

Everything you've never wanted to know about litter and then some!

Litter is an ever increasing problem in and around our towns and cities as a result of our ever changing lifestyle but it is not a new problem. Let's go on a journey through time and find out more about rubbish and litter in the past.

Cavemen (Long, long, long time ago)

With no McDonalds, cigarettes or even the wheel there was a distinct lack of litter in the days when cavemen ruled the earth. The waste produced would be wood, bones, vegetables and the occasional body. Once the useful bits had been salvaged the rest would be left behind to decompose, feeding all their nutrients back into the ground.

Ancient Egypt (3150 BC - 31 BC)

Picture the scene.....

You are rich beyond your wildest dreams. You have a team of slaves building you a pyramid of your very own. The harvest this year was very good and to celebrate these good times you decide to throw a party. After the party there is a huge pile of rubbish left over. In ancient Egypt they didn't have a wheelie bin collection service like we do so what are you going to do with all this rubbish?



Of course.... you send one of your slaves out to dump it all in canals or open fields. These dump sites were a breeding ground for rats and disease. Not a nice place to visit!

Ancient Greece (800 BC - 146 BC)

The ancient Greeks were highly civilised and still have a great influence on our lives today. Democracy began in Ancient Greece, they had trial by jury, they had the first alphabet to use vowels and they opened the first ever landfill site. In Knossos, the capital of Crete, archaeologists have discovered large pits where rubbish was taken and then covered over with earth, much like our landfill sites work today.

Vikings (793 AD - 1468 AD)



Now we have come to the Viking invasion of Britain. The Vikings came from Scandinavia by boat, some to loot and pillage but some just to find new homes. Viking houses were made out of wood and our Viking house is being rebuilt for the 3rd time. With each re-building of our house the floor levels rise. Can you guess why? Well below our feet are the remains of much of the rubbish we produce and as we still don't have wheelie bins this has all been trodden into the dirt floor and left there. However there is still some more rubbish to get rid of so, at the back of our house, we have dug out a rubbish pit to dump the rest in.

1297 Medieval Britain



With central heating still a thing of the future most household waste is burnt in the open fires we use to heat the house. Despite this there are still piles of rubbish building up outside our house, so much so that a law was passed to make householders keep the front of their houses clear from refuse. (Not that it made much difference!)

1354 The First "Bin men"

Not like we know them today but due to the litter on the streets "rakers" were employed in London to rake together the piles of rubbish and take it outside the city or to be taken away in boats. This was a dirty job as many people kept pigs and horses in the towns and their waste would have been disposed of in the street along with everything else.

Early 15th Century

The first enforcement officers appeared...well not quite. In London if you reported the throwing of rubbish either in to the streets or the River



Thames you would receive a reward of 2 shillings, fourpence. (That's about £50 in today's money) In fact, in 1515 Shakespeare's father was fined for dropping rubbish in the street (Naughty Man!).

1665 The Great Plague

The Plague had been around for quite some time, in fact the city of Florence (Italy) had regulations for street cleanliness as far back as 1348, but it was in 1665 that London took the worst of the Plague.

The population of London was booming and as such the streets were becoming dirtier and dirtier because the only way people could dispose of their rubbish was to throw it out on the streets. This would include everything from household waste to human waste! Now, as you might know rats love rubbish, they will eat almost anything (including poo!) and as such they were thriving. The plague wasn't actually caused by the rats but a flea that was carried on the body of the rat.



The plague was only finally brought back under control the following year when the Great Fire of London burned down most of the city. It is believed that some 100'000 people died as a result of the plague. (See, litter can kill!)

1750 The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial revolution transformed Britain. With increased production came increased amounts of waste. People flocked to the cities to find wealth and many ended up living in slums where rubbish collections were non-existent. Factories would dump their waste into rivers and streams and disease was once again rife.

1825



In 1825 the first railway to carry goods and passengers started operating in England. As rail travel boomed people became desperate to get out of the filthy cities and day-tripping to the countryside became a favourite pastime with the picnic being an integral part. It was at this time we saw the first concerns being raised over what we today would consider litter.

The Birth of the Anti - Litter Campaigns

By the mid 19th century it was considered to be a working class trait to drop litter and the Women's Institute became active in supporting anti-litter campaigns. Unsurprisingly, like today, some of these campaigns were not received too well and during one campaign passengers actively threw their litter from the windows of their coach in protest.

1875 Invention of the Dustbin (sort of)

In 1875 a Public Health Act was passed stating that Local Authorities must arrange the removal and disposal of waste. (This still applies today!) This act also introduced the concept of the modern day dustbin by stating that householders must keep their waste in a moveable receptacle. Much of their waste would have been ashes from the coal fire hence the name 'Dustbin'.



1951 Keep Britain Tidy

The phrase Keep Britain Tidy was first introduced in 1951 but the Keep Britain Tidy group was not formed until slightly later in 1954 when the Women's Institute voted to launch a campaign to preserve Britain from ruin by littering.

1978 The Winter of Discontent

During the Winter of Discontent there were wide spread strikes across Britain. Refuse collections stopped due to disputes over pay and rubbish piled up in towns, cities and parks all across Britain. Leicester Square in London and George Square in Glasgow became piled high with rubbish bags which again led to a boom in the amount of rats in the city.

Today



Local Authorities still have responsibility to keep towns, villages and cities clean but so does the individual. It is an offence to drop litter and if caught you can receive a fine of £50. (In the 15th Century you could have made that back by turning someone else in, unfortunately not today though). While dumping your litter into the streets is no longer the done thing some people still do. This ranges from dirty nappies (yuck!) to fast food remains and wrappers. As we discovered earlier rats love all this litter. They use it for food and as such today rats are bigger than ever. In the cities we are seeing a new breed of super rat. These rats are about 22 inches long nose to tail (about the size of small dog!); they can gnaw through concrete to get to food and can jump more than two feet in the air. So far there are no signs of the plague rearing up again but if we don't start putting our litter in the bins who knows what might happen.....

Litter Timeline

