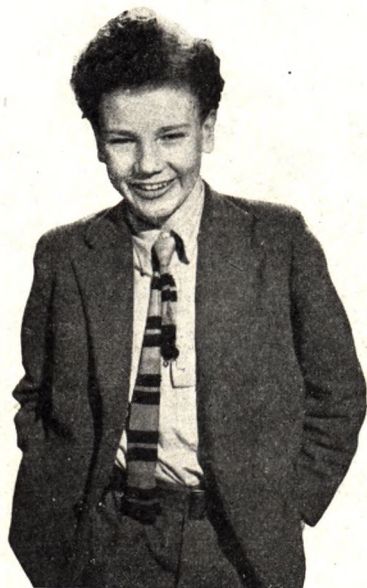




FILM's artist Harry Dodd editor John Rowe, Michael Medwin, Robert Raymond and William—caught by Richard Cantouris

W-I-L-L-I-A-M!

In the person of William Graham, he will be with us until 1953



WE WERE TALKING to a United Artists publicity man about the mounting cost, in time and money, of British films. "Oh, I don't know," he demurred. "We make our 'William' pictures in six weeks." "There you are," we said triumphantly. "Six months for just—" and we suddenly came to earth. "Six weeks?" we echoed. "You mean you make the entire film in six weeks?" "Come and see," he said, simply.

So that was how we found ourselves at Southall Studios, where films are somehow produced against overwhelming odds in the shape of claustrophobic shortage of space, lack of facilities, a depressing locality, and a formidable degree of inaccessibility.

Inside the single sound-stage, however, we found ourselves plunged into the midst of what might be termed an English version of "Hellzapoppin'." Lights were blazing, people shouting, painters painting, plasterers plastering, actors acting, carpenters tearing down sets and building new ones, while in and out through the crush weaved director Val Guest and his camera, shooting a line here and a gesture there, recording fractional glimpses of his cast against backgrounds that rose and were demolished again while we watched. It was the last day of "William Comes to Town."

The "William" series will run to

twelve films, two a year until 1953. The entire family has been signed up for the series—William Graham as William, Garry Marsh as his father, Jane Welsh as his mother, Muriel Aked as his sister, and Jumbles, his dog.

Val Guest, who has directed the first two ("Just William's Luck" and "William Comes to Town"), writes the scripts himself, using mainly original story material, but incorporating episodes from the books by Richmal Crompton.

The first was conceived last July and trade-shown in December. Simultaneously, Guest was writing the second, which was begun a few weeks later.

The first two weeks were spent on location at Olympia, shooting scenes against a background of Bertram Mills' circus.

"We used a handy little device to avoid too much interest by the public," Val told us as we trotted beside him round and round the set in pursuit of the fleeting cast and flying camera. "It was a wooden contraption that looked like a side-show stall, covered with signs and slogans. It was on wheels, and inside we had a camera, with camera operator and assistant. I would stand beside it, tell Garry Marsh to go over to the roundabout, do what he had to do, and exit left. At the right moment, a thump on the side of the box and the camera started. We couldn't miss."

With the location stuff in the can, the unit descended with wild whoops on the set at Southall. Here, in the remaining four weeks, was shot the rest of a full-length (1 hour 20 minutes) feature film, at a total cost of perhaps £60,000.

Teamwork is the key

The secret lies in the perfect teamwork between Production and Construction, between those who take and those who make. With only one sound-stage to work on, there is no question of shooting endlessly on one stage while the carpenters take their time about building a new set on another, as is done in bigger studios. Everything has to be done at once.

What happens, therefore, is that while Val Guest and his camera crew are shooting at one end of the huge barn-like building, the rest of his thirty-five-strong team are hastily erecting sets at the other. The cast rehearses to the accompaniment of hammering, sawing,

shouting. When the carpenters pause to suck their thumbs, Val Guest rolls his camera.

In this way he gets as much as ten or fifteen minutes shooting a day in the can, which is phenomenal compared with the two or three minutes averaged in big studios. The construction crew, on their side, work wonders of contraction, on one occasion shoe-horning nine sets into the single sound-stage.

Everything is planned down to the last degree, both in time and cost. Each day at three there is a conference just off the stage, when each department—construction, design, wardrobe, transport, etc.—presents its costings for the day. These are compared with the original estimates, so that the producer knows from day to day exactly how much he is running over or under his target figure.

Snags do crop up. "William Comes To Town" includes scenes at Downing Street, where William and his friend go to tell the Prime Minister that his father knows how to solve the nation's problems (or at least he says so every breakfast-time!). But permission to film the outside of No. 10, Downing Street was refused, so a set had to be built, at heavy cost.

Cricket is their game

Returning from lunch with Val Guest, where he told us how he discovered Jean Simmons in a waiting-room and gave her her first part with Margaret Lockwood in "Give Us the Moon," we came across two boys playing cricket in the yard with Michael Medwin, who plays a reporter in the film. They were William and his friend, Henry.

Led with considerable aplomb by these

two to Garry Marsh's dressing-room, we were subjected to a merciless hail of facts. William Graham, curly-haired, bright-eyed, and keen-faced, told us that he was the son of a blacksmith, that he applied for the part while touring with a Carroll Levis show, that he wanted to play a "sort of Donald O'Connor part" one day, and that he would be twenty-one by the time the William series ended.

His partner, Brian Weske, a small but knife-sharp boy of fifteen, admitted casually to playing in twenty-four films and hundreds of broadcasts, and said that his eventual medium was drama (because his father thought he would "stink as a comedian").

They live together with Brian's people in Brixton (William's parents are in Darlington) and spend their spare time learning lines and going to bed early in order to be on the set at 8.30 every morning.

Fishing used to be their favourite relaxation, but they admit that the studio no longer encourages their habit of fishing knee-deep off the top of Chertsey weir. (Yes, they did fall in once.)

As they bounced around the dressing-room, with inexhaustible energy, we began to feel older and older, until finally, when they challenged us to a game of cricket, we just had to leave. Wishing them luck, we were crossing the studios to the exit when we saw Val Guest fidgeting impatiently atop his camera while two men hastily moved a piece of furniture on the set.

After about thirty seconds, Val suddenly burst into sound.

"Come on, let's get going," he shouted. "We've taken more time on this than 'Ben Hur' . . ."

Lifelines No. 3 William Graham by Harry Dodd

