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A peek into how the world of our well-heeled gumshoe works

Kate Rankine finds today's corporate investigator is no longer a shadowy figure rooting through dustbins

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I am not sure that I've come to the right place. In front of me is a tall black garden gate on a small street, off Berkeley Square in Mayfair. There's not even a discreet nameplate to confirm it is home to GPW, a corporate investigations firm recently set up by Andrew Wordsworth, and his two partners, Patrick Grayson and Peter Pender-Cudlip.

I press the buzzer anyway and am let into a small grimy courtyard. To my left is GPW's somewhat shabby office. It isn't a surprise to discover that the building was once a brothel. Wordsworth, 42, who has come bounding down the rickety stairs to greet me, takes me up to a smallish office on the first floor. It turns out that it isn't his own. Apparently the one he shares with Pender-Cudlip is too untidy for me to see. Who knows, I might just spy something interesting. Instead, the office belongs to Grayson, who at 62, is considered the doyen of this secretive, fascinating business.

A red plastic rubbish bin, labelled "Shredding Only", is next to Grayson's desk, while Wordsworth assures me that the mirrored wardrobe opposite is exactly that. So no secret filming through a two-way mirror then. He also insists their offices aren't bugged. Well, he should know.

The hand grenade on a side table is rather more disturbing. Had it gone off 40 years ago, Grayson, an ex-Irish Guards officer, wouldn't have lived to set up the London offices of Kroll Associates, the New York corporate investigators. Wordsworth boasts how he and Pender-Cudlip (also both ex-Kroll) are Grayson's "young turks". "We're the next generation," he says.

So what is it that they really do? "Business intelligence" is his reply. "We use business intelligence as a counterpart to military intelligence, or just to the intelligence services," he says. I'm none the wiser, but he soldiers on. "We find out information which will enable people to solve problems. Those problems can be almost anything where the information is going to be helpful. Lots of cases are where people are in litigation with each other, or our clients have an interest in people they're doing business with. " Clients include venture capitalists, lawyers and hedge funds who are prepared to pay City-sized hourly rates of between £250 to £350 a hour. GPW also works for a flat fee, sometimes receiving success fees.

So how does he find out his information? Does GPW do much bugging, obtain private mobile phone records or rifle through rubbish bins? "It's weirdly pointless, getting very difficult and, of course, illegal under the Data Protection Act" he replies. I suppose that's a no. Everything, it seems, is all very proper at GPW.

He insists: "The best information comes from finding people from whom it is not a secret. It's an awful kind of demystification of the industry. But I'd much rather have information handed to me by a person who has a right to have it, even if it's questionable whether they should give it to you. Someone saying to you 'Yeah, this guy's got a load of bank accounts here' is a more interesting bit of information to me than getting the print-out."

So they are terribly well-connected at GPW and not just with the living. His great, great, great, great uncle William wrote rather well. Today's Wordsworth favours the Duddon Valley Sonnets, which "serious scholars sneer at enormously because they're late Wordsworth and not approved of". Among the living, he says: "The people we know tend to have as a primary characteristic knowing everyone, so we sit in the hub of a web that reaches out incredibly far, in incredibly short periods of time." (Unfortunately it doesn't say much for either of our investigating skills that it takes over an hour before we discover that we were together at the University of East Anglia. However, he dropped out after two years).

GPW, he admits, is ruthless about exploiting its relationships. "We tap into connections absolutely shamelessly," he says, without a flicker of remorse. "We shamelessly use those connections we have and we reward those connections who are good to us." Apparently, the professionals get money. "We pay them to tell us things, to find things out for us." Amateurs, meanwhile, get a "nice lunch, or by introducing them to someone who'd be helpful to them".

Still, Wordsworth later 'fesses up that the contents of a rubbish bin did prove very helpful in one of his early investigations. (Fortunately someone else had the horrid job of actually picking through the rubbish). "I've seen the results of going through someone's garbage," he admits, at one point. "This is a long time ago, and I have to say that it did reveal something interesting. There was a declaration that a deal was going to be done between two people, one of whom was supposedly under a non-compete agreement with my client," he explains.

Surveillance, however, isn't a problem. "I'm doing surveillance now," he declares. Well, not actually him. GPW employs others to do much of the grunt work. How can someone tell they are being spied on, I ask. "There's always one in Berkeley Square," he gossips, "6ft 4in very slim white guys, standing around, looking kind of smart country casual, nice chaps, former SAS." Then he adds: "I've always said I would want a team consisting of little old ladies. If you saw a little old West Indian lady sitting on that corner" - he points out the window - "and she was still there, two hours later, you wouldn't think anything suspicious. You'd think 'Poor dear, she was obviously waiting for a minicab, and it hasn't turned up'."

Elsewhere, much of what they do involves gaining people's trust. "Our skill in terms of talking to people is slightly to be chameleon-like. To fit in to what they're expecting in that particular place. You don't dress in the same way to go to White's as you do for Soho House." That mirrored wardrobe in Grayson's office contains different outfits, as does a similar one in his own out-of-bounds office.

Today the tireless Wordsworth is wearing his "loud pinstripe" because he's meeting someone later "who's a bit young, rich, high net worth individual". He adds: "I'll put on a slightly wacky, knitted silk tie for him, not a snazzy Hermes tie." Detection is detail, I suppose. Is there any investigation that he wouldn't touch? Apparently he's uncomfortable about "matrimonials". (Wordsworth is separated from his wife, the author Frances Wilson, with whom he has a six-year-old daughter, Ada). "Trying to destroy people who are absolutely blameless to gain custody of children - I'd find that unacceptable," he says.

Still, isn't there something slightly sinister about his world? A long pause. "I wouldn't use the word 'sinister'. I wouldn't, would I?" He laughs. "People would like to think that it's sinister but it doesn't work doing it as a sinister occupation. Not at the high level. What you're trying to do is talk, for the most part, to well-placed, highly-connected interesting individuals and work out who is going to know the bit of information I want, for whom this information is not a secret."

It's time to go. Back in Berkeley Square, I'm trying to hail a cab when I notice a tall, casually-dressed white man lurking on the corner. I just can't imagine what he's doing there.