ribbon torcs are of Iron Age date, it gives us a lot more Iron Age gold. This suggests there were different styles of gold ornaments in different areas of the country, some with the heavy Snettisham-type torcs, some with the lighter ribbon torcs. The evidence of wide-ranging contacts from the Stirling hoard also shows that many parts of Britain and Ireland had widespread connections and wealth at this time, not just the south.

The setting

David Booth immediately reported the find to the Treasure Trove Unit, who deal with all discoveries of finds of archaeological importance. The exact findspot is being kept confidential at the moment, but it was clear that there was a great opportunity here to find out more about the setting. Many Scottish hoards are old finds, where we know very little about why they were buried or what the surroundings were like. Here we had the chance to explore this with a modern, precisely-located find. Was this buried for safety in an out-of-the-way place, or was there evidence of other activity in the area? Was it buried as part of a communal religious ceremony, or a small, private offering?

Thanks to the support of the landowner, we were able to excavate a large area around the discovery spot. It sits on a patch of drier land in a boggy, wet area.

Figure 1. Excavated view of the circular timber structure where the hoard was found.

There has been human activity in the area for thousands of years – we found a scatter of flints and remains of a cooking site probably dating back to the early Bronze Age. We could also demonstrate that the hoard did not come from an isolated site – it was buried inside a circular timber building, some eleven metres in diameter (Figure 1). This shape and size of building would normally represent a house, but this one is a bit odd – apart from a central cooking pit, there is no trace of normal domestic activity, such as rubbish or cooking waste, although evidence of repairs indicates it was standing for some time. We don't even know if it is the same date as the hoard, although samples taken for radiocarbon dating will clarify this. It is tempting to speculate that this was some sort of shrine. This kind of isolated, boggy location is a typical place to find Iron Age religious offerings. However, we very rarely get the chance to investigate such a site scientifically, and we are planning a wide-ranging research project to take advantage of this tremendous potential. Was this a secluded, wooded site, hidden from view, or was it an open landscape, visible to crowds gathered to watch the spectacle? How wet was it? Was it boggy, or flooded, or was it perched above the water, a dry island in a wet landscape? And how did it relate to the surrounding area? Where were the nearest settlements, and what was the basis of the wealth which allowed people to acquire such gold? Was this a time of agricultural prosperity? Or was it a time of crisis, when valued objects might be sacrificed to appease the gods?

These are only a few of the questions which this discovery opens up. It is a remarkable find, which has changed our view of the Scottish Iron Age, and put the Stirling area centre-stage in a European story. In the months to come, as teams of specialists pore over the evidence, we look forward to teasing apart this gleaming glimpse into a long-lost world.

Plate 8. The hoard of four golden torcs.

Plate 9. One of the two ribbon torcs found in association with the two other torcs proves these ribbon torcs are of Iron Age date. © National Museums Scotland.