

For Alex Bailey, going to work means rubbing shoulders with Hollywood A-listers including Meryl Streep and Brad Pitt. Keith Wilson meets the stills photographer who makes the stars look hot...

When opportunity knocks, you'd better open the door. No-one knows this better than Alex Bailey. Having just embarked on a freelance career in 1990, after three years as a staff photographer with the General Electric Company he opened his front door and walked onto a film set...

How did you break into doing cinema stills photography?

Soon after I left GEC, the girlfriend of an old school friend of mine knocked on my door. Her name was Rebecca and she worked in the film business, in publicity. She said, "I'm working on a film in Shepperton, *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves*. We're in the studio and we've got an assistant who doesn't know one end of the camera from another. Are you any more knowledgeable? We're desperate." I said, "Yeah, I've been working in a studio at GEC for three years." She said, "Tomorrow?" I said, "Hmm, let me check my diary!" So of course I went!

Were movies a big interest of yours when you were growing up?

Not specifically. Like anyone else I was interested in artistic and visual things. *Betty Blue*, *Jean de Florette*, *The Third Man*, the arty films were more my kind of thing. I was interested in photography.

What triggered that interest?

We had a Saturday club in photography at school. I can remember being in the darkroom for the first time and seeing the print appear in the developer tray. That was magical. I was 12.

Why did you study photography?

When I was 20, I had a girlfriend who was doing a graphic design course and photography was one of the modules. It came up often in conversation that as far as photography was concerned, I had a better eye than her. I realised that you have to spend a lot of time working in life, so you'd better do something ▶

CLOSE-UP

ALEX BAILEY



ATONEMENT
Nikon D2x, 25mm, 1/60
sec, f/7.1, ISO250





PRIDE & PREJUDICE POSTER SHOT
Nikon F5, 105mm, 1/500 sec at
f/5.6, Kodak Portra film: ISO160



ATONEMENT
Nikon D2x, 300mm, 1/80 sec, f/2.5, ISO1600
Keira Knightley in one of the definitive stills from the film

PRIDE & PREJUDICE
Nikon F5, 180mm, 1/125 sec, f/4, Kodak Portra film: ISO640
Including the clapperboard provides a record of a day's shoot

“ I didn't realise that I had gone in at the deep end. I'd gone straight in on a Kevin Costner film... so I was on a steep learning curve ”

Alex Bailey *Movie stills photographer*

interesting. I thought photography might be an interesting pursuit.

How did you get work?

Ewell College of Technology in Surrey offered a part-time course for mature students and all you needed was to turn up with a book of a few pictures and an interest in photography.

There were eight or nine people on the course and I was the only one who didn't have a job in photography. The College had a relationship with the *South London Guardian* group of newspapers and they required people and apprentices in the darkroom. They approached the College, and I went there and started in the darkroom, processing 20, 30, 40 rolls of

film a day. After six months of doing that I was given some photographic assignments.

What type of photographer had you dreamt of becoming?

None. I stayed with the *South London Guardian* for two and a half years.

Press work has its limitations in that the picture that makes the pages is the more sensational photograph. I wanted to be a bit more professional and I saw a job advertised with GEC at their in-house photographic department. I worked with five people and we would be rotated every week, so I would do colour photography one week, black and white the following week, studio photography the week after that, then AV, and I did some video work.



I did that for three years and learnt a lot. I was by then 26.

What stills work followed *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*?

I didn't realise that I had gone in at the deep end. I'd gone straight in on a Kevin Costner film and I didn't know that movie stills photography is used in a lot of different ways, like TV and small movies. So I went on a steep learning curve. By coincidence I was at the same house when UIP, the distribution company, rang and asked about someone to help out. Rebecca had a baby and she was too busy so she recommended me. I went to the UIP office in London to work for the day and ended up staying there for a couple of months.

What did you learn from that experience?

They had the distribution packs for films going back 20 or 30 years. It was great to see what sort of pictures made the grade. They were also doing premieres – *Jurassic Park*, *Schindler's List*, *In the Name of the Father* – back when 20 or more A-list celebs come to the opening of a film. *Jurassic Park* was at The Natural History Museum – a hundred-grand budget. The press boys would be outside – around a hundred photographers – but inside there would be just two or three invited ones: Richard Young, Dave Bennett and me!

Sounds like a great gig – any others?

I started to get work on television for *Heartbeat*, up in Yorkshire. They used to

spend a million pounds an episode. This was when it was at its peak, pulling in 17 million viewers, and they'd guarantee me three days a week on every episode. Shooting *Heartbeat* and doing those film premieres meant I was getting a regular income. Thereafter the phone kept ringing.

Is there a photograph where you felt a great pressure to get it right?

Yes, it was the picture of Meryl Streep as Margaret Thatcher for *The Iron Lady*. It was important to the film-makers, producer and director, hair and make-up. That picture was released around the world. It was everywhere because it was a light news day and there was an uncanny resemblance between them. The coverage was just ►

 LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER:
THE CRADLE OF LIFE

Nikon F5, 1/80 sec, f/5, Kodak Portra
film: ISO320



eye-watering. It was on front pages, it was on news bulletins. We knew there was going to be a lot of interest, but we didn't think it was going to be quite that stellar.

What's it like working with Meryl Streep?

Meryl Streep is delightful but not a pushover. She falls into that 'very nice and decent, yet formidable' category: been at it a long time, very well respected and an incredible actor, but doesn't suffer fools.

I had to do quite a bit of work with her for a lot of the images they used for montages in the film. That was pretty complicated and brought us close together. It was a low-budget movie and done pretty much on a shoestring. I said, "I don't have the resources to go ridiculous with this,

so I've just got to be creative with it," and she said, "Oh darling, we'll do it together." She was really interested in what I was shooting. She wanted to make it work.

What exactly were you doing?

Shooting pictures to montage into old pictures they'd bought from agencies. We spent a whole day doing this. She made about 10 costume changes for all these different shots. That was the day before the start of two months of filming, so I was off to a great start. From then on in it was pretty easy working with her.

Do you ever get starstruck?

You know what, everyone's time is so precious and everyone on set has a job to

do, so you have to make sure that when you open your mouth it's not rubbish that comes out! It takes time to get that sort of confidence. You have to listen to everybody else, read the situation, and then when you want to speak, be assertive, polite and controlling, and you'll get the co-operation. If you stand there and you're wishy-washy, they'll absolutely walk all over you!

What's your 'desert island lens'?

70-200mm. I've shot more definitive images and posters on that lens than any other.

f/2.8 or f/8?

Oh, f/2.8 with films. It's got to be really because films are shot at a wide aperture to put the emphasis on the subject.

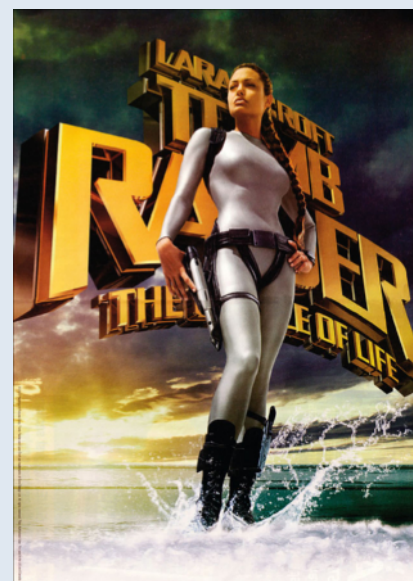
PROFILE

Alex's awards and publications

■ Alex Bailey has worked on some of the most celebrated films of the past 20 years including *Atonement*, *Pride & Prejudice*, *Elizabeth*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Hanna*, *Enemy at the Gates* and *The Iron Lady*.

■ He has used Nikons all of his professional life and blogs about photography, techniques and equipment from www.buntyme.wordpress.com

■ Alex has self published two books about photography in the performing arts industry: *Movie Photos* and *Digital Workflow*. Both can be ordered from www.moviephotos.info



TOMB RAIDER MOVIE POSTER
Seeing this poster, printed 30 feet wide, in Leicester Square, is one of Alex's best moments as a photographer



Can you list for me all the Nikons you have owned and the main difference each one gave you?

I had four secondhand F3 bodies to start with. They were a bit doggyish. I had an FM2, which I bought from new and I've still got. I then upgraded to the F4, which brought autofocus and better metering, a titanium shutter and a built-in drive. The F4 was a film camera I liked. It was good ergonomically and it was a really strong, well-built camera. Then I moved to the F5, better autofocus and metering again.

Then came digital and I got the D1 and D1x. Misery personified! I'd like to take a hammer to all D1 and D1x cameras. The whole range was revolting. I can understand how it worked for the press guys, but for

(TOP) LARA CROFT: TOMB RAIDER
Nikon F5, 85mm, 1/100 sec, f/4, Kodak EPJ 320T film: ISO500
A quintessential 'hero' shot for publicity

(ABOVE) LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER: THE CRADLE OF LIFE
Angelina Jolie being filmed against a green screen for a CGI sequence in *The Cradle of Life* – the background would be added later

“The picture of Meryl Streep as Margaret Thatcher... was released around the world. It was everywhere. The coverage was just eye-watering”

Alex Bailey *Movie stills photographer*

me, working in low light situations – a CCD chip, batteries that ran out in minutes, a little monitor – it was horrible.

I really couldn't see the benefit of digital, but the D2 and D2x were a massive leap forward: a CMOS sensor, better battery life, a monitor on the back you could actually see. Digital came of age with the D3. It was a revelation: you could see in the dark, had batteries that lasted, a monitor you could look at. It was marvellous. At the moment I have a D3s, D3x and a D4.

What's the most unusual thing you carry in your camera bag?

Dental floss. You're in an environment where people have to look good after lunch, so there's nothing worse than having a ▶

MEET THE BLIMP

After more than 20 years working as a cinema stills photographer, Alex Bailey has seen revolutionary changes in camera technology

One piece of equipment has never changed. Alex describes it as "a lump", "archaic", and yet it is as essential to his work as his memory cards...



How do you remain discrete to take pictures while the cameras are rolling?

■ There's an archaic piece of equipment, a big lump of a thing, called a sound blimp. It's a square box with foam inside and looks just like a gas mask container. It keeps the camera quiet. You can't shoot without it when they're recording the soundtrack.

Can you not shoot during rehearsals instead?

■ You can shoot normally during rehearsals, but if the actor has got clips in their hair because they're holding their hair together before a take, or there's a big lump of make-up on their chin, it's no good for a still. So you're forced to shoot when they're looking right, which is during a take, and you've got no alternative but to use the blimp.

Who makes them?

■ Mine's from Jacobson Photographic Instruments in LA. For years that was the only company that made them. Other people have moved into the market in the last two years, in particular Aquatech, which makes kit for divers.

It sounds similar to an underwater housing?

■ Yes, it's very similar. The camera stays permanently inside the box. You look through a hole in the back, and you have to preset all of the controls, f-stop and shutter speed.

You can still shoot autofocus?

■ I use both autofocus and manual focus. I'll use AF to preset certain positions, placing the dot where I want it and locking that setting. You get lens tubes to go on the front and grip the focus ring so you can manually focus. It's an archaic piece of kit, but you have to use it.

www.soundblimp.com



MERYL STREEP AS MARGARET THATCHER
Nikon D3s, 90mm, 1/200 sec, f/4, ISO400

Alex spent a whole day with Meryl Streep shooting montages



THE POSTER SHOT
Nikon D3x, 70-200mm, 1/250 sec, f/3.2, ISO1000

Seeing this on bus stop after bus stop was a great moment for Alex

piece of chicken stuck in your teeth while talking to Meryl Streep.

How many gigabytes of pictures do you shoot on a set?

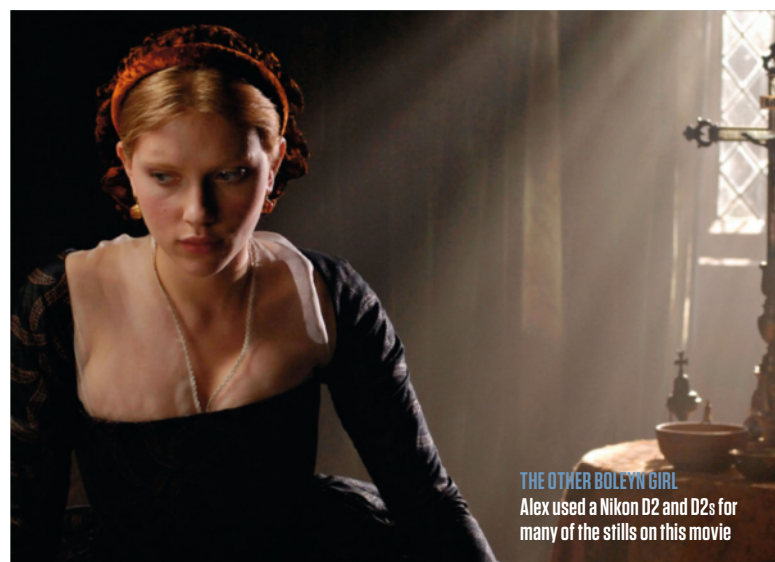
On *The Boat that Rocked* I did a lot of inset pictures, prop photographs, and the publicity and marketing. We finished at 27,200 images and that was after a light edit, which loses about a third of the images. So each day I'm shooting 3 or 4Gb.

How often do you have to edit?

I edit every two or three days, otherwise it becomes too much to deal with. We're shooting 11- or 12-hour days sometimes, five, sometimes six, days a week, so it's a 70- to 90-hour working week. When I come



ENEMY AT THE GATES
Nikon F5, 35mm, 1/250 sec, f/5.6,
Kodak Portra film: ISO400



THE OTHER BOLEYN GIRL
Alex used a Nikon D2 and D2s for
many of the stills on this movie



THE OTHER BOLEYN GIRL
Nikon D3, 35mm, 1/160 sec,
f/5, ISO640

back in the evenings, twice a week I do the sorting: get the card reader, get the hard drive, and just copy them across.

Can you describe your image workflow?

I use Photoshop 6 and NX2 software. I'm a photographer, not an editor, so I send a hard drive of around 1200 to 1500 edited RAW images per week, with the metadata attached, on a hard drive to a lab in LA, which renumbers and sorts them. Of course it's backed up, and still on my CF cards. Once they've been numbered, graded and resized for viewing, they're posted on a secure website which is password-protected. Access is required for the publicists, marketing people, the filmmaker and quite often the actors.

What has been your longest film shoot?

I did six months on *Snow White and the Huntsman* in 2011. It started in June and finished in December. I took a gap year last year. We moved house and we had a baby. I went back to work in November 2012 and did a film, *Philomena*, with Judy Dench for five weeks and a poster shoot.

Is there a film production season?

Kind of. January and February are quiet. Sometimes I'm on a movie until Christmas, which can fall into the New Year. It's unusual to start a film in January or February. It's usually April or May, certainly by June. My lead-time is a month or six weeks. Sometimes the phone rings and it's a case of, "Is your bag packed? Can you be

in Thailand tomorrow?" That's happened a few times – for *Mission: Impossible* in China, I got the call on a Monday and was there on the Wednesday.

Do you shoot weddings?

I did Ted Danson's wedding a few years ago in Martha's Vineyard. I have done a few for

“ Sometimes the telephone rings and it's a case of, “Is your bag packed? Can you be in Thailand tomorrow?” ”

Alex Bailey *Movie stills photographer*



HANNA
Nikon D3x, 1/400 sec, f/5.6, ISO640
This still became the main poster for *Hanna*

“I’m part of a production that costs £60,000 to £80,000 a day, so I have to get it right. I can’t turn around and say, “Oh, sorry, I left the lens cap on!””

Alex Bailey *Movie stills photographer*

friends. I have also done some portraiture in Cornwall. It was a pleasure to take people into the studio, to photograph them, to see the process through and to give them prints. It was really rewarding because with film work I take the photographs, I hand them over and I don’t see them again!

Which films would you like to have shot?

Gosford Park, definitely. I would like to have worked on *The Third Man*. As a photographer, those are two great films. I would have enjoyed them for their content and visually they would have been interesting. Of the recent crop, I really enjoyed *Skyfall*. Sometimes it’s better not to see a film that you’ve worked on. There are a lot of films I’m glad I didn’t work on

because I enjoyed watching them as films! *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* series was absolutely gripping.

Which has been the most challenging film to photograph?

Hanna. Three years ago. We started off a hundred miles from the North Pole and it’s just damned cold. Batteries run down quicker, you’re in and out of warm and cold places, so condensation forms on the lens. You’ve got big clothes on, big hats on, icicles on your eyebrows, everything’s just more awkward.

At the other end of the spectrum I’ve been to Morocco, in the desert, and that’s even worse. There’s a driving wind at knee height and you can’t put a bag down




because you get a sand drift against it. That was *Hanna* as well. Heat with the desert sand is the worst. The cold is just awkward but the equipment stays clean and works. It's the desert that presents the greatest technical challenge to any equipment.

Have you had any embarrassing moments?

The most embarrassing situation would be if my pictures didn't come out. Shooting a film, I'm part of a production that costs £60,000 to £80,000 a day, so I have to get it right. For *Tomb Raider* I was flown on a helicopter, one of six people, to a volcano in Tanzania with Angelina Jolie for five hours. It took months to negotiate with the Tanzanian government, to organise security and insurance, and they've got to have photographs of it. I can't

turn around and say, "Oh, sorry. I left the lens cap on!"

What has been your greatest moment as a cinema stills photographer?

As a stills photographer, your work gets seen on the front cover of a magazine, on the poster, a billboard, so even if you don't get the recognition your work at least is quite well seen. It's still a thrill to see my work on billboards. I was on a job in Leicester Square once and then suddenly there was my work, the *Tomb Raider* poster, 30ft across. That's still a buzz, or seeing the *Iron Lady* poster on bus stop, after bus stop, after bus stop. It's a repetitive greatest moment really. That's the best this type of work gets. 

 (TOP) *SNOW WHITE & THE HUNTSMAN*
Nikon D3x, Nikon AF-S 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR II,
1/85 sec, f/13, ISO125

 (ABOVE) *SNOW WHITE & THE HUNTSMAN*
Nikon D3s, 1/320 sec, f/4.5, ISO2500
Alex spent six months working on this film

• See more of Alex's work, including posters and magazine covers using his shots as well as stills from films, at www.alexbailey.com

