

Designing the Steam Highwayman

The character of the Steam Highwayman was born in around 2010 after reading Keith Richards' *Pavane*. The novella focuses on the character of the haulier, who falls prey to a group of bandits led by a wicked but charismatic some-time friend. Unillustrated, I supplied my own mental imagery with ideas drawn from stories I've loved.

Smith by Leon Garfield is one of the most atmospheric and character-driven young historical novels I know. Antony Maitland's illustrations have always defined the highwayman for me in the character of Lord Tom. I never submitted this image to Ben during our design process, but it must have defined what I was looking for, because the similarities are striking now that I look at it again.



Lord Tom by Antony Maitland

Ben May impressed me as an artist who could draw first and foremost. I was attracted to his work in pen and ink and since I had always envisioned monochrome interior illustrations after the manner of classic children's novels, black-and-white drawing work was always going to be the focus of the brief.

Brief Context

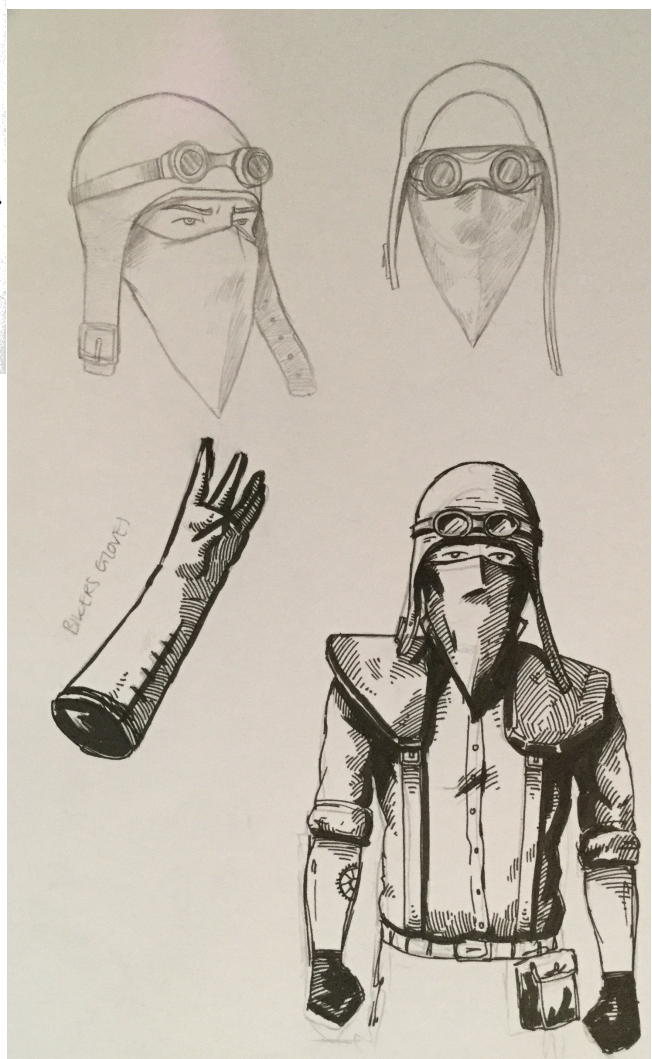
Steam Highwayman is a Steampunk adventure gamebook, in which the reader explores a murky alternate 19th Century England on a powerful steam motorbike - a 'velosteam'. The reader can engage with roadside robbery, fight for justice, join the revolution, antagonise the Constables and discover the depths of the social and economic divide that plague the land. The world is largely a realist steampunk fantasy - assuming the success and proliferation of Babbage's Calculating Engines and the possibility of a supercharged industrial revolution.

The brief I gave Ben focused on defining the character of the Steam Highwayman through imagery rather than on any specifics of costume or appearance. In fact at this stage I was keen to have as much gender-neutrality as possible, in keeping with the 2nd-person narrative style.

Image

Featuring a masked (non-gender-specific) steampunk figure eg

- heroic
- glamorous
- successful
- technical
- courageous
- identified with the reader



Ben's first responses

The quality of Ben's first—sketch—responses was very exciting. The three-quarter profile in particular evoked real character: determination and secrecy in those eyes. We discussed what was successful about these images and I asked Ben to work up a few alternative looks. His response was amazing.



Ben May's Gallery of Rogues

Working with an artist like Ben is an opportunity I think every writer should have: when I received these images by email I was forced to ask myself exactly what I wanted and to define my own idea more exclusively. Ben's work shows his real strength in character design, costume and clarity of line, as well as showing some nice relationship with superhero characterisation—an area he has explored in his *Behind the Mask* project.

The eight alternative visualisations here each have their strengths. It took me some time to analyse my own responses and provide Ben with a critique that took us to the next stage. For me this centred on the costume, as well as some of the accessories that might be relevant to the Steam Highwayman in different illustrations. Advising other authors going through character development, I'd say that remaining open-minded is important, as well as acknowledging every part of an artist's imaginative creativity, even if you have a tight brief. Building a working relationship with your illustrator is just as important as getting the 'look' you want. After all, unless you count yourself a real polymath, your skill is in words and your illustrator will have the edge in visual imagination.

Being confident to critique and refine the ideas you are presented with is also vital: I found it helpful to indicate the number of revisions I might hope to see. This meant that from the start, both Ben and I were ready to change our ideas.

Concept development critique—Steam Highwayman Figure



← This figure best fits the concept of the Highwayman

To keep:

- gloves / gauntlets
- shoulder padded jerkin
- open shirt
- baggy trousers
- cloth cap and goggles

To vary:

- belts
- boots

Note - disregard gender neutrality at this stage

The coat on this more 'classic' highwayman → should be an option - the rain shoulder pads suit really well.



← The eye-mask works very well in communicating 'highwayman' - I'd like to try it on figure 1. Also to try adding...

- cloak on one shoulder
- sword (in scabbard?)

Highwayman figure 'shopping list'

- gloves / gauntlets
- shoulder padded jerkin
- open shirt
- baggy trousers
- cloth cap and goggles
- cloak on one shoulder
- sword (in scabbard?)

And options on

- Headwear
- tricorne
- wide brim
- soft hat
- cloak / coat
- ambush cloak full-length
- off-the-shoulder cloak
- ¾ length raincoat
- straps / frames

Full cloak on this figure → has a great mystery / threat air. Let's use it in an 'ambush' illustration.



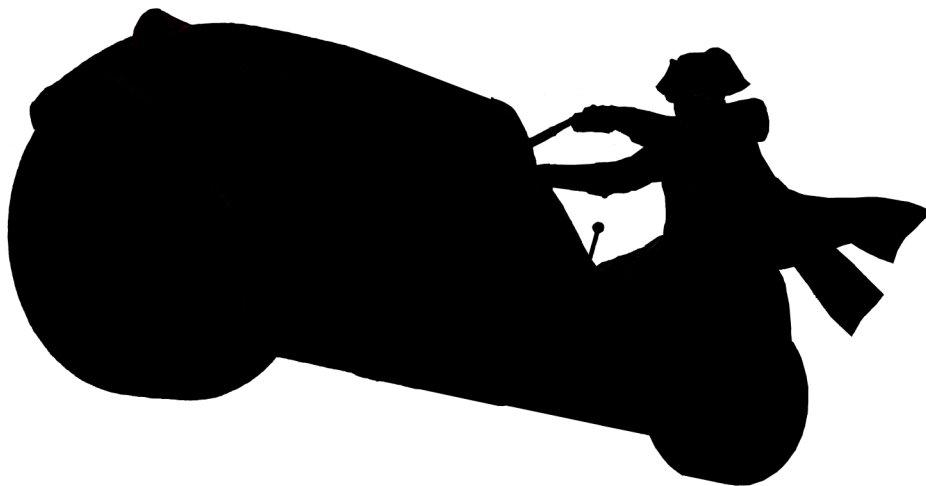
Ben and I also talked a lot at this stage about using the character: the highwayman would need to be featured on the cover, on marketing materials and in internal illustrations. I was keen to find a sharp and distinctive silhouette that would survive being combined with the velosteam. At this stage I was still deciding how to create a 'promo' video, but I was fairly sure that a silhouette against a lightning-torn sky should feature. Besides, silhouettes are mysterious and the premise of the hook question is the mystery of the Steam Highwayman's identity.

Ben responded with more options and a fine level of detail. At this stage we were about a month into the collaboration and on the fourth exchange of ideas and images. As you can see, the costume closely resembles the final image used in the marketing and draft cover illustrations and we were both happy with a fulfilled brief.

Shortly after this, Ben delivered two excellent images of the Steam Highwayman astride the velosteam: pictures which excited me beyond words. At last the project had a face, an atmosphere and a visual story that I could share with the world. It was my turn to do a little amateur image-manipulation and I ended up with the silhouette I had been after!



Two of the costume options Ben delivered



Who is the Steam Highwayman?

As you can see, elements of the costume survive even into black-out and the outline of the highwayman's cloak is particularly dramatic, implying speed, weight and even temperature. Reading Ben's image from left to right, I see a *steam* motorbike ridden by a *highwayman*. Could I ask for more?

Throughout the character development we've depended on frequent communication—about twice a week—mutual trust and well-defined briefs. I had help from three friends involved in creating or commissioning illustration who helped me create my briefs: Francis Wong, Caleb Simmons and Jessica Noutch. Caleb and my sister Jess both have illustration work you might like a look at.

See more at: www.benmayart.com

www.calebsimmons.co.uk