

IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL

Who: Rob Hopkins
Where: Totnes, Devon
What: Founder of the Transition Initiatives movement, which aims to prepare us for life when oil supplies run out

‘Our lifestyles are awash with oil: cars, plastics, medicines, building materials, paint, varnish, glue, resin,’ says Rob Hopkins, taking us on an imaginary walk around his home. ‘The reasons our socks are stretchy is because they have Lycra in them; our PVC windows, Nylon in our bedding – the range of things is incredible. Oil underpins our society.’

From his base in Totnes, Devon, Rob co-ordinates the extraordinary network of ‘transition’ towns and initiatives that have flourished in the UK since the movement’s inception in September 2006. The two drivers at its core are climate change and the concept of peak oil.

Sticky situation

‘Peak oil is the idea that what matters isn’t when the last drop of oil runs out, but when we reach the peak of oil production – when we’ve used up the oil that’s easy to get at,’ Rob explains. His concerns were first raised by the work of Richard Heinberg – a research fellow of the Post-Carbon Institute. Rob read Heinberg’s seminal book *Power Down* in 2004, just before starting to teach the world’s first full-time permaculture course in Kinsale, Ireland.

‘I found out about peak oil on the first day of term,’ says Rob. ‘So we designed a project for the students looking at how

the town of Kinsale could respond to the oil challenge, and came up with the Energy Descent Action Plan.’ This first transition initiative asked some pretty big questions. ‘People argue that we need a 90 per cent reduction in carbon emissions by 2020, but what would this look like?’ says Rob. ‘And what happens when you add peak oil into the mix?’

What grew from this initial experiment was the Transition Initiatives movement. Having lived in Ireland for 10 years, Rob upped sticks to Totnes in

I’ve always been able to read a very depressing book about climate change and peak oil, then go plant some carrots

September 2006 where he intended to trial the ideas developed in Kinsale. But he hadn’t bargained for such a huge and positive response – there are now 17 official Transition Towns and many more initiatives running throughout the country.

‘Totnes is special because it was the first Transition Town in the UK. It also has a history of being involved in alternative projects, so people are open to new ideas,’ says Rob. ‘It’s been valuable as a lab for testing new schemes that other towns copy.’



Rob initially set up a number of working groups involved in building, food, energy, transport, health and medicine, liaison with local government – every aspect of people’s lives – to drive projects forward. But his role quickly changed from initiator to facilitator, bringing together people who are passionate and knowledgeable about their own particular subject and supporting them to achieve their goals.

‘We try and keep the whole process very unthreatening, playful and interesting,’ Rob

says. ‘The scheme acts as a catalyst, encouraging people to imagine their community without all the oil it relies on. This tends to stimulate people to question their basic assumptions about energy resources and come up with practical solutions.’

The end of the world...

So what’s the bottom line? ‘To spell it out, we’re currently collectively £1.2 trillion in debt, borrowed against the fact that the economy will keep growing,’ says Rob. ‘When the economy

can’t do that things will quickly unravel. Most people find it hard to deal with, but I’ve always been able to read a very depressing book about peak oil and climate change then decide I need to go out and plant some carrots.’

Rob helps communities learn how to anticipate and cope with the terminal decline in oil production that will start at around the turn of the decade. There could be potential benefits like ‘a renaissance in food farming in Britain’ and ‘an incredible rethinking of the way we do things’ according to Rob. And if Totnes is anything to go by, communities will become increasingly independent of the state.

The term Rob uses is resilience: ‘It’s about shock-proofing our communities at a time when the likelihood of shocks is increasing.’ In Totnes, local people have run schemes to plant nut trees as an alternative source of food. They’ve set up conferences for landowners and estate holders and education days in local schools. But Rob’s favourite project by far has been the launch of the Totnes Pound.

Under the slogan *The Totnes Pound is like real money only better*, the ‘economics and livelihoods’ group printed and promoted 300 bank notes for use in 30 shops in the town. The parallel currency – £10 of which is worth £9.50 sterling – will strengthen the local economy against big chainstores, and give businesses a boost.

The mushrooming growth of the Transition Initiatives movement shows no signs of slowing. Rob has recently appointed his first two full-time staff members, he’s writing a book called *Small Is Inevitable* (to be published by Green Books) and he’s being approached by more individuals, councils and councillors each week. ‘We want a team of trainers to support new initiatives,’ says Rob.

‘There’s something about this process that is like creating new stories about what the future could be like,’ he continues. ‘It’s really a very simple idea: the future with less oil could be better than the present if we design it with creativity, adaptability and imagination.’ www.transitiontowns.org/Totnes



Totnes Pounds were given away at an open evening for 200 people and can be exchanged in the town’s businesses – on one side of the note is a facsimile of the 1810 Totnes bank note

LCM ENVIRONMENTAL 24 hour phone line: 01884 841 387

REMEDIATION • OFTEC TANK SERVICES • GROUND CONTROL



TANK CARE • ENVIRONMENTAL • INCIDENT MANAGEMENT

A nationwide company, with 20 years experience offering a safe pair of hands for all your environmental needs.

Langlands Business Park, Uffculme, Devon, EX15 3DA
www.lcmenvironmental.com

Self Cleaning effluent quality monitors

TO ASSIST YOU WITH IPC COMPLIANCE



Dissolved oxygen, Suspended Solids, Total chlorine, pH, ORP/Redox

All with ATI’s air blast cleaning system



Analytical Technology, Bank Chambers
 33 Stamford Street, Mossley, OL5 0LL
 +44 145 783 2800
 sales@atuk.com

- Reduce compliance failures
- Improve treatment
- Never need cleaning
- Typical maintenance intervals of 12 months
- 1000’s installed

www.analyticaltechnology.com