



Howard sets 'em up for happy new year

02/03

THE Hatters ended the old year in style and have now the platform for a play-off push in 2003.

A professional performance and two well-taken goals from top marksman Steve Howard gave them the upper hand in the Beds/Bucks derby.

More importantly it gave them all three points in their quest for a second successive promotion.

The Hatters went to Adams Park with just one change from the side that Cardiff City on Boxing Day, Sol Davis being recalled at left back in place of Alan Kimble.

Luton lived up to their early billing as favourites, creating a decent chance in the very first minute. Emmerson Boyce, who enjoyed a productive half on the right, beat two men and his cross found Howard, whose downward header at the back post was blocked on the line by on-loan goalkeeper Frank Talia.

In the opening exchanges Luton were all over Wanderers and were first to every challenge, looking every inch a promotion team.

However, shell-shocked Wycombe frightened the Hatters on 11 minutes when veteran midfielder Steve Brown hit the woodwork from the edge of the area with a curling free kick.

It only delayed the inevitable and buoyant Luton took the lead on 20 minutes. A headed lay-off from captain Tony Thorpe gave Howard the chance to unleash a fierce right-footed shot from just outside the box that gave Talia no chance.

By now Luton were in cruise control with Thorpe in inspirational form up front, pulling all the strings, and his strike partner Howard a handful alongside him.

Just after the half-hour mark, Howard got his second. This time it was a bit more basic. A long throw from Ian Hillier into the penalty area found Howard, who rose to glance his header in and claim his 14th league goal of the season.

The only negative of the half came when Dean Crowe came off injured with a tweaked hamstring.

Shortly into the second half Luton added Ahmet Brkovic to their injury list as the midfielder hobbled off after falling awkwardly. Manager Joe Kinnear replaced him on the left flank with defender Kimble and effectively shut up shop.

But on 64 minutes that decision was under threat. A whipped in free kick from winger Michael Simpson caused chaos in the Hatters box and Johnny Dixon scrambled the ball in from not much more than a yard.

Wanderers, who had gone walkabout for most of the game, were rejuvenated by this lifeline



and suddenly the Hatters looked fragile.

On the backfoot, the Hatters had to defend in numbers against long-ball tactics but the closest they came was ten minutes from the end from another setpiece.

A Danny Bullman free kick from 30 yards beat the wall but was pushed on to a post by the diving Carl Emberson, who was making amends for his mistake on the goal.

In a frantic finale, Howard retreated into defence to try and combat the high balls and despite Wycombe throwing all they had Luton never looked troubled.

Kinnear was overjoyed at the display from the Hatters in particular Howard. "We are not the same side when he doesn't play. He has been playing out of his skin recently. He is a handful for sides and improving all the time," said Kinnear.

"If we'd had a bit more composure, we could have nicked a third on the counter-attack. They

played a lot of route one football in the second half."

After seven points from three top-of-the-table sides, the Hatters now go to Chesterfield on New Year's Day full of confidence with a target of 40 points in the second half of the season.



MATCH FACTS



LUTON TOWN (4-4-2): Emberson; Boyce, Coyne, Hillier, Davis; Crowe (Mansell 42m), Hughes, Robinson, Brkovic (Kimble 52); Howard, Thorpe (Fotiadis)

Subs not used: Owendale, Deeney

Referee: Peter Walton (Northants)

GOALSCORERS:

Wycombe: Dixon (64)

Luton: Howard (20, 33)

SHOTS ON TARGET

Wycombe: 3

Luton: 3

SHOTS OFF TARGET

Wycombe: 6

Luton: 5

CORNERS

Wycombe: 4

Luton: 4

OFFSIDE

Wycombe: 0

Luton: 2

BOOKINGS

Wycombe: McCarthy (28)

Luton:

ATTENDANCE: 7,740

HATTERS' STAR MAN: STEVE HOWARD

Brilliant all-round display and two good goals

Division Two results

Barnsley	2	Port Vale	1
Blackpool	3	Colchester	1
Brentford	1	Mansfield	0
Chesterfield	2	Cheltenham	2
Peterborough	0	Northampton	0
Plymouth	1	Notts County	0
Stockport	1	Bristol City	4
Tranmere	3	QPR	0
Wigan	2	Swindon	0
Wycombe	1	LUTON	2

How they stand

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wigan	24	17	5	2	40	13	56
Bristol City	24	15	4	5	50	27	49
Cardiff	23	14	4	5	37	20	46
Crew	23	15	5	5	39	18	44
Oldham	23	12	7	4	36	17	43
Luton	24	10	7	7	36	31	37
Tranmere	24	11	4	9	33	36	37
Brentford	24	10	6	8	30	27	36
Blackpool	24	10	5	9	32	34	35
QPR	24	9	7	8	31	30	34
Chesterfield	24	10	4	10	21	26	34
Plymouth	24	8	9	7	31	30	33
Wycombe	24	7	6	11	31	35	27
Stockport	24	8	3	13	33	39	27
Swindon	24	7	6	11	28	37	27
Barnsley	24	7	6	11	28	38	27
Notts County	24	5	11	8	35	36	26
Colchester	24	6	8	10	24	33	26
Port Vale	24	7	5	12	28	38	26
Northampton	24	7	5	12	21	34	26
Mansfield	24	7	3	14	41	56	24
Peterborough	24	5	8	11	27	34	23
Cheltenham	24	5	8	11	22	35	23
Huddersfield	23	5	6	12	18	28	21

Stand-in skipper Tony Thorpe (top) was in superb form at Wycombe yesterday as was Steve Howard (far left), who is shown being mobbed by his team mates after his opening goal

