

The Hallmarking System in Ireland -

**An investigation into the past, present, future and function of
hallmarks.**

By

Wendy Clarke

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I would like to thank the Assay Master, Captain Ronald Le Bas for all his help. I would also like to thank Brian Clarke and my tutor John Turpin.

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Preface

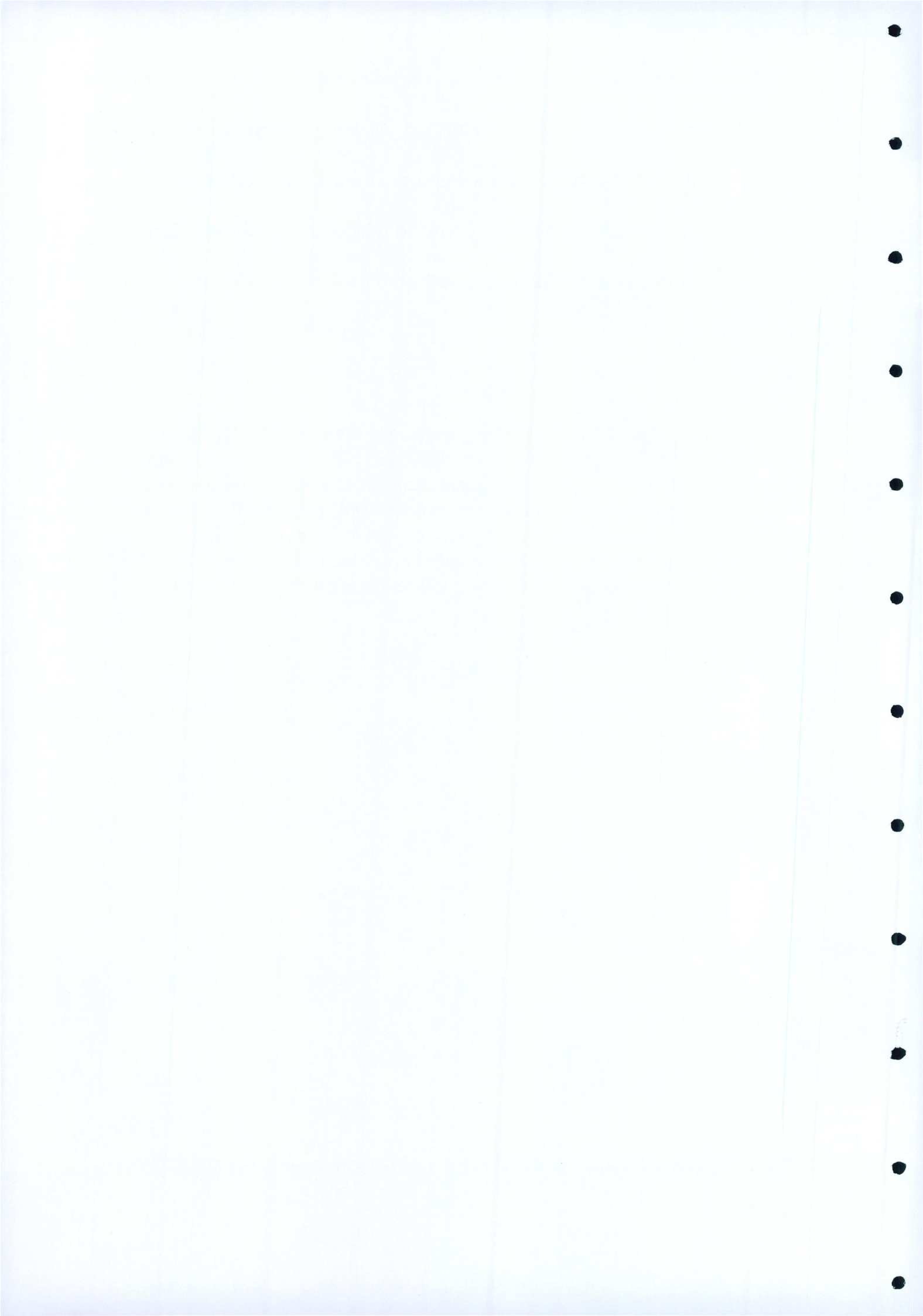
In 1997 I deferred my college studies for a year in order to gain some work experience in the field of metalwork. During this year a job became available to me in the Dublin Assay Office, working as a hallmarker. While working as a hallmarker, the whole process of hallmarking and assaying of precious metals became very interesting to me. I found the history and tradition of the assay office, fascinating. Having worked at this job, I gained great insight into the daily routine and organisation involved in the hallmarking system. Very few jewellers have ever seen the inside of the assay office and therefore many people have asked me what it was like.

There are many different charters and acts of Parliament hung on the walls in the assay office. There are also copies of different hallmarks down through the years in frames in the entrance hallway. As you ascend the staircase to the boardroom, photographs of the assay masters and wardens of the past greet you. There is a great respect for tradition and you can get a sense of being part of something historical.

While working as a hallmarker I decided to research the history of hallmarks in Ireland, in order to find out how the process began. I also became very aware of the problems facing the assay office at present. I have tried to discuss these problems in relation to Britain and Europe, and also to find out the opinions of others on the hallmarking system and its future.

“One of the success stories of our time must surely be that of hallmarks. Devised as a simple system some four centuries ago to protect the maker and the consumer, not only has the system survived the trial of time but is now a major factor in helping to make silver wares so much sought after throughout the world. This valuable heritage is today more sought after because of its protection than at any time in the past.”(1)

(1) Ronald Le Bas on hallmarks in 1984 from Douglas Bennett, Irish Silver.



The History of Hallmarks and their Function Today

In order to understand the history of hallmarks, we must look at the history of the company of goldsmiths in Dublin. During the 16th and 17th century there were a number of guilds set up in Dublin. Each guild had a written charter stating the reason for the guild, and the rules and regulations governing its operation. The goldsmiths and silversmiths of Dublin formed a guild called the Guild of All Saints, but in 1555 their charter was accidentally burned. Without this they had no recognition as a proper guild. A true copy of their original charter was given to the mayor and granted the seal of the city in April 1557. This recognised the existence of the guild and ensured that the company would have the same privileges as other guilds.

There were a lot of problems with the new charter because it also stated that the Mayor of Dublin would oversee proceedings, and that the Common Council of the city could interfere whenever it wanted. It also stated that members had to be of English descent. As a result of this there was no proper control over substandard silver and gold being sold, as it was

outside its guild made by ineligible metal workers. The Dublin goldsmiths wanted complete control over all assaying and hallmarking. They felt they were entitled to the same privileges as the Goldsmiths Company in London, which had complete charge of all assaying.

In 1637 the goldsmiths of Dublin petitioned the king asking him if they might be incorporated by royal charter. On the 22nd December 1637 the Guild of All Saints was granted a new charter by Charles I. This new charter was, and still is at the core of many of the rules and regulations which are applicable today (fig.1).

The charter states that the reason the guild was set up was to prevent the public being sold base or corrupt silver and gold through lack of a recognised mark or standard. It states that a number of people should be employed to find out and deal accordingly with anybody abusing the system. Each person employed by the company should take an oath not to let any gold or silver below the given standard to be marked. No vessel was to have any more solder, anneal or filling than was necessary for it to be manufactured. All assaying of gold and silver was to be supervised by the company and any goods found to be of substandard were to be broken

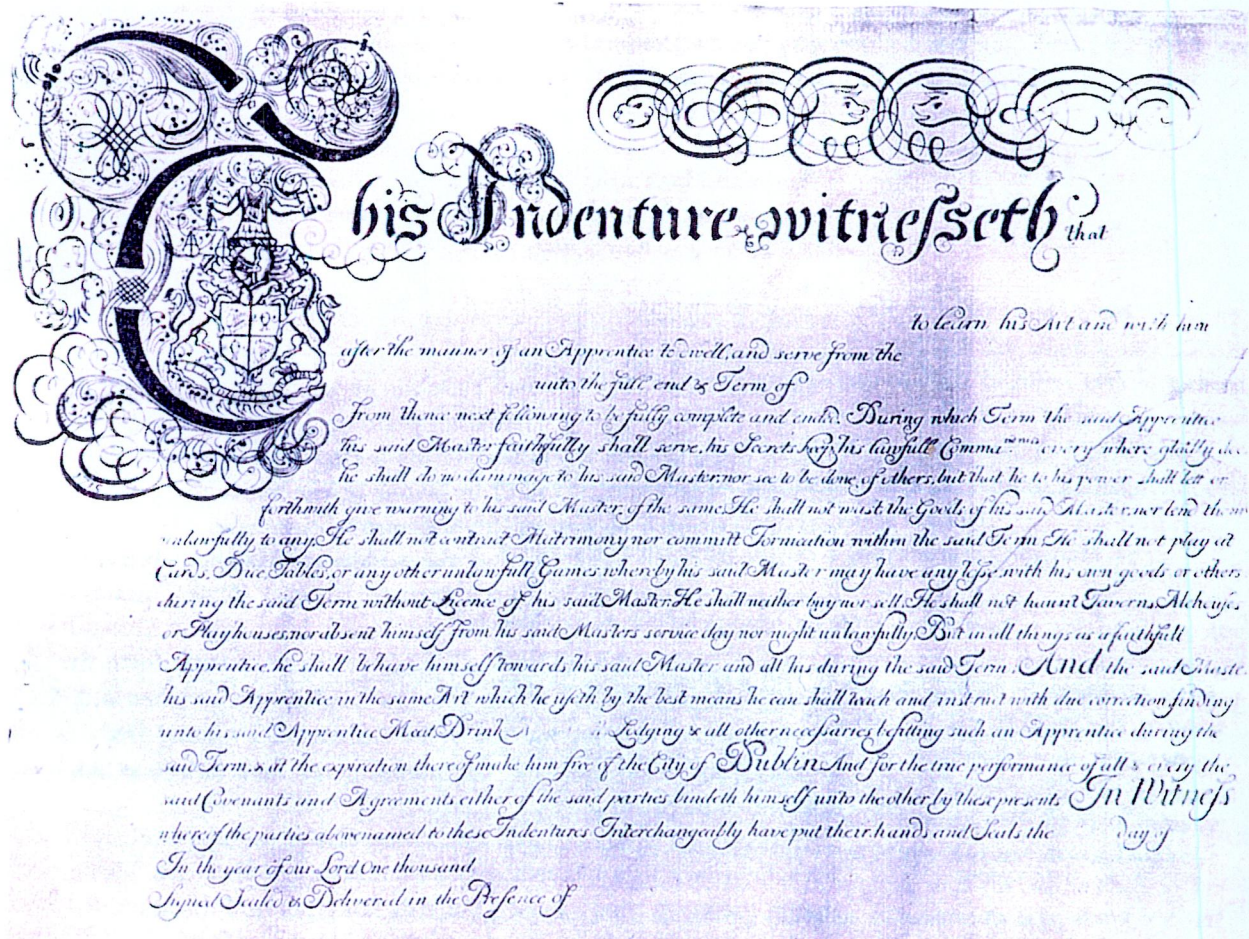


Fig.1 The charter granted to the guild of All Saints in December 1637

and the maker fined. All goldsmiths and silversmiths throughout Ireland were bound by the rules of this charter.

The charter stated that there would be two marks for silver – the Harp crowned and the maker's mark. This was realised on the 6th of April 1638, when for the first time a piece of silver was assayed and hallmarked with both these marks (fig.2). All silver was to be assayed and tested for standard and must also bear the maker's mark and the harp crowned before being put on the market.

These marks became known as hallmarks and they were given that name because of the fact that they were stamped at Goldsmiths Hall. A hallmark is an accurate and invaluable guide to when a piece of work was made.

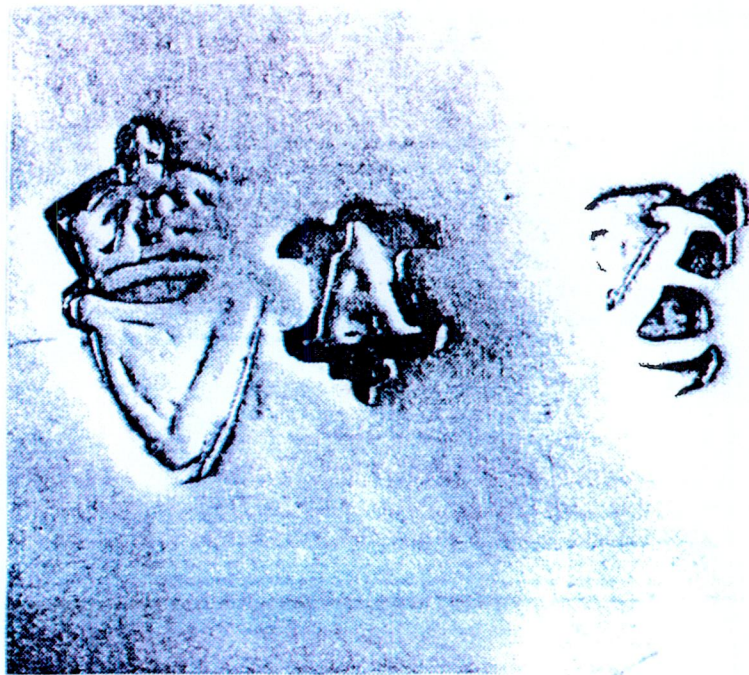


Fig.2 The first silver hallmark dating back to 1638

The three marks introduced in 1638 were:

1) The Harp Crowned. (Fig.3)

Once a piece of work was marked with this it meant that it had passed the required fineness tests, and that if it was silver, it was 925 parts silver and if it was gold, it was 22ct gold.

2) The Maker's Mark. (Fig.4)

Each Irish maker having registered with the company of goldsmiths would receive the right to hallmark his own initials onto his pieces to denote who had made the article. All pieces had to be marked with the maker's mark before they were assayed and hallmarked.

3) The Date Letter. (Fig.5)

A date letter was also introduced, beginning with the letter A. This helped to identify the year a piece of work was made. They changed the date letter from year to year going through the alphabet. After 26 years a new style of letters would be introduced. The date letter also helped the goldsmiths to prevent and detect fraud.



Fig.3 The harp crowned



*William Cooke's
Maker's Mark
(1637-44)*



*James Vanderbeck's
Maker's Mark
(1937-42)*

Fig.4 Examples of the first maker's marks

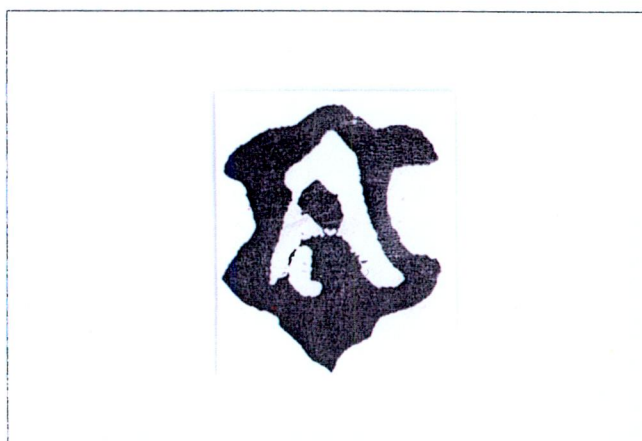


Fig.5 The first date letter used

In 1729 an Act of Parliament was passed stating that these three marks must be present on all gold and silver being offered for sale. This act of parliament also stated that a duty of 6d per oz must be paid on all gold and silver wares. The act came into effect in March 1730. As a result of this the Dublin goldsmiths had a punch made that would show whether or not the duty had been paid on a piece. This mark was the Hibernia mark (Fig. 6). It was first used as a duty mark in April 1730. A lot of people tried to counterfeit this mark so that they wouldn't have to pay the duty.

At the time of the first Irish hallmark there was only one standard of fineness for silver and one for gold. The standard for silver was .925 or 92½% pure silver. The reason it was not 100% pure was because the silver would have been too soft to work with if it was totally pure. The other 7½% was made up of metal alloy, which was usually copper. The standard for gold was 22-carat, which is still the highest standard of gold available today. 1-carat would be approximately 41.65 parts gold to a 1000. 22-carat gold is therefore 916 parts gold to a 1000. Gold is a softer metal than silver and this is the most amount of gold a piece can contain for it to be still workable. This is still the case today.



Fig.6 The first Hibernia mark used in 1730

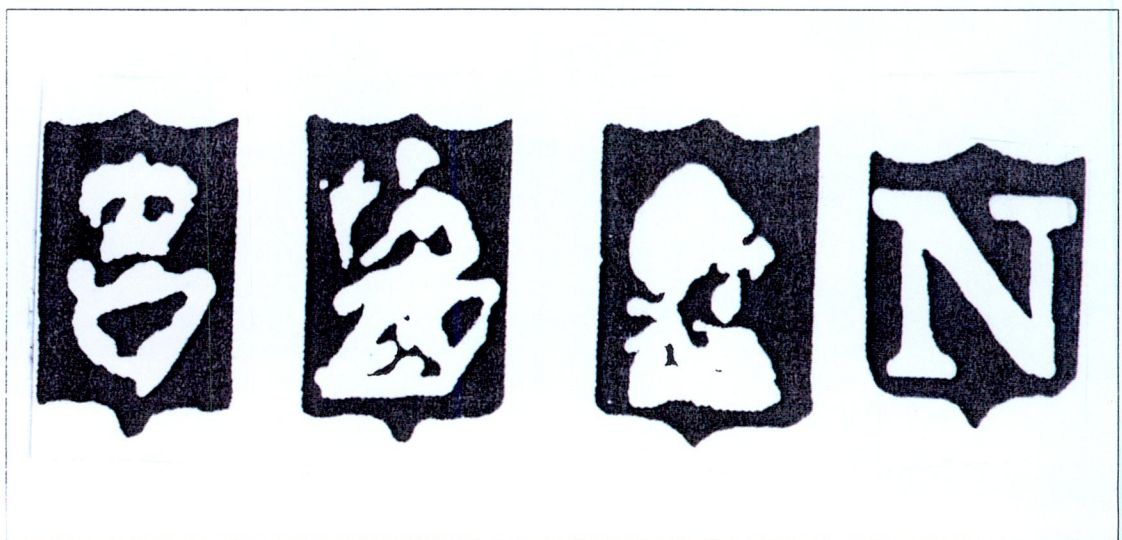


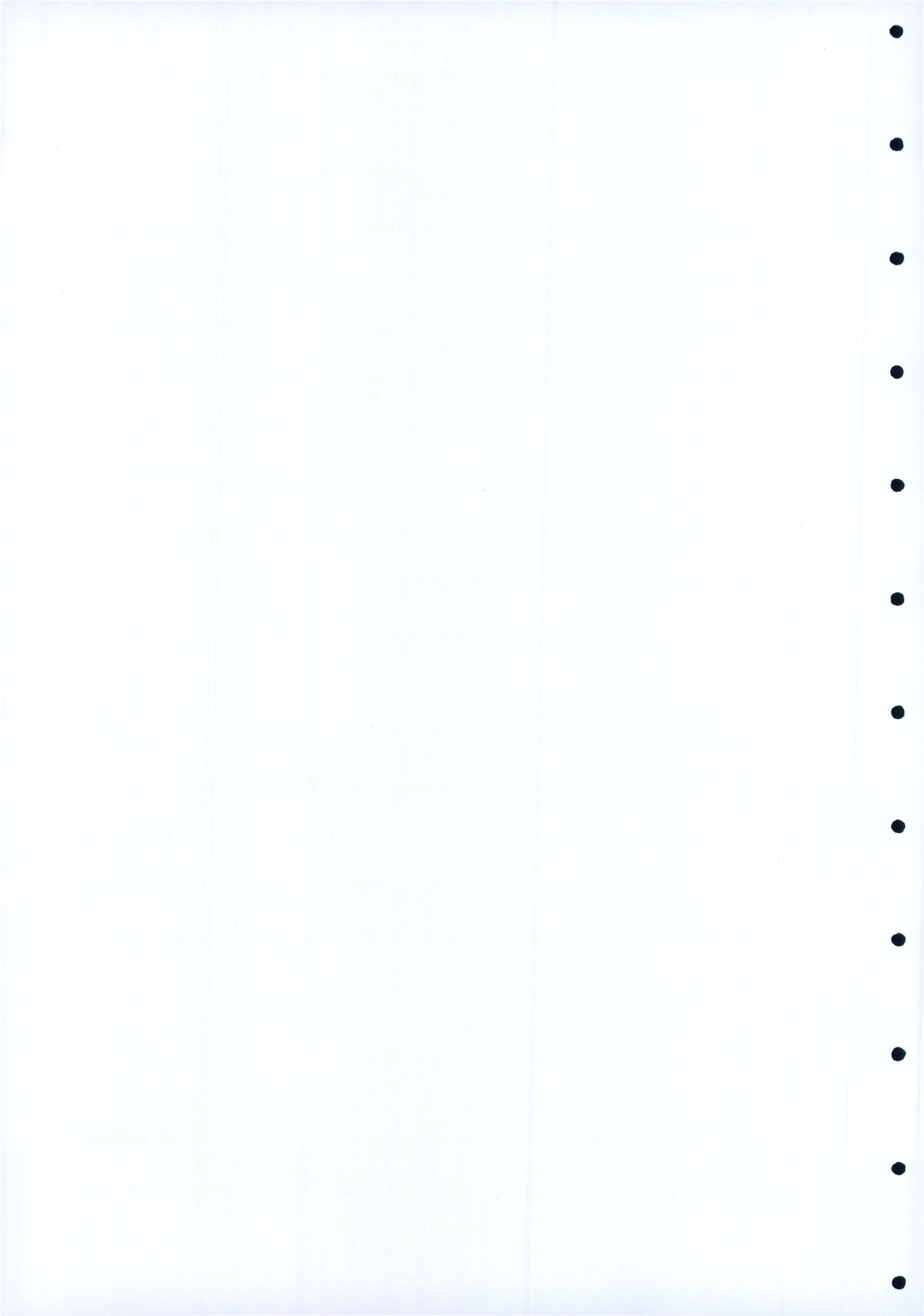
Fig.7 The Sovereigns head and Hibernia being used simultaneously in

1807

In order to bring Ireland's regulations in line with England's, an Act of Parliament was passed in 1807 stating that the sovereign's head should be stamped on all silver and gold in Ireland to show that the duty had been paid. This mark was being used in England since 1784. The Assay Office used this mark but they also continued to use the Hibernia mark as well (fig.7). This was an unusual move on the part of the Dublin goldsmiths. The Hibernia mark was kept on as a symbol of Ireland to denote that the piece was made here. In 1890 duty on silver and gold came to an end in Ireland and Britain and the duty mark of the sovereign's head was not used any more after that date. Following Irish national independence in 1922 the Dublin assay office continued as before.

In 1966 the first commemorative mark was used. This was a special mark in the form of the sword of light, which was used on all gold and silver plate to commemorate the golden jubilee of the 1916 rising (fig.8). It was used for one year only and was stamped together with the existing hallmarks of that year, which were the Hibernia, the harp crowned and the date letter Y.

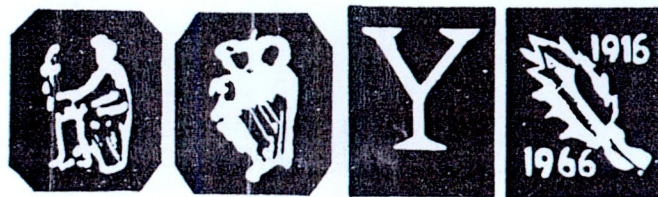
To commemorate the historic significance of the Republic of Ireland joining the European Community on 1 January 1973, a special mark was



introduced for that year only in the form of a miniature representation of the Glenisheen collar. It was stamped together with the existing hallmarks on all Irish-made articles of gold and silver other than jewellery and watchcases (fig.9). On the 1 January 1986 the 16th alphabetical cycle since the foundation of the company began.

As part of the commemoration of the 350th anniversary of the founding of the Goldsmiths Company a new mark was brought into use on the 1 January 1987 for one year only. This was a representation in miniature of the coat of arms of the company. The shield is divided into four portions or quarters. 1 and 4 have a harp, and 2 and 3 show a covered cup between two buckles. The same regulations applied as in the two previous commemorative marks (fig.10).

Today hallmarking covers a much wider field than it did in the 17th century. There are six standards for gold: 9, 10, 14, 18, 20 and 22. There are two standards for silver: sterling / 925 and Britannia / 9584. Platinum has now to be hallmarked and a whole new laboratory has been built to deal with this metal (fig.11). The harp crowned is still used on sterling silver and on 22-carat gold. While the marks are the same, the gold marks



*Fig.8 The commemoration mark for the golden jubilee of the Easter rising
in 1966*



Fig.9 The Commemoration mark for the joining of the E.C. in 1973

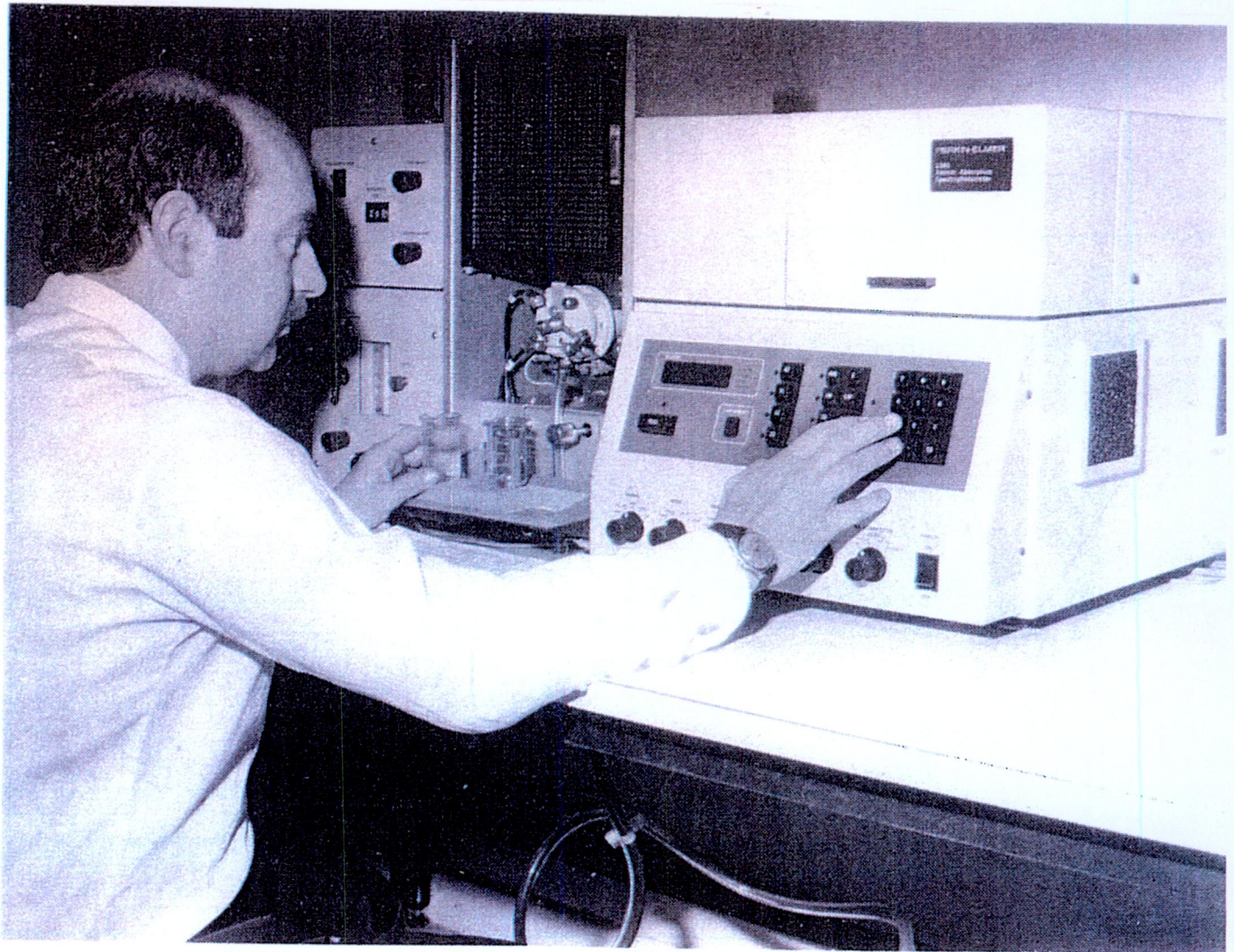


*Fig.10 The commemoration mark for the 350th anniversary of the
goldsmiths company 1987*

are on their side while those for silver are vertical. In addition, the numerals 22 appear with the maker's mark on 22-carat gold items.

The three highest standards of gold all carry their own special mark. With 22 carat as we have said, it is the harp crowned. 20 carat gold carries the symbol of three feathers on its side. 18 carat carries the symbol of a unicorn on its side. The numerals 22, 20 and 18 also appear on items of this carat alongside the maker's mark. With 9, 10 and 14-carat items the carat number appears alongside the standard of fineness e.g. 9-375. This is used on 9,10 and 14-carat items instead of a special symbol, (see appendix).

There is still only one standard of silver for Irish manufactured items, which is 925. In the Republic of Ireland the law also provides for the assaying and marking of silver items of finer quality, which are imported and are made of a higher composition than 92.52 per cent pure silver. This is known as Britannia standard. On these items the mark is stamped, 9584, (see appendix).



*Fig.11 The laboratory used for the testing of platinum at the Dublin assay
office*

Foreign or imported items do not bear the symbol of Hibernia. They have a different symbol that is called "Bouget". This is the Irish import symbol and appears on all imported items, which have been assayed and tested for fineness, (see appendix).

Platinum can now be hallmarked. The fineness or standard mark for platinum is a capital letter "P" with a broken loop. Both the Assay Office mark and the standard mark "P" are in a pentagonal shield. This is so as to readily identify the mark from a hallmark on white gold, (see appendix).

There is also a set of hallmarks called the convention hallmarks. They are often referred to as "C.C.M. Marks". In 1987 the C.C.M. marks were agreed upon by a number of countries in Europe including Ireland. They facilitate international trade in articles of precious metals while at the same time maintaining consumer protection. In other words, when the assay office in Dublin receives imported items from another country which is part of the convention, it would check the parcel for items bearing the C.C.M. mark. Anything bearing this mark does not have to be tested and hallmarked as the convention hallmark is recognised as being of proper standard. Items bearing the C.C.M. mark do not carry a date letter however. The convention mark is commonly used by mass manufacturers

who wish to export to Europe. By putting the convention mark on their work they will not have to resubmit it for assay and hallmarking in the country of export, providing that the country is a part of the convention.

In addition to the maker or sponsor's mark the convention hallmark is made up of the following three marks:

- 1) The "Town Mark", which indicates the country and Assay Office in which the items were assayed. In Ireland's case this is the Hibernia.
- 2) The fineness in Arabic numerals, indicating the parts per 1000 of gold, silver or platinum, as the case may be e.g. 9ct gold is 375.
- 3) Finally, the mark of the convention, this takes the form of scales with the fineness in numerals across the centre of it. The convention mark for 9ct gold will have the scales with numerals 375 across the centre, (see appendix).

Hallmarks have come a long way since they first were used in the early 1600's. The term "Hallmark" has come to be used in daily speech to mean that something is genuine, authentic and of high quality. Should we try to preserve our hallmarking system as we enter into the new millennium? How do we compare with our British and European counterparts? Would the surrender or discontinuing of hallmarking constitute a grievous loss to present and future generations?

How does the Hallmarking system in Ireland compare with Britain and Europe?

Great Britain has a long history of hallmarking precious metals. In Great Britain since 1544 there has been a legally guaranteed standard of silver. This is 925 parts to a 1000. This is indicated by a lion passant (fig.12). All British silver has a maker's mark and place of origin mark. It also has a date letter. The place of origin mark and the date letter vary between assay offices.

In England up until 1696 assaying and hallmarking was carried out in many small towns throughout the country. After 1696 the Britannia standard of silver was introduced. Because of this some of the offices had to close, as there was a lack of working silversmiths. In 1721 they returned to the old sterling standard of silver, and by that time there were only 4 towns which had been able to sustain an assay office. These towns were Chester, Exeter, Newcastle and London. Over the next few years the towns of assaying changed and in 1773 an assay office was opened in Birmingham and in Sheffield. Each goldsmith would send his or her work to the nearest assay office. Today there are three assay offices in England



Fig.12 The Lion Passant the silver standard mark in Britain

and one in Scotland. They are Birmingham, Sheffield, London and Edinburgh.

The assay office in Sheffield proved to be very innovative. It was set up and opened in 1773. From then on they began to come up with new ways of hallmarking. They came up with the idea of using combined punches; i.e. the date letter and town mark were to be combined on the one punch. In that way they could strike the mark with one blow making it easier and quicker for the hallmarker. The first combined punch was used in 1780. Today all assay offices including Ireland use combined punches. Most major companies would have a set of combined punches that also have the maker or sponsor mark on it. This makes the hallmarking process even quicker again as a full hallmark can be made with one punch.

In Sheffield they have a unique system for marking items which are silverplated. Goldsmiths can strike their surname or that of the firm into the piece of plate, as long as the mark is not deceiving and has no similarity to a hallmark. They keep a record of these marks and they must be inspected and registered. The penalty for selling wares with a mark that is not registered, is one hundred pounds. This service is not available in Ireland.

Apart from this the assay offices in Britain are very similar to that of the Irish assay office. Both states use maker's marks, marks of origin, and a date letter. Historically the Irish hallmarking system stems directly from Britain.

There is one major contrast however between Ireland and Britain. In Ireland there is not a list of items that are exempt from hallmarking. In England in 1738 a list was drawn up of articles which were exempt from hallmarking. This list included all wares that were under a certain weight. Today this list applies to all of Britain. Ireland still marks smaller lighter pieces with a full hallmark. An example of this would be products sold by a major company like Argos.

Argos is a large catalogue company based in Britain. They make a wide range of jewellery products. All of their heavier jewellery pieces are hallmarked using the convention hallmark. This means that once they are imported into this country or any other country in the convention, they can be resold without having to be resubmitted for assay and hallmarking. A lot of the jewellery produced for Argos is very light, in order to make it exempt from being hallmarked. Once these lightweight pieces are imported into Ireland they have to be assayed and hallmarked. This forms

a large amount of business for the Dublin assay office. They have a hallmarking room dedicated solely to the marking of Argos and H. Samuels (who are of a similar nature). These lightweight pieces consist of various items e.g. stud and hoop earrings, light gold and silver pendants. If the exemption law was applied to Ireland as it is Britain, the Dublin assay office would stand to lose a major part of its business.

The assay office in London is a huge organisation. Most British silver is hallmarked here. There are vast warehouses for hallmarking and the system is very advanced. They receive thousands of items for hallmarking each day. By contrast the Irish assay office deals with much smaller quantities and on a much smaller scale. Some larger Irish manufacturers feel that it might be quicker for them to send their wares to England to be hallmarked as the system in Ireland can be quite slow. This is not good for business as it takes longer for the items to reach the shops.

The hallmarking systems in some other European countries are however fundamentally different to Britain and Ireland. In Germany for example there was no central political power in the 17th and 18th century, and the country was split up into various different principalities. This meant that over the centuries there was no central legal authority. Each

city set up and organised its own guild. They in turn were responsible for the development of artistry and craftsmanship. It was not until after 1871, when all of the principalities were united and the King of Prussia had styled himself as the new German Emperor, that Germany started to develop centralised systems. Economic growth brought with it prosperity and a great demand for silver objects.

From 1888 onwards all German silver had to be of a certain standard. Compared to Britain and Ireland the German standard was quite low. Their standard was 800 parts silver to a 1000. A lot of silver produced in Germany in the 19th century was industrially mass-produced using the latest technology. There was a preference in Britain and Ireland at that time for hand made, hand crafted objects.

Today there are three recognised standards for silver in Germany. These are 800, 900 and 925. There is a maker's or retailers mark, but no date letter is used. There is no special import mark. Foreign maker's marks are found stamped with the crown and crescent which is the state mark (fig.13). The German method of hallmarking is very different from both the British and Irish tradition. Most of the smaller jewellery items in Germany are hallmarked by the makers themselves.

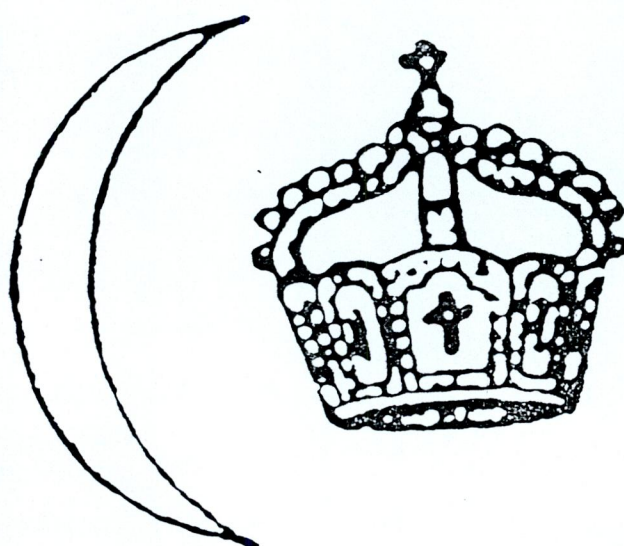


Fig.13 The German state mark of the crown and crescent

The Future of Hallmarking in Ireland

The future of hallmarking in Ireland is uncertain. There is no doubt that some form of assaying and marking silver and gold objects will be needed to check their value and standard of fineness. However, since Ireland has joined the European Union, there is a fear that all assaying and hallmarking systems across Europe will have to conform to the same rules and regulations, therefore standardising all European Union countries. The fact that this will happen is, I think inevitable to a large extent since we are to become one large European trading and financial block, made up of smaller blocks, similar in many ways to that of the United States of America.

It is worth noting then that in America they do not have a compulsory system of hallmarking. There are no restrictions on the mixing of precious metals with non-precious metals. They can for example solder copper to gold or use beach pebbles instead of precious gemstones. These practices reflect the tradition of capitalist individualism, and commercial freedom, unlike the regulatory tradition of Europe.

Ronald Le Bas, the Irish Assay Master has spoken to me of hallmarking, and what he thought might happen in Ireland. He believes that an assay office will still be present in Dublin many years from now. In his opinion however, there would probably be some changes in the overall organisation of hallmarking in Ireland. One of the most important changes in the next few years would probably be the introduction of a new laser-hallmarking machine in the assay office in Dublin. These machines are currently in operation in London, and have proved very successful. The assay office in Dublin is in the process of getting one installed.

The new laser-hallmarking machine will make life a lot easier and will speed up the hallmarking process considerably. It will help immensely in the marking of hollow rings and bangles. The laser beam cuts the mark into the item of jewellery without damaging the piece in any way. Le Bas feels that this will be a great advantage to the everyday running of the assay office.

Other changes in the daily running of the assay office may include an exemption law coming into this country. In Ireland every piece of gold and silver jewellery must be assayed and hallmarked, as Ireland does not currently have any exemption laws, as they do other European countries.

With Ireland joining the European Union there have been discussions about applying this law to Ireland. However, the Assay Master would oppose this change every time, as it would mean a great loss of business for the Assay Office and possibly some job losses as a result. Major companies like Argos and H. Samuels, (two of the biggest manufacturers on the books) would be on the exemption list. The Argos and H. Samuels pieces that are marked in Ireland are pieces that would be too light, and would not be marked in other countries. It seems almost certain however that this exemption law will operate in Ireland some time in the near future.

One other important thing to note for the future is the commemorative mark that the Assay Office will use to celebrate the year two thousand. This special mark, like other commemorative marks, will be stamped together with the existing hallmarks of that year on all Irish-made articles of gold and silver, other than jewellery and watchcases.

The assay office ran a competition together with the Metalwork Department of the National College of Art and Design, to find a suitable millennium mark. The winning design was the letter M with a small two beside it (fig.14). The small two denotes the mathematical term meaning -



Fig.14 An artist impression of the year 2000 commemoration mark.

to the power of two. The M stands for the Roman numeral for one thousand. It also stands for millennium - that is the year 2000.

The competition was a significant step for the Assay Office. It demonstrated that the office was not totally set in its ways. It showed that the Company of Goldsmiths was aware of the great talents of designers and makers emerging from the art school system rather than the former apprenticeship system.

I feel that the Company of goldsmiths must look critically at the future of design and production in this country, particularly in the handcraft sector. If the hallmarking system were to change and become like some European countries, where it is the maker's decision whether or not the piece is to be marked, we would then have more artistic freedom and many contemporary handcraft jewellery designers in Ireland would look at using other types of materials besides metal to work with in the making and designing of jewellery. In art school, students of metalwork and jewellery are taught to look at other materials besides silver, for example: perspex, plastics, rubber, resin and found objects. Once out of Art College however, young jewellers and metalworkers find that using diverse modern materials is not accepted in the main stream of commercial jewellery. Most craft

producers end up conforming to make a living, making small jewellery items solely from gold or silver, or a combination of these.

In America, since hallmarking is non compulsory, the idea of using precious metals with mixed media is nothing new. They are experimental and adventurous without the fear that occurs in Ireland, of being extravagant in their jewellery. American conditions give designers much more scope and freedom to express themselves artistically. In turn the people there are more open to new and exciting things and designers will find a market for their work.

When speaking to Ronald Le Bas regarding the changing trends in jewellery in Ireland and whether or not it is viable to mix silver and gold with other non-precious metals, he was conservative in his view. The assay office he said is there to protect the consumer. It is their right to be made aware of the amount of gold or silver contained in a piece, so that they can be aware of its value. On the issue of style, he has seen no major changes in pieces which are sent to the assay office.

“ Every now and then we get something new which catches the eye of everyone, but on the whole it’s mostly just mainstream mass manufactured products”. (2)

The assay master is aware that craft metalworkers are using different materials and says that it is acceptable to use gold or silver in conjunction with other non-precious materials as long as there is no soldering involved and the precious metal which is used must be assayed and hallmarked.

He does not believe it is right however to solder a precious metal to a non-precious metal. Under law you can sell precious metals which are soldered to non-precious metals but you cannot say that the precious metal is silver or gold. You must label the piece as being made from “yellow metal” or “white metal” otherwise you are committing an offence. If a piece of work is made up of precious and non-precious metals the assay master believes that the piece should be brought in and scraped and the gold, silver or platinum separated from the non precious metal such as copper or brass. The Goldsmiths Company of Ireland has every right under law to do this and I am told it has been done.

(2) Ronald Le Bas from interview

When working in the assay office myself I found the running of it to be very strict and rules were carried out without question. There is a long history behind the running of the assay office and you can feel it when you work there. Whilst I respect the history and also believe hallmarks are necessary I sometimes think that maybe there are too many rules. Perhaps the laws in Ireland could be a little less restricting, which would facilitate the modern craftworker.

How important are Hallmarks?

How important is a hallmarking system in modern day Ireland? Should craft metalworkers be trusted to mark their own pieces? I talked to a modern day craftsperson to find out his opinion on the subject.

Brian Clarke is well known silversmith who runs his own workshop and metalwork school in Kilkenny. For the last number of years he has been involved in the silversmithing project in association with Cooksons, at the National College of Art and Design. He works mainly in silver but most recently has worked in patinised copper and other materials.

In his opinion hallmarks are important when working with precious metals, on larger pieces and one off jewellery pieces. Everything he makes in silver or gold is hallmarked, as it is compulsory. He states, however that he would like to be able to decide himself whether or not the piece should have a hallmark. He feels that sometimes the system is very restricting. For example, once when teaching a student from America, he was amazed to find that the student had no qualms whatsoever about hammering up a

bowl from copper and soldering a piece of 22-carat gold onto it. This made him realise how much emphasis is put on the preciousness of gold and other precious metals in this country. He would like to be able to work without limitation. With the restrictions in this country it would not be unusual for a metalsmith to feel an incredible sense of guilt about soldering 22-carat gold to copper.

Like most metal craftworkers Brian feels that hallmarking is an important way of keeping a record of silversmiths and their wares. It is vital to keep up the tradition of marking pieces for future generations to be able to look back and see when a piece was made and who the maker of the piece was. It is also important that the consumer is protected when purchasing a piece of silver and not fooled into buying something that is substandard.

It would be an enormous advantage to craftworkers if they were able to mark their own pieces. In some countries, jewellers and craftspeople can assay the metal themselves using a small device suitable for a workshop and can therefore hallmark the piece themselves. A team of experts is employed by the Goldsmiths Company to randomly inspect the quality and

hallmarks on pieces. A system like this would work well in a country like Ireland, as there is nowhere you can't get to in a day.

I wrote to mass manufacturers, Argos to find out how much they valued hallmarking and what they thought of the Irish system. As mass manufacturers of mainly gold commercial jewellery they felt hallmarks were important. In their catalogue they print the slogan,

"Look for the hallmark, its your guarantee" (3).

They feel that the public in general needs to be assured that what they are buying is genuine. Argos sells a wide range off diamond rings and wedding rings, also pendant and earrings. It is important for them that there is an assay office to deal with the vast amount of product that must be hallmarked. Some of the jewellery is sent to Ireland to be hallmarked. They feel that the hallmarking laws in Ireland are more severe. In Ireland even the lightest pieces are marked. This does not happen in Britain.

(3) *Argos catalogue 1999*

Conclusion

Hallmarks have been used in this country since the 17th century. They are called hallmarks because they were originally stamped at Goldsmith's hall. A hallmark is made up of three marks, the harp crowned, the makers mark and the date letter. There have been many changes in the rules and regulations of hallmarking since it began. The word hallmark has passed into the English language as a synonym for genuine, authentic and scrupulous.

The Irish hallmarking system was set up when Ireland was under British rule. Our system therefore is very similar to the British system. The British and Irish systems are different from many of the European systems. They are also very different from the American system.

There may be many changes in the Irish hallmarking system in the future. Ireland's involvement in the European Union could have a major effect on Irish hallmarks.

Contemporary jewellery design may also affect our views on the preciousness of gold, silver and platinum. It is important that modern craft designers can explore different materials and mix them with precious metals without the fear of being outrageous or extravagant.

It is also important that mass manufacturers are facilitated with an up to date system of hallmarking.

I believe that a hallmarking system like the one we have at present works well for mass manufacturers and big businesses but it does not facilitate the artistic craft metalworkers as well as it should. There should be more of an outlet for craft workers to explore and utilise metals in new and exciting ways.

To a foreigner visiting this country the image they receive of modern Irish jewellery is one of Celtic designs, claddagh rings and crosses. I believe that modern Irish jewellers and craft workers have a lot more to offer than this and our hallmarking system has a part to play as it does not allow for the exploration of modern materials being mixed with precious metals.

In conclusion I feel that the hallmarking system is not "one of the success stories of our time" and needs to be updated to facilitate modern Irish craft workers. In the 19th century in Britain and Ireland there was a preference for hand made, hand crafted objects. I feel that in the 20th century too much emphasis has been placed on mass manufactured, mass produced objects and I hope for the future that craft metal workers are able to make their own decisions about the hallmarking of their pieces.

Appendix

(i.) Irish Hallmarking Guide:



**Makers or
Sponsors Mark**



**Assay Office
Mark**



**Fineness
Mark**



**Date Letter
(changes each year)**

Assay Office Mark

**IRISH MADE
ARTICLES**

PLATINUM



GOLD



SILVER



**IMPORTED
ARTICLES**



Date Letter

ON IRISH AND IMPORTED ARTICLES



1994 1995 1996 1997 1998 1999

Irish Made Articles

PLATINUM



GOLD

22 Carat



20 Carat



18 Carat



14 Carat



10 Carat



9 Carat



SILVER Sterling



Imported Articles

PLATINUM



GOLD

22 Carat



18 Carat



14 Carat



10 Carat



9 Carat



SILVER Sterling



Britannia



Convention Hallmarks

A Convention Hallmark consists of a Sponsor's Mark, a Common Control Mark, a number indicating Standard of Fineness and an Assay Office Mark. There is no Date Letter.

750



GOLD

585



375



SILVER

925



PLATINUM

950



Marks indicating a standard of silver below Sterling (925) are not approved hallmarks in Ireland

Issued by the COMPANY OF GOLDSMITHS' OF DUBLIN, Assay Office, Dublin Castle, Dublin

(ii.) Questionnaire issued to the Assay Master Ronald Le Bas:

1. Is our current hallmarking system in jeopardy?
2. What would happen in your opinion if hallmarking were discontinued?
3. Do you believe that there is a strong future for hallmarking in this country?
4. What in your opinion will the hallmarking system be like in 10 years from now?
5. What new changes do you see taking place that will effect the daily running of the Assay Office?
6. What do you think of artist / craftspeople who want to use silver with other non-precious materials?
7. Why is it that you can solder silver and gold together but not silver and brass?
8. Now that Ireland has joined the European Union, will hallmarking become the same across Europe?
9. How does the Irish hallmarking system compare to that of Britain and Europe?
10. Should we try to preserve our hallmarking system as we enter into the new millennium?

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