By COLIN MALAM: Luton 0, West Ham 0

WEST HAM equalled a club record of 18 matches without defeat yesterday, but they gave little pleasure to most of the 14,999 people who preferred Kenilworth Road to Christmas shopping. On this occasion, not even the prolific Frank McAvennie could oblige.

These days, West Ham do not go away to entertain. That in fact, is one of the reasons they have not been beaten for so long and are mounting a genuine challenge for the First Division title.

Away from Upton Park, the Hammers' priority now is to avoid defeat. With Orr and Dickens Ward and Devonshire patrolling the flanks they defend resolutely in depth and try to catch their opponents unawares on the break.

The strategy worked well yesterday to the extent that it prevented Luton, the only team to have won at Upton Park this season, from scoring. But West Ham did not have much to spare in a severely disappointing contest.

If they play like this away to Charlton in the third round of the FA Cup, a situation tailor-made for a safety-first policy, then the return of live football on television could be something of an anti-climax.

Luton were not a great deal better in the first half, but they deserved to win for attacking West Ham with a real sense of purpose after the interval. Unfortunately for them, most of their best chances fell to Mark North, a young striker making only his third full appearance of the season.

North, 20, might have eclipsed the largely anonymous McAvennie totally had he accepted only one of the three chances he was offered. There were other errors in front of goal, and Parks stopped everything Luton did manage to get on target.

On a gloomy, blustery afternoon unsuitable for football, most of the first-half was eminently forgettable. A lot of the play was so hurried, inaccurate and aerial that there were really only three moments that could be called highlights.

We had to wait 17 minutes for the first. A lovely dummy by McAvennie left Devonshire a clear sight of the Luton goal, but Donaghy managed to block the ensuing shot as the home defence covered up desperately.

A good, solid tackle by Nicholas on Orr began the next incident of note five minutes later. Stein's cleverly delayed pass opened up the middle of the West Ham defence for Hill to try a shot that went narrowly wide.

But the outstanding moment of the first-half came when only three minutes of it were left. Having burst through two tackles in midfield, Thomas released Harford for a blistering shot that Parkes turned round his near post at full stretch.

North's hat-trick of chances were packed into three early minutes of the second half. First, he headed wide from a central position 10 yards out after Hill had headed back a deep, diagonal centre from the increasingly impressive Thomas.

North's slowness to react then became the problem when Foster back-headed a long throw by Hill. The leggy young striker responded more readily to an inviting through pass from Stein, but his rising shot flew the wrong side of the woodwork.

Preece was also guilty of poor finishing when Stein killed Donaghy's floated pass for him. Either side of that miss, Parkes beat out a ferocious shot from Hill, and Donaghy, leaving McAvennie alone for a change, went forward to clip the bar with a header from Preece's free kick.

Only five minutes remained when West Ham constructed their only substantial attack of the second half. A long clearance by Stewart released Cottee on the left, but the little striker's effort went wide of the far post to the relief of all those with any sense of justice.

☐ Alan Devonshire was taken to hospital with a suspected broken jaw. Devonshire was injured in a late clash with Nicholas and suffered a gash to his chin. West Ham manager John Lyall accompanied him.

Luton manager David Pleat was disappointed not to have ended the Hammers' run. "West Ham were certainly resilient for 90 minutes. They accepted a lot of pressure and took it well. I thought we had the game but we weren't able to score. Our lads are disappointed not to win, but they're not down."

Luton: Sealey, Breacker, Thomas, Nicholas, Foster, Donaghy, Hill, Stein, Harford, North, Preece.

West Ham: Parkes, Stewart, Walford, Gale, Martin, Devonshire, Ward, McAvennie, Dickens, Cottee, Orr.

Referee: D. A. Hedges (Oxford).

OUTNUMBERED: Harford and Stein get the better of West Ham's Martin