

FEATURE - Animation

A black silhouette of a boy in a long coat, carrying a large wooden structure resembling a windmill or a boat on his shoulders. The background is a solid, vibrant orange-red color.

The
adventures
of

WINDMILL BOY



Who is Windmill Boy and how did Wallace and Gromit help give him life? The University of Canterbury's animator in residence reveals all

Words by Vikki Rimmer pictures by Jose Pico and courtesy of Dan Richards



The story of a boy who, in a moment of inspiration, takes charge of the direction of his life by harnessing his dreams for the future, is as good a way as any to introduce both Dan Richards and the central character of his debut film *The Windmill Boy*.

Meeting 24-year-old Dan Richards from Faversham, the man behind the sensational *Windmill* project is as inspirational an experience as viewing the stop-motion animated film.

Dan has worked day and night for the past two years to bring to life the story of a boy kept prisoner in a windmill by an evil horde, until one day a fateful storm gives the boy inspiration for escape.

The filmic journey began back in the summer of 2003 with Dan sat on his bed drawing designs for a character called The Windmill Boy. Dan recalls: "I spent the summer thinking up ideas for a film with my mum, discussing characters and concepts. That summer my mum died of cancer very suddenly, which came as a real shock."

Determination

The death of Dan's mother made him even more determined to complete *The Windmill Boy* and to dedicate the film to her memory. So, after completing a course at Canterbury Christ Church University, he packed his bags for a trip to the centre of British Animation - Bristol.

The school, originally set up by Aardman, makers of *Wallace & Gromit*, is a mecca for animators from across the world. As the only English student on the course, Dan met some amazing animators from all over Europe, two of whom went on to work on *The Windmill Boy*.

Dan also got his hands on probably the most famous duo in British animation history when he worked on *Wallace and Gromit - Curse of the Were Rabbit*. Dan says: "The experience really gave me the vision and scope of how to make a large

animation project and was the catalyst for making my new film."

Returning home to Faversham, he was offered the chance to become the first ever animator in residence at the University of Canterbury, and with access to the University's equipment and facilities, was able to put the *Windmill* project into production.

Enter Steve Allen, renowned model maker and puppet concept designer famous for his work on *The Muppets*, *Fraggle Rock* and *Labyrinth*. Dan had previously worked as an apprentice to Steve, so when the opportunity came to put *The Windmill Boy* into production, Steve was one of the first people Dan called on to help with the project.

The work took 18 months to complete, with 14 weeks of model making and 12 weeks of animating. The film had 41 artists and technicians, producing all the sets and models and bringing the whole film alive. With amazing determination



Above: Windmill Boy



Above: Dan Richards animates *The Windmill Boy*

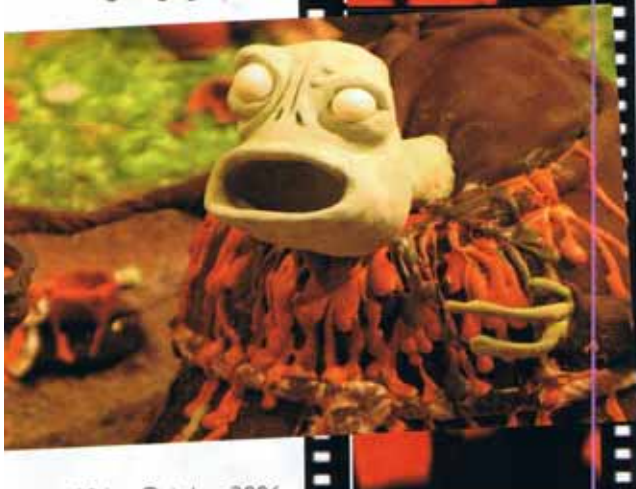
“We converted Dad’s garage into a workshop, the garden table into a mould and casting area and the conservatory into a fabrication area”



'Fate didn't put that boy in the mill to bake bread, no, fate had other reasons'



Below: Characters from the film including the evil Mayor eating orange 'gloop'



Dan has used every facility open to him - even his Dad's garage.

Dan says: "Dad's been amazingly supportive: we converted his garage into a workshop, the garden table into a mould and casting area, the brick barbecue into a work-bench and the conservatory into a fabrication area."

Not content with commandeering his Dad's BBQ and conservatory, Dan also nicked the poor man's shed to provide a temporary house for the model makers so that work could continue apace on the fantastical story.

The story of both *The Windmill Boy* and Dan's animated progress in the film world has culminated with both 'boys' soaring into a bright future and a date with fate. As the narrator of the film says, 'fate didn't put that boy in the mill to bake bread, no, fate had other reasons'.

Destiny

Two silent characters, 'fate' and 'destiny', stalk large across the film set, and it's not too fantastical a notion to suggest that destiny has taken a hand in Dan's own story. He won a well-deserved opportunity to show his film at The London International Animation Festival at The Curzon Soho this autumn.

The film first debuted in Kent with a special screening at The Powell Theatre and at special Windmill Boy weekends at the famous Sarre Mill in Kent. Dan says: "It's been amazingly atmospheric at the special weekend screenings at Sarre Mill, the inspiration behind the Windmill in the film."

The Windmill Boy has been made into a pilot and plans are afoot to raise funds to produce a 26 minute special for television. Dan says: "Ever since I first sat down on my bed and started to draw my first designs for *The Windmill Boy*, I have planned for this short to promote the character and hopefully lead to a TV special."

"I'd love to see Windmill Boy move around in his mill, like Doctor Who in his Tardis and travel to strange worlds like in *Gulliver's Travels*."

Dan is currently looking for funding to help bring animation back to Kent - and with Dan's enthusiasm and energy it would be unwise to tempt fate and say he won't succeed in animating his plans.

The Model Village with The Guildhall Faversham immortalised as The Guildhall in the film



Want to know more?

Visit www.windmillboy.com and to book to see the film and talk by Dan Richards, tel:01322 866293 www.aandrgirl.com

Did you know?

Kent has a rich history in animation, with Peter Firman and Olivier Postgate producing stop-motion animation in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s including *Bagpuss*, *Noggin The Nug* and *The Clangers*.

