

Assay Office Report

Activity

The number of articles sent for hallmarking to all UK assay offices was reduced from 9.4 million in 2012 to 9.2 million in 2013, a drop of 2.3%. The number of gold articles fell by 1.3%, silver by 3.4% and palladium by 10.8%; only platinum saw some growth at 6.8%. The picture is not, however, quite as gloomy as it seems. Most of the downturn took place in the first three quarters of the year, whilst each month in the last quarter showed sustained growth which has continued into the early part of 2014. Hopefully, this encouraging growth represents a turning point in the fortunes of hallmarking in the UK.

London did significantly better than the other offices as a whole, with the number of articles hallmarked rising from 2.4 million in 2012 to 2.8 million in 2013. This increase was driven largely by success in competing for work, aided by the rise in the general market which started a little earlier in London than the rest of the UK. As a consequence, London's market share rose to 30.5%, its highest level for a generation, and for some months London became once again the largest office. The market share would have been greater if one of the Assay Office's largest customers had not been lost to the Dutch Assay Office which installed a sub-office in the customer's factory in Germany. Competition is now not just limited to the other four UK assay offices but is open to those from other countries as well.

The sub-offices at Heathrow and Greville Street remained buoyant during 2013. The Heathrow sub-office hallmarked 1.35 million articles and Greville Street 1.32 million articles. Heathrow has been the venue of choice for most of the competitive growth, and it is now the largest of the Assay Office's manufacturing sites in terms of articles hallmarked. By the end of the year an exciting project – to create a sub-office in the premises of the UK manufacturer Allied Gold – was completed. This is the first time that London has opened a sub-office within a single customer's production facility. This is a progressive move for all parties concerned and is a prime example of how the Assay Office is continually striving to provide the most convenient and best service to its customers.

The number of items sent for hallmarking remains highly dependent on the gold price. The reduction in the price of gold in 2013 has certainly been a factor in the recent growth in hallmarking numbers as customers replace, and buy, new stock. A downside of the lower gold price is that the valuable income provided from companies which buy scrap gold fell significantly.

It is now about 16 years since lasers were first introduced for hallmarking. Requests for laser hallmarks have grown steadily over the years, and now over 50% of all articles are hallmarked in this way. The first laser machines were extremely well made and continue to be used. However, they are not as efficient as the latest machines nor is the quality of the marks as good. As a consequence, the decision has been taken that four of the oldest machines are to be replaced in 2014 with the latest models. Investment in the future also continued with a complete refurbishment of the laboratories at Goldsmiths' Hall. This coincided with the introduction of new testing services for lead and cadmium in jewellery. The Assay Office retained its accreditation to international standards ISO 17025:2005 and its certification to ISO 9001:2008.

Marketing efforts went from strength to strength, and a full programme of events was organised including Fakes and Forgeries seminars, Valuation Days, 'Buying Precious Metal' training courses and Hallmarking Information Days. The Assay Office took stands at New Designers, IJL, Chatsworth House, Goldsmiths' Fair and Art in Action (in the grounds of Waterperry House, Oxfordshire). The weather was glorious this year at the latter event, prompting a rare appearance, on the stand, of the Deputy Warden's dog. People were only allowed to pat her if they registered for hallmarking.



Michelle Miller at the Allied Gold sub-office
Image: Julia Skupny



Goldsmiths' Company apprentice Candice Devine with Barbara Spicer, Chief Executive of Skills (BIS) at Downing Street. Image: © National Apprenticeship Service

Antique Plate Committee

A total of 97 pieces were examined, of which 30 conformed to the Hallmarking Act. The remainder comprised 31 with alterations and additions, 16 with transposed marks, and 20 with counterfeit marks. None was outside the Committee's jurisdiction.

Suspected Offences

Four suspected offences against the Hallmarking Act were reported to the Office by Local Authority Trading Standards Officers but there were no prosecutions.

Standards Committees

Progress remains slow on the revision to the many ISO standards relating to the testing of precious metal Jewellery. The proposal set out in 'ISO/DIS standard 9202 - Jewellery - Fineness of precious metal alloys' for the introduction of a 600 ppt platinum seemed to catch the trade in the UK unawares. The UK voted against its introduction until a full debate on its merits was undertaken.

International Convention on Hallmarks and International Association of Assay Offices

Italy's attempts to accede to the Hallmarking Convention remain thwarted, as unanimity could not be found between member states to allow it to join. There are, furthermore, no mechanisms for appeal or arbitration within the Convention's articles of association, thereby creating the current stalemate.

The 40th anniversary celebrations for the Hallmarking Convention will be held in Goldsmiths' Hall and the Goldsmiths' Centre in September 2015.

The International Association of Assay Offices (IAAO) continues to grow. Egypt and Spain (Andalucia) signed the Memorandum of Understanding in 2013.

Changes to the Hallmarking Act

There were no changes to the Hallmarking Act during the year, but the British Hallmarking Council issued guidance information on: Cancellation of Hallmarks; Sponsors' Marks and Trademarks; and Nomenclature of Coatings (bonded gold).



The Love family with the Wardens. Image: Sophia Tobin

Staff

Alison Byne received her Freedom by Special Grant. A new generation of hallmarkers was created when John Love became a grandfather after his daughter Sam (who also works for the Assay Office) gave birth to a son, James. They managed a 'double whammy' when Sam received her Freedom and John was clothed with the Livery on Wednesday 5 March 2014.

Dr Robert Organ