

HL: This is Helen Lloyd recording the memories of Alwynn Griffiths at the Assay Office on the fourth of February 2015. Alwynn tell me about your background?

AG: Well, I was born to parents who I suppose, almost an unique background nowadays because you would say they were both in service, my father was a gardener and mum did cook, housekeeping and within the family I think if you were thinking of mum two things that would probably come to mind straightaway that would be hazelnut meringue and soufflé Grand Marnier, and possibly Beef Wellington because she loved cooking. It, although she did cleaning and stuff like that the thing that she really got excited about was cooking. And dad was a gardener on a private, at a private house and we lived in tied accommodation. And briefly he ran a market garden but that's tied accommodation to somebody who used to own three villages and they were down to a Home Farm and a market garden. And they, that was in about 1955 and those people still live, or their descendants still live in the same house in Cotesbach in Leicestershire.

So I went to country schools for, until I was about eleven and then moved near to Birmingham. We went to I suppose an urban/rural school just on the outskirts. And I, like a lot of people at the time I was an Eleven Plus failure and I went to a secondary modern school. And when I was about fourteen I suppose they decided we would be the first ones at that school to do an external exam. And it was something called The UEI in those days, which I think morphed into C, CSEs, but we were the first ever fifth year. And during the fifth year they decided that a few of us, who were possibly brighter than everybody, should do some 'O' Levels, and we did 'O' Level English and Maths and about six of us did 'O' Level History. And we did that by staying behind at four o'clock for maybe an hour on a few occasions, not that many times, and doing something at lunchtime, once again on not many times, and I don't know whether they all passed but I passed anyway.

But in the old days if you were at secondary modern and they did, very few of them did 'O' Levels you'd have to go to a college to do 'O' Levels. And went to the local college, did that, then an engineering apprenticeship at HDA and I started off, as lots of people did when they're doing apprenticeship, which is do a day release. But eventually I, in I think the second year I went on to a block release and then after that I did a three year sandwich course, which

was quite nice when you're at college for six months of the year and you're being paid. But that and that went all the way through until I was twenty-two.

HL: And then what did you do when you were twenty-two in 1969?

AG: Like many people who've just finished college and their employer has funded them all the way through I left, because you always think the grass is greener and you can get more money, which I did, I went from about eleven hundred pounds at HDA to fourteen hundred at Honeywell in Scotland, which I think you would say I joined them in their Graduate Recruiting Campaign. Although I wasn't a graduate they accepted me as the same as everybody, with the others and I worked there for about four years. It was, I was a production supervisor, it's like a production management trainee but you worked on the shop floor. And I, there are times I didn't like it very much. I had a walkout in the middle of the night, and all I'd done people had disappeared at their tea breaks and I thought "They've been a long, long time", and eventually when some of them came back a long, long time later I said "Where have you been?" And they said "Oh we've just been to the..." I said "But you've been missing for ages." "Have you had a clock on us?" They said and called a meeting and they all walked out. And they had Industrial Relations Manager and all sorts of people coming in, but basically it was all smoothed over but I was right, I was right, they'd, they'd been, nowadays I think [00:05] they would, the management would have organised a midnight raid on the place and turfed them all out and sacked them all because they were obviously sleeping. And I stayed, spent three years at Honeywell.

Eventually decided to return to the Midlands, and Valerie was pregnant at the time so it dragged her back down here. And I got the, I accepted about the first job I got purely to get somebody to pay the removal expenses. And I stayed, and it was, I didn't like what I was doing and I stayed with them until I'd got my removal expenses and then left and that's when I joined the Assay Office. I started looking for a job as soon as I knew the expenses were coming through and I got the job as assistant to the General Manager at the Assay Office.

HL: Tell me about your interview for the Assay Office?

AG: I think it was in 1974, it probably would have been. I started on the first of April so I assume the last interview would have been end of February, beginning of March and I was interviewed by Francis Maughan, who'd had the title of Director. Mr Beechey had the title of Assay Master, and the other person at the interview was Mr Cartland, Arthur Cartland who was the General Manager. He was a short man with very dark hair, brushed back and dark glasses, dark rimmed glasses not dark glasses, and he had the stature and the look of Arthur Askey and I was going to be working with him.

It was quite a shock when I first started to come in because to say the place looked a bit antiquated, once you got beyond the first door was an understatement. The furnishings were probably Victorian, very heavy mahogany tables which must have cost a fortune to make because they had turned legs and it was all bolted together, and we had some tables on the ground floor that must have been pushing thirty feet long and with big swing balances on them. And the work went round in what they called 'boats', which were slightly curved leather, well they were like an elongated... If you think of the profile of a boat and, but with stretched to the side, that's what they were like. Some of them were, had got three compartments, some were very big and had lots of compartments. And they had one big table at the end where the work came in and was always checked by two or three people. They were checking that the people were registered and they'd filled the form in, and a lot of it I thought was a load of nonsense, some of the things that they checked, but it was just the way things were, and you were, you have to accept the way people do things. And there were on the ground, I used to help with the registration dealing with phone calls from customers. And we used to weigh the stuff on the ground floor, although I didn't actually do very much of it, and look after the registration, punch ordering and stuff, and that sort of thing.

Work was expanding throughout the '70s and the Assay Office were being charged by the authorities like The Birmingham, British Hallmarking Council to plan for the future and plan for expansion. At the time I joined they were already in the middle of a building project which I think started in about 1972. At, they put a new floor on the top floor, on the top of the building. Filled in a sort of a balcony area I think which you, on the ground floor you would look up and you could see a balcony there, that had gone when I came there but that was all being filled in and there was an extra floor for the lab and the sampling floor. And eventually they moved on to that floor, which I suppose would have been in '75. But it was ongoing

when I was here, lots of areas where you'd got studding with polythene sheets on it to stop the building dust coming through and things like that and architects and builders were still here. It was super, the project was supervised by architects Holland Hobbiss, I think it was, and Mr Hobbiss used to be down here quite a bit. And it took a long time to finish that. They, at one time they had staircases that went from the ground floor up to the second floor almost continuously but that had, that had all gone by the time I arrived but lots of people told me about it. [00:10]

And eventually the place was getting bigger and bigger and busier and busier. And at that time... Just before I joined there'd had been a strike, I think it was in 1972 which was about union recognition. And the unions were, I would, to say they were trying to run the place and people, Mr Cartland I don't think stood up to them very much at all. But when the work started to diminish because of the increase in silver prices, the Bunker Hunt situation, which is very similar to the situation we had in about 2008, you know, you can say "Well, here we go again." The prices of precious metal shot through the roof and the volumes of jewellery being produced went through the floor.

So the Assay Office had lots of capacity, probably pushing two hundred and twenty staff of some type or other and they wanted to reduce the staff and the unions said "No" and they went out on strike in 1980. And the strike was over redundancies but I think it was over other issues as well. I think in some instances it, well it was to do with who runs the Assay Office, is it the union, which was NUGSAT, or is it the management of the Assay Office? And I think that's mainly what it was all about. And people like myself and our Personnel chap who'd joined in the late '70s, a chap called Alf Hall who joined here from Birmingham Mint, we were quite determined that the management must not give in. I can remember Alf saying to me "He's wavering, I think he's wavering, [Laughter] you need to go down and say something to him he needs an injection of backbone."

HL: He being?

AG: Francis Maughan. Though whenever we had any contact with Mr Maughan we were always quite open that we felt that the office shouldn't give in to them but The Guardians' Committee were strongly behind him and were determined that the Assay Office view would

prevail and their, the Chairman which was a chap called Hilary Eccles-Williams who you may, may have been mentioned by other people was a staunch supporter of Mrs Thatcher and I've seen photographs of him sitting on the stage next to her. He was determined that the Assay Office should stick to their guns and should make the number of people redundant that they felt. And the strike, as you know, went on for some considerable time. During the period of the strike we had lots of customers turning up wanting their work back so one of the main tasks for the people who were in the building, the management people who were in the building, was to sort out people's work and return it to them. Which was quite a simple operation one, you know, you just, you just had to keep searching and searching until you found it.

The downside of it was that the strikers weren't all on the outside, that for a period at the beginning of the strike, and I don't know whether it was a matter of a week or two weeks or three weeks, there were about ten strikers who were sitting-in or living in. They were getting food parcels given to them from people outside and they were hauling them up through the windows. The difficulty it presented for the people inside is that we were picketed and abused as we were going around the building looking for the... These long tables that I mentioned earlier they took great delight of getting sticks and staffs and banging them on the table as we were walking round and shouting "Scab, scab, scab." It was really quite an appalling situation and on, in hindsight the management at the senior level and the Guardians should not have allowed that to arise and allow the staff who were here to be subjected to it. It's ingrained in the memories of quite a few of those people and I imagine some of them will never forgive the staff who were in here and who abused them at the time. [00:15] Eventually the strike was settled and negotiations were conducted through The Engineering Employers Association, and our negotiator was a chap called Bill Ferguson, and meetings were held at The EEF's offices and at ACAS in Alpha Tower and eventually the workers, the union came to an agreement with the management. They agreed to return to work, and the position had changed quite a lot over the period of the strike so that there was virtually no work available, well there wasn't any work available for people when they came here.

So when the final settlement was drawn up the number of people being made redundant was greater than the number of people that were going to be made redundant before the strike started and if... I think, I can't remember the exact number of people we were left with when

we returned but I know there was a second bite at the cherry of, in making people redundant which was probably, it might have been later in 1980 or earlier the next year and the full-time equivalent of numbers, of the staff left came down to roughly a hundred, you know, ninety-nine to a hundred and two. It was, the full-time equivalent it was something like that. When you consider at the peak, probably in the September, October before the strike started, there were two hundred and twenty people on the books, it's quite a dramatic drop.

But you've got to say when we came back we were starting from square one. We had no customers, no work and I think everybody realised that we had to pull together to get customers and provide them with the service. And we've, it was just a struggle to get work in. And there was still, there was quite a nasty atmosphere in the place that persisted for quite some time. I'm not sure, I can't, wouldn't like to say how long it went on but there were, there was an atmosphere and there were some people who were very anti the management for years to come, and I suppose there were other people who were anti the strikers. But eventually we started to get work coming in and the service level was a lot better than it used to be. During the strike, or shortly after the strike, obviously the Assay Office was losing loads and loads of money. They were in the position where they had an overdraft facility and were, if memory serves me right, about halfway through that facility and looked as though there was no prospect of them repaying it. And a deal was done with The Goldsmiths' Company whereby they took a very large proportion of the office's silver collection, effectively bought it off the Assay Office and gave, paid the Assay office I think it was something like a hundred and fifty thousand pounds for it, but I could be, could be wrong. And they, the silver was all boxed up, sent down to The Goldsmiths' Company and they put it in their vaults and the money was transferred into the Assay Office's bank. But at about this time business started to pick up and the money was never, that overdraft, the money from the Goldsmiths' Company was actually never touched because business picked up to such a level we were sort of funding ourselves, and that continued. Volumes grew quite steadily and they reached a point, and I can't remember when it was, when the office actually redeemed the silver collection and paid the money back to The Goldsmiths' Company. I've no, I've no real idea, recollection of when that was but it's obviously got to be in the '80s at some time.

HL: What other memories do you have from the first half of the '80s?

AG: Well, one of the key points is that after the strike and everybody came back there were lots of changes made. One of the changes was that the Director at the time, Francis Maughan, left. Whether he decided to go or was pushed I've no idea, but Stan Beechey who'd been Assay Master [00:20] and been here for donkey's years and was very well respected by the staff was appointed Director and Assay Master, and it was very popular with the staff because everybody, they liked Stan. One thing about Mr Beechey his, he knew the Assay Office, The Hallmarking Act back to front, he actually he could quote it word for word, virtually any section and tell you which section it was. So he was appointed. There were lots of changes in working practice. I was appointed Works Manager and I, it was me who instigated lots, well virtually all the changes in working practices because Mr Beechey was very much a technical man and interested in The Act and everything like that and he really in terms of the day to day running of the place, other than if it affected his samplers or markers he didn't have a great deal of interest in it. But he did know his stuff when it came to the testing and hallmarking and the law.

So he was appointed, I should imagine he took the job probably '81, late '80s, '81. We'd made lots of changes, volumes started to increase, gave the customers a pretty good service. And I was looking after the marking, sampling. The only thing I didn't, wasn't really responsible for were the accounts and the laboratory area. Mr Cartland was still here and he was responsible for the Registration and the Accounts Department. He and Stanley Beechey retired at some time in the 1980s and Bernard Ward was appointed. That was quite a worrying time for a lot of the people at the Assay Office because he's, he would be the first non Assay Office person to be appointed as Assay Master. He started here while Mr Beechey was still in post and they had like I think it was almost a transition year if I remember rightly. I can remember him saying he thought it was far too long but at other occasions he said "I'm glad in some ways it was too long because there was some things I didn't like and that appalled me and said I've got, these have got to change", and he said "Then after I'd been here quite a long time", he said "Well if we change them what do we change them to? And I can't think of anything better, although I don't like it we've got to live with it because I can't see any differences." One of the things that were done before he came we used to, we questioned everything that was done in the place, is it really essential? And if I just go back to Stan Beechey for a little while. We looked, we tried to maintain as much production capacity and cut out as many indirect staff as possible. Look at what jobs were really

necessary, and there was one job, and I can't quite remember what it was, it was some sort of record that they kept which was in a book on a desk in what is now the reception area and I couldn't find out what it was for, why they did it so I said "Stop, it's just a complete waste of time."

About four years later Mr Beechey found out that we weren't keeping these records and he wasn't very happy about it so we had to start keeping them, but nobody ever looked at them in all the time I was here, and when he went we stopped again and have never restarted. I think it was something to do with, it was some record about something to do with The Assay Department but I can't for the life of me remember what it was, but I know it was, I thought it was a complete waste of time. But he was insistent that we must do it so we did, but then, you know, in Bernard's era it stopped, it stopped.

Bernard had a completely different background, as I said, and one of the things that he did was bring in a lot of extra work because he had contacts throughout the jewellery trade. And as he used to work at Engelhard Industries we got their work. We, [00:25] he had lots of contacts so there were lots of companies like H Samuels came. There was a company called Abbeycrest who used to be one of our customers and had gone to Sheffield, which is quite a logical place for them to go because they were based in Leeds, but they came back here. I think there was a combination of a contact with Bernard and they must have had a bust up with Sheffield. And they were the rising star in the assay, in the jewellery manufacturing trade. They were predominantly an importer but they were an importer in a big way. Their work used to come down by post and we collected it from The Post Office, and our driver used to go up and collect it and bring it down here, and there would be at times kilos and kilos. And when the driver was on off myself and Ken Gould, who was the foreman of the Assay Department who I gave a lift to, we caught, we used to go to Royal Mail, The Mail Box as it is now to The Post Office and collect it. And we would have sacks of stuff and we literally dragged them out to the car because we couldn't lift them. And we used to sling them in the boot and bring them back here and then it was all unpacked, processed and packed back up. And I don't, I can't for the life of me remember whether it had to be taken to The Post Office or it was collected by The Post Office but the volumes were huge.

HL: Without any security?

AG: Without any security. Ken and I used to just carry and our driver used to go up with somebody else, Ronnie, and I can't even remember whether Ronnie had somebody with him. But there was a lot and we had a, we, the new customers that we picked up tended to be importers but the growth of Abbeycrest and there was another company that grew a lot in that area which was H Samuels cum Ratner, because it was the Gerald Ratner era and it gave a general boost to the jewellery trade. And one of our local companies grew tremendously, a company called Gallery, who when I used to go round and collect things from the trap at one time somebody would come in with a few, a little, a few little buff envelopes with two or three rings in. In the heyday, in the Octobers in, I suppose it would be in the late '80s they would be bringing, their porter would be bringing down boxes of rings and he would bring in six, seven thousand a day. And they were also making locket, stamping locket, and there would be thousands and thousands of those. They produced so much for the Assay Office and our volumes rose and we made lots and lots of money. The staff often had a Christmas do, a Christmas show, and they did a sort of home grown panto, and I can remember one of the ladies being dressed up in silver, a lady called Margaret, I think it was Margaret Burns being dressed in silver and they had a song to Abbeycrest. I can't remember the words but they were so important to the staff that they, they' that somebody had actually written a song to Abbeycrest.

But in the '80s the volumes grow, increased hugely, we made lots and lots of money. And before this interview I was talking to some of the staff downstairs and they can remember me telling them that I'd, at one stage that I'd said to Bernard that I thought the amount of money we were making was ridiculous, I actually said to him I thought it was obscene because there was one year we made an operating profit, a profit before tax of, I think it was something like one point two million on a turnover of not much more than two and a half million. But this all goes back to the post strike era when we changed the working practices, we got rid of as many indirect staff as we could and the, my objective was to maintain as much hallmarking capacity as I possibly could with the budget that I'd been set. And also we'd stuck the prices up an awful lot so it meant that as the volume increased [00:30] for quite a long time we didn't need to take on any extra staff and that means that extra, every extra pound that was coming in a large proportion of it was profit, and even when we got to the stage where we had to start taking on staff and we started using temporary staff in the autumn to help us with

the peak the extra volume even at that stage lots and lots, and lots of it was profit. Because we were, we'd got, we'd set up so that we could break even at around the five million mark. So I think we went up to about six and a half or close to seven million before we had to increase the staff.

So other than the consumables and bonuses that we, you know, production bonuses we paid to people the costs didn't go up very much. And it remained like that for along, long time because although we had to increase staff they, we were very reluctant to take on permanent staff and we had lots of people on temporary contracts and on seasonal contracts. And even when I retired although we'd taken on more permanent staff we still had lots of people on contracts because the volume of the Assay Office is seasonal. You have a very quiet period for probably a month, or we did, a month, six weeks, then it used to get in to its swing and with a few fluctuations post Spring Fair and post Easter it used to stay fairly level with, you know, you'd get general little fluctuations week on week until August, September, and then in September it was almost as I say as somebody threw a switch and it, the volumes increased hugely, and the volumes in October could be almost double your average volume for the period February to August. And in the year before I retired we were doing probably low two hundred thousands for most of the year and it would go up to three hundred and fifty to four hundred thousand at the back end of the year.

HL: Talk about the temporary workers?

AG: Well, one of the things that we had to do, because the work is so seasonal and it fluctuates on a week by week basis. When you've got lots of imports it could fluctuate because most of the imports at those, at that time were coming from Italy, so a lot of different people would probably have stuff coming in on the same plane from Milan so you'd have a spike in your work one of the days and your volume might go from, we'll say, thirty or forty thousand a day that you could cope with, you might have sixty or seventy come in one day, so we had to find some way of doing, dealing with it and the way we dealt with it we had a twilight shift who worked when requested. But a lot of them worked three days a week, three evenings a week, some of them would work five days a week, five evenings a week. But it, we could vary it so that if we got a peak of work we could cope with it a little bit. We would leave other people's work, because we had key customers who we wouldn't let down so

there's no magic solution. If you've got people's work you've got to get out tomorrow and they're really important customers everybody, you switch your resources on to it and you basically dump the other people's work and catch up with theirs later. There's no magic, you know, it's not rocket science there's only so much you can do and if these people's work got to go out tomorrow you've got to put a lot of people on it to get it out and you catch up with the others who's not, you know, if you've got somebody who spends three thousand pound a year and somebody who spends three hundred thousand pounds a year you've got to put your resources on to clearing the three hundred thousand pound a year's person's work, you can't afford to let them down. And that's basically what we did.

And we had people on, because the volume increased gradually through the year with those fluctuations we used to take on temporary staff who they might work from March to Christmas and others would work, we would take them on in September/October so that they were reasonably competent [00:35] by the first of September and they would work through from August to September and they would leave at Christmas. And we would, as soon as we could we would take some of them back on in the following year, which might be in January, end of January, it might be in February, even it might be March. And a lot of them liked, were quite happy with what they earned here and were quite happy with what they did, they would hang around for us. And we had some people who'd worked for us for ten years on temporary contracts and, but we did take lots of them on on permanent contracts eventually, and I suppose when I retired there would be quite a lot of the full-time staff actually started as temps. We had lots and lots of different shift patterns to suit the work coming in, we'd have couriers delivering early in the morning, we had the post delivered early so the Post Section would start early. Sandra Scott, who used to do the wages, really used to moan at me because of all the different shift patterns we had, she said 'Why can't you have them all doing the same thing? Another different bloody shift pattern'. She, she used to get really uptight about it and, but we just had to match the staff to the work that was coming in, which is what we've done, we did for probably the best part of twenty years and it enabled us to keep the labour costs as low as we could and provide a service. Because the service level gradually increased so that we were turning the work, at least eighty-five per cent of the work was turned round in forty-eight hours and some of the key customers' work was turned round much, much quicker. It, some, it was in in the morning and it was gone at five o'clock, or it was in in the

middle of, at twelve o'clock on a Monday and by twelve o'clock on Tuesday it was gone, and we did that consistently.

It got very, very busy at times and we were running round like headless chickens. Probably in, this is late '80s, early '90s, in the autumn we would be working seven days a week, not everybody but some, there are some people that, who work for us if you wanted them to work, them to work twenty-four hours a day seven days a week would, there were one or two you virtually had to prise out of the place. But it was very, very difficult at times trying to provide the service and we used to get a bit fraught. And I can remember on one occasion something that Dave Logan did. Because before the days of bar codes, the computerised tracking system that we had people had to manually enter the number and if they couldn't get it in because the Accounts Department hadn't put it in they had to write it on a list. But because it was entered manually people transposed numbers, they forgot and Dave couldn't get invoices out until it had been put in in the Marking Department. So there was one occasion he was waiting for something to go out by courier or post and he couldn't get an invoice because obviously... So he went, he ran upstairs, he was so fraught he ran upstairs to put the number in and he found himself putting the number in to the coffee machine on the landing, stood in front of it and he put the numbers in before he realised what he was doing. I mentioned that to him today when I, he can still remember doing it, and that was probably, it would be late '80s, early '90s. But we, a lot of people were so, so fraught because in the autumn you just hadn't got a minute and everybody was really anxious, you'd got to get the stuff out. Just pause a second.

HL: Give me as many memories as you can from the second half of the '80s?

AG: Well, this is, we're really in to the Bernard era now. He brought in lots of work and we became much more customer focused. We were making lots of money. He initiated updating a lot of the equipment. Although we'd already changed some of the, these Victorian tables and things like that there was a drive to improve productivity. And there were lots of changes made to the building and we had a big building programme which probably, I can't remember exactly when it was, it would be late '80s, early '90s when [00:40] the reception area that we've now got, the conference room downstairs was created, Associated Architects designed that and we worked throughout that period. A lot of the old Victorian structures inside the

building were knocked down but we worked in those areas. There were builders working around us, above us. We had, my desk at one time was under scaffolding and we had people knocking down partitions. We were working away when there were people with pneumatic drills working in the same area which in, it wouldn't happen nowadays but we couldn't stop so we, whatever we did we crammed in to a small area so that the builders could go at the rest of it. Because at one time the Prep Department covered nearly all the ground floor from the Accounts to the back wall and half of that was taken over to build the conference room. So we were compressed on to the other side which there were things on that side had to be demolished before we could go over there. So they moved over on to the left hand side, well the car park side of the building so that the right hand side could be changed. There were stairs down to a vault that had to be filled in and that, the conference room was built over the top of it. And it still looks pretty good today and the new furnishings for that. I well remember us going to two different suppliers to look at, there was a, oh, Peter somebody up in Wirksworth who we went to have a look at his stuff and then somebody called Russell in Broadway, I can't remember the, is it Donald Russell? Quite a famous furniture designer and maker, and we opted for the ones in Wirksworth which were these very heavy ash tables and chairs and on reflection you can say that it wasn't really the best choice, they look really good when they're in place but you try moving them they're very, very heavy that the, I know when we had functions the waitresses really struggled to pick some of the chairs up. And they don't stack, although we had a storeroom you couldn't get them in. But it was part of the things Bernard wanted to do to modernise the place, and the reception area is as it was when that was done.

He was a great driver in trying to get new business. One of the things that he was preoccupied with, I don't know whether it was late '80s or early '90s, was The European Commission trying to scrap hallmarking. And he spent a lot of time lobbying people in Parliament, any decision makers he could get his hands on or could get in front of to try and stop the Directive on Hallmarking going through. And it was a long battle but eventually they got there and it was put on the back burner or scrapped.

Bernard was very, very popular with the staff here. He did a lot for the staff, he got on very well with them, they respected him, he spoke to them. I mean he used to walk round every morning and talk to people and the people who were here before, in the dim and distant past

they will have told you about the Westwoods and their ilk. That never happened but Bernard communicated with the people and he pushed through changes. There were, he was so well liked by the staff at one time, I well remember in a union meeting, I can't quite remember whether it was about pay or some other changes but he really had a paddy and threw his toys out of the pram, which is something he did very, very rarely. And I found out afterwards the union were having, they were having a meeting and I thought "What the bloody hell are they having a meeting for, what's all this about?" And it turned out they were having a meeting because they were concerned that they'd upset Bernard. That's quite genuine, that's one of the things that they said, they had a meeting because he, [00:45] he'd lost his temper and thrown his toys out of the, and they were quite shocked and they were upset that they'd upset him, which is quite a strange thing. And Bernard had over the period of his time here he had some very good times and I think it would be in the '90s he had personally some very bad times, his daughter was very ill, had a major operation which didn't go very well and she died eventually. And it, it changed him. He was visibly, he was a different man. And it was, and it was upsetting for everybody but I think any, the one thing that most parents absolutely dread is anything happening to their children, and I think most people when they see things that have happened to somebody else's children, whether it's somebody they know or in the media or on television I think most people think "How would I cope, what would I do, how would I survive this?" And he went through that and he did survive it but he didn't survive it as the same person. And it was, it was sad to see. It definitely changed him, but there's nothing you could do about it, it's one of those things that's happened, and he won't be the first person that's affected like that or the last unfortunately.

HL: What are your most vivid memories of the 1990s?

AG: Well, I think really during the '90s I think there was another dip in business but I couldn't really tell you when it was but I mean we've had, we've had another dip in the, you know, 2008 wasn't it till 2009 so these things are cyclical, and there was one in, in the '90s but it wasn't as severe as the one in the '80s or the current one, it just went down a little bit. Bernard didn't, you know, he continued driving us forward and he was being, I think he was being pushed by the powers-that-be to diversify. They wanted him to look at going, opening something and doing something in America, and I don't think it's any secret he wasn't keen on it, he thought it was a stupid idea and it would never work. Subsequently I think he was

shown to be right because in Michael Allchin's time they did set something up in America and it was a disaster.

Towards the end of the '90s we started looking at improving productivity and using technology. On the lab side they were looking at non-destructive testing methods and they eventually got round to testing out ex RAF equipment. They had some in the lab but then they gradually looked at developing it and trying to use it elsewhere. It was at that time we also started looking at making our own punches, which is something we'd wanted to do for years, but it was very much a craft based industry with high skills required. And when we've had punches made, looked at other suppliers from our punch makers, which at the time were Britten, we used two companies, H Britten in Birmingham and Edward Prior in Sheffield, but we looked to get in other people to make punches and just tried them out on sponsors mark punches and we give, give them a couple of samples to do. Most people never came back. The odd one came back but the quality was absolutely appalling, and we, because when you've got work you want to turn round quickly you want combination punches, that's one with the sponsor's mark on, the Assay Office mark on made as quickly as possible, and when you rely on outside suppliers you can't really do it, get it all that quickly. You could, Britten's if you twisted their arm and asked them to leave something you'd may be get it two days. Prior's a week to two weeks. And we, we said well, people were saying we should make our own. But when we looked at how people made it [00:50] you needed a high level of skill. But we kept looking and eventually we went down the route of using CNC equipment and had some trials done and they looked pretty good. Myself and our toolmakers went to Germany to a place called Bad Lauterberg which is in the Harz Mountains which to a firm called Kuhlmann who had some CNC equipment and they'd done some trials for a machine supplier in Rugby. And they were very good so eventually we decided to take the plunge, and it was very much a plunge, and Bernard wanted us to, said "We'll have to recruit some people", and the only ones that you could get were from the existing engravers and punch makers. And the only advantage with them they would know how to grind a cutter but the technology and the method would be completely new to it. And I said "Well, our boys, our lads want to do it", and I said "Because they want to do it you're halfway there", and eventually that's the route we went. We bought a machine, we went over there for some training and we did lots and lots and lots of trials and things didn't go well. I used to come in, I'd go home from work and then come back at night and do some samples. I'd come in on Sunday mornings by myself and do some samples. And we'd produced some punches, some

pretty good punches and they were okay. But we were having good ones and lots of duds and we eventually found out why. Because we'd had lots of tests done on the machine and we thought a spindle might be bent or something because the cutters that you used are very small. And one thing we used to do with visitors, if we'd get a, we'd ground a cutter, we'd put the cutter under the microscope that you used for checking it and let them have a look at it and they'd see this long thin triangle, the cutter bed. And then I would say "Could you take a hair, pull a hair out?" And they would pull a hair out and I would lay that across the cutter and say "Now look through the microscope", and the tip of the cutter is, was smaller than a human hair. And we found out the reason that we weren't having the success we thought we would have is that the spindle in the cutter grinder was off centre so we were cutting the spindle, the cutters were off centre so when they were rotating in the machine instead of staying on centre they were breaking the tips off every single time. So the big ones came out okay but the little punches didn't. But as soon as we sorted that and the cutter grinder was changed we started producing good punches. And we eventually, we used to measure ourselves against our suppliers and work out the cost of producing our own punches but comparing the cost by how much were we generating, what would we have generated had to pay for these? And eventually we got to the stage where we were more paying our way with it. But we still maintained supplies outside because we only had one machine and we didn't want to get in to the position where we couldn't, you know, if we have a breakdown we were stymied. But eventually I think we got to the stage where we were producing the vast majority of the punches and now they probably produce them all themselves, and we used to make them for other people. And we, the quality of the punches that we made improved a lot. When we had an Engineering Manager appointed he helped a lot in terms of the hardening and tempering of the punches, they used an induction hardening. And we got to the stage where, as I say, some of the staff would have said whose punches are the best and they would have said it was the ones we made ourselves. But the big difference it made is if you had a job come in in the morning, a large job from a product that you hadn't seen from a customer and you needed a combination punch, as soon as the markers saw it said 'We want this, this punch', you could, they could write out an order and take it down to the lads downstairs and they would have it by lunchtime, and that could save, cut the time it would take to do a job in half or down to twenty-five per cent if you made two of them so it made a huge difference.

As a by-product of making the punches we talked to the same suppliers about problems we had with [00:55] hollow items, particularly hollow bangles, where the only, the way we used to mark them the operator would have a punch almost in a file handle and they would push it on by hand, just rock it, and people would be appalled when they saw it “Oh what a bloody stupid way of doing it”, and this and that, but it worked. And I went to the Dutch Assay Office in Gouda once and when I walked through, past their Marking Department I could see people, see lots of these bangles so the chap took me in to see and they were doing it in exactly the same way. So although most people would have thought it was a really stupid way it worked. But we looked to see how we could do it and make a better job of it and do it more quickly, and eventually we started looking at marking it with lasers. And I went to look at a laser machine that they were using in Prague, in the Assay Office in Prague, which was supplied by somebody from St Petersburg. And the operator had to stick their hands through two holes in this machine and hold it underneath the laser beam and I thought ‘There’s no way we could do that’, and it wasn’t EC approved, didn’t have the ‘E’ mark on it. So I sent for all the information, because the machine was quite cheap and it did the job, did the hollow silver bangles perfectly. So I sent away for all the regulations and the bumph to explain what you’d have to do to this equipment to get it to comply. It was about an inch thick, I flipped through a page and then threw it in the bin, I thought “There’s no way we’re doing that”, so there’s got to be somebody who supplies in equipment within the EC. And the chap who supplied our punch making machine, they were agents for a laser company so we did some trials with that and eventually we became the first Assay Office to have laser equipment.

We had to get the approval of The Hallmarking Council and because of it, it’s, a laser, anybody could do it so we had to put in security measures in the marks so that we could identify which were genuine marks and which were ones that somebody else could do. Because if anybody got some artwork they could mark the thing. So we basically did it by having faults in our mark that we knew were there, but if you, if you took photographs of the marks you wouldn’t know they were there but we could identify them. Because you had to be able to discern, tell the difference between a genuine mark and a counterfeit mark. And it’s bad enough with a stamped mark let alone the laser mark, but we did that. So eventually we did that, and we had a, we started off with the laser machine on the marking floor and then eventually we had a little room built which was the men’s loos on the first floor, that was all ripped out and we, I think, I can’t remember we started off with one machine and we

gradually increased to the stage where when I retired I think we had six or seven machines and in the autumn we were running them round the clock. We had a day shift, evening shift, night shift and at times we were working them Saturdays and Sundays, the demand was so great. But the demand was great because everybody had switched to importing.

In the '70s imports were maybe three per cent. In the '90s and 2000 time the official figures were, I don't know, sixty, seventy per cent but everybody knew it was much higher than that. Because at one stage customers had to declare whether they were UK or imported products, and at one stage, at some stage it was... Because they had different marks on but that was discriminatory so that had to stop. We changed our paperwork so people didn't have to put in the country of origin and but The Hallmarking Council said 'Oh we still want that information'. But our Law Clerk said to us when we said "Well, we've done that because we can't discriminate", he said 'Absolutely, that's exactly what I would do', but The Hallmarking Council decided we had to still identify. [01:00] So we had to use our judgement on what was imported and what wasn't imported because you can't get in to an argument with the customer if they haven't said it's imported. And I mean it isn't really important so our staff downstairs used to just use their judgement and stamp 'foreign'. And it and it was only used for statistical purposes, no other purpose, but the volumes must have been up around the eighty per cent mark.

HL: What were the countries of origin?

AG: Well, the countries of origin changed dramatically over the period I was here. When we, the first imports we used to get in volume terms were from Germany and Italy. It was chain from, chain and earrings from Italy and chains and locketts from Germany. It was, you'd get odd bits of Scandinavian silverware which were actually quite nice looking bits of silverware, much better looking than the traditional stuff that we used to get. And I always used to wonder why none of our designers or makers made that sort of stuff because it was modern, it looked nice, clean, simple lines, but obviously they felt there wasn't a market here for that. But when you saw that stuff from Denmark it was only once in a blue moon, the volume was always chains. But over the years the volume of imported goods increased but also the countries of origin also changed dramatically, it went south-east in a big way. Mainly, you got a lot from Hong Kong, India, China, Malaysia. I think the Italian, there was still a lot of

Italian stuff even when I retired but that was predominantly chain, because chain makers can run round the clock with one man looking after goodness knows how many machines so there were still lots and lots of chain. But we had manufacturers who would, were setting up plants overseas. Some big European operations were setting up plants, some of our customers were setting up plants overseas. One of them who used to make a lot of lockets in Birmingham moved the locket manufacture to the Far East, I used to know the country they moved it to but I can't remember. And eventually all those thousands and thousands of rings that they used to bring in to us in the autumn that went the same way. So it migrated and the manufacture in Birmingham diminished an awful lot. And it was just, it's one of these, it's happened in every other industry so the jewellery industry was not going to be unaffected. I mean making jewellery it's engineering, it's very crude engineering because we, one of the things we tried to do at one time was to get a machine to hallmark earrings because they're all marked on a stem. The only difference is that if that stem that goes through your ear lobe actually had to go in to a car engine or a machine that stem, the position of it on the earring or whatever would be defined, it would be always be the same, the stem would always be vertical, always be in the same place. If you're sticking one in your left ear and one in your right ear it doesn't matter and they're not in the same place. We had quite a few people when we gave them samples said 'No problem, easy, we can do that', and they could do it but they need everything to be the same and they're not and they all gave up one after the other.

HL: Can you talk about the change in Assay Master from Bernard Ward to Michael Allchin?

AG: Well, they're both, they've got completely different backgrounds. Michael had always run a business, sorry Bernard had always run a business, had run businesses for a long time in the manufacturing side. Michael was sort of more a sales and marketing person. And they're from different eras and different personalities, and the business climate that Michael's been brought up in was very different to the one that Bernard was brought in, so he was more [01:05] a modern manager I would have said, whereas Bernard, he's not an old-fashioned manager but he's different because in the outside world things had changed a lot in the '80s and Michael was a product of that change, whereas some of that had actually bypassed Bernard because he joined us at a different time. They had a small overlap, I can't remember whether it was three months or six months.

They were very different people. To say that Bernard was loved by the staff, I would say you couldn't really say that about Michael. He was very outgoing person, very driven and he was brought in really, one of the things to do was the diversification which he did really well. I've, we've already touched on America, a place was opened in America, and I can't remember how long they kept it going for but it was a few years. They couldn't really get enough business to keep it going and I used, it used to annoy me because one of the things I used to do was have to authorise payments that went there because I was one of the people who could, you know, with their direct banking would put the password in, so our accountant would do it and then I'd have to go and put my password in to authorise it. And we, sometimes we were sending them fifty thousand dollars a month, which I was thinking "It's fifty thousand dollars down the drain." And I don't know how much money the office lost over a period of time there but it was considerable, and I know their turnover probably didn't ever generate enough money even to pay the rent on the property let alone, you know... But that, so it was all wound up eventually. It was a bit of a disaster but it was tried and it didn't work, but the other things that they tried, went after have been successful.

Safeguard, I can remember going with Michael and others, we went up to Shrewsbury to look at the operation that they had there, their sort of valuation business, that was brought in here up in to what was the canteen at one time and that's gone from strength to strength. And even that's probably diversified itself because they went in to stone certification which has grown considerably. The lab side and their testing has diversified, you know, that's grown hugely. I think at one time when I was here in the early days you would be lucky if they did sort of thirty, forty thousand pounds a year in the lab on testing of other things, well it was all precious metal testing, it wasn't testing anything else, and doing reports for different people. I don't know what it, the turnover is now but I should imagine there's a couple of extra noughts on there, well certainly, there's certainly one extra nought, there probably isn't two extra noughts, but that's grown hugely and is very, very successful. So that, you know, you've got to say that that's worked really well. And he, Michael has pushed that and pushed us on terms of improving our service and modernising. He brought in an Engineering Manager, somebody who'd had his own firm making special purpose machinery, and I've forgotten his name but he really knew his stuff. I mean he could design and build machinery, and he did design and build a laser machine and other things and put in the, changed the layout. We had conveyor belt and we had the sort of helter-skelter that moved parcels from

the ground floor up to the top floor. We consolidated operations on to one floor, on to two floors, we would have liked to have got it all on one floor which is something we were looking at in Bernard's era building on the car park and I was quite keen to move the tool room in to the Guardians' dining room and things like that, [Laughter] which didn't go down very well. But we looked, did look at building over the car park at first floor level and at ground floor level.

Because we it, there's so much time would be saved if we were all on one level because basically what we rather than this sort of building, we basically needed a shed, it didn't really need anything else. A shed with some, you know, office buildings at the front. I mean I used to think "Well we could", it would have been nice if we could have had a shed with some office buildings under it but where on the ground floor you could come in, [01:10] we would have a permanent display of our silverware and things so that people could wander through it but never be able to touch anything, but also on the way out the one wall was partly glass and the hallmarking operation we could have something going on so people could see it. It would have been very nice but we did think about that and talk about that. But, you know, it wouldn't have brought any money in and it would have cost something but that's a completely different issue.

But that was the drive was to improve efficiency. And we, did took on, and we provided extra services for people. As the amount of imports increased the amount of bagging increased but we also used to prepare things for sale for people, like they would have cufflinks come in bulk, we would hallmark them, then we would put them on cards and put them in boxes and put sleeves on them and the bar codes and all that. And we did that, I think we certainly did it for Next and we did it for other people as well but that sort of thing, we were trying to add value to what we did for the thing, and actually it was to tie people in. And during Michael's time off sites picked up. We'd actually looked at it at the end of Bernard's era, we'd been talking to one customer, one company, we actually did go to look at some premises on some, a room on somebody's premises. That was actually at Abbeycrest in Leeds and that was towards the end of Bernard's time. But the off sites started and by the time we finished we had about six I think it was and there was some more in the pipeline. But the volumes were huge then, I think some of the off sites in a good week would do what the Assay Office has done in a poor week recently. But we had that. And they knew, I think the most anybody, one

of them employed would be three. We had to have a minimum of two people but I think one of them did have, might have had three or four the one at Optima but we had about several of them and we had somebody dotting round. And we'd got those going and it worked pretty well. We had the samples coming to, back to us for testing. They would arrive in the post so that we, that's why we had, one of these other shifts that we had going was somebody starting which had the post opened at seven o'clock, we'd have somebody in the Assay Department to weigh the samples up starting about half past seven so that they were upstairs for testing at eight o'clock and we'd get the results by twelve o'clock. And the ladies, and they were all ladies at the off sites, would be able to release the goods back to their customer, and it worked quite well and I think they've still got some going even now.

HL: What other memories have you got of the 2000s before you retired in 2005?

AG: About the last things that we did, which is quite important, was the introduction of ex, the ex RAF non-destructive testing for production work. We had, they had to get approval from The Hallmarking Council to do that and it, that was a great benefit, particularly for importers, because the last thing they want is you chewing great chunks out of their finished products, but you still have to chew little tiny chunks out because you, they've nearly all got gunge on the outside because they've been, you know, the polishings leaves debris there or they have a flash plate on it and you have to just tickle a little bit of that away. So I think by the time we had a lot, I think we'd got about four ex RAF's when I finished, from none in just a few years. It might have been more than that. And we'd also expanded the laser marking.

One of the other things that had happened during Michael's time we started doing as a company, and I think it was for him to try and break down the barriers between the staff and the management if you like. We did charity things, we did charity fundraising walks. And we started off by, I can't remember which was the first one. We did, it was, we did a long distance walk every year and I think they're still doing them. For example we did the Twenty-four Peaks Challenge in the Lake District where you had to raise a fee, your entry fee was five thousand pounds **[01:15]** so you had to raise five thousand pounds for the charity. And the staff did lots of things towards that. One of the things we did I can remember, that I helped in was, we had a pancake afternoon. So I slaved away at home and made I think it was a hundred pancakes which we were going to serve at lunchtime at work with, you know,

orange juice, lemon juice or apple sauce which I'd made. So I'd made all these, put foil between them, brought them all to work and when it came to the lunchtime we couldn't get the oven to work [Laughter] to warm them up. It just, we just couldn't get it to work, I don't know why. We did eventually get it going but we'd managed to reheat some somehow, I think we'd reheated some in pans on the hob or something or other but eventually we got rid of most of them. But that was a fundraiser.

The staff did lots of things, you know, and they did them, participated in the Macmillan coffee morning. But we did lots of these long distant walks, the Twenty-four Peaks thing with, it was a two day thing and most of us who participated in it were, we were probably a bit too old to do it really, most of the other teams were much younger. And we did the first day, because it was over two days, and you had a night in a youth hostel in the Lake District. So the first day we did about eighteen miles and about eight thousand feet of ascent, and I remember Michael collapsing on the ground when we were almost within spitting distance of the checkpoint and saying "I can't go on, I can't go", and the lady from the Accounts Department, Chris, was encouraging him again because we weren't more than about three hundred yards away. But all the way on the last few hours of that I was thinking 'I hope somebody suggests we don't do tomorrow' because my knees were absolute shot. From Scafell Pike to Bow Fell there's almost a boulder field and you're constantly stepping from stone to stone and every step was absolute agony. And we struggled back to the youth hostel, and I remember that we came down to have our evening meal in the youth hostel and there's somebody said something about not doing tomorrow [Laughter] and they nearly bit his head off. Everybody suggests, we'd done, we... The youngest, we had one lad who was about eighteen and he was fine, he'd probably done less preparation for it than everybody but he was a, but everybody else our knees were completely shot. We knew starting the next day going uphill we would have been okay but as soon as it came to go downhill we were not. But in subsequent years we did lots of other things. We did the Goyt Valley one, we did the Mortimer Trail, which is thirty miles from Ludlow to Kington and we did that in one go, so thirty miles. But we did lots of those sort of things that quite a few people participated. We raised quite a lot of money for charity. There was a lad downstairs, Mark Malin was our support driver, he used to drive the minibus and take our food. But the staff did a lot of those sort of things and they did their own fundraising within the office and have been doing that for years and years.

HL: What proportion of the people who went on these walks were management?

AG: Probably [Pause] a third to a half. It was, I don't know whether it's the same now. I would have said it would be a third to a half. I think the first one it might have been more, but gradually we got more people involved and different people involved. And the first time it was, there was one lady, Chris, from the Accounts and actually I don't even remember whether she did do the first one but there used to be quite a few girls involved in it. But it was good fun and they still do it, but it was trying to get people involved because there was a bit of a barrier between us and them if you like and there was a barrier between him and them. Whereas Bernard was [01:20] held in great affection by the staff I don't think you could say the same about Michael. Mainly because, one of the reasons is, they liked him as a person but he was driving change. Now a lot of the changes were essential and needed to be done. I mean some of the changes I'd been on to Bernard for about ten years that we ought to do these things and he wouldn't have it, but there were a lot of the things that Michael did and lots of other businesses have done as well and they were just essential, they were painful for a lot of people but they were important. And I think it's a good, and I suppose there's still even, you've got a different era now and they're still driving changes through. And the Assay, people at the Assay Office, particularly when you get back to the s'70s and '80s, yes late '70s more than anything else, they'd never had any change at all probably in their whole lifetime here, and some people had been here for donkey's years and change wasn't something that they were used to and they don't, whereas in the outside world now I think people accept change, it's continuous but, you know, and continuous improvement. Whereas it was a totally alien concept to a lot of people in the Assay Office and they were always worried that standards would go down, which it doesn't necessarily follow.

[End of Interview 01:21:37]