



Stirling Hoard: Re-writing Scottish history

2,000-year-old Celtic treasures found
with a Garrett metal detector

Talking the Torc

Part One

By David Booth



To start right from the beginning a colleague and I were talking about metal detectors sometime in August. It was my birthday at the end of the month and I thought I could treat myself as I had always fancied trying the hobby. After weeks of searching on the internet and reading countless reviews I decided to purchase the Garrett *ACE 250* as it seemed to be a good model for beginners.

I received my detector on Thursday 24th September and like any boy with a new toy I couldn't wait to get it out of the box. When I got home from work I set it up and had a practice around the house much to the bemusement of my partner, Carolyn. My first day off work was on Monday 28th, the weather was fine and after a call to the land owner to ask for permission I set off for my first trip. I have lived and worked around Stir-

ling in Scotland for nearly 16 years and had knowledge of local history and some areas in mind that I wanted to detect on.

After arriving at the site I parked and got my detector, trowel, spade and other bits and pieces and decided to try my luck near to where I had parked. I had the machine set on 'All Metals' mode as the manual suggested this was a good idea for the first ten hours of use. About seven metres into my search the machine indicated my first find under the 5c icon, the depth indicator was at six inches. Being a novice I thought it would be a good idea to dig a large lump of earth around each target until I became better acquainted with the pinpoint feature of the *ACE 250*.

Approximately six inches down I had my first glimpse of the hoard – at this stage I didn't realize it was part of one of the ribbon torcs, but had a feeling that it

was gold and carefully started to uncover the rest of the piece. As I removed more soil it became clear that there were other bits as well. At this point I had a sense of shock and disbelief; lots of questions were popping into my head. What age could it be? Could I be this lucky? How many pieces are there? Is it really gold? I carefully removed the rest of the hoard and laid it beside the hole. When I had finished there were three complete torcs and two fragments of another. I stood and stared at the items for a few minutes wondering what to do next—I decided to bag them individually and head for home.

I gave the torcs a quick wash with cold water and left them on a towel to dry. I turned my computer on and started searching for anything that looked similar to the items I had found. After an hour or so of research I was pretty confident I had uncovered some Iron Age torcs and my excitement was starting to build. I wasn't aware of how Treasure Trove worked in Scotland although a quick read through the Treasure Trove Scotland website, www.treasuretrovescotland.co.uk, brought me up to speed. The rest of the evening was mainly spent staring at the torcs, taking some photos and online research. I eventually locked them in my shotgun safe and went to bed.

The next morning I took the torcs to show them to the land owner, who was amazed that they had been found on his land, I explained that I was going to report the find and I would keep him informed of any developments. When I got to work I printed off the treasure trove reporting form, filled it in, scanned it and emailed it off with an image attached. I anxiously waited for the rest of the day to see if the treasure trove office would get in touch. When they didn't I began to think that maybe the find was not as important as I had first thought. When I got home the evening was again spent staring at torcs and online research.

The next morning I was getting ready to leave for work when my mobile phone rang. The caller was a rather excited sounding staff member from the Treasure Trove office who said, "*from your image it appears that you have found an Iron Age hoard*" and asked, "*would it be okay if we came out to have a look?*"



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My heart was beating a good bit faster than normal and I had a huge grin on my face. I told them it would be fine to come out, however they would need to meet me at work. Three hours later two Treasure Trove staff and a principal curator from the Museums of Scotland arrived. They confirmed that the find was indeed an Iron age hoard and explained a bit about Iron age history, other Iron age finds in Scotland and the significance of my find. After that they explained how the Treasure Trove system worked in Scotland and carefully packed the torcs for transport. I

had a sense of relief that they were now in safe hands.

Over the next few weeks a team of archaeologists excavated the area around the find spot. I was invited to help with the initial stripping of the site by using my detector alongside the dig team. It has been fascinating to be involved with the excavation of the site and extremely interesting to listen to new theories as to how the hoard came to be there. Each time the archaeologists work at the site I am invited to visit so that they can show me around and update me on any progress made. The

staff from the Treasure Trove department and the National Museums of Scotland has made the whole process enjoyable and I am full of praise to them for all their information and help especially when the story broke to the press.

The question which I now get asked most often is "Are you going to keep detecting?" The answer yes, it's a great way to get out in the fresh air and even though I have only been doing it a short time I have already met many interesting people.



More torcs Part Two

By Dr. Fraser Hunter, Principal Curator of Iron Age and Roman Collections, National Museums Scotland

Just another day at the museum...

It's not every day you come into the office to be greeted by a picture of gold torcs — but the 30th of September was far from an ordinary day. David had reported his amazing find to the Treasure Trove unit, and they immediately asked me to look at the photos and confirm it was what they thought. I was amazed—although I've worked in the National Museum for 18 years and been involved in some fantastic finds, there had been nothing as dramatic as these. This was stuff you saw in books or exhibitions—not things you actually got to work with yourself! We called David immediately, and high-tailed it towards Stirling to meet him at his work. As we walked into his office, we were met by the torcs spread out on a table. It was an amazing sight—the photos didn't prepare me for their sheer splendour. Throughout the drive, I'd been thinking about them. When I first saw the photos, I was sure they were Iron Age, but two of them were unusual, and I'd been racking my brain for parallels. Now I saw them, it was clear we were dealing with some very rare material — but more of that below.

Luckily, David has an understanding employer, and he was able to sneak off work to take us to the findspot and describe how he'd found them. We cleaned the pit up and had a good wander around the surroundings to get a feel for the location. It was clear that, although there was no archaeology recorded from this spot previously, it was a site with lots of potential—and the landowner was really enthusiastic, and keen that we carry out some fieldwork. But that was for another day—today we had to get

the torcs back to Edinburgh, and start serious attempts to make sense of them.

Finding out about the torcs

Some time with my head in my books soon confirmed my suspicions. This hoard had a unique combination of material, with some very unusual finds. There were two ribbon torcs made from single strips of twisted gold, expanded to the front and narrower to the rear where the hooked ends thickened into terminals. This creates a dramatic effect from very little gold—only 50-60g. In one, the small knobbed ends could be linked together to hold it. The other, more unusually, ends in discs. Ribbon torcs are a typical (if rare) Scottish and Irish find, but this hoard provides the answer to a long-running debate. There's been a lot of ink spilt over their dating—most people accepted they were middle Bronze Age, but Richard Warner of the Ulster Museum argued the most common type, with tight spiral twisting like our ones, was Iron Age based on the composition of the gold and some Irish finds associated with Iron Age material. I had suspected he was right, as we'd found a tiny fragment in my excavations of an Iron Age house near Elgin. Now we had much stronger proof—for the other two torcs in the Stirling hoard were quite clearly Iron Age.

One had travelled a long way to reach Scotland—it was made in south-west France, near Toulouse. Two joining fragments make up half of a tubular torc. It's clear that only half the torc was buried, and that the surviving pieces were broken before they went into the ground—a feature of other hoards too. It's a technical master-

piece, as the complex triple row of linked 'mushroom' motifs which decorates it is hammered up from sheet metal. The centre is hollow, but the metal is so thin I think it must originally have had a core to support it, perhaps of wax or pitch. Each 'mushroom' has fine decoration carved into it, in a style very similar to what's called 'Plastic' style on the Continent, one of the well-known forms of Celtic art typical of the third century BC.

The fourth torc is the real surprise. It's a unique mixture of Iron Age style and Mediterranean skill. The shape is typically Iron Age, well known from finds such as Snettisham, with loop terminals made up of eight wires twisted into a braided hoop. But the decoration of the terminals is unlike anything else in the Iron Age. Discs of gold were soldered into the loops, and then twisted wire coils were soldered to them, with little balls of gold topping the design. These techniques of filigree and granulation were alien to the Iron Age world, but common in Greek, Etruscan and Roman gold-work, and must indicate a craft-worker trained in the Mediterranean. This is confirmed by the fine gold chain linking the two terminals—a feature found on no other Iron Age torcs, but again common in the Mediterranean. In a way, this torc is the 'missing link' between classic Iron Age torcs like Snettisham and the Mediterranean-made chain collars of the Winchester hoard. We know from French Iron Age finds that gold-smiths from the Mediterranean were working in temperate Europe for powerful clients—now we can see that those links stretched to Britain as well, although whether this torc was made especially for a powerful person in Stirling, or was made elsewhere and then passed through various hands as a gift is unknown.

Thanks to my colleague Jim Tate, we were able to do some preliminary analysis of the torcs, which showed they were a gold-silver alloy with one per cent or so of copper. The French torc and the hybrid one were purer, around 75:25, while the ribbon torcs were nearer 65:35 gold:silver. We'll be doing a lot more work to confirm these results and to see how they were made—already, examination under the scanning electron microscope has shown details of the solder and toolmarks on the French torc. We can't date these styles of torcs very closely, but parallels suggest a date bracket of c.300-50 BC. The sizes of the torcs differ markedly. While the tubular and hybrid ones are a size I could wear, the ribbon torcs are much smaller, suggesting that these were



female ornaments—which gave the tabloids plenty of excuse to run pictures of scantily-clad torc-wearing ladies. But more of that below...

Digging at the findspot

I was really keen to dig around the findspot—not in the hope of any more gold, which was a remote possibility, but because this was a fantastic chance to investigate the setting of such a hoard. We have lots of wonderful pieces of Celtic art in the National Museum, but most were found a century or more ago, and we know almost nothing of their context. Why did they end up in the ground? What was happening in the area at the time? Valuable objects like these don't just fall off the back of a chariot—could we find any clues? It was time to do some digging.

Thanks to the landowner, we could borrow a mechanical excavator to strip off the topsoil, with David helping us by scanning everything with his now-charmed detector before it was excavated. For a day, we found virtually nothing bar the odd suggestive dark smudge in the subsoil—but then things started to get interesting. Cut into the gravel around the hoard were two dark, curving lines. As we cleaned these up, they became clearer—the remains of a circular wooden building, some 11m in diameter. We still have some digging to do—my winter woolies are just about dried off and ready for another week in the field—and the full story will only become clearer once we get some

radiocarbon dates. However, it seems too much of a coincidence to find this building exactly where the hoard came from. I think they must be contemporary, with the hoard buried inside the building, near the back. But what was this structure? The remains show a circular wall line with a regular series of posts in it to hold the roof. About half a metre outside it is another groove, perhaps from a second wall which acted as a wind-break, perhaps from a drainage gully. It had an east-facing double-door, a central cooking pit, a couple of other pits and postholes, but very little else. No pottery. No stone tools. Not even any charcoal or burnt bone, except in the cooking pit. What is this building? It doesn't seem like a house, because there's no rubbish or evidence of wear and tear from everyday activity. Could it be a shrine of some sort? That would fit its isolated setting, in the middle of a rather wet bit of landscape, and there's a palisade cutting off the tongue of land it sits on, restricting access. So could the hoard be a religious offering? That's our working hypothesis—though I'm waiting for the results of analysis on the samples we've taken before I stick my neck out too far.

The hoard's significance

This has been a fantastic discovery. It's the most important Iron Age find from Scotland for well over a century, and a hoard of European importance. It brings together an unparalleled range of material, with rare and unique objects. Yet, with hindsight, it

does fit into a pattern. All across what we call Celtic Europe there are hoards of gold torcs. Many of the styles are international ones, showing wide-ranging connections. If we look at the other main gold hoard in Scotland, from Netherurd in Peeblesshire, this too had a mixture of material, some from East Anglia, some from northern France, some arguably from Ireland.

Certain Irish hoards, such as Broighter and Clonmacnoise, also show a mix of far-flung and local material. There were clearly people across Europe who had the power and connections to acquire valuable objects. Perhaps they were travelling as adventurers or mercenaries. Perhaps they had built connections to powerful people elsewhere, and received some of these valued objects as political gifts. Often when we think of Iron Age gold we focus on East Anglia—but this reminds us that there were powerful, well-connected people all across Britain and Ireland.

The hoard is also a great example of the value of collaboration between detectorists and archaeologists. David's reporting of the find was tremendous. It meant the material was safeguarded and the findspot investigated, giving us loads of additional information. The detecting led us to a find which we archaeologists would never have suspected—but then the digging and the study of the torcs has added lots more information, and rewrites part of the history books.

When the story broke, it grabbed the media's attention. At a press conference in the museum, we got a glimpse of celebrity life—for the torcs were in the gaze of the press pack, with the rattle of camera shutters and blazing of flash-guns giving us the full paparazzi experience. And no wonder—they are a fantastic find, one we hope to get on display soon so everyone can appreciate them. It's been an amazing journey so far, and I've no doubt there's more information to come. Now the words of the Chinese fortune cookie which I keep by my desk seem very appropriate—*"If you look in the right places, you can find some good offerings."* That should be the motto for us all...

Thanks

I'm grateful to David for his tremendous cooperation and enthusiasm, to Stuart Campbell in the Treasure Trove Unit for his assistance, to colleagues in the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland for survey and aerial photos of the site, and to the eager volunteers who braved the cold, mud and rain during the excavations.



David Booth's remarkable recovery with his Garrett ACE 250 metal detector has been well publicized by international media. The stories in this leaflet were the feature stories in the February 2010 issue of *The Searcher*.

This image of David with his Iron Age torcs was taken before they were taken into the possession of the National Museums of Scotland.

Image courtesy of David Booth.



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