

Assay Office



The Superintendent Assayer making a presentation to Sir Jerry Wiggin. Image: Julia Skupny

Activity

The number of articles sent for hallmarking to all UK assay offices fell from 10.86 million in 2011 to 9.37 million in 2012, a drop of 13.8%.

Gold dropped by 6.9% and silver by 20.1%. Platinum grew by 1% and palladium by 17.5%; palladium figures are now about one half of those of platinum – excellent growth since its introduction a few years ago. London did better than the UK offices as a whole with the number of articles hallmarked falling slightly from 2.44 million in 2011 to 2.41 million in 2012, a drop of 1.5%. Market share thus increased, reaching 30% in some months.

The total number of items hallmarked by all UK assay offices is now less than one third of the 35 million articles marked in 2004. This unprecedented and seemingly relentless downturn reflects the hugely difficult environment in which the assay offices are still operating. Interestingly at London, while articles have fallen by a third, the number of packets has not changed. In 2004, 72,472 packets containing 6.24 million articles were completed while in 2012, the 2.41 million articles were contained in 72,901 packets, 429 packets more.

The two sub-offices remained busy. The Heathrow sub-office hallmarked just over one million articles and Greville Street slightly in excess of 137,000 articles.

It is now five years since Heathrow opened, and a contract has recently been signed with Brinks to operate there for a further period. The financial impact of the downturn in article throughput was again tempered with the generation of additional income from assaying and smelting services required by companies who buy scrap gold. Income was also helped by the success of the commemorative hallmark to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. This mark was available from July 2011 until 1 October 2012 and 31,592 articles were punch marked and 11,037 articles were laser marked.

Despite the downturn, investment in technology continued in 2012 with the purchase of new XRF spectrometers, a microwave digester for improved assaying accuracy and the replacement of the fume cupboards in the laboratory. The investment the previous year in the punch making laser in the Engineering Workshop has already proved its worth; all punches are now made in-house and the annual punch order was completed in October, well before the deadline date of the end of the year. The Assay Office retained its accreditation to international standards ISO 17025:2005 and its certification to ISO 9001:2008.

A key objective during the year was to keep customers informed of the Assay Office's activities and the latest hallmarking information. Greater use was made of social media networking and presences on the Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn portals were established. To coincide with this activity, the website was improved, making the wealth of information more easily accessible. The Hallmarking Information Seminars saw record numbers in attendance, and several Fakes & Forgeries seminars and Valuation Days were organised. Due to the surge in buying and selling scrap gold, a new training course, 'Buying Precious Metals and How to Avoid the Pitfalls,' was introduced. Several trade events were attended, the highlight being Art in Action held at Waterperry House in a rain-soaked field in the Oxfordshire countryside. Wellington boots were *de rigueur*.

A great honour this year was being chosen by the Royal Mint to hallmark the medals for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games. John Love, the Superintendent Assayer, took on the task himself to carry out the hallmarking of approximately 3,300 of them. This is the first time the Olympic medals have been hallmarked.

Antique Plate Committee

A total of 73 pieces were examined, of which 18 conformed to the Hallmarking Act. The remainder comprised 26 with alterations and additions, 13 with transposed marks, and 16 with counterfeit marks.

Suspected Offences

A total of 11 suspected offences against the Hallmarking Act were reported to the Office by Local Authority Trading Standards Officers, which resulted in one prosecution.

Standards Committees

Progress has been slow on the revision of the many ISO standards relating to the testing of precious metal jewellery. Technical Committee TC 174 which deals with this aspect did not meet last year.

International Convention on Hallmarks and International Association of Assay Offices

Italy's attempts to accede to the Hallmarking Convention were thwarted in 2012 as some of the member states would not ratify Italy's accession, despite a positive technical report and recommendation by the Convention Inspection Team.

The International Association of Assay Offices (IAAO) is going from strength to strength and Montenegro, Mongolia and Russia signed the Memorandum of Understanding in 2012.

Changes to the Hallmarking Act

The Legislative Reform Order (LRO) to amend the Hallmarking Act to permit off-shore hallmarking by UK Assay Offices was passed by the Government in February 2013. As part of the Order, assay offices must not use their current town mark in any off-shore facility. London has chosen a portcullis design.

Staff

Sir Jerry Wiggin retired as Chairman of the Assay Office Management Committee. Sir Jerry was responsible for sponsoring the current Hallmarking Act and pushing it through Parliament. An equally remarkable achievement is serving a total of over 20 years on the Assay Office Management Committee, initially as a member and

latterly as Chairman. He will be replaced as Chairman by Grant Macdonald.

Sheila Priest, Helen Haher and Maggie Leach received their freedom by special grant while Danny Love received his freedom by service following the completion of his apprenticeship. The Deputy Warden recalled the recruitment of Sheila, Helen and Maggie when he was Superintendent Assayer. They had all recently left the same ink cartridge filling company in East London which was relocating to another part of the UK; this was a very good day for laser markers but not such a good day for laser printers!

Dr Robert Organ



The Wardens and the Deputy Warden with (right to left) Sheila, Helen and Maggie on 21 November 2012. Image: Sophia Tobin



The marking of the Olympic medals in 2012. Image: © The Royal Mint