



BEAUTIFUL: Hand-crafted jewellery by Mick Derrington. He's loved gems ever since visiting the "pebble heaven" of Lightning Ridge in northwest NSW as a child.

CHILL TIME: Dental nurse and mum-of-two Erin Reynolds polishes a gemstone on a grinding machine. She says the Lapidary club is her creative escape.

CUT AND POLISH: These would have started out as simple chunks of rock.



O'Donnell boasts of the enormous wealth of knowledge inside the venue, and how everyone was happy to teach and mentor each other.

Bill Pieterse travels from Menai to the club regularly. He's loved playing with pretty stones since he was 12-years-old after reading a few articles about Honduras black opals.

"I was fascinated by them," he tells me.

So much so he bought his own Opal mine in north-west NSW in 2004.

"A mate of mine says 'lets go to The Ridge' one day and that's where we stayed," he explains.

"We lived there on and off for three months, then would go back for a few weeks then go again for a couple of months, and so on, on and off for about four years."

Despite objections from family, Pieterse was happy digging for colourful pieces of the earth, but says it was only ever a hobby "as if it was for a living I'd starve to death".

One of the more experienced members of the group Mick Derrington interjects with a laugh, "the great Australian story, that's what happened to most of the people out The

Ridge!"

Derrington may have only been with the club four or five years, but he's been polishing stones and making jewellery since rock fever began as a child.

It was a trip to Lightning Ridge with his father that initially set the spark alight for him.

"When I went to Lightning Ridge with my old man ... I was grabbing every pebble I could see. Every time we'd pull over on the road to have a pee I'd be in the creek getting pebbles and filling them up, and my dad would be like 'what's going on with this sugar bag full of pebbles!' Then we got to Lightning Ridge and it was pebble heaven," he laughs.

From then he would often "fossick" around the Illawarra escarpment searching for interesting pieces and would regularly trek to Scarborough or Shellharbour from his family home in Woonona.

He says "fossicking" was a major pastime for kids and families around the region when he was young, but the introduction of television and video games pushed it aside.

Creating award winning jewellery and

cabochons is just one of the loved hobbies for Derrington, who also dabbles in photography and building miniature steam engines.

Trevor Wilkie, a 29-year-old from Gerrington got involved in the club early last year. He needed to find a "sedentary sport" after injuring himself in the army.

"I had a lot of troubles so it helps you focus, keeps you paying attention, and you don't have to think," he says.

"I only wanted to come and learn [how to facet gemstones] but I got sucked into some silver-working and other stuff."

Inside this converted scout hall is a real sense of community, and I am blown away by the niceness of it's people and the interesting stories they have to tell.

The club's value isn't measured by how many gemstones they have or fossil specimens in the cabinets, nor is it measured by the weight of their silver. It's value is in its members.

To discover more about the wonderful world of gems, meet many from the club at the 2016 Rock and Mineral Fair Sunday February 28th at Stuart Park, North Wollongong.