The recent BBC series ‘A History of the World in 100 Objects’ beautifully told the story of the evolution of human history illustrated by 100 objects chosen from the British Museum’s collection. In this article I want to use a similar approach to tell the story of the emerging and unfolding Transition movement, which in its short life has spread to 35 countries around the world from its humble beginnings in Kinsale, Ireland (see PM45).

With its roots firmly in permaculture, Transition is an attempt to take the core ideas of resilience, localisation, decarbonisation and community empowerment into the mainstream. It also promotes the idea of ‘localisation as economic development’, arguing that in increasingly uncertain times, localisation (the meeting, where possible, of local needs from local production, and also of increased local ownership of that production) will be the key way for economically strapped communities to regenerate themselves.

At the time of writing this there are over 300 ‘formal’ Transition initiatives, and many more ‘mullers’ (those still deciding whether to ‘go official’ or not). It is a process that starts with a small group of people and grows and deepens. These 10 objects, gathered from Transition initiatives, give a sense of where it can all go from that point on...
OBJECT 1:
A REALLY QUITE HORRIBLE JUMPER
Origin: Transition Taunton Deane
Between July and September 2009, Transition Taunton Deane ran a series of workshops with their local council looking at peak oil, climate change and resilience. What was extraordinary was that every one of the Council’s 375 employees attended, from CEO to car park attendants. This was written up as ‘Towards a resilient Taunton Deane’ and the whole process deeply impacted the Council. They set up a Green Champions team, every department now has an energy charter, it has cut its electricity use by 14%, set up a car club and is now installing PV and insulating its buildings. After the initial workshop, a planning officer and a car park attendant got together and planted a new community orchard on public land.

Chrissie Godfrey from TTD told me “our main role is to keep telling them how brilliant they are... it just goes to show how powerful a catalyst Transitioners, in the right place at the right time, can be”. The jumper? In 2010, the Council held a ‘Turn the Heat Down’ day where the heating in their offices was turned down and staff were invited to wear the most revolting jumper they could find to work, and prizes were awarded for the most hideous.

OBJECT 2:
BERTIE & GERTIE
Origin: Transition Town Tooting’s Trashcatchers’ Carnival
In July 2010, Tooting was the setting for the Trashcatchers’ Carnival, the first Transition project to get Arts Council funding. Together with Project Phakama and Emergency Exit Arts, Transition Town Tooting (TTT) created a street carnival celebrating the Earth using entirely recycled materials. Over 800 people took part, including local schools, mosques and temples, and over one million plastic bottles and shopping bags, half a million crisp packets, half a ton of renewable willow and half a ton of materials were collected over a six month period to create this extravaganza, which included several structures over 6m (20ft) high.

On the day, thousands turned out, the sun shone, local restaurants fed over 1,000 people for free at the end of the event, and the community was left with the feeling of ‘if we can do that we can do anything’. Bertie and Gertie were made entirely from recycled plastic bags by members of Tooting Bec Lido as part of their float, and represent the real Bertie and Gertie, who are often to be found swimming in the Lido.

OBJECT 3:
A GAS LAMP BULB
Origin: Transition Malvern Hills’ ‘Gasketeers’
Malvern is home to 109 Victorian gas lamps, which provided C.S. Lewis with the inspiration for the lamp that first greets Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. They are listed, part of the identity of the place, but are also hugely inefficient. At the moment each lamp costs £130 to maintain per year and £450 to maintain. They don’t even create that much light, and as local council budgets tighten, there is a risk that they will be turned off altogether. Enter Transition Malvern Hills’ energy group, known locally as the ‘Gasketeers’.

The group brought together experts in gas lighting from the local area and also from further afield. They have now started making the lamps over; their changes will mean that each lamp will now cost just £14 a year in gas and £40 a year in maintenance, reducing carbon emissions by 84%. They will also be 10 times brighter, and produce no light pollution at all. They are maintained by Lynn, the UK’s first qualified female gas lamp technician, who performs all her maintenance with a bicycle and trailer.

OBJECT 4:
AN EGG
Origin: Transition Town Forres’s Community Garden
Like many Transition initiatives, Transition Town Forres (TTF) saw the rebuilding of food resilience as a key part of its work. It sought to bring land into community management for new food production. TTF was invited to negotiate a lease with Moray Council for 0.59ha (1.45 acre) of horticultural land starting on the 1st April 2009. With an 11 year lease, work began on the site. Rather than divide it into the traditional rectangles of allotments, it was divided into circular allotments, called ‘pods’, each one 250m², and shared by 4-6 people. The garden now has 75 gardeners, 60 local scouts and 26 chickens (hence the egg). Participation is from a broad cross section of the community, and the dropout rate has been less than half that of other local allotments. The next step that is planned is a Farmers’ Market in the town.
they held a public meeting where people expressed enthusiasm for the idea. Time was tight, so they set up an Industrial and Provident Society and designed a share launch which was unveiled three weeks later. The goal was to raise £15,000, and this was achieved within 10 days. From initial idea to the shop opening? Two months.

The shop is now a busy thriving community enterprise, and MASTT is setting up a growing co-operative called ‘Edibles’ to supply the shop with local produce. Early on in running the shop, they found that all the wholesale garlic available to them was imported from China, and so they set up the Green Valley Grocer Garlic Challenge, making garlic cloves available to customers at cost and offering to buy back whatever people produce, with the aim of making Slaithwaite self-sufficient in garlic within two years (well you have to start somewhere...).

**OBJECT 7:**

**TRANSITION TOWN TOTNES’S TRANSITION STREETS**

*Origin: Transition Town Totnes*

In December 2009, Transition Town Totnes, the UK’s first Transition initiative, was chosen as one of 20 community groups in England and Wales to win the ‘Low Carbon Communities Challenge’. Its project, ‘Transition Streets’, was awarded £625,000. In the last 18 months, nearly 500 households have participated in Transition Streets, each, on average, cutting their carbon emissions by 1.5 tonnes. About a third of those have gone on to install solar photovoltaic systems. However, the main benefits that people who have participated talk about are the social connections they have made and how they now feel so much more a part of their community. It has also acted as a platform for all kinds of other initiatives as neighbours start to get a taste for working together.
**OBJECT 8:**
**A SMALL PENNANT FLAG**
Origin: Transition Town Monteveglio (Bologna, Italy)
Transition Town Monteveglio (TTM) was the first Italian Transition initiative. In 2009 its local Comune (local Council) passed an amazing resolution that offers a state-of-the-art taste of what it looks like when a council really ‘gets’ peak oil and climate change, stating:

“... a view of the future (the depletion of energy resources and the significance of a limit to economic development), methods (bottom-up community participation), objectives (to make our community more resilient, i.e. better prepared to face a low energy future) and the optimistic approach (although the times are hard, changes to come will include great opportunities to improve the whole community’s quality of life).”

It has led to all kinds of initiatives and projects, including a local currency and renewable energy installations. Our object here is the Comune’s official pennant.

**OBJECT 9:**
**A SMALL BAG OF TOPSOIL**
Origin: Transition Norwich’s food initiatives
It is one thing to start local food projects, but quite another to think strategically about how those projects sit in the larger context of the intentional relocalisation of the area. Transition Norwich, together with East Anglia Food Link, produced a study called ‘Can Norwich Feed Itself?’ which worked out that it could, albeit with a simpler diet, but that it would need certain new infrastructures put in place. This included a new mill to enable locally produced grains to be milled, two CSA farms (hence our object, a soil sample from their first CSA site), community gardens and research into varieties of beans and oats that will grow well in the area. A successful application to the Local Food Fund enabled these to become a reality. It is a fascinating example of why we need to think strategically about the localisation of food. As Tully Wakeman, one of the co-ordinators, told me:

Whittling down to these 10 objects has been very difficult but I hope what you have gained is a sense of something infectious, reaching beyond the idea of small individual initiatives, and arguing that localisation is the best way for the places in which we live to return to health. Various learned writers and academics have tried to encapsulate what Transition is, but I still think the best description of its spirit comes from Tove Jansson in *Comet in Moominland* in 1946, who wrote:

“It was a funny little path, winding here and there, dashing off in different directions, and sometimes even tying a knot in itself from sheer joy. (You don’t get tired of a path like that, and I’m not sure that it doesn’t get you home quicker in the end).”

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