

BOOK OF THE WEEK

Life Sentence

By Mark Hodkinson

Parrs Wood Press, £8.95

THE SIGHT of Rochdale sitting atop the Third Division recently must have been a delight tinged with just a little irony for Mark Hodkinson.

Commissioned to chronicle the frustrations of supporting a club that has endured 27 unbroken seasons in the bottom division of the Nationwide League, Hodkinson has seen their fortunes turn around.

If a narrow failure to make the play-offs counted as a disappointment last season – and the descriptions of the last game at Plymouth are the most harrowing in the book – then they are showing every sign of going further this time.

If *The Times* thought they were ordering an account of football at the bottom of the heap, they were wrong, because Rochdale are thriving.

Heaven knows the Dale's fans have earned a bit of pleasure, not to mention a stand roof that doesn't leak. But even this modest level of success irons out some of the quirks that makes a little club interesting.

It is hard to imagine them now fielding a player who wears glasses, as David Reid did between 1948-50. He is one of the figures from the past conjured up by letters from Rochdale fans that make up an entertaining final chapter.

For the main author, the challenge is to reflect the new surge of optimism at the club, without losing the flavour of its essential homeliness or reducing it to a stream of "Oop North" clichés.

He rigorously avoids the latter path, although not sufficiently to satisfy some critics from within the club, who live in fear of a return to the clogs and flat caps image.

They need not have worried. Hodkinson has produced a portrait that respects both the past and the present – and shows how, for the lifelong fan, the two are intertwined.

DAVE HADFIELD