

Nick Park was at school when he first started dabbling in animation. At age 13 he made movies in his parent's attic. He was 17 when one of his earliest works was screened by the BBC in 1975. It was entitled **Archie's Concrete Nightmare**. After completing a BA at Sheffield Art School Nick went on to study animation at the National Film and Television School at Beaconsfield. It was here that Nick commenced

#### A Grand Day Out.

In February 1985 Nick joined Aardman Animations and, with their help, completed this first Wallace and Gromit adventure. In 1989 Aardman produced the Lip Sync series for Channel 4. Nick's contribution was **Creature Comforts**. That was Oscar No 1. The film also inspired one of the most successful advertising campaigns of all times. Next came **The Wrong Trousers**, seen on BBC TV on Christmas Day 1992.

It brought in Oscar No 2, as well as 30 International Awards. Nominated for 1996 was **A Close Shave** and that brought in Oscar No 3.

The article preceded a holiday season of Nick Park's work on BBC & Channel 4 television, with BBC 2 using the odd couple in hilarious station breaks during holiday programmes.

It might be hard to believe but Nick's original film, **Creature Comforts**, did not feature Wallace and Gromit. However it did bring him his first Oscar in 1990. The two had their debut in **A Grand Day Out** the saga of their hunt for cheese to go with their tea and crackers. Nominated for an Oscar and winner of a BAFTA, it was followed by **The Wrong Trousers**, which did take the Oscar in 1993, as well as a BAFTA and the Cartoon d'Or.

One of the most striking features of both **The Wrong Trousers** and **A Close Shave**, is the subtle and expressive photography. Dave Alex Riddett takes up the story: "I approach the story as if it were live action. The set is lit with that in mind. As far as I am concerned we have to light them as real people, because in our minds, and in the mind of the audience they are. Both Nick and I collaborate closely at the storyboard stage. Our starting reference is very often a film classic. We discuss a "Hitchcock" look, or maybe the feel of something by Carol Reed (*The Third Man*). Then I work out how to light and shoot to achieve that effect." John chips in to talk about voltage control. "Shooting

a frame at a time we have to ensure that we have a constant voltage. We monitor all the time.

Voltage fluctuation is a major problem to us as it can be anything from two minutes to two hours between exposing frames. 2 or 3 seconds of film in the can a day is about the norm. This presents a problem with the potential voltage fluctuation as supplied. The best solution we have come up with is using the Strand Andi DX Tourer. We set the top trim on all dimmers to 220V. Then using 220V lamps we eliminate most, if not all, of the problem. We are not 20 volts down on a 240V lamp. Once we explained our problems most suppliers were happy to help make 220V lamps available."

Continues Dave, "There was a great tradition in Britain for children's television like **The Magic Roundabout**. However the programmes, although excellent, were never really lit. Gerry Anderson came close to breaking through with the puppets of **Thunderbirds**. But even then the real film look seemed to elude him. I think Nick's gift is one of keen observation, an eye for detail that goes far deeper than most."

Regular viewers of Nick's work will testify to this. Drainpipes have rust streaks, newspapers have appropriate headlines. In one scene in **A Close Shave**, Gromit reads "Crime and Punishment" by Fido Dogstoefsky.

How does anyone manage to direct a plasticine figure and decide what it will do? Says Dave: "You become the figure, you become an actor. You go through the motions, you time them and execute them so that each frame will match whatever might be required". Adds John, "It is not unusual to see animators grimacing in front of mirrors, walking a certain distance and timing it." Is there any one thing that singles out the animator and makes him or her different. Dave has no doubt.



"It's observational skills, the noticing of things that other people just do not see, yet are always there. How someone taps their finger, how they frown. Gromit is an example of all of this. It's the eyebrows and the eyes. A frown for an expert takes about 15 minutes to create". Unlike many animation productions the use of plasticine allows for the minute sculpting of expressions. Thus the only limit to the effect is the patience and creativity of the animator. Such patience must have been stretched to the limit with Nick's first film. It took 6 years to complete. Today a Wallace and Gromit is more likely to take around 14 months.

This year **A Close Shave** was nominated for an Oscar winning for Nick and Aardman a third statuette. There is a strong possibility of a full length feature film soon. It might not feature Wallace and Gromit. Nick Park does not want to over expose his heroes. That he has plans for them seems certain. Whatever the outcome children of all ages, in other words people like us all over the world, have something to look forward to. As our **LIGHTS!** reporter walked away from Aardman Animation on a chilly afternoon in March he swears he saw a strange motor-cycle rig roar out of the car park. In it were a bald-headed man and a dog with large eyebrows.

Maybe they are taking a vacation, maybe they had run out of cheese, or just maybe they were nipping to the store to get a larger trophy cabinet. Whatever it was lets hope they come back very soon. ●

Wallace and Gromit has been broadcast in 29 countries including the United States where it appeared on PBS as well as the Fox Network. The sales of licensed products, too numerous to mention, has literally gone through the roof.

(Left) Ian Jewels, Gaffer, stand mounts a Harmony profile. In the background is Wallace's Space Vehicle from **A Grand Day Out**.

(Above) Gromit catching up on some knitting in bed clearly illustrates Alex Riddett's lighting philosophy. (*A Close Shave*)

Peter Lord and David Sproxton are the co-founders of **Aardman Animation**. It is a partnership that dates back to their schooldays.

They set up their company in 1972, moving to Bristol in 1975. The studio has been nominated for the Oscar five times, winning three, all in the last 6 years. They have developed adult interest in animation with programmes commissioned by UK's Channel 4. Their very first creation was Morph for BBC Children's TV. The studios' reputation continues to grow. **Creature Comforts** inspired commercials for

The Electricity Association, while Wallace and Gromit appeared for Reebok. Other commercials include Lurpak Butter, Ace Bars-McVities, Rice Crispies, and the Central Office of Information. In all the company shoots about 18 commercials a year, a tremendous work load given the precise animation required.

Strand Lighting, through their West of England distributor **Stage Electrics**, of Bristol and Plymouth, is pleased to be a part of the continuing success of Wallace and Gromit, as well as all the other exciting work being done at Aardman Animations.