

Luton desperate to move into upward spiral

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A little more than 20 years ago, there were three points between Norwich City and Luton Town. When they meet in the FA Cup at Carrow Road this afternoon, that gulf will be 95 places. When English football had its sliding doors moment, one club found itself safely ensconced in the inner sanctum.

The other was resolutely locked out.

Few clubs have experienced a period as traumatic as that endured by Luton ever since they were relegated from the top flight at the end of the 1991-1992 season. That year, the year before the

inauguration of the Premier League, with its bottomless riches and endless ambition, they finished twentieth. Norwich, with three points more, were eighteenth. The next season, they ended up on the road to Europe. Luton, on the other hand, began their long descent into the wilderness.

In those two decades, Luton have changed hands eight times; they have had just as many managers. They have slipped down, through the divisions, and out of the League in 2009; they have been in administration and receivership, they have been docked a record 30 points for illegal payments to

agents, and they have been the subject of a BBC documentary into financial malpractice.

They have stood on the brink of oblivion, and they have lived to tell the tale.

"It's been a rollercoaster," said Steve Townsend, secretary of Trust in Luton, the club's supporters' trust. It is oversimplifying the matter considerably to suggest that Luton's woes can be traced to 1992.

They stretch back to 1955, when the club's then-chairman, Percy Mitchell, outlined his vision of cashing in on the value of Kenilworth Road, the club's home, and building a new, 35,000-

capacity ground that would "attract much of the support that is lost to London". That never materialised. Instead, Luton remained rooted at a crumbling Kenilworth Road, torn between a need to modernise a ramshackle ground and the desire to find a new home.

"That is what has attracted so many different owners," Townsend said. "They come in, intending to make money from a move, they find that they can't move, and then they sell it on to someone else who sees the same possibility, and the cycle begins again."

It might have been at the bottom, but

at least the rollercoaster had stopped. "The 2020 consortium who bought the club are all successful local businessmen — including Nick Owen — but they're all fans too," Townsend said. "We have a good relationship with them, and they have our interests at heart. The only problem is that we are in the Conference, way below where we believe we should be."

For 90 minutes in Norfolk this afternoon, Luton will be able to forget that. They will be able to remember what it was like, 20 years ago, before the descent began, when they were on the inside, looking out.