

Aardcase helps chickens run

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Who has not been delighted by the escapades of Wallace, the eccentric Lancashire inventor and his faithful, but long-suffering dog, Gromit? Perhaps you remember Morph from BBC's 'Vision on' series back in 1976? Or Douglas the Lurpack butter man? These films, and many commercials, were the creation of the studios of Aardman Animations Ltd of Bristol which has achieved world wide fame, Oscars and an impressive list of awards during the last decade - a cracking performance by a delightful British company. Now the company is about to release its first feature length movie, Chicken Run, in UK cinemas on the 30th June. An animated comedy-thriller (loosely based on the sixties classic The Great Escape which starred Steve McQueen) it's about a group of chickens who, to avoid finishing up in chicken pies, engage in a daring and spectacular escape. A co-production with US giants Dreamworks (Steven Spielberg's studio) and Pathe Pictures, this big budget production retains all the charm of the Wallace & Gromit films and is set to be a smash-hit world wide.

Worthing-based computer manufacturer, Sight Systems Limited, is proud of its contribution to the success story of Aardman Animations. Its specially-designed vibration-proof black-box computer - known as the Aardcase - of which it has supplied more than 40, plays a vital role in the commercial world of 3-D animation and the production of Chicken Run and Wallace & Gromit films.

3-D animation, as opposed to the 2-D digital computer animation used to make Toy Story II, usually involves articulated puppets or models made of Plasticine built around an adjustable skeleton called an armature. The action is shot one frame at a time but is shown in the finished film at 24 frames a second deceiving the eye into believing it is watching a moving picture. Why bother, when you can do it by computer? Well, to achieve the subtlety and charm characterised by the Wallace & Gromit films, you have to shoot 35mm film.

It's incredibly labour intensive. Over 30 cameras units were working at once to achieve a production target of up to 100 seconds of finished film a week. It took one and a half years to shoot the film. Sight Systems' Aardcase computers were used on every set and in shooting every scene of Chicken Run.

This sophisticated computer system is connected to the camera and uses Perception Video Recorder software, from DPS, to help animators scrutinise their animations 'on the fly' using Video Assist and a Digital Frame Store designed and built by Aardman. This technical wizardry allows the animator

to plan character movements on screen allowing him to mix between frames already shot and one currently being shot so he can check that apparent motion is smooth and nothing has moved on the set.

The Aardcase computer is what Sight Systems Managing Director, Phil Walters likes to call 'an adaptive engineering solution'. Working closely with the technical team at Aardman Animations, Sight Systems used its technical capability, experience and resources to research, design and manufacture a complete system to meet the customer's unique needs. 'The solution exceeded expectations and was supplied at an agreeable price resulting in repeat orders', reports Mr Walters.

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