

Sub Crowe has Hatters soaring

THE Hatters atoned for a turgid first 45 minutes with two goals that keeps the pressure on the chasing pack in Division Two.

Tony Thorpe had a hand in both goals, scoring the first himself and winning a penalty for the second.

In the week that his ex-Hatters clubmate Raddy Antic took over Barcelona, Vale boss Brian Horton found himself at the opposite end of football's fortunes.

Vale are on the verge of going into administration – a depressing back-drop before facing his old club.

It was a daunting task for Horton's side as Luton have been so impressive on the road this season with seven league wins.

Hatters boss Joe Kinnear welcomed back skipper Kevin Nicholls in place of the injured Steve Robinson and incorporated on-loan Chris Willmott into defence by switching Alan Neilson to left back.

The first half will not go down as the most exhilarating from the Hatters this season.

Luton were dire and Vale were not much better – it was the worst I have seen from Joe Kinnear's men this season.

Hatters did not seem at the races for the opening exchanges with the midfield failing to impose themselves on the game.

Thankfully Chris Coyne and Chris Willmott were awake and limited Vale to only two noteworthy efforts.

On nine minutes, a cross from Ian Armstrong found Steven McPhee in the box and the striker's loping header looked to have beaten Mark Ovendale but the goalkeeper rose well to tip the ball to safety.

On the half hour mark, Ovendale again came to the rescue as he held well from Billy Paynter's well struck 30-yard shot.

In the closing stages Luton were visibly malfunctioning as a likely play-off unit.

Passes regularly went astray and they seemed happy just to hold on to a clean sheet before the break.

Something had to change and at half time, Paul Hughes was replaced by striker Dean Crowe. With the change in personnel brought a revision of tactics to a 4-3-3 formation. It was the catalyst for a much improved second half.

Crowe won a corner on 46 minutes that led to Thorpe scoring his ninth goal of the season with a close range header.

It was the perfect antidote to an awful opening 45 minutes.

Kevin Nicholls whipped in the corner and Thorpe was unmarked three yards out to nod past goalkeeper Mark Goodlad.

The striker was booked for his post-goal celebration, which took the form of throwing a snowball into the crowd.

He should have got his account into double figures even minutes

later but he spurned a great opportunity. A Vale corner broke to Ahmet Brkovic who ran the length of the pitch and picked out Thorpe's run inside the box.

The through ball teed up the striker perfectly but he blazed over from 15 yards.

The game came alive and both sides looked more threatening in attack and cash-strapped Vale could feel slightly aggrieved to go down 2-0 down with just 15 minutes left.

Crowe burst into the box and ran at his marker. He cut the ball back to Thorpe on the edge of the area, and he looked to be bundled over from behind by Ian Brightwell.

It was a controversial decision to give a penalty, and one Vale fan was so incensed he ran on to the pitch to remonstrate with referee Lee Mason.

Five stewards descended on him before he could cause too much trouble.

Nicholls kept his head to drill the penalty into the bottom right hand corner. At 2-0 up the victory was rarely under threat until Vale rallied late on to pull a goal back on 86 minutes.

A corner was not properly cleared and the ball to the impressive midfielder Mark Boyd on the edge of the area to volley into the back of the net.

Kinnear agreed that his side had not fired on all cylinders in the first half.

"I wasn't happy with our first half performance. It was looking as if it was going to turn into a nothing game."

"A couple of lads needed a talking-to at half time and by bringing on Crowe I shook things up a bit."

Kinnear will be delighted his half-time dressing down inspired his side to their eighth away win – and it bodes well that they were successful while well short of their best.



■ Valiant efforts: Chris Willmott and Tony Thorpe successfully appeal for a penalty (top), stroked confidently home by Kevin Nicholls (centre), after Thorpe had headed the Hatters in front (bottom)



MATCH FACTS



LUTON TOWN (4-4-2): Ovendale; Boyce, Willmott, Coyne, Neilson; Brkovic, Nicholls, Spring, Hughes (Crowe 46m); Howard, Thorpe. Subs: Emberson, Kimble, Holmes, Hillier

Referee: Lee Mason (Lancashire)

GOALSCORERS:

Port Vale: Boyd (86)
Luton: Thorp (48), Nicholls (pen 75)

SHOTS ON TARGET

Port Vale: 4
Luton: 3

SHOTS OFF TARGET

Port Vale: 5
Luton: 4

CORNERS

Port Vale: 6
Luton: 5

OFFSIDE

Port Vale: 1
Luton: 3

BOOKINGS

Port Vale: Bridge-Wilkinson (51)
Luton: Thorp (48)

ATTENDANCE: 4,714

HATTERS' STAR MAN: CHRIS COYNE

Utterly reliable and a class act at the heart of the defence

Division Two results

Brentford	1	Crewe	2
Bristol City	1	Colchester	2
Cardiff	1	Barnsley	1
Cheltenham	0	Stockport	2
Chesterfield	0	Peterborough	0
Mansfield	3	Notts County	2
Northampton	1	QPR	1
Oldham	0	Plymouth	1
Port Vale	1	Luton	2
Tranmere	0	Swindon	1
Wigan	1	Blackpool	1
Wycombe	0	Huddersfield	0

How they stand

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wigan	31	21	7	3	50	19	70
Crewe	31	18	7	6	55	28	61
Cardiff	30	17	7	6	47	25	58
Oldham	31	15	10	6	46	27	55
Bristol City	30	15	7	8	54	34	52
QPR	31	14	8	9	42	35	50
Luton	29	13	8	8	44	37	47
Plymouth	30	12	9	9	40	34	45
Blackpool	30	12	9	9	39	38	45
Tranmere	31	13	6	12	41	46	45
Swindon	31	11	9	11	42	43	42
Wycombe	31	10	9	12	43	40	39
Chesterfield	30	11	6	13	26	36	39
Brentford	28	10	8	10	33	32	38
Stockport	31	9	6	16	42	51	33
Peterborough	31	7	11	13	31	39	32
Mansfield	31	9	5	17	48	66	32
Notts County	31	6	13	12	45	52	31
Port Vale	29	8	7	14	32	43	31
Colchester	30	7	10	13	31	43	31
Northampton	31	8	7	16	28	48	31
Barnsley	30	7	9	14	33	46	30
Huddersfield	30	7	8	15	21	35	29
Cheltenham	30	6	10	14	27	43	28