

Dale replace Hatters at top

Luton Town 0 Rochdale 1

Despite enormous second half pressure the Hatters saw their unbeaten home record crash at Kenilworth Road yesterday to their main championship rivals.

Hard-working Rochdale took over from the Hatters at the top of the table, opening up a three point lead thanks to a 39th minute winner from Paul Wheatcroft.

After the interval it was one-way traffic but the Dales defence held out with considerable help from goalkeeper Marcus Hahnemann.

Two late saves from substitute Adrian Forbes and Jean-Louis Valois were out of the top drawer, but he still had veteran Richard

Jobson to thank for keeping a clean sheet when the former Watford player crowned a superb display by heading Kevin Nicholl's goal-bound header off the line.

Early on, Dean Crowe took advantage of Gareth Griffith's slip to fire in a shot which Jobson deflected over the bar.

Almost immediately at the other end it was Carl Emberson's turn to keep the scoreline blank with a great save. Clive Platt won the ball in the air, Wheatcroft got in a shot that Chris Coyne blocked, only for player-coach Tony Ford to fire back in.

The shot was well placed but the Town 'keeper's reactions were equal to it and he turned it round his left post one handed.

Steve Howard was perhaps unfortunate to be penalised to the despair of the home crowd when he slid in against Hahnemann's dive to win a ball that Crowe netted.

Howard flashed a header over from Ian Hillier's accurate cross

and was then called back for off-side after powering clear away with Griffith having a double handful of his shirt.

Like Howard, Platt was causing his markers some problems and he made his presence tell for the goal.

His sweet turn and run with the ball drew the Hatters defence before he slipped a neat ball to the unmarked Ford.

His low cross-shot was parried by Emberson's right hand but only to Wheatcroft, coming in all alone at the back post, for an easy tap-in.

The Town were again frustrated when Crowe charged down the keeper's hacked clearance only to see the yellow card for dissent after being called back for a less than obvious foul.

Early in the second half Crowe twice almost charged down Hahnemann's clearances when poor back passes put the visiting 'keeper in trouble and he had to be quick to back pedal to turn over Nicholl's chip when it threatened to sneak in under the bar.

Jobson came to his side's rescue when Forbes and Howard beautifully carved out some space down the right, getting Nicholl's header off the line as the Town moved forward with increasing urgency.

Several punches off Howard's head kept Luton at bay but the two best saves came in the last ten minutes.

Forbes held off three defenders in a strong run and topped it off with a fierce shot but the American 'keeper made a wonderful low save and repeated it a few minutes later when Valois smashed in one of his specials.

The last drama came when late substitute Andrew Fotiadis mis-kicked with the goal at his mercy.

After the match Joe Kinnear said "In tight games like that, you have got to take your chances. That was one thing we didn't do.

"We did more than enough to get a share of the spoils out of it; Emberson only had two saves to make in the whole match."

Luton Town: Emberson, Hillier, Perrett (Boyce 46, Fotiadis 89), Coyne, Taylor, Brkovich (Forbes 46), Spring, Nicholls, Valois, Howard, Crowe.

Substitutes not used: Ovendale (GK), Dryden.
Attendance: 7,696.



■ In full flight: Dean Crowe in the top-of-the-table clash with Rochdale



■ Above: Adrian Forbes, who came close to an equaliser. Below: Steve Howard collides with Rochdale 'keeper Marcus Hahnemann