I'd read in a newspaper about an Englishman Alistair McAlpine who apparently owned large tracts of Broome - a town in the remote north of western Australia. The report implied McAlpine had major designs on the development of the whole region, but that Broome was quite divided about his presence. There were also the tourist operators who salivated at the prospects of rapid growth, and there was a large Aboriginal population who were concerned about the impact on land and indigenous culture.

The more research I did the more interested I became. McAlpine spanned a number of contradictions. He was a true-blue Tory holding important offices inside Thatcher's Conservative Party - but he was also a conservationist with a small 'c' - having lovingly restored many of Broome's classic pearlers villas plus the town's ancient open-air movie theatre. I obtained a letter of interest from the ABC, cashed-in my bankcard and headed north, having arranged to meet McAlpine in his private zoo. To my surprise he readily agreed to be involved. Soon I found myself filming the Redex rally and its motley crew (including McAlpine) arriving in Broome to the astonished stares of the mainly Aboriginal bystanders.

In retrospect I was lucky even to get the film shot. It was through no lack of trying. I remember being in Broome six months earlier. The shooting had been arranged, but I couldn't get through to him to confirm anything. Here I was sending faxes to his ex-pearling master's villa from a hotel less than a kilometre away.

His house was one place I couldn't film. I inquired. "Why?" "You can film me anywhere", he told me , "except in my Lear jet and my Broome residence. It's terrorists I fear. We all have to be very careful now in England, you know." It seemed beyond me why terrorists would want anything to do with McAlpine. Here was this affable, diminutive and slightly portly man. Very little research would reveal where he lived and how he travelled. Maybe there was a different reason. Perhaps McAlpine didn't want to appear pompously rich in the film. After all, he assiduously cultivated the image of being one of the locals. He would be always be seen in Chinatown strutting round in his bush hat, denim shirt, moleskins and desert boots. Every day for filming he turned up in the same gear. Yet it was very difficult to disguise the lavish grandeur of *his*Cable Beach Club where everything was imported - even the palm trees were not indigenous to Broome. There was Jarrah timber panelling supported with beams from a dismantled Indian temple. Sidney Nolan, Elizabeth Durack and Sali Hermann paintings hanging on every corner. One private alcove had a collection of antique bird cages hanging from the ceiling. "Staying in a hotel is about fantasy", McAlpine told me as the cameras rolled "You want it to be a little theatrical....if you stay here, you can imagine yourself to live like the pearling masters used to.

The older locals saw McAlpine simply as a recent manifestation of a long line of colonial/pearling masters. Although, it would be more accurate to describe him as a country squire. McAlpine is an unusual developer. "The policy of my company", he explained to me , "is, when we operate in a community, then we become part of that community and help it as much as possible”. Whenever McAlpine was in town, a constant stream of people came to his zoo office, many of them Aboriginal artists trying to sell work to him. McAlpine usually bought at a much higher price than the local government supported co-operative. This was always a source of some friction. Nonetheless McAlpine had an excellent relationship with Aboriginal people, especially community elders .

What fascinated me was the complexity of McAlpine's relationship with the Aboriginal community. He really polarised opinion. Many thought change was coming too fast, particularly McAlpine’s plan to build an airport nor far from Broome. Others, including the traditional elder Paddy Roe, were convinced that sacred sites would only be protected with a conservation-minded developer - and McAlpine represented that ethos. The eventual film covered a year in the life of the community portraying how McAlpine cleverly endeared himself to both sides, bankrolling various projects including the spectacular musical BRAN NUE DAE.

My filming, however, was beset by frustrations - especially the fact that McAlpine never gave me the permission to film at his home or at meetings. I resolved this problem to an extent by setting-up situations where McAlpine would interact with other characters in the film and then standing back to film what would happen. Access is a problem that continually bugs documentary-makers. But each film has its own issues, and McAlpine was especially hard to pin down. "He can change his diary from week to week", his secretary told me. "he often makes last minute decisions to leave the country. Come at your own risk." In the end, I did.

Once I was there McAlpine knew I was serious and arranged to meet me for a filming session in his antique shop near London's pricey Burlington Arcade. He had recently purchased a large collection of 17th century English wea ponry. When I found him he was pulling out swords from scabbards and discussing their relative merits with another dealer. He managed to squeeze me in before entertaining a group of middle Eastern businessmen for lunch. On home turf McAlpine appeared more relaxed than in Broome, reminding me of a gentleman of leisure from another time. As the camera rolled he proceeded to show me around. His collection included rare 15th century Venetian bowls, exotic African masks, suits of armour, medieval tapestries and much more. A strangeof skeletons of animals and birds littered the shop. "What are these, I inquired?". They're from a museum in Brussels that was selling up,"he told me , as he stroked one of the skeletons, "I love the patina. "They're from a museum in Brussels that was selling up," he told me , as he stroked one of the skeletons, "I love the patina. There's a great melange of things here. It shows that objects gain in beauty by being mixed together , by juxtaposition of the unexpected. We've got pre-historic objects here, flints.” He proceeds to pull out several canvasses.”….and bits of dinosaur....and over here we've got a collection of Sidney Nolan paintings. His collection of Nolan's outrivals that of any gallery Suddenly he got nostalgic about Broome. "You see London gripped with a flu epidemic, everybody feeling awful. Wouldn't it be nice to be in Broome today. It'd be about 36 degrees.”

McAlpine lived in a rarefied world. One of his London staffers told me that he sometimes even forgot his own phone number. They all appeared to put up with his eccentricities . After all , why not? He's been known to fly some of them from London to Broome just for a party. To be fair, this generosity also extended to Broome people. During the ariline pilots strike of 1989, he flew the Broome band "Kuckles" to the Spoleto festival in Melbourne in his hired Lear jet. McAlpine also donated $25,000 to the Aboriginal musical Bran Nue Dae written by Broome Aboriginal playwright Jimmy Chi. The show went on to become the hit of the Perth festival. However these favours didn 't extend to everybody in the town. He sued the local newspaper proprietor for damages totalling $5million. The writ concerned an article critical of some of his development plans.

McAlpine might have been very sensitive to what other people said of him, but he's was certainly not reluctant to expand at length about his future plans. In a memorable sequence in the film, he bends over a map indicating the places he'd like to 'pioneer' with more tourist development. Suddenly his hand moves across the map: "I'm interested in the whole top end of Australia", he admits. His vision is quite staggering. Small towns would turn into small cities. Tourism would no longer be the dominant industry. The Kimberley would become the new Silicon Valley. "I have a strange idea", he says, "that by Australia’s Tri-centenary, people will stand on the northern coastline, and they'll wonder why people ever settled in the south at all. "

McAlpine left Broome in the 90’s. The Pilot’s Strike basically ruined him. The only thing that remains is the cinema Sun Pictures. He died in London in 2014.

A profile of his life can be found here: <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/lord-mcalpine-the-englishman-who-transformed-broome-has-died-aged-71-2014-1>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alistair_McAlpine,_Baron_McAlpine_of_West_Green>