

Trying to interview Alex is a lot like taking dictation.

I've only been sitting in his office for five minutes — can it be just a coincidence that I've been given what is clearly the fattiest chair in the whole building? — and already he's casually mentioned his salary half a dozen times, made sure I'm entirely clear on the fact that he mostly weekends in the country these days and seen to it that I've noticed the tastefully framed bank statement adorning his spotless

When I was a nipper what I really wanted to be was a primary market executive

mat black designer desk. And he's hardly even mentioned his brand new 750i BMW yet.

I try to staunch the flow with a question about his background.

"... power steering, electronically adjustable headrests, heated wing mirrors, in-car computer with temperature and speed alarms, anti-theft alarm built in, sports gearing ..."

Your background, Alex.

"... fully programmable Blaupunkt, wipers on the lights, memory setting on the front seats plus, of course, automatic locking with remote control from four metres. Sorry?"

Your background, I remind him again. At this, he finally pauses then, apparently deep in thought, stands up and removes his jacket. He arranges it carefully on the polished wooden coatstand to let the

blinding red bespoke lining shine forth to full advantage. Behind their impossibly skinny venetian blinds, the light-sensitive windows darken almost imperceptibly, blocking out a panoramic view of the City.

"I suppose one had a certain number of advantages," he says, after a long silence. "But, naturally, it all seems rather squalid looking back. I mean to say, until I was 22, I'd never been to Covent Garden. Looking back on that from my current lifestyle it seems very odd. Have I mentioned that I'm only 28 now?"

But what dreams did he have as a youngster? Does he ever look back from the perspective of an £80,000-a-year rather ill-defined job with a major merchant bank and wonder what might have been? Or perhaps he's always wanted to be in corporate finance?

"Good heavens, no," he replies, throwing his head back with laughter. Hoping I might be about to catch some revealing insight I lean forward: "Really, what then?"

"Well," says Alex, a faraway look sneaking into his eyes, "when I was a nipper what I really wanted to be was a primary market executive."

At this point, the telephone rings — the fifth time this has happened in the 20 minutes we've been talking. Once again, Alex switches the phone to a desk speaker. Once again, it's Clive, a long-

ALEX

The quintessential City merchant banker leads a life of unremitting snobbery with vileness; megalomania and power jeering also come as standard. Stenography by Paul Slade



Charles Peattie

Fool injection

standing colleague and subordinate.

Clive announces a call waiting from Tokyo — we've already had calls placed from Wall Street, Singapore, Hamburg and a particularly broad-minded bank based in the Dominican Republic.

When Alex has dealt with the call — and apologised yet again for the fact that he's going to have to interrupt the interview later for a fitting with his Savile Row tailor — I decide on another attempt to take control. What, I ask Alex, are his ambitions?

He seems mildly puzzled by the question. "Did you get my CV?" he asks.

Alex's CV, which I'd requested in advance of the interview, had indeed arrived safely. I had received one copy by fax, one on a bike, one via Datapost, one in a taxi and one by telex. Only

the singing telegram was missing. Yes, I'd got his CV.

Reaching into the top drawer of his desk when I confirm this, Alex produces an electronic organiser. As he hits a couple of buttons and it begins to print out, I recognise the typeface.

Alex takes a duplicate with his pocket photocopier, places it in a tray for filing, and hands the original over. "March 1996: Reached millionaire status at age of 35," it says. This seems to settle the question of ambitions as far as Alex is concerned, so I decide to try a different tack and ask him about his politics.

"Well, I do find the Conservatives' current stance on the National Health Service rather worrying," he says. "After all, if they keep driving more and more of the middle class to private health

care it is going to completely ruin the tone of most private hospitals."

Preparing for the interview, I'd earlier called Clive to ask what Alex was like to

If they keep driving the middle class to private health care it is going to completely ruin the tone

work with. When he called me back, he sang the great man's praises extensively, refusing to be put off by a barely audible but familiar purr of satisfaction in the background. "And did you realise," blurted Clive as if reminded by a sudden poke in the back, "he's only 28 now?"

Pressed for more details, Clive recalls occasions when Alex has helped him to develop ideas.

"Whenever I come up with an idea which might make the bank some money, Alex is always very keen to help push the presentation through to board level," he says. "If it looks like a good idea, he really takes a personal interest."

Alex confirms this later: "Clive's ideas often require a certain amount of... packaging," he says. "But I do try to use as many of them as I can."

Rupert, head of the bank and Alex's immediate boss, is also full of praise for Alex's qualities. Still awaiting his day in court on insider trading charges, Rupert singles out Alex's "loyalty and discretion" as the qualities he most admires.

"But I must confess, I do find his interest in the status conferred by a certain car rather amusing," Rupert says indulgently. "Sorry if the line's rather bad, by the way, I'm calling from the helicopter."

Outside work, Alex is developing an increasing appreciation of opera. "I suppose some people might find regular trips to Covent Garden rather a challenge," he says. "After all, I suppose it can be somewhat demanding. But of course, I can easily afford the tickets."

Shopping is another hobby, although pressure of work means he has less and less time to actually go round the shops himself. "One can buy just about anything via mail order nowadays, of course," he says. "But I do miss the personal touch — there's nothing quite like the atmosphere in a busy store when you can actually pass a platinum Amex over the counter yourself."

He also enjoys his Parsons Green flat, despite the fact that stagnant property prices mean it has now been on the market for some months. "Most of the people who

I suppose one had a certain number of advantages. But naturally it all seems rather squalid looking back

come to look at it clearly haven't a hope of meeting our price," says Alex. "But that just makes showing the round all the more satisfying, really."

Alex's wife Penny, about to present him with their first child, is developing an interest in charity activities, working with victims of social justice in SW6. Her most recent venture, a champagne ball in support of the Grouse Breeders Benevolent Society, attracted a gratifying amount of publicity for the cause. "And," says Alex, "we damn near broke even."

Despite dismissing SIB and other regulators as "interfering busybodies", Alex does see some value in the know-your-client rules.

"I've been thinking of changing my financial adviser recently," he says. "I was disappointed to find how few of the ones I saw seemed prepared to allow me to brief them really fully on my financial affairs — most of them started to lose interest after an hour or two."

At this point, Caroline, Alex's secretary, buzzes through to inform him his tailor has arrived. Alex stands, making it clear the audience is over. As I'm backed determinedly towards the door, I hazard one final question.

With your BMW, your just-so wife and your obsession with status, Alex, could you be accused of being something of a snob? "Yes, perhaps I could," he says, extending his arms for the proffered tape measure. "So get out."