

Ever wonder what happens to your recycling..?

I live in Leeds, which is a fair-sized city in the north of England. Every two weeks, the recycling is collected, and driven off with. Where does it go? What happens to it? In idle moments, I do sometimes wonder. So I contacted Leeds City Council, and I was put in contact with Kim Auckland, who is the operations and compliance manager with H W Martin Waste Ltd. This company handles all of the domestic recycling in Leeds, plus a few trade contracts.

Considering the scale of the operation, the outside of the facility seems rather serene - in a grey, light-industrial kind of a way. In fact, there is no discernible activity whatsoever. I soon discover that the activity has been internalised within two (very) large sheds.

Kim informs me that the plant typically handles between a hundred and a hundred and twenty tonnes of recycling per day, six days a week. So, that's thirty-one to thirty-eight thousand tonnes per year. The 2011 census put the population of Leeds and its district at 751,000. The population of London is eight point three million. Therefore, we can extrapolate that London must generate somewhere in the region of four hundred thousand tonnes of recycling per year. Which, I'm sure you'll agree, is a lot.

These figures refer to recyclable plastic, paper-based materials, and metals, such as aluminium, steel and tin. All of this is collected as mixed, or "co-mingled" waste, which is then sorted out and processed using a variety of techniques. As much as twenty percent of the incoming material, by volume, is found to be unrecyclable. This might include card or paper that has become saturated with liquid, or glass, which is dealt with at another facility. Paper-based products that cannot be recycled are sent to Ferrybridge power station, a few miles to the east, to be incinerated.

Interestingly, almost all of the recyclable materials that arrive at the plant are then sent on for reprocessing within the UK. Cardboard and low grade paper goes to a mill in Manchester, to be pulped and turned into "new" cardboard. High grade paper goes to a mill in north Wales, to be turned back into usable paper. Aluminium goes to a company in Warrington to be melted down and turned into ingots, which are then shipped to Germany to become drinks cans and car body parts. The only stuff that is sent for recycling beyond these shores is cardboard, which finds its way to Asia in the run up to Christmas. As Kim explains: "stuff comes to England in cardboard boxes, so it needs to go back to make cardboard boxes." Can't argue with that.

Having asked enough questions for the time being, we don our hard hats and I follow Kim into the main shed, where the bulk of the materials are recycled. It is an enormous space, filled with the kind of machinery you might expect: magnets and automated sifters, conveyor belts running at different speeds, chutes and mobile bale carriers. It is pretty tidy, considering the nature of the business. On one side of the shed, the incoming material is piled up in a mountain, to be manually scattered on to the conveyor belt. At the other end, the cube shaped bales of sorted materials are

stacked on top of each other, to be trucked off. In addition to the industrial machines, people are employed as pickers, to weed out the unwanted detritus as it zips past on the conveyor belt.

There is another, smaller shed where hard plastics are processed. Workers here wear ear defenders to cope with the noise of the massive shredder that obliterates the products into small chips of uniform size, which can then be sent on to various locations and turned into a vast number of different things.

The operation runs twenty-four hours per day, six days a week, and workers are arranged in three eight hour shifts. It is a highly rationalised, efficient process, which had me feeling like I had stepped into an episode of *How It's Made* - an addictive programme for borderline autists who work nights.

Prior to my visit, I didn't entirely know what to expect, and I was plagued by recurring bouts of skepticism as regards the recycling. My visions of vast covert burials taking place in the countryside proved to be way off the mark. Instead, I am happy to report that recycling *does* work, it isn't just an empty exercise aimed at cynically mollifying the environmental concerns of the population, and that it can be counted as one of the unambiguous successes (and necessities) of our consumer-lead society. For all that, it is under-utilised, and the system is abused - remember that twenty percent figure. In the district of Leeds, that amounts to around seven thousand tonnes per year of unrecyclable rubbish that has to be weeded out - much of it by hand - slowing the process down, and reducing capacity for the stuff that *can* be recycled.

It is no surprise, then, that Kim's message to the public should be this - take care with the recycling! Don't just shove any old thing in the green bins. But if it *can* be recycled, then recycle it! It doesn't matter if the odd bit of unrecyclable plastic sneaks in there - its not going to bring the whole enterprise to a juddering halt. The main thing is just to get in the habit, and stay in the habit. And sometimes, when you've finished with a tin of baked beans, or a carton of milk, take a moment to picture its journey once you've parted company with it.

Or not.

But whatever you do - recycle it!

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