



Dealer Spotlight:

Grays of Westminster

Peter Corbett turns the clock back to a gentler age of customer service and discreet salesmanship with a visit to one of the country's most urbane photographic retailers



Top: You probably wouldn't be all that surprised if you were offered a glass of Port on entering Grays of Westminster. Above: The award given to Grays by Nikon in 2003 to thank them for their support.

A shop would be the wrong word to describe Grays of Westminster. But just how should this exclusive Nikon dealership be named? Now that's a challenge.

Roget's Thesaurus offers thirty alternatives for the word 'shop' but none fits the bill.

When you think of it, a typical shop has a display in the window to draw people off the streets. Grays doesn't have such a display and it doesn't deliberately set out to catch 'passing trade'. A shop has display counters behind which assistants stand ready to take out items for the customer to look at. Grays has no such counters. You could reasonably expect a shop that sells state-of-the-art digital equipment to be all chrome, glass and minimalism in its décor... but Grays is none of these.

You'd also expect a shop that prides itself on being able to supply virtually any camera, component, accessory, spare part, gadget and gizmo that has ever borne the Nikon name to be pretty big. It's not. It's small... tiny in fact.

Oh yes, do note that reference to Nikon. It's unusual for any shop to sell just one brand, unless it's owned by that brand. Grays of Westminster isn't owned by Nikon – it simply chooses to be "exclusively Nikon".

See what we mean about defining it? In the absence of any other suitable word, 'shop' it will have to be!

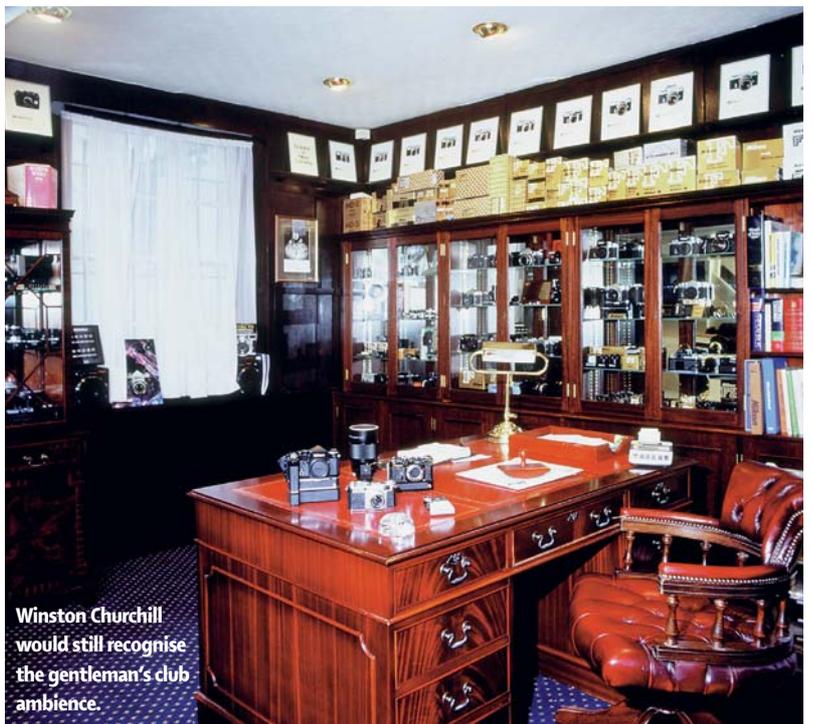
Home for Grays of Westminster is a 19th-century building in Churton Street in London's Pimlico. Word is that Churchill used to have his hair cut there by the barber who occupied the shop until Grays took it on in 1984. If the great man were to pop back today for a quick trim and a shave he would still feel very much

at home here – the digital world of sensors and megapixels might be new to him, but the oak and leather ambience would be instantly familiar.

The shop area is more like a cosy, 19th-century gentleman's study, with a magnificent red leather topped desk at which he would be invited to sit while a member of the Grays team enquired how they might help. The selected item would be brought to him, quite probably taken from one of the antique

cabinets lining the room. It wouldn't matter if it was a simple cap for a flash terminal he was after, a second-hand D-SLR body or a new lens costing over £6,000, the service would be just the same. And Churchill would not have been one little bit surprised if Jeeves himself had shimmered into view from the lower ground floor Nippon Kogaku Room – a shrine to all things Nikon.

However, don't go away with the thought that the shop is lost in the past. A museum



Winston Churchill would still recognise the gentleman's club ambience.

Best sellers *You can have any camera or lens that you like as long as it's a Nikon*

1. Nikon D200 and 18-70mm DX AF-S Zoom-Nikkor lens **£POA**

A superb camera for the digital SLR buyer.

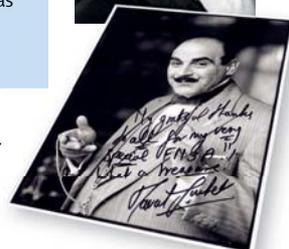
2. Nikon D2Xs digital flagship D-SLR **£POA**

The flagship model in the range and still the number one choice for professionals.



3. 17-55mm f/2.8G AF-S and 70-200mm f/2.8G VR AF-S Zoom-Nikkor lenses **£975**
Grays two biggest selling zoom lenses.

4. 200-400mm f/4G VR AF-S Zoom-Nikkor **£4,299**
Described by many as the perfect wildlife zoom lens.



piece it ain't. It is one very efficient and highly successful business which is technologically as bang up to date as the latest Nikon D-SLR or Nikkor VR lens.

The singular mixture of Victorian style and 21st-Century technology that is Grays of Westminster is exemplified by the use of an

having long admired Nikon's engineering skills and the quality of its lenses. They approached Nikon, were given a year to achieve a tough sales target, met it in three months, and were granted 'Category A' dealer status in March 1992. Grays subsequently underlined its relationship with Nikon in 1999 with the

Gray Levett has acted as technical adviser on a number of TV programmes, including "Death on the Nile", one of Agatha Christie's Poirot stories starring David Suchet, one of Grays regular customers.

There is no doubt that Grays of Westminster is something of an anomaly in the photo retailing world but it may be because it is an anomaly that it works so well. There are branches of Jessops and Photo Optix within a few minutes walk of Churton Street yet Grays not only survives, it thrives; as the recent sale of four £4,000 lenses in one afternoon clearly illustrates.

Gray Levett puts it all down to service as well as to the shop's ambience. In his first job as an assistant in a photographic store, he was constantly quizzed by his employer on a wide variety of technical questions, many of them esoteric, so that he could accurately answer even the most exacting customers' questions.

"At the time I rebelled," he recalls, "but now I bless him every day. Providing a constantly high level of service is almost an art form but that's what we always aim to do.

"As far as we are concerned, the answer's yes... Now, what was the question?" ■

Above: Gray Levett also acted as technical adviser to television's Poirot series. Star of Poirot, David Suchet, is a regular customer of the business.

"As far as we are concerned, the answer's yes... now what was the question?"

GRAY LEVETT, GRAYS OF WESTMINSTER

image of a brass door bell push as the icon you click on to enter the Grays website, while the shop's 80/20 percent split between sales of digital and analogue products is a straight reflection of the state of the retail market.

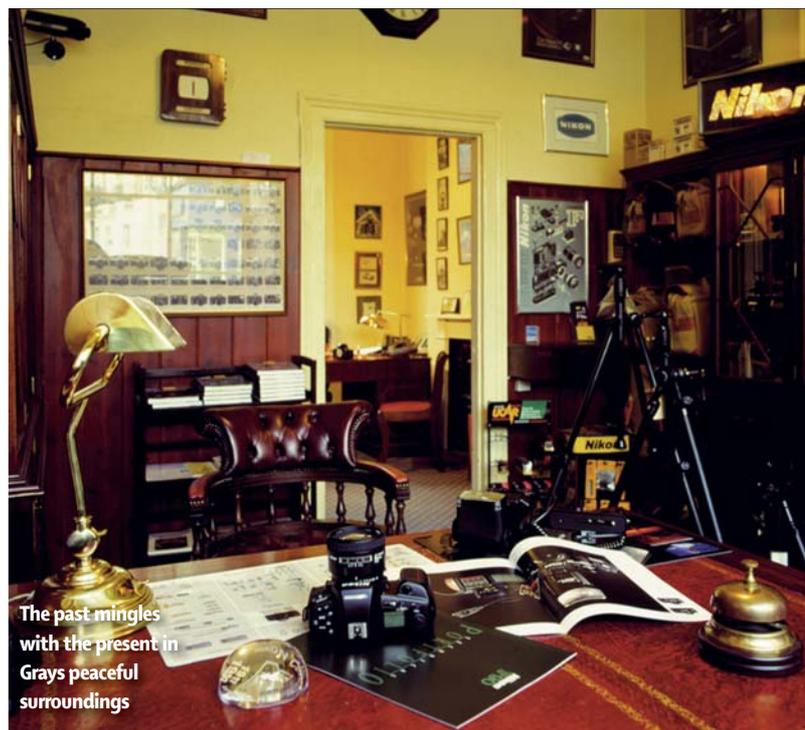
After some years selling a broad range of brands, founders Gray Levett and Nick Wynne decided Grays should specialise in one brand, along with essential accessories made by other companies, such as LowePro bags, ExpoDisc white balance filters, SanDisk memory cards and so on. They felt instinctively that being "Exclusively Nikon" was the right choice,

foundation of the Nikon Owner's Club, with its prestigious Nikon Owner magazine.

Gray Levett himself was recently elected to the exclusive Explorer's Club on the strength of the shop's huge international reputation for an unflappable ability to respond to "I'm in the Amazon jungle and I've lost my lens cap and need another by the end of the week".

Grays also runs a hugely successful annual weekend workshop with top wildlife photographer Heather Angel and a series of tutorials from Simon Stafford, technical editor of Nikon Owner. And if that weren't enough,

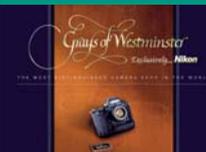
Below: Yes it's a shop... but not quite as we know it. More like something from Upstairs Downstairs.



The past mingles with the present in Grays peaceful surroundings



GET IN TOUCH



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