**History of the Gemmological Association of Australia**

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[**http://www.gem.org.au/historyf.htm**](http://www.gem.org.au/historyf.htm)

In compiling this history of the Association, one first must take note of the events which combined to produce a need for the Association’s formation. We must look at events that occurred about 1934, when the Gemological Institute of America was but three years old and the Gemmological Association of Great Britain had been in existence for about twenty-five years.

At that time air travel was almost non existent, and overseas correspondence between Australia and England or Europe could easily take three months from the initiation of a question to receipt of a reply. Telephone contact was virtually unobtainable. In this situation, studies of gemstones were highly individual. But, it also must be remembered that only Verneuil synthetic corundum and spinel, garnet topped doublets, and paste were present in the market to pose problems for gem identification. Perhaps this was just as well, for gemmological instruments had not developed to anywhere near their current state of sophistication.

However, some people, such as W.E. Hamilton, who had migrated from England during the 1920s, and Arthur (Sandy) Tombs, became friendly through a shared interest in photography. Hamilton then became interested in gemstones, particularly in the field of crystal growth where he specialised in photographing crystal growth under polarised light. He produced time lapse switches for movie photomicrography to allow him to take quite spectacular movies of the mechanics of growing crystals. Unfortunately these films have been lost, largely as a result of intellectual snobbery of the time — as Hamilton did not possess a University degree. Consequently, his efforts and results were turned down by the University.

Prior to the start of World War II, the Federated Retail Jewellers Association (FRJA) commenced a course in gemmology in Sydney under the tutorship of T. Hodge-Smith, then Curator of Minerals at the Australian Museum. This course was conducted until 1942-1943. Among those who completed this course were Mrs G. Huie (who later co-edited The Commonwealth Jeweller and Watchmaker magazine), and Messrs John Pope (Victoria), Arthur Wirth, Arthur (Sandy) Tombs, Jack Taylor (New South Wales), and Alan Philby (Tasmania). Unfortunately Mr Hodge-Smith died suddenly in 1943 and the FRJA abandoned future courses in gemmology.

During 1944, concerns about the training of members of the gemstone and jewellery industry were developed by three students (Sandy Tombs, Arthur Wirth, Jack Taylor) who had completed the FRJA gemmology course. At that time Sandy Tombs was employed as a gem expert at Hardy Brothers; Arthur Wirth worked for the jewellery wholesalers Ponsford, Newman & Benson, while Jack Taylor was a member of W.C. Taylor & Co. All firms were based in Sydney. These three gentlemen had a very strong interest in gemstones, and a desire to spread knowledge of gem identification and an appreciation of gemstones throughout Australia.

However, the beginnings of The Gemmological Association of Australia were hardly world shattering as discussions which were held by the three founders took place in a small coffee shop in George Street, Sydney. Although the name of the coffee shop now escapes me, it was situated on the western side of George Street, between Market and King Street. Following many hours of talk, and numerous cups of coffee, the three founders decided to call a meeting of both jewellery trade members, and the public, to ascertain the possibilities of forming The Gemmological Association of Australia. The founders also considered that, before holding a foundation meeting, it would be necessary to seek some academic standing for the proposed association. Therefore, it was decided to approach two members of the University of Sydney staff, who had an interest in gemstones, to add both their names and their scientific standing to the embryonic association. To this end Arthur Wirth approached two University of Sydney staff: Dr G.D. Osborne, who was Professor of Geology, and Dr D.R Mellor, who was Reader in Chemistry. The approaches having been successful, Dr Osborne accepted the office of Patron and Dr Mellor that of President of The Gemmological Association of Australia.

The path to formation of the Association then became a little easier, although there was some passive resistance from sections of the jewellery trade who objected to the teaching of facts which many considered to be at the most secret, and at least the result of several years experience that should be kept for their own personal use. However, most objections were overcome, and lecturers were obtained for the Association's proposed course in gemmology. Mr H.F. Whitworth, from the Mining Museum, was designated Chief Examiner, while Mr R.O. Chalmers, Curator of Minerals at the Australian Museum, became the Lecturer.

The inaugural meeting of The Gemmological Association of Australia was held in the School of Arts Building, Pitt Street, Sydney on the 29th October 1945. Mr A.E. Tombs was elected Chairman, and Mr Jack S. Taylor Secretary. Twenty-one people attended this meeting. Among those present were Dr G.D. Osborne, Dr D.P. Mellor, A.E. Tombs, A.A. Wirth, Jack S. Taylor, F. Kirkby, R. Tiley, L. Taylor, A. Kessler, J. Davis, R.C. Felton, F. Blackmore, C. Coote, J. Pope (Victoria). Strangely, all who attended this Inaugural Meeting were men.

The agenda and aims on the Notice of Meeting of the Inaugural Meeting were:

1. That The Gemmological Association (GAA) be formed.
2. That The Gemmological Association affiliate with the Gemmological Association of Great Britain

The aims of the newly formed association were:

1. To advance the science of gemmology in Australia and in particular to encourage by all means the more practical studies in gemmology.
2. To arrange classes of study and monthly lectures by some prominent gemmologists, especially considering the rehabilitation of ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen.
3. To provide an up to date library and information bureau with reliable data for members.
4. To provide an up to date laboratory conducted by a qualified gemmologist for the testing of gemstones.
5. To form Branches of The Gemmological Association in all States of the Commonwealth.

The first elected officers of the Association were:

* Patron: Professor G.D. Osborne
* President: Dr D.P. Mellor
* Chairman Mr A.E. Tombs
* Secretary Mr J.S. Taylor
* Treasurer Mr F. Kirkby
* Councillors Messrs Colin Coote, Arthur Wirth, Reg Tiley, Les Taylor, Albert Kessler, J. Davis
* Lecturer Mr H.F. Whitworth

Matters now moved rapidly and, based on notes from the Gemmological Association of Great Britain, lectures in gemmology commenced at the beginning of 1946. As the Association had no permanent home, the first lectures were held in the Grand Order of Oddfellows boardroom, 139 Castlereagh Street, Sydney. This accommodation, though luxurious, soon became unsatisfactory for lecture purposes, and classes were transferred to the Institute of Optometrists' rooms in Bond Street.

These rooms satisfied for a time, but due to rapid growth of the Association it was soon necessary to seek larger premises. The Association was fortunate to obtain space in History House, Young Street, courtesy of the National Council of Jewish Women. Classes were held on the top (?4th floor), where ample space allowed tables to be set to hold gemmological testing instruments, and the area was sufficiently large to allow practical examinations to be properly conducted. These rooms served the Association well until 1951 when the landlords required the space for their own purposes. The Association was forced to move once again.

The first Diploma in Gemmology examinations were held in October 1947. Successful candidates were awarded their diplomas on the 22nd July 1948 by the Association's Chairman Mr A.E. Tombs. Unfortunately, only a few weeks later, on the 8th August 1948, Sandy Tombs suffered a sudden, fatal heart attack.

However, even at this early stage of the Association's development, Aim 5 of the Inaugural Agenda had well and truly been accomplished. Branches of The Gemmological Association of Australia had been formed in Victoria, in April 1946, and in Queensland in November of the same year. South Australian Branch (1947) and Western Australian (1950) followed. Five years after the Association was formed all mainland states were conducting courses and examinations in gemmology. However, it was not until 1976 that a State Branch was formed in Tasmania.

In the formative years of 1945-1950, annual conferences were held on a Federal level. But, at the State Branch level, difficulties soon arose due to individual differences in teaching methods, finances, presentation of accounts etc. Consequently, following considerable work and endeavour by Jack Taylor, The Gemmological Association of Australia was registered and incorporated as a non profit company in New South Wales on the 1st May 1952. The original subscribers to the Memorandum and Articles of Association of The Gemmological Association of Australia were Jack Stanley Taylor, Arthur Albert Wirth, Keith William Walsh, Reginald Moxey Tiley, Malcolm James O'Hara, Rudolph V. Marks, and Geoffrey Arthur Tombs.

During the early years that followed formation, the Federal Executive of the Association was domiciled in Sydney; even though Annual Conferences of the Association were held in other States. However, following incorporation a decision was made to rotate Federal Officers between each State on the basis of a three year tenure. This system still operates today. While there are some members who consider this rotation a disruption to effective administration, the general opinion prevails that in a country the size of Australia individual members of the Association develop a greater feeling of belonging as the Federal Executive rotates through their State.

Incorporation of the Association resulted in some changes to the title of Officers. For example, the Chief Examiner became the Chairman of the Board of Studies and Examinations. The Board now had State Branch representatives as well as Federal appointments. Mr R.O. (Oilver) Chalmers was appointed the first Chairman of this Board. This appointment he retained until his retirement in 1975. As Mr Chalmers had taken over the appointment of Chief Examiner from Mr Horace Whitworth, in 1957, he served the Association in an educational capacity for almost thirty years. In recognition of his devotion to the educational activities of the Association, Oliver Chalmers was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the Association in 1965.

Shortly after its formation, the Association realised that publicity and dissemination of knowledge was to be vital for the long term survival of the jewellery industry. To this end the FRJA was approached to determine whether the GAA could contribute articles to their magazine The Commonwealth Jeweller and Watchmaker. This magazine was published by Shipping Newspapers Limited, who, in the 1950s, were taken over by Marchant & Co Ltd.

Discussions with the FRJA resulted in a section of the magazine being allotted to The Gemmological Association of Australia - so the Gemmology Review was born. This association with The Commonwealth Jeweller and Watchmaker continued until 1958, at which time the Association considered that it was in the position to publish its own journal of gemmology The Australian Gemmologist.

Over the years The Australian Gemmologist has become a world wide read, highly respected publication due, in great part, to two editors — J.H. (Jack) Oughton and W.H. (Bill) Hicks. There were, of course, other editors dating from the time of the old Gemmology Review - Jack Taylor, Arthur Wirth, Len Ingleton. For The Australian Gemmologist John Holdsworth, Julia Myers, Geoff Tombs, Jim Jones, Reg Ball and Norman Beckenham are editors that come to mind, just to name a few.

Jack Oughton and Bill Hicks are, however, owed a great deal by members of The Gemmological Association of Australia. Jack Oughton brought his experience, as a professional editor, and having retired from employment was able to devote a great amount of time and effort into improving The Australian Gemmologist in both layout and content. Jack was, as well, a keen international gemmological correspondent; thereby lifting the standard of the journal into the wide world and out of the parochial. Jack Oughton was editor of The Australian Gemmologist from 1968 to 1975, when his untimely death left editorial responsibilities in a state of flux until the appointment of Bill Hicks in 1981. Bill continued the tradition of expansion, until his death in 1993, and certainly augmented the overseas content of our journal. This proved to be a vital contribution that allowed Australian gemmologists to remain on an equal footing with the rest of the world as well as providing the catalyst for some interesting productive research.

Like all Associations which are dependant on much voluntary labour, The Gemmological Association of Australia has necessarily proceeded through the past fifty years slowly but steadily.

Due to the efforts of various Presidents and Councils of all States, in conjunction with the Board of Studies and Examinations, the original aims of the founders have been fulfilled almost totally. In fact, the one area which is missing is the formation of a fully equipped, world standard gem testing laboratory. This is an aim which must be realised during the next period of the Association's history. After all, if the British, Americans, Swiss, and the Thais can do this, surely the Australians can.

Looking at the list of past and present Patrons, Presidents, and Chairmen, the Association has been fortunate indeed to have combined the services of the scientific community, jewellery industry, and general public to ensure its continuing interest and operations.

As Mr Arthur Wirth (one of our founders) was often heard to say:

**"To all gemmologists - may their tribe increase."**