

■ **UPS AND DOWNS:** Until the 1986-87 season the bottom club in the Fourth Division could usually count on the sympathy of the other clubs to be re-elected. But then the Football League decided to encourage the many prosperous non-league teams who wanted to play in the big time and automatic demotion to the GM Vauxhall Conference for the bottom team was introduced. Some clubs, such as Colchester and Lincoln, have sorted out their finances and bounced back immediately after the drop. For others the financial pressures of the league — such as the costs of running a full-time playing, coaching and administration staff and making crumbling Victorian grounds safe — have proved too much. Newport folded in 1987 and Aldershot and Maidstone followed in 1992. If football was only about profits and losses then many other clubs, with no chance of ever making money or winning trophies, would follow immediately.



HALIFAX: The Shay, where Halifax play, boasts a speedway track, an overgrown grass terrace behind one goal and dressing rooms carpeted with wonderfully

tacky astro-turf. It has long been a favourite haunt for feature writers from the national press.

There have been many wry obituaries to dear old Halifax and their Ealing comedy ground but the club has staggered on, from one apparently terminal crisis to another. They applied for re-election to the old Fourth Division 12 times before the introduction of automatic demotion in 1986-87, a dismal record matched only by Hartlepool (a club now enjoying a remarkable renaissance in the Second Division).

But this year Halifax's luck may run out. Last Saturday, before a bumper crowd of 7,121 people, Halifax lost 2-0 at Gillingham and this weekend they must beat Hereford at home to have any chance of avoiding the drop into non-league football. The omens are not good; Halifax have won just three games at home this season, a spectacularly pitiful record.

If Halifax failed to beat the drop it would be the first time the club would not be taking part in full-time professional competition since 1921 when they were founder members of the long-defunct Division Three (North).

The chairman, Jim Brown, has muttered about closure if the team lose on Saturday but other officials of the club have vowed that Halifax would not be allowed to die — whatever happened. "We have some new directors here and they have assured us that the club will keep going next season," said one.



NORTHAMPTON: The club which every football fan over 40 fondly remembers for its heart-warming rise from the Fourth to the First Division is back struggling

for survival at the bottom of the heap.

"The Cobblers" share the County Ground with the county cricket club; the cricketers enjoy fine facilities — in contrast to the footballers. Many grounds in the Third Division are scruffy but Northampton's home is regarded by other teams as a decrepit shambles.

The club seemed doomed last year, when it had debts of £1.3 million and fell into the clutches of an administrator. But Northampton is refusing to die quietly. Club secretary Phil Hough, says, straight-faced, that it is now trading profitably and hopes the local council will help build a new ground — presumably for the team's push for promotion to the Premier League.

The last game is away, next Saturday, against promotion-chasing Shrewsbury. Providing that Halifax draw — or lose — "the Cobblers" are safe. However if Halifax win then Northampton could be in big trouble. But Hough bravely insists: "We are going to be here next season, whatever happens."



WYCOMBE WANDERERS: The champions of the GM Vauxhall Conference will be playing in the Football League next season for the first time since the club was

founded in 1884. The Wanderers are an example of how a small club should be run. It sold its stadium, Loakes Park, for £3.25 million in 1990 and spent the money by building a fine little ground, Adams Park, on an industrial estate on the outskirts of the town. From the outside Adams Park looks like a DIY superstore but inside there are restaurants, bars and conference rooms, run by a team of professional managers to ensure a healthy income outside football.

The ground can hold 7,200, all under cover, and a pitch as big and as smooth as Wembley's.

Manager Martin O'Neill has avoided wasting money on ageing, injury-prone ex-league stars. His players are all part-timers, earning, before bonuses (£30 for a win, £15 for an away draw) around £200 a week. Last year the club announced profits of £30,000 on a turnover of around £1 million, helped by average crowds of over 4,000, much larger than many league clubs. Of course, the Wanderers are lucky. They are just far enough up the M40 not to be affected by the giant clubs in London. But there could be problems next season. O'Neill, who is being touted as a successor to the "retired" Brian Clough, wants a full-time playing staff, which will be expensive. And fans may find mid-table tussles against the unglamorous likes of Torquay and Gillingham less appealing than the recent diet of Vauxhall Conference promotion battles.