

It just shouldn't have ended this way

LITON TOWN CHESTERFIELD

League Two Kenilworth Road

BY JAMES CUNLIFFE

THIS wasn't in the script. IIIS wasn't in the script.
Buoyed on by their success at Wembley, Luton
would uphold their end of the bargain by winning their final five games and take the relegation battle down to the wire.

May 2, at Griffin Park the Hatters would
wetcome Brentford with a last minute goal,
condemning Grimsby and Chester to the
Conference.

Conference

Instead Monday's insipid 0-0 draw against Chesterfield and victories for both their rivals has put the oldest professional club in the south of England out of the league after an 89

We all know why, we've all had a whole season to get used to the idea that this day would almost inevitably come... but it still hurts. Yet it's not the same hurt you'd get from a

leam who've been beaten on the pitch all sea-son. It's not the same shock of a defeat that condemns the club to defeat.

Its the sting of injustice.

The fans, the club and the entire town do not deserve this, and the worst thing is that unlike any any other knock, any other relegation - I don't think that pain will ever go away.

Luton have been sent into the footballing wilderness for a crime the current regime did not commit and at the expense of far poorer leams. One of Chester, Grimsby or

Bournemouth will join Luton, and the ones that do not will be in exactly the same position next year. They have been given a stay of execution but Luton have suffered a harsh sen-

Chairman Nick Owen said after the game: "I haven't met anyone who agrees with what's

As a manyone who applications are also as a can see, there are eight people in the world of football who agreed with what appened to us, and they're the people that imposed it.

With his tongue firmly in his cheek, he added: It has preserved the integrity of the Football



SLIM CHANCES GONE: Top fans applaud their Hatters heroes, top, as Claude Gnakpa misses this chance against Chesterfield on Monday

League and that's very important to us. We are thrilled about that."

He also echoed manager Mick Harford's vow that the club will rise again. It's clear from 40,000 people at Wembley and a regime that, at last, has Luton in its heart, that the club will not die. But next in line to death there is another wethinkelds fate. The more than the club will not

die. But next in line to death infere is another unthinkable fate... nothing. An example was Leicester City boss Nigel Pearson who said that it was vital the Foxes bounced straight back from relegation to League One straight away or face years of stagnating in the division.

August may seem far away but Luton simply must go back up at the first time of asking. You only need to look at Oxford, Cambridge, Torquay, Wrexham and Mansfield to see former league teams struggling to escape the Blue

Advance Premier.

However good the Conference is these days, in the grand scheme of things it is still a distant outpost, eclipsed in the public conciousness by the injured limbs of millionaire Premiership. players and the extra-curricular activities of

men who cost more than clubs like Luton. Failure to get back into the league will see decent players leave, lesser ones replace them and the Hatters will get caught in the cycle of mediocre teams trying to getback to the

'promised land'.
Harford said: 'I'm disappointed to be in the
Conference and out of league football, but
these players are not non-league players.

There's a put a trouby thi

"They are winners. They've won a trophy this season. There are millions of players who have never won a trophy and this group of players

The key now is how many of them the Hatters The key now is how many of them the Hatters can keep. Captain Kevin Nicholls confirmed his commitment, saying: "Unless I'm told otherwise I'll be a Luton Town player next year.
"The most important thing is to keep the group together and bounce back. It's not going to be easy. We can bring the good times back to

"It's not for me to decide other people's futures but the players are a good bunch of lads. They came to this club to play football.

Not to pick up bonuses or appearance money."
But Harford admitted he may face a tough
time in keeping some of his players.
"If I was another manager I'd be ringing me
up." he said. "We've got some good players. We
try and play the right way and I'm sure they'll
be people knocking on the door for our play-

ers.
"If a Championship club comes in and offers the right sort of money you can't stand in their way and that's always been the policy of Luton Town Football Club.

Harford though is eyeing a quick return and he picked out Doncaster Rovers as the benchmark. He said: "They went down a few years ago, came back up, got a new stadium and now they're flying high in the Championship. And

that's how we've got to respond."

Nicholls finished by saying that despite his disappointment he can't wait for the fixtures to

come out so the club can get on with the job.

It just still doesn't seem real that the list will include the likes Crawley Town and Eastbourne Borough.