

Alastair Dickson, founder of the law firm Dickson Minto, doesn't seem to like the media: "No, you're right," he says in his soft Scottish burr, "I hate the press, I hate publicity."

It's understandable. Dickson Minto is a markedly discreet corporate and commercial law firm that has been involved in some of the biggest private equity sales and purchases of the last 20 years.

The firm's website admits to having "passed the £65 billion mark" in the value of private equity deals it has helped put together.

Many of those deals have made the national press, but that's no thanks to Dickson Minto. The firm maintains a strict "no comment" policy, even when its name has been leaked to the press by other parties involved.

So, how come I'm sitting here at a breakfast bar in Alastair Dickson's beautiful Mayfair flat with his striking colleague Kelly Cooper Barr on my left and a digital recorder in front of me?

Well, we're not here to talk about Dickson Minto, we're here to talk about another Alastair Dickson company, ARD Films, and two of its current projects. *Stolen* is more or less fully financed at \$5 million and soon to go into production, and *The Widow*, a British low-budget film to be shot in 3D is still seeking the last few tranches of investment at around £20,000 to £30,000 a time.

The story begins a decade ago when the government encouraged investors to put money into the British film industry, offering tax breaks as an incentive. Dickson, who had always been interested in film, took up the offer – only to find that somewhere between the politicians, the accountants, the Treasury and HM Customs & Excise, the promised incentives failed to materialise.

Not a man easily beaten, Dickson found that investment in movies could be tax efficient if the investor "traded". That meant an investment of time as well as money. And last year he invested again, creating ARD Films in the process.

Dickson is a remarkable character. One of Britain's most successful lawyers, he possesses a fierce intelligence, he is instantly likeable and he works blisteringly hard.

"I can't imagine going into work on Monday morning and thinking, 'God, when will it be lunchtime, when will it be time to get home'," he says. "If you can't enjoy your work, then life would be very miserable. If you can, why would you ever not want to do it? The kind of work I do is not nine to five. You get phone calls in the night, in the morning, Saturday, Sunday. Sometimes you work all night, sometimes you work weekends. You wouldn't do it if you didn't enjoy it. You wouldn't do it primarily for the cash." He adds later: "I have people working for me who work extremely long hours too."

Even so, running a successful law firm, going to the gym at 5.45am, flying to Switzerland for regular skiing weekends, socialising, learning about and becoming a

film producer and now writing a film script himself (*Trust* – "everybody is betrayed") – that would be a stretch for anybody, surely?

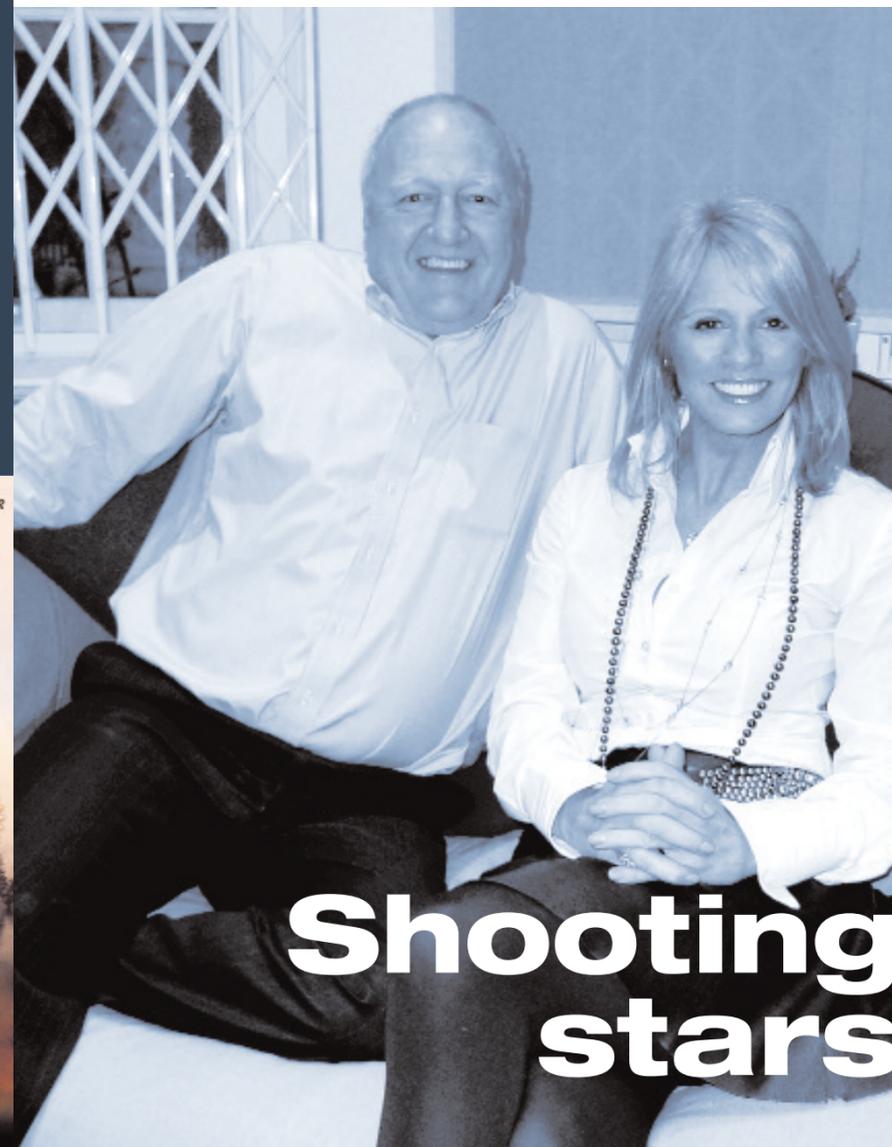
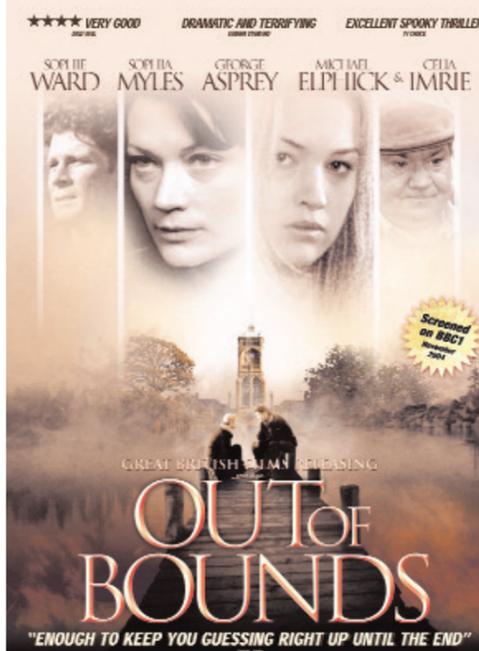
"If you set out to get things done during the day, you can do a lot of things," Dickson says. "You get up early and you can do lots of things. I'm also lucky in the sense that I don't sleep a lot. It's just luck. Some people sleep long hours, others don't."

Once Dickson had decided to get back into the film business, he met a producer who had a gap in his funding for a film starring Timothy Spall and Honor Blackman. Dickson agreed to a six-figure investment in the movie, with the producer promising: "I'll tell you all about the industry. You can come on set and I'll develop your knowledge and by the time it's finished, you'll know how to produce a film yourself."

As it turned out, Dickson was allowed only a small investment in the movie, but he did go on set and began the learning process.

"I started off knowing nothing about film," he says, "but just the other day I wrote to somebody trying to persuade them why I thought it was low risk to go from 2D to 3D (on *The Widow*). We'd been to see the new 3D

GETTING INTO THE BRITISH FILM INDUSTRY IS EASY – IF YOU HAVE A SENSE OF FUN, AND £20,000 TO GAMBLE. ERIK BROWN REPORTS



LEFT: LAWYER ALASTAIR DICKSON HAS BECOME A FILM INVESTOR AND PRODUCER, WITH THE HELP OF STYLIST KELLY COOPER BARR. THEIR LATEST PROJECT, THE WIDOW, IS BY THE WRITER-DIRECTOR MERLIN WARD, WHO MADE OUT OF BOUNDS (FAR LEFT AND BELOW LEFT)

she has many contacts in the film industry – the actor Robert Carlyle, for instance, is a close friend.

As soon as you express an interest in investing in film, Dickson explains, you have scriptwriters buzzing around you like bees around a honeypot.

He and Kelly read hundreds of scripts, met with writers, producers and directors and are now concentrating on four projects.

The first, *WMD*, was spookily timely: shot through spy cameras, it centred on the fact that some people in British intelligence knew there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq before the war began. The producer had already committed it to distribution via the internet, and Dickson is still in discussion to acquire other rights to the film.

The second was *Stolen*, an adventure film set in New Zealand during the 1850 gold rush. The third was *The Widow*, described by Kelly as a contemporary Gothic horror film with "ghosts, satanic rituals, sex, twists and turns and love". And the fourth is a film called *Alpha*, which is set in a single location and which Dickson plans to fund entirely. The company also has options on other projects still at the script stage, including a film set on Iona.

At the time of the interview, ARD Films was waiting to hear if its tax credits on *Stolen* had been confirmed, if so, the film would be fully funded. It had been approved by the New Zealand Film Board that very day.

The Widow – which requires around £550,000 of investment – was about 70 per cent funded. Written, produced and directed by Merlin Ward (whose first film, *Out of Bounds* – starring Sophie Ward, Sophia Myles, Celia Imrie and Michael Elphick – was well received) it is to be shot in 3D.

"You don't go to people and say, 'Invest in film, you'll get a nice return'," Dickson says. "You have to admit, in the best possible way, that you get some huge mega-budget films with real stars and mega directors that don't make money.

"There's always an element of a punt or a gamble in a film, you can't get away from that. It's a high-risk investment with the possibility of a higher return. It's also a fun investment. If people put 30 grand into *The Widow* we'll let them come down on set and see what's involved in making a film, and the number of people that need to be on set and what you need to actually produce it at the end of the day.

"They've got to be prepared to risk £20,000 or £30,000 and not feel that it's the end of the world. But for that they get some fun, they might get a good return and they might get a spectacular return. You can't tell. There's an element of luck in films."

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technology – you know, what you do, how you edit it. So, you learn. There's probably a mountain of stuff I still don't know, but you do learn an awful lot."

In his own words, Dickson dipped his toe into the water "and before I knew it, I was swimming deep in the sea".

With the workload increasing, he realised he needed help, and his wife Belinda introduced him to Kelly Cooper Barr. Belinda is herself a successful entrepreneur. As Belinda Robertson (www.belindarobertson.com) she was awarded an OBE for services to the textile industry. She is known, affectionately, as The Queen of Cashmere.

Kelly Cooper Barr, a fashion PR, stylist and editor, had worked with Belinda for 15 years. As it happened, her office is in Film City, Glasgow (she, Belinda and Alastair are part of the Glasgow mafia, she says), and