

Viridor ERF (Energy Recovery Facility)

On Thursday 29th June two different groups visited the Viridor site at Ardley. Our first task was to make sure we went to the Viridor site and not the Ardley Tip!

It was quite a surprise when we got there to see how well it fitted into the landscape with nothing unsightly on view. Everything happens underneath a modern, vaguely space age looking building, whose shape is actually based on the dinosaurs they found on the site.

After checking in we were taken to the Visitors' Centre for a safety briefing and then a presentation on the history of the site and how it works. Viridor are a big national company dealing with waste disposal all over the country. However, at Ardley they only deal with non-recyclable waste, the recyclable waste is dealt with elsewhere. The contents of our brown bins are dealt with locally but the blue bins go all the way to Cheshire.

Ardley deals with waste from the whole of Oxfordshire and also has contracts from further afield. Some of the refuse collection lorries covering nearby areas go directly to Ardley to dump their waste whereas those from other parts of Oxfordshire go to a transit station where the waste is collected together and put into larger lorries for onward transportation to Ardley.

After our briefing we all donned our hard hats, hi-viz jackets, safety glasses, ear muffs and gloves to tour the site. Our first point of call was the control centre which was fascinating, everything is computer controlled, it only needs 4 members of staff to operate the whole process.

Then we went out into the large hanger like area where we could watch the lorries arriving and dumping their contents into an enormous pit. The bottom of this pit was 12 metres below ground level and the top of the pile was, at some points, at least 7 or 8 metres above ground level. A huge amount of rubbish! Computer controlled grabbers were busy mixing the waste and moving it into other 'containers' where it was gravity fed into the incinerator. On our tour we did get to look through a glass window at the fire.

This process generates enough electricity to power 38,000 homes as well as the plant itself. Any metal is extracted, using a magnet, from the residue after incineration and other large objects are also removed. Any remaining ash is used as a base when building roads. Nothing is wasted!

There are stringent checks on the content of any smoke (air) which is emitted by the incineration process so no pollutants are entering the atmosphere.

We were not allowed to take photos during our tour for security reasons but did manage to take a group photo standing in front of Meg, the dinosaur made entirely from recycled waste.



We then returned to a room showing the cycle of extinctions of life through the ages, 5 previous extinctions. We talked about serious topics such as the need to conserve resources. There is an interesting diagram showing how many years various metals will be available to us, for example silver will run out in about 17 years, the metal used for touch screens in about 8 years. This really makes you conscious of the fact that we definitely need to move away from our current throw away culture or our children / grandchildren will not be able to enjoy the lifestyle we currently have.