

By Dr Robert Organ



Julia Skupny

The Assay Office at Goldsmiths' Fair (above), at the summer Hatton Garden Festival (right), and at seminars on jewellery fakes and forgeries (bottom right)



London Jewellery Week



Julia Skupny

Activity

Last year was another challenging one for hallmarking in the UK. The total number of articles hallmarked dropped in 2010 to 14.9 million (16.2 million in 2009). A continuing fall in the demand for gold articles of 16.9% between the two years was the driving force for this decrease, which was exacerbated by the very high gold price. Demand for silver fell by 1.1% over the same period, whilst platinum showed a small increase of 0.4%. Palladium showed an encouraging increase of 136.9% in its first full year of hallmarking.

London's performance mirrored similar trends in the UK figures. The total number of articles hallmarked by London was 2.89 million, 15% less than the previous year. Of these, 1 million were marked at the Heathrow sub-office and 140,000 at Greville Street. The latter sub-office continues to be a major success and it received a facelift recently to improve efficiencies and the work environment for staff. A new contract was signed with Brink's to operate the Heathrow sub-office for a further three years from January 2011.

The high price of gold did, at least, bring some much needed additional income from smelting and assaying services required by companies who buy scrap gold. A new smelter was purchased to help to develop this growing business.

The Assay Office organised a number of successful events during the year. A new development was an event held exclusively for members of the Livery, which included an informative and entertaining talk on the Trial of the Pyx by Professor Robert Turner, former Queen's Remembrancer, and tours of the Assay Office. Many other events were held for the general trade, including valuation days, hallmarking information days for retailers and manufacturers, and training seminars for Trading Standards authorities. The Assay Office played an active role in the London Jewellery Week celebrations by arranging a jewellery-based Fakes and Forgeries seminar and hallmarking workshops, and by taking a stand at the Hatton Garden Festival. A well-attended Fakes and Forgeries seminar in November concentrated on the infamous Ashley-Russell fakes case.

Several initiatives to improve customer service were introduced during the year, including improved telephone switchboard procedures, an on-line registration function and an on-line packet tracking and bill payment system. The latter two facilities were incorporated as part of the new Company-wide website. All of the Assay Office literature was rebranded in line with the new Company brand guidelines. This was a major task.

Antique Plate Committee

A total of 86 pieces were examined, of which 13 conformed to the Hallmarking Act. The remainder comprised 14 with alterations and additions, nine with transposed marks and 18 with counterfeit marks. Thirty-two pieces were outside the Committee's jurisdiction.

Suspected Offences

A total of 17 suspected offences against the Hallmarking Act were reported to the Office by Local Authority Trading Standards Officers, albeit there were no resulting prosecutions.

Standards Committees

The UK voted against proposed revisions to EN1811 relating to Nickel Release Testing, but there was insufficient support from other countries to prevent the standard being approved. Technical Committee TC 174 was re-convened and a major review took place of many ISO standards relating to the testing of precious metal jewellery. These standards will be brought up to date to take into account the latest procedures and equipment available for testing. It is hoped that new standards using X-ray fluorescence spectrometry will be introduced later this year.

International Convention on Hallmarks and International Association of Assay Offices (IAAO)

The Hallmarking Convention is considering whether to drop the requirement to apply a fineness mark in addition to the Common Control Mark, which also contains fineness information. This was in response to the increasing complexity and smaller size of articles sent for hallmarking where space for both marks is often limited. The September 2010 Convention meeting was held in Israel, the first time it has been held outside Europe.

Assay Offices in Spain (Barcelona), Sweden and Palestine signed the Memorandum of Understanding for the IAAO. Palestine will become an Official Observer. The IAAO voted to extend the Chairmanship period from one year to three years to allow greater continuity and momentum in its administrative programmes. London was elected as Secretariat for a further three years.

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Alison Byrne

The Ashley-Russell seminar

Changes to the Hallmarking Act

The need of the British Hallmarking Council (BHC) to be retained was included in the Government review of Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisations (QUANGOs). The Assay Office played a major role in the provision of information to the Government and, as a result, the future of the BHC remains secure. Progress on the Legislative Reform Order to permit off-shore marking was delayed as a result of the General Election, but this review is now progressing again.

Staff

Primula John-Baptiste, Alex Palmer, Sylvia Dogble and Will Evans received their Freedom.

A very proud moment in the year was the successful completion of a BSc in Information Systems and Computing at Birkbeck College in the University of London by William Evans. Less successful was his attempt to grow a moustache.

NOTE

See fact file, p.63, for hallmarking statistics