Sports News

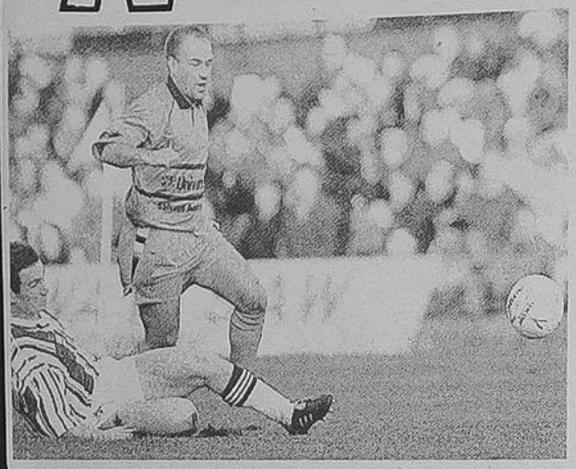
TOWN MATCH VERDICT

West Brom.....1
Luton Town.....1
(Half time 0-1)

★ ★ ★

Brian Swain reports — Action pictures: John Sherwood

Not too pretty, but hard work makes its point



● ON ITS WAY: Paul Mardon is grounded and David Preece sets off for goal, on the run that ended with a clinical finish to put the Town ahead at The Hawthorns.

● CONQUERING HERO: Preece celebrates his goal, with Scott Houghton ready to lead the celebrations.

THE new year started for Luton Town with a hard day's work at The Hawthorns.

They prised a point out of West Brom through effort and endeavour, and the need to concentrate on those qualities because the passing football could not be produced meant that it was not a very pretty match to watch.

But the result was fair, on a cold day when neither team could completely master the other, nor cope happily with a tacky, uneven surface.

SUFFERED

Saturday's match drew one of West Brom's biggest gates of the season, and it was home fans who suffered most.

One of their moans was that they expected Luton to play open passing football, to give their own struggling team a better chance.

Instead, the Town kicked off with a determination to play it tight.

As in previous away games, they fielded five midfielders, leaving **Kerry Dixon** to forage alone in attack.

The idea presumably was to suck in West Brom and catch them on the counter-attack.

But it never looked like happening until a massive clanger by the home skipper, Paul Mardon, gave the Town the chance to pinch the lead.

The calm manner in which **David Preece** shot his third goal of the season was admirable, but from West Brom's point of view it was a nightmare.

Until then they had battered away at the Town goal, but were kept out by numbers and by their own inability to deliver a telling final ball.

Both Town fullbacks were stretched at times, and not until later in the game, when they were able to attack more, did **Des Linton** and **Mitchell Thomas** show their real abilities.

Fortunately **Trevor Peake** and **John Dreyer** were in commanding form in the middle, with **Alan Harper** again doing sterling work in covering and tackling back.

But the midfield was spasmodic in terms of building attacks, with **Scott Houghton** recalled in place of **Scott Oakes** and not grabbing the chance to make the flank attack position his own.

With a heavy pitch bogging them down, **Ceri Hughes** and **Paul Telfer** got through a lot of work without being able to put consistent pressure on the West Brom defence, and the result was that Dixon was all too often forced to play deep.

But he still managed to give Mardon a worrying afternoon.

The tough defender obviously wanted to get upfield more, especially when his side was on top, but he soon learned that you give Dixon a yard or two at your peril.

The Town striker had the beating of him in the air, thanks to his ability to get clear of his man to make the headed flick-ons, one of which led to the Town goal.

Before that West Brom had softened up **Juergen Sommer**, with Lee Ashcroft collecting a well-deserved booking in the ninth minute for following up with his studs into the keeper's shins.

Sommer is having a switchback spell, but if his handling at crosses was not 100 per cent, he did the business when it mattered.

As West Brom pounded away in the first half-hour, Hughes came to the rescue with a goal-line clearance from Paul Raven.

Bob Taylor headed the rebound towards the top corner and Sommer turned it over the bar with the best save of the match.

The keeper did well to hold a low drive by Simon Garner, and was happy to let shots by Ian Hamilton and Garner fly wide.

With ten men in their own half, and showing little sign of breaking out, the Town were frustrating West Brom and their fans, and their agony was complete when the Town nicked the lead with their first shot at goal.

It was a delight for Town fans: Sommer whacked the ball downfield, and Dixon, two or three yards in front of Mardon, gave it a flick with his head.

Mardon had time to gather and control the ball, but failed to do so, and Preece was on it like a whippet, taking charge, running to just inside the penalty area, and burying a left-foot drive before the goalkeeper could advance far enough to rub out Mardon's error.

West Brom were deflated by that, and almost conceded another goal five minutes before the break.

A cross from the left by Preece was palmed out by Tony Lange, and Telfer shot for a goal that would have been wide open except for Steve Lilwall, who made the saving clearance.

In the second half I thought the Town should have completed the job against a side robbed of its confidence, and struggling even more because the big crowd got at them.

But Hughes fired wildy over the bar when a strong run took him clear from another Dixon flick-on and Telfer had a header then a shot deflected for corners.

Both sides used subs, with experienced Wayne Fereday giving the home side a touch of composure they needed

But **Paul Dickov**, on for the out of sorts Houghton, was closest to the most telling contribution, just short of converting a low cross by Telfer as the keeper came out to smother.

Mardon did get the ball into the Town net with a header, but the whistle blew for offside as he did so, and the Town were close to their second away win of the season until they were caught on the break in the 68th minute.

Stacy Coldicott collected a throw from his keeper inside his own half and knocked off a sweet pass through the inside right channel.

Micky Mellon saw the chance a second before Dreyer did, got a yard clear of the defender, and unleashed a very good drive into the corner of the net from the edge of the penalty area.

But at least the Town did not let that reverse unsettle them, and they went close to grabbing an injury time winner, when Dixon headed in from a cross by Dreyer. Again, an offside flag ruled it out, leaving both sides to-go off thinking of what might have been.

The match details

LUTON TOWN: Sommer; Linton, Peake, Dreyer, Thomas; Houghton (Dickov, 60 mins), Telfer, Hughes (James, 83 mins), Harper, Preece, Dixon. Goalkeeper sub: Petterson.

WEST BROM: Lange; Burgess, Mardon, Raven, Lilwall; Ashcroft (Fereday 59 mins), Mellon, Coldicott, Hamilton; Garner, Taylor. Other subs Hunter and goalkeeper Naylor.

THE GOALS: 0-1 36 mins: David Preece, expert left foot drive after being put through by Kerry Dixon's flick-on and Paul Mardon's failure to clear when he had the ball at his feet; 1-1 68 mins: Micky Mellon, thundering drive after Stacy Coldicott's pass put him a yard clear of John Dreyer.

OTHER STRIKES: Town five saved, two wide, one netted by Dixon and disallowed for offside; West Brom four saved, eight wide, one netted by Paul Mardon and disallowed for offside. Corners: 7-5 to West Brom.

BOOKED: West Brom's Lee Ashcroft for leaving the studs showing in a reckless challenge on Juergen Sommer and Paul Mardon for a foul on Julian James; Des Linton for holding Steve Coldicott and Mitchell Thomas for delaying a free kick.

REFEREE: Kevin Breen, Liverpool: Kept the game going as well as he could, and the bookings were all spot on.

ATTENDANCE: 16,138, highest at any Town match so far this season.

ENTERTAINMENT: Not brilliant, with a sticky pitch helping neither side. The Town did a professional job well, without showing too much of the passing football they can play, and which would have added extra pleasure to the result.

The Town's facts and figures so far

● CHART SHOWS Town score first, goalscorers, gates and league position.

ENDSLEIGH LEAGUE DIV I

1993

	AUGUST			
14 Watford (h)	2-1 (Telfer, Dixon)	9,149	—	
21 Portsmouth (a)	0-1	12,248	—	
28 Nottm Forest (h)	1-2 (Harison)	9,788	22	
	SEPTEMBER			
11 Bolton Wdrs (h)	0-2	7,199	24	
14 Tranmere (a)	1-4 (Benjamin)	5,871	24	
18 Middlesbro (a)	0-0	12,487	23	
25 Birmingham (a)	1-1 (Telfer)	11,081	23	
	OCTOBER			
2 Barnsley (h)	5-0 (Oakes 2, Hartson, James, Houghton)	6,201	21	
5 Bristol City (h)	0-2	5,956	21	
9 Derby Co (a)	1-2 (Williams)	15,885	23	
16 Notts Co (h)	1-0 (Dickov)	6,366	21	
20 Sunderland (a)	0-2	13,760	23	
23 Oxford (a)	1-0 (Hughes)	5,161	19	
30 Leicester (h)	0-2	8813	21	
	NOVEMBER			
2 C. Palace (a)	2-3 (Aunger, Hughes)	10,925	23	
7 Charlton (h)	1-0 (Telfer)	6,327	18	
14 Southend (a)	1-2 (Dixon)	5,567	18	
27 Stoke (h)	6-2 (Dixon 3, Hughes, Oakes, Hartson)	7,384	15	
	DECEMBER			
4 Charlton (a)	0-1	7,121	17	
11 Tranmere (h)	0-1	7,075	19	
19 Watford (a)	2-2 (Preece, Dreyer pen)	7,567	21	
27 Peterboro (a)	0-0	9,522	20	
29 Grimsby (h)	2-1 (Harper, Hughes)	7,234	18	

1994

	JANUARY			
1 West Brom (a)	1-1	16,138	18	

APPEARANCES (as sub in brackets): Ever-presents, 24: Sommer and Peake. Hughes 23, Telfer 22(1), Dreyer 21, Harper 19, Oakes 17(3), Johnson 16, Dixon and Linton 15(1), Hartson 10(4), Preece 10, Dickov 8(7), Thomas 8, James 7(4), Rees 7(1), Houghton 6(6), Williams 4(8), Campbell 3(6) Aunger 3, Thorpe (1) Petterson (1).

Before transfer: Benjamin 2(1).

Number of players used: 23, same as last season.

GOALS: Dixon 5. Hughes 4. Telfer, Oakes and Hartson 3. Preece 2. One each by Houghton, Williams, James, Dickov, Aunger, Dreyer (pen) Harper and Benjamin.

ASSISTS: Oakes and Hughes 6. Dixon 4. Two each by Johnson and Harper. One each by Williams, Hartson, Linton, Houghton and Thomas.

THE COCA-COLA CUP

Round 1 (1): Aug 17	Cambridge (a)	0-1	4,065	
Round 1 (2): Aug 24	Cambridge (h)	0-1	3,861	

APPEARANCES: Two each by Sommer, James, Johnson, Peake, Dreyer, Benjamin, Preece and Hughes. Oakes 1(1), Houghton 1(1), Rees 1, Telfer 1, Campbell 1, Williams 1, Hartson (1).

THE ANGLO-ITALIAN CUP

Aug 31 Watford (a)	1-2 (Preece)	2,854	19	
Sep 7 Southend (h)	1-1 (Dixon)	1,823	21	

APPEARANCES: Two each by Sommer, Hughes, Preece, Peake, Dreyer, Johnson, Houghton, Dixon and Hartson. Williams 1(1), James 1, Telfer 1, Linton 1. One each as sub by Oakes, Greene and Woolgar.

Unexpected happy ending

LUTON TN...2
GRIMSBY....1

THE old year went out with a most unlikely victory, after a Town performance described as 'awful' by manager **David Pleat**.

For more than an hour the Town looked hung-over and lethargic, just like a bunch of trialists according to the boss.

Grimsby dominated the first half, but their opening goal was as much about bad defending as good attacking: the defence was caught square and Paul Groves shot straight at **Juergen Sommer**, who let the ball go through him into the net.

PREECE MISSING

The Town had reverted to a four-man midfield, with **David Preece** left out.

"It's to keep him fresh for West Brom," explained the manager.

He got his reward at The Hawthorns three days later, but against Grimsby the Town could have used the steadying influence and passing ability of Preece.

Teenager **John Hartson** was in the pocket of wily veteran **Paul Futcher**, and the midfield failed to make any impact.

Grimsby looked well capable of repeating last season's 4-1 success, when Groves got a hat-trick.

The Town made a double substitution ten minutes after the interval, with the arrival of **Julian James** in midfield having more effect. **Paul Dickov** went on to scuffle, but the goals that were needed came from midfield, two absolute belters.

With 19 minutes to go a clever free kick routine led to **Alan Harper** hitting a tremendous 25-yarder into the bottom corner, and in the 82nd minute **Ceri Hughes** fired in a winner that was almost as good, slightly aided by a deflection off Futcher.

Mr Pleat had no complaints about the crowd jeering his team before their late revival.

LETHARGIC

"Every player knew they let themselves down," he said. "I don't know why we were so lethargic. We never got near Grimsby in the first half.

"The hardest thing in football is to turn it around when you are awful, and we were.

"I feel for Alan Buckley, but they were two tremendous goals to win the match."

Grimsby boss Buckley was almost at a loss for words, with praise for his team's first half show, and sharp criticism of what followed.

"We were totally in control in the first half," he said. "At half-time I gave them a pat on the back and told them to do the same again in the second half. But for some reason we blew it."

MATCH DETAILS

TOWN: Sommer; Linton, Peake, Dreyer, Thomas; Telfer, Hughes, Harper, Oakes (James 45 minutes), Dixon, Hartson (Dickov 55 minutes). Dixon. Goalkeeper sub: Petterson.

GRIMSBY: Crichton; McDermott (Shakespeare 74 mins), Futcher, Hobson, Croft; Ford, Dobbin, Gilbert (Rear 46 mins), Groves; Mendonca, Livingstone. Keeper sub: Clobesy.

THE GOALS: 0-1 38 mins: Paul Groves shot straight through Juergen Sommer's body; 1-1 71 mins: Alan Harper 'stepped better from a clever free kick routine; 2-1 F mins: Ceri Hughes, 30-yard number.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town two saved and seven wide. Grimsby three saved and ei wide. Corners: 11-0 to the Town.

REFEREE: Dermott Gallagher, Rainhe Had a much better game than most of the Town players.

ATTENDANCE: 7,234.

ENTERTAINMENT: Dreadful until the last 20 minutes, when it was lifted by the tremendous goals

● OUTNUMBERED: It's two to one against Kerry Dixon at West Brom.

'Pitch beat both sides'

WEST BROM boss Keith Burkinshaw blamed the Town's tactics when his local Pressmen complained that the game had not been high on entertainment.

"It was always going to be difficult for us against five men in midfield," he said. "People come and try to catch you on the break, and it has worked for Luton.

"But it was a disastrous mistake by Paul Mardon that led to their goal.

"We try to play football, but the pitch didn't help, heavy and bumpy, and the crowd became impatient.

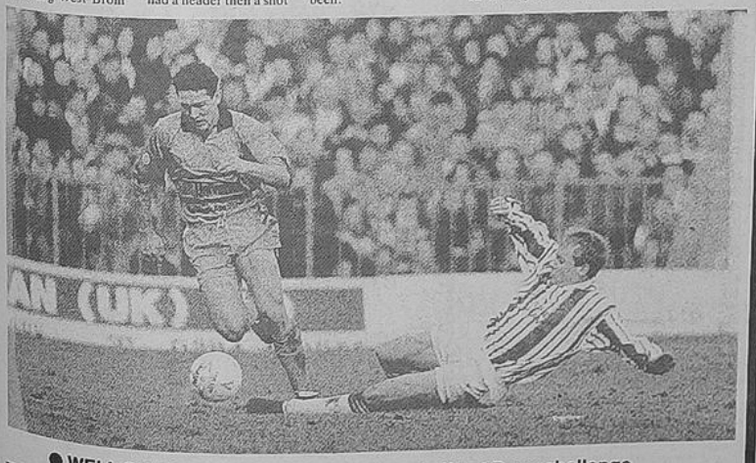
"We needed an early goal, and the longer you go without it the more the other side sits back."

Town boss David Pleat agreed that his side had stifled West Brom, but added that the poor pitch had handicapped both sides by making it very difficult to play passing football.

"It was a bit of a slog," he said.

"There was always a chance that if we passed it well on the break we could get something, but on the day neither side created too many good chances."

● DAVID PLEAT



● WELL ON TOP: Paul Telfer skips clear of a West Brom challenge.