

The Jewellery Quarter of Middle Earth

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

People of Birmingham, United Kingdom, are known as Brummies and for the sake of full journalistic disclosure (though now a proud adopted Aucklander) by birth, I am one. Contrary to popular belief, Birmingham, and not Liverpool or Manchester, is actually England's second city. With a population of well over a million, it is larger than those two combined. Birmingham is one of the most ethnically diverse regions on Earth and its gifts to the world are just as varied: Ozzy Osbourne, the industrial steam engine, Cadbury's chocolate and the postage stamp to name but a few. Brummies famously brag that the city has more canals than Venice. Though admittedly, they're not quite as spectacular. Perhaps more pertinently, and I realise I write this at the risk of deportation, it is also the real home of *Lord of the Rings*. Again, just not quite as spectacular.

By the 12th century, the small town of Birmingham had been permanently settled. A few centuries later, iron and coal reserves were discovered, and that, coupled with its fertile lands and central location, paved the way for it to blossom into one of the major cities of the Industrial Revolution, manufacturing everything from cast iron to cotton. It was also, for a time, the arms-making capital of the world. The innovative residents used skills learnt during the British Empire's most prosperous period to further develop an industry which remains to this day the city's most shimmering success: the manufacture and manipulation of precious stones and metals. The art of jewellery making.

A handful of goldsmiths first registered in Birmingham in the 1500s. By the mid-19th century, a specialist jewellery trade centre was established in the Hockley region,



01/02 — Images from the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

03 — The Jewellery Quarter today

which became known as the Jewellery Quarter. As the wealth of the empire bulged, so too did its subjects' desire for beautiful, sparkling goods, with the vast chunk crafted in Birmingham. The area prospered. At the time, it was estimated to have produced up to half of all Britain's precious wares, with more Brummies employed in the jewellery trade than any other. The School of Jewellery opened in 1890, and remains the biggest of its kind in Europe. The craftsmen also made many of the pins, buttons and medals for the First World War. At its production peak, the Jewellery Quarter employed in excess of 30,000 people and its assay office (where the purity of precious metals is tested) is still the world's greatest, responsible for hallmarking 12 million products annually.

The Great Depression and Second World War heralded economic disaster, and as the 20th century progressed, the trade, like so many others in the western world, suffered a downward shift from which it never fully recovered. However, still totalling well over five hundred, the Jewellery Quarter boasts the highest

concentration of jewellery businesses in Europe, processing over 40% of the UK's gems. With its array of workshops and museums, it remains one of the region's biggest tourist draws.

The Jewellery Quarter is now also a thriving hospitality hub, home to some of the city's trendiest bars, boutiques and eateries, as well as being one of Birmingham's most sought-after residential postcodes. It is home to St Paul's Square, the city's last remaining Georgian square and that, along with its legendary industrial architecture, has seen the area recognised as an English Heritage Site. It has recently been proposed for a World Heritage Site listing too. The Prince's Foundation granted the region a \$500million investment for a rejuvenation project, with Prince Charles commenting, "here a precious and unique industrial craft neighbourhood is beginning once again to become a place where people want to live, work and enjoy themselves." And so Birmingham's iconic Jewellery Quarter refuses to lose its shine.