

VILLA PARK WIN LAYS CUP GHOST

ASTON VILLA 0,
LUTON TOWN 1

ONE goal, superbly poached by Brian Stein, and a determined defensive battle carried the Town to their third away win of the season at Villa Park on Monday to all but end their relegation worries.

It was not, admitted manager David Pleat, the sort of stylish performance he likes to see win games. But rarely can any victory have been sweeter for a team or its fans who went down an unhappy Memory Lane.

Less than a month ago Luton went to Villa Park, outplayed Everton in an FA Cup semi-final, endeared themselves to friend and rival alike . . . and got nothing.

On Monday, while Everton were clinching the league championship at Goodison, the Town half-buried the miserable cup memories with a result which took their run to a haul of 13 points out of the 18 at stake

LUTON TOWN went to Chelsea last night with their First Division future almost secured for another season after taking maximum points from their two holiday weekend games. Sports Editor BRIAN SWAIN and chief photographer MARK RICHARDS present the stories and pictures from the victories over Arsenal and Aston Villa. The report and pictures from Stamford Bridge will be in today's edition of The Leader.

since the semi-final defeat.

Aston Villa, who had hit nine goals in their previous two matches, were frustrated by a mixture of their own over-anxious approach and a stubborn refusal by the Town to give ground under growing pressure.

"I certainly feel better tonight than the last time we were here," said the manager in the Villa Park press room.

The attacking flair and skill had not matched the performance against Everton on the same ground, nor was it as overwhelming as it had been against Arsenal at Kenilworth Road.

But the resilience of the back four, with Michell Thomas and Tim Breacker matching the dependable Steve Foster and Mal Donaghy, was as complete as I

have seen it for a long time.

Foster amazed the Villa people by the ease with which he snuffed out Peter Withe and covered colleagues when danger threatened from other angles.

They remembered him as something of a misfit in his unhappy eight months at Villa Park after a transfer from Brighton. "He's a different player today," one of the Birmingham Pressmen said. "Perhaps Luton suits him better than Villa did."

Peter Nicholas tackled like a tank in midfield, but the attacking thrust from that department was more spasmodic than usual. Ricky Hill was missing through injury, and although Garry Parker can become a top quality First Division player he is not yet Hill's equal.

But the single-minded persistence he showed when a run at goal was possible should have counted — in the second half he took on defenders for pace, got clear and thumped in what should have been the Town's second goal.

But Stein had gone too far forward in support, and while few fans of either side thought he was interfering with play referee Jim

McAulay ruled it out.

Mick Harford and Meka Nwajiobi were sprightly enough to worry Villa when the Town did build good counter-attacks, but there was none of the consistent pressure that had destroyed Arsenal on Saturday.

Even the deciding goal was a little scrappy. Breacker attacked down the right, crossed inaccurately and Gordon Cowans had time to gather the ball and decide what sort of clearance he should make. But he stumbled, lost control, and before he could regain his balance Stein surged forward and whipped in a first-time shot from the inside-right position into the far corner.

The 21st-minute goal was instinctive finishing at its very best and Villa had none capable of matching it.

They pressed forward hopefully for long spells, but only three times did they look like scoring, and each time Les Sealey denied them.

He dived to his right twice, to save low drives by Tony Dorigo and Withe, and to his left to tip a shot by Cowans round the post.

Villa got round the back of the Town's right flank a couple of times in the first half, without having the poise to capitalise, but for most of the second it was a case of a very competent defence blunting an eager but inconsistent Villa attack.

The only unhappy note was that Foster, lucky to escape a booking for a challenge on David O'Leary on Saturday, had the luck balance itself out when he was cautioned for a foul on Steve McMahon. The Villa man had earlier been booked for a wicked foul on Breacker.

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Parker, Nicholas, Preece (Turner 71 mins); Nwajiobi, Harford, Stein.

VILLA: Poole; Williams, Evans, Glover, Dorigo; Gibson, McMahon, Birch, Cowans; Withe, Walters (Daley, 47 mins).

THE GOAL: Brian Stein, 21 mins, low drive into far corner after Gordon Cowans gave the ball away.

OTHER STRIKES: Town four saved, four wide, one netted and disallowed; Villa eight saved, seven wide. Corners: 9-2 to Villa.

ATTENDANCE: 14,130, including several hundred from Luton.

REFEREE: Jim McAulay, Leeds. Had a fair game, but did football a disservice when he ruled out a goal by Garry Parker because Brian Stein was in an offside position. Even Villa fans thought the ref was wrong.

ENTERTAINMENT: Short of sparkle, with gutsy determination from the Town protecting the lead admirably.