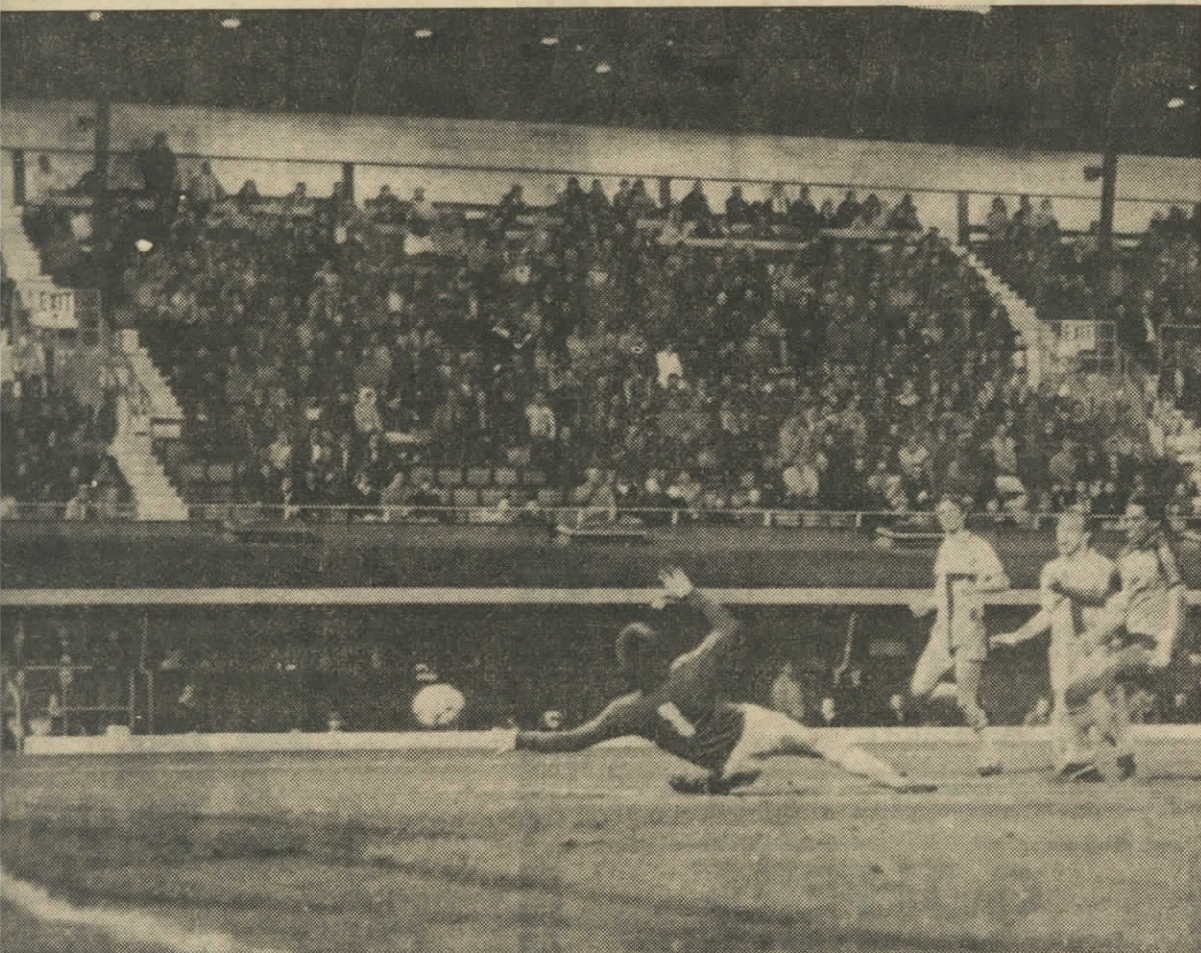


SOMEONE'S DUE FOR THE HAMMER



● EQUALISER: Brian Stein nets his 12th goal of the season.

Fellow strugglers set for the crunch

TH 15 First Division matches ended, the Town are at a crossroads on Saturday when they entertain Southampton, one of four teams below them in the league table.

Victory could send the Hatters to or four places up the table, but a defeat could dump them in the bottom three, and would certainly drop them to 19th or below.

Birmingham City, never higher than 20th since the first league game of the season, dropped to bottom again by going to Manchester and collecting a goalless draw, fourth in their last five league games.

Sunderland and Norwich are in other relegation places, each with

THE FIRST DIVISION SURVIVAL FIGHTERS										
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts			
14 Everton	15	5	4	6	25	24	19			
15 Swansea	15	5	3	7	22	25	18			
16 Notts Co	15	5	3	7	18	26	18			
17 Brighton	15	5	3	7	15	32	18			
18 LUTON TOWN	15	3	7	5	30	32	16			
19 Southampton	15	4	3	8	14	28	15			
20 Norwich	15	3	5	7	19	29	14			
21 Sunderland	15	3	5	7	13	29	14			
22 Birmingham	15	2	7	6	9	24	13			

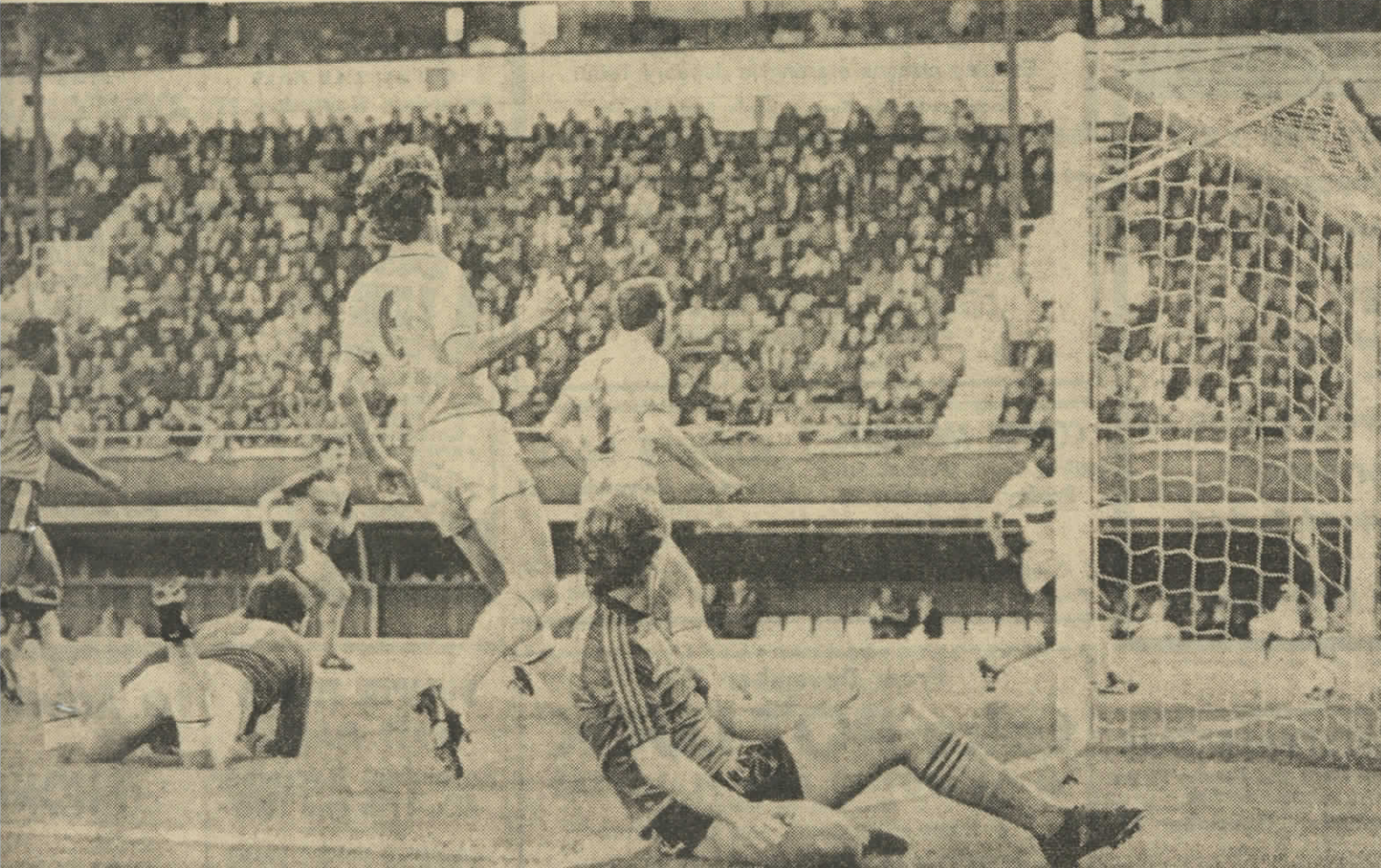
14 points, one ahead of Birmingham and two below the Town.

Norwich moved off the bottom, and ahead of Birmingham and Sunderland, with a 4-2 home win over Stoke while Sunderland were losing at home to Nottingham Forest, to Ian Wallace's tenth goal of the season. Southampton also lost 0-1 at home, to Ipswich.

At the other end of the table Liverpool increased their lead at the top. A 2-1 win at Notts County put them four points clear of the field with a record that shows only two defeats so far.

Watford moved into second place with a 4-1 home win over Brighton, whose away form looks no better than it did when they were thrashed 5-0 at Kenilworth Road — they have picked up only one away point all season.

Brighton and Notts County both have 18 points, and meet at the Goldstone on Saturday. A draw there will put the Town above them both on goal difference if the Town beat Southampton. Swansea will also be overtaken if they are beaten at Ipswich. And to keep the pot boiling, the Town are away to Swansea the following week.



● SO NEAR: Paul Walsh reaches the by-line but sees the ball miss the far post by a whisker.

MISTAKES AT BOTH ENDS of the field wrecked Luton Town's hopes at Coventry. They missed some of the best chances of the game, gave the opposition a two-goal start, fought back to equality and then threw it all away through defensive slackness in the last seven minutes.

And the despondency many Town fans must have felt on the way home was all the more exasperating because they had seen the Town play the sort of soccer that could have had the game wrapped up before Coventry had scored.

All six goals came in the second half, and one of the unbelievable features of the game was that neither goalkeeper had to do anything out of the ordinary against other shots.

In the end the defence in general, and Jake Findlay in particular, took most of the blame for defeat. Their frailties were freshest in the mind at the final whistle.

MISSING

I thought they missed the influence of Mal Donaghy, a late absentee with flu, yet any club with First Division aspirations needs to be able to ride the occasional injury.

Perhaps the time has arrived for directors to play a part in strengthening the depth of the Town's squad. David Pleat's transfer dealings have been canny, and we're told that the club has recently saved around £100,000 on the Paul Walsh transfer deal.

COVER

That money should be given to Mr Pleat immediately to buy more defensive cover before the slide down the table gets down to the panic level.

But the players already on the books must surely produce something better against fellow-strugglers Southampton on Saturday.

I wouldn't be surprised to see the Saints buried under a goal avalanche—much of the Town's play at

REPORT BY BRIAN SWAIN PICTURES: MARK RICHARDS

Highfield Road left me feeling that some day soon an opposing team will take a pasting.

Neither side looked brilliant in the first half, but with Ricky Hill looking more like his old self the Town were the smarter attacking outfit.

Luck robbed them in the ninth minute when Hill took a pass from Walsh, surged into the penalty area in the inside-right channel, and cracked a low shot which beat Les Sealey, hit the far post and rebounded to safety.

Walsh flashed an enticing low centre across the face of the goal with no-one near enough to get the finishing touch, and was then given a clear chance by Gillespie's mistake but shot wide when at the very least he should have forced a save out of the goalkeeper.

CREATED

More good chances were created and missed early in the second half, with Raddy Antic blazing a shot over the bar, Hill shooting wide from a cross-field pass by David Moss and Walsh wasting another good opportunity with a hurried first-timer over the bar after a delightful run and cross from the right wing by Brian Stein.

Between times Steve Whitton had volleyed a Coventry chance over the bar, and the Town's punishment for failing to go ahead by two or three goals came in a five-minute disaster spell.

Defender Paul Dyson went upfield to head Coventry into the lead in the 58th minute from a corner by Gerry Francis and five minutes later Stein and Antic gave the ball away through a misunderstanding.

standing in midfield. Whitton took charge near the half-way line, going past Wayne Turner, getting a lucky bounce to leave Clive Goodyear, and then shooting a spectacular goal as Findlay came out in a vain attempt to narrow the angle.

The encouraging thing was that this season the Town have shown the ability to come back after that sort of double blow. Horton, in another man of the match performance, struck a stunning 25-yard equaliser a minute after Whitton's goal and in the 79th minute a goal that was "pure Luton" brought the equaliser.

OPENING

Hill and Antic exchanged passes to cut through the midfield. Hill ran at the defence with the ball, then gave Stein an opening. Under pressure from a defender, and with the goalkeeper only partly exposed, Stein tucked away as good a goal as we shall see this season to end his six-match blank run.

I thought then that if any side could win, the Town were favourites to complete a memorable recovery. But instead the marking for a left-wing cross went to pieces to allow Whitton to head his second goal in the 83rd minute, with Findlay going for the ball when he had little hope of reaching it.

And within a minute the goalkeeper held back when an over-the-top ball was pumped upfield and Gary Thompson got there first to make it 4-2.

It was very rough justice after an overall Town performance that was worth a point at least until those last crazy minutes.

Match Details

COVENTRY CITY 4, LUTON TOWN 2
Half-time: 0-0

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Goodyear, Money, Turner; Hill, Horton, Antic; Stein, Walsh, Moss. Sub: Thomas, not used.

COVENTRY: Sealey; Thomas, Dyson, Gillespie, Roberts; Francis (Butterworth 86 mins), Jacobs, Hunt; Whitton, Hatley, Thompson.

THE GOALS: Paul Dyson header, 58 mins; Steve Whitton after solo run, 63 mins; Brian Horton for the Town, 25-yard cracker, 64 mins; Brian Stein for the Town, best goal of the game, after typical Luton build-up, 79 mins; Whitton header, 83 mins, Gary Thompson 84 mins.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town six wide, one saved, one hit the post; Coventry three saved and four wide. Corners: 8-3 to Coventry.

REFEREE: Howard King, Merthyr Tydfil; Town thought he missed a handball before giving the corner from which the first goal was scored. But he didn't make as many mistakes as the Town's defence.

ATTENDANCE: 9,644—about average for Coventry, just under half their all-seater capacity.

ENTERTAINMENT: Probably better than the Luton supporters thought—it's hard to enjoy a game when you see your team throw it away at both ends of the field and concede two goals in the last seven minutes.