

# Heightened Present

**Fergus Byrne meets some of the talented people behind Chasing Cow Productions**

A popular café in the heart of a West Dorset light-industrial trading estate may be the ideal backdrop for a conversation covering empathic vision alongside state and corporate manipulation.

Cappuccinos arrive, the sun shines, and the bubble of Mercato Italiano in Bridport glows brightly as I meet Grace Crabtree and Fred Warren to hear about their new project, *Elecampane*, a film in which medieval cosmology and folk custom collide with climate breakdown. In their words, it's a fragmentary portrait of, not just a political uprising, but a spiritual one.

Far from the usual hubs of the British film industry, Fred and Grace are preparing to make their most ambitious work yet. Co-written with fellow Chasing Cow member Bryony Moores O'Sullivan, *Elecampane* is to be a feature-length, dark-folk road movie about climate breakdown, medieval wall paintings, and the fragile threads that hold communities—and reality—together.

Formed in 2019 by a group of friends who grew up locally, left for university, and then returned, Chasing Cow Productions has already built a reputation for inventive, landscape-driven films and cross-disciplinary projects.

'We'd done all sorts of different degrees, but we wanted to make creative, collaborative projects,' Grace explains. 'And so we thought we'd form together and let our different interests be the guiding point for all of that.'

Those 'different interests' have since produced a quietly impressive body of work, beginning with the silent film *Brink by Brink*, which won Best Mid-Length Film at Derby Film Festival. Among other productions, the group also made the recycling-centre-set short film, *Refuse*; documentary commissions on hemp and flax; a radio play based on a Soviet poem accompanied by a scholarly booklet; some very impressive videos for local singer-songwriter Aidan Simpson, and the zine *Matter Out of Place (MOOP)*, created during the pandemic when filming was difficult.



Although it wasn't planned that way, both Grace and Fred point to the landscape of West Dorset as the inspiration for much of their work. Grace, a painter, sees her work as 'very much landscape and geologically rooted.' She describes it as a way of thinking through the world, an 'artistic lens' that looks at 'deep time through the landscape.'

Fred agrees. He sees the area as a 'fertile place' to create 'fictional space.' As many larger production companies have discovered, the area 'has different identities in the landscape. It's not just like one thing—you've got the coast and then these dramatic valleys and villages.'

a folk ritual. They're coming to this countryside in a state of crisis, and they're seeing this drought-blasted landscape.'

Grace picks up the thread: 'It's a road movie. We're following the characters, and they only pick up these things in fragments while they're in the car. There are often bits of reports coming through the radio. The government keeps shifting the narrative about what's going on.' Hattie and Jeff become aware of a ground-level rebellion that's bubbling up. 'And the state is getting increasingly concerned and trying to quash it.'

The internet exists in this world—until it doesn't. Fred adds, 'If Google Maps turns off and you don't

## *'People are once again grasping for images and rituals that might help them live through a world in flux'*

After many years of working together and producing an eclectic mix of projects, it's inevitable that this inspiration and creative energy have pushed the collective to go up a gear. Now, after years of shorts, mid-length experiments and commissions, they're trying to raise funds to shoot their first full-length film next summer.

The new film, *Elecampane*, is fictional, and sits in what Fred calls 'roughly the genre of climate fiction,' though what they're making is subtler, stranger, and more grounded than most disaster narratives.

'It's a dark-folk indie road movie,' Fred says. 'And it's set in a sort of heightened present... during this long summer heatwave which is destabilising social relations, and things are becoming a bit frayed.'

The central characters, Hattie, on a research trip to a series of neglected parish churches, and her reluctant companion, her brother Jeff, whose mother is trying to get him out of the house and off his phone, are steadily drawn into the effects of a countryside blighted by drought and contaminated water. Outbreaks of pageantry, protest and misrule intermittently shatter the "business as usual" illusion the state is desperately trying to maintain.

As they travel, the pair find themselves drifting into the path of something larger and more unsettling. 'Alongside it, there's this sort of civil unrest, something's going on, which they are coming across in fragments,' Fred says. 'They're seeing all these pageants. And it's unclear whether it's a protest or just

know where you are, that's dislocation. So, yeah, it's kind of harking back to a time when people were a bit more beholden to the natural world.' Threaded through this contemporary crisis is a deep historical resonance. The medieval wall paintings Hattie studies aren't just a backdrop: they are clues, mirrors, and omens. Images of the past begin to serve the urgent present.

'These are kind of relics of an enchanted landscape,' Fred reflects. He points to the 14th-century era of plague and 'societal unrest.' In those centuries, wall paintings of saints and strange apocalyptic visions helped people make sense of upheaval. Now, in the film's present, people are once again grasping for images and rituals that might help them live through a world in flux.

Water becomes the film's most charged symbol—and battleground. 'A narrative running through the film,' Grace explains, 'is this failing water company which gets taken over by an asset management firm. And then there's a lot of fear around how that's getting managed or mismanaged, and controlled in a way that people are getting concerned about.'

Fred adds, 'Water is a very emotive issue for a lot of people. And it's easy to see how that could develop into more of a kind of paranoia and unrest more broadly, because it's essential for life.'

The film plays with rumours of contamination, shifting corporate statements, online speculation, and more spiritual responses. Crucially, the producers are keen to avoid another grim, grey

dystopia. Fred says they are trying to make it colourful to ‘move away from the folk horror kind of thing. There’s some dark and slightly scary elements, but it’s not like a *Wicker Man*.’

Grace sums up their approach: ‘That’s why we’re calling it a heightened present rather than dystopia, because it’s now, just slightly more extreme.’

If all goes to plan, the team will work on art direction and initial shots this year with the main filming to be done next summer. The budget will still be tiny by industry standards, but huge for a grassroots collective that has previously worked on a low or no budget. ‘It’s still working on a shoestring,’ says Grace. ‘Yeah, more would be good.’

For all its national and even global resonance—climate crisis, water wars, media fragmentation—the film grows from the same soil as all of Chasing Cow’s work: West Dorset.

‘I think the one constant that we always come back to is the West Dorset landscape,’ Grace says, ‘being just a very core part of how we all want to navigate the projects... the landscape became a real character.’

Fred puts it simply: ‘We quite like that challenge of creating a sort of fictional space out of these areas that we know so well.’

That rooting in place has been more than aesthetic; it’s practical and emotional, too. ‘We’ve just been really blessed and really lucky to have come back to such a fertile area for creative work,’ Fred says. ‘Everyone has been great... It’s never really been a barrier. It’s more like people have always been like, How can I help?’

Grace hopes their example might encourage others: ‘Hopefully it’s interesting or exciting for other people to see that you can do really interesting projects without thinking, Okay, I have to move to London or a city, because that’s where all the things are. You can try and grow them from the ground up, and then, you know, reach out more widely from there.’

A feature film about drought, climate issues and a country on the brink is a bold way to test that belief. If they can pull it off, Chasing Cow Productions may prove that some of the most urgent stories about our shared future are being written—and filmed—far from the usual centres of power, on uncertain ground where landscape, community and imagination converge.

To learn more about Chasing Cow Productions visit:  
<https://www.chasingcow.co.uk>.

The team would love to hear from anyone who might like to support the film—contact them at [elecampaofilm@gmail.com](mailto:elecampaofilm@gmail.com)



Above: stills from *Brink by Brink*, *Refuse* and *The Wind Blows*.  
Below: stills from the *Elecampane* test scenes (2025).

