



Oast to Coast



Kent Scrubbers
Sewing for Victory
see page 11



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How are you? It is okay not to have an answer to this; it is a question that has played on my mind in various online meetings in recent weeks as so many people tell of what they have been doing however.

Much of this "doing" is kindly, neighbourly and supportive to all number of individuals and organisations. It strikes me too as being one of the great things Rural Kent is about. We are honoured to help people to do great things that are, or become, assets to a whole community.

There is a lot that is tragic, horrifying and deeply worrying about both the coronavirus and its impacts on our lives - yet every day I see or hear stories from colleagues, and the rural communities we work with, which warm the heart. If you have worked with some of our staff or volunteers, and seen our website or social media feeds, then you will know some of these tales already. In this edition of Oast to Coast you will be able to read about a few of them too.

Maybe it is the opening of the eco-Community Shop in Smarden. Perhaps it is the food (including cake) deliveries to isolated folk on Romney Marsh. It might be the socially distanced theatre performances in Elham. Simply it can be the constructive use of Twitter by Farningham Parish Council. The statement that there was "an increased sense of community bonding" in Wouldham comes to mind. There is much, much more of this of course and it all shines a light both on human ingenuity and the resourcefulness of many rural communities.

'... I see or hear stories from colleagues, and the rural communities we work with, which warm the heart ...'

Of course, we have seen some challenges: village halls and local businesses losing trade is one example and although we have helped (sometimes only in a really minor way) a good number to obtain grant aid not all have found recovery funding easy to access. What we have been able to do, however, is raise concerns - backed by real evidence from our work across rural Kent - to help agencies working directly with Government to articulate where recovery programmes need to be improved. It has been particularly welcome to see the committees working on the Environment, Food & Rural Affairs and Digital, Culture, Media & Sport pick

up on issues we know have been affecting social enterprises, small independent businesses, local charities and informal community

groups, for example.

Elsewhere in this issue of Oast to Coast you will see an interview with me where I talk more about how coronavirus has impacted on the work of Rural Kent - and what we have done to try and manage this. It is really down to the imagination, understanding and ideas of everyone involved in this organisation - beneficiaries, volunteers, trustees, staff, a good number of our funders included - that we have made progress.

Our aim for the future is to take the best of these things to help you in even better ways in the future, however you may be.

Stay safe. Thank you for being with us.

Keith Harrison

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Kent Community Housing Hub

Housing during the pandemic

ACRK is very happy to announce that we will be hosting the Kent Community Housing Hub; a project to help community led housing groups across Kent, fulfil their ambitions. We've written before on what community led housing is and how it incorporates community land trusts, cohousing, co-operatives and self-builds. In short, community led housing is housing that has been built or bought back into use by local people. The Hub is currently being formed and we will be announcing its launch in the near future.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown us how we really do rely upon one another; how coming together, we can help look after people in our community. It has also made us very aware of living in isolation, often not being able to see our family and friends. We think of those people who live alone and find it hard to get out at the best of times, who rely on our health and social services. Everyone is experiencing lockdown differently depending on their individual circumstances, but we can all see how the best of human nature can help to unite us and look after our vulnerable members of society.

Housing has also come into focus; stories of people living in inner-city high-rise flats, unable to go out, families living in temporary housing, having no choice but to share kitchens and bathrooms with others outside of their household. Some people feeling very isolated and suffering ill mental health because of it. People getting into rent or mortgage arrears because they now have no work. On the other hand, some people living in pleasant areas with nice garden space are not experiencing the harsher end of the crisis.



A lot of the problems associated with the pandemic could be eased if people lived in closer communities and better housing. Co-housing schemes for instance create a neighbourly and sharing environment and can alleviate the alienating effects of modern living; people know their neighbours and look out for them. Having outside space for food growing and using renewable energy technologies could all help right now. Living in housing that is truly affordable can help people more easily pay their rent, or at least have more manageable arrears when the time comes to start paying them off. Community land trusts and co-operatives will be more likely to help tenants address their arrears and make payment plans than perhaps a private landlord would do.

We look forward to hearing more about how community led housing schemes have managed during the pandemic and what lessons can be learned about how our ways of living can be more resilient. Look out for the launch of the Kent Community Housing Hub and get involved.

Tessa O'Sullivan

Rural and Community Housing Manager

A Village Hall Response to Covid-19

Like many village halls, Hodsoll Street and Ridley Village Hall had to suspend all its activities in March. The hall is equipped with wi-fi and for a while after group activities had stopped we kept our small meetings room open as a facility for local residents who had lost their wi-fi connection for whatever reason. However, with the advent of total lock-down even this use had to cease and the hall was effectively mothballed.

As with most communities, we have been heartened by the strong community support response to the crisis and there has been a great deal of support for those in particular need. But of course we all have differing needs and differing levels of access to essential supplies, so we were delighted when one of our residents had the inspired idea of converting the disused phone kiosk next to the hall into a Community larder. This also happened to coincide with the realisation that as the Village Hall could no longer hold its monthly community "Big Breakfast" we were going to be faced with much of the food in store going to waste.

The kiosk had recently been vandalised so a concerted effort was required to replace broken glass panes and generally clean out the kiosk. Within a matter of days new signage had appeared, shelves installed, publicity arranged and stocking of the shelves commenced. We now have a fully



running Community Larder which is organised a little like a book exchange. In fact the sign on the kiosk says "Bring what you can, take what you need".

We look forward to the gradual relaxation of the current lock-down so that normal life can begin to resume. Although some Village Hall activities have been able to continue on-line, the Photography Club being a notable example, others are completely on hold. We anticipate that the continuation of some form of "social-distancing" will be inevitable, and this is bound to affect the ability of the hall to pay its way. We will be living in a Brave New World and the sharing of ideas with other halls will be essential to their long-term survival.

Frank Cottee

Chairman of Community Halls Advisory Group



News from The Coffee Project

Members of the Coffee Project Team pose with a famous 'guest' for VE-Day. From left to right - Gail Cox, Angie Startup, Karl Randall and Kathy Bugden.



LOTTERY FUNDED



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Stronger Kent Communities



HM Government



Coffee & Information Project

We have been overwhelmed by the response to our three-year pilot project; from appreciative residents, parish councils, community groups, service providers and funders. Our Three Years in Numbers and Words gives a flavour of the project. It has been humbling to meet so many interesting and inspiring people, from all walks of life. We thank you all for giving something new a try and for helping it to succeed.

Thanks to The National Lottery Community Fund, which distributes money raised by National Lottery players, we are delighted to announce that we have been awarded funding, to expand and extend the project for another three years.

Our first job has been to welcome 3 new community engagement officers to our team and we would like to introduce you to

Karl Randall, Angie Startup and Gail Cox whose photographs you can see on the page opposite.

We would also like to introduce you to our other new addition; our Peugeot Partner.



The new van will provide a pop-up café service at village halls; outdoors wherever possible but using kitchen facilities and shelter from wind and rain.

Our Friends of Rural Kent (FoRK) mentoring service will continue to grow over the coming years, thanks to volunteers, Jane and Rodney Watts.

As I write, we are mid-Covid-19 lock down. Like so many of their years, Jane and Rodney are self-isolating but have been using some

of their time to give some tender, loving, care to the campervan and to kitting out the new van, so that it is ready for service, when the time comes.

The coffee project has offered its services to the New Romney Community Hub and we're waiting to hear how best we can support them to help meet the needs of vulnerable people across the Marsh, during the coming weeks.

In the meantime, we have been warmed by the stories coming in from our community champions; stories that tell of the community spirit that has fired up to keep people connected and to take care of each other.

Our friends in Suffolk (the original Rural Coffee Caravan project) have put together some information to help inspire and motivate others and have asked us to share some links, please follow:

www.ruralcoffeecaravan.org.uk – for lots of inspiration and information for isolation.

www.facebook.com/groups/885597545214906/?epa=SEARCH_BOX - somewhere to share your ideas for staying connected and to read about others. Is there any way you can share this with your residents?

Finally, this.....

www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAGbxKfNMuE: some of the good news stories that we may want to remember when this is all over.

If there is anything that we can do to help, please do let us know.

In the meantime, it would be lovely to hear your news and please keep safe.



Kathy Bugden
*kathy.bugden@
ruralkent.org.uk*

The Coffee Project: Our first three years in words and numbers

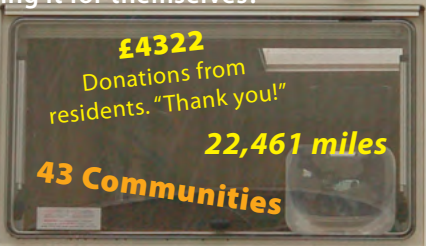
368 Community Coffee Mornings

8 Communities now
'doing it for themselves'



15

Volunteer
bakers



48 rainy days
but still the
residents came!



216
Sunny days

Discombobulated!
The Team's favourite word.

8 Communities now
'doing it for themselves'



368 cakes

Lemon Drizzle is
the favourite

9440 smiles
5 Work placements supported



12 volunteers
contributing
287 days



7050
Drinks
served

99 Agencies hosted:
KCC Community
Wardens, PCSO, fire
fighters, Healthwatch
and many more ...

24

Community champions
helping us out.

42

Record number of
visitors in one go!

2 boxes dog
biscuits



HV56 VCK

80 community
organisations
supported

WOULDHAM

27th Feb. 2019.

First visit to the pop-up café, what a brilliant idea. Chatted & met old & new friends from our village. Cakes are delicious & coffee very good.

Thank you for organising this, a good way to encourage community spirit.

Take care & Good Bless.

Skelle (A.K.A. The Lollipop lady) 😊
XX

"So many different conversations happening at once, fantastic busy session! Companions and carers bring friends, relatives and neighbours along."

March 20th

Through you I have met new faces in Broughton. Thanks for opening up my life!

Heather
HU Betterbridge

22nd August

Peter & I are hoping to move to Kingswood and are so impressed with the pop up café which everyone is so friendly - lots of people help supporting it - delicious cake and a great opportunity to meet people.

Peter & Wendy Mally (& Fred the dog)

"The project is amazing. A great way to bring people together. It would be great if it happens more often. I'm shy but felt welcome. It definitely brightened my afternoon, which I thought would be gloomy."

Very enjoyable - Have met some really lovely people, who have become good friends. Great cakes & tea - Thank you
Hilary Swales

Rural Matters!

Keith Harrison in Conversation

By James Laidlaw



Keith Harrison is the CEO of Action with Communities in Rural Kent, the leading charity in Kent responsible for coordinating and delivering services aimed at ensuring no one living in a rural community is disadvantaged. He joined in the summer of 2006 and has been working in Rural organisations since the late 1990s.

Welcome Keith. Cutting to the chase, these are immensely challenging times for Kent's rural communities.

Yes! The current situation is like nothing we have seen in my time here, though I'm really pleased at how we have been able to play our part in helping out – sometimes by being on the front foot, and also in responding where we have called upon to assist communities in managing change. We have needed to re-design some of our services, and it also looks as though greatest demand is being placed on those of our services that have suffered from the greatest funding cuts in recent years.

When did COVID-19 first impact ACRK?

At the end of March is when we felt the real impact although we were well aware of it before.

What actions did ACRK take?

Most importantly, we looked at ways to work from home more effectively. Each of our team knows who the main beneficiaries are in their particular area of work, as well as the nature of the barriers to socio-economic wellbeing that are faced. We were determined not to go missing as an organisation and so have focused on support that we can give. We

had a day in the office as a team to prepare for remote working; our approach is a self-managing style, everyone knows what to do - and where to seek help if a new challenge arises. We found sharing stories from rural communities was especially helpful too - it provided a good reminder of why we are here.

How did you let clients, staff, trustees, funders know of your actions?

We have client groups we communicate regularly with on services with a specific basis. We offered rapid reminder of our phone and online support on a range of services including village halls, coffee caravan, social enterprises which we got out quickly, it was a friendly approach aimed at reminding our beneficiaries that "You Matter- Keep Talking with Us".

The range of responses from our funders have been interesting. Some came to us. For example, The National Lottery Community Fund has been brilliant – offering a range of flexibilities around how they support the Rural Coffee & Information Project in particular. Other positive support has come from bodies such as the Charities Aid Foundation, Kent Community Foundation and Colyer-Fergusson Charitable Trust who are putting a range of coronavirus-related packages forward. I've also had good dialogue with DEFRA and ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England, our umbrella body) – in the main, established funders have come to us.

However, some funders have withdrawn or delayed funding and this affected about 20% of our annual income in April alone. Principally

this has been public sector funding, although I would like to say engagement with Parish and District/Borough - level authorities has been positive and constructive around this; there is an understanding that whilst we are not doing the usual face-to-face work, we are continuing to deliver our services and wherever possible to meet needs of the rural communities across Kent.

My initial meetings under Lockdown were with staff and funders and I've probably had least contact with our Trustees. However, all Trustees have been in touch with me and quickly understood that whilst we do have to come together as a Board, the priority focus has been on managing our way through something of a crisis.

What advice did you give staff and volunteers?

I have really focussed on giving specific advice only where it most relevant - for example, when it is asked for or where we have some form of Government guidance to interpret. We tend to have conversations at Rural Kent - nobody has a monopoly on good ideas, and everyone's voice is relevant.

How's it going so far?

Some great opportunities have been created to demonstrate both our relevance, and some of the challenges we face. For example we have been approached to provide feedback on what is happening during the pandemic in the rural communities of Kent to local bodies such as the Kent & Medway Business Hub, Stronger Kent Communities and the South East LEP. Nationally we are feeding insight to Defra on a weekly basis, MHCLG (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) has held a teleconference with me seeking views on possible regeneration fund priorities. I even made a short film for the Food, Farming & Countryside Commission on specific challenges we face as a result of Covid-19.

I mentioned stories earlier, and these can

bring huge satisfaction; this week we have seen the opening of Smarden's Community Shop, for example.

What are the less learnt so far?

Firstly, a greater appreciation of just how trusted ACRK are across Kent. It's easy for our sector to play the victim but we try not to and instead position ourselves as very much supporting the rural community. Secondly, the value of the clear staff conversations and clear conversation with the client base. It has allowed us to focus on our core purpose as an organisation.

Anything you would've done different with hindsight?

Yes, mainly minor things though. For example: we could've prepared better for more efficient homeworking. If we had more money we would have provided new, better kit for individual staff.

I also need to think about whether we can cover staff homeworking costs such as part of their electricity bill. We have great professionals in our team with practical knowledge which we have been able to use smartly. With hindsight, and going forward, I would like to have had a better understanding from everyone about what might have worked well during a time like this and also what we could keep doing in future.

How well is the Rural community in Kent coping?

It's a mixed picture. People will only expose so much – for example, with certain village halls there is a risk some Trustees might not actually return after the pandemic and so one wonders what services will not be delivered in those communities as a result?

There have been disparities in government support, for example for social enterprises and charities not always afforded the degree of state help that has been open to traditional for-private-profit businesses. Food distribution to those in need has to

be better coordinated and we also need to better understand what needs are hidden – access to mental health services for example where CARM do such a good job on Romney Marsh. Who are the people that are missing out? – it's all pretty laissez-faire. It is also clear how much we need to hear the good news around for people and businesses going the extra mile with acts of kindness and lots of innovation. An example is our coffee caravan which did 90 meal deliveries across Romney Marsh (including cake!) during the early May VE Day week. Of course we have over 300 villages in Kent and each one is handling the crisis in different ways.

Where is the main support coming from? Who is leading the support for the rural communities across Kent?

To be frank, nothing is really focused and targeted across Kent rural communities apart from the work that we're doing and some specific local activities. However the Kent Together initiative is to be applauded. With its central "failsafe" telephone help number, this has been rolled out by KCC and subsequently the Borough, District and Parish Councils and has been promoted as a safety net.

Where are the gaps?

We have picked up on a few gaps. We were asked to provide insight to DEFRA on domestic violence and homelessness in rural communities, which we have encountered through our social enterprise and housing work although perhaps more at the fringes. In these cases there are organisations with greater expertise whom we have worked with – Porchlight come to mind. Another potential gap are all the people that have just been released from prison as there appear to be questions over the availability of crisis support packages that in place for them. So the gaps are really where the most vulnerable are concerned – and often the charities that work with them do so very discretely to ensure confidences are maintained. There

is hidden rural poverty ranging from sofa surfing to isolation and right now there is limited capacity to support this. Another gap is those people not online who simply don't have access to digital support, although this is where the Coffee Caravan can help.

What are the implications for the future?

I see big opportunities for proactive change. Many people working from home have particularly enjoyed it – so we could see a greater demand for homebased working opportunities. This might give Village Halls the opportunity to expand services and of course people will still want the opportunity to socialise. There could well be more co-working opportunities.

Other opportunities might be for leisure use in the rural community. There is a recent government paper on transport strategy that particularly focuses on cycling and public transport services and there may well be increased demand for people coming out of London to enjoy leisure activities in Kent and of course people might want to re-locate here.

Where will the greatest need in Rural Kent be?

The initial need is access to services that support good well-being, this could be food, care, medicine, healthy life, reduced stress, access to green space and the opportunity to create things.

If there is one thing that you think should be changed in ACRK supporting the rural community in Kent post COVID-19 what would this be?

Gaining the core funding to employ one or two members of staff to support emerging organisations and support a wide range of emerging needs. Everything that we do at the moment is schematic and project based therefore restricted funding so we don't really have the resources to support emerging organisations which we would also love to do!

Thanks very much Keith.

Sew for Victory

The British people know how to win under extreme pressure. Our victories are usually built on spirit, determination, pride and patriotism. But they're always forged in community – a shared bond to friends, neighbours, strangers – and to those who would risk their lives to save others. Inevitably, we've lost many along the way. We never forget. Lest we forget.

While it can be misleading to get caught up in the rhetoric of war in the face of COVID-19, parallels can certainly be drawn between situations that force our nation and the world into joint action. But how about at the community level? What happens in a community like Kent with a strong network of social enterprises that exist for community benefit, established to combat the biggest challenges faced by our society, when the biggest challenge to society for 75 years appears? The answer is exactly what you'd expect. Community business leaders rise up to the challenge, and tackle the problem head on.

Take, for example, some of the social entrepreneurs that Rural Kent helped enable through the Stronger Kent Communities project: the makers at Made In Ashford – a creative collective of talented artists, designers and crafters – who, under the beam of Craftship Enterprise CIC make up a stylish shop at Park Mall, Ashford, in collaboration with the borough council. Described by founder Melissa Dawkins as, “a social enterprise set up to support and nurture small creative businesses by giving them an affordable platform on the high street to showcase and sell their products. We've made it our mission to make creativity accessible to everyone. We know first-hand just how good creating is for our overall well-being and for a sense of pride in our community. That is why we



Melissa Dawkins

are so passionate about what we do! This social enterprise is made up of avid collaborators and we try to help our community as much as we possibly can.”

That was before COVID-19 when non-essential shops and businesses were ordered to close and millions of people were placed on furlough. Traditional business leaders could be forgiven for putting their plans on hold, for hunkering down and waiting for the storm to pass. But social entrepreneurs, by definition, don't care for tradition. They go into business with a drive and passion to change forms of injustice, inequality and the status quo. Telling a social entrepreneur to shut up shop is like telling a lioness she needs to stop hunting for her cubs. Ultimately, the cause wins because livelihoods and lives depend on it.

It was in this spirit that began – with the order from government to shut up shop –

Social Enterprise

an iconic display of uniquely British social entrepreneurialism: Sew Scrubs For The NHS.

As the COVID-19 crisis deepened, news spread of a severe shortage of personal protective equipment for doctors and nurses all over the country and as the hand wringing from politicians began, the makers of Made in Ashford turned straight away to their calling. Sewing machines across Kent whirred into action as they began making masks, scrub hats, drawstring bags and more for the NHS; backed by a fundraising campaign to buy materials in bulk for anyone to get involved, regardless of their personal financial situation. Almost overnight, Craftship Enterprise raised over £4000 for materials, forming a group of over one thousand sewers and supporters, turning two miles of fabric, six hundred metres of tape

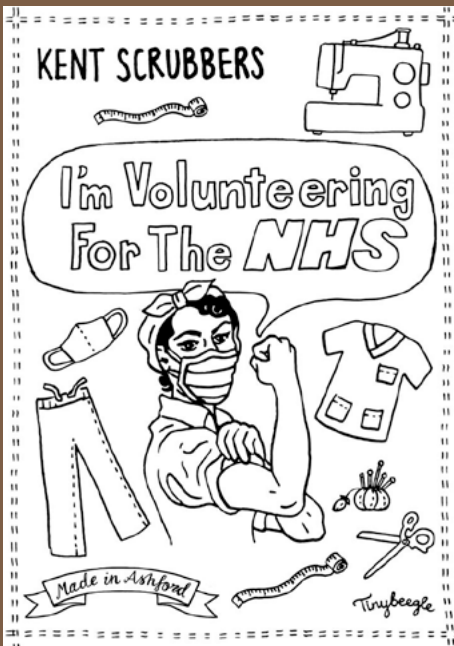
'...turning two miles of fabric, six hundred metres of tape and endless thread into potential lifesaving equipment...'

and endless thread into potential lifesaving equipment. But it didn't end there. As a candid sign in the Made In Ashford store says, "Haters gonna Hate. Creators gonna Create."

By the middle of May, 1138 sets of scrubs were created for the NHS and 763 scrubs, 127 facemasks, 844 hats and 958 washbags were dispatched to local care providers. £9000, (and counting) had been raised on a crowdfunding platform and £6500 from private donors,

with support from Ashford Borough Council, Deal Freemasons and local businesses, taking the total to £15,500. Melissa reflected, "people have contributed a HUGE amount to this project and the donation of time and skills has been key to providing our NHS Trusts in Kent with the scrubs they desperately need to keep them safer in their front-line roles. We have thanked them before but can't thank them enough - the sewers, collectors and distributors; the team of coordinators and printers; the broadcasters at Radio Ashford and every other person who is helping us through this. The volunteer effort has been immense: scrub sewing hours - 5,700; driving hours - 450; admin hours - 600; fabric/scrub sorting - 240. A total of 6990 hours! If they were all being paid the living wage it would equal £60,952.80 of effort!"

As you'd expect from such a group, the effort does not go unrecognised. Sarah Mabb - co-founder of 'Kent Scrubbers' as the group has come to be known, made sure the volunteers are treated to something special. She found local businesses willing to donate prizes for raffles and competitions that scrub sewers and other volunteers can enter to win. As Sarah says, "it's a lovely little way to show appreciation for what people are doing and a nice way for local businesses to get involved. Donations have been received



from Ashford Picture House; Old Dairy Brewery; Ashford Truck Stop; Biddenden Vineyard and East Kent Timber, so far.”

No doubt this will grow further, no doubt this will enter the annals of social entrepreneurialism in Kent and beyond, and no doubt these women will go on to even greater things, inspiring others as they go. Nothing can stop creators from creating. In fact, moments of crisis may provide the most fertile ground for makers and creators of all kinds. As the proverb goes, “necessity is the mother of invention.” Shakespeare apparently penned King Lear under quarantine from The Plague in the early 17th Century. A few decades later, a young Isaac Newton produced some of his best work during a year in quarantine, writing the papers that would form Calculus as well as coming up with theories of optics while playing with prisms in his bedroom! Not to mention germinating his theory of gravity, under lockdown. Admittedly, these two didn’t have to answer endless pointless emails and Zoom calls. They knew how to focus on their craft.

This historic moment will undoubtedly create a vacuum for business. A void that can be filled by social entrepreneurs. This is their moment. A time to prove that the future of business has arrived. The ones that survive – the fittest – will go on, and become even stronger. They will inspire new business leaders who align purpose with passion. In a 2018 report entitled, The Age Of The Social Entrepreneur, HSBC Bank found that “many of today’s entrepreneurs – particularly the younger generation – have a different aim: to make a positive impact on society. Nearly a quarter of business owners under the age of 35 consider benefiting society to be their main motivation. These socially-minded millennials prioritise areas such as protecting the environment or taking practical action in their community over, say, building financial



security for their family. In contrast, only 11 per cent of entrepreneurs over the age of 55 are chiefly driven by the desire to create a social impact.” That was 2018. Imagine how many under 35s will be thinking of starting a social enterprise when the world returns to work, after COVID-19.

The economic world will need to be rebuilt around social challenges, as Europe had to be after the Second World War. Social enterprise provides a template for a new kind of Marshall Plan because it is led by people who refuse to shut up shop, even when it’s acceptable to do so. People who refuse to lose. Refuse give up after failing time and time again. People who refuse to stand still, watch and moan. This new world order will attract New World Creators. Some of them are already here, brought down on the good ship Craftship Enterprise. Full of heroines of our time. Full of live saving supplies. Full of hope.

Hope is not cancelled.

Carl Adams

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