Sheffield Assay Office Making its Mark

If you know about hallmarking, you'll know the four UK Assay Offices, but it's fair to say that some have higher profiles than others. Sheffield – home of the rose and the crown marks – deserves closer inspection. Belinda Morris took the tour.

While it may not be as ancient as the London Assay Office (700 years old and counting) there's been an Assay Office in Sheffield since 1773, when local silversmiths joined forces with Birmingham petitioners to ask Parliament for their own Assay Office. Despite fierce opposition from London Goldsmiths' Company, an Act of Parliament granted Sheffield the right to assay silver.

Which makes it particularly interesting to discover that these days there are any number of London-based businesses who actually choose to send their precious goods up to West Yorkshire to be assayed. And some clients have seriously major international reputations to protect… so clearly Sheffield is doing something right and perhaps it's time that it was no longer a best-kept secret.

"I like to use a metaphor of windows," says industry consultant Helen Dimmick, who is a new Guardian at the Assay Office and has been working with the team on various staff and customer-facing initiatives. "Of course there are no actual windows where the assaying work is carried out, but we want to create a window on to the business, so that people can see what goes on. We have very talented and hard-working guys here that the industry should know about. They are the heroes," she adds.

Eleven years ago the Assay Office moved from its last in a run of central city locations, to the large, airy, purpose-built Guardians Hall in the Hillsborough area of Sheffield. The vast, open-plan, light-filled (despite being window-free) hallmarking production area appears to be an oasis of calm, unhurried busy-ness. There may be an average of 10,000 of precious metal goods passing through the building on any given day, but there's no sense of frenzied stress among team members.



"Our previous building was across five levels with lots of narrow corridors; it was harder to communicate there," explains Assay Master Ashley Carson. "We now have, essentially, three departments in one (very big) room. The flow of work is more efficient – this building works well." He's well placed to make such (and many other) comparisons, having started work at Sheffield Assay office in 1977 and risen through various departments, eventually becoming, at 32, its youngest Assay Master in 1993.

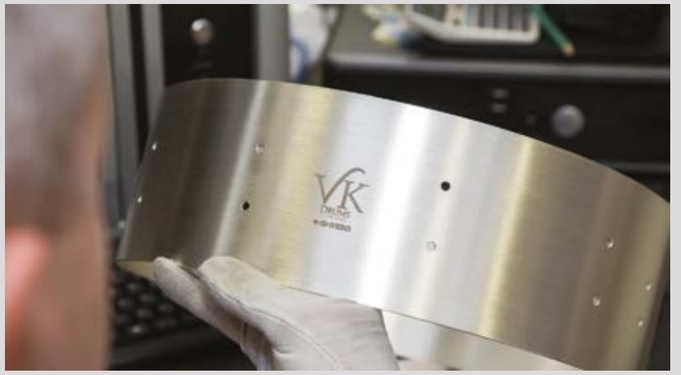
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He's clearly witnessed (and presided over) many key developments and changes in that time – some common to all four Assay Offices, such as the introduction of the mixed metal hallmark, date-letters becoming voluntary and palladium becoming the fourth recognised precious metal. Other changes and initiatives have been more specific to Sheffield. Laser marking was introduced in 1997 and updated, versatile, highly accurate fibre laser machines brought in two years ago. And Sheffield Assay Office is rightly proud of its support of art degree programmes, exhibition sponsorship, and numerous collaborations designed to share and ensure continuity of silversmithing skills in the city.

Ensuring that a strong link is maintained between the Assay Office and the wider community – be it consumer or trade – is its library with over 4,000 books, including some highly specialised and rare volumes. Run by librarian and curator Emma Paragreen (a past winner of the NAJ's JET Bransom Award), it welcomes visitors, whether they are students, researchers, collectors, groups or clients with commercial requirements. Can't make it in person? Emma offers a free enquiry service – when she's not giving talks and tours of the Assay Office, as well as its stupendous collection of some 1,000 items of silver and silver plate dating back to 1773 and added to every year by a specially commissioned piece.

Assay Office progress has also been prompted by changes within the industry itself, adapting to the trade's movements and the needs of clients. "We're aligning the business with particular developments," explains Carson. "Sheffield Assay Office is experiencing significant percentage growth in 18ct gold and platinum hallmarking figures and as such we're working hard to provide a quality service to support the challenges and nuances of the UK jewellery market. Our service has to match the fineness of what we are hallmarking."

The wealth of experience across the departments – from receipt and dispatch to XRF analysis of the purity of precious metals, hallmarking, press, hand and laser marking and examination – ensures that quality is kept high. In 1982 the Sheffield Assay office bolstered its reputation for protecting customers and manufacturers further by adding the Sheffield Analytical Services division. Today the highly qualified team and comprehensively equipped laboratories are headed up by Dr Belen Morales, where not only precious metals are tested, but also metals used in agriculture, animal supplies, healthcare, transportation and toys, and independent assays are provided for bullion companies.







Belt and braces are being added to this roster of care, by Helen Dimmick, who is working on innovative staff training and client-focused initiatives – investing in the team that is already in place. "High trust management style is a tool I work with to train individuals on how trust is essential to organisational success," she explains.

"Trust is mutually reinforcing, but once managers operate by sharing information, allowing others to influence, depending upon the team and clarifying and living up to expectations, high trust can be established. High trust is essential to increase employee morale, reduce absenteeism, promote innovation and help in the adjustment to change – really essential in our very changeable UK jewellery market."

Just a few weeks in and this style of staff training is paying dividends. Communication, collaboration and cooperation between team members and whole departments are palpably evident. It also works on team-client relationship levels – planned visits to customers' businesses will offer hugely beneficial insights into the life of hallmarked goods after they've left the Assay Office. "The development of the team and sharing with the trade the best practices that go on here, is what I want to see," says Dimmick. "Sheffield may have hid its light under a bushel, but now it wants to shout about it."