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Tale of Transition in Ten Objects

Rob Hopkins tells the story of the evolving Transition movement – a shooting star pointing to a better way of living on this planet

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



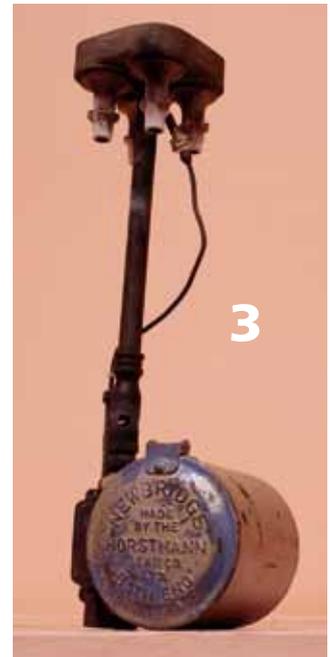
period to create this extravaganza, which included several structures over 6m (20ft) high.

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.



OBJECT 5:
MINI DRAUGHTBUSTERS

Origin: Transition Belsize's Draughtbusters

Transition Belsize, one of over 40 Transition initiatives active within London, was inspired by 'Draught Busting Saturdays' created in South London by Sue Sheehan and a group from Hyde Farm Climate Action Network. They started working with Camden Council to deliver Draughtbusters in Belsize. The idea is a simple one. The area has many Victorian homes with leaky sash and casement windows. Up to 15 people meet in someone's house and learn to draught-proof by working on the host's house. The host gets given £50 of materials, and the participants £20 worth each. It has proven very popular, and 15 local schools have also been draught-proofed by keen Draughtbusters. It has now spread to many other London Transition groups, just one example of how Transition groups can incubate ideas that can then be rapidly replicated by others. Our object here is a miniature version of the Draughtbusters team: Patrick (doing the door) and Sarah and Lauren (working on the window).

OBJECT 6:
A CLOVE OF GARLIC

Origin: The Green Valley Grocer, Slaithwaite

When the local greengrocer went out of business, members of Marsden and Slaithwaite Transition Towns (MASTT) in Yorkshire wondered if perhaps the community might take over the running of the shop. They realised this would only work with the support of the community so

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:



A trap a lot of NGOs fall into is overthinking about vegetables (yet) only one tenth of what we consume, in calorific terms, comes from fruit and vegetables... where is the other 90% going to come from? Growing vegetables in gardens, allotments, community gardens and so on offers a degree of food security and can happen relatively rapidly. However the other 90% requires the rebuilding of the infrastructure required for growing, processing, cleaning, storing, milling and distributing grains and cereals, and that takes longer and requires more planning".

**OBJECT 10:
A BOTTLE OF 'SUNSHINE ALE'**

Origin: The Lewes Community Power Station
The Ouse Valley Energy Service Company (OVESCO) is one of the offshoots of Transition Lewes focused on the installation of renewables in and around the town as well as promoting energy conservation and local economic resilience. In 2011 it took on its most exciting and ambitious project to date installing a 98kW solar photovoltaic array on the roof of local brewery, Harveys. This will turn the building into one of the first community-owned solar power stations in the country. The 544 photovoltaic (PV) panels will generate 93,000kWh of green electricity each year – enough to save more than 40 tonnes of CO₂ annually.

A community share launch event took place in April 2011 attended by 300 people. Within five weeks the target of £307,000 had been reached. Money invested will be repaid in full at the end of the 25 year scheme, or earlier at the request of the investor and subject to conditions. While the investment is held a dividend will be paid after the first year which is expected to be around 4%. Our object is a bottle of 'Sunshine Ale', a special commemorative beer brewed to celebrate the launch of the scheme. Very nice it is too.



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)." 

Rob Hopkins is the co-founder of Transition Town Totnes and Transition Network and blogs at www.transitionculture.org. His new book The Transition Companion is reviewed on page 73.