

Wicksteed Park; a Remnant of a Humphry Repton Landscape

Well thank you Humphry. The lottery funded project "Sharing Repton" enabled the Gardens Trust to invite the Wellingborough African Community Association to spend an afternoon at Wicksteed Park. The Association provides care and support for a diverse community, some of whose members suffer from dementia in its various forms. On the afternoon of the visit the only thing any one looking or listening to the whole group (dementia sufferers, carers and helpers) would have been able to observe was the group's shared laughter and sense of fun. Humphry Repton wrote that he "preferred the sight of mankind to that of herds of cattle." He would have been completely at home with the WACA.

The visit was planned extremely well by Elaine Johnson and Carol Fitzgerald, in conjunction with Tracey Clarke, the Community Link Manager from Wicksteed Park and the WACA. First on the agenda were ice creams. Rum and raisin went down very well. This was followed by the train ride round the perimeter of the park. It is easy to assume that if someone suffers from a memory loss then all of his or her recollections are misplaced. Once on the train one member of the group was eager to see the suitcases. I imagined that she meant suitcases that go into luggage racks on main line trains, and was ready to tell her, but she did not. She knew, unlike me, that there used to be a display of suitcases on the Wicksteed station platform, and when the train returned to the platform we found them. A quick thank you to St Rita (patron saint of extracting one from potentially difficult situations, a kind of face saving saint) would have been appropriate.

The train ride was a great success. The echo in the tunnel provided the opportunity for the whole group to go "ooohhh" with such panache that any self-respecting apparition would have retreated for safety. After the train up the path to the rose garden. The beauty of the flowers, the reds, the oranges, the mauves, was a pleasure for the group. It was the first time one of the group had been in the rose garden and he just stood and drank in the colours, his only words were "how beautiful." At the back of the garden is a statue commemorating Jerry, Charles Wicksteed's much loved dog. One lady spoke saying how she loved her daughter's dog because "he remembers me". This lady and Charles would have had the most enjoyable of conversations.

Back to the Learning Space, a beautifully designed centre for group activities, a film of Wicksteed Park in the 1950's was shown, which evoked many memories of times group members were there with their children, especially the delight of the Water Shoot. Nearly everybody seemed to have queued, up and climbed the steep stairs for the opportunity to get into a wooden boat, race down a ramp and hit the water so fast that anybody standing in the vicinity would have been soaked. A second film showed a squad of American soldiers performing a choreographed march, the Cookhouse shuffle. Attempts were made by some members of the group to follow and imitate the American soldiers who had been drilled numerous times. This is the only excuse that can be mustered for the group members, (including me) who were at least four beats and one movement behind the actions expected.

The Garden Trust had organised an afternoon tea and this was held in the Learning Space. Sandwiches of every description, numerous cakes and cups of tea, something for every dietary need, were available, and everything was consumed with glee. As the tea was progressing a large wickerwork container was taken round in which were a range of gifts. The gifts had been chosen to promote conversations and bring to mind times when group members had used the gift they received. The organisers might have been intending the occasion as a lucky dip, but in reality each gift in the basket was turned over and considered very carefully before the selection was made. There was nothing serendipitous about the final choice – it was specifically chosen. A picture was chosen by a blind lady who felt all over the surface as the scene was described to her very carefully so that in the end she said, “I can see this. It is Wicksteed.” Tulip bulbs were picked out because they would enhance the border of the sheltered housing complex. The jar of honey was discussed as the pot came out of the bag and back in the carrier gift bag numerous times. The hand trowel and rake were chosen as the new owner recalled her delight when she had tended her own garden. The conversation about the vegetables was very informative and the helpers learnt that you could make a salad out of the fronds of the carrot tops, which was not something we had known. The pineapple was one of the heavier gifts but easily raised from the basket as the recipient recalled the different ways she had used the fruit in her cooking.

Then the disco! WACA had brought some music with them, chosen by the group members. A hint of reggae filled the air. Another go at imitating that American soldiers march was done to the music followed by general group dancing. The blind lady proved to be exceptionally good and when complimented said that we had not seen anything yet. Her carer had mentioned that when the group went on holiday this lady was the only one that was regularly chatted up. As the afternoon had progressed those in the group who might have been less sure about the situation initially had grown in confidence and by the time the music was played all you could hear above the reggae was laughter and conversations and all you could see was a group of people enjoying moving to the music.

Thank you Humphry.

Brenda Lofthouse



