

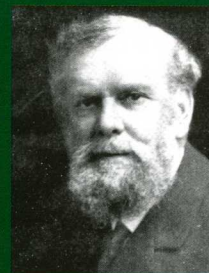
Just Child's Play?

by Linden Groves



The slide at Wicksteed Park, perhaps the first to be built, with a sliding surface made out of teak.

How an engineering genius made a Northamptonshire park and changed children's play across the world.



Charles Wicksteed

Like so many public parks in the UK, Wicksteed Park in Kettering, Northamptonshire, was created as a benevolent act by a successful local businessman. Where Wicksteed Park is unique is that its creator, Charles Wicksteed, was an engineer with a love for children who filled the park with play equipment of his own invention. In doing so he set a precedent for parks all over the country, and then all over the world. Today, Wicksteed Park is still run by a charitable trust set up by Charles and operates as a popular open space with an ornamental lake, formal gardens, large free playground, entertainment hall, and family-friendly fairground. Its historic significance has been recognised by English Heritage who have placed it on the Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest.

Charles Wicksteed was born in 1847 into the large family of a Leeds clergyman and his wife, and enjoyed a reportedly idyllic childhood once they moved to rural Wales. After attending a Lancaster boarding school, at the age of sixteen Charles became an apprentice with the engineering firm of Kitson and Hewitson, before setting up his own steam ploughing firm. Based in Norfolk, Charles worked for some important clients, including Prince Albert at

Sandringham and Lord Leicester at Holkham; but in 1871 he decided to spend the summer months working in the Midlands, in search of better profits.

On arriving in Kettering, Charles made an instant impact by displeasing the owners of Barton Seagrave Hall when he filled his steam plough with water from the Hall's brook without permission. Nonetheless, he settled in Kettering, married a local girl, produced three children, built a successful ploughing business, and established an engineering works. In 1894 he sold the ploughing business to concentrate on engineering and soon he was a millionaire. By 1928 he had also bought Barton Seagrave Hall and used it as one of the Wicksteed Park attractions.

In 1914 Charles began to buy land in Kettering with a view to creating a philanthropic garden suburb housing development, perhaps inspired by social planner Ebenezer Howard and developments such as Bourneville in Birmingham. The First World War, though, brought delays and also a change in local authority attitudes to public housing and so it was decided instead to create a public park from the land.

Although Wicksteed Park offered a large open space with a beautiful man-made lake and sporting facilities, it was not much used at first. Charles

Right: A plank swing, or 'Jazz'.
Left: The Giant Stride's origins were clearly in the Maypole.



