

Goalless stalemate for Hatters

PART TIMERS FULL VALUE FOR THEIR REPLAY AS HARFORD'S MEN STRUGGLE TO CREATE ANY CHANCES

LUTON TOWN FC

FA CUP
LUTON TOWN 0

AKTRINCHAM 0

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LUTON Town's dismal home record this season continued as part-timers Altrincham forced a replay in probably the dulllest game of the first round.

Hatters have won only twice at Kenilworth Road and showed no signs of getting back to winning ways against the Conference side.

This could be a league fixture next season if Luton don't halt their alarming form in front of their home crowd and if it is it will surely contain more action than was on offer yesterday.

Just one effort on target was all Mick Harford's men had to show against a lively but limited Altrincham who will fancy their chances in the re-match.

The afternoon started brightly enough as Kevin Nicholls returned to the starting line-up. Back from injury, the Luton captain has been missed and his inclusion buoyed the atmosphere around the ground.

That could have fallen flat in the 22nd minute when a defensive mix-up almost gave Altrincham the lead.

Keith Keane's powerful back pass to Conrad Logan was awful and forced the keeper out of his goal to prevent a corner.

Conceding a set-piece immediately looked the better option as his clearance went straight into the path of Christopher Senior. Blushes were spared all round when Keane's burst of speed helped him pinch the ball off the toes of the Altrincham striker who had an empty net in front of him.

Danger averted – but only briefly as the non-leaguers started to make some headway. Senior again played a part moments later, pulling the ball back from the bye-line for Greg Young who should have at least tested Logan from ten yards out.

It would have been against the run of play had the underdogs scored but Luton were guilty of not creating any clearcut chances of their own.

The build-up play was easy on the eye but the final ball was even easier for Altrincham to read.

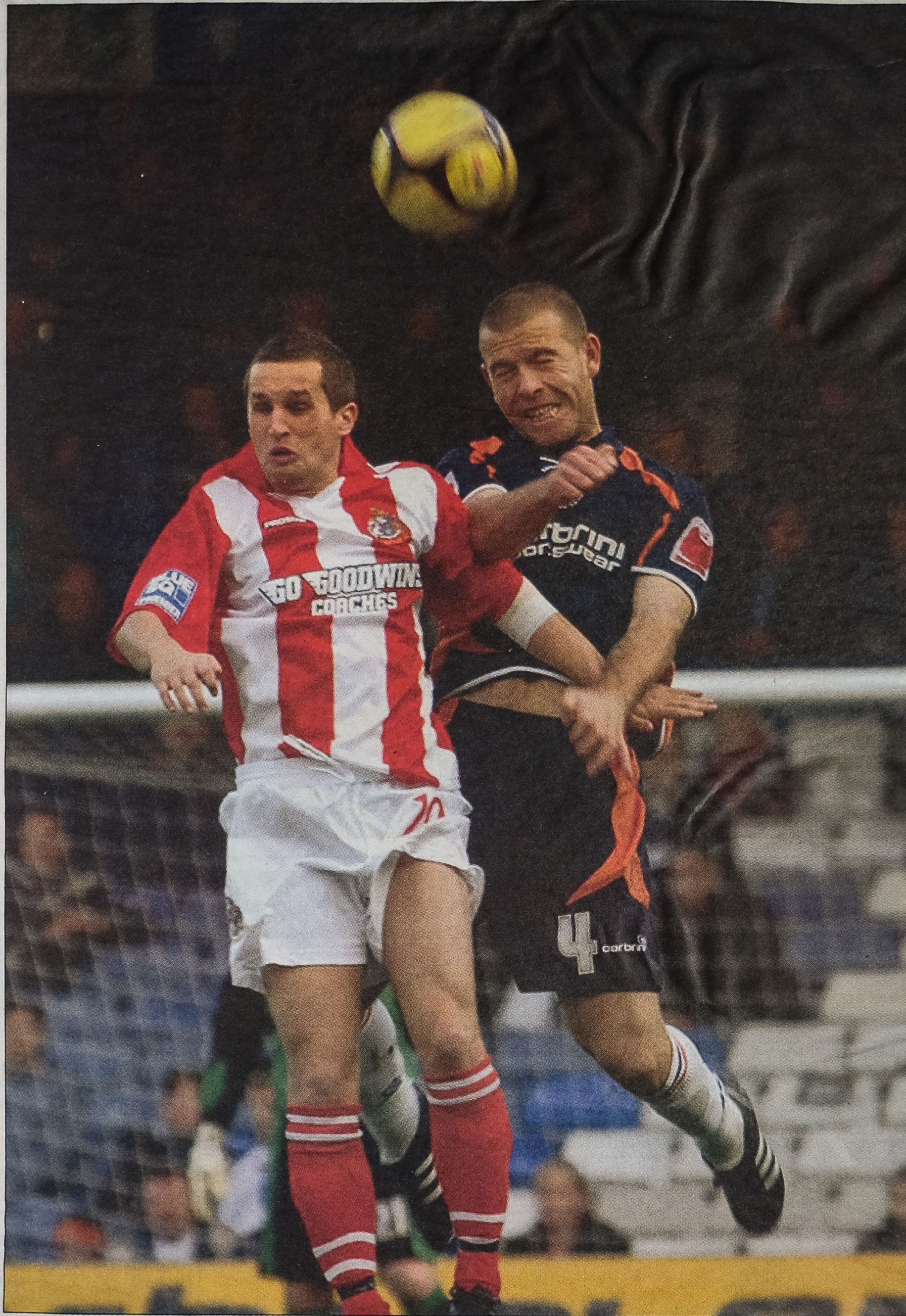
The home crowd had to wait until the last minute of the half to see a single effort on target.

Claude Gnaka's cross was met by Chris Martin on the penalty spot but the weak header dropped straight into Andy Ralph's arms.

It was no surprise to see Nicholls replaced by Kevin Watson at the break. The talismanic skipper still looks some way off full fitness and struggled to live up to his own high standards.

The best chance of the game went to the visitors minutes after the restart.

A fortunate flick from goalkeeper



HIGH BALL: Keith Keane challenges for the ball in the draw with Altrincham yesterday in the FA Cup

Ralph's long punt up the field put Colin Little clean through with only Logan to beat.

The Irishman made Little's job harder by rushing off his line to narrow the angle and made a last-ditch tackle on the edge of the area that any centre half would have been proud of.

An opportunity missed, but at least Altrincham were making them.

By contrast, Luton were looking devoid of all ideas in attack. Wayne Andrews was subbed but it could

easily have been fellow striker Martin or any of the midfield.

Garreth O'Connor came on and moved to the wing with Paul McVeigh pushed up front.

It's no exaggeration to say with 15 minutes remaining Hatters were hanging on and Altrincham could sense an upset.

The away side's substitutes Dale Johnson and Lee Elam were beginning to stretch the over-worked Luton defence and they always looked a threat on the counter

attack.

The introduction of Drew Talbot lifted spirits in Kenilworth Road – it was the striker's first game back from an injury sustained in March – but that was as good as it got.

At the final whistle it was much clearer which side was from the league and which was from the Conference.

Altrincham players and staff ran over to their fans in celebration while Luton sloped off contemplating a difficult replay.

Post match...

ALTRINCHAM manager Graham Heathcote was full of praise for his team but insisted Luton remain favourites in the replay.

"The FA Cup's about being in the hat and we've only done half a job here," he said. "I'm fully aware that Luton have a far better away record than their home one but it's who does the job on the day."

"I don't think either keeper had a lot to do. But you must remember we're part-time. My players have been working all week! Luton are still favourites to win."

Hatters boss Mick Harford wants his players to be more clinical in front of goal.

"We controlled the game from start to finish. We should have won the game comfortably," he said.

"I asked the players for two things – a clean sheet and to be in the hat for the next round."

"We didn't create a lot in the final third. We lack that little bit of confidence or craft to open teams up."

"I'm disappointed with the result, not the performance. There were a lot of positives to take from it."

"Strikers are a rare commodity – that's why everyone wants them and will pay so much to have them in their team. We struggled to create in terms of possession which we dominated."

"I asked the players why we can't seem to turn our away form into home form."

A bonus from the afternoon was the return of Kevin Nicholls and Drew Talbot from injury.

"It was Kevin's first match in nine weeks – he'll be ready for the next game. It was a bonus to get Drew on. He's ahead of schedule," said Harford.

Talbot himself looked sharp when he came on but knows he's not yet rehabilitated.

"It was nice to be back – it's been a long road. It's seven months since I last played so it was a shock to be named on the bench but I was pleased."

"It will take a good couple of months to get back to where I was before but I've got a game on Monday and I'll be trying to get my fitness back."

THE SQUAD

Logan; Gnaka, Spillane, Keane, Beavan; McVeigh (Talbot 77), Jarvis, Nicholls (Watson 46), Howells; Andrews (O'Connor 63), Martin. Subs: Brill, Davis, Worley

MAN OF THE MATCH



CLAUDE GNAKPA

Frenchman posed more threat from full back than his attacking team-mates

MATCH FACTS

SHOTS ON TARGET

LUTON: 1
ALTRINCHAM: 1

SHOTS OFF TARGET

LUTON: 9
ALTRINCHAM: 3

BOOKINGS

LUTON:
ALTRINCHAM: LANE 39, DENSMORE 65, DANYLYK 90

REFEREE: FRED GRAHAM (ESSEX)

ATTENDANCE: 3,200