Film & Animation

Hopewell Studios has an in-house animation department, also capable of producing small scale films, as well as sound recording facilities and an editing suite.

Simon Webster & Richard Sargent busy editing at Hopewell Studios

The Silent Years

The Silent Years was a project undertaken on the Graphic Arts & Design course at Leeds Metropolitan University as part of a B. A. Honours Degree. The idea behind the film was to depict a day in the life of a novice monk in a twelfth century monastery, showing the routines and lifestyle as well as reconstructions of the buildings in a medieval abbey.

Inspired by the great old ruins of Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, Simon Webster set himself the task of trying to convey what life was like for the Cistercian monks of long ago, and very quickly realised that this project would be more than he could handle alone. Fellow student Richard Sargent came onboard, initially to help with the storyboard, ultimately turning it into a two-man production.

The aim was to pull together as much historical information as could be found and to put it across in not only an educational but hopefully also an enjoyable way. The fictional monastery, whilst being an accurate representation of the standard layout shared by all medieval Cistercian abbeys, is heavily based on the site at Fountains.

To really appreciate the finished film it should be understood that Simon and Richard were simply two art students, working with no budget or professional guidance, and driven only by a shared vision. Neither of them was experienced at making films, but the university encouraged diversity, and animation facilities were available for use (rudimental though they were). They both learnt a lot during the 18 months it took to make The Silent Years, and despite setbacks and time constraints along the way, somehow managed to complete the dangerously ambitious 16 minutes of animated footage. Bear in mind that most animated films made on their course at Leeds were three to five minutes in duration at maximum. By comparison, what Simon and Richard were trying to accomplish, involving set building, props and costumes, lighting etc seemed more akin to an actual movie shoot.

The sets needed to be of a certain size so that the model characters would not be too intricate to animate, so they ended up with a collection of monastery buildings which were approximately 12 feet square when fully assembled, and monk figures about 15cm tall. For the soundtrack, which always comes before the visuals with animation, Simon and Richard visited Ampleforth Abbey to obtain some spoken Latin, and were fortunate enough to be allowed to use recordings of their Gregorian chants. The filming was done in blocks of two or three weeks whenever the equipment was available, between September 1994 and May 1995. You can see a selection of behind the scenes photographs from the making of the film in the gallery here...

Animation is filmed at the rate of twenty-five frames in every second, each frame requiring a slight alteration to the previous one, so that when the finished sequence is played back it gives the illusion of movement, and this is obviously a very time-consuming process. On average they would manage about ten seconds of animation in a day. This project formed the major part of both Simon and Richard's coursework and developed far beyond their original intentions, to a scale not foreseen but ultimately only fitting to the subject matter.

After completion, the film was transferred to VHS video and sold in the gift shop at Fountains Abbey, as well as several local stores. On Thursday 14 June 2001, Simon & Richard were invited along to the official opening of Fountains Mill, a newly renovated part of Fountains Abbey, by the National Trust. The Mill featured an upstairs room where visitors could watch The Silent Years on a television monitor. This in turn helped sales of the VHS video in the Fountains Abbey gift shop. The ongoing popularity of the video inevitably led to the decision to bring The Silent Years to DVD. Feeling that a sixteen minute student film alone was insufficient, and knowing that they both could see much room for improvement anyway, Simon & Richard decided to rebuild the film from scratch, and also include as much extra material as possible, giving The Silent Years a new lease of life. The film has been remastered and extended from sixteen minutes to twenty-six, featuring new footage and effects, and has been given a new narration (optional). Details of the differences between the two versions can be found here. Anyone worried that the film may have been altered beyond recognition should be happy to note that the original 1995 version is also included on the disc. You can view a gallery of image comparisons showing shots from the 1995 film and the remastered 2006 version here...

The Silent Years - Special Edition DVD

Co-produced by fellow students Simon Webster and Richard Sargent for their degree course during 1993-95, The Silent Years is a light-hearted educational animation which follows the misadventures of a new recruit in a 12th Century Cistercian Monastery.

Popular on video since it was first released, this Mini Masterpiece comes to DVD in a newly remastered Special Edition with new scenes and an extended timeline as the directors originally intended.

The Special Edition DVD of The Silent Years is now available to purchase direct from this website via our Online Shop!

Click here to buy your copies now...

The Silent Years has been completely re-mastered for this Special Edition. Click here to read the DVD Production Diaries.

Click here to read details about the design and production of the on-screen DVD menu system.

Format: PAL. Region Zero (worldwide)

Ratio 4:3. Colour. English

E: Exempt from classification

Exclusive DVD Special Features Include:

Divine Labour - The Making of The Silent Years (43 mins)

An in-depth documentary telling the story of The Silent Years during its original production as a sixteen minute student film at Leeds Metropolitan University. Featuring interviews with Simon Webster and Richard Sargent, with behind the scenes photos and clips. Narrated by Malcolm Neesam.

History Repeats - Making the New Version (15 mins)

Covering production of the new Special Edition of The Silent Years at Hopewell Studios in 2005/6, using behind the scenes footage, photos, and interviews with Simon Webster and Richard Sargent. Narrated by Malcolm Neesam.

Tour of an Abbey - Short Film (11 mins)

A guided tour around the buildings of a medieval Cistercian monastery. Featuring a specially constructed scale model of the full layout of the abbey, and using clips from The Silent Years itself to help the viewer to get to know their surroundings better. Narrated & produced by Richard Sargent.

Original 1995 Version (16 mins)

The Silent Years is presented here as it first appeared when it was made at Leeds Metropolitan University. This is the version that was released on video in 1997.

Interview with 'The Novice' - Featurette (5 mins)

A short tongue-in-cheek piece in which Richard Sargent meets the star of The Silent Years and attempts to ask him a few questions...

'Shot by Shot' Guide to the Film (32 mins)

An extended version of the Special Edition of The Silent Years featuring extra educational content intercut with the film, such as images of the ruins at Fountains Abbey, a closer look at details of props and costumes, and an informative voiceover by Simon Webster and Richard Sargent.

Audio Commentaries

Simon Webster and Richard Sargent discuss the making of the film and the ins and outs of animation in these optional audio tracks, available on the main film, the 1995 version, and the deleted storyboard sequence.

Music and Effects Soundtrack (audio option)

The new Special Edition of The Silent Years features a narration by Phil Lyth as the default audio; as an optional extra you can watch the film with no narration, just the music and sound effects track.

Complete Teacher's Guide Resource (PDF file)

The 1998 video for schools came with a Teacher's Notes booklet to accompany the film, which included historical background information, illustrations and teaching material. The full package is included as a PDF file on the DVD, meaning it can be downloaded and printed off.

Complete Original Storyboard

The original 1993 storyboard, a collection of drawings by Richard Sargent which provided the plan for filming, is reproduced in gallery form.

'Behind the Scenes' (galleries)

An archive of photographs taken during the production of The Silent Years in 1994/5, showing the progress of the project from set building to completion. Further galleries cover the art & design side, as well as a recent collection of photos taken during the Special Edition filming period in 2005/6.

Production Stills (galleries)

Photographs taken on-set by Simon Webster, covering nearly every camera shot from the original film.

Production Notes (trivia track)

An optional subtitle track which provides the viewer with a wealth of additional information about all aspects of the project as they watch the film.

English Subimages/stories/titles (subtitles)

Subtitles have been created for all DVD content to help the hard of hearing. English only.

Deleted Storyboard Scene with Commentary

A sequence from the new Special Edition which was never filmed is presented here in storyboard form as drawn by Richard Sargent, with commentary by Simon Webster and Richard Sargent.

And more!

VHS trailer/TV news clip/'Thousand Year History' text document/scene selection/animated menus.

...all this and Hidden Easter Eggs too!

Keep your eyes peeled for a few special extras on the DVD.

Please click here to view our Film and Animation Portfolios

Click here to buy The Silent Years DVD from our webshop