Treasure in the Trash

by Louise Atkinson

EVEN the quickest glance around the (rather smart) shop shelves reveals some outrageous bargains.

There's a Swan breadmaker (worth £45) for £6, a 50in Philips flat-screen TV (worth £499 new) at £65, a George Foreman grill still in its box and never used (worth £24.95) priced at £10, a Breville juicer (worth £29.95) for £8 and a Panasonic Blu-ray player (worth £79.95) marked at £15.

One shelf is full of coffee-makers (Delonghi, Morphy Richards, Russell Hobbs) — all boxed and as new — priced between £5 and £8, and beside them a Globe easy chair (worth £89.99) at £20.

There are also big-ticket items such as skis (worth £150 but selling for £5), a snowboard (was £80, now £20), and a fishing rod (worth £70, now £15).

Outside, just being loaded into a self-drive truck is an M&S three-piece suite priced at £1,800 in the current catalogue which, the assistant tells me, has just sold for £200.

You could be forgiven for thinking this is some kind of high-class department store clear-out. But this shop is situated in the middle of the local authority dump and every item for sale — much of it never used and still in original packaging — was destined for landfill.

'If you were setting up home for the first time, you could kit out an entire flat here — including kitchen, bedroom and sitting room — for less than £200,' says Graham Oliver, area manager for Age UK Warwickshire, who runs the shop. 'We have everything you could possibly need — it's all as good as new.'

This shop, at Wellesbourne household waste recycling centre, is one of a growing number of on-site shops set up to sell (or 're-use') rubbish residents want to throw away. There 'rubbish' residents want to throw away. There are more than 1,000 household waste and recycling centres across the UK (they don't like to call them 'dumps' or 'tips' any more, and many are keen to lose the 'waste' word, too).

A small but increasing number have shops like this on-site in a bid to extend the life of anything that might still have a use and keep it out of the waste stream.

Staff are trained to keep a discreet eye on the contents being emptied out of cars and to intercept anything with possible resale value before it is tossed into a recycling skip.

Items can then be taken to the shop to be checked (many have facilities for testing electrical goods to ensure they are safe) before being priced and immediately put on sale.

Environmentalists call the process 're-use' and this is certainly a top item on Michael Gove's agenda. The Environment Secretary was pictured at a council recycling centre last week calling for more local authority centres to throw their doors open for the re-use business so people can recover others' cast-offs.

'I do not want to go full "Good Life" but resource efficiency is good for the economy,' he told a meeting. 'We must reduce the amount of material we waste.'

Mr Gove's hi-vis photo opportunity was clearly timed to shine a spotlight on 're-use' in the run-up to the release of his resources and waste strategy, due next month. Much of it is likely to focus on the plastic problem and insiders believe he was hinting that 're-use' will feature large.

'We've come a long way in the fight against plastic in the last 12 months, and, thanks to campaigns such as those run by the Mail, we are all taking steps to reduce our use of plastic — particularly single-use plastics such as bags, coffee cups, water bottles, cutlery and straws. We are also becoming more adept at recycling.

But in the sometimes murky world of waste management 're-use' (defined as giving an item a new life in a bid to save it from landfill or incineration) is an important third 'R' in the reduce/recycle hierarchy.

Many — clearly including Mr Gove — feel re-use has been given short shrift in the battle against plastic and should play a more prominent role in resolving the country's ever-increasing waste issues.

Clearly there are environmental issues at play, but recycling will always have cost implications while re-use is a free way to take items out of the waste stream.

The problem it could really help address is the fact that our growing throwaway culture has extended beyond single-use plastic to encompass large unwieldy items, too.

FANCY a change to your living room colour scheme? Previous generations might have spruced up cushion covers to match the wallpaper, but now it's cheaper and easier to buy a new three piece suite on 0 per cent finance and dump the old one.

Technology is moving so fast that sports lovers think nothing of upgrading (and upsizing) their TV and throwing away a perfectly serviceable one.

Increasingly we dump perfectly good furniture and appliances when we tire of them. The scandalous result is an ever-growing pile of bulky items finding their way to landfill or being incinerated.

'You cannot believe the amount of stuff — and the sheer volume we see here,' says Graham.

'It is absolutely incredible what people throw away, and we get so much coming in we have to set the prices in our shop ridiculously low — about a quarter of what you might see on eBay — just to keep it moving out of the door.'

After every Christmas, he says, the car park is heaving with people offloading unwanted presents, many only partially unwrapped.

The Wellesbourne shop is one of eight run by Age UK in Warwickshire, which together claim to save more than 500 tons of rubbish from landfill each year. Their figures show they make a staggering £1 million a year from waste-saving and split the profits three ways: one-third going into running the recycling at the site, one-third to pay the staff who operate the tip as well as the shop, and one-third going to the charity.

With this kind of business model it is difficult to understand why there isn't a shop at every household recycling centre.

Paul Taylor, chief executive of FCC Environment, which operates re-use schemes at 111 sites in the UK, points out that there is one large obstacle standing in the way of increasing the uptake: policy.

'Currently, re-use does not count towards the UK's recycling targets which have been set at 70 per cent by 2030 by the EU,' he says.

This means businesses and local authorities have little incentive to prioritise re-use.

There is speculation that things 'might' change with the Defra department and this could explain why Mr Gove was pictured last week.

PAUL TAYLOR adds: 'Waste and resources is one of a number of policy areas which the UK has ceded control of to the EU, which has historically meant there have been limited opportunities for the UK to decide on its own waste policy framework.

'However, Brexit and the subsequent transposing of EU law into UK law provides us with an opportunity to fundamentally redefine our approach to waste and have a discussion about where re-use, and all its associated economic, social and environmental benefits, sits within that.'

Taylor is one of many who would like to see the current law, which is focused on recycling, shift its focus to re-use. Previously, many local authority tips operated an unofficial system, referred to as 'totting'. Eagle-eyed staff would scrutinise your booty and pounce on anything with value before you could throw it in a skip.

These items would be set aside, on display, to be 're-homed' for a small, back-hander cash payment which supplemented the worker's pay.

Although 'totting' isn't legal, it could still go on under the radar.

In Oxfordshire, local authorities are embarking on a trial 'Give your item a new home' scheme at Dix Pit, near Stanton Harcourt.

Staff have designated a shed for items with a possible resale value. The trial has only been running two weeks but the room is full.

I'm told a hoard-up guitar and footspa went to auction last week along with a Teasmaid, a slow cooker, a child's quad bike, a power drill and a complete socket set.

This week alone the Dix Pit staff have accumulated seven flat-screen TVs (six 34in, one 28in) which will sell for around £30, a full drum kit (was £139, now £30), a Hammer snowboard (worth £80, now £20), two fishing rods (£10), an exercise bench (Ah King Pro, £145 on eBay, now £15), ten pairs of adults and children's skis with poles, one complete with travelling case, (worth £150 each, now £5,) a pristine condition golf bag (worth £100, now £15), a working tumble dryer (was £130, now £30), and a full-size patio barbecue still in its box (Landmann Pedestal Grill, was £49.99, now £15).

According to Steve Burdis principal officer of waste management at Oxfordshire County Council, the hope is that this re-use initiative will help offset some of the £15 million a year spent on waste management in the county.

'We are hoping that re-use will amount to a four per cent reduction in waste here,' he says.

The idea is very much focused on keeping bulky items out of the disposal route.

The first auction at Dix Pit raised £741.60. 'It's not a huge profit when you take into account transportation costs,' he admits. 'But it's early days. If we can make this system more successful, we might be able to start looking at working with charities in the future.'

But let's not be too misty-eyed about the idea of a family day out to browse the cornucopia of cut-price delights at your local tip, or young couples kitting out their new home with a complete set of pre-loved furniture for the price of a booty night out.

Steve Burdis says although the Oxfordshire booty goes on sale at a public auction, most of it is bought by dealers or collectors to sell on for a profit. It's the same story at the Wellesbourne shop. Graham Oliver reveals 80 to 90 per cent of customers are dealers who pull up in a van and hand over cash for anything they know they can sell on.

One of his regulars is a businessman who made his fortune importing goods from China. Until last year, his container ships sailed back half-way across the world full of UK plastic to be recycled for Chinese manufacturing.

Now China is no longer willing to pay for our plastic rubbish, Graham's customer has discovered a new market — he scours tip shops for anything with a 'Made In England' stamp on its base which the Chinese appear to adore.

It is ironic that quality produce made in Britain — and made to last — is being rescued from landfill for homes in the suburbs of Shanghai.

Treasure in the Trash

A pristine flat-screen TV, a tumble dryer and a three-piece suite. Goodies in a department store? No — astonishingly, they were all rescued from a dump ... and in a new recycling trend, now on sale for a song!