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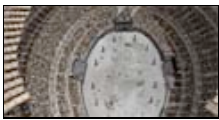
## Post Production

### Noses to the grindstone

Rob Buckley



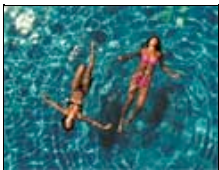
“When we first started, we had a few opening days. I remember standing in reception and thinking, ‘S\*\*t, is anyone going to turn up?’”



It seems odd, in retrospect, that the MD of a company that is now the epitome of trendy post-production - the rock-and-roll effects house of Soho, if you like - should have had insecurities about how popular his company was going to become. But, eleven years later, The Mill is probably London's most famous and most popular commercials and feature-film post-house, and Robin Shenfield has little to be worried about.



Complete with multi-coloured iMacs on every desk, runners who are usually more qualified than the clients they serve and seventeen kinds of coffee available on demand (probably), The Mill's vast West Soho-offices are almost a caricature of a top-end post-house's. But then, when you work on projects like *Gladiator*, *Tomb Raider*, *Hannibal* and commercials that everyone's seen and wondered at, clients come to expect a certain je ne sais quoi. In keeping with the company's image, The Mill started in January 1990 with most of its backing coming from rock group, U2. A sister company to the Irish Windmill Lane house, it landed on an unsuspecting Soho on Great Marlborough Street like “a big hungry monster” according to Shenfield. “Most companies started off small back then, but we started out with the aim of being big so we could get the top-end work. We had to get premises that were suitable - the offices were originally 12,500 square feet - so we took the Great Marlborough Street site. But there are still glass walls in people's minds, particularly if you're west of Regent Street or north of Oxford Street, so we felt slightly on a limb.”



Shenfield believes The Mill was very different from the post-houses the market had known up to that point.

“We were the first digital company almost anywhere in the world and we were breaking a lot of new ground with technology. Plus we had a big building and our rooms had windows.” He recalls the shock that greeted the company's opening among his rivals. “It dawned on us graphically what people were thinking when we saw one of our competitors at one of our receptions. I subsequently heard there were meetings being held at the time where they met and grumbled about us and took bets on how long we might last. People really did expect us to go out of business in the first year.”

After a slightly jittery first year (Shenfield confesses that one or two jobs didn't go swimmingly, putting the irate clients off doing anything more at the firm for another three years), the firm really got into its stride by 1994, by which point it was growing by 25% per annum. Time to do something big again.

As if having backing from Ireland's premier rock band wasn't windswept and interesting enough for Shenfield and the rest of The Mill's board, in 1995 the company launched Mill Film with the aim of becoming one of the top dogs in the world feature-film effects market. Which might, by The Mill's standards, have been a little dull if it hadn't been for the alliance the firm cemented in 1997 with Ridley and Tony Scott, owners of Shepperton Studios and directors of such movies as *Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *Top Gun*, *Crimson Tide*...

Again Shenfield knew the firm had to come into the market his

“You can’t build a business of real scale, and you can’t compete for the more creatively stimulating end of the marketplace if you’re just a small company, chugging along.” So he and the board went looking for partners for Mill Film just as the two Scotts were looking for somewhere with which they could work on their projects. Mill Film is now recruiting like there’s no tomorrow, has acquired two other companies, and has 10 projects on the go between its Great Marlborough Street and Shepperton sites, so obviously there’s something in Shenfield’s philosophy. Eleven years on, the marketplace is very different from the one in which The Mill started. The Web has spread itself all over the planet and anyone who’s anyone has a website. Interactive television has arrived in the UK, and to a lesser extent, the rest of the world, and it won’t be long before interactive advertising becomes the norm. And many of the names that were famous in post have now disappeared while others have sprung up seemingly from nowhere.

Yet Shenfield says he can still count his direct competitors on the fingers of one hand. Even Liberty Media, which has been buying up post houses all over Soho and is rumoured to be looking at Shepperton Studios as a possible acquisition, isn’t a big threat to The Mill. “I recognise Liberty is a huge, unique corporate consolidator in video post-production, with a huge amount of muscle behind it. They have bought a lot of companies, but the only competitor of ours they’ve bought is Rushes. The companies are limited in their ability to act as one because they’re all in different marketplaces.”

But The Mill is adapting to the changing times, having launched an interactive television division and a web division (The Mill Interactive Lab and E-Mill respectively) in recent months.

“Increasingly, we’re operating more internationally: anything up to 15% of our business is from the US and we’re doing more work to make ourselves better known in the European market. Now, I’d characterise us as a moving image company: we do everything from the Internet through to the movie screen.” In ten years time, Shenfield predicts, The Mill will be “an interactive centre for creative production”.

“I think what’s always driven us is the ambition to be at the top of the marketplace, where things are the hardest to fulfil. We want to be at the top.”