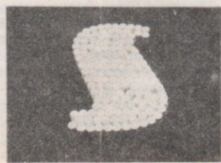
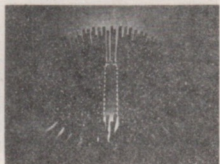
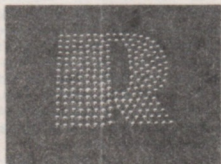
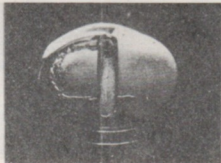


THE EFFECTS GAME



**JOHN FLEMING TALKS
TO THE BBC VISUAL
EFFECTS DESIGNER
BEHIND THE SPECIAL
EFFECTS ON SUCH
FANTASY OFFERINGS
AS THUNDERBIRDS,
THE DAY THE EARTH
CAUGHT FIRE, DOCTOR
WHO AND BLAKE'S 7,
IAN SCOONES.**



Opposite above: A highly detailed model space ship built by Scoones for the BBC series Doctor Who. Opposite below: The award-winning title sequence for the science fact tv show Tomorrow's World. Above: Ian Scoones.

house down by the River — lonesome marshes all the way round. I'd get up in the middle of the night and wander out across the marshes. I loved atmosphere right from the start. My earliest recollections are of the Blitz. I can remember, before we moved to Kent, watching bombs hitting the streets in London. I didn't know the horror of it all, I just saw the incredible colours, especially at night-time. And the bangs. I don't like horror in real life — a car accident is nauseating — but it's great fun for me being able to fool people and turn their stomachs purely for entertainment. It's solely fantasy — grown up fairy stories."

He went to Medway College of Art with Keith Wilson (see Starburst 13) and, when he left, tried to get work in feature films. He wrote 75 letters and got no reply from anyone. But then he struck lucky. He met a famous actor who lived fairly near to him in Gillingham. The actor put him in touch with effects man Les Bowie and Scoones became one of the "Bowie boys", who also included Derek Meddings (see Starburst 11 & 12) and Brian Johnson (Starburst 9). The first film he worked on was *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, for which he was paid £10 a

week — good money at the time. Bowie gave him, like many other youngsters, his first big break.

"I had," says Scoones, "the best training possible because of the variety of work. I will always be eternally grateful to (the late) Les Bowie. I started off as a trainee matte artist because of my art training. I wasn't very good really and also I purposely wasn't very good because I found it rather boring to be stuck away in a black room delineating paintings and strips of film, which is highly, highly technical. I wanted to be on the floor where the action was."

Bowie had, at one time, been head of the matte department at Pinewood and, for *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, he used about fifty photographic cut-outs painted over to show deserted London streets. Rubble and debris were painted onto the scenes and live actors matted into certain sections. Scoones explains: "It was a very clever way which Les had. The possibilities are endless with models and photographic cut-outs lined up to live-action. And, apart from all the cut-outs, there was loads of smoke, which is what I call prop effects: fogging up the stage every single day, much to the annoyance of the sparks (electricians) and the actors."

Bowie also had a contract with Hammer Pictures and so Scoones worked on various horror movies (see filmo-

**"HORROR FILMS DON'T ACTUALLY
HAVE THAT MANY EFFECTS IN THEM
— ONLY THE ODD PROP OR TWO."**

graphy below). "Horror films don't actually have that many effects in them," says Scoones. "You might have an establishing shot of a model gothic castle. You'll have the odd prop or two to make — a heart, a pulsating lung, laboratory equipment or whatever. Then you have to wait a few weeks for the odd day with mist. At the end, there'd always be the inevitable fire — the paraffin lamp dropped on the straw in the middle of a fight or whatever. They were almost formulated: the same actors, the same technicians, even the same sets all juggled around."

So, although effects men are always learning, there came a point where Scoones was learning little that was very new. And that's when he joined Gerry Anderson.

"Les (Bowie) basically had this 'repertory company' of young assistants," says Scoones. "There were obviously some professional, bona fide people with him apart from all his 'boy scouts'. But basically it was Bowie's boys. And every now and then the boy scouts had to go

When I talked to BBC Visual Effects Designer Ian Scoones at Home in Gillingham the surroundings were, to say the least, unsettling. On a side-board lay a rubber vampire bat. In a corner there was a monster from *Quatermass II*. There were various scale models of spacecraft, a drawer full of eyeballs and a very real skull sitting on the bookshelf, yellow with age.

"My art master probably influenced me more than anybody else at school," Ian Scoones was telling me. "He knew that I had an interest in the macabre because I was always drawing monsters eating people and he once said to me *Ah, here's a little press cutting that might interest you*. It was all about the (Kent) marshes which I lived near. Evidently, every now and again, on a certain piece of marshland called Dead Man's Island, the water would wash away some of the clay and a coffin would pop out of those lonely, windswept marshes. So I went off down to the marshes and found my own skulls and coffins by prodding in the clay. It was unconsecrated ground: Napoleonic prisoners."

And that's where the skull on the bookshelf came from: "The brain was still intact after all those years," Ian Scoones explained to me. "The clay acted as a preserver. As I pulled him out of the broken box he'd been buried in, the clay

**"I WAS ONE OF THOSE BOYS AT THE
BACK OF THE CLASS WHO HAD THE
BANNED HORROR COMICS**

fell out of the spinal column and out plopped his brain — including his teeth, which I then had to try and pick up out of the mud. He's been used in a number of films and on television. He made his debut in *The Curse of Captain Clegg* (1962; aka *Captain Clegg*; US title *Night Creatures*).

Scoones was to work for Hammer Pictures, the Gerry Anderson outfit and BBC TV, where work has included *Dr Who*, *Blake's 7*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Key to the Universe*. As a child, it was the bizarre which fascinated him:

"I was one of those boys in the back row who had the horror comics which were banned in the mid-Fifties. They released the mind into fantasy and imagination, which I'm far more interested in than any other type of effect — You can do certain abstract things and captivate the audience with something they've never quite seen before."

Atmosphere was something he grew up with: "I lived in this very old gothic

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off and do their own thing because there was no work for them. Gerry Anderson was expanding (when *Thunderbirds* was about to start) and moved to buildings further up on the Slough Trading Estate leaving his first studio, which Les took over. So we all went up there, but then we heard that Gerry was looking for people and one or two of us went over. I mean, we all used to meet at lunchtime in the same pub and every now and again we'd beg or borrow the odd can of paint or paintbrush because, obviously, we had the same sort of workshops doing the same sort of thing.

"When I'd first got into the film game (with Les Bowie), Keith Wilson was still at college and I introduced him to Derek Meddings and he (Wilson) started straight away with the Gerry Anderson outfit, whereas I was still with the Bowie outfit. And then — small world — I started with Keith in the art department at Gerry's and it wasn't long before, through the expansion of *Thunderbirds*, we had two 'live action' units which were looking after the puppets and miniature sets and

"ATMOSPHERE IS A PART OF SCALING A MINIATURE LANDSCAPE. ONE CAN MAKE THE BACKGROUND APPEAR MUCH MORE SUBTLE BY HAVING A MIST WHICH JUST SOFTENS THE BACKGROUND PAINTING."

we had two special effects units churning out, on average, about six different set-ups a day — which is going it some. We used to work until eleven o'clock every night and lived on fish and chips in the evening.

"I learnt a helluva lot from Derek Meddings on *Thunderbirds* because Derek had learnt from Les and discovered basically through trial and error (on the Anderson series) what speeds to use for doing certain shots: explosions, fire, model spaceship take-offs, landings and crashes."

Scoones left the Anderson outfit after the first series of *Thunderbirds* and returned to Les Bowie for another couple of years, working on more Hammer films. "Then it was on to *The Battle of Britain* and then unemployment and Auntie BBC took me on and I've stayed with them for about ten years now. Our department has quadrupled in ten years and it's still expanding. We've now got about ten designers, each with a team of three to draw on."

Obviously, in that time, feature film techniques have become much more sophisticated and, because of budgets, effects on the big screen are generally more spectacular than on television. I put this to Scoones and he agreed, but reminded me of an interesting point: "You must remember that the majority of people don't go to the cinema in this country. Only the sophisticated few, especially in big towns like London. So Mrs Brown of Scunthorpe sees more on television than she ever does at the local cinema. But, yes, we do try to become more sophisticated, as time and money will allow, each year.

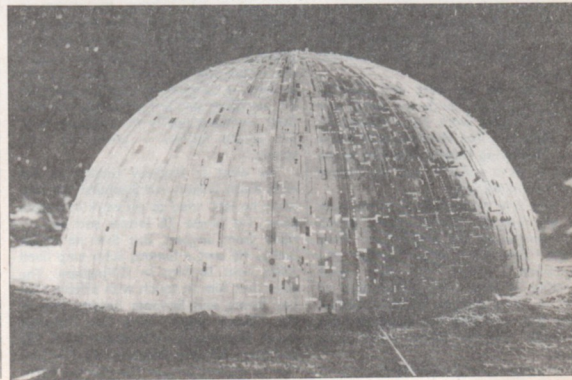
"One's improving all the time. (At the

BBC) there's a complete army of effects people working on something like 18-20 shows a week, some of which — like *Blake's 7* — will take a big chunk out of our manhours output, whereas others are perhaps just doing a one-off. And we all have our frustrating problems of having to work out very quickly how to do certain things which perhaps have never been done before."

There's more to effects than spectacular bangs, as Ian Scoones points out: "It's very easy to do an explosion provided you know what you're doing and go by the laws of safety. Everybody thinks *Wowee! That's fantastic!* and you get ripples of applause on the unit. Great.



Below: A domed city from the first series of *Blake's 7*. Above: Ian Scoones and a camera crew during the filming of the same episode of *Blake's 7*.



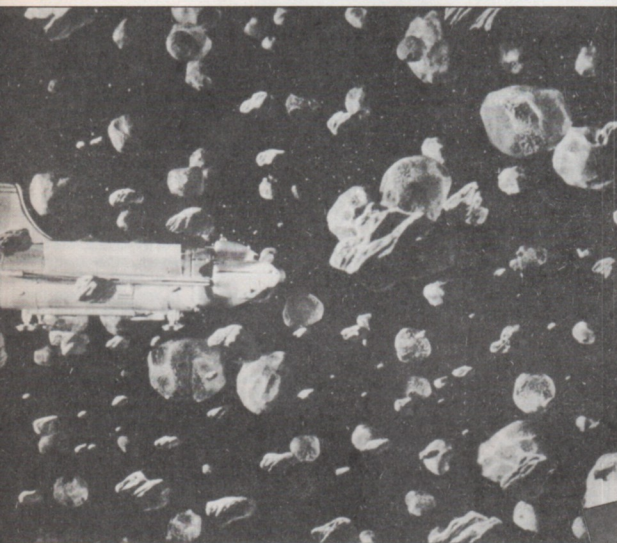
But there's maybe less thought put into something like that than something that's very intricate for a comedy show like *The Goodies*, where virtually every other gag is a visual gag needing a special prop."

The best effect, of course, is one which the audience does not recognise as an effect. Ian Scoones remembers a model he made for the BBC's version of *Wuthering Heights* in 1978. Because of failing light, real rain shot on location did not show up on the film. "To get over this," explains Scoones, "I did a miniature of the *Wuthering Heights* house and a lot of people, even in the business, didn't realise that was a model. Water, of course, is a very difficult thing to scale

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and there are some men in the effects game who'll never touch it. But with rain — and we wanted to overdo it — down comes this great, gushing, cascading storm. And I was able to use the same model for the mist. Because it was so windy on the moors (during location shooting, the fake) mist would not lie. With the miniature, I was able to lay in what appeared to be a low-lying mist about two feet off the ground, which I think was successful."

Scoones also emphasises the importance of atmosphere: "This is part of scaling a miniature landscape. One can make the background appear much more subtle by having a mist which just softens



Left: Ian Scoones clowns around with a huge model spider in his workshop. Above: A small space craft navigates a cluster of tiny asteroids in the invisible Enemy from *Doctor Who*. Ian Scoones (as the Frankenstein monster) and friend. Right: A memento from Ian Scoones' scrapbook from his days on the *Thunderbirds* series.



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the background painting. Equally, you can put a gnuze or filter in front of the lens. It gives much more distance. If you go over the top with something, it becomes obviously an 'effect' and therefore it's open to more criticism. The more subtle the effect, the more it slides by unnoticed. There's this subtle halfway position where the background just merges into the background. If it gets too spectacular, then you're divorced from the dialogue and you've lost the point of the story. One must always remember it's the action with the actor that's important."

Another important factor, of course, is the budget. Effects are limited by the amount of time and money available. I asked Ian Scoones about the money on *Dr Who* and *Blake's 7* and got a surprising reply: "There's this odd BBC thing," he told me, "of Drama Series and Drama Serials (Departments) and one has a bigger budget than the other. So *Dr Who* (series) actually has a far bigger budget than *Blake's 7* (Serials)."

Scoones was in charge of effects on the first series of *Blake's 7* and says, "Sadly, we had very little money and, after episode one, a lot of the miniature stuff took a downward trend because there just was not the budget there. I thought, well, let's make a big bang at the beginning and I did: I spent probably more than I should, which meant that the other episodes tended to suffer a bit. The money wasn't there. As far as I can gather, *Blake's 7* was originally to take over a vacant space that had been a police series — something like *Z-Cars* or *Softly Softly* — and to (the BBC Programme Planners) the original conception of *Blake's 7* was basically a chase: baddies versus goodies in space. But with no thought to special effects. One thinks, if one's doing a science fiction series, that's where the money must be spent, but the allocation of money just was not there."

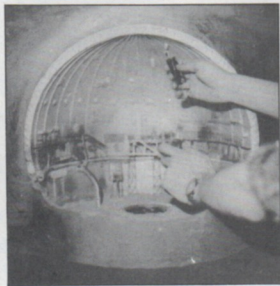
On the whole, though, Ian Scoones has very few complaints about the BBC: "We have much more freedom than on a feature film. With certain exceptions, the majority of (feature) effects men don't design from scratch. It usually comes through the production designer or the art director. In (BBC) television, one has the whole ball game and one directs one's own model sequences and one takes over when it's live-action stuff such as a minefield or a battlefield."

Although, several years ago, he directed some documentaries for the Central Office of Information, he's not interested in direction as such: "We have enough headaches in special effects," he says. "Although I suppose it's all the

headaches and frustrations that one enjoys, actually. Every new script is a new challenge, whether it's a mammoth production like *Blake's 7*, which brings in just about everything, or an exploding lollipop for a children's show."

As for what has given him most satisfaction, when I asked him, he said it was the *Dr Who* story *The City of the Dead*: "The reason that was the most satisfying was because not only did we have quite a lot of model miniatures to do on a larger scale than normal, but I was able to finish on time for once. We were ahead of schedule, so I had all evening to do the

Below: A recreation of the domed storage tank which originally appeared in the BBC tv series *Quatermass II*.



"THERE'S SOMETHING VERY FINAL ABOUT A BIG BANG THAT FILLS THE SCREEN. IT HAS INSTANT IMPACT."

final big bang in the laboratory. And it was satisfying to blow the whole darn lot up. My two assistants were working with the artists on another set and I just wired it all up bit by bit and it took all afternoon. There were something like 36 explosions. They started and went on and got larger and larger until, in the end, you couldn't see anything but sparks, flashes, flames and we got everything in one take. There's something very final about a large bang that fills the screen. It has instant impact. I often feel like saying to an actor *Follow that!* You see, nearly all our stuff, because of the nature of the medium, gets burnt, blown up, sunk or whatever. But this is what it's for and it's marvellous not to have anything left after you've finished. One's worked it out of one's system."

I asked him if he cannibalised his models. "Oh yes," he said, "improvisation is another one of those key words

in effects. There's a very easy little party trick that anybody can try with a fishtank. You cut out a photograph of a building or a street and you stick it upside down on the side of a tank that's full of water and (having removed the fish) you drop red ink into the water and look at it upside down. You've got the most marvellous fires on the skyline."

Another simple effect actually used in *Dr Who* involves the kitchen liquid Dettol: "The TARDIS is travelling through an odd cloud of disease which envelops it (*The Invisible Enemy* story). With multiple exposures of the camera, I introduced Dettol into water which becomes very wraith-like".

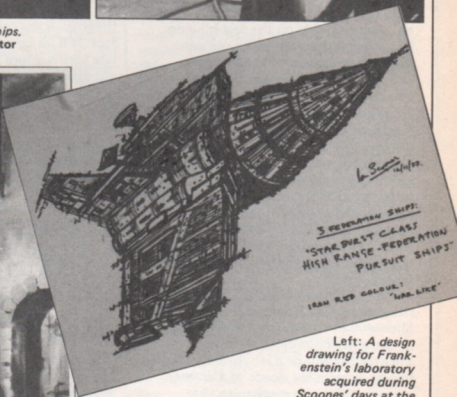
Ian Scoones also improvised an effect which helped his old mentor Les Bowie: "I was experimenting with silver paint and a commonly-available cleaning agent and, by adding an oil-based paint from an aerosol, you get vivid movement which looks just like the surface of the Sun, if you put a red filter over the camera. I was doing this for a *Dr Who* at Bray Studios and dear Les was doing *Superman* and just poked his head round — always being interested in everything that was going on — and he said *Ah! Like that one!* And it was a great compliment to me that not only was it successful for my *Dr Who* but, when I saw *Superman*, what had they used for the Sun's surface? — This very same technique. It was rather nice that one of his 'boys' was able to — not help him — but he could see how he could interpret it into what he was doing".

Scoones believes that, although there are occasional giant leaps in technology — like John Dykstra's computer-controlled cameras in *Star Wars* — basic effects have changed little since *Metropolis* in 1926: "It was all there. Mind you, they did go bankrupt".

One area in television that, he feels, can be developed further though is title sequences. He won an award from the Designer & Art Directors' Guild for his *Tomorrow's World* titles. Another personal highlight of his BBC career was *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* "because there were so many bits and pieces in that". And he is looking forward to working on two upcoming fantasy productions: *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Day of the Triffids*. The reason he looks forward to the new BBC productions is the same reason he enjoys his job: "An effects man is tested every time he reads a script". But he's never totally satisfied with his work: "That's what gives you the energy and, hopefully, the inspiration to do better next time. Bigger and better. That's what the public expects." ●



Above: Ian Scoones hard at work on one of his highly detailed model spaceships. Above right: Scoones positions a model TARDIS during the filming of a Doctor Who episode.



Left: A design drawing for Frankenstein's laboratory acquired during Scoones' days at the Hammer film studios with effects veteran Les Bowie. Above: Concept drawing for a "Starburst Class: High Range Federation Pursuit Ship" from the Blake's 7 tv series.