Test practice

Academic Reading

Test Tip

This reading text is also good practice for General Training section 3.

Rags, bones and recycling bins

Tim Cooper investigates the history of waste recovery.

As concern mounts that the consumer society may be ecologically unsustainable, historians have begun to interest themselves in past efforts to achieve efficient use of scarce resources. Far from being a recent innovation, recycling and reuse of household cast-offs have a long history. In early modern Britain, one of the most characteristic forms of recycling has been the trade in second-hand clothing, which has survived to the present day in the shape of the ubiquitous charity shop. The cost of buying new ensured that many among the lower orders of eighteenth-century English society relied on second-hand apparel. The rag fairs of the rapidly growing cities and a network of tradesmen and pawnbrokers supplied this trade. Some historians have argued that the second-hand trade played an important role in the nascent development of mass consumerism and fashion; demand was so high that there was a ready market for stolen clothes.

Recycling was not restricted to the clothing trade. A much wider culture of reuse existed. This included, for example, the recycling of building materials from demolished buildings, the repair or reuse of most metal goods, and the use of old rags in the paper industry. The paper industry was almost wholly reliant upon recycling for its raw materials. Recycling was thus an important component of the pre-industrial economy, enabling it to cope with shortages of raw materials and aiding the poor. Pre-industrial recycling was largely a response to chronically low levels of production. After 1800, industrialisation, urbanisation and population growth would see the emergence of a new problem – waste – and give a new significance to recycling.

Of course, the generation of urban waste was not new in itself, but the scale of waste production after 1800 certainly was. The treatment and disposal of domestic waste became a problem of the first order. From the 1850s the problem of human waste disposal was being addressed by the construction of sewerage systems; the domestic refuse problem, however, remained relatively neglected until 1875. Up until 1900 most urban areas relied on private contractors for waste disposal, who operated only with the minimum of environmental regulation. This was the context in which the Victorian dust-yards, immortalised in Charles Dickens' novel *Our Mutual Friend*, emerged.

These yards sprang up either in or around many major cities in the nineteenth century, but were particularly characteristic of London. The dust-yards made their money by employing men, women and children to sift and sort through the filth in search of items of value, such as rags and metals. These were then sold to contract merchants. A large proportion of the material that remained after sorting was dust and cinders; where possible these were sold as a fertiliser or fuel source, but where no market existed they were dumped either on land or at sea.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

The dust-yards were the most notorious of the nineteenth-century waste trades. In *Dangerous Trade* (1902), industrial health expert Thomas Oliver stated that 'under all circumstances dust-sorting is dirty and disagreeable work'. The uniquely unpleasant conditions of the yards meant that dust-women formed 'a class by themselves, and so the work becomes more or less hereditary'. The workers also received marginal reward for their efforts. By 1900 the average wages of women in contractors' yards in London were only between seven and eight shillings per week. As a result the dust-yards were increasingly controversial by the end of the nineteenth century. At the same time, the waste continued to grow. The 1875 Public Health Act had given local authorities a legal responsibility to remove and dispose of domestic waste. However, the last years of the century saw a solution to the apparently insoluble problem of what to do with the refuse of Britain's cities. A means, in the eyes of experts, to achieve the perfect removal of waste without resort to either the dust-yard or the tip: the incinerator.



Test Tip

For notes completion items, make sure that you stick to the word limit. Do not write extra unnecessary words. Check you have copied the words correctly from the text.

Questions 1–7

Complete the notes using **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** from the text.

The history of recycling in the UK

Eighteenth-century Britain

- People recycled products such as
  - used (1) .....
  - (2) .....
  - anything made from (3) .....
  - old cloth.
- The (4) ..... business relied heavily on recycled materials.
- Recycling had two main advantages:
  - it provided necessary (5) .....
  - it helped (6) ..... .

Nineteenth-century Britain

- More refuse was created by an increase in the number of
  - i) big cities
  - ii) inhabitants

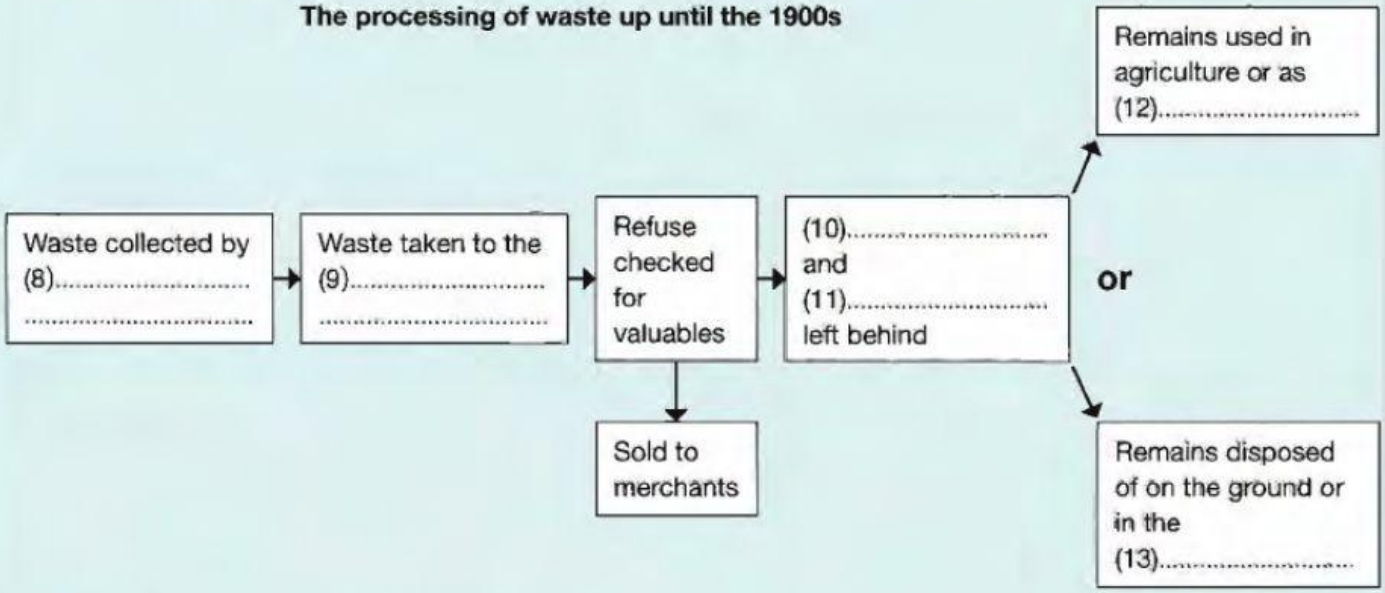
  and
  - iii) increasing (7) ..... .

LIVEWORKSHEETS

Questions 8–13

Complete the flowchart below using **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** from the text.

The processing of waste up until the 1900s



Question 14

Choose the correct answer **A**, **B**, **C** or **D**.

In the final paragraph, what are we told about waste disposal at the end of the nineteenth century?

A It was a respected business.
B The work was relatively well-paid.
C Authorities decided to burn the waste.
D Disposal of waste had not yet been regulated.

LIVEWORKSHEETS