

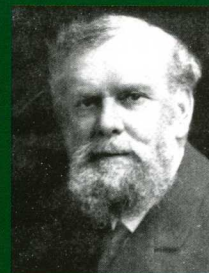
# Just Child's Play?

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.**







**Left: Teenagers enjoying a Swing Boat. Top right: See-saw ladders, taken from Wicksteed's 1929 catalogue. Bottom right: See-saws with new 'non-bumper' technology, which used air cylinders to prevent shock when hitting the ground. Bottom: The very popular Ocean Wave.**

admitted that he had given low priority to creating a playground, until one day they “had a Sunday School Treat in the Park and put up primitive swings with larch poles, tied together at the top with chains. Fortunately they were not cleared away with the other things the day after the treat, and I ultimately found them so popular that instead of pulling them down I added more to them. But these were not enough for the children, I found them piling up forms one above another on a slope under a tree to form a slide, and breaking them. As a consequence I thought I would make a slide: first for the boys. This was so much appreciated that I made a better one for the girls: the boys got jealous of this, so I made a still better one for them.”

The equipment was a huge success, attracting first mothers and children and then the general public, so Charles had his factory make more and more. He visited many other parks and was appalled by what he saw: “I went on a tour all round the country to

find what playthings were made for the children. The result was that I found very little was made, used or new, except the old-fashioned swing, a few broken down, dangerous giant strides and an exceedingly clumsy and dangerous bumper see-saw. It appeared that no one had devoted themselves to the bringing out and development of a variety of really good playthings.”

A canny businessman as well as a philanthropist, he began to sell the play equipment made by his factory, the first catalogue being produced in 1924 with a photograph of the Wicksteed Park playground on the cover, and a claim that the Wicksteed equipment was ‘Designed and Tested to Stand Any Abuse’.

The catalogue marketed items such as Giant Strides, Plank Swings (also known as the ‘Jazz’), See-Saws, and Slides, which Charles Wicksteed claimed to have invented. He also claimed to be the first to make equipment out of metal piping rather than wood.

Soon the issue of children’s play was occupying a



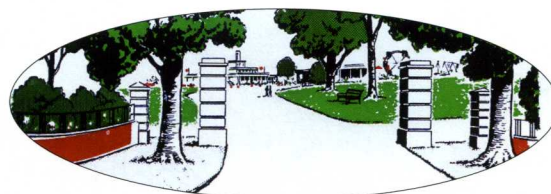
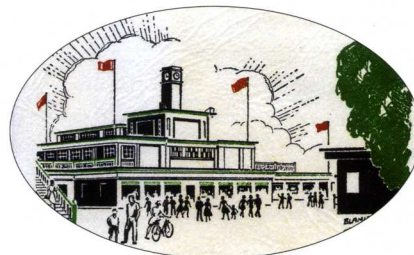
“... whiny, pale-faced children, complaining of any food they get, have come back with healthy faces and rosy complexions, ready to eat the house out after a good play in the playground ...”

great deal of this lively man's mind and he became something of a champion for the cause. In 1928 he wrote a book on the subject, *A Plea for Children's Recreation after School Hours and after School Age*, in which he said: "I have good reason to believe that the park I have formed in Kettering has changed the lives for the better, to a greater or lesser extent, of thousands of children. I have direct evidence from mothers how whining, pale-faced children, complaining of any food they get, have come back with healthy faces and rosy complexions, ready to eat the house out after a good play in the playground. My plea is that the care for the children should be continued after school hours and after school age by the provision not only of parks outside the towns, but also in slums inside the towns. Where possible, playthings should by no means occupy the whole of the ground: in addition to these there should be plenty of free space left for the children to run about in, kick and throw balls and do as they like. At certain times in the afternoon and evening instructors should be provided to superintend and teach all sorts of team games... They should be conducted on a space set apart for the time, and I think they would be joyfully entered into under these conditions, especially if competitions and little prizes were offered... It need hardly be said that instructors should be people suitable for the job, people who love children and have a natural command."

As a play equipment manufacturer, Charles Wicksteed & Co Ltd found astonishing success. By 1935 the firm was claiming to have supplied over 3,000 playgrounds; by 1938 this had risen to 4,000, and by 1967 they were claiming to have supplied 10,000 at home and overseas (including in Kuwait, Jamaica and South Africa). Thus the history of children's play in public parks is virtually synonymous with that of the company's development, and to browse the run of catalogues from the 1920s to the present day is to browse through a century of children at play. (Although sold

out of the family's hands in 1960, Dorada Wicksteed is still a major supplier of play equipment.)

Meanwhile, Wicksteed Park had become immensely popular. It was formally opened in 1921, some years after the people of Kettering had actually begun to use it, and throughout the 1920s Charles was working hard to give it a Theatre and Tea Pavilion (complete with a bread and butter machine of his invention, capable of cutting and spreading at the rate of one slice per second); a Rose Garden (for tired mothers to get some peace and quiet); Bandstand; and Fountain. The ethos was a friendly, caring one: the playground was open on Sundays long before this became normal; girls and boys of different ages all shared "an open playground" (it had previously been usual to have separated areas for different genders and different ages); and users were permitted to "walk on the grass" (a big taboo in many parks of the time), a subject on which Charles was rather amusing: "It is not generally known that trampling on grass improves it if not excessive. A year ago I formed a fountain lay-out... and a lady said to me: 'You will never allow the people to go on the grass, it will spoil it.' I said: 'I certainly shall allow them to; it would spoil the whole thing to keep people from walking about.' She said: 'It would be a pity to spoil the grass.' My reply was: 'I care more about the



Illustrations from the original Wicksteed Park guide.





**The main playground at Wicksteed Park in the 1940s (left) and 1960s (right).**

people than I do for the grass.' ... Is the park and the grass laid out for the pleasure of the people, or is the pleasure of the people to be sacrificed to the look of the grass? Some ardent housewives think that they are made for the house instead of the house being made for them. There is such a thing as proportion in this life."

Inevitably, the park was by now crammed with playground paraphernalia and, then as now, balanced this offering of free play equipment and parkland with charges for facilities such as refreshments. Visitors also had to pay if they wished to go on fairground-type amusements, including a water-chute ride in which visitors climb a tower to sit in a 'log' on wheels which then rushes down a chute into the passing river. Astonishingly, this 80-year-old ride is still in operation, continuing to pass modern Health and Safety tests, and, as when it was first created, there is a free drying room in which soaked children are towelled down by a matronly figure and given a fresh change of clothes.

Charles' final contribution to the park was a 1.5 mile train ride along the banks of the lake. This took several stressful years to create and was eventually finished a few days after his death in 1931, but it survives today and is cared for impeccably by local train enthusiasts.

And what of the rest of Wicksteed Park in the 21st century? There continues to be a splendid free playground (although these days the Trustees find British play manufacturers uninspiring and unresponsive, so much of the equipment comes from Denmark) and new fairground rides have also been

added in recent years. The managing Trust is still headed by a member of the Wicksteed family, Oliver, who is clearly enthused by the park and his great-grandfather's principles of free entertainment.

But Wicksteed's spirit of private philanthropy struggles in an age in which public funding is king. Visitors find it difficult to grasp the concept, grumbling either that what they perceive as a 'public park' charges for some of its facilities, or alternatively that this 'theme park' is not up to the standard of its expensive commercial competitors. This is a shame. Wicksteed Park was – and is – a brilliant endeavour that is not only benevolent, but also FUN! ❀

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# Just Child's Play?

## Wicksteed Park in 1935

“ Where in 1914 were grass and arable fields, a small plantation, and a winding stream, today stands Wicksteed park as we know it. On a summer's day the cheering of bus-loads of children may be heard, as they catch their first sight of the park. As they unload they rush to the swings, slides, see-saws, merry-go-rounds, joy wheels, rocking-horses, ocean-waves, and all else that is to be found in the playgrounds. Mothers sit on the jazz, or dare the slide, and laugh, or put their infants into the sandpit and watch them dig. Above them, lads and girls are playing tennis on hard courts, the drivers of charabancs are beguiling their time with a round of putting, while others play golf on the miniature golf-course. Athletes and energetic youngsters course round the cycle-track. The 'Lady of the Lake' and 'King Arthur' – two neat little locomotives – take their loads on the toy railway down the grassy slopes, around the lake where the Ise brook once wound its way, and where, now, paddleboats, skiffs, punts, and canoes dot the waters.

The large white-painted canteen gives teas to its one or two thousand hungry and thirsty visitors with an ease that goodwill and good management make possible. Picnic parties are fetching their jugs of tea and bottles of lemonade from the counter. The fountain plays, or the strains of the band are heard, and the marble statues invite admiration. Below lies the garden where those who love flowers and peace wander, and where the statue of Jerry, the 'sweetest little dog in the world', holds court.

*From a biography of Charles Wicksteed  
by his daughter, Hilda.*

**From top to bottom: Rose Garden;  
Fountain Lawn, miniature railway,  
plank swings; Tea Pavilion.**

