

LUTON GET THAT SINKING FEELING

CRUISING to a point at Pompey, Hatters sprang a leak and sank on the south coast on Saturday.

Kevin Dillon punched the crucial hole in their hopes and then led the Portsmouth boarding party which looted the Luton wreck as it went down.

The midfielder, recalled following the midweek Littlewoods debacle against Swindon, scored two goals and made another, while Mick Harford's last-kick penalty was a poor consolation for Luton.

But Dillon looked as jaded as everyone else in a first-half that showed about as much sign of life as the Mary Rose, the reclaimed 16th-century ship on exhibition a short distance from Fratton Park.

But Luton were at least holding their own, having started the game with Ricky Hill restored to midfield, after injury.

Ashley Grimes partnered Hill and Danny Wilson in midfield, with Rob Johnson wearing 10 but starting his first league game of the season as left-back.

Youngster Kingsley Black made way, although fellow winger Mickey Weir continued earning his £230,000 fee.

Despite some early Portsmouth enthusiasm,

Hatters looked comfortable on a slippery surface.

However, one-time Hatter Vince Hilaire looked eager to mark his 28th birthday.

He was finding room on the right but wasted threatening breakaways with naive solo charges, sometimes culminating — ominously as it turned out — in a desperate flop into the Luton 18-yard box in search of a penalty.

But it was Hatters who had the best chances to go in ahead at the interval.

After 26 minutes Foster's free-kick was headed across goal by Harford, for Weir to send a looping header against the bar.

But Wilson could only head the rebound against a post and Pompey survived.

Six minutes before the break Hill and Brian

Stein combined fluently to carve open the home defence, finding Harford, whose astute chip from 20 yards fell just the wrong side of the bar, with keeper Alan Knight well beaten. On reflection the striker may regret not taking the ball on into an empty penalty area.

And seconds before half-time Tim Breacker was muscled off the ball in front of goal, but unlike Hilaire, struggled to stay on his feet.

With skipper Steve Foster seemingly back to something like his old form, pushing Hatters forward against his old club, the bolt came from the blue of Portsmouth 10 minutes after half-time.

Luton were caught on the rebound after Hill's overhead kick was dropped by Knight and Weir had two stabs at goal blocked.



● Steve Foster blocks Kevin Ball's effort, with Mal Donaghy in support.

Knight's long clearance was flicked on by Ian Baird and Dillon ran up to smash a half-volley from 30 yards, which squeezed past Les Sealey's dive, shaving a post on the way in.

With time and the talent to recover, Luton made the mistake of letting anxiety overcome discipline.

Johnson had to make a desperate block on Quinn, while Stein's snapshot from Breacker's pass went over.

Another Stein shot rebounded to elude Harford.

Then Hilaire — after being booked for dissent — took Dillon's pass, feinted to round Sealey and fell over the

keeper's dive. Dillon dispatched the penalty without sentiment.

Alan Ball brought the ancient Mariner on for Baird, while Ray Harford swapped Johnson and Weir for Darron McDonough and Meka Nwajiobi.

But it was former England striker Mariner who rubbed salt in the

Luton wounds by trading passes with Dillon and ramming in a header nine minutes from time.

But when Kevin Ball was penalised for handling Ricky Hill's shot, Harford made no mistake from the spot, with only seconds remaining.

Kevin Ball was