

Letter from Totnes¹

images © holobolo 2009

Totnes - £69 return from London - a bargain! - is a town that prompts such reflections associated with a certain rejection of materialism. Ever since the educationalist Leonard Elmhurst arrived in the 1920s to found a progressive school at nearby *Dartington Hall*, Totnes in south Devon has enjoyed a reputation for alternative ideas. The standing joke is that it is twinned with C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* - a town where people are more likely to crochet their own handbag than they are to pay £1,450 for one.

Totnes stands on the River Dart, and its high street winds up a hill towards the ruins of a Norman castle. It is a popular spot with tourists, some of whom may find the journey up the hill somewhat strenuous. In high season, two auto-rickshaws imported from India and modified to run on biodiesel made from used oil from the local chip shop carry visitors free of charge to the top of the high street, letting gravity carry them back down - spending money in the shops as they go. It seemed a very Totnes sort of enterprise.



Architecture is one of the serendipitous factors that has prevented Totnes going the way of the 'clone town'; many of the properties on the high street date from medieval times, and are too small and cramped to be of interest to large-scale multiples. There is no *Costa Coffee* or *Wetherspoons*. But there is a *WH Smith*, a *Clinton Cards*, and a large *Morrison's* supermarket, discreetly tucked away near the river.

It is the kind of high street you think every town should have - the butcher, the baker, the (scented) candlestick maker - along with a plethora of shops selling new age knick-knacks, and a record shop, *Backtrax*, that seemed to stock every record ever made by John Martyn, Robyn Hitchcock and the *Grateful Dead*, and none at all by *Take That* or *Miley Cyrus*. In *Greenlife*, an independent organic goods supermarket, members of staff were dressed in stripy black-and-yellow T-shirts to celebrate *National Bee Day*.

But quirkiness and a strong sense of community has not made the Totnes high street completely immune to recession. There are victims here, too: a juice bar, a cafe, a mobile phone shop, a pub. The chairman of the town's *Chamber of Commerce* is Paul Wesley, who runs a bookshop in the high street selling a mixture of remaindered and antiquarian books, and who - unusually for a *Chamber of Commerce* chairman - was deported from America in the 1960s for his anti-war activities in Haight-Ashbury.

Small independent shops Wesley believes are generally better placed to weather the downturn. 'You really have to keep on your toes; you have to be aware of trends and how people respond to them. An independent can do that quicker. But there are some people who simply shouldn't be running a shop in the first place, and they will be the first to go under.'

¹ First published in the *Daily Telegraph Magazine* on Sunday 14th June 2009. © *Daily Telegraph* 2009. This version edited by William Shepherd.

Totnes, he said, had always attracted an unusual type of 'hobbyist' shopkeeper. 'Someone would open a business, run it for a couple of years before they realised it was a mistake. Sometimes you felt they hadn't even done the back-of-the-envelope sums, and there were no bank managers leaning on them saying show me your business plan. Now there's nobody to step into their shoes, because banks aren't going to give me the 50K. They don't do that any more.' He laughed. 'We've even had a *fairytale* shop in Totnes, although that closed down. Actually, it turned into an angel shop.'

I had been there. *Say It with Angels* sold crystals, oils and angel statues; a poster in the window also offered *reiki healing* and *tarot card readings*. The manageress was glum. Sales of the angel items had plummeted, she told me, and few people nowadays seemed to want *reiki healing*. But *tarot readings* were up. 'Money guidance is the big thing now,' she said. 'People want to know if they're going to be skint for the next six months.'



While it is clear that Totnes is hardly the typical British town. Something is stirring there that could have a profound influence on the shape of every high street in the future. Totnes is the birthplace of the *Transition Movement*, which aims to strengthen local communities and develop resilience - a favourite *Transition* word - in the face of climate change and the looming crisis of *Peak Oil*.²

The *Transition Philosophy* disputes the conventional wisdom that capitalism's propensity for innovation and efficiency will provide the solutions to energy and climate problems, arguing that no alternatives can possibly sustain the economic system we now live by, and that local communities need to be planning a transition - hence the name - to a *Post-Carbon Society*.

The architect of the *Transition Movement* is Rob Hopkins. An affable man in his early forties, he was teaching *Permaculture* at a college in Kinsale, Ireland, when he first read about *Peak Oil* in 2004. A year later, he moved to Totnes and with a friend, Nareh Giangrande, began organising talks and events around the topic.

In 2006 they staged the official 'unleashing' (Hopkins's term) of *Transition Town Totnes*. 'We were just making it up and seeing what worked and what didn't,' Hopkins says. 'In a way, we still are.'

Rather than a correctable blip, Hopkins sees the present recession as the first step in the total unravelling of the idea of perpetual economic growth, 'and the beginning of many chickens coming home to roost. The idea that the way we get ourselves out of this economic situation is by doing more of what got us into it in the first place -

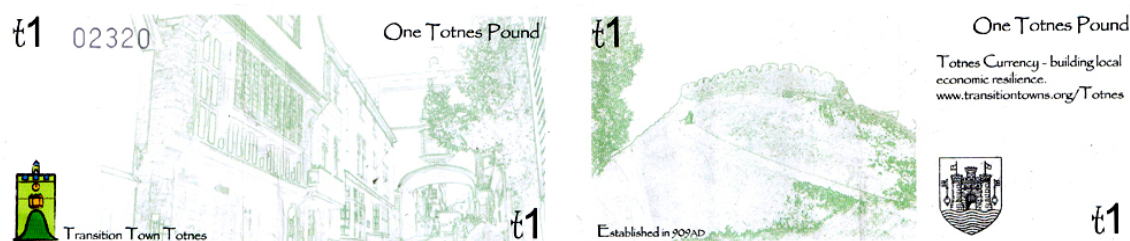
² *Peak Oil* refers to the widely held theory that the world's production of oil is now at or close to its peak, and that we face a future of inexorably dwindling supplies, with all the potentially catastrophic consequences that implies, unless we can reduce our energy usage and find alternative forms of energy.

taking out more cheap credit, buying more stuff we didn't need in the first place - more and more people are starting to see the flawed logic in that.'

The *Totnes Project* includes the development of localised food networks, linking pubs and restaurants to local suppliers, and encouraging consumers to buy through community supported agriculture - where a community gets together with a local farmer and guarantees them a market for their produce, thereby eliminating the food miles that govern big supermarket chains.

Hopkins estimates that about 800 people in Totnes - 10 per cent of its population - are engaged in these schemes. There are now more than 170 *Transition Groups* throughout the country and Hopkins jokingly notes that his *Transition Handbook*, which was published last year and is now in its third reprint, was 'the fifth most popular book among MPs for their summer holidays.'

In a sense, the *Transition Movement* provides a focus for myriad ideas that have been gaining currency in recent years - of *Self-sufficiency*, *Permaculture*, *Ethical consumerism* and *Green activism*, the building of strong *Local economies*. 'A lot of things fit into it,' Hopkins says, 'but it doesn't have the baggage so much environmental stuff carries where its starting point is that everything is wrong, and who is to blame. It's not based on any judgmental, moral precepts. It's not saying it's wrong to have a car, it's wrong to go shopping. It's not saying small is beautiful, but that small is inevitable, and a shift back to a local scale is inevitable, and the sooner we start putting that infrastructure in place the easier it will be.'



At the heart of the *Transition Philosophy* is the idea of local currency, as a way of keeping money circulating within the community and supporting local businesses. Totnes introduced its own *Totnes Pound* in 2007. Lewes, in Sussex, followed suit a year later, while Brixton, in south London, will be the first urban community in Britain to introduce its own currency, the *Brixton Pound*, in September.

The administrator of the *Totnes Pound* - the governor of the *Bank of Totnes*, as it were - is William Lana. Lana, 41, worked for five years as an investment banker for *Chase Manhattan* and *Morgan Stanley*, and then for the *European Commission* in the financial services sector, before undergoing a Damascene conversion. 'I looked at what we were doing to the planet, the whole question of resources, and what kind of future I wanted for my children, and thought, I'm working in an investment bank and I don't really have a clue what investment in an *actual* community looks like!'

He left the banking world and moved to Totnes, where he started up *Greenfibres*, a small company retailing organic textiles and fashions. Lana led me to an organic restaurant on the high street, where we sat eating mozzarella quiche and mixed vegetables - locally sourced, I had no doubt. It seemed that everything in the garden was lovely. But that was not quite the case. Lana said his own business was down 20 per cent. In a bitter irony, the company that prints the *Totnes Pound* had also gone out of business, because of cash flow problems.

'We are in the middle of a crisis, but it's also a huge opportunity,' he said. 'People are open to ideas in a way that they weren't 20 years ago. It's almost like we're re-tooling. There is a shift away from our quite greedy form of capitalism to a system of trading based on answers to questions like, what's really important? What makes us happy? What world do we want our children to inherit?'

The Totnes currency was launched with the injection of 2,500 *Totnes Pounds* into the local economy, which has subsequently been topped up with a further 5,000. Some 70 businesses have signed up, and there are plans for the bank to offer interest-free loans up to £500 to small businesses. 'The final ingredient is movement,' Lana says. 'People will buy 10 *Totnes Pounds* because they like the idea, but to encourage them to integrate it into their daily spending habits is more difficult.'

My own straw poll along the high street revealed a great enthusiasm for the project, if only limited uptake by members of the public. At a butcher where a sign in the window announced *We Take the Totnes Pound*, the owner said it was 'a lovely idea' but few customers actually used it. 'It comes in waves,' Dave Lacey, the owner of *Sacks Whole food*, told me. 'A week can go by and I'll not take one. The most I've taken in one go was 80, for a big weekly shop. I try not to cash them in but to hang on to them and push them back out.'

Clearly the *Totnes Pound* has not yet reached the tipping point where it passes from being an interesting idea to a viable proposition, but, Lana said, it has a powerful symbolic value. 'We're coming to a point where as individuals in small and large communities we need to take the reins. The idea of local currency says nothing is sacred. Currency symbolises the conventional, the status quo - let's have a go at transforming that and turning it on its head.'



Part of the *Totnes Scheme* is the preparation of an *Energy Descent Pathways Project*, which envisages how the community will change between now and 2030. By no coincidence, 2030 is the year when, according to the government's chief scientific adviser, Prof John Beddington, the world will face a 'perfect storm' - that phrase again - of food and water shortages and dwindling energy resources³ that will threaten to unleash public disorder, cross-border conflicts and mass migration as people flee from the worst-affected regions.

The *Pathways Project* envisions a radically transformed high street. With national currency in short supply and pension schemes in tatters, local currency banks will be flourishing; there will be more bicycles than cars, and car-parks will have been dug up and turned into nurseries and market gardens; builder's merchants will be stocked with straw, hay and locally grown timbers; ornamental verges and bushes replaced by 'edible landscapes' of fruit and vegetables.

Critics will detect in all this a fanciful nostalgia for an imagined golden past of harvesting with scythes and delivering goods by horse-drawn cart - and argue that the world has grown too small for

any community, even one as agreeable as Totnes, to pull up the drawbridge. It is also hard to see how such a model would work in a large urban and industrial area such as Birmingham or Manchester.⁴

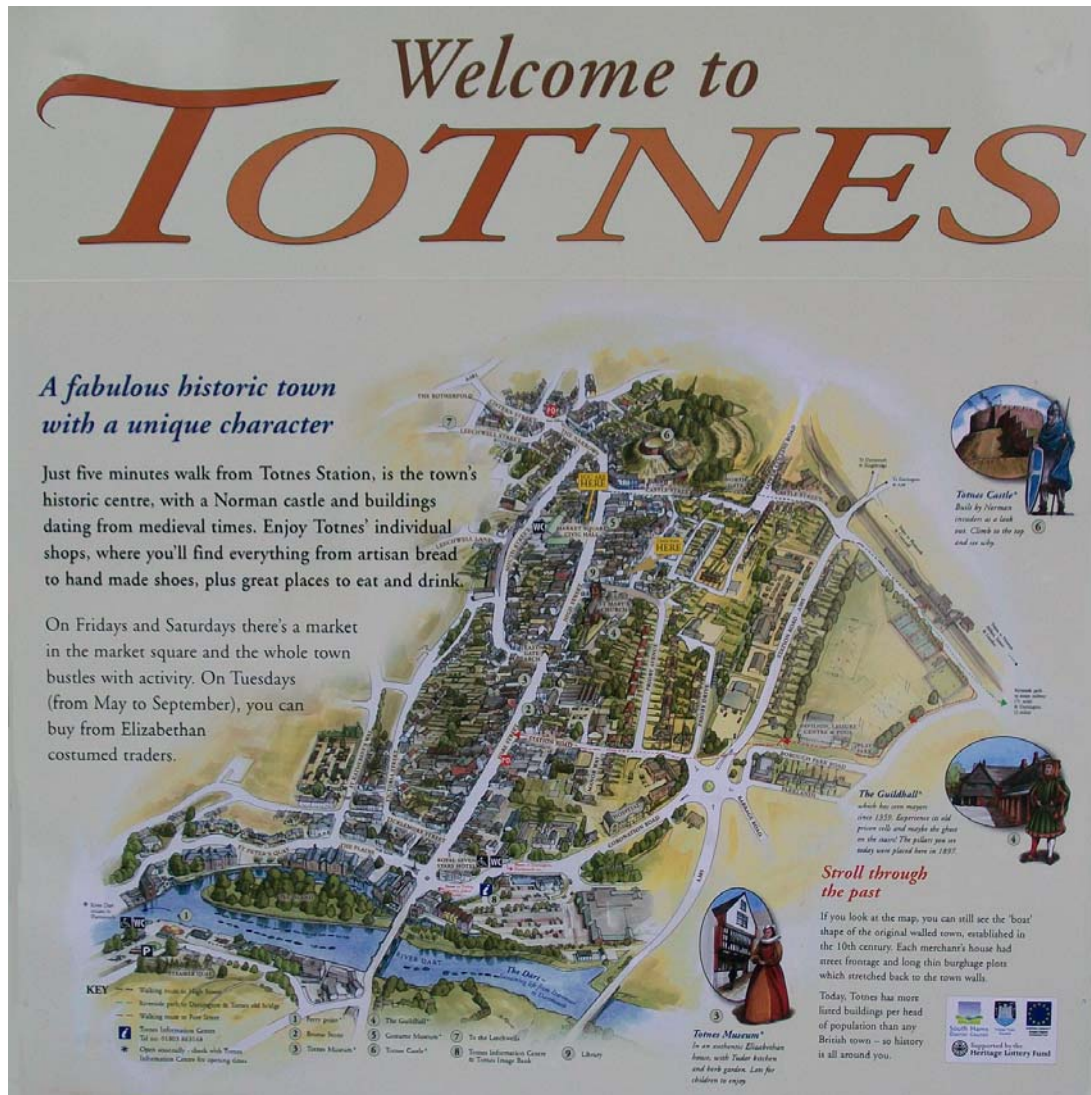


³ At the moment, we consume an average of nine barrels of oil per person per year in Britain; according to some estimates, by 2030 we will be fortunate to be able to draw on one barrel each.

⁴ Cuba is pioneering the way. See *Letter from Havana* at <http://www.delicious.com/williamshepherd/dispatches> [Ed].

But Andrew Simms of the *New Economics Foundation* believes we face a stark choice: ‘What the high street will look like in the future depends on how we respond to the range of challenges we are faced with now - whether or not the recession becomes a full-blown depression with long-lasting unemployment, and whether we react against being turned into passive consumers and start to do things for ourselves.’

‘You could have a distinctly more characterful and vibrant high street where you’re not just going to shop, but where there are centres to learn new skills to do with urban agriculture and making the home energy-efficient, where you’re tapping into people’s entrepreneurial spirit and laying the economic foundations for a vibrant, diverse local economy with lots of local businesses, creating a community that has learnt to talk to itself again.’



The alternative, he believes, is a ‘divided high street’, with on the one hand semi-fortified shopping malls filled with ‘clone’ stores in areas where there are still pockets of wealth, and on the other, ‘ghost-town’ urban wastelands ‘where the tumble-weed blows with the empty *Kentucky Fried Chicken* wrappers, and you have lost all of the relationships that bind the community together.’ Perhaps one of the things that will most determine which of these visions prevails is how a society that has grown intoxicated on consumerism will react when the hangover really starts to bite.

‘There are certain advantages in being older.’ Paul Wesley told me in his shop in Totnes. ‘One is that you’ve experienced a very different economy to the one of the past 20 years, and you know it wasn’t that hard.’ He paused to serve another customer the fourth since I had walked in. Somebody was doing well.

‘It’s funny. People say they don’t like change when you suggest something. What do they mean? People love change! They love the latest *iPhone* or computer game, the latest car. What we’ve never had to deal with is forced change. The change to having more, people love that. It’s the change to having less that’s the problem.’