

Fag Ends of a Feather Flock Together

‘Smoking kills,’ say the packets, but from the litter-picker’s point of view not quickly enough. Fag-ends are not difficult to clear because the implement won’t take hold of them but because birds of a feather – in this case fag-ends – flock together. It takes a lot of concentration to clear a square yard of the corner flower bed of a hospital where patients have gone for a smoke.

I know because the other day I went litter-picking round our local hospital. Among the most frequently encountered items were used car-park tickets. It would be an interesting experiment to compare the rate at which they were discarded before and after they were inscribed with the registration numbers of the cars on the tickets. In my career as a volunteer litter-picker, I have rarely come across a piece of litter that could be traced back to a litterer.

My pet hate – or perhaps I should say one of my pet hates – is the beer-can or can of soft drink that has been pushed so deeply into a shrub that it is difficult to extricate. It is particularly horrible when it is not empty. You would think that alcoholics of the type that drink Frosty Jack’s or Special Brew would drain their cans to the dregs, but you would be mistaken. As often as not, a quarter or half of the contents remains in the can.

Another genre of littering, of comparatively recent origin, is the tying up of litter in a plastic bag and suspending it from

a branch of a shrub or small tree. This obviously takes some effort, more effort in fact than to dispose of it properly; and so one must conclude that it is some kind of a statement. Another indication that littering is not always unthinking is the fact that a public notice in the park of my town that asks people not to leave the remains of their takeaway food in the park is, of all places, where there are most such remains. This means that the authority that made the request is regarded by those who leave them as illegitimate, and by extension all and any other authority that does not emanate directly from their own egos.

The degree of littering in Britain suggests that there is a general problem of authority's legitimacy. This is much more serious than the question of whether we should leave or stay in Europe.

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