



A lengthy, and somewhat rambling, treatise on this site on the effect recycling is having on retail raises some interesting points – and points out some valuable initiatives. For example, Marks and Spencer offer a £5 voucher to everyone who donates their old clothing to Oxfam. That's an environment news item we can all profit from.

Mike Barry, head of sustainable business at M&S, is quoted as saying: "Customers come back to shop with us for their next piece of clothing rather than going off to one of our competitors."

The arguments are worthy, but the article sees the Holy Grail of recycling as being that of creating like from like. "We can fly to Mars, but we are not yet able to make a T-shirt back into a T-shirt," according to Stephan Wiegand, chief executive of I:CO, which makes and distributes the brightly coloured recycling boxes that are cropping up in stores across Europe.

The seeds of that fallacy are in the paragraph above it. Like-for-like recycling has been going on for ever in all societies – it's called 'second hand'. At Oxfam a T-shirt IS recycled into a T-shirt: you take a T-shirt into the shop, someone else buys it and it becomes a T-shirt again – somebody else's T-shirt. So the ultimate clothing recycling initiative was the grunge movement. As a founder member I like that!

The same used to be true of cars. If you wanted a spare part for a car you went to the amateur mechanic's Aladdin's Cave – the scrapyards. You took what you wanted off an old car and put it on your own. When the gearbox finally dropped out of my beloved Citroen Xantia I phoned the bloke in the next valley who specialised in parts for French cars and he came and carted it away. He even paid ME for the privilege. Nowadays you have to pay THEM to come and get it.

OK, you can't run the modern world like that, and there is just so much more stuff than there was. But there are still bits of commerce that are recycling the same as they always have. Not so long ago I reported for this magazine on a company in Salford that has been recycling clothing since 1959. Some becomes wipes or paper (the 'rag content' of paper is a measure of its quality), but most is reused as clothing, mostly in Eastern Europe and the developing world.

And there are other companies in the Environment Directory that can claim similar pedigrees.

While the growth in awareness of the environment among the population at large is a great source of encouragement, there is a small element that is inviting the older ones among us to egg-sucking lessons.

*Chris Stokes*