

Date: 6 December 2010

Opposition: Aston Villa

Competition: League

Times	Guardian	Mail
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Echo		



6 December  
2010

## THE TIMES

Hodgson enjoys respite after his supporting cast warm to task  
Liverpool 3 Aston Villa 0

As the cold snap grips the nation, green shoots of recovery are threatening to appear at Anfield. A winter of discontent had loomed in Roy Hodgson's first season at Liverpool, but a heart-warming victory last night took his club into the top half of the Barclays Premier League and turned the focus on the difficulties facing Gerard Houllier at Aston Villa.

This was certainly not the happy return that Houllier might have envisaged, back at his old manor in a managerial capacity for the first time since leaving Liverpool in May 2004. Villa were without several senior players, but, as goals from David Ngog, Ryan Babel and Maxi Rodriguez subjected them to a fourth consecutive defeat, Houllier will be far more troubled by the performances of some of those who were regarded as mainstays of the team under Martin O'Neill, his predecessor as manager.

The only heartening aspect of the evening for Houllier was his reception from the Liverpool supporters. It was a little muted as he took his perch on the touchline, but, with his team soundly beaten and seemingly relieved that the deficit was no more than three goals, they began to serenade him in the closing stages.

Reverence from the Kop is something that Hodgson has yet to experience, but while changing perceptions and preconceptions is proving difficult for the former Fulham manager, Liverpool are at least beginning to show some semblance of quality. For Villa's travelling supporters, faced with an impoverished performance that had few if any redeeming aspects, it was all they could do to resort to sarcasm. There was a chorus of oles when Stephen Ireland finally managed to involve himself in a period of possession play early in the second half, followed by chants of "It's just like watching Brazil". At times it was barely like watching Bromsgrove. Even without Jamie Carragher, Steven Gerrard and Fernando Torres, their three most influential outfield players, Liverpool were far too strong. Pepe Reina wore the captain's armband, but the only time his clean sheet - bringing up a remarkable record of 100 in 198 Premier League matches - came under the slightest threat was when he saved Gabriel Agbonlahor's close-range effort early in the second half.

As for Torres, who was attending the birth of his son, he was not missed on this occasion, with Ngog and Babel giving a torrid time to Richard Dunne and James Collins, the Villa centre backs. If Hodgson worried about where the goals would come from in the absence of Gerrard and Torres, he need not have done because the stand-ins had both scored by the sixteenth minute.

First, Raul Meireles swung in a corner and Martin Skrtel rose above Ciaran Clark to send the ball into the six-yard box, where Ngog, unmarked, reacted like any good centre forward, beating Brad Friedel with a diving header.

Two minutes later Clark lost the ball in the centre circle, setting in motion a quick exchange of passes between Meireles, Rodriguez and Lucas Leiva.

As Lucas slipped a pass into the inside-right channel, Babel set off from an offside position - by a matter of inches, but offside nonetheless - and sent a right-foot shot across Friedel and into the far corner of the Villa goal.

Ngog and Babel, playing together as Hodgson sought to expose a lack of pace in the Villa defence, deserved praise for the way that they made light of the absence of Torres, but the tone was set by Meireles and Lucas, who brought energy and tenacity to the midfield. Where Liverpool began the season so ponderously, scoring one first-half goal in the Premier League before November 7, they have finally begun to take the game to opponents.

Clark and Jonathan Hogg, respectively making their eighth and third Premier League starts, were enduring a tough night in midfield, but no Villa player had a more unenviable task in the first half than Agbonlahor, the lone striker.

The team-sheet suggested that Ireland was playing as the link man behind him, but there was little sign of the former Manchester City player during the first half, in which Agbonlahor must have been yearning for the opportunity to use his pace against Sotirios Kyrgiakos and Skrtel. Villa briefly perked up in the second half, with Nathan Delfouneso having come on to join Agbonlahor in attack. Finally, Ireland, back into a more conventional midfield role, did something of note, threading a neat pass into the area behind Glen Johnson for Downing to run on to. The England winger sent the ball into the danger area, but Agbonlahor, sliding in, failed to generate the power to beat Reina.

A Villa goal might have been a turning point, but within two minutes Liverpool scored again, Rodriguez receiving the ball from Reina in the centre circle and leading a counter-attack in which he traded passes with Ngog before sweeping a first-time shot into the net.

Liverpool eased off after that, but Kyrgiakos had a header cleared off the line by Hogg and Johnson twice wasted excellent approach work by fluffing his shot. It could, all told, have been far worse for Villa and Houllier.

Liverpool (4-4-2): J M Reina - G Johnson, S Kyrgiakos (sub: M Kelly, 83min), M Skrtel, P Konchesky - D Kuyt (sub: J Cole, 80), R Meireles, Lucas Leiva, M Rodriguez (sub: F Aurelio, 76) - D Ngog, R Babel. Substitutes not used: B Jones, C Poulsen, J Shelvey, M Jovanovic.

Aston Villa (4-4-1-1): B Friedel - L Young, R Dunne, J Collins, S Warnock - M Albrighton (sub: R Pires, 65), C Clark (sub: N Delfouneso, 46), J Hogg, S Downing - S Ireland - G Agbonlahor (sub: J Carew, 66). Substitutes not used: B Guzan, C Cuellar, C Herd, E Lichaj. Booked: Clark.  
Referee: P Dowd.

## the guardian

Babel seizes chance to shine on miserable return for Houllier

Gerard Houllier had been looking forward to his return to Anfield but will have no cause to remember this game with any fondness. His Aston Villa side were blown away by two early goals from a depleted Liverpool team, leaving Roy Hodgson the only 63-year-old manager with something to smile about.

While Houllier still has many happy memories from his time at Anfield, his stewardship of Villa is rapidly being called into question. This was their fourth defeat in a row, and with only one win in their last 10 league games, Villa are just two points above the relegation zone. Liverpool, who added a stylish third in the second half through Maxi Rodriguez, move up to eighth for the first time this season, and will practically be on the tails of the title candidates if they can overcome managerless Newcastle United on Saturday, assuming Martin Jol - or anyone else - has not been installed by then.

"It would be nice to get some points away from home now," Hodgson said. "In terms of a title challenge we are still limping; we shot ourselves in the foot early on. But the limp is getting better. It was a comfortable victory in the end, but comfortable victories have to be worked for."

Struggling to make himself heard above Jose Reina leading the Liverpool celebrations in the dressing room next door, Houllier admitted his side need to address a few problems. "Our confidence is low and we need to defend better," he said. "Even I could see the second goal was offside, but it was the first goal that affected morale the most. We need to be mentally stronger."

The Frenchman possibly deserves more recognition for the work he did on Merseyside but it was Liverpool who were unrecognisable on his return. While the absence of the injured Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher had been signalled in advance, few were expecting them to be joined by Fernando Torres, who pulled out late, after his wife went into labour. That left David Ngog and Ryan Babel to lead the attack, but the reshuffle worked better than anyone dared hope and Liverpool were two up in a little over quarter of an hour.

The only Houllier signing on the pitch, Villa's Stephen Warnock, was indirectly responsible for the first goal, surrendering possession to Dirk Kuyt then conceding the 14th minute corner from which Martin Skrtel's forceful far-post header was turned past Brad Friedel from close range by Ngog. Liverpool doubled their lead less than two minutes later, with another goal from their makeshift strike pairing. This time it was Babel with a smart finish, beating Friedel with an angled shot into the far corner after seizing on Lucas Leiva's immaculately flighted ball forward. Considering Babel has been criticised for his confidence and his finishing, the chance was tucked away impressively, even if there was more than a possibility of offside. Villa were suddenly looking as frail and exposed as their manager on a freezing cold night, and never appeared likely to get back into the game with just Gabriel Agbonlahor on his own up front.

Villa did not manage a goal attempt before the interval, though they did put an attack together eight minutes into the second half when Agbonlahor reached Stewart Downing's low cross and was only foiled by Reina's quick reactions. Unfortunately for the visitors it merely presaged Liverpool's third goal. Reina, captain for the night and the quickest ever Liverpool player to 100 clean sheets in the league, sliced Villa wide open right through the middle.

The goalkeeper bowled out a clearance to find Rodriguez in the centre circle, for the Argentinian to feed the ball out to Ngog on the left and advance smartly into the penalty area to accept the return. Ngog's final ball was excellent, as was Rodriguez's finish. Friedel was beaten again before the end, when Sotirios Kyrgiakos connected with another of Raul Meireles's precise corners, though Jonathan Hogg on the line prevented a fourth goal.

Villa offered little resistance, and Reina's century would have come up even more quickly had all Liverpool's recent opponents proved so toothless. "We just need to keep going," the goalkeeper said. "We are not a three-man team, we are really confident at home."

Liverpool 4-4-2

Reina; Johnson, Skrtel, Kyrgiakos (Kelly, 83), Konchesky; Kuyt (Cole, 80), Lucas, Meireles, Rodriguez (Aurelio, 76); Ngog, Babel.

Subs not used

Jones, Jovanovic, Poulsen, Shelvey.

Aston Villa 4-5-1

Friedel; L Young, Dunne, Collins, Warnock; Albrighton (Pires, 65), Clark \* (Delfouneso, h-t), Ireland, Hogg, Downing;

Agbonlahor (Carew, 66).

Subs not used

Guzan, Cuellar, Lichaj, Herd.

Referee P Dowd.

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## The Mail

Hard labour for former Liverpool boss Houllier

Liverpool 3

Aston Villa 0

FORTUNATELY for Roy Hodgson, Liverpool's players had much the same idea as Senora Torres last night. The wife of the club's principal striker appeared to think it was a good time to deliver, and so did they. Not least for their manager.

A loss to Gerard Houllier would have been hard to stomach for Hodgson on the Frenchman's first professional return to Anfield since his departure in 2004. It probably would have made his position all the more precarious, too.

But on a night when Liverpool were weakened by the absence of Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher as well as the otherwise engaged Fernando Torres -- his wife went into hospital an hour before kick-off -- the 90 minutes of labour they put in amounted to quite a performance. Even if Maxi and Pepe Reina did wear snoods. Liverpool were terrific, with David Ngog, Ryan Babel and Maxi Rodriguez providing the goals and Lucas a masterclass in midfield. It helped that Villa's defending was woeful, while the absence of Nigel Reo-Coker, Stiliyan Petrov and Ashley Young enabled Lucas and his colleagues to dominate midfield.

But this remained impressive from players who seemed to thrive on the opportunity to shine without their more illustrious teammates. As well as Lucas there was some fine attacking football from Ngog and Babel, who looked like quite a partnership on this occasion.

For Houllier, it was rather more depressing. His appearance was met with real warmth here last night. There was a standing ovation from the supporters and a banner that was extended across the face of The Kop. 'Gerard's heart beats', it said, which was a slightly odd way of putting it but was clearly well intended.

Houllier was all smiles to begin with. But the smile soon made way for a grimace after two goals inside the first 16 minutes and a third 10 minutes after the break. Not exactly the comeback he had in mind when he was so sad to leave here in the first place and he retains such a strong affection for the club.

The applause for Houllier might have been warm but the reception these Liverpool players gave him was as icy cold as the temperatures at Anfield last night.

Not one of them was here during Houllier's tenure and they were quick to make the Frenchman's return rather uncomfortable.

Even in the absence of their big three, Liverpool were two goals up inside the first 16 minutes, going ahead with a header from Ngog, then doubling the lead through a fine finish by Babel.

For Houllier it amounted to something of a nightmare, so disappointing was the defending.

Villa's manager had already seen Dirk Kuyt threaten with a decent half-volley when his side's abject failure to defend a corner from Raul Meireles led to Liverpool's opening goal. It was disappointing to see Martin Skrtel meet the ball virtually unopposed outside the area, but the ease with which Ngog then diverted it past Brad Friedel would have been really galling.

What followed was even more depressing for Houllier, not least because it was a former Liverpool full-back whose mistake proved so costly. While the floated pass from Lucas was a good one, Babel owed much to the ineptitude of Stephen Warnock before driving a terrific finish beyond the grasp of a diving Friedel.

At that stage a Villa side suffering in the absence of Ashley Young had offered little in return. They had threatened briefly when Stewart Downing delivered a cross that Marc Albrighton met with an effort that drifted wide, but that was about the best of it.

While Villa struggled, certain members of Hodgson's side continued to shine. Lucas was having an impressive game in central midfield, while Babel and thriving on the opportunity to start a game alongside Ngog. They actually looked like a half-decent pairing.

Villa had another good chance after the break, with Downing again the creator. This time it fell to Gabriel Agbonlahor, an isolated figure in attack, but his effort was blocked by Reina before Paul Konchesky cleared.

It soon proved a costly miss, with Maxi increasing Liverpool's advantage. Ngog raced down the left flank before delivering a ball that Maxi met first time with a super finish.

Houllier did make changes. On went Robert Pires as well as John Carew and Nathan Delfouneso. But it was Liverpool who went closest to scoring again, with Glen Johnson twice going close.

All that was left was an update from their missing striker.

### MATCH FACTS

LIVERPOOL (4-4-1-1): reina 6; Johnson 7, skrtel 7 Kyrgiakos 7 (Kelly 82min), Konchesky 6; Kuyt 7 (Cole 79), meireles 7, lucas 8, maxi 6 (aurelio 76); ngog 7; Babel 7. Subs not used: Jones, Jovanovic, poulsen, shelvey. Scorers: ngog 14, Babel 16, maxi 55.

ASTON VILLA (4-4-1-1): friedel 5; Young 5, Dunne 4, Collins 4, warnock 5; Clark 5 (Delfouneso 46, 5), ireland 5, Hogg 6, Downing 5; albrighton 5 (pires 65, 5); agbonlahor 5 (Carew 66, 5). Subs not used: guzan, Cuellar, lichaj, Herd. Booked: Clark.

Man of the match: lucas. Referee: phil Dowd. Attendance: 39,079.

## The Daily Telegraph

Unhappy return for Houllier as Liverpool make light of absentees

Liverpool 3 Ngog 14, Babel 16, Maxi 55

Aston Villa 0

Gerard Houllier touched the "This Is Anfield" sign before kick-off and received a warm reception from the Kop but this was a chastening trip back to his old home. His Aston Villa side were easily brushed aside by Liverpool, who rose to eighth in the Premier League with goals from David Ngog, Ryan Babel and Maxi Rodriguez.

To the delight of freezing Liverpool fans, good performances could be found all over the chilled ground. Raul Meireles and Lucas impressed as a central-midfield pair, Glen Johnson was excellent all along the right while Pepe Reina, barring one early mistake, made a terrific save from Gabby Agbonlahor and also played a significant part in Liverpool's third. The only Villa visitors to emerge with any credit were their magnificent supporters, who sang "We're going to win the League" and celebrated a rare passing move with chants of "Ole". Otherwise, Liverpool were in complete control.

Already missing Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher, Liverpool were also without Fernando Torres, whose wife was heavily pregnant. Liverpool's strikers certainly delivered, Ngog and Babel both finding the mark within 15 minutes.

Babel has been drafted in alongside Ngog as Hodgson continued with a 4-4-2 system. Dirk Kuyt kept breaking inside from the right, supporting the front line and even went close with an early volley.

On the coldest of evenings, with the temperature plummeting from a kick-off -4C (24.8F), mistakes were only to be expected. Pepe Reina gifted Villa an early opportunity with a wayward goal-kick, but Liverpool quickly settled.

When Kuyt pressured Villa's defence into conceding a corner, Liverpool took full advantage from a classic set-piece ploy. Meireles lifted the ball over, Martin Skrtel nodded back and there was the diving Ngog, flying through the air, to head the ball past Brad Friedel, another Anfield alumini making a painful return to this famous footballing theatre. One quickly became two. Liverpool were lively enough, brimming with energy and movement, but Villa were so poor, so hesitant.

Lucas was working well alongside Meireles, men against the boys of Villa. Granted too much time in possession, spotting the ragged nature of the visitors' defence, Lucas lifted the ball down the inside-right channel for Babel to chase. Villa screamed for offside, pausing fatefully. Babel eluded Stephen Warnock, another visitor enduring an awkward journey down memory lane.

Babel still had much to do. The Dutchman's finish was magnificent, the ball thumped from right to left past Friedel. Two goals to the good, Liverpool then seemed to pause for breath, allowing Villa to think of an improbable comeback. Given some time in possession, Houllier's players began pushing on. Marc Albrighton and Stewart Downing, who switched flanks on occasion, started running at Paul Konchesky and Johnson, who held firm. Such was the excellence of one Johnson interception that Reina, captain for the evening, ran from his line to salute a right-back not always noted for his defensive work. Villa's youngsters toiled hard. Agbonlahor led the line but got little change from Skrtel or Sotirios Kyrgiakos in the first half. One Skrtel challenge on Agbonlahor was a masterpiece of timing, the defender just nipping in to nick the ball. When Agbonlahor targeted an incoming aerial ball, Skrtel again was master of the situation. Behind Agbonlahor, Stephen Ireland was operating in the hole but whenever he dropped deep Lucas snapped into him. Liverpool's central midfield was impressing, particularly Meireles, who was patently enjoying the opportunity in the centre granted him by Gerrard's hamstring injury. Johnson also caught the eye, dealing well with a 37th-minute break from Warnock.

Frustration began to seep into Villa's movements, seen nastily with a lunge by Ciaran Clark on Lucas, bringing a fifth caution of the season and a one-game ban for the young midfielder.

Villa were losing the ball as well as their composure; Liverpool kept being gifted possession and it was a surprise the scoreboard showed only 2-0 to Liverpool at the interval. Replays at half-time confirmed Villa's suspicions that Babel was offside and their dismay soon deepened when Liverpool added a third. Reina was the catalyst, launching the ball through the midfield, totally catching Villa out. As the Kop stood in anticipation over the blur of movement hurtling towards them, Maxi and Ngog executed a superb 1-2. As Ngog raced down the left, Maxi kept charging through the middle. The Frenchman's cutback was perfection, judged expertly for the Argentine, who opened up his body and side-footed the ball at pace past poor Friedel. There will surely be a run on Maxi's Liverpool red snood in the Anfield club shop today.

As Liverpool celebrated, the fans doubtless reserved a silent thought for Reina, who had just made an important, close-range save from Agbonlahor. From a possible 2-1, Liverpool now led 3-0 and Villa were embarrassed. Their fans refused to go quietly, filling Anfield with ironic chants of "ole" when Villa managed to put together a passing move.

Houllier had already brought on Nathan Delfouneso for Clark, and sent on Robert Pires and John Carew for Albrighton and Agbonlahor. As rescue teams go, it was hardly on the youthful, mobile side.

Liverpool then almost scored a fourth, Johnson waltzing past Pires and Warnock before bringing a good save from Friedel.

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## THE INDEPENDENT

Houllier forced to endure night of misery on Anfield return

GERARD HOULLIER last night made his competitive return to Anfield six years after leaving as manager and, having watched his side eviscerated in the icy air, the Frenchman would be forgiven for wishing for a similarly lengthy gap before his next visit.

But as chilling as it was for Villa and their emotional manager, this was another 90 minutes of promise for Liverpool. Fernando Torres was called away on urgent childbirth matters, but in his place the makeshift partnership of David Ngog and Ryan Babel flourished.

For Roy Hodgson, the duo's performances, and the displays of other less heralded squad members, were certainly the most pleasing aspects of a fourth successive home win in the league which hauled them up to eighth. The last-minute defeat at Tottenham might well have hurt but they have seemingly carried away the positives and built on them. In contrast, Villa, if only for the moment, appear rooted in the bottom half. In truth, this was not the rousing homecoming Houllier would perhaps have expected. In six seasons on Merseyside he won five trophies, four in one season, before making way for Rafael Benitez in 2004. The applause was respectful but nothing more, but at least Anfield sang his name at the end and gave him more than Villa. They were lifeless and, at times witless. Houllier could only look and wonder at how some of Hodgson's squad members stepped up to the mark.

Torres was granted compassionate leave after his wife, Olalla, went into labour with the couple's second child. With Steven Gerrard still carrying that hamstring injury picked up on England duty and with Jamie Carragher facing three months on the sidelines courtesy of the shoulder he dislocated against Spurs, Liverpool were plainly without their names and their talismen.

But then, Villa also had their absentees, most notably for this evening the suspended Ashley Young. Yet it was not an attacking threat they lacked; it was any sort of defensive cohesion. Within 16 minutes the visitors were two down with their back four resembling a hen party slipping down Lime Street.

Dirk Kuyt should have opened the scoring as early as the third minute when a Raul Meireles free-kick from the right caused havoc in the area. No matter, as another Meireles free-kick reaped similar mayhem before a corner from the Portuguese broke this weakest of deadlocks. Martin Skrtel cleverly nodded the ball back across the box where Ngog performed a flying header past Brad Friedel.

Two minutes later it was Babel daring to pose the question "Fernando who?". This was a classic finish by the oft berated Dutchman as he ran on to Lucas's deft dink to locate the inside of the far post from a prohibitive angle. Ten minutes after that the chance fell to the replacement centre-half Sotirios Kyrgiakos to make it "Jamie who?" but he skewed a free header. Again, it was a Meireles set-piece that produced the panic; not quite how Anfield remembered a Houllier defence. It seemed each and every Meireles cross would trigger the Benny Hill theme tune when Babel was allowed to pick up a low, scuffed centre on the edge of the box and curl it narrowly the wrong side of the post.

Villa were desperate for another outlet and after the break Houllier offered the isolated Gabriel Agbonlahor some support up front by bringing on Nathan Delfouneso for Ciaran Clark, one of a five-man midfield in the first half. The move almost paid quick dividends when Stewart Downing teed up Agbonlahor in the 54th minute. But Pepe Reina was alive to the threat and moments later the importance of his reflex stop was amplified after he rolled the ball out to Maxi Rodriguez.

The Argentine is another who had more critics than admirers but he continued his upturn in form with his third goal in seven matches. It was a beautifully simple counter-attack with Rodriguez picking up Reina's invitation, feeding to Ngog and, 40 metres later, timing his run to perfection to score.

And so any hopes of a Villa comeback on Houllier's comeback were extinguished. Reina was to be rewarded for his fine save with his 100th clean sheet in 198 games (a record for Liverpool). At the other end, Friedel had no such concerns.

The American had to be at his sharpest to deny Glen Johnson and from there the home surges came quick and often. Johnson blazed over, Kuyt fired wide and Kyrgiakos hit the post. There should really have been a fourth. But Liverpool would not have begrudged their old manager his mercy.

Liverpool (4-4-2): Reina; Johnson, Kyrgiakos (Kelly, 84), Skrtel, Konchesky; Kuyt (Cole, 79), Meireles, Lucas, Rodriguez (Aurelio, 76); Babel, Ngog. Substitutes not used Jones (gk), Jovanovic, Poulsen, Shelvey. Aston Villa (4-5-1): Friedel; L Young, Dunne, Collins, Warnock; Albrighton (Pires, 65), Clark (Delfouneso, h-t), Hogg, Ireland, Downing; Agbonlahor (Carew, 66). Substitutes not used Guzan (gk), Cuellar, Lichaj, Herd. Booked: Aston Villa Clark Referee P Dowd (Staffordshire). Possession Liverpool 50% Aston Villa 50% Shots on target Liverpool 7 Aston Villa 2 Man of the match Meireles. Attendance 39,079. Match rating 6/10.

## DAILY MIRROR

No Torres but Kop thrash Villa dummies

HOW appropriate at this time of year that an unexpected birth brought renewed hope for Liverpool.

Against a struggling Aston Villa side, they seemed a team almost reborn, despite losing star striker Fernando Torres just before kickoff when his wife Olalla went into labour with their second child.

Earlier in the season, the loss of such an important player, combined with injuries to the inspirational Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher, would have disrupted the Reds.

But times are slowly changing at Anfield, as this emphatic victory showed.

A Liverpool side shorn of their three main stars still dominated against opponents with injury problems of their own.

Perhaps most important for Liverpool boss Roy Hodgson was the fact that his back-up strikers, David Ngog and Ryan Babel, were so prominent, scoring a goal apiece within the space of two first half minutes.

Such news should be heralded by angels at Anfield, because it is much-needed.

The two young forwards caused a panicked Villa defence huge problems all night and allowed Liverpool a control that gave Maxi Rodriguez their third after the break.

Their former boss Gerard Houllier, now in charge at Villa, was supposed to have hung over this game like a ghost of Christmas past.

But he was merely a horrified spectre at the feast, as his side slumped to another depressing defeat. They have now won just two games in their last 12.

There has been much handwringing at Anfield over the apparent lack of cover for the misfiring Torres, but here, against admittedly weak opposition, they seemed to have an embarrassment of striking riches.

Ngog is Liverpool's top scorer this season, and has played with the increasing confidence such a status bestows.

But it was the form of Babel that was a revelation, on the back of his encouraging display in Europe last week.

The Dutchman has seemed like a departure in waiting for the last two seasons, after enduring a miserable time since his much-heralded pounds 12million arrival under previous boss Rafa Benitez. He almost was on his way to London in the summer, on the final day of the transfer window, and rumour has it that he was flown down in a helicopter to complete a last-gasp deal with either Spurs or West Ham.

But that deal fell through when Liverpool failed to buy a replacement and he was condemned to the wilderness as Ngog moved ahead of him in the pecking order.

But his strength and movement here was a reminder of the athletic ability that prompted Liverpool to pay so much for him in the first place.

Babel's wonderful 16th-minute strike completed an incredible passage of play for Hodgson's side, as they snatched two goals in as many minutes.

Babel took a delightful through ball from Lucas in his stride, and turned and hit a shot in one move that nestled in the back of the net before keeper Villa Brad Friedel had chance to move.

Moments before that, Villa's defence had already been exposed for a criminal lack of concentration.

Ngog was allowed a three-yard exclusion zone in the penalty area as Raul Meireles swung over a corner, Martin Skrtel outjumped Ciaran Clark and the Frenchman dived to head home.

With such a young side, Villa were lost, and they barely retained the ball long enough before the interval to mount an attack worthy of the name.

Rodriguez gave the scoreline a comfortable sheen in the 55th minute when he glided into the box to latch on to a clever run and cross from Ngog and steer home with a calm authority.

Poor Villa had just one chance all night, when Gabriel Agbonlahor should have done better from close range than merely hit keeper Pepe Reina early in the second-half.

For Liverpool, it was a stroll.

LIVERPOOL: Reina 7; Johnson 6, Kyrgiakos 7, Skrtel 6, Konchesky 6; Kuyt 7, Lucas 6, Meireles 7, Maxi 7; Babel 8, Ngog 8. VILLA: Friedel 6; Young 5, Collins 5, Dunne 6, Warnock 6; Albrighton 5 (Pires 65, 5), Hogg 6, Clark 5 (Delfouneso 46, 5), Downing 5; Ireland 6; Agbonlahor 5 (Carew 65, 5).

REFEREE: Phil Dowd.

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Gerard Houllier gets warm welcome, but chilled by result

GERARD HOULLIER has long since divided opinion at Anfield.

Many remember him as the manager who landed an unprecedented cup treble and snapped up the likes of Sami Hyypia, Didi Hamann and Gary McAllister.

For others he's the boss who wasted a glorious chance to end the club's long wait for the title by frittering away cash on misfits like El Hadji Diouf, Salif Diao and Bruno Cheyrou.

Last night everyone was in agreement. The Frenchman and his Aston Villa team were the perfect guests.

Houllier's emotional return six and a half years after he parted company with Liverpool turned into a personal nightmare.

On paper a Reds side without Fernando Torres, Steven Gerrard or Jamie Carragher looked vulnerable. Instead they ran riot as a dismal Villa side were swept aside with consummate ease.

The welcome for him was warm but what followed will have chilled Houllier to the core. His team were outclassed and outfought in every department.

The stand-in strikeforce of David Ngog and Ryan Babel got Liverpool off to a flyer and Maxi Rodriguez' sweet strike wrapped up the points in the second half.

It was the perfect night for Roy Hodgson with the performance going some way to backing up the manager's claim that he's finally getting the Reds playing in the style he wants.

Villa were abject but they still had to be put to the sword and that was done swiftly and with a swagger.

This was a fourth successive home triumph and lifted Liverpool back into the top eight and within sight of the European places. The Reds are finally looking up rather than over their shoulder.

Now Hodgson's challenge is to get his players delivering on a consistent basis away from the comforts of Anfield.

Torres' absence after his wife Olalla went into labour earlier in the day handed a chance to Babel and how he grabbed it.

The Dutchman had impressed Hodgson with his efforts in Bucharest last Thursday and he continued where he had left off during a lively opening.

Raul Meireles and the outstanding Lucas stamped their authority on proceedings in the middle of the park and the Reds started at a tempo Villa simply couldn't live with.

At White Hart Lane eight days earlier Liverpool had failed to turn pressure into goals and paid the price. This time they were ruthless.

Dirk Kuyt had already gone close before the opener deservedly arrived in the 14th minute.

Martin Skrtel, on his 100th appearance for the Reds, rose to send Meireles' corner goalwards with a thumping header and Ngog nodded it home from close range.

It was the Frenchman's eighth goal of the campaign but his first since September. Two minutes later the Reds were in dreamland. Lucas demonstrated his growing prowess at Anfield with a delightful clipped pass for Babel to race on to.

There was still plenty to do but Babel made it look easy as he hooked a shot across former Reds keeper Brad Friedel and into the far corner.

The celebratory double somersault which followed was almost as stylish as the finish.

Confidence oozed through the Reds' veins and Sotirios Kyrgiakos should have added a third when he nodded wastefully over.

The only danger to Pepe Reina apart from frost bite was sloppy errors from his back four. Both Skrtel and Paul Konchesky were guilty but a dismal Villa weren't good enough to take advantage.

It wasn't only the quality of the Reds' attacking play but also the work-rate which stood out as the visitors were hustled and harried into conceding possession.

Having been booed off by their fans at the break, Houllier's side briefly threatened in the second half with Reina saving bravely at the feet of Gabriel Agbonlahor.

It was a record breaking night for Reina as he became the quickest keeper in the club's history to clock up 100 league clean sheets.

This was his 198th game and he comfortably beat the record previously held by Ray Clemence on 217. The Spaniard will have had few easier nights.

The goalkeeper played his part in helping the Reds deliver the decisive blow with a blistering counter attack in the 55th minute.

Reina's throw found Rodriguez who in turn released Ngog down the left. The rookie striker picked out Rodriguez in the box and he made no mistake with a clinical finish past Friedel.

The only criticism was that Liverpool should have gone on to improve a goal difference which is now finally in the black for the first time this season.

Glen Johnson was denied by a great save from Friedel before the right-back lashed another decent opening over the bar.

Kyrgiakos then saw his header cleared off the line by Jonathan Hogg. Villa were lucky to escape without a hiding.

With Houllier's side boasting just one win in 10 games and only just above the drop zone, it looks like being a long, harsh winter for the Frenchman. The Kop chanting his name in the closing stages last night will have briefly lifted his spirits, an honour not yet bestowed on the current occupier of the Anfield hot seat. Hodgson still faces a battle to win over plenty of doubters. But more nights like this and the plaudits will come his way.