

COVER STORY

IN THE ROUGH: Peter Walsh faceting gemstones at the Lapidary Club in Tarrawanna. **Pictures:** Adam McLean



ROMANCING THE STONE

A rare gem hides inside a quaint brick and tin Scout Hall in a backstreet of Tarrawanna. From the outside it doesn't look like anything special, but DESIREE SAVAGE was invited to step inside and investigate.

FROM the outside it looks like a simple cream building with minimal tiny windows, curtains drawn.

It sits slightly out of place nestled amongst Tarrawanna family homes and a gorgeous view of the escarpment.

For decades it has housed a little known club. A community of people old and young, from all walks of life, with one thing in common - they all have rocks in their head.

I peer in the door and am spotted by the vice-president of the club. He hurriedly welcomes me in and begins rushing me around to meet the dozens of busy workers, each creating intricate works of art, tools whirring, blow-torches glowing, happily chatting.

The vibe, I imagine, is similar to that of Santa's workshop.

Many of the people I meet tell me this

little hall, with insufficient air-conditioning, is like "home". It has given them a sense of belonging or become a place to fill the void in retirement, a place to meet friends, a place to escape small children, or simply a place to pursue "their calling".

The Illawarra Lapidary Club has been running since 1962 for the love of rocks and silver, with around 160 members.

They come and utilise the many tools and machines to turn rocks into jewellery or beautiful statues and turn chunks of metal into detailed necklaces and rings.

Some members have been creating with the club for 50 years, while others are still new to the craft and eager to learn.

Mother of two from Helensburgh Bec O'Donnell believes she is finally on the right life path after leaving the corporate hustle and bustle of Sydney.



SILVER LINING: Mick Derrington soldering the backing to a sterling silver pendant he's designed and created.

After ditching a career as a project manager and sales manager, Ms O'Donnell finally found time to pursue something she

had dreamt of for many years.

"It's something I should've done years ago," she says. "I've been collecting jewellery for 35 years and always believed I needed to be designing and making jewellery, but you do what you've got to do."

O'Donnell admits it was her friend Erin Reynolds, already a club member, who inspired her to join.

"She was thoroughly enjoying herself and getting right into being creative and coming up with some brilliant stuff that I'd never seen before," she says.

"Given the opportunity I came down and I checked the guys out. I met all these wonderful people, they were making glass beads at the time which just fascinated me. Just to see a bunch of really creative people inspired me to have a go."

Since joining last October O'Donnell has never looked back, learning about the different types of gems, crafting silver and how to cut and polish cabochons.

"You've got all these jewellers out there that charge these phenomenal amounts of money and then you've got these guys here ... it's like I've found home," she said.