold out against the pressure. Much of the home forward work was clever in the extreme, but Whitley was really a marvel in goal. From a characteristic effort by Simms, quite the best shot of the afternoon, he had to make a great leap, hit the ball up and catch it at the second attempt, and three saves from Mathieson just under the bar were wonderfully smart. Bristol owed much to him, but even more to their good fortune. Early in the second half, Bookman was brought down quite two yards inside penalty area, but the referee awarded the foul outside. Cockerill's free kick was right away from Whitley, and Panes must have been over the line when he headed out the ball from under the bar, but the referee would not listen to the appeals. Immediately afterwards, Simms hit the upright when he looked a scorer all over, and rushing across to Whitley's rescue Panes was nearly as close as Simms was in scoring for Luton.

In the last ten minutes Bristol were reduced to packing their goal, and in one scrimmage at least half a dozen shots were rained in without one getting to Whitley. With five minutes to go and Simms right in front from a centre by Hoar, Hall stopped his shot with his hands. His action only turned the ball on to Simms' left foot, and with one movement he shot in. But the whistle had gone for the foul, and instead of allowing the goal to count the referee gave the Rovers another chance by the award of a penalty. It was a costly decision to Luton, for Simms' shot from the spot was magnificently held on the line by Whitley. Twice afterwards the ball was forced right up the line by regular Rugby scrimmages, and once it was claimed to have gone over, but the referee was once more against Luton. The Town were vainly struggling for a goal until the last few seconds, when Tirrell landed a free kick just under the bar and made the result:

Luton 1, Bristol Rovers 2.

To suffer the first defeat of the season at the hands of a team including no fewer than five reserves was mortifying, but it was sheer ill-luck. If the Town had had their deserts they should have been allowed at least three goals, and they were value for several others.

NEXT SATURDAY'S CUP-TIE.

Mr. Todman is due at Luton again next Saturday to referee the Cup-tie, and a Birmingham Club official who was at Saturday's match to spy out the land was no more enamoured of the prospect than the Town players, directors and supporters. His sympathies were all for Luton, in the way they suffered in the second half, and he described some of the free kick awards as ridiculous.

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