

Thursday 4 November 2004

Beatles' Polythene Pam appears for commemoration of famed chemical

The Beatles' character Polythene Pam came to life for one day to commemorate the discovery of the world famous flexible packaging.

Model Wendy Scapens dressed to match the lyrics of the Lennon and McCartney song that first appeared on the Abbey Road album.

She then appeared with guests at Winnington Hall, Cheshire, where the Royal Society of Chemistry was presenting a plaque to mark the discovery of the material in 1933.

In a polythene bag, kilt and jackboots Polythene Pam met eminent chemists and the Mayor of Northwich, where Winnington Hall is located.

One of the guests was 94-year-old Frank Bebbington who worked for ICI in 1933 at the research centre in the heart of the North West chemicals community.

The "waxy, solid" material was discovered on a Monday morning in a vessel in which benzaldehyde and ethylene had been heated together at 170 degrees C and some 2000 atmospheres pressure over the weekend.

In 1935 a team including Frank Bebbington (pictured with the model) now 94 years old, set out successfully to rediscover the way that polythene was made. "When it first happened it was a fluke," said Frank. "It was our task to see if we could recreate the material and thankfully we were able to do so, and that opened a whole new era."

It was soon to play a key role in the Second World War in newly-invented radar which helped to defeat the Nazis.

Later it became the most widely used plastic material in the world and helped to change the nature of food storage and shopping and becoming an everyday feature in dozens of ways in most homes in the developed world.

Today it is employed in saving lives as the main component, along with Kevlar, in bullet proof body armour and in gas and plumbing supply pipes. Since a wheel came off a Formula 1 racing car killing a spectator, F1 wheels now have to be attached to polythene ropes that prevent them from detaching and flying out of control.

Dr David Giachardi, Royal Society of Chemistry chief executive, said today: "Polythene is the most popular plastic in the world and is used in grocery bags, shampoo bottles, toys and hundreds of other applications. It has a very simple structure. Yet the contribution that it has made to the world since that discovery at Winnington Research Laboratory 70 years ago is astonishing."

More information: Brian Emsley 020 7440 3317 or 07867 993849.

