

Abbey thwarts the Quakers!

NATHAN ABBEY was the Hatters' FA Cup hero at Darlington on Saturday as Lil Fuccillo's men forced a second round replay.

The 22-year-old keeper made three excellent saves to keep his side in the tie before a late rally from Luton could have seen the visitors snatch victory.

Abbey thwarted home striker Richard Hodgson twice in one-on-one situations during the first-half and then pulled off a brilliant diving save to prevent Gary Himsworth's 35-yard piledriver from rocketing into the top corner.

That save left Fuccillo purring at the final whistle and full of praise for Abbey, who continues to keep £425,000 summer signing Mark Ovendale on the bench.

The Hatters boss said: "Nathan Abbey's last save was fantastic. I thought it was in from the touchline and am still not convinced he saved it.

"I think there was a brick wall there. He's keeping an expensive keeper out of the team, but the team picks itself on merit and I can't drop Nathan Abbey because of the way he's currently playing.

"He won the Save of the Month award in October and he might get it again for this month. It's all credit to him because he works very hard. He was down in the dumps last season, but he's been seeing more of the Ipswich Town goalkeeping coach Malcolm Webster and I think that's making him a much better keeper.

"It gives everybody in the side great confidence to have him making such good saves and knowing that it's got to be one hell of a goal to beat us."

But if Fuccillo was delighted with Abbey's display he was less enamoured with Peter Thomson's performance against the Quakers.

Thomson, the recent two-goal hero at Stoke, missed an 86th-minute sitter to settle the tie at Darlington and an unimpressed Fuccillo said: "Matthew Taylor put a good cross on Thomson's head and, for some unknown reason, he did not score. It was the best chance of the game.

"The keeper was beaten by the cross but, incredibly, Thomson headed it over from five yards. I

match facts

DARLINGTON 0 LUTON TOWN 0

● **DARLINGTON:** Andy Collett, Craig Liddle, Adam Reed, Neil Aspin, Gary Himsworth, Martin Gray (Steven Walklate, 90), Brian Atkinson, Kevin Kyle, Glenn Naylor, Richard Hodgson (Phillip Brumwell, 67), Thomas Butler (Stuart Elliott, 76). Subs not used: Mark Kilty, Frank van der Geest.

● **HATTERS:** Nathan Abbey, Adrian Whitbread, Julian Watts, Marvin Johnson, Stuart Fraser, Paul McLaren, Adam Locke, Matthew Spring, Matthew Taylor, Peter Thomson, Liam George. Subs not used: Mark Ovendale, Mark Stein, Lee Nogan, Kent Karlsen, Jude Stirling.

● **Referee:** John Brandwood.

● **Shots on target:** Darlington 5 Luton 5.

● **Off Target:** Darlington 4 Luton 3.

● **Corners:** Darlington 5 Luton 5.

● **Top Hatter:** Nathan Abbey - made three brilliant saves to keep his side in the cup.

YOUTH team strikers Chris Dillon and Daryl Murphy were both on target in the Hatters juniors' 2-2 Football League Youth Alliance Cup draw with Cambridge United on Saturday. Brian Stein's boys' next game is at Wycombe Wanderers on Saturday when they will be back in league action. The reserves will play Oxford United at Baldock Town on Monday night.

couldn't believe it and think he must have closed his eyes. Even if our keeper had had to make 10 saves we should still have come away with a 1-0 victory."

The Hatters manager certainly had a valid argument, but a 0-0 draw was a fair reflection over the 90 minutes.

Luton struggled to make an impression for long periods of the first-half and only Abbey prevented his side from falling behind.

Darlington's larger-than-life chairman George Reynolds was once jailed for safe-breaking and his players expertly unlocked the Hatters defence twice in the opening stages.

Hodgson was the beneficiary on both occasions, racing on to through balls from Glenn Naylor and Brian Atkinson, only for Abbey to save well. Kevin Kyle then clipped the Hatters' keeper's crossbar with a 39th minute curling effort.

At the other end, Liam George had a couple of unconvincing goal attempts and skipper Paul McLaren failed to unduly trouble Darlington keeper Andy Collett with a pair of long-range daisy-cutters on the stroke of half-time.

On 51 minutes, George curled a better shot just wide after Adam Locke's surging run but, moments later, Abbey again came to his side's rescue with the wonder save that kept out Himsworth's spectacular drive.

Darlington then faded badly as the Hatters commanded the final half-hour.

Back-three Adrian Whitbread, Julian Watts and Marvin Johnson all enjoyed solid games after a slightly uncertain start and prevented the home side from having another sight of Abbey's goal.

Taylor also suddenly found plenty of room down the left flank and delivered a series of dangerous crosses but the 19-year-old wing back's best centre was wasted by Thomson.

The 6ft 3in striker had earlier drilled wide on the hour when put clear by McLaren and he failed to make amends on 86 minutes by heading over when it looked easier to score.

Lil's verdict

Darlington is not the easiest place to play and we were on a hiding to nothing. It was a tough game and Darlington are no mugs. They deserved to go a division higher last season. But we defended with a lot of credibility. It's always nice not to concede a goal and gives confidence to the team and defence. We're getting better and need to keep scrapping for everything we can get. The backbone of the team is looking stronger and stronger.

