

LUTON TOWN, the team almost everybody outside Bedfordshire would like to have seen relegated, completed a remarkable recovery to stay up and send Sheffield Wednesday into the Second Division.

They needed a win and they also needed Wednesday to lose at home to Forest. Despite the odds, the script went according to plan on a balmy afternoon of fluctuating emotions at the Baseball Ground yesterday.

Luton, gaining their only away League win in 15 months, not only beat Derby, they did it with the type of football — short passing and quick movements — which soon had Derby in trouble.

For the last five months, Luton have languished in the relegation zone and, a week ago, looked destined to plummet into Division Two for the first time in eight years.

But, having beaten Arsenal a fortnight ago, they overcame Crystal Palace with a goal in the final 30 seconds, and that gave their travelling fans — 5,000 made the journey up the M1 to Derby — another chance to watch 'the great Houdini escape'.

Within 66 seconds, Luton took the lead. They were given a free-kick 30 yards out when Hindmarch fouled Dowie and Preece quickly passed to Breacker, whose fierce right-foot drive was hit so accurately that Shilton, the England goalkeeper, had no chance to save.

Luton do a Houdini in fine style

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John Ley

Breacker, celebrating his first League goal of the season, was mobbed by his delirious team-mates and, in the 18th minute, there were similar scenes when Black scored the first of his two goals.

McDonough, who has been injured for much of the season, won the ball on the right and passed to Wilson. The ball went on to Black, 10 yards out, who scored in the bottom right-hand corner of the net. The Northern Ireland winger turned almost in disbelief as the ball crept past the despairing dive of Shilton.

But Derby, their pride punctured by these early set-backs, rallied strongly. First, Saunders had a goal disallowed for handball and then, in the 29th minute, they

pulled a goal back. Harford won a duel with Dreyer and the ball fell to Wright who calmly scored his sixth goal of the season.

Luton were further jolted just before the interval. A controversial free-kick awarded for a foul by Wilson on Paul Williams, resulted in Williams equalising from 15 yards.

To their credit, Luton came out for the second half determined not to leave the First Division without a fight. News of Nottingham Forest's second goal filtered from the terraces to the players and seemed to have the right effect.

Dowie, whose goal against Palace a week earlier had given his team hope, wasted another header — and then Black forced Shilton to make a fine save.

It was 1983 all over again. On that occasion, Luton stole a last-minute winner at Manchester City to stay up. The venue was different but the drama was the same when, in the 74th minute, Black saw an opportunity to score the winner.

It ensured another season of plastic football for First Division teams next season, with no visiting fans being allowed at Kenilworth Road.

Derby County: Shilton; Sage, Forsyth, G Williams, Wright, Hindmarch, Davidson, Saunders, Harford, P Williams, Ramage (Hubberd 45).

Luton Town: Chamberlain; Breacker, McDonough, Beaumont, James (Kennedy 83), Dreyer, Wilson, Rees (Elstrup 59), Dowie, Preece, Black.

Referee: B Stevens (Stonehouse).