



Too posh to pick up – the rise of the middle-class litterbug

Drink cans have been replaced by punnets of organic strawberries, says *Helen Brown*

Prosecco bottles. Plastic champagne flutes. Packaging that once contained M&S quiches, Waitrose tabbouleh salads and Tesco Finest cheese boards. Since lockdown I've noticed a change in the litter I pick up on my daily dog walks in Chelmsford, Essex.

"What kind of people are leaving this stuff?" sighed a friend, as we wrestled the remains of expensive sushi selection boxes from our dogs' jaws last week. We've walked this path for years, often retrieving empty cheap drinks cans and crisp packets from the reeds. It looked like the kind of stuff dropped by those either too young or too drunk on budget cider to know better. But lockdown brought a new kind of luxury litter. It was evidently left by people with a fair whack of disposable income and far more sophisticated tastes.

In June, I found a dead butterfly trapped in a punnet of Duchy Organic strawberries. Fruit purchased by somebody who'd paid a premium to support the environmental or health benefits of organic farming, but then let those considerations drop when it came to taking the container home with them. Perhaps they are so used to restaurant service, it simply doesn't occur to them that there are no minimum wage staff in the fields to clear up after them.

Of course, we can only theorise about the demographic responsible for this new wave of entitled littering. According to a 2013 survey by Keep Britain Tidy, 62 per cent of Brits drop litter while only 28 per cent admit to it.

What we do know is that the pandemic had clearly given these people the time and motivation to enjoy rural spots that they may not have visited before. It provided a stylish backdrop to social media posts in which G&Ts were held aloft as swans sailed past. Yet they seemed to think it beneath them to tidy up once they'd enjoyed and

uploaded the view, their rubbish left to snare the legs and beaks of the same birds they'd used to accessorise their lifestyle snaps.

While I blame lockdown and Instagram, my friend blames music festivals. "They're people in their 30s and 40s who have got used to paying a fortune to spend long weekends trashing the countryside while knocking back Pimms and gourmet burgers. It's a culture that's normalised treating durable items like tents and cooler boxes as disposable, because they can't be bothered to carry them

They don't realise that there are no minimum-wage staff in the fields to clear up their mess

back to their cars." She has a point.

"Finding out who these people are would be a good project for an environmental anthropologist," says George Monck, chief executive of CleanUpUK, a charity that unites volunteers to tackle litter problems, often in run-down areas. In Jaywick, the Essex coastal neighbourhood recently named "England's most deprived town", Monck has been heartened to connect with "so many wonderful people working hard to clean up and change attitudes to littering".

He notes that teenagers are often unfairly blamed for making a mess and can be some of the most engaged litter pickers.

Monck feels "there's a latent willingness to do good in most people". But he's found "it does take real confidence to stop and pick up litter that other people are walking past." I've certainly found that to be true. I've noticed other dog walkers make disgusted faces when I reach into the long grass to

remove greasy rubbish and drop it into my bag. But last summer I challenged a group of local picnicking teens to help me get the remains of a helium balloon out of a tree and – after some initial uncertainty – they obliged and even had fun and impressed each other in the effort.

"People feel better about themselves and more connected to their communities when they make their environments cleaner," says Monck.

Volunteers at Chafford Gorges Nature Discovery Park – which is maintained by Essex Wildlife Trust – would agree that their work is good for their mental health. But Lauren Cosson, the trust's communications officer says that they've been struggling with an increase in fly tipping. "Volunteers are spending too much of their time picking up rubbish when they could be doing other work to support wildlife – and at a time when nature is already facing so many other challenges."

Caroline Speed, a volunteer seal warden on the Norfolk coast, says she's always picking up rubbish left by tourists. The beach where she works is remote and the car park is often full of upmarket SUVs. "Seals are incredibly playful, like dogs. The young seals haven't worked out what they can eat yet and it's heartbreaking to see their bodies wash up after they've swallowed what humans have dropped."

I felt no less tearful as I tipped the soggy remains of that butterfly from the plastic punnet. It was a heath fritillary, a rare insect brought back from the brink of extinction in the 1970s and only recently reintroduced to Essex. To glimpse its shy flicker of orange is infinitely more intoxicating than a swig of fizz from a plastic flute. This wealthy new breed of litterbugs don't understand that the best things in life are free. But they'll lose it all if they don't take their posh trash home with them.