

It's good riddance to 2000!

LUTON TOWN go into 2001 with an endless list of New Year resolutions.

Lil Fuccillo's men will resolve to give up conceding sloppy goals, give up producing toothless attacking displays and, most importantly, give up their place in the Division Two relegation zone which they have occupied since September.

The first two will be essential if the Hatters are to have a hope of achieving the last one. Luton bid good riddance to a disappointing year 2000 with a 2-0 home defeat against Wigan and the failure to convert possession into goals or stop conceding needlessly were both factors in their downfall on Saturday.

Wigan strolled to victory by scoring from their only two on-target efforts of the afternoon. The second goal also came after the visitors' only corner of the game while Luton forced one and could not net from any of them.

Wigan's experienced centre-halves Arjan de Zeeuw, Stuart Balmer and Pat McGibbon were all in imperious form as the visitors enhanced their reputation as the meanest defence in the division and the gulf between the two sides was not only confirmed by a glance at the league table before the game but also by the respective substitutes bench.

The Hatters included largely untested trio Jude Stirling, Friedrich Breitenfelder and Peter Thomson while the visitors dugout boasted former top-flight stars Keith Gillespie, Neil Redfearn and Carl Bradshaw.

Bruce Rioch's men are a Division One team in waiting, as they have proved in their recent close shaves with promotion.

The whole set-up at the JJB Stadium suggests Wigan can emulate the relative success of Lancashire neighbours Preston and Burnley if they do go up in May.

But Luton could still have made them at Kenilworth Road.

The Hatters' front two of Andrew Fotiadis and Lee Nogan ploughed a lonely furrow for the first hour against Wigan's uncompromising five-man defence, exposing the home side's desperate need for an energetic, attack-minded midfielder, especially in the absence of injured Liam George.

Matthew Spring is close to recapturing his old form in the middle of the park but Peter Holmes lacks power and Adam Locke's penchant for the square bass was verging on vintage Ray Wilkins against Wigan.

Petri Helin's delivery from the flanks was also disappointing against Wigan but his fellow wing-back Matthew Taylor provided a steady supply of crosses from the left only for the Hatters to show a distinct lack of penalty-box presence.

Fotiadis and Nogan appeared too similar to be effective as a pairing with the nimbleness of Mark Stein or the bulk of Peter Thomson likely to provide a better foil for both of them.

But even the second-half introduction of both Thomson and Stein could not break down the determined Wigan back-line on Saturday.

The visitors took the lead on 11 minutes when Simon Haworth volleyed powerfully past recalled keeper Mark Ovendale after peeling off his marker Stuart Fraser to meet Lee Ashcroft's cross.

That proved to be Wigan's only notable attempt of the first half but the Hatters were largely restricted to long-range attempts at the other end.

Taylor twice went close from distance, as did Spring, but Julian

match facts

LUTON 0 WIGAN ATH 2

● **HATTERS:** Mark Ovendale, Adrian Whitbread, Julian Watts, Stuart Fraser, Petri Helin, Matthew Spring, Adam Locke, Peter Holmes (Peter Thomson, 59), Matthew Taylor, Andrew Fotiadis, Lee Nogan (Mark Stein, 74). Subs not used: Friedrich Breitenfelder, Jude Stirling, Nathan Abbey.

● **WIGAN:** Derek Stillie, Stuart Balmer, Kevin Sharp, Pat McGibbon, Arjan de Zeeuw, Darren Sheridan, Stefan Bidstrup, Scott Green, Lee Ashcroft (Neil Roberts, 90), Andy Liddell, Simon Haworth. Subs not used: Carl Bradshaw, Gareth Griffiths, Keith Gillespie, Neil Redfearn.

● **Shots on target:** Luton 5 Wigan 2.

● **Shots off target:** Luton 7 Wigan 4.

● **Referee:** G Laws.

● **Top Hatter:** Adrian Whitbread - another solid performance.

Watts headed the best opportunity wide on 23 minutes when visitors keeper Derek Stillie completely missed an inswinging Hatters corner.

Stillie made amends two minutes after the break when he turned Nogan's low shot around a post.

Seven minutes later, Wigan doubled their advantage after an Ovendale blunder.

Fuccillo's decision to replace Nathan Abbey with Ovendale after a couple of unsure performances seemed sensible, considering the spectacular manner in which his confidence was shattered last season.

But Ovendale's return to first team duty was shaky and, when he juggled Darren Sheridan's corner and presented the ball to a grateful Stefan Bidstrup, the Danish midfielder headed into an empty goal.

Haworth fired wide moments later before the Hatters managed a laterally. First, Fotiadis wasted a great 62nd-minute opportunity when he headed straight at a grounded Stillie from two yards out.

Nogan then headed into the side netting and the last chance of the game saw Fotiadis shoot over at the near post after Thomson's low cross.

Fuccillo, the Hatters third manager during a turbulent year 2000, was left disappointed at the final whistle, as must have been the 50 volunteers who did a magnificent job to ensure the game went ahead by clearing snow off the pitch.