

'A Village Life'

Jan Webley and Lizzie Westray

In February 2023 Luigi put out an email to the SaveAs Writers community, saying that a local film director, Nigel Woodley, was looking for writers for a short film. And, in August 2024, the residents of the tranquil and beautiful village of Elham were entertained by a small film crew making use of locations around the place. In between, quite a lot happened.

Back in February 2023, we both expressed an interest in working on the project. We were both members of SaveAs but had never met – and, though Jan had worked collaboratively on a script before, Lizzie had not. We met, talked it over, then arranged to meet with Nigel in the café of the Marlowe Theatre – which has the benefits of being quite good for meetings, has a bit of literary kudos and isn't too expensive for a pot of tea and a scone either.

Nigel had a very loose brief about the project. He wanted a thirty minute film, with low production costs and a local, village setting. His only suggestions as far as the characters and plot went were that it might contain scarecrows at a village fete, who came to life and acted out the desires of their makers, something which he thought might edge towards comedy or horror, but he was very open as to the final result.

Both of us hail from rural upbringings, so we knew that village communal events contain a rich vein to mine for character, experiences and history, and saw that this could evolve further, into a meditation on village life, with its quirks, foibles and histories. Our aim was surrealism tempered with humanity and humour, and the final script has a mix of human and scarecrow characters, all of whom are part of the village, its past and present, all of whom need to find their place.

The most lengthy part of the process was developing the characters' plotlines and the structures which enabled them to journey through to their own conflict resolution – all as a comedy and in under thirty minutes. Working and collaborating face to face was an essential part of this, giving us an acid test as to the comedy value of each step. We also felt there had to be some flexibility for the casting of characters – such as a general age and appearance, rather than being too specific, as there might be a limited number of actors. (In the final event, many of the actors were professionals and very close to our original visions of the characters, but we still had to change the sex of one character and a substantial feature of another for filming.)

Once the script for 'A Village Life' was finished we also got involved in some of the preproduction, such as casting, prop making, (including a 'dead' hamster in a blue cavalier outfit) costumes and in the filming, talking with the actors about motivation and settings. We also met with the drone operator who will be filming the atmospheric shots for the introductory sequences.

We're looking forward to seeing the finished project, which should be edited and ready to go by the end of the year. Nigel's intention is to enter 'A Village Life' into local film festivals and competitions and to achieve some distribution, which is something he's done with his previous short films.

We'll keep you updated on any future screenings and, in the meantime, we're in the early stages of another collaboration. No dead hamsters in this one, though.