

ALMOST HISTORIC PERFECTION

LUTON TOWN 3 WEST BROM 0

ON THE night they honoured the memory of ten-goal Joe Payne, Luton Town were in the sort of form that might have repeated their historic Easter victory of 1936.

Mrs Peggy Payne, widow of the man who set the league scoring record half a century ago, was guest of honour at Kenilworth Road to see a performance that might have equalled the 12-0 victory over Bristol Rovers.

Bottom club West Brom, already planning for a Second Division survival struggle next season, were outplayed, but avoided a humiliating thrashing by dint of some good goalkeeping and Town finishing that did not match the build-up excellence.

But if, as manager David Pleat believes, the fans want to see quality football above all else, the lowest league crowd of the season enjoyed a feast.

West Brom were back-peddling from the first whistle, and were chasing shadows for most of the uneven contest. The Town were so much on top that at times they looked over-anxious in the overcrowded West Brom penalty area.

Stuart Naylor, a £100,000 goalkeeper West Brom bought from Lincoln a couple of years after Mr Pleat decided against recruiting him, was heroic behind a side that played with only flashes of defiance.

"Remember Oxford" was one of the warnings in the Town dressing room before the start. West Brom came to Luton with the worst defensive record in the First Division, and so far adrift of the field that they might have been able

to play relaxed and open soccer and perhaps pinch a surprise result.

Within five minutes of the start they knew their cause was hopeless as scintillating Town passing took them apart. The opening spell set the tone for most of the 90 minutes, with Mick Harford seeing a roaring drive brilliantly tipped over the bar, and Mal Donaghy having another despatched the same way.

Ricky Hill, celebrating ten years of consistent contributions to the Town's success, tomented West Brom's midfield with his touch and vision.

Peter Nicholas did the midfield stopping job, David Preece motored up and down the left until a groin strain took him out of the action late in the second half, and Tim Breacker frightened opponents into submission with fierce running in support of the attack.

The Town were so much on top that West Brom had to settle for defence and hope for a break. They managed a few, with Craig Madden wasting two chances and Clive Whitehead hitting a post in the 70th minute, when his side's cause was already lost.

Madden and Imre Varadi, who managed one shot on target, must have envied the service the Town's attack received.

Mick Harford, seeking goals to speak up for his England claims, admitted to his manager that it had been a frustrating night for him, seeing so much Town possession get to the penalty area but with only three goals to show for it.

But his touch in approach never let him down, and it was unfortunate for him and Mike Newell that it turned out to be a night when shots and headers refused to find the target.

Defensively the Town were in an unreal situation — they had so much of the ball that the back four all popped up regularly as attackers.

Steve Foster cracked a shot against the bar when the Town were two up and threatening to run riot, and if Rob

Johnson did not match Mitchell Thomas's attacking bursts down the opposite flank, he played a major role in snuffing out the threat of Derek Statham on the overlap.

Goalkeeper Naylor must be wondering if he made the right move in going to the Hawthorns as he faced a bombardment: He was West Brom's man of the match, but given no chance with the goals.

The first came in the 14th minute when Preece was fouled in midfield. His free kick to the far side of the penalty area was headed back by Hill and Newell accepted a close range chance with a careful header.

Within a minute a similar build-up produced the second goal. This time Hill rose for a free kick by Preece and martin Dickinson handled. Harford despatched the penalty to end a five-game lean spell with his 20th goal of the season.

It was all too easy as the Town strolled through a demoralised team — West Brom manager Ron Saunders, normally a good talker, often a blusterer, was left speechless and ducked out of the after-match Press conference.

How he must wish he had a man like Hill. The goal the man of the match deserved was a gem, six minutes into the second half. Breacker made one of his many surges down the right, flicked the ball inside and Hill took it on his chest and almost nonchalantly stroked in a sweet volley.

It was one of those moments that can raise football into an art form, another reminder of how lucky we have been to see men like Hill, as well as Joe Payne.

MATCH DETAILS

TOWN: Sealey; Johnson, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Breacker, Nicholas, Preece (Mark Stein, 74 mins); Harford, Newell.

WEST BROM: Naylor; Whitehead, Palmer, Dyson, Statham; Bradley, Dickinson, Mackenzie, Thompson; Varadi (Grealish, 79 minutes), Madden.

THE GOALS: Mike Newell, 14 mins; Mick Harford, penalty, 15 mins; Ricky Hill, 51 mins. Other strikes: Town ten saved, 14 wide, on hit the bar; Albion four saved, five wide, one hit a post. Corners: 6-0 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 9,226, lowest for any Town league game this season.

REFEREE: Tony Ward, London.

ENTERTAINMENT: Magical stuff at times from the Town, slightly flawed by not taking the score into double figures.