

'Garbology' is commonly defined as a study that uses material waste of a culture to aid in the understanding of daily life in groups or individuals, and a form of modern archaeology.¹ This concept was presented to the group required to take part in this assignment and use teamwork to find different assemblages in the form of two rubbish bags that contained a multitude of items in various packaging, purposes and forms, and these will be the subject to uncover the social patterns of the previous owner(s) of the rubbish, who will be referred to as 'the household'.

Terminology

Firstly, the terms used in this essay will be important to help distinguish items regardless of assemblage (i.e., material or weight). The terms that will be used to describe the kinds of products, outside of material, will fall under fresh, frozen, and ambient (kept at room temperature). Food and drink are required by law to have dates of expiry on them, referring to their shelf life. They are 'use by' and 'best before'.²

'Use by' is found on fresh and ambient products with short shelf lives, and refers to food safety; items which should not be consumed past the given date, and are helpful for determining the date(s) for this essay.

Whereas 'best before' refers to the quality of consumables. They can be consumed past this date, but may not be the best quality. The usage of senses is needed to determine whether they are safe to consume. i.e., 'does it smell, look or feel okay?'

Numbers

Firstly, it is important to note the amounts of the items to have a base of understanding the data of social patterns within the household. Due to the different assessments, they are formatted as a list to prevent confusion.

Totals: The total number of items that were present in the two bags of rubbish was 179, with 84 different kinds due to repetitive consumption of certain items.

Dates: Only 51 of the total items had dates on, yet some outliers lower this number. There were 3 entries for 2020, 33 entries for 2025, 14 entries for 2026 and 1 incomplete/unsortable.

From the 33 listed items, 1 is an outlier that dates '09/04/25', 24 dates within October, 6 dates in November, and 2 dates in December.

Notable Dating Issues: 1 ambient product only had '1-/—' readable, 3 had only month-year present, of which all were long-life products consisting of 2 ambient and 1 frozen, and 3 uniquely had a date range of 6 days, and were all concurrent. These were all

¹ "Garbology Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/garbology. Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.

² "Best before and Use-by Dates." Food Standards Agency, www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene/best-before-and-use-by-dates. Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.

magazines dated back to 2020, 2 being from the Radio Times, dated '11 - 17/10/20' and '18 - 24/10/20' and 1 Big Issue, dated '06 - 12/10/20.'

The group calculated all of the prices on the shopping between the stores they were bought from, (most commonly found were Co-op and Sainsbury's) if the labels revealed the information, or the average price between branded shops due to their relatively close prices. The rough estimate was about £234.56.

Time Frame

The time frames were assumed via the fresher and ambient products that have shorter shelf lives and 'use by' dates, alongside items such as magazines and newspapers with dates on. By only using the items with a shorter shelf life, there is a higher likelihood that the assumed date range is correct. Many of the items had dates primarily in October, and some in November 2025, with some items that were likely frozen and had dates later on in 2026.

The earliest date of a fresh/ambient product that the group found was 09/06/25; however, after further research, they found this to be an outlier within the data. The second earliest was 02/10/25, then 06/10/25, and so on. This is highly likely to be packaging found within the household in October that may have been forgotten or missed. The latest dates were '05/12/25' and '20/12/25'.

First Assemblage

One of the first assemblages produced by the group was done through sorting the rubbish by material to exhibit the different types and subsequent frequencies that were contained within. They organised the material through the following categories: cardboard, soft plastic, hard plastic, paper, tin, and non-recyclable. A spreadsheet, bar chart and a pie chart were produced by the group to record and visualise the data for this assembly.

Product name	No. of products	Date (if applicable if it has all the parts)	Type Material	No. of materials
Oykos Straw	4	23/11/2025 yes	Cardboard	
Oykos Straw	2	21/10/2025 yes	Plastic	
Tin Foil	6	crumpled up	Paper	
Tin container	1	no	Misc.	
tin lid = bon	2	yes? somewhere???		
Coop Orange	1	yes		
Takaway pot	3	yes		
Takeaway pot	3	yes		
Henllanl ba	1	yes		
beef stroganoff	1	03/04/2026 yes		
aunt bessie	1	yes		
takeaway sauce	3	yes		
co-op vanilla	1	22/10/2025 yes		
butter Lurpak	1	22/10/2025 yes		
butter Lurpak	1	02/10/2025 yes		
co-op stuff	1	28/10/2025 no		
sainsburys	1	22/03/2026 yes		
bonne marr	1	15/10/2025 yes		
bonne marr	1	05/11/2025 yes		
sainsburys	1	02/11/2025 yes		
co-op all day	1	27/10/2025 yes		
co-op plastic	4	yes		
sainsburys	1	31/10/2025 yes		
co-op milk	1	27/10/2025 yes		
co-op meat	1	31/10/2025 ripped up		
co-op blue	1	16/10/2025 yes		
sainsburys	1	29/10/2025 yes		
radio times	1	18-24/10/20 yes		
radio times	1	11-17/10/20 yes		
big issue 16	1	06-12/10/20 yes		
fox's classic	1	18/04/2026 ripped up but yes		
cardboard pot	1	09/06/2025 ripped up		
cardboard tin	1	squished up		
big envelope	1	folded		
printed piece	4	scrunched + cut up		
big envelope	1	unopened		
welsh cake	2	yes? somewhere???		
caramel dig	2	09/05/2026 yes		
more destr	1	1---- no		
vanilla and	1	28/10/2025 yes		
belgian cho	1	28/10/2025 yes		
alpro protei	1	20/10/2025 yes		

Figure 1: A PDF, the first part of the spreadsheet.³

³ Drake, Nicholas R., "First half; Spreadsheet of all items", 11 Nov. 2025. Accessed 13 Nov. 2025.

cadbury cai	1	26/04/2026	yes
cadbury cai	1	13/07/2026	yes
big plastic t	1		no? box??
jakemans c	29		no
sainsburys	1	20/11/2025	no
tonys choc	1	21/11/2026	no
ready brek	1	05/02/2026	yes
plastic pud	8		no lids
welshcakes	2	15/11/2025	yes
welshcakes	1	29/11/2025	yes
oral b pape	1		no
sainsburys	1	25/10/2025	yes
tyrells ched	1	28/02/2026	yes
sensations	1	20/12/2025	yes
bin bag gree	1		ripped up
Haagen-Da	1	29/07/2026	yes
Haagan-da	1	13/08/2026	no
co-op curec	1	14/10/2025	yes
diet coke 2	9		yes
sainsbury s	1	06/10/2025	yes
sainsbury 4	1	24//10/2025	yes
blitz kitcher	2		no
toilet paper	2		yes
co-op all bu	1	29/10/2025	
co-op wholi	1	24/10/2025	
sainsburys	1	29/10/2025	
vimto squa	1	Jul-26	
pritt stick p	1		yes
mortlity poli	1	05/12/2025	
Hallowe'en	1		yes? somewhere???
rizzla + ciga	12		
swan 120 fi	8		
square plas	8		
golden virgi	1		
rubicon spr	1	Jun-26	yes
Ice cream v	2		no
solero card	1	Jun-26	no
sainsburys	1	24/10/2025	
zipper all pt	1		yes
tg jones pla	1		

Figure 2: A PDF, last part of the spreadsheet.⁴

The spreadsheet was used to present the names, dates, condition and frequencies of each item, with twenty being repetitive. This allowed the group to present all the items in total as individuals, alongside the quantity and quality after being found. It was the first of the

⁴ Drake, Nicholas R., "Second half: Spreadsheet of all items", 11 Nov. 2025. Accessed 13 Nov. 2025.

multimedia produced, and therefore the most rudimentary and unorganised, but it gave the other charts the ability to organise the total visually and in other efficient ways.

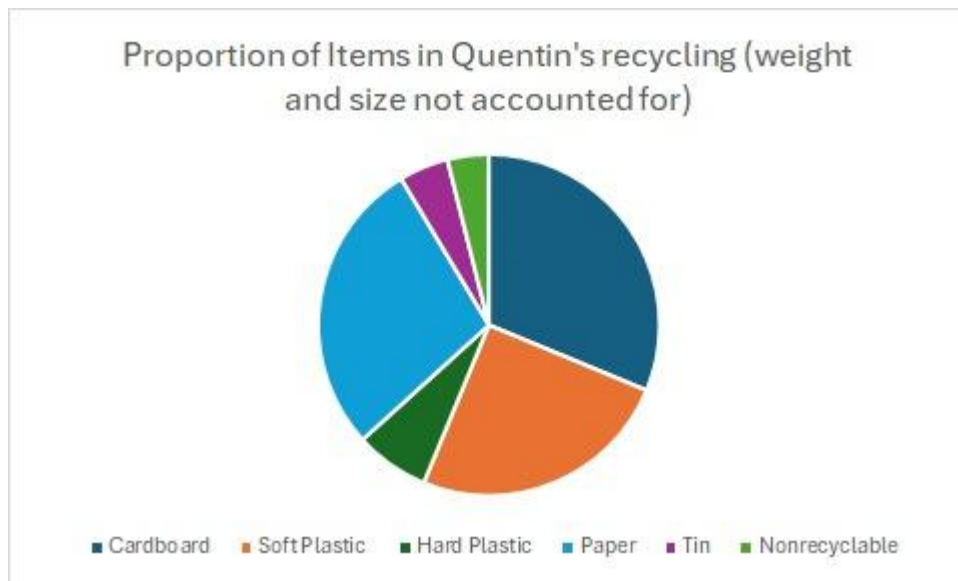


Figure 3:

A pie chart produced by the group.⁵

The pie chart visualised the amounts of each category compared to each other through frequency. The household consumed a higher percentage of cardboard and hard plastic, with soft plastic close behind.

⁵ Drake, Nicholas R., "Proportion of Items in Quentin's recycling (weight and size not accounted for)", 11 Nov. 2025. Accessed 13 Nov. 2025.

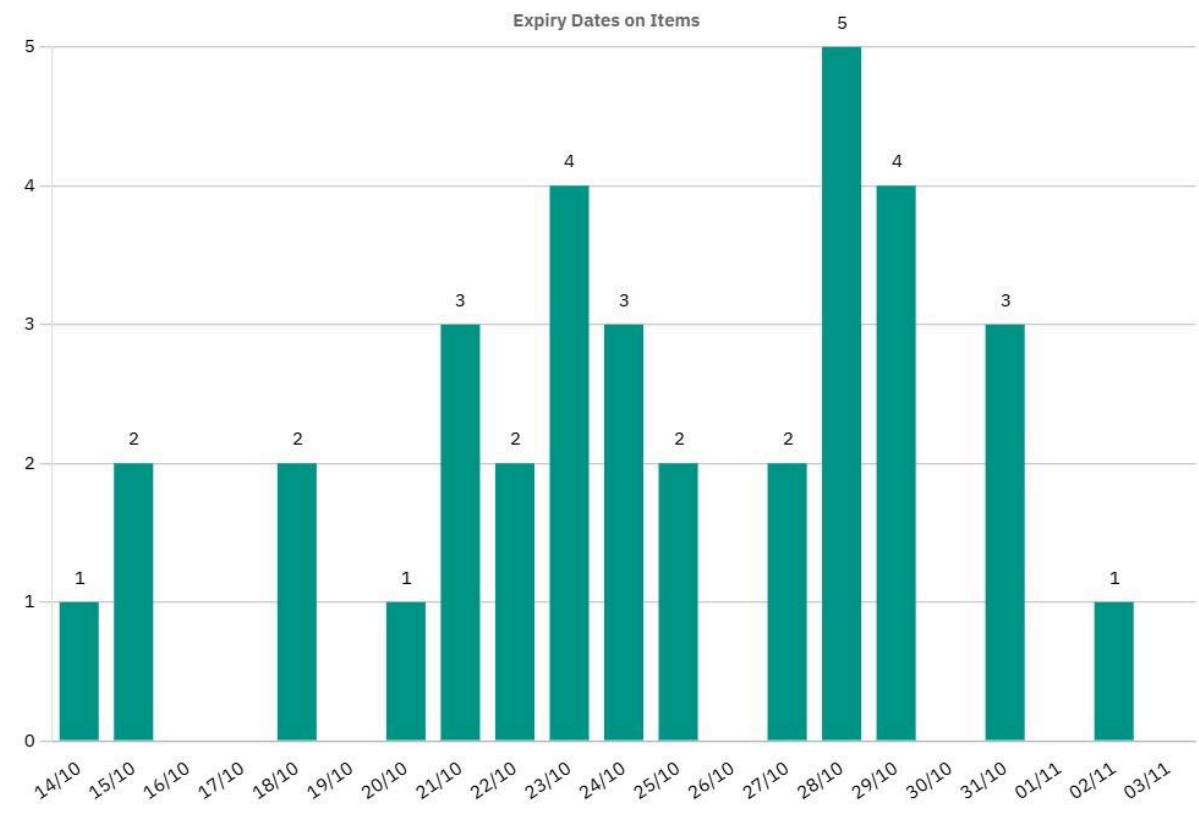


Figure 4: Bar chart created by the group.⁶

The bar chart was used to visually present the expiry dates of items. The most expiration dates were from the '28/10/25' with 5 items listed, then followed by the '23/10/25' and '29/10/25'. This information is very useful, as it allowed the group to surmise that for the number of items with close expiry dates to one another, they were all likely purchased together during the same, 'big', shop.

It is also largely noted that the household does not seem to purchase much fruit or vegetables, and preferred to consume ready meals or takeout, as a sizable amount of the cardboard and hard plastic was due to the packaging of ready meals and specifically Chinese takeout. This, alongside the multitude of other products, led the group to deduce that this household prefers snacking over home-cooked meals.

Regarding the gender and/sexes of the people within the household, there are no direct products - period product or contraceptive packaging, condom packaging, (these may not be revealing of gender) etcetera - that allow the group to assume gender or sex, however, they did find the only hint towards this would be the target audience for the magazines; Radio Times, and Big Issue. Radio Times does not have statistics for gender or sex, but the age demographic for the printed magazines is an "average age over 61."⁷ The Big Issue does not reveal gender, sex or even age, but rather literacy. Their audience is described as, "typically middle class, educated, and reformist, with an interest in political and

⁶ Harvey, Will, "Expiry Date on Items", 19 Nov. 2025. Accessed 13 Nov. 2025.

⁷ Carter, Meg. "Radio Times: Constantly Evolving." InPublishing, InPublishing, 28 Feb. 2024, www.inpublishing.co.uk/articles/radio-times-constantly-evolving-22841. Accessed 20 Nov. 2025.

social issues.”⁸ which gives the group an idea of the mindset of the household and the people within.

Repetitive Consumables

Out of the 179 total items, 21 individual items were bought and consumed multiple times. The act of repeatedly purchasing these items, especially family packs or bigger quantities, connote a clear preference and subsequent social pattern.

Within these there are clear addictions, due to the number of them in reference to the time frame the group estimated, whereas a few items propose that the household go through so many because all persons within like them. One could argue that the sheer quantity of some likely falls under both addiction and preference.

The highest quantity of an individual item found was 28 Jakeman's cough drop wrappers, but these are all likely from a singular packet, and as such, will be exempt.

The second highest quantity of 14 was the Rizla cigarette papers, used to roll cigarettes, each with 50 papers in. This coincides with the one 50-gram pouch of Amber Leaf tobacco found, along with 8 Swan Filter Tips, of which have 120 individual filter tips in. However, the group found these numbers unlikely - overall, that meant that there were 700 cigarette papers, 960 filter tips supposedly for one singular 50-gram pack of tobacco.

The group made the decision that this was likely performative; and if so, this could suggest that there is at least one person in the house that smokes and empties the rubbish into the main household general waste bin, and one person that may be in disagreement to the amount the other smokes, discouraging them from putting the tobacco pouches, specifically, in. The group agreed upon this decision because it would make sense for only the tobacco pouch to be restricted in number, because tobacco is notoriously expensive to encourage smokers to quit due to the cost.

The 50-gram Amber Leaf pouches retail for around £45 each, which in regard to all the filter tips and papers, doesn't equate. The group found it was better to assume that the smoker(s) in the household prefer to not receive repercussions from the non-smoker(s), and with this assumption, they also found it to be that the smoker(s) were not the ones who take the bins out usually.

Origins

The bags of rubbish also contained information on where they were purchased - one major clue was a receipt found from the Co-op shop in Lampeter, Ceredigion. They consisted of: 6 two-litre bottles of Diet Coke, one Vimto original two-litre bottle of squash, one easy-peel oranges, one bunch of bananas, (amount not known) one box of Welsh cakes

⁸ “The Big Issue.” Masteringmedia, www.masteringmedia.net/bigissue. Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.

and one pack of chocolate griddles. The receipt also revealed that the household has an active Co-op Membership Card, due to the receipt showing what items they saved money on, and how much overall was saved on the shopping that day.

Some items are present in the overall amount that can only be found in Lampeter's other branded shopping store, Sainsbury's: an example of this would be the Morliny Polish bacon. Yet, there doesn't seem to be any items from the more local produce-centered shops, of which there are at least 2 within the town.

The group chose to investigate the product's origins as well, presenting the pattern of where West Wales supermarkets may typically receive their products from. Many items were produced in the UK, and revealed that specific items tend to come from certain areas within the UK. Manchester was the biggest recurring location with just four items, that being the all-day breakfast, chocolate digestive biscuits (McVitie's), and interestingly, cookies that were bought from both Co-op and Sainsbury's, likely sharing the same manufacturer. This presents a clear social pattern of shopping largely being purchased at local brand shops, as opposed to more expensive but locally grown produce.

Upon further investigation, Co-op's website reveals their manufacturers and suppliers. Co-op is marketed as being run by the same people and general shoppers, but also as a company that values supporting British/UK-based producers, and is reflected in most of the items that had Co-op identifiable packaging.⁹

Research also revealed that Sainsbury's is on the same mission of supporting British and UK-based products, and is taking an active role in developing the UK's food systems.¹⁰ Their website refers to their suppliers as 'partners', and is helping to create their own trader groups for specific produce, like egg farms.¹¹

The household's main consumption is clearly distributed between their local Co-op and Sainsbury's, and, potentially without realising, they are directly supporting British and UK grown/developed products that are partnered and/or trading with both shops. Co-op in particular also supports local communities with their food banks and pet shelters, meaning the household may be donating whilst in-store.¹²

Sensitive Information

There was sensitive information, such as letters and packages, found that were not properly discarded containing two persons within the household's full names and exact address. This can pose a risk of identity theft or fraud on behalf of the people living in the house, and in the worst cases can allow criminals to build a profile of sensitive information to

⁹ "Our Suppliers", www.coop.co.uk/our-suppliers. Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.

¹⁰ "Our Partners." J Sainsbury Plc, corporate.sainsburys.co.uk/about-us/our-partners/. Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.

¹¹ "A Cracking Concept: Sainsbury's First UK Retailer to Launch Egg Farmer Group." J Sainsbury Plc, corporate.sainsburys.co.uk/news/press-releases/a-cracking-concept-sainsbury-s-first-uk-retailer-to-launch-egg-farmer-group/. Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.

¹² "Right by your community", www.coop.co.uk/communities. Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.

gain access to financial accounts or apply for things like government benefits, credit cards, and much more. However, this does also give information into how many people are likely living in the household, and in the group's case allows them to see how food is being bought and consumed.

Conclusion

To summarise, the group's experience with garbology revealed how much information about a household is able to be obtained through just their consumed products alone.

The clearest social patterns found were that there are clear addictive products of Diet Coke and smoking for at least one member of the household, of which the group decided had to be 2 persons or more due to the amount of food consumed. The household prefers to shop at local branded stores, and appears to also prefer snacking and ready made meals in comparison to home cooking.

They may be less careful than most about their personal information on letters and packages, although this cannot be confirmed, as this was just two bin bags from one specific case, the group would need further data to say for certain. It would be recommended that they take greater care in disposing of sensitive information in the future.