

LEEDS RECYCLING AND ENERGY RECOVERY FACILITY (RERF) U3A VISIT APRIL 2023

I guess many of you will have wondered what happens inside the rather impressive-looking RERF building on the A63 in Cross Green. With its timber frame and green wall, it doesn't look like a typical industrial building let alone one where some 214,000 tonnes of waste are incinerated each year. Is there a massive furnace inside, blazing like something from the pits of hell?

Well, fifteen U3a Scitech group members found out when we went on a visit in April.

You may be surprised to hear that all the domestic black bin waste in Leeds goes directly to the RERF, so none is going to landfill anymore, which is good news. After a clever extraction process that removes both magnetic and non-ferrous metals, the waste ends up in a massive concrete bunker where we saw a huge grab (like something from a seaside arcade) continuously feeding the furnace bunker. Suitably dressed in PPE, and after climbing up and down various metal stairs past a myriad of conveyors, pipes, tanks and girders, (which would make a great James Bond set) we were able to gaze into the depths of the furnace through a small window.

The RERF operates all year round, generating electricity for 22,000 homes and also supplying heat and hot water to homes and other premises across the city centre through the District Heating scheme. At the end of all that the water returns to the plant to go round again, while all the ash (20-23% by weight of the original waste) is sent to be recycled into building materials.

Outside, the green wall is an impressive sight close up, hosting numerous plants and shrubs as well as a host of wildlife including some birds of prey!

Despite all these green credentials, however, it would be better if we could get to a point where less waste ended up here at all. The volume of waste from Leeds' residents has risen since the pandemic to some 170,000 tonnes a year and we noticed a lot of old clothing which could easily be reused or recycled. Incineration is only one step above landfill in the waste pyramid: reducing, reusing and recycling being much better alternatives, nevertheless it is a marked improvement on throwing it all into holes in the ground and we were assured that the emissions from the plant are highly controlled with even stricter standards soon to come into play.

This was a very informative and interesting visit and many thanks to Carol Jinks for arranging it.