



The oldest form of Consumer Protection

In an age where consumer protection and rights are a key concern for most present-day manufacturers it is fascinating to note that the hallmark is, in fact, one of the oldest forms of consumer protection that exists.

The history of the hallmark dates back as far as 1300, when a statute of Edward I established the assaying (test and analysis) and marking of precious metals.

The original aim of the introduction of hallmarking was enlightened - to protect the public against fraud and the trader against unfair competition.



A Brief History

So why was it felt necessary to introduce hallmarking?

When jewellery and silverware are manufactured, precious metals are not used in their pure form, as they are too soft. Gold, Silver, and Platinum are always alloyed with copper or other metals to create an alloy that is more suitable to the requirements of the jeweller. Such an alloy needs to be strong, workable, yet still attractive. However, it can be impossible for even an expert to determine the quality and fineness of precious metal items by sight or touch alone.

In addition, unscrupulous manufacturers had realised that there was an opportunity for extra profit if they reduced the precious metal content of an alloy at the manufacturing stage. For example, an article made completely from base metal could be made to look like something else altogether by plating it with a thin coating of gold or silver!

In the 1300's, the ability to manufacture in high volumes was limited but in the present day, high volume manufacturing of certain items is a reality, making the need for compulsory, independent testing as important as it was in 1300.

In the early days of hallmarking, the Statute of 1300 empowered the Wardens of the Company of Goldsmiths in London to go out to workshops in the City and assay silver and gold. Initially, only silver that met the required standard was marked - with the symbol of the leopard's head which is still the mark of the London Assay Office today. Over time, gold came to be marked in the same way as silver.



In 1363, the maker's mark was added to the hallmark. The maker's or Sponsors mark tells the buyer or collector who made the piece - or more commonly who submitted it to be hallmarked, and ensures traceability of the piece.

At first, most maker's marks were pictorial but as literacy rates improved the method of using initials combined with a punched 'surround' shape was introduced.

It wasn't until 1478 that the Wardens of Goldsmiths set themselves up in Goldsmiths Hall in London, thus creating the first formal base for assay work. A salaried assayer was employed to test and mark items, leading to the introduction of the date letter as an additional mark, a means of identifying the assayer by date and make successive assayers accountable for their work.

For almost 300 years, Goldsmiths Hall had the monopoly on the assay work and it wasn't until 1773 that Sheffield Assay Office was founded by an Act of Parliament. The silversmiths of both Sheffield and Birmingham felt strongly that the vigour and volume of their trade warranted an Assay Office of their own and lobbied Parliament until they were finally rewarded by the Hallmarking Act 1773.

The Hallmarking Act

Under the UK Hallmarking Act of 1973 (amended 1998) it is illegal to offer items for sale described as gold, silver or platinum unless they have been tested and hallmarked by a UK Assay Office.

An item may be exempt if –

- The item weighs less than 1.00 gm in Gold
- The item weighs less than 7.78 gms in Silver
- The item weighs less than 0.50 gm Platinum

Note: There is no weight exemption in the Republic of Ireland and all items destined for sale there must be hallmarked.



If an article is exempt by weight it may still be described as Silver, Gold or Platinum but samples from a consignment should be assayed to avoid any contravention of the Trades Description Act.

- The item has already been marked in a country with whom the UK signed an International Convention from 1976, and the item carries a special 'Common Control Mark'.



- The item has already been marked in a country whose national hallmark is accepted in the UK. Since 1st January 1999, the UK has accepted some 'equivalent' European marks without the need for further testing and marking.

At present these include the national hallmarks of Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal and Switzerland, plus Spanish marks A1, V1 and M1.

- With the exception of Israel, which is a member of the International Convention applying the Common Control Mark, marks from outside the European area are not permitted in the UK.
- Negative tolerances are not permitted in the UK and are not permitted by any country applying an 'equivalent' mark.



Traditional fineness marks, the crown on Gold, the lion passant for 925 Sterling Silver, the Britannia mark for 958 Silver and the orb for 950 Platinum, plus the date letter, are now voluntary additional marks.

Examples - Sterling Silver



18 Carat Gold



950 Platinum



The UK Hallmark

Each hallmark tells its own story through a series of individual marks within the hallmark.

The first mark is usually the Maker's or Sponsor's mark which identifies who made the piece or more commonly who submitted it to be hallmarked. For the purposes of traceability, maker's must register a maker's or Sponsor's mark of their own with the Assay Office before they can begin sending goods for hallmarking.

Members of the general public can submit goods for hallmarking under the Assay Office sponsor with out the need to register.

A Sponsor's mark or Maker's mark is made up of at least two initials combined with a shape which surrounds the initials. The initials of the person or the company applying for registration are normally combined with one of the punch surround shapes available to make up a unique Sponsor's mark.

The sponsor's mark, fineness mark and the Assay Office mark – the Rose for Sheffield - are **compulsory marks**.

Finenesses permitted in the UK are as follows:

- SILVER – 999, 958 (Britannia), 925 (Sterling) and 800 parts per thousand.
- GOLD – 999, 990, 916 (22ct), 750 (18ct), 585 (14ct) and 375 (9ct).
- PLATINUM – 999, 950, 900, 850.



Applying a mark

A hallmark can be applied either by traditional methods, using the skills of our highly-trained punch and hand markers, or by the latest laser machines.

Traditional, Struck or Punched Marks

The traditional method of marking is by hand, using a punch. Using this system, the mark is created by, in effect, moving or forming the metal.

The size of the hallmark is thus dictated by the sizes of the punches used. If no indication of size is placed on the assay note, then a normal UK mark is applied.

A minimum mark can also be requested and is charged at the same rate.

Sheffield Assay Office has its own toolmaking department which produces hundreds of jigs in a wide variety of shapes and sizes to accommodate all types of articles and support them during the marking process.

The toolmakers also make the blank hallmarking punches which are then sent to an accredited supplier to have the individual customer's sponsor mark and other hallmarking symbols cut into them.



Laser marking

Laser marking is particularly suitable for hollow gold and silver items which can be damaged by the traditional process. Hallmarks applied by laser do not distort the material, making it an ideal solution when marking fine hollow-ware, flatware and fragile articles.



Typical Laser mark

Laser marking also allows items to be marked in their finished state. The mark can be lasered as a skeletal mark or undercut to give a 3D effect resembling a punched mark.

Mixed Metals

It is now possible to mark certain combinations of precious metal and items made of precious and base metal such as stainless steel that were previously illegal under the Hallmarking Act.

Registering a mark

To register your unique mark at Sheffield Assay Office contact the Registrar, Hilary Theaker theakerh@assayoffice.co.uk

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