

**FIRECREST FILMS**  
**NOTE FOR THE CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE**  
**COMMITTEE**  
**THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT**  
**20 JUNE 2020**

Firecrest Films is an independent TV production company. We make factual programmes from our office in the former Fairfield shipyard in Govan, Glasgow. We currently employ 65 people and have seven series / 40 hours in production for the BBC, Channel 4 and Amazon. This week we were nominated as one of the best small indies in the UK by the Edinburgh TV Festival Awards, for the third year running.

Our recent titles include:

- *Murder Trial: The Disappearance of Margaret Fleming* (BBC Scotland / BBC TWO). A ground-breaking series with cameras inside Glasgow High Court relating the astonishing story of a vulnerable young woman who went missing for nearly 20 years without anyone noticing. With access to the police investigation, alongside the prosecution and the defense teams, the series won six awards including RTS and BAFTA Scotland for best Factual Series, and has had 3m views to date on TV and BBC player.
- *Murder Case* documenting the work of Police Scotland's Major Investigations Team, winner of six BAFTA Scotland and RTS awards. The series began on BBC Scotland and subsequently transferred to BBC TWO. Now in its third series it is the model for co-commissioning between BBC Scotland and network BBC, with 50:50 contribution from either side. It resonates strongly with young audiences – a third of iPlayer views across the UK are from 16-34 year olds.
- *Michael Palin: Travels of a Lifetime* – BBC TWO. Developed in the first lockdown, when filming and travel were tricky and viewers yearned for escapism and nostalgia, this series with Michael Palin revisiting his travel films was one of the highest rating new BBC titles in 2020 with an overnight audience of 2.7m. It was also a critical hit – Pick of the Day / Week in almost every paper. “*I watched Travels of a Lifetime twice, just for the joy of it*” Daily Telegraph; “*Excellent viewing... lucid, fascinating and informed*” The Times; “*Charming, entertaining and wistfully reflective, it's guaranteed to put a smile on your face.*” Sunday Telegraph.
- *Rescue: Extreme Medics*, premium Channel 4 series showcasing the extraordinary pioneering work of the Scottish Trauma Network. This scale and ambition of this project

made it a game-changing commissioned, offering extensive training opportunities for Scottish talent.

- *The Hunt For Bible John* - BBC Scotland / BBC TWO. The two-part series was named the best show on the BBC iPlayer by The Guardian in April 2022. The reviews have been outstanding: “*The best true-crime documentary of the year*” (The Guardian); *A chillingly brilliant piece of film-making. Rather than wallow in the details of the crimes (hello, Netflix!), [director Matt] Pinder focuses on the people and culture of the city. As a result, it becomes a far more fascinating and engrossing watch, showing how religion, popular culture and Glasgow's unique style of journalism shaped the reality and the myth surrounding this terrifying folk devil. Beautifully assembled, with a variety of rich subplots, this is a crime documentary par excellence and undoubtedly one of On Demand's shows of the year.*” (The Times).

Firecrest has enjoyed strong commercial success. The business has expanded every year, even through the tough challenges of the pandemic. Established in 2008 to produce short investigative films for Channel 4 News, Firecrest began as a one person operation, run from our spare room. Four years later we took premises in Govan when Channel 4 commissioned the first of many Dispatches films. Our output for Channel 4 Dispatches has included some of the strand's highest rating episodes, as well as award winning investigations like *Low Pay Britain* and the undercover expose *Inside Facebook: Secrets of a Social Network*. This work cemented the company - and Scotland - as a key supplier to Channel 4 current affairs; in 2020 Firecrest was the department's biggest supplier.

Channel 4 has been central to Firecrest's growth. At every stage of expansion, Channel 4 has been there, supporting the business with funding, advice and talent schemes. In 2015 Channel 4 provided development finance through their Alpha fund which led to our first returning series, *Supershoppers*. Returnable business is holy grail of independent TV companies as it provides dependable income. It means we can offer secure employment in predominantly freelance industry. *Supershoppers* ran for seven series, winning both BAFTA Scotland and RTS Scotland awards and providing a stable income stream which enabled further growth.

Subsequent Channel 4 Alpha funding in 2016 allowed Firecrest to diversify into documentary, with series like the award-winning *Lifers Behind Bars* filmed at HMP Shotts, Barlinnie and Castle Huntley, showcasing the very different approach the of the Scottish Prison Service to the rest of the UK.

Channel 4's support has also been key to the growth of the talent pool in Scotland. The broadcaster has part funded nine posts at Firecrest for new entrants from diverse backgrounds, providing year round training and mentoring. (C4 provide similar opportunities at other Scottish companies). They have also financed senior talent

development, allowing us to grow Executive Producers and Series Producers. No other broadcasters works with us in this way.

Five years ago, Channel 4 took an investment stake in Firecrest through their Indie Growth Fund, the first investment the fund made outside England. This new relationship supercharged the company, allowing us to expand our creative team and diversify further. It is much more than a financial investment in our business – the IGF provide management and commercial advice, mentoring, and strategic development which has been invaluable, putting us in touch with industry giants and creative leaders who have grown their own businesses successfully.

In the first year after investment our turnover trebled to £3m, growing again to £4m in the following year. In 2018, the company was named the fastest growing independent production company outside London.

The business grew again during the pandemic although more modestly. We have emerged from that tough period in good health, with our key series renewed and new business commissioned. Last month we announced our first streamer project, a three-part documentary series for Amazon, the first indie in Scotland to make this breakthrough. Made by an all female team, this will cement our reputation not only as a premium factual producer in Scotland but also a key player across the UK.

In terms of Screen Scotland, we have received support from the Broadcast Content Fund, including for slate development. We have had two tranches of development support; the first led to the ground-breaking commission of *Rescue: Extreme Medics*, and the second was the lifeline that kept our new business pipeline running through the pandemic.

The Broadcast Content Fund has supported two productions: *Rescue: Extreme Medics* and the BBC Scotland series *One Night At the Museum*. Both had a wider benefit to the Scottish sector. Neither would have happened without Screen Scotland support.

I also wanted to add a note about public value. We have filmed inside many of Scotland's key institutions – the courts, police, hospitals, ambulance service, schools and prisons. All have invited us back to work together again. There is a strong public interest in opening up the workings of these bodies to viewers in Scotland and beyond, fostering greater understanding and showcasing the different approaches we have here to the rest of the UK.

Looking to the future, the proposed privatisation of Channel 4 presents a real challenge to Scottish independent producers. But it is not the only concern. All of the public service broadcasters (PSBs) face significant pressures, and together they represent Scottish indies' biggest customers. Changes in viewing habits across the PSBs have accelerated

in the pandemic as people move away from linear TV. Ad-funded and subscription funded models are also precarious with the cost of living crisis.

Indies are grappling with reduced programme tariffs at the same time as inflation and wage costs are rising. Increasingly, broadcasters are not fully funding projects but asking us to look elsewhere for the remaining budget. It is harder than ever for productions companies to make any margin at all on production.

This means international distribution is more important than ever. It is vital that Scottish indies are able to retain and exploit high value IP and benefit from selling our programmes around the world. Getting a foothold with streamers like Amazon has also been crucial for us. Although the streamers usually take all IP they offer high tariffs and generous production fee in recompense.

Without IP or true compensation for it we can't grow and invest our profits back into Scotland. We can't continue to reflect and promote Scotland to the rest of the UK and world. We would struggle to sustain the business and continue to employ people in Govan, meaning a contraction in growth in the sector here and reduced opportunities for people from all backgrounds to work in this world leading industry.