

## A A THORNTON



Gold chain being Hallmarked  
courtesy of the Assay Office London

Last month, in my article about Gold, I explained that it was extremely rare for jewellery to be made out of pure gold and that the jewellery you buy and wear is crafted from a gold alloy. For those who have missed this, you can always go to [www.aathorntonjeweller.com](http://www.aathorntonjeweller.com) where it can be found along with many of the other articles I have written.

I mentioned that I could not write about Gold without touching on the subject of Hallmarking. The reason for this is if gold jewellery is not pure gold how can you be sure of its purity and this is where Hallmarking comes in?

Several years ago when European directives were in danger of threatening our system of Hallmarking, I had a meeting in our shop in Kettering with Phillip Hollobone our local MP, Roger Helmer our MEP and councillor James Burton to explain to them my concerns. Prior to that I gave a couple of interviews on the local radio stations trying to explain what hallmarking is and why it was important. To be honest I was terrible and I have vowed never to go on radio

again, but now I am writing and not live on air I hope I will make a better job of it.

So what is Hallmarking? Hallmarking is when an item of Gold, and also silver or platinum, is independently assessed for its purity and marked accordingly. This independence of the assessing is crucial and dates back to 1300 when it was introduced by Edward I. Admittedly this was initially only for silver, but this probably makes it one of the oldest form of consumer protection in the world.

The responsibility of this assessing and marking was given to the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths by Edward III. By the mid 15thC the company was employing in Goldsmiths Hall salaried assayers to test and mark items submitted to them, hence the work words Hallmark and Assay Office. Since then there has been various legislation regarding Hallmarking which effectively means that any item of Gold, Silver or Platinum over a certain weight and sold in the UK must be hallmarked.

But why is this important to you when you are buying jewellery? An unscrupulous Goldsmith would know full well that most people would have no idea how to check on the purity of gold jewellery. He may therefore be tempted to reduce the gold purity by even just one or two percent and in so doing substantially increase his profit. Fortunately for you the assay office would immediately pick up on this when the item was submitted for hallmarking.

This protection covers not only items made in the UK, but also those imported and subsequently sold here. We sell items crafted not only in Germany and Italy but also now from Thailand and even China, but you are protected as these will still have been Hallmarked here in the UK.

Those who travel abroad and are tempted to do a little shopping whilst away may bear in mind that they are not necessarily afforded the same level of protection they enjoy at home. The situation overseas varies greatly from country to country. Some have a system where there is no independent assessment and the manufacturer is entrusted to do this themselves. In others, the acceptable tolerance for purity is quite wide which gives the goldsmith an opportunity to benefit, whilst in some countries there is no system at all.

I have on too many occasions been proudly show holiday purchases which sadly turned out not to be quite what they seemed. This is why I was opposed to the proposed changes to our UK Hallmarking legislation, and thankfully such changes have for the time being been dropped.

There is undoubtedly a great deal of history and romance connected to Hallmarks. Some of you may have noticed that on three separate beams in our shop there are painted copies of Hallmarks. These were put there by my father and signify notable dates in the history of AA Thornton and are useful examples of the information Hallmarks provide. The first of these that you may notice is on the beam at the back of sales area to the right when you enter the door. The first mark AAT is the AA Thornton mark, whilst the second is an anchor and signifies the Birmingham Assay office. The third is a lion and signifies Sterling Silver, whilst the fourth is a K which means 1909. My great grandfather came

from Birmingham and moved to Kettering where he founded the business in 1909.

Turn left when you enter and in front and above you is another selection of marks. Again the AAT which is our mark, then lion's head which signifies the London Assay office, the orb which is for platinum of a 950 purity and lastly G which is 1981. This was the year that my father enlarged the shop into no 3 High Street. My father had many associations with London including his time as the chairman of the National Association of Goldsmiths and later as Master of the worshipful company of watchmakers.



Finally, and more hidden, is another set of marks which once again start with the AAT mark, then the Sheffield rose of the Sheffield Assay office, followed by crown 750 for 18ct Gold and lastly the U for 1994. This was the year my father expanded again this time into no 1 High Street.



It has been suggested that I should have a similar plaque put up and maybe when the building is finally refurbished I might be tempted to do this.

I have in these few words just skimmed over the surface of this vast subject, but as ever if you want to know more please don't hesitate to call in or visit our website [www.aathorntonjeweller.com](http://www.aathorntonjeweller.com).

**Sally Thornton**  
**AA Thornton, 1-7 High St, Kettering**  
**01536 513014**  
**[www.aathorntonjeweller.info](http://www.aathorntonjeweller.info)**

