Hugo Rodrigues (left) and Andy Lindegaard, of Yeovil Town, challenge Liverpool's El Hadji Diouf during the third-round FA Cup tie at Huish Park yesterday *David Ashdown*

Heskey carves a path past Yeovil's bold challenge

THE ROMANTICS hoped the fog swirling in from the Mendips yesterday afternoon contained the ghosts of the Yeovil yeomen who felled then mighty Sunderland at the old Huish Park 35 years ago. Romance, though, has its limits and the Laffan Trading Estate, venue of the new, flat Huish, will not go down in lore as the graveyard of Gérard Houllier's Liverpool ambitions.

By Glenn Moore

Yeovil Town	0
Liverpool	2

Houllier's team are some way from threatening the preeminence of Manchester United, Arsenal and Chelsea but, with this ultimately comfortable victory, they have bought their manager time. They may also have generated the vital self-confidence their game has lacked.

This felling was evident in the first half-hour when Yeovil took the game to their Premiership visitors and might easily have scored. That would have been a real test of character for a Liverpool team lacking the local heartbeat provided by Steven Gerrard and Michael Owen.

Instead, building on the platform provided by Dietmar Hamann's disciplined performance, and Danny Murphy's complementary probing, they gradually took control, pinning Yeovil within their own half. The breakthrough came from Emile Heskey, who came off the bench in score after 69 minutes. Murphy, from the penalty spot, made sure seven minutes later.

"They gave us a very hard game, which we expected, but we had the right attitude," said Houllier. "We were extremely professional, focused and composed. We had to withstand heavy pressure but the second half was different. Yeovil tired and we passed the ball well."

Hamann, Houllier added, had shown what Liverpool had missed in his long absence. "We call Didi 'The Kaiser'," he said. "He is very important in our set-up. Every team needs a player like that."

Gary Johnson, the Yeovil manager, said: "I was pleased at half-time because we were well in the game, creating chances and looking strong. Liverpool then showed their Premiership quality."

The 6ft 4in Hugo Rodrigues aside, Yeovil are atypical for a Third Division team, being predominantly small in stature. This made for an ironic contrast given Houllier's preference for physically imposing men. Yeovil's neat passing and movement initially troubled Liverpool's less nimble defenders and their pressing game gave the visitors' midfield no time to settle. Yeovil were thus able to gain useful possession and build such promising attacks that the normally unflappable Sami Hyypia was soon soon heading a clearance right out of the ground.

This followed a Lee Johnson free-kick which had forced an agile save from Jerzy Dudek. A flowing move then ended with the busy Darren Way volleying over before Gavin Williams, from a half-cleared corner, brought the save of the match from Dudek. Colin Pheik and the tidy Nick Crittenden also tested the Pole, and Terry Skiverton headed over, as Yeovil sounded blood and glory.

Liverpool had, at this point, rarely threatened. A fine tackle from Crittenden halted an early break by Florent Sinama-Pongolle; Vladimir Smicer stretched Chris Weale with a header; and El Hadji Diouf shot wide after Smicer had carved out an excellent chance. Diouf's other contribution was to be booked for diving.

YESTERDAY'S FA CUP THIRD ROUND RESULTS

Aston Villa 1 Man United 2
Fulham 2 Cheltenham Town 1
Leeds United 1 Arsenal 4
Yeovil Town 0 Liverpool 2
(Fourth-round draw today 1300)

So, when the fog descended at half-time, Liverpool might have been the happier were the game abandoned. Their most humbling defeat loomed since going out to Southern League Worcester City in 1959 – the loss which led to the arrival of Bill Shankly whose shadow still clouds Houllier's every remove.

However, the fog cleared and so did Liverpool's heads. Tackles were sharper and passing more precise while Heskey's arrival added a focus in the attack. He might have scored with his first touch after Hyypia had stepped out from defence but Weale denied him. Encouraged nevertheless, Liverpool continued to tease at Yeovil's increasingly packed defence. Soon after the hour Smicer, from the edge of the box, hit the post. Williams briefly raised home hopes with a bold counter-attack but Murphy then rolled through a pass which Heskey, from the inside-right position, turned inside the far post.

Any prospect of Yeovil's season-long alcohol ban being compromised by a crate of champagne went soon after as Rodrigues, always an acrobat waiting to happen, tripped Harry Kewell. Murphy, the only Englishman in the starting line-up, converted. There was still time for Kirk Jackson to bring a fine save from Dudek but not for a giant-killing.

Yeovil were left to concentrate on their faltering promotion campaign and count their takings. This, with television fees, should approach £600,000, an impressive return on an XI which took £45,000 to build. It is now Liverpool who can look to history. This was the fifth time in 32 years they have drawn bottom-division opposition in the third round. On each previous occasion they went on to reach the FA Cup final. After the season he has had Houllier might settle for that. It remains to be seen whether, if it is not accompanied by a Champions' League place, the board will.

Yeovil (4-4-1-1): Dudek; Hyypia, Henchoz, Hamann, Carragher; Kewell, Diouf (Le Tallec, 88), Murphy, Gerrard, Smicer; Heskey (Riise, 90). Subs not used: Carson (gk), Biscan.

Booked: Liverpool: Diouf.

Referee: N Barry (Dorchester).

Attendance: 6,048.