

Howells hails Luton's easy FA Cup triumph

Luton Town 3 (2)
Grays Athletic 0 (0)

CLASSY defender Jake Howells put in a sparkling performance as experimental Hatters obliterated visitors Grays Athletic in the fourth qualifying round of the FA Cup, writes Mark Wood.

Injuries, flu and suspension may have left Luton down to the bare bones, but it didn't show as they completely dismantled their struggling Blue Square Premier rivals in a one-sided affair and moved into the first round proper, after playing in an FA Cup qualifying game for the first time in 90 years.

Shane Blackett's first-ever goal for Luton broke the deadlock, while Petar Rnkovic's own goal put Town in control at the break.

Asa Hall made sure of victory with a third in the second half, but it could have been plenty more as Taylor Nathaniel was able to make his debut as a late substitute.

Howells, 18, playing in his favoured left-back position, said: "It's a game we had to win and they weren't the best of teams, but we had to make sure we convincingly won with three good goals.

"I think we eased off in the second half, we were playing well and it was a bit too easy for us.

"We could have got three, four, five or six."

With a flu bug running riot at Kenilworth Road, Alan Neilson rang the changes, but could still only name six players on the bench, when seven are allowed.

Town almost got off to a dream start in the fourth minute, but former trialist Luton keeper Preston Edwards deflected Kevin Gallen's effort round the post.

The Grays stopper then beat away a Gallen volley before Blackett netted on 10 minutes.

GRAYS DAY: The hapless Petar Rnkovic slides the ball past Preston Edwards after good work from the grounded Ryan Charles on the right



George Pilkington, who anchored the midfield for Luton, had a sharp shot saved by Edwards, only for Blackett to pounce from close range.

Grays briefly threatened at the other end. Daniel Charge struck weakly at Mark Tyler before Jamie Slabber twice went close.

He waltzed past Hall and Blackett on 15 minutes, but could only drill wide of Tyler's near post, before a swerving a dipping, long-range effort flew just past the far post.

Luton were playing some lovely stuff and they almost doubled their advantage on 20 minutes when Andy Burgess' low cross got caught between Sam Cutler's legs. Ryan Charles was on hand to stab goalwards, but Edwards somehow turned his effort round the post.

A sizzling 25-yarder from Callum Reynolds was then well turned over the bar by Edwards before Hall thumped well wide as

Town began to turn the screw.

Gallen then wasted two gilt-edged opportunities to cement the Hatters' advantage.

First he headed Charles' pinpoint cross wastefully wide from inside the six yard area before lashing wide after Howells' pass had created an opening for him in the box.

Edwards then denied Charles before Town's pressure finally told on 38 minutes. The young striker fired in a dangerous low cross from the right which looked destined for Gallen lurking at the far post only for Rnkovic to slide in before he could get there and turn the ball past the helpless Edwards.

Town took their foot off the throttle after the break but continued to dominate.

Billy Crowther did well to block Gallen's 48th-minute effort after some more haphazard defending had let the Hatters in.

Hall was then thwarted twice in

quick succession as he first had an effort ruled out by the linesman's flag before curling against the right-hand post after being teed up by Gallen.

At the other end Tyler furthered his claims to be the best keeper outside of the Championship with a brilliant low stop to deny Slabber on 50 minutes.

But it was a fleeting threat from the Gravelmen who were unable to cope with Town's creativity and energy.

Reynolds saw his 65th-minute header drift agonisingly wide before Hall fired straight at Edwards.

Nathaniel made his debut with 11 minutes left and played a key role in the hosts' third two minutes later.

Reynolds and Ed Asafu-Adjaye started the move from the back before Nathaniel made yards and set Hall up on the edge of the box, the midfielder squeezing his effort into the bottom left-hand corner as Luton eased into the next round.

STAR HATTER: Jake Howells. Energetic and classy show from the youngster.