

Like most of my holiday ideas the plan came to little once I got home, until I discovered a similar emporium of shiny spheres in my home town of Manchester. Researching a feature in the infamous Affleck's shopping centre I became seriously distracted by its comprehensive Bead Shop – but what were all those metal bits and pieces and how did I actually make something?

Luckily, as well as stocking everything you could ever need to make jewellery, the store runs courses to show you how, and when my enthusiasm was rewarded with box of beads and tools for Christmas I thought I'd better sign up. I wasn't alone in my interest, however, and for a couple of months the £10 beginners session booked up before I could bag a place. "People are always coming into the shop and not knowing what things are or what they need," says co-owner Emily Kersh, whose family has run the business for 20 years. "So the beginners courses are really popular and always sell out."

There are eight of us in the session I eventually get into, all new to the activity and keen to get busy with our pliers. At the head of our communal table an impressive-looking wire bracelet and dangly ear-rings are nestling on Kersh's work mat, and everyone seems excited that in a couple of hours they might have made something similar. First things first, though, as we're given a rundown of the basic tools and materials we'll be using: pliers and wire-cutters, tiny metal hoops called crimps and the obvious wire, beads and clasps. Despite my Christmas bounty I've made a pre-course visit to the shop to stock up on some of these and spent around £40, to say nothing of the beads themselves – although a starter kit can be bought for around £20.

Fully briefed about our toolkits we launch into

Shopping around

BEAD SHOPS (asterisked shops also give classes)

Greater Manchester: The Bead Shop* - www.the-beadshop.co.uk; Beady Kate* - www.beadykate.co.uk; GemCraft - www.gemcraft.co.uk

Cheshire: The Bead Trail* - www.thebeadtrail.co.uk

Carlisle: The Bead Shed - <http://beadbuddies.co.uk>

Leeds: Yum Yum Beads - www.yummybeads.co.uk; Bead Monster - www.beadmonster.co.uk

Sheffield: Jencel* - <http://jencel.co.uk>

York: The Bead Hive - www.bead-hive.co.uk

West Yorks: Bedazzle* - www.bedazzlebeads.co.uk

East Yorks: www.beadsbydesign.co.uk (markets and craft fairs)

BEADING CLASSES (also check local colleges)

Cheshire: <http://burtonmanor.wordpress.com>

Cumbria: www.highamhall.com

Lancs: www.jewelleryartist.co.uk

ONLINE:

www.beadmaster.com, www.sand-stones.co.uk, www.constellationbeads.co.uk, www.thecrystalpearlbeadshop.co.uk, www.jillybeads.com, www.beadaddict.co.uk, www.beads.co.uk, www.epbeads.co.uk



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making the bracelet, measuring each other's wrists to ensure a perfect fit. Despite its complex appearance the piece turns out to be surprisingly simple to make, with the crimps being squeezed flat to secure sets of beads at intervals along the wire. In fact, after a tricky start sealing two wires together it's downhill all the way, each of us creating a unique bracelet with our own chosen combinations of beads.

In case we're getting too confident Kersh introduces a tricky bit towards the end, and we wrestle with two pairs of pliers to show the rings attaching the wires to the clasps who's boss. But even with just a few minutes' practise we start to get the hang of it, and are emboldened enough to move on to the ear-rings.

Despite being an adult woman my ears aren't actually pierced, but I know a girl whose are and – more importantly – this is a great way to learn to create wire loops. Those familiar bent rings at the top of ear-ring dangles are a tad tricky to master but it really is all in the wrist, and when Kersh likens the movement to revving a motorbike or scooping ice-cream I start to get the idea. The finished products are slightly wonky but I'm impressed to have made them at all on my first attempt.

With 10 per cent discount available in the shop after each class I get a rush of blood to the head and spend another £25, so I'd better stop with the shopping and get my teeth into the hobby. Luckily I don't think I'll need much further encouragement, although with more advanced classes running regularly for £15 a session I have a feeling I'll be back sooner rather than later. ■



Basic tools and materials

- Beading mat
- Wire cutters
- Flat-nosed pliers
- Round-nosed pliers
- Beading wire
- Crimps
- Box crimps
- Lobster clasps
- Jump rings
- Extension chains
- Headpins
- Eye pins
- Fishhook ear wires

Facing page: Emily Kersh at one of the workshops she runs for keen jewellery makers