

ELECTRIC DREAMS

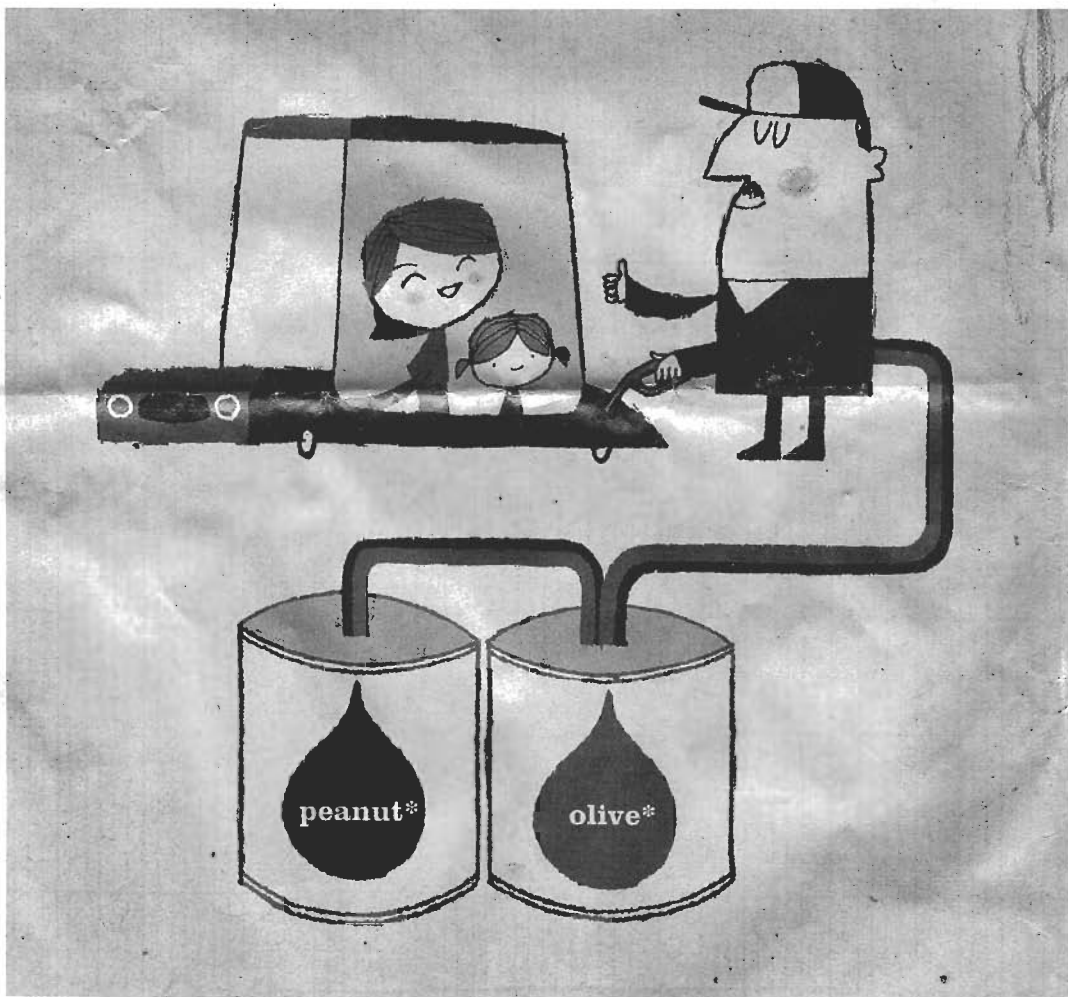
Bishop's Castle is situated in an area of outstanding national beauty. The small market town has a population of around 2,000 who enjoy the kind of things that go with rural life in England – there is a chapter of the Women's Institute, pubs which boast a fine selection of ales and a team of Morris dancers called the Shropshire Bedlams. It's not the place you would expect to find a mini-revolution, but that is exactly what is happening here. Fed up with rising gas and electricity prices and conscious of the ever-more devastating effect our energy consumption is having on the planet, a small group of dedicated citizens has decided to take matters into their own hands.

Though Bishop's Castle boasts its own eco-homes estate, The Wintles, we are not talking about a bunch of old hippies here. These revolutionaries include an ex-teacher, a retired council advisor and a dairy farmer, and together they have started Britain's first 'energy services club'. Most people will never have heard of such a thing; in fact, it's hard to stop the general public from nodding off at the mere mention of energy efficiency. But – as energy prices continue to soar and oil supplies dwindle – clubs like this could soon have the nation sitting bolt upright.

Christened Wasteless Escape, the club is an idea borrowed from industry whereby an energy services company is paid an agreed flat rate for supplying all the energy requirements of, for example, a business – therefore, it is in the interests of the energy services company to bring energy bills down in order to make money through savings. In this case, Wasteless Escape aim to operate as the energy services company on behalf of club members, who also benefit from the associated reduction in carbon emissions in their local environment.

"What the community is trying to do is work out how to deliver a solution to our energy consumption problems," explains Adam Kennerley, chairman of The Wasteless Society, the group of like-minded individuals which is responsible for the new club. Together they want to reduce the town's carbon emissions by 85 per cent by 2050, an ambitious target considering the

With dwindling oil supplies, rising energy prices and growing concerns about climate change, conserving energy is an urgent global quest. But what can we do? A small energy services club in Shropshire believes they have the answer



government target is 60 per cent by 2050.

There are many schemes which encourage energy efficiency, but, points out Kennerley, "They are not sustainable. They don't have a business case." Key to the success of Wasteless Escape, which was started with a £90,000 grant, is that it must eventually be self-financing. The hope is that happy customers, who have had their energy bills slashed without even lifting a finger, will put some of the

savings back into the club. "It's boring things like loft insulation, energy-saving light bulbs, keeping upstairs doors closed," says Kennerley. "Most of these things can be done for free. We want to give people better advice with more hand-holding. If they want help, we will broker the deals." The idea is eventually to get householders to sign contracts so Wasteless Escape can apply for bank loans to finance major changes (such as solar panels) which will then be paid

back over time by the householder.

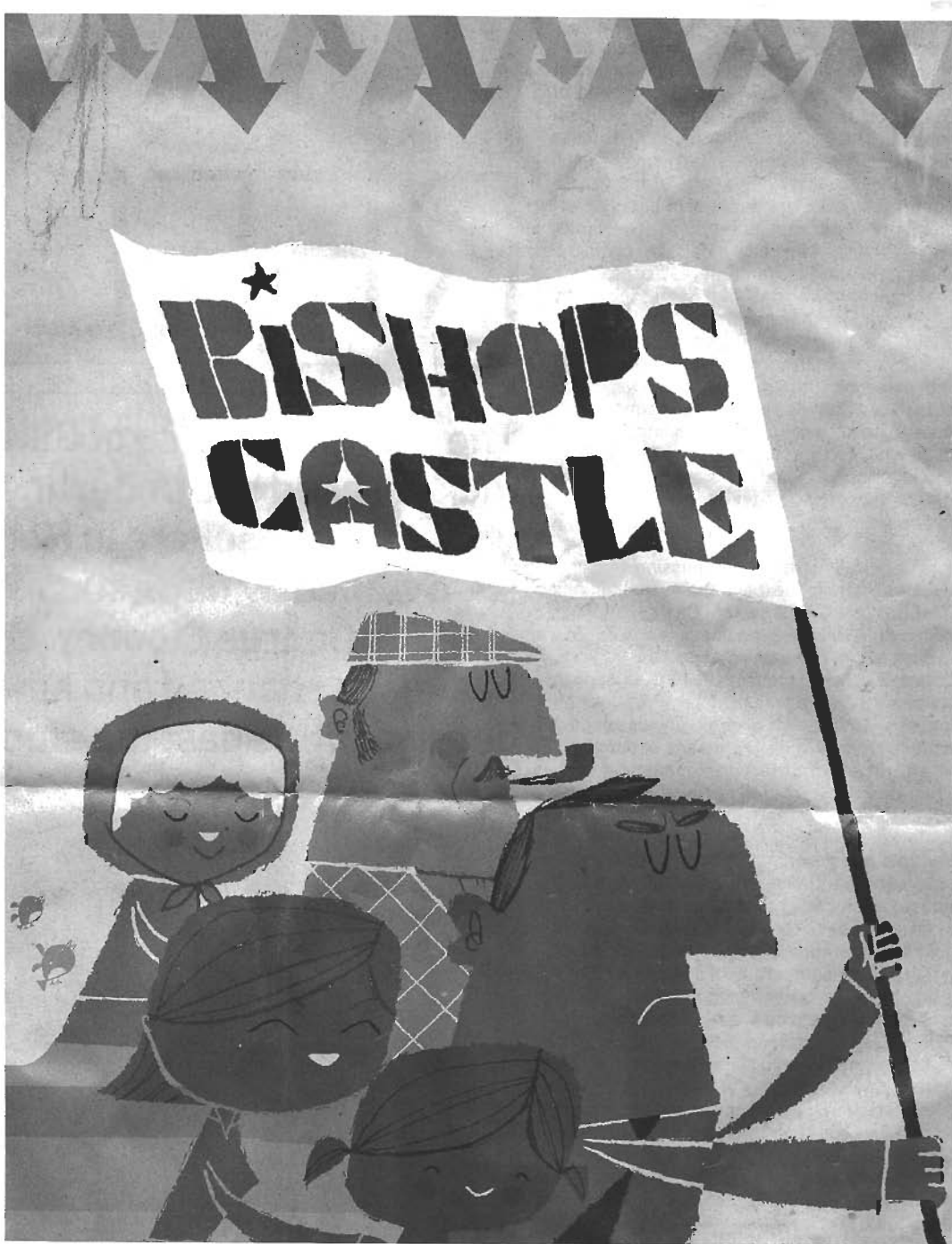
Jim Footner, Greenpeace energy campaigner says: "Energy services clubs provide a framework and incentive for people to save energy in a genuinely sustained way, and as people catch on to the fact they can help the environment and save money they are likely to grow. But there is a big onus on government to recognise the value of organisations like this and legislate accordingly. If we are going to stand a chance of stopping climate ►

change we need to improve energy efficiency and we have to move small-scale projects like this into the mainstream to achieve this."

As well as the energy club, Bishop's Castle will be the first place in the UK to sell bio-diesel from a petrol station forecourt. Wasteless Society director and local businesswoman Kaye Chambers will launch the scheme – which feeds into the energy services club ideal because it will help lower the town's carbon emissions – on January 20. She is responsible for picking up left-over cooking oil from shops and restaurants, having it processed and giving it to a local petrol station for sale. "We are all working evenings and weekends," says Chambers, a single mother who fits her environmental commitments round her business. "But it's very inspiring and somehow turns into your social life as well. There is a sense of urgency because I've got kids and I want them to be able to continue living in this country – at the moment, the prospect of climate change and the possibility of the gulf stream stopping means I don't know if they will be able to."

Perhaps the most unusual club member is Clive Pugh, a dairy farmer who lives just across the Welsh border in Powys. Farmers are not always noted for their commitment to environmentalism, but Pugh has not burned fossil fuels on his farm for 15 years. He uses two anaerobic digesters to break down the dung produced by his cows and produce methane, which is then used to heat and light the entire farm and two houses, as well as producing fertiliser. Pugh says: "Other farmers used to think I was a bit loopy, but now they are taking an interest, mostly because of the new regulations on waste and pollution." But he believes Britain's beleaguered farmers are unlikely to commit to building their own digesters without government help. "They [the government] could put a lot into it but they won't," he says. Like many, he sees the recent gas crisis suffered by the Ukraine when Russia turned off its pipelines as evidence of energy insecurity which could soon hit the UK, which is importing more and more natural gas from abroad. "What you put in to cattle comes out, so why not take out the energy before it sinks into the ground?" he asks.

David Finney, a former science and technology advisor to Shropshire Country Council who lives in Bishop's Castle, is a volunteer for Wasteless Escape. The club has four paid employees and 15 volunteers who are being



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trained to go into people's houses and find out which energy-saving improvements could be made. "The goal is to make Bishop's Castle and the district an example of how a local community can take responsibility for its actions," says Finney, who lives in a low-impact 'eco-home' he built himself. "We are aiming to have made 300-400 homes energy efficient over the next two years," he says. "Global warming and the rise in oil prices mean ironically energy conservation is being forced on us."

Kennerley plans to approach local organisations such as the WI to act as advocates of the scheme

and help attract more inhabitants of Bishop's Castle to the energy services club. "Climate change is on the agenda," he says. "And for most people, there are no real options. What we want to do is offer meaningful solutions." The aim is to spread the idea to other communities. "This is miniscule – Bishop's Castle is just a speck on the face of this planet," says Kennerley. But the town's vision may one day amount to far more than that. ■

More information for people wishing to start their own energy services club can be found at www.wasteless.co.uk