

STIG OF THE DUMP REMEMBERED



Out of the myriad of rules introduced because of the Covid-19 scourge, one of the few positives has been the restriction on the number of vehicles using our local KCC recycling centre, a stone's throw from Sheerness Railway Station.

No more than half a dozen vehicles are allowed in at the same time, by appointment. All have to be sensibly parked in a row of marked bays, with appropriate social distancing. Gone are the days, hopefully permanently, when a trip to our recycling centre was like being at the dodgems, with cars parked all over the place, often parallel to the skips, thus preventing anyone else from getting near them.

Drivers would reverse without checking and people would near-miss cars as they rushed by clutching armfuls of junk, often discarded kitchen appliances or lumps of wood or metal liable to inflict serious damage on paintwork. It was mayhem. But now sanity prevails. Let's hope it stays that way.

Reading recently about the success of the new measures at KCC recycling centres, I found myself being transported in a time machine – mentally at least – back about 35 years.

My son, then aged five or six, would accompany me most Sunday mornings to what was then called “the council dump,” which was in the same place as it is now. Of course, the word “recycling,” along with health and safety, hadn't been invented then.

I used to tease my son by telling him that Stig of the Dump was likely to pop up from one of the skips at any moment. Every time we went, my son would watch in anticipation mixed with a degree of alarm as I tossed another item of junk into a skip. “I hope that didn't wake Stig up,” I would say.

It was a place where a child's imagination could run wild. Our trips to look for Stig would continue for a year or two before he got old enough to realise I was talking drivel.

It was Kent-born author Clive King who introduced Stig of the Dump to the world with his 1963 children's modern classic of the same name. King, who died in 2018 aged 94, based Stig of the Dump on a rubbish heap at the bottom of his garden where he and his brothers played. King's book, which has sold more than 30 million copies world-wide, has stood the test of time and has never been out of print. It tells the story of a friendship between Barney, an eight-year-old boy, and a caveman called Stig living in the local chalk pit.

Illustrations for Stig of the Dump were drawn by renowned Royal Academy artist Edward Ardizzone, who lived much of his later life at Rodmersham Green, near Sittingbourne.

I know all about dumps because we had one at the bottom of my parents' smallholding where I grew up. It was a huge mound of earth full of (probably dangerous) mysterious metal objects. I think it had been there since before the Second World War. It was my playground too. Sixty years on, I still remember digging up a pair of brass knuckle-dusters there, which must have belonged to someone in the Home Guard. Wonder what happened to the knuckle-dusters? They'd fetch a fortune on eBay now, though I suspect it would be illegal to sell them, or even own them.

Looking back, everyone referred to the council yard where we got rid of our rubbish as either the "the tip" or "the dump," hence the Stig association. Later, "the dump" got promoted to become more generally known "the tip" and now, as we all, know, "tips" have still further gentrified to become "Household Waste Recycling Centres."

My son is now 40 and old enough to take his own rubbish to the tip, though not the one in Sheerness. It's definitely not worth a 100-mile drive to chuck a few items of junk in a skip at the recycling centre of his childhood days.! He now has a six-year-old son, so perhaps the time has come for me to mention Stig to them both. As I said, Stig has stood the test of time, so he'll be around for a long time.

I still make trips to the same "dump," but there things have changed out of all recognition. A team of workers employed by council contractors carefully scrutinise every item being deposited as if their jobs depend on it, which they probably do. Throw an item in the wrong skip and you'll be in trouble. The list of rules and regulations is now extensive, though 35 years ago I don't remember there being any rules at all, except common sense.

I tip a bag or two of grass, sand and some hedge trimmings into the garden waste skip these days, but that's about it. But I never cease to be astonished by sheer volume and variety of junk being deposited by others. It's waste disposal on an industrial scale, vastly different to the way it was 35 years ago. No place for children's adventures any more. They are not even allowed to get out of cars, which makes sense with the arrival of strict health and safety rules. Stig wouldn't feel at home there now.

The End: By David Jones



Clive King

