

Garbology is the study of people through their rubbish and, according to William Rathje, “Garbage is among humanity’s most prodigious physical legacies”¹, if garbage is as important to the understanding of people as William Rathje seems to suggest, then it is clear that much can be discovered merely by looking through their bins. Throughout the last week, a sample of rubbish has been studied and analysed in an attempt to understand the person or persons to whom it belonged. The objects analysed included things such as letters, food items and packages in an attempt to understand such things as the gender, age, ethnicity and other identifying and important characteristics of the people that the rubbish belonged to. Understanding these things about people is vital to understanding humanity as a whole and “to understand garbage you have to touch it, to feel it, to sort it, to smell it.”² It is therefore clear that the practicality of being able to access the waste contents of a household is increasingly important to the study of humanity in the modern era where people are ever more closed off to the idea of being studied.

Through looking at the contents of the sample rubbish given, it is clear that the household selected was relatively high income. Empty packages of items such as Wild Lakeland Venison Linked Sausage³ and Oxtail, clearly show that the owners of this rubbish have no qualms about spending large amounts of money on quality foods that the average household would rarely be able to afford. Not only are they buying generally expensive foods, the venison sausages are from Cartmel Valley Game and Smokehouse which claim to be “supplying the best quality gourmet game and smoked products to top class establishments”⁴ such as the Three Shires Inn⁵ whose prices for meat courses start at £17 and go up to £29.95. They also appear to get their products at shops that are in general considered to be more expensive than more affordable options, such as M&S. They have purchased orange juice from M&S, however, this appears to be the only purchase from M&S and so does not show a habit of frequent shopping at more expensive shops such as this. This therefore shows that they may value quality in certain foods such as meat and fruit produce over other products that were bought at more affordable shops such as Lidl. It is not just their food products that are generally expensive, from their rubbish, it is clear that someone that they know has had a child recently which they spent a significant amount on. It can be concluded that the occupants of the household were not the ones with a baby. This is because there was wrapping paper also in the bag of rubbish along with the receipt for the two dummies that were bought which dated to the 5th of May 2024. It is clear that the contents were held onto for a while



¹ William Rathje, *Rubbish! The Archaeology Of Garbage*, (The University Of Arizona Press, 2001), p. 4.

² William Rathje, *Rubbish! The Archaeology Of Garbage*, (The University Of Arizona Press, 2001), p. 9.

³ Kip Williams, *Wild Lakeland Venison Linked Sausage*, Image (2024).

⁴ Cartmel Valley Game Supplies, *Try A Taste On The Wild Side...* (2024)
<<https://cartmelvalleygamesupplies.com/>> [accessed 3 November 2024].

⁵ Three Shires Inn, *Meet The Supplier - Cartmel Valley Game* (2023)
<<https://www.threeshiresinn.co.uk/langdale-life/meet-the-supplier-cartmel-valley-game>> [accessed 3 November 2024].

before the packaging could be thrown out, clearly implying that they had bought the gifts before the baby had been born. From looking at the receipt, they spent £27 on the gifts for the baby,



the gifts were purchased from JoJo Maman Bébé⁶, a children's designer brand of clothing and accessories⁷, not only can we conclude that this household is relatively wealthy, we can also conclude that they are also social, with a diverse social sphere. Another key indicator that this is a high income household is that they have private healthcare as shown by a letter they received from said private healthcare provider, Bluecrest Wellness. In 2022, approximately 12% of people in the UK used private healthcare⁸, clearly showing that it is inaccessible to the general public and therefore the occupants of this household must be from higher earning careers than the average UK household.

From further investigation into the contents of the rubbish bag, it could be suggested that the occupants of the household could originate from a country outside of the UK. They are potentially from a European country as shown through their buying habits. While they do shop at places such as Morrisons and M&S, these seem to be outliers in their usual shopping habits. Their most common place to shop is Lidl, which is an exceptionally European, in particular German⁹, shop. The majority of their shopping, such as Greek¹⁰ yogurt, muesli and many bakery items were purchased from Lidl along with many other items. This by itself would not point to them originating outside of the UK, and could instead suggest that Lidl is just their closest shop, but they also received a letter from Germany, indicating that they have connections in Germany which therefore implies that they may have originated from Germany and moved to the UK. While it can only be inferred from the evidence, many of the foods that they have purchased can also be used in traditional German dishes such as the oxtail being used in German Oxtail Soup¹¹ This combination highly implies that they are of German descent and



⁶ Laura Singleton, *JoJo, Maman Bébé*, Image (2024).

⁷ JoJo Maman Bébé, *JoJo Maman Bébé* (2024) <<https://www.jojomamanbebe.co.uk/>> [accessed 3 November 2024].

⁸ The Health Foundation, *Is The Use Of Privately Funded Health Care On The Rise?* (2024) <<https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/charts-and-infographics/is-the-use-of-privately-funded-health-care-on-the-rise#:~:text=A%202022%20IPPR%2FYouGov%20survey.do%20so%20in%20the%20future.>>> [accessed 3 November 2024].

⁹ Lidl, *About Lidl GB* (2024)

<<https://corporate.lidl.co.uk/#:~:text=The%20Lidl%20brand%20was%20founded,of%20Europe's%20leading%20food%20retailers.>>> [accessed 3 November 2024].

¹⁰ Kip Williams, *Greek Yogurt*, Image (2024).

¹¹ My German Table, *German Oxtail Soup* ('Gebundene Ochsenchwanzsuppe') (2021)

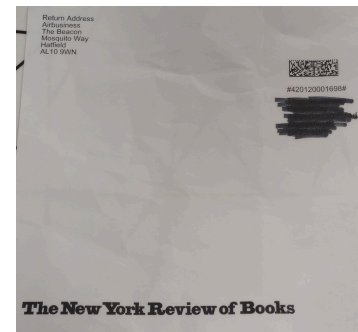
<<https://www.mygermantable.com/german-oxtail-soup-gebundene-ochsenchwanzsuppe/>> [accessed 3 November 2024].

therefore may be shopping at Lidl as a loyalty to their heritage, preferring to shop somewhere that originated in the same country as themselves.

It could also be suggested that they have recently left the country for a prolonged period of time. While nearly everything that they threw away went out of date at some point in October and so implying that the rubbish bag was collected in October, a bottle of long life milk¹² was thrown away that went out of date on the 28th of August. This outlier clearly shows that they were not at home for a significant amount of time, and therefore were elsewhere when the milk went out of date. They also have no other milk cartons or bottles in their rubbish bag which may imply that they typically get their milk from other sources, such as in glass milk bottles. This therefore shows that they were predicting needing a more long-lasting milk than they would generally have, potentially implying a planned trip away from home. They could have potentially been to China as they also have four kinds of Nespresso coffee that appear to have originated in China, they may have purchased these in China and then returned to the UK and disposed of them here.



There doesn't appear to be much evidence of hobbies in the rubbish bag. The only evidence there is, is a letter from The New York Review of Books¹³, potentially suggesting that someone in the household enjoys reading. The New York Review of Books is a monthly subscription magazine that focuses on literature, political and art books¹⁴. This clearly shows that whoever is reading these books prefers non-fiction writing to fiction writing and therefore might be from an academic profession. While not a hobby, the baby gifts may indicate that the occupants of the household have a wide social sphere and may spend a large amount of time interacting with others and therefore might prefer to spend their time in social situations rather than spending time on their respective hobbies.



From the amount of rubbish collected, it seems that there are only maybe two people in the household. There is only a small amount of food packaging found in their waste and what is there is only large enough to feed two people, not a large family. They also seem to be an older couple, potentially around 50 years old. They have acquired enough money to live a comfortable lifestyle with private healthcare and premium food products, this money is usually acquired through working in a relatively high paying job for a long amount of time. As well as this, they also seem to eat quite sophisticated foods that have, for the most part, gone out of fashion among the younger generations such as venison sausages and oxtail. Therefore, it is

¹² Laura Singleton, *Milk*, Image (2024).

¹³ Laura Singleton, *Letter*, Image (2024).

¹⁴ The New York Review Of Books, *Home* (2024)

<<https://www.nybooks.com/?srsltid=AfmBOog5R7kDtva0DRlxm5-bT75xZsxVywXCbycTKFDvcn7V3MKEk6zs>> [accessed 3 November 2024].

implied that they are probably around middle aged. There doesn't appear to be any evidence of children or pets in the household, there is no pet food nor toys and the only items for children were clearly gifted to a friend and not kept by the occupants of the household. There are also no foods that children would typically eat, the meat is generally for an older palette and there are no snack foods that would generally interest a child. As it is clear that this is a relatively traditional household that consists of two people, it is probably a married couple, most likely male and female.

While the study of garbology is clearly important when looking at the material culture of an area, it only shows a small glimpse into the lives of the people that it studies. Especially when, as shown here, there is only a singular sample that does not show the full extent of the household in question. According to Rathje, "Our civilisation is reflected in billions of fragments that may reveal little in and of themselves"¹⁵. While we can infer much from the small sample that we are given, it is only a fragment of a tiny part of the owner's life, it is a singular week's worth of data. Not only this, it is also an incomplete image of the owner's life, not everything will have been thrown away into the bag studied, they will have been disposed of in other ways, or reused within the household and therefore this small data sample can not be taken to represent the entirety of the household. To improve, a prolonged study would have to be conducted, analysing a household for an extended period of time or analysing an entire area of households instead of just one and comparing them. From that, we would be able to understand the area or the household better and gather what their typical life is rather than what a singular household's life was like for one week. For example, things such as gifts for babies are not typical things to be found in a rubbish bag and so do not show what their daily life is, they also may have decided to spend more money than they typically would have on their food that week, therefore eating premium venison sausages instead of Lidl's own sausages. Studying a singular bag of rubbish is not a fair representation of daily life.

In conclusion, from this bag of rubbish, it can be inferred that the owners are relatively wealthy as they spend large amounts of money on quality food produce. They are also potentially of German descent as they have connections in Germany and tend to shop at German shops. It is likely that they have recently been out of the country, maybe visiting China as they have Chinese products in their rubbish along with a significantly out of date carton of milk. They enjoy reading non-fiction books, they are probably a two person household of middle age, with no children. All of these things can be inferred from a singular bag of rubbish, however more may be inferred with a larger data sample or a longer study of their rubbish, allowing a more accurate representation of their daily life instead of just a week long fragment.

¹⁵ William Rathje, *Rubbish! The Archaeology Of Garbage*, (The University Of Arizona Press, 2001), p. 11.

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