

Lawrence sees light in the gloom

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By Keith Pike

PLENTY of clubs have been there before and most have emerged stronger and wiser, their opponents here included. It is the speed of Luton Town's descent into receivership that has underlined the dangers of what Tony Blair might call English football's boom-and-bust economy.

It is, after all, only a dozen years since the Happy Hatters smiled and passed their way to seventh place in the old first division, the likes of Manchester United and Chelsea in their wake; only 11 since that

thrilling Wembley victory over Arsenal. Yet by Tuesday the insolvency experts had moved in and by Thursday two players had been sold to help to keep the club afloat. How swiftly the pendulum swings.

Even by Saturday teatime, however, it was on the move again, and the black clouds had begun to move away. Of immediate benefit were three desperately needed points. In the long term is the growing belief that Luton will survive and prosper if, as the wise money locally suggests will happen, Cliff Bassett, a director and committed fan, eventually takes control of the club.

What few would dispute is that, in Lenny Lawrence, Luton could not have a better

man at the helm. His managerial career seems to have been spent in the throes of his employers' financial instability and again he finds himself without even two has-beens to rub together. But when his players could have been excused for buckling against Gillingham, a no-nonsense team at the sharp end of the Nationwide League second division, they were passionate and committed. And lucky.

Lawrence had spent most of the previous three days arranging transfers and short-term deals. Then, just for the hell of it, he switched to a back three for the first time as well. But misgivings and defensive uncertainty were all redeemed by the brilliance of Kelvin

Davis in goal, and when Sean Dyche, recruited on loan from Bristol City on Thursday only after permission had been given by the receivers, claimed the decisive touch to Matthew Spring's 42nd-minute corner, the match was won as well.

"Everybody was down, but the players and the crowd responded to the call," Lawrence said. "You begin to believe in human nature again when you get a reward at the end of a week like that."

LUTON TOWN (3-4-3): K Davis — C Willmott, S Dyche, M Johnson — G McGowan, P McLaren, M Spring, M Thomas — A Thorpe (sub: A White, 82min), P Gray, S Douglas.

GILLINGHAM (4-4-2): V Bartram — A Pennock, G Butters, D Carr (sub: M Galloway, 85), M Patterson — N Southall, A Hesen-thaler, P Smith, M Saunders (sub: J Hodge, 70) — R Taylor, C Asaba (sub: M Browning, 67).

Referee: S Baines.