

Gray's Coat of many colours



As if a desirable Pimlico post code wasn't enough, Nikon-only specialists Grays of Westminster, run by industry veteran Gray Levett, has laid claim to being the first camera shop in the world to be granted a Coat of Arms.

BPI News hears how it all came about from the man himself...

As soon as we heard that long-term Nikon specialist Grays of Westminster was being bestowed its very own Coat of Arms, we had but one question: how does one go about being afforded such an honour?

"Well," laughs owner Gray Levett (above), "I was talking to one of the Heralds at the College of Arms, who had created a Coat of Arms for someone I knew, so I got to know him on a friendly basis. And I had been interested in having one for some time, because, many years ago when I was dealing in rare illustrated books, I'd discovered a sticker inside one depicting a Coat of Arms for someone who shared my family name. So, talking to the Herald one day I said: "God, I'd love to have had a Coat of Arms for Grays of Westminster..." And the answer came: "Well, why don't you apply?" Of course I didn't think we'd meet the pre-requisites... whatever they were. It simply didn't occur to me that it would be possible."

Heralds are appointed by the Queen and are delegated to act on her behalf in all concerns of heraldry, including the granting of new Coats of Arms. Gray divulges that a lot of questions were asked once he'd shown interest and it took around five months to get an answer as to whether his wish would indeed be granted. "They ask for a lot of things, including to see your financial records, and they take a view on your standing in your industry and look for examples that you can prove what you say, if you say you're well



regarded. Fortunately we have lots of testimonials that have appeared in print and I gave them all of those.

"Once you can prove everything and things can move forward, you then have to do an application to the Duke of Norfolk, the most senior figure in the country who is in charge of State occasions like Coronations, the opening of Parliament and royal weddings."

Gray then reads the application letter to us. Beginning 'My Lord Duke I have the honour to represent unto your Grace...' continuing with 'the Board of the Directors is desirous of having armorial ensigns

established under lawful authority,' and concluding 'Your most obedient servant... it's clear that this is not an everyday occurrence, with a 'standard' letter that sounds anything but.

"They follow an exact way of doing things," Gray concurs. In response to this official request from Grays, a Herald visited the business and stayed for a few hours, asking many further questions, including a discussion about the elements to be depicted on the Coat of Arms. Clearly a great deal of thought went into the whole process. "For example at the top there's a lion to symbolize

the name of Levett. That lion is looking over its shoulder at the green pheasant of Japan and 'amicably communing' to show the relationship between our business and the Japanese. And then around its neck there's a crown, which symbolises our responsibility to the public, while under its right paw there's a lens, which is based on a 50mm f/1.4 Nikkor-S lens. Showing a glass with an iris diaphragm is workable, and in keeping with the traditional aspect of a Coat of Arms I thought we should have an old Nikon lens. It's then standing on a chapeau, the French for hat, and sticking out of the

Want to know more? To watch a short film about the 'exclusively Nikon' Grays of Westminster, founded more than a



At the celebration dinner – left to right: from Nikon UK Jenny Price, Jeremy Gilbert, Mark Fury; Gray Levett, Gillian Greenwood, Uri Zakay (of Grays of Westminster); Kentaro Kusakari, John Walshe and Hidehiko Tanaka representing Nikon UK and Nikon Japan.



chapeau is a green feather, as a nod to Gillian Greenwood who is my wife and a co-director, while the red and white mantling is that of St George.

"The helmet, if you look closely, has three holes, which is the mark of St Cecilia, the patron of music. That was a nod to my former background in the music business, where I worked with a number of people including Kate Bush and Art Garfunkel. Then we have the shield and the cornucopia of flowers, which are a mix of British and Japanese, and include the unofficial flower of Tel



Left: the Coat of Arms, emblazoned by Lancaster Herald Robert Noel, seen in the group photograph (in his College of Arms livery) with Gray Levett, his business associate Uri and wife Gillian. Above: the red box in which the rolled scroll is delivered on behalf of the Crown.

Aviv to denote the birthplace of my business partner, Uri. In the centre is a red Christmas rose, to symbolise the Christmas shop that I discovered near London Bridge, which gave me the original inspiration for Grays of Westminster to be Nikon-only and to do one thing, but do it well."

Fittingly, the core of the design of the Coat of Arms features light (representing photography) emanating from a cornucopia of flowers (representing flourishing growth), the tip of the horn has been modelled into an emblematic portcullis for Westminster, while the motto beneath reads: 'Lead in order to serve'. The rationale of the badge is to depict an occidental phoenix with two heads, for looking both east and west.



Left – a crystal commemorative engraved glass tablet presented by Nikon Corporation to Grays of Westminster. Above: the Nikon F Sapporo, as sold for £100,000 to one of the firm's overseas collector clients.

Get your Coat, love...

Gray was privileged to be presented with his specially-crafted Coat of Arms by Robert Noel, Lancaster Herald of Her Majesty's Coat of Arms, at a celebratory dinner held at the Institute of Directors in Pall Mall, London, in October.

Distinguished guests at the bash included representatives from Nikon Japan, Nikon UK and Nikon Germany, plus Grays of Westminster clients who had travelled from as far as Dubai and Australia.

"To be acknowledged by Her Majesty's College of Arms is something very, very special, and the Coat of Arms will serve as an enduring inspiration for me to continue to offer the very best in service to our Nikon customers," promises Gray.

So now, following such trailblazing, can we expect to witness a whole bunch of camera shops applying for a Coat of Arms? Peter Jones of Jessops applying for one featuring a dragon, for example...?

"Well, why not," its owner laughs. "It just occurred to me that people would appreciate it of us, and in that regard I really have had a very good response from the public. In terms of acknowledgment this is a high point in my professional career. But we will just continue to offer the same level of personal attention as we have always done, that is to give our customers the very best in staff and service. We deal with a brand that we think very highly of and so that's what we like to do."

Famous friends and customers tend to agree too: head to the Grays website for a short film located on the home page, featuring a framed thank you letter from the actor David Suchet, aka TV's Hercule Poirot.

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– Gray Levett

Above and beyond its recent recognition, Grays business itself continues to thrive, with sales of the Nikon D810 doing 'exceptionally well' at the time of speaking. "And probably just like any other dealer, when Nikon offers cashbacks it brings us a big boost. It's when they do deals on the high-end models that it works well for us – people don't come to us for the Coolpix cameras. We keep everything else though, including the D750 and D4S, plus, of course, the second hand market is very buoyant. I notice I'm now getting more people investing in earlier equipment, such as the Nikon F and Nikon rangefinder, particularly overseas, because whereas at one time certain customers might not have been able to afford such cameras, because of emerging markets like China they now can. For example we sold a Nikon F Sapporo, which is a high-speed camera for which they only made about 54 units, for £100,000."

There are arguably few camera retailers that could pull off that prestigious a sale. And fewer still with their own Coat of Arms.

www.grayswestminster.co.uk