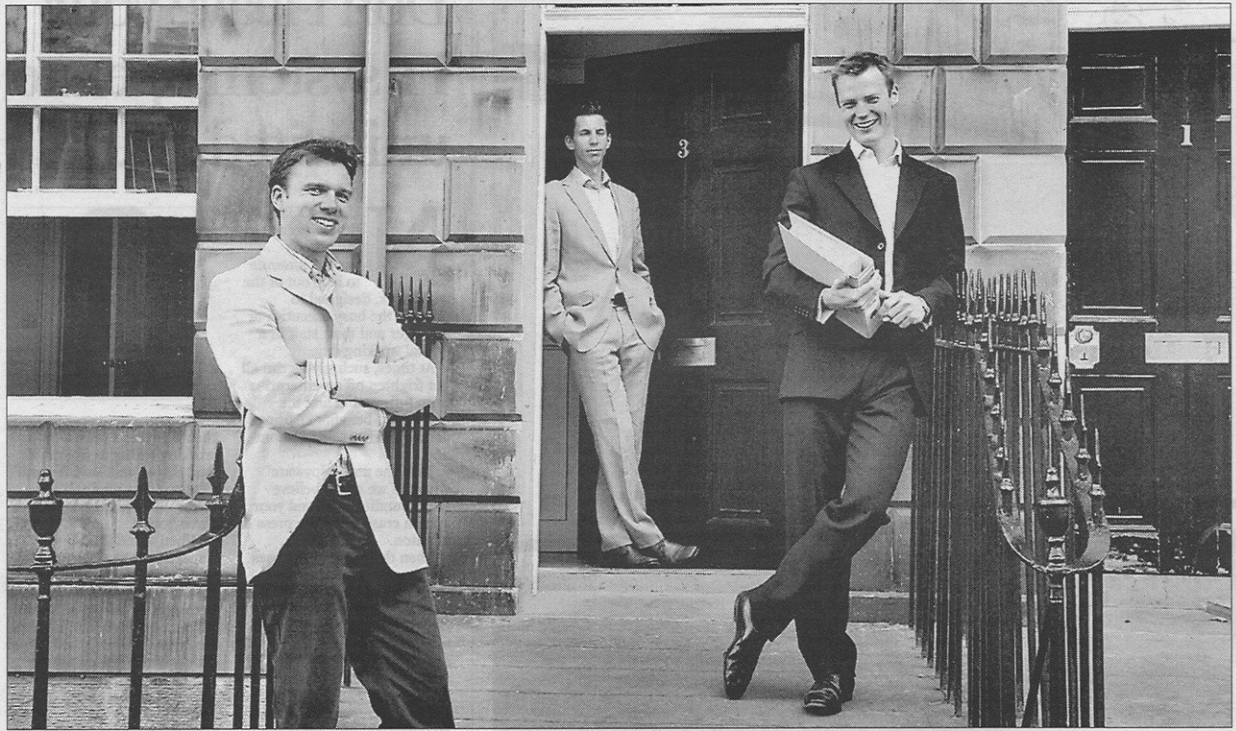


Trio work on student-landlord relations, finds John Gibson



TEAM: From left, James Brooks, Darren Hobbs and Nick Webber, alias Splendid Property Management, set up shop six months ago in the New Town. Picture: JULIE BULL

Neighbourhood strife makes for a Splendid business idea

THE rented accommodation scene for Edinburgh's student population has been so fraught over the past year, sparking talk of Antisocial Behaviour Orders, that it made headline news.

Tenement flats featured at the heart of it. The behaviour of noisy and untidy students was perceived by "ordinary" non-student citizens, their neighbours, as antisocial and irresponsible. Landlords figured in the middle of an increasingly hostile atmosphere.

Stalemate looked like prevailing until three relative outsiders – Englishmen who had lived in rented property themselves in their

student days down south – assessed the ongoing problem in Edinburgh from a "clear perspective" and, essentially, from a business one.

Splendid Property Management Ltd was hatched six months ago by Nick Webber, James Brooks and Darren Hobbs to bring "a fresh approach to the property rental market" in Edinburgh.

They talked of improving tenants' rights and forging better relations between landlords, tenants and the community.

Cheshire-born Mr Webber, 29, who studied drama here for five years, explains: "We found it was all becoming a bit unsavoury.

There was talk of Asbos flying around, and student accommodation in the Capital, mainly in tenement flats, has become a contentious topic.

"Their behaviour in too many instances was noisy and untidy.

"Headline-hogging correspondence in the press was giving the student population, estimated at 80,000 in and around the Capital, an unfavourable name."

He explains that he and his colleagues had formed an events company, Splendid Events, in London in 2001, before bringing the business to Edinburgh in 2001.

"We employed only students, so when we recommended them as tenants to landlords we knew their backgrounds, knew they'd make responsible tenants," says Mr Webber. "Nobody else in the city was doing that and nobody else is doing it today. It's been a priority of ours, keeps us unique, we like to believe."

And he adds: "Some landlords weren't exactly squeaky clean, either. So, yes, setting ourselves up in property management with this scenario in mind, seemed to us to make sound business sense.

"We headquartered in the New Town with £30,000 and a steady-as-we-go maxim. Our wheeze, if you like, appears to have caught on

"Our wheeze, if you like, appears to have caught on with the 'responsible' element of the student fraternity" NICK WEBBER

with the 'responsible' element of the student fraternity and simultaneously with the more scrupulous landlords."

This does smack of a situation where "entrepreneurial" is applicable in its truest sense. A gap-in-the-market scene and in swoop three Englishmen cavalier-style, doubtless construed by certain sectors of Edinburgh's still-thriving property fraternity as whippersnappers.

London-born Mr Brooks, 28, a former archaeology student, says: "I want to be the same prep school as Nick. I was sick of London and he brought me up here. We discovered some terribly amateurish goings-on, with individuals letting their flats for a good return to, say, four students, and having it trashed. We felt we could re-educate all concerned."

Mr Hobbs, 33, from Surrey and the only married member of the trio, says: "We have an effective vetting system. We get a good idea of a student's history and back-

ground. Also, we visit, neighbours right and left of a property, above and below.

"We don't deal with anything smaller than a three-bedroom flat. We charge on average £300 per person per room for a month."

The fledgling company had 12 properties before opening for business. "They're still on our books," Mr Webber explains. "They're mostly old and near the city centre. We own two of them, in the Royal Mile and Scotland Street. The other ten we run on behalf of other landlords.

"Our aim is to make students proud of where they live, encourage them to respect their surroundings.

"We have around 60 tenants at the moment. Initially, we are getting them on a word-of-mouth basis. We've not been obliged to run an advertising campaign."

Splendid, with a staff of four – the directors and a secretary – are operating from a modest office in Broughton Place, with plans to move to more spacious headquarters next spring.

Mr Brooks says: "We see ourselves with a couple of offices in Edinburgh five years down the line. Nobody else in Scotland is doing what we're doing, as far as we know. We're getting a real buzz."



RENT A ROOM: Marchmont is home to thousands of students