

# My Jewellery, My Story at Charnwood Museum



An unusual Bronze Age necklace has inspired a colourful exhibition exploring the personal stories behind ancient and modern items of jewellery. **Carly Hiltz** visited to learn more.

In 1999, University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) were excavating the remains of an Early Bronze Age round barrow in a quarry at Cossington, Leicestershire, when they discovered an unusual burial on the mound's edge. It contained the remains of a necklace whose components had come from far and wide: at its centre, a small faience bead was flanked by larger beads made of jet from Whitby in Yorkshire and Kimmeridge shale from Dorset, and there were another ten beads of Baltic amber. The remains of its owner had been destroyed by the acidic local soil, but in contemporary graves where skeletons survive, composite necklaces like this are associated with women.

Wear patterns on some of the beads suggest that they had long use-lives before they were buried, though the reasons why these varied materials were brought together, and why such a precious object was committed to the ground, are lost to history. Now, the Cossington Necklace has inspired a community-led exhibition currently running at Charnwood Museum in Loughborough.

Drawing on workshops which encouraged local people to share stories about their own jewellery (see [www.cultureleicestershire.co.uk/projects/my-jewellery-my-story](http://www.cultureleicestershire.co.uk/projects/my-jewellery-my-story) for more on the community project), the displays include panels documenting the memories and meanings behind cherished items and heirlooms.

These surround glass cases containing objects loaned by Loughborough's diverse modern population – among them a Coptic cross from Eritrea and Kurdish *tisbeh* (Muslim prayer beads) – as well as artefacts from Leicestershire Museum Collections. Spanning thousands of years, these include an intriguing prehistoric necklace made up of 68 fossil sponges and a single flint bead – an antiquarian find from 'a cairn in Leicestershire' – as well as a coin of the local Iron Age Corieltavi tribe, pierced to make a pendant; a pair of Roman bracelets shaped like snakes (whose small size suggests they were worn by a child or a petite woman); a Viking Thor's hammer pendant; and a 17th-century mourning ring.

The Cossington Necklace itself can be seen just outside the temporary exhibition, in an area of the museum's permanent displays dedicated to the barrow cemetery in which it was found. This space also includes a new film about the necklace, created by Emma Jones of Prehistoric Jewellery and featuring

interviews with John Thomas of ULAS, ancient jewellery specialist Dr Alison Sheridan, and experts from experimental archaeology practitioners AncientCraft.

Elsewhere in the museum (which is housed within a former Victorian swimming baths) you can learn about other archaeological finds from the region, natural history (including a huge 180 million-year-old pliosaur fossil, found in 1851 and known as the 'Barrow Kipper'), and local industries and innovations like Ladybird Books, lace manufacturing, and Morris cranes. It is an eclectic and absorbing mix. ■



## Further information

*My Jewellery, My Story* is at Charnwood Museum until 15 June. The museum is open 10am-3pm Wed-Sat, and entry is free; see [www.charnwoodmuseum.co.uk](http://www.charnwoodmuseum.co.uk).