

## Artefacts: Autumn 2023

### Friends' Acquisitions: 'The Glascote Torc'

By Melissa Hughes, Artefacts' Editor and Friends' Administrator

This next article in the series of Friends acquisitions purchased for Birmingham looks at 'The Glascote Torc', one of the oldest pieces of metalwork in Birmingham's collection.



'The Glascote Torc'; 1970A17

A torc, which can also be spelled 'torq' or 'torque', is a large rigid or stiff metal neck ring, sometimes made from multiple intertwined metal strands of twisted wire. The word comes from the Latin 'torqueo', which means 'to twist'. Most torcs are neck-rings which open at the front although they were often designed for near permanent wear, and would have been difficult to remove.

Torc's appear to have predominantly been made from gold or bronze, less often silver, iron or other metals (gold, bronze and silver survive better than other metals when buried for long periods).

'The Glascote Torc' was found by a canal worker near Glascote in Staffordshire in the 1940s. Thinking it was an old coffin handle, he was told to keep it as a souvenir and it was not until 1970 that its true worth was identified. It is formed of twelve gold wires, twisted in pairs with loop terminals cast on. Following its identification, the torc was declared 'Treasure' and Birmingham Museums was invited to purchase it. A huge appeal was launched and the torc was purchased by public subscription with the assistance of Birmingham City Council, the John Feeney Charitable Trust, the Victoria & Albert Purchase Grant Fund, the W A Cadbury Charitable Trust and, of course, the Friends, who contributed £500.

In his article 'An Iron Age gold-alloy torc from Glascote, Tamworth, Staffs', published in 1971, Kenneth S. Painter records the content of the torc as being 29.8% gold; 41.9% silver; and 27.2% copper and states that 'such an alloy would be strained to the limit by the manufacturing process'. As a result, the torc has manufacturing imperfections – one of the gold wires has failed to attach to the terminal – suggesting that it might have been a reject set aside to be re-worked and that the imperfection would have made the ornament unsaleable.

Painter suggests that the closest parallel in the same county would be the 'Needwood Forest Gold Torc' which was discovered on Duchy Land in Needwood Forest in Staffordshire in 1848 and is believed to have been buried in c.75 BC. The proximity of these two objects suggests that there is likely to have been a craftsman based in the area. The Glascote torc, a neckpiece made of gold alloy which weighs exactly 1lb (or 454 grams), would most likely have been made for a Celtic chieftain. Two thousand years ago it would have been a symbol of wealth, status and political power. Painter proposes that between twenty and eighty coins, depending on their fineness, would have had to be melted down to provide the gold for the Glascote torc, supporting the notion that it was commissioned by a wealthy patron.

Little is known about Iron Age life in the Midlands, but there must have been a major metalworking industry and a wealthy element in society existing in the area to have produced such an exquisite object.

**Illustration:**

'The Glascote Torc'; 1970A17; Purchased by public subscription with the assistance of Birmingham City Council, the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, the John Feeney Charitable Trust, the Victoria & Albert Purchase Grant Fund and the W A Cadbury Charitable Trust, 1970; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

<https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=6840&index=0&total=1&view=viewSearchItem>



**Bibliography:**

Painter, Kenneth S. (1971). 'An Iron Age gold-alloy torc from Glascote, Tamworth, Staffs' from 'Transactions of the South Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society 11', Volume 11, pp. 1-6; <https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/library/browse/details.xhtml?recordId=3121481>