



# Harold Hodges' Opal Teeth

The newsletter of the Lightning Ridge Opal and Fossil Centre Project

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## THANKS

to our supporters:

Walgett Shire Council  
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Lightning Ridge &  
District Bowling Club  
Down to Earth Opals  
Lightning Ridge  
Hotel Motel

and the many other  
people who help in  
so many ways.

**NEXT FILM  
NIGHT  
5 MAY**  
See over page  
for details

## NEXT ISSUE...

- Harold Hodges' **WHAT? What sort of name is that for a newsletter?**
- **The first in a series of profiles of the people bringing Lightning Ridge Opal & Fossil Centre into being**

**AND LOTS MORE!**

**W**ELCOME to the first issue of *Harold Hodges' Opal Teeth*, the newsletter of Lightning Ridge Opal and Fossil Centre.

This newsletter will chronicle the development of Lightning Ridge Opal and Fossil Centre on the historic Three Mile opal field near Lightning Ridge in northern New South Wales, Australia. This museum development is one of the most exciting projects underway in Australia today.

Lightning Ridge Opal and Fossil Centre will be a spectacular public museum and centre for tourism, education, research and the storage, maintenance and display of the world's premier public collection of Lightning Ridge opal and opalised fossils.

In its exhibition spaces the centre will feature the world's best public collection of gem-quality Lightning Ridge opal. Australia produces the vast majority of world opal supply and high-quality black opal rivals diamonds in value per carat. At Lightning Ridge Opal and Fossil Centre, this spectacular gemstone - Australia's National Gemstone - will finally be celebrated with a magnificent public display for the wonderment of Australians and visitors to this country.

The centre will also house and exhibit fossils that have been preserved in opal - teeth, bones and pinecones sometimes in rainbows of gem colour.

These rare fossils are recovered by miners from the opal mines of Lightning Ridge and are the exquisitely preserved remains of animals and plants that lived 110 million years ago. Fossils recovered from Lightning Ridge include some of the best-preserved dinosaur bones yet discovered in Australia, the oldest eel fossil in the world and the oldest frog fossil in the southern hemisphere. Over the page, Elizabeth Smith introduces us to the lost world these fossils are gradually revealing.

Other important themes will be opal geology, mining and cutting; the famous, free-spirited, pioneering life of the opal fields; fascinating stories about the work and lives of the indigenous people of the region; and the remarkable multicultural heritage that has characterised Lightning Ridge since its birth a century ago.

Lightning Ridge Opal and Fossil Centre will seek to be the world focus for research and information about, and promotion of, opal. It will also house significant heritage items, conduct educational and research programs, offer opal appreciation and cutting workshops, contain a cinema, a gallery space for travelling exhibitions, locally-generated artwork and performances, and have a program of resources and activities not only for visitors to Lightning Ridge, but for residents of the local and wider communities.

Visitors will approach the centre across the historic Three Mile opal fields, where mullock heaps of pink and cream opal dirt create a sparsely beautiful outback landscape.

There, they will discover a remarkable building by



Architects Wendy Lewin and Glenn Murcutt at Lightning Ridge in November 2004.

internationally-acclaimed architects Glenn Murcutt and Wendy Lewin - a building recessed into, and protected by, the earth. The underground museum will be an unforgettable experience and a model of ecologically-sensitive, energy-efficient design in this striking semi-arid Australian landscape.

Freeman Ryan Design, one of Australia's most highly-respected design companies, will design world-class exhibitions for the Murcutt-Lewin building.

Lightning Ridge Opal and Fossil Centre is going to be magnificent. Watch this space and be part of the excitement.

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## WHAT'S HAPPENING

*Highlights of current LROFC project activities*

The architects and designers for the project are developing preliminary designs for the building and its exhibition spaces, working from a brief produced for the LROFC steering committee by Richard Wesley of Museum Planning Services Australia, as well as information from visits to Lightning Ridge and regular consultation with the local committee.

\*

Work is underway on a sound business plan for the Opal and Fossil Centre and on applications for major funding from the State and Federal governments.

\*

LROFC Inc. is applying to become a Deductible Gift Recipient, so it can receive tax deductible gifts and donations. We will also apply to be a recipient institution under the Federal Government's Cultural Gifts Program, so that significant items of cultural heritage (for example, opalised fossils) can be donated to the Opal and Fossil Centre in return for tax deductions. This will mean donors can receive a fair valuation on their fossils and that the fossils can be properly stored, displayed and cared for, remaining available for us and future generations of Australians to see or study - and all in their town of origin - Lightning Ridge.

\*

We're building relationships with government organisations, other regional museums and centres, tourism organisations, people in the opal industry, people in the education arena, and people all over Australia and beyond who are excited about Lightning Ridge's Opal and Fossil Centre project.

## EVENTS

The end of 2004 was a busy time for supporters of the Opal & Fossil Centre.

On November 5-6, architects Glenn Murcutt and Wendy Lewin, designer Susan Freeman and engineer James Taylor visited Lightning Ridge to work on the site and with the local project team.

The visitors enjoyed an underground visit at The Big Opal and a sellout evening at Dig In with local supporters of the project. Thanks to Lightning Ridge Hotel Motel, the Big Opal and Dig In for their support.



In late November geotechnical engineer David Murray found himself being lowered down shafts on the proposed Three Mile site for the centre; then a couple of weeks later surveyor Ross Gleeson was on site to produce a contour map of the site area.

December 2 was the first of a series of film nights, showing historical films of the Ridge. More than 90 people enjoyed fascinating old footage courtesy of Lightning Ridge Historical Society, an update on the Opal and Fossil Centre project and a supper kindly provided by Lightning Ridge & District Bowling Club.

## COMING UP 2ND FILM NIGHT

Thursday 5 May  
7.00pm  
Lightning Ridge & District Bowling Club  
Ask anyone who was at the first film night and they'll tell you:

**DON'T MISS IT!**

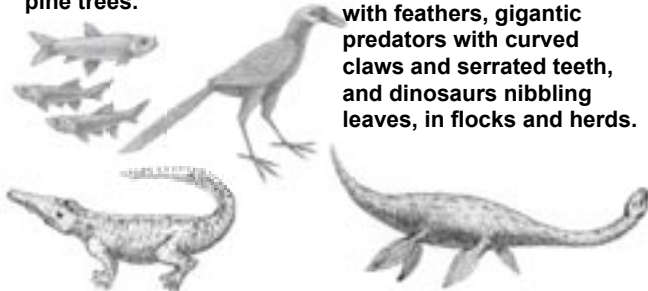
## NOT A MEMBER?

We need you!  
Membership of LROFC Inc. costs only \$10 - contact us and we'll send you an application form.

# OPALISED FOSSILS: WINDOWS ON A LOST LANDSCAPE

ELIZABETH SMITH

Welcome to Lightning Ridge, 110 million years ago, a vast floodplain with mountains to the east and the inland sea to the northwest. There are rivers and billabongs and weird forests of giant ferns and pine trees.



Myriads of amazing animals live here - huge yabbies and lungfish, eels, armour-plated turtles, lots of crocodiles, flippered reptiles with spear-point teeth, pterosaurs, birds and egg-laying mammals. There are also dinosaurs - tiny ones, dinosaurs with feathers, gigantic predators with curved claws and serrated teeth, and dinosaurs nibbling leaves, in flocks and herds.



The remains of these life forms dropped into the waterway, were covered in soft muds and eventually turned to silica. Opalised fossils are our window to the ancient supercontinent of Gondwana.

We're all on the edge of the known world, peering at a lost landscape, and

the fossils are packed with scientific information that is filling in the picture.

The museum at the Three Mile will be a treasure house for display and study of these magic relics which are among the most beautiful natural objects on earth.



## ROYAL TYRRELL MUSEUM: AN INSPIRATIONAL VISIT

JENNI BRAMMALL

In February this year, LROFC member David Schoeffel and I made a two-day visit to the Royal Tyrrell Museum in snowy Alberta, Canada.

The Royal Tyrrell is one of the best dinosaur museums in the world. It opened in 1985, making it a relatively new museum 'great', yet a proven success.

It's an incredible place - if you want to see dinosaurs, go to the Royal Tyrrell! We saw many wonderful displays and facilities, and I've passed on dozens of photos and pages of notes to the designers for the Lightning Ridge project.

But what was also interesting were the parallels between Drumheller - the location of the Royal Tyrrell - and Lightning Ridge.

Drumheller is a regional town with a population of around 7000. Historically, its main industry was mining, but as coal mining dwindled in the region, the town and its population suffered a steady decline.



Jenni Brammall outside the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Canada.

The museum was conceived as part of a revitalisation program for Drumheller. Looking at the museum - and speaking with local business owners - it has been a great success.

The Royal Tyrrell is located about 8km outside Drumheller, on a scenic road winding through a stark, dramatic badlands landscape rich with fossil deposits. The location of Lightning Ridge's Opal and Fossil Centre - in town or out - has been the subject of vigorous discussion, so I was interested to see whether the Tyrrell's out-of-town location was working.

Drumheller business owners like the location of the museum because it is not in direct competition with their shops - the town is perceived as a separate experience from the museum, so tourists visit both. And visitors love the location, because the journey itself is a transforming part of their museum experience.

All 'round, the Royal Tyrrell Museum is a winner...and made me more confident than ever that we're on the right track with Lightning Ridge Opal and Fossil Centre.



Underground at the Big Opal, Lightning Ridge, before a site visit in November 2004 (left to right): James Taylor, Glenn Murcutt, Wendy Lewin, Wolfgang Johansson, Michael Taylor, Elizabeth Smith, David Lane and Susan Freeman. For story see 'Events' at left.

## LROFC IN THE NEWS

Lightning Ridge Opal and Fossil Centre made news in the October 2004 issue of the American Opal Society's *Opal Express* newsletter, together

with an overview about opalised fossils (derived mainly from Elizabeth and Robert Smith's book *Black Opal Fossils of Lightning Ridge*).

## ★ ★ ★ WANTED ★ ★ ★

**WANTED: Candidates for Patron of Lightning Ridge Opal and Fossil Centre. Do you have any ideas?**

The Patron of the centre should be a high-profile, widely-respected person who is willing to lend influential support to advance the cause of the Opal and Fossil Centre. It is possible to have more than one patron, if two or more suitable persons are available.

**Do you have, or know of, items that are part of Lightning Ridge's mining**

**or cultural heritage?**

*Don't let them disintegrate on the fields, gather dust forever or be eaten by mice! Why not ask if there's a place for them on display in the Opal and Fossil Centre?*

Mining equipment, home-made gadgets, relics of camp life, photos or souvenirs from fun times of the past - they're all part of our story.

*If you can help with any of these items, please contact Jenni Brammall on 02 6829 1667 or opalfossil@wj.com.au*