

Gunner Nicholas times a festive celebration

By JOHN MOYNIHAN
Arsenal 3, Luton 0

ARSENAL'S form on a freezing afternoon at Highbury looked decidedly patchy against a weakened but stout-hearted Luton side until Niall Quinn gave them the lead in the 71st minute.

Then with Charlie Nicholas on the pitch as substitute for Groves in the 78th minute the high-flying sparkle and teamwork revived. In particular, Williams showed again what a buoyant season he is enjoying in midfield.

Adams and Hayes confirmed victory with late goals which took Arsenal five points clear in the First Division, a salubrious position to be in with their centenary to be celebrated on Christmas Day.

"At the end of the day, we were comfortable winners," said a satisfied Arsenal manager George Graham. "The game was a bit scrappy, but we did build some nice moves, particularly in the second-half. We're very pleased with what we've been doing recently."

Graham, still refuses to talk about championships: "What pleases me most is that there is a great spirit in the club, similar

to when I was playing and we did the double," he said.

Luton's challenge would no doubt have been more severe had they been able to play Steve Foster in defence, but he went down with 'flu. In addition, Hill's return was delayed, and his creative work was missing at the heart of matters. But there were positive performances, particularly from the Stein brothers, Brian and Mark.

Arsenal had naturally been on their guard against a side which had done them more than a few favours by knocking over such notable tin soldiers as Liverpool, Nottingham Forest and Everton.

But those victories were on the artificial surface at Kenilworth Road, whereas the Highbury grass with a cold blast blowing in from the east, must have been a bit daunting to the visitors.

Yet Arsenal were slow to unwind as Luton defended stub-

bornly and with discipline. Once, Johnson blocked an effort from Groves with an outstretched leg, which might have troubled the able Sealey.

Breacker was next to rescue Luton, kicking away a centre from Rocastle near his goal-line. Arsenal's reluctance to punish such openings remained a puzzle up to half-time.

But they were up against a massed defence, and when Mark Stein broke out on the rare occasion, his smooth acceleration worried the experienced Sansom.

Quinn had a chance to put Arsenal in the lead before half-time, but after breaking through he failed to beat Sealey, who made a brave block.

Arsenal continued to dabble at the task before them and Quinn, tall and rangy, headed another fair chance wide from Sansom's cross.

A lack of direction from both sides frustrated the crowd, the

scapegoat being a linesman who was singled out for a bizarre flag-waving.

Sansom, always looking for the chance to roam upfield, went on one blistering run, followed by a shot which romped over the bar. Later, Sealey made a good save from Rocastle's stirring drive.

At last, Arsenal broke the deadlock when Quinn headed in Groves's cross, after Williams had set up the move.

After McDonough had been booked for a foul, the Gunners found their sights and Adams emerged on the far post to head in after Quinn's effort had hit the bar.

Two minutes from the end, Hayes chanced a shot from the edge of the area which Sealey allowed to slip through his fingers into the net. It marred a distinguished afternoon for the Luton goalkeeper against powerful, all-conquering opposition.

Arsenal: Lukic, Anderson, Sansom, Williams, O'Leary, Adams, Rocastle, Davis, Quinn, Groves, (Nicholas, 78), Hayes.

Luton: Sealey, Breacker, Johnson, Nicholas, North, Donaghy, McDonough, Stein, B. Newell, Stein, M. Grimes.

Referee: R Groves.