

# Skipping meals

Claire Platt gets in with the freegans



I pick up, and put back, three different jars of coffee before finally deciding I can't decide (herbal's better for me anyway). I move on to the bananas, which are hardly local produce. With a bit of warped logic, I hope coughing up for Fair Trade will ease my conscience over food miles. Shopping's hard work these days. There's too much to agonize over. After checking the labels for non-veggie E-numbers, we now have to worry whether it's Fair Trade, organic, vegan, non-tested, over-packaged, green - a head-buzzing array of ethical dilemmas!

Tonight, though, I'm meeting up with Alex, who has a different take on shopping altogether! For a start, we are meeting when the shops are closed, and our choices are made from what's on offer in the skips round the back. Alex is a freegan ('free' plus 'vegan'). Freegans avoid ethical shopping dilemmas by not buying anything! The movement began in America, but freegan groups are now springing up in Britain too.

## 'With a last glance towards the security cameras, I poke my head over the edge and get stuck in.'

A vegan lifestyle already seems extreme to some; but freegans recognize that even avoiding all animal products doesn't stop us from funding corporations who harm animals, use child labour or slavery to produce their goods, or pollute the environment to provide us with the latest and the new. Freegans reject consumerism and its evils, and live from what others discard. And there is certainly enough of that. Britain produces its own body weight in rubbish every four days (according to the NCC). Freeganism not only avoids adding to the amount of products purchased, but also helps reuse some of the ridiculous amounts of waste we throw out.

Time to give it a go: "This is a great place", says Alex. "Some supermarkets fence in their bins and padlock them, but these skips are open and the deli over there shut half an hour ago, so there's lots of ready made stuff."

Alex dives in for a rummage and emerges with bags in his hands: "Come on". I hang back, checking to see if anyone's watching. It feels furtive, criminal even, though I'm only 'stealing' what people have already thrown away. With a last glance towards the security cameras, I poke my head over the edge and get stuck in. One or two straggling shoppers glance our way, but no-one comes over.

We come away with bagels, fruit and salad, all still in their plastic packaging. I also come out with a grin, and a buzz a bit like I used to get from bunking off school. There is time to snack on some gorgeous pastries (from the deli) before moving on to another enormous bin behind a parade of larger shops. I pull up my hoody and open the lid of the first skip, starting to get into it now. This one smells pretty bad, though, and the first bag I find is nastily slimy. I resolve to wash thoroughly before eating anything else! My enthusiasm dented, I need a lungful of oxygen before I delve in again. I score a couple of jars of pesto and ready-made sauces, and, more importantly, regain my sense of achievement and fun. Alex comes up with some bags of onions and other fresh veg. We also find some potatoes, which Alex rejects ("too far gone") and still cold, sliced, wrapped ham ("not for me"). I ask Alex if he's ever chased by security guards or those big scary dogs.

"Mostly skips just have cameras. If there are fences, we stay away. There's enough to find elsewhere." I am relieved my hoody is the only defence I'm likely to need.

Later on in the evening, Alex and I meet up with Toni, Jane and Baz. They also have backpacks full of discarded, but perfectly edible, food and after some swapping and organizing, we all have plenty. Back at Alex's, he cooks up an amazing vegetable curry, complete with ready-made chapattis and pickles. I eat with a 'midnight feast' feeling of excitement, guilt (I didn't pay for it) and pride (I got away with it).

Over dinner, my freegan friends explain that supermarkets throw out food that is past its sell-by date, but not its use-by date. Restaurants, delis and cafes regularly discard what they haven't sold at the end of the day and make fresh offerings for the next day.

Baz tells me freeganism is a reaction to a society of waste: "Really, it's just extreme recycling. So much gets thrown away that can be re-used, or, in the case of food, so much gets thrown out that's still good." I am shocked when he tells me, "Some places actually throw bleach over their waste rather than let people take free food. Our society is driven by corporations making money and so much harm is caused by consumerism. Most of the stuff people buy, they don't need. It's just a culture driven by adverts and money. If you do have to buy something, you can get loads second hand. Charity shops are great for clothes."

Neither Alex nor Baz have to live by foraging. Like most freegans, they have a place to live, jobs and money. Their lifestyle is a conscious choice to impact less on the world.

Alex says he goes 'skipping' about 3 times a week and finds more than enough to feed himself, as well as picking up plenty of other goods: "I have found loads of computers. A mate of mine reconditions them and gives them away on Freecycle. Now and then he sells one on Ebay to get cash. They throw out clothes too – end of line stuff, but brand new. And furniture – so much of that..."

Freegans are organized too. Groups meet to swap and share their finds, so foraging is more efficient. In America (where the movement was born) there are even freegan groups who set up food stations, feeding the homeless for free. In the UK, a charity called Foodfare uses volunteers to collect food from co-operating companies and re-distribute it where it is needed.

The conversation turns to the 'boundaries' of freeganism. Some suggest that it makes no difference to eat discarded, still-edible meat or dairy products. Baz: "Yes, it will go to waste anyway, but that's like saying to a vegetarian, 'you can't help that chicken, it's already dead'." Central to freeganism is lower impact living, so most freegans are into renewable energy, composting, shared living and transport – "It's just doing what you can", says Alex.

As I cycle home I reflect on the evening and what I can do. I'm not sure I'm ready to live by skipping alone (though I'll definitely go again – it was fun as well as lucrative!). I can buy less (so that bag of salad doesn't end up in the bin) and I can cook with the leftovers, rather than chuck them in the compost. Mostly, I think I'll just ask myself, 'do I really need it?' a little more often.

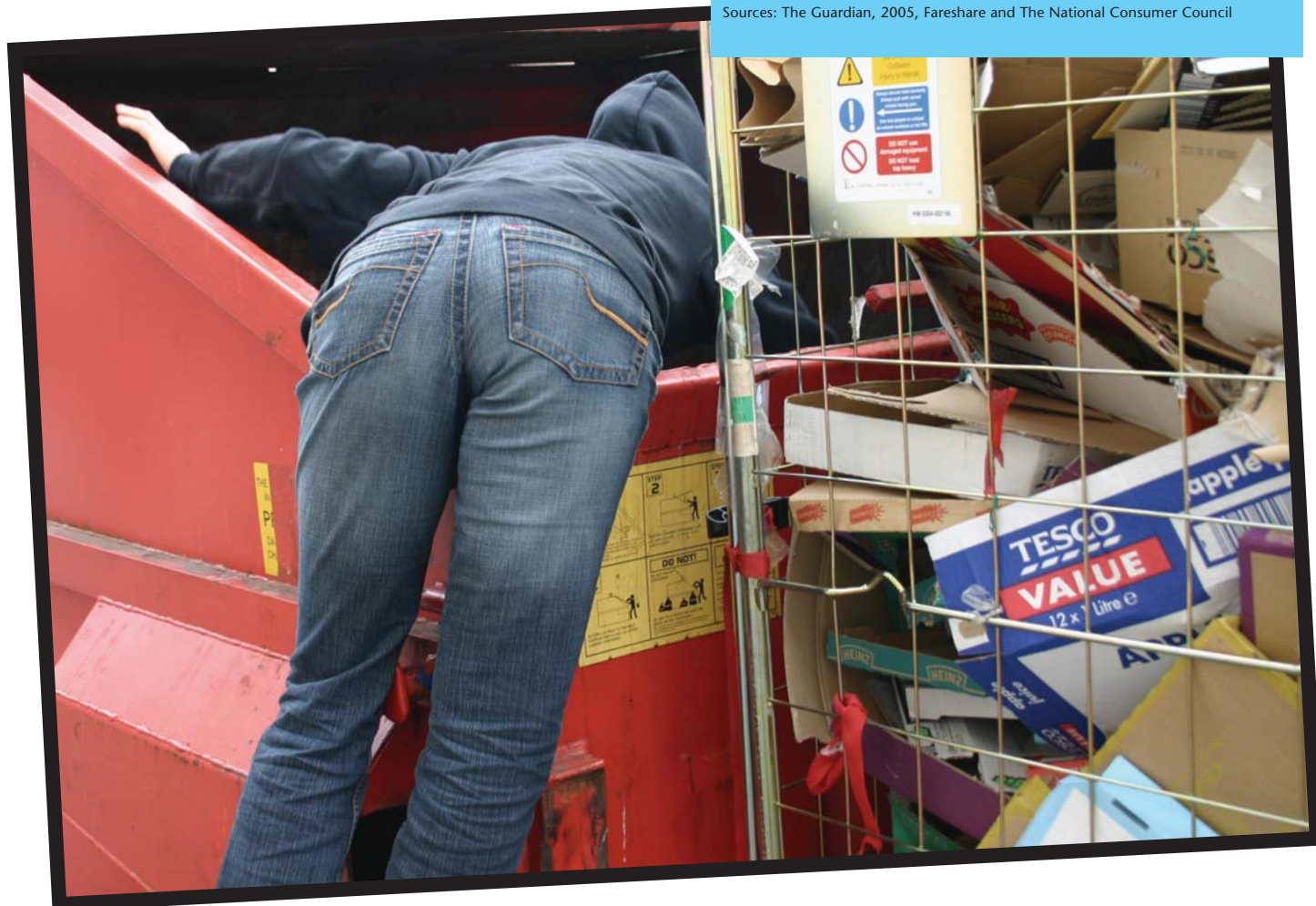


## Food Facts

*(No, not the usual ones on how good vegetables are for you!)*

- In Britain, we waste a larger proportion of our food than any other country.
- 7 million tonnes of food, worth £20 billion, goes to landfill in the UK every year.
- UK supermarkets throw out up to 500,000 tonnes of food each year.
- UK households waste up to a third of the food they buy.
- 30-40% of what is grown on the farm is discarded or ploughed back in.
- 4 million people in the UK cannot afford a healthy diet.
- One in seven people over 65 are at serious risk of malnourishment.
- Only 14% of household waste was recycled or composted in 2002-2003.

Sources: The Guardian, 2005, Fareshare and The National Consumer Council





# Top Tips to Stop Waste!

If going 'skipping' is not for you, how about thinking of other ways to stop wasting food, clothing, furniture...? There are plenty of easy, practical ways to reduce your consumption, lessen the waste and make a difference!

## REDUCE

- How many times have you gone to the supermarket and not known what you want, or gone shopping when you're hungry and just bought lots of goodies? Why not plan your meals ahead of time, make a list, stick to your plan, and don't get tempted!
- Forage for food; pick wild mushrooms, berries and plants, but be sure to check these carefully in a good field guide and gather only what you are sure of.

## REUSE

- Before you set out to do the shopping, think: take a handful of old carrier bags or even better, buy a strong, re-usable bag. Every year in the UK 100,000 tonnes of plastic bags are thrown away. That's the same weight as 70,000 cars!
- Don't throw out your leftovers. Think creatively and come up with a meal to incorporate 'last night's throwaways'.
- Do you always need to buy new? Why not shop at charity shops? Don't forget that what's one person's rubbish is someone else's treasure. Think before you throw things away and take it to your local charity shop for them to sell instead.
- Throw a 'Clothes Swap' party. It's a great excuse to get rid of all those clothes you've been hoarding and have a social and fun get-together with friends. Whatever's left at the end of the night goes to the charity shop.

- Become part of the ever-expanding 'Freecycle Network'. Local Freecycle groups match people who have things they don't want or need to people who can use them. The goal is to keep usable items out of the landfill sites by reducing consumerism. If you don't have a local group, why not start one? Find out more at [www.freecycle.org](http://www.freecycle.org)

## RECYCLE

- Buy as many recycled goods as possible, and encourage others to do the same. Some easily available recycled products include office paper and toilet roll, but that's just the tip of the iceberg. There are literally hundreds of items available, from recycled cat litter to wine glasses! For a list of products and where to buy them, check out [www.recycledproducts.org.uk](http://www.recycledproducts.org.uk)
- These days, a huge amount of household waste can be recycled. Glass, cardboard, paper, plastic, cans and garden waste are all easily recyclable. Even Tetrapaks can be recycled and more information on this can be found at [www.tetrapakrecycling.co.uk](http://www.tetrapakrecycling.co.uk). If you have a garden, then why not compost all your bio-degradable rubbish (garden and kitchen) and eventually you'll have a high-nutrient compost to help your garden grow. More information on composting can be found at [www.compost.org.uk](http://www.compost.org.uk)

**The impact we make on the planet is always in the news these days, and although the ideas above are not going to make a significant change on their own, they will in a small way help to lessen this impact. Collectively, we can make a difference!**