By Robert Organ

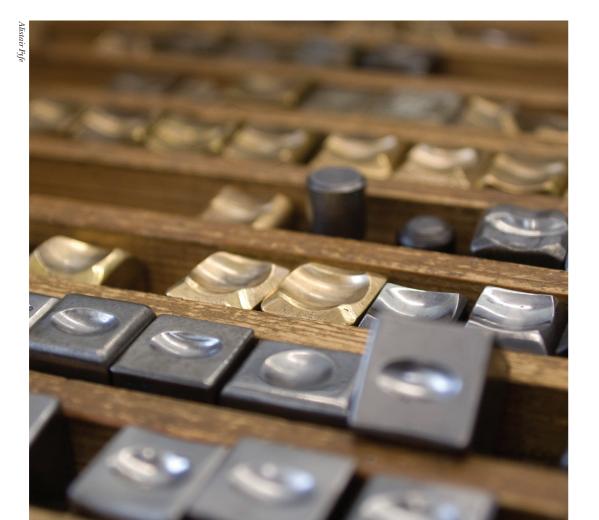
In 2009 the Hallmarking Act was amended to include palladium

A selection of hallmarking support tools for rings

Activity

It was a particularly notable year for hallmarking because in 2009 the Hallmarking Act was amended to include palladium in the list of those alloys that require compulsory hallmarking. It is only the fourth time in the 700 year history of hallmarking in the UK that alloys from a new metal have been introduced, the last being alloys of platinum in 1975. The palladium hallmark became available in the summer for the compulsory launch date of 1 January 2010. Uptake during this period was encouraging, and 17,777 of the 45,304 articles received by all UK offices were marked in London.

The total number of articles hallmarked dropped from 18.9 million in 2008 to 16.2 million in 2009. A continued fall of 30.8% in gold demand between the two years was the main factor in this decrease. In contrast, demand for silver increased by 5.5% over the same period and, for the first time for many years, more silver articles were hallmarked than gold. Platinum showed a small decrease of 4.5%.



The number of articles hallmarked by London was 3.4 million, 16.6% less than the previous year. Of these, 1.1 million were marked at the Heathrow sub-office and 130,647 at Greville Street. Both of these sites continue to receive considerable praise for the quality of the specialist service which they deliver.

Fuelled by the record high gold prices, the great phenomenon in the trade during the year was the prolific increase in the number of companies offering to buy gold from the general public. The Assay Office was able to offer to a number of these customers professional services, such as melt and assay, and this generated welcome additional income.

Following the palladium information evening in April 2009, the Assay Office organised a number of successful events during the year to educate manufacturers, retailers and trading standards officers on hallmarking. Amongst these were three retailers' information days, and two trading standards seminars. One of these was held in Belfast, which helped to kick off a major initiative on hallmarking in Northern Ireland. Several smaller workshops were also provided for individual trading standards enforcement teams. Lectures were given to students on silversmithing and jewellery courses across the country.

To improve communication with customers, a regular e-news bulletin was introduced. This provides up-to-date information on activities within the Assay Office and lists forthcoming events.

Antique Plate Committee

A total of 147 pieces were examined, of which 54 conformed to the Hallmarking Act. The remainder comprised 22 with alterations and additions, 24 with transposed marks, 32 with counterfeit marks and 15 items which were outside the jurisdiction of the Committee.

Suspected Offences

Seventeen suspected offences against the Hallmarking Act were reported to the Office by Local Authority Trading Standards Officers, which resulted in four prosecutions.

Standards Committees

The proposed revision to EN1811 relating to Nickel Release Testing has caused considerable discontent amongst UK providers of this test, many of which are the Assay Offices. There is considerable risk that customers will lose confidence. Every effort is being made to find a way to improve the current test in a way that keeps the customers on board.



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

Life on the international hallmarking front became more settled over the past year as the key issues relating to the EU Mutual Recognition Regulation and Services Directive were resolved with only a small impact on existing hallmarking arrangements.

Lithuania finally completed ratification of the 2001 amendment of the Hallmarking Convention. One impact of this is that there will now be a palladium Convention mark. No new countries acceded to the Hallmarking Convention.

The IAAO goes from strength to strength and Bosnia and Herzegovina signed the Memorandum of Understanding.

Changes to the Hallmarking Act

The Hallmarking Council and National Measurement Office are liaising with the Government to amend the Hallmarking Act to allow UK offices to apply a UK hallmark off-shore. This will allow UK assay offices to compete with countries, such as the Netherlands, which already have such legislation in place. A Legislative Reform Order (LRO) will be used to progress the matter and the amendments are expected to be completed by the middle of next year.

Staff

Brent Jones and Chris Walne received their long service awards. A consequence of the downturn in business was that ten redundancies had to be made during the year. This was a particularly painful experience.

The wearing of pink and a spate of cross-dressing broke out again as £200 was collected for Breast Cancer Research. John Love was first into his frock.



David Archer with Summer School students during a visit to the Assay Office