The Collective Spirit

Brought to you by the Members of George's Hall Probus Club.
Issue 78 - The Lightning Ridge Edition - September 2025

A Special Lightning Ridge Edition

Compiled by Sue Brown with contributions from our travellers. Thanks to Di Ham, Norma Jenkins, Andrea Best, Bill Brown and Cathy Dice.
Photographs by Cathy Dice, Rob Best, Dirk Gruene, Sue Brown





The Trip

We set off for Lightning Ridge very early on Sunday morning, 14 September 2025. We had 32 in the Probus group but were joined on the tour by 10 members of Sylvania Probus Club.

It's a long way to Lightning Ridge (almost 800 kilometres) and our trips up and back took two days. We stayed at Tamworth on the way up and Parkes on our return trip. And spent four nights at the Wallangulla Motel in Lightning Ridge.

Thanks

A trip like this takes a lot of organisation and it wouldn't have been the success that it was without the following. So we would like to thank:

- Coach Holidays and Tours who provided a well organised and excellent tour.
- Our Coach Captain, driver and poet laureate, Ray
- The motels in Tamworth and Parkes that provided a break in the long drive.
- The Wallangulla Motel in Lightning Ridge, our home for four nights. While the accommodation was very basic (that's all there is in Lightning Ridge), the staff were friendly and helpful and breakfast was very good.



- The Lightning Ridge District Bowling Club for all our excellent meals.
- Ray Cook for his overall organisation of the trip
- Colleen for organising our lolly jar and all those people who helped top it up.
- Cathy Dice for organising and running our trivia game.
- All the Georges Hall Probus participants for being such a wonderful friendly group. Everyone looked out for each other. Nothing was ever too much trouble. In particular, those of us with mobility issues thank everyone who helped us in that difficult physical environment.
- The members of Sylvania Probus Club who shared the coach with us. The two groups came together well, and we had a lot of fun.

A message from Sylvania Probus Club

When we returned home, I received this lovely message.

> Hi Sue
>
> Hope you are well after our tour. Could you please convey to your Probus Club the following:
>
> On behalf of Sylvania Probus Club we wish to thank Georges Hall Probus Club for their wonderful friendship on the Lightning Ridge Tour. Thank you also for the invitation to join in your very interesting Trivia Games and for the lollies you supplied on this trip. It was great. We thoroughly enjoyed your company, and believe that your Club was one of the nicest groups we have travelled with (if not the nicest) and look forward to having the opportunity in the future to join with you on another tour.
>
> Best wishes to all your members.
> Regards
> Doreen and Gwen
> Sylvania Probus Club

On behalf of Georges Hall Probus Club we would like to say thank you as well. Both groups worked very well together and we all had a wonderful time.

Days one and two – Travelling to Lightning Ridge

Thanks to Norma Jenkins and Di Ham.

As usual, all our travellers were on time and we left even earlier than planned. Our 32 members met the ten ladies from Sylvania and our coach driver, Ray. Our first stop was at Ourimbah for the Heatherbrae Pie shop which we all enjoyed. Then it was on to Muswellbrook to have a lunch break at the Hunter Belle Cheese Café where we had a cheese tasting (their brie was amazing), followed by sandwiches, cakes and drinks.



It was a long day travelling but Ray gave us interesting stops, including at Wallabadah for the First and Second Fleet Memorial Garden where people had a good time looking for their ancestors. From here we travelled to Tamworth, with a quick photo stop at the Golden Guitar and then on to our lovely luxury motel with a lovely meal.



The second day was another long travelling day. From Tamworth, we travelled through the lovely countryside, had morning tea in Gunnedah and landed in Narrabri at a most unusual RSL, a bit of old and a bit of new with a fascinating lunch room. An afternoon tea stop at Walgett, where the locals put on tea, coffee and biscuits for us. We were certainly getting plenty of food on this trip.

We finally arrived in Lightning Ridge late in the afternoon and found that our motel was quite different to the previous night. There is not a lot of accommodation in Lightning Ridge, especially to cater for a coachload. The Wallangulla Motel was quite old and very basic, but it was clean, the staff were friendly and helpful and breakfast was very good. The motel was owned by the Lightning Ridge District Bowling Club (LRDBC) which was across the road. There are not a lot of restaurants in Lightning Ridge either (especially able to cater for large groups) and we had all our meals at the LRDBC and they were varied and very good.

Tuesday – Exploring Lightning Ridge

We started with a visit to Bevan's Cactus Nursery where some of the cacti are over 100 years old. Very interesting, but we did lose some people in the gift shop, where you could buy all sorts of black opal jewellry. We were to learn that everywhere we went sold opal jewellry! And we all bought heaps.







Regan joined us for our tour around the town and it's not very far before you lose the tarred roads. And nothing in Lightning Ridge is ever what you expect it to be. Lots of home made dwellings and mines, and heaps of discarded rock everywhere. Along a dirt road out to an amazing lookout, where we walked around on a very uneven surface. Amazing views and a maze made of shin cracker stone and a house made of beer cans.



And more adventures followed. For those who were interested, we took a trip out to the Artesian Bore Baths, where the temperature of the water was forty two degrees. We all ventured in but didn't last long, it was too hot. But it's another thing we've tried. Some of the others went shopping, but there's not too much shopping in Lightning Ridge unless you're looking for opals!



Wednesday – More Exploring



Today, Regan joined us again, and we drove about 40 Ks south west of the Ridge, to the Grawin Opal Fields. The region is known for its "Wild West" atmosphere, free camping and has a mix of permanent residents and seasonal visitors. We drove out here along mile after mile of dusty dirt roads which gave us a chance to see life in an authentic mining settlement. Past lots of "camps" where people live beside their mines.



This is a real community with a shop and (of course) a number of watering holes, like the Glengarry Hilton, The Sheepyard Inn (the best Baa in town!) and The Club in the Scrub (where we had lunch). This was a real eye opener, to see how these amazing people live.

One of the highlights here was the Sheepyard and Community War Memorial and museum, located at Lake Beard. This was established in 2001 and constructed by local miners. It has become a significant gathering place, especially for ANZAC Day commemorations, attracting hundreds of people each year, and has a particular significance for Vietnam veterans who are part of the local community.





Back into Lightning Ridge and a number of our travellers took the optional tour of the Chambers of the Black Hand. This was an opal mine where the owner didn't find a lot of opals, but found that the sandstone was a great media to carve. So the owner carved over 800 pieces of art, making this a fabulous art museum. This took him many years and he did it all using a bread and butter knife. There were 84 steps down into the mine (40 feet underground) and some of our group managed these. But luckily for us, they had recently installed a lift, meaning that the less mobile of us could visit the mine as well. The sculptures were amazing and ranged from classical pieces to more modern topics (like Elvis and the Beatles).
(Note from Di Ham: Albert and I thought that this was the highlight of the trip.)





Trivia Night

We had our trivia night that night. Thanks to Cathy Dice for organising and running it. We invited the Sylvania people to join in and they did. There was a full house and everybody ended up with chocolates.. Cathy had four categories of questions:



- Australiana. Not too hard? Or were they? Who knew that Cherry Ripe was our first Australian chocolate bar.
- Abbreviations. We all knew OMG, but the rest were more difficult.
- Idioms. Tricky, but are you as happy as Larry?
- Questions based on our tour itinerary. Quite controversial because there was an inaccuracy in the information provided.

Thursday

Day five started off with an underground tour of the Walk-In Mine, where many of our travellers braved the 32 steps into the mine, wearing hard hats, of course. We were also shown a very informative video about Lightning Ridge and opal mining and (surprise, surprise) there was a gift shop with some beautiful opal jewellry for sale.







In the early days, miners would mine in the dark, then light a candle if they thought they may have hit opal. The sound of chipping in the sandstone vs. clay, vs hitting opal makes different sounds. Those who snuck into mines owned by others to take some of the opals are known as Ratters and were dealt with harshly.



Next stop was the Australian Opal Centre and another interesting talk and video. I learned more about mining opals here than I had all week. There is a huge amount of building work going on here, with a much grander centre due to open soon. This building has been described as an extraordinary national monument, a world class, energy-efficient, two-storey underground building that will be the home of the new Australian Opal Centre.



The AOC is located next to a huge open cut mine that has been worked by numerous prospectors over the years. It is known as Lunatics Lookout, as those who climbed and mined the cliffs of this open mine were considered lunatics.

After lunch, we visited the John Murray art gallery. No photos were allowed there, but there was plenty of it about town.





But our day wasn't over yet. Ray had provided us with a sensational way to spend our final time in Lightning Ridge. He drove us out to Nettleton's Lookout to see the spectacular sunset over the escarpment. This is a very popular spot and there were lots of others enjoying the view. Ray organised wine and nibbles which made the time there even more special. Thank you Ray.







And thank you to Cathy Dice for the amazing photographs. She even managed to capture the sunset in the bus windows.





Days six and seven – Travelling Home

Thanks to Norma Jenkins and Di Ham.





Once again, we had a long drive home, this time travelling through Coonamble where we saw the water tower decorated by John Murray. Then onto Gilgandra where we had lunch at the Services Club and learned all about the Coo-ee March. Seeking recruits for WW1, 26 men left Gilgandra, recruiting others along the way. The march continued through the towns and villages of the Central West and gained momentum as it headed over the mountains, arriving in Sydney with 263 recruits.

We arrived in freezing cold Parkes for our overnight stay and a wonderful dinner and beautiful accommodation.

On our last day, we travelled via Orange, Bathurst and Lithgow where we had another good lunch. We certainly had plenty of good food everywhere along our trip. Leaving Lithgow, we travelled down the Bells Line of Road, stopping at Bilpin, where everybody rushed off the coach to stock up on fruit and pies! Then our trip was over, with the Georges Hall people being dropped off , waving goodbye to our new friends from Sylvania. Glad to be home, but with lots of good memories.

The Long Grey Road

Thanks Bill Brown



To the long grey line
I give you thanks
You open my mind
To places I have never been
As your distance I travel
To your white line that changes my scene,
That opens my mind's eye
To brown, darks and greens.
To butterflies and yellow scenes,
To the grey arteries of life.
Take me to places I am yet to see
Through tours of life.
Crossed by life
The other going in a different direction.
Yet we will all join in one place.
Not just any road,
Each
Our road,
Grey line of destiny
Our road to where?



Our Driver



We were very lucky to have Ray as our driver on this tour. He fitted right into our group, but remained professional through and through. He was a superb and very safe driver and his commentary was excellent. We especially want to thank him for our sunset surprise. A beautiful way to end our time in Lightning Ridge.
Thank you, Ray.

And on our last evening, there was another poem (a very good one), that's now our sixth trip where we have been able to continue our tradition of having a poem from our coach captain.





As usual on a trip like this all sorts of interesting things happen and people have little adventures. Here's a few.

- ❖ Guess who got locked in the ladies toilet on day one?
- ❖ Guess who was so involved in chasing her convict ancestors that Ray had to blow the horn to get her back on the bus?
- ❖ Guess who ate the driver's cheese at our first lunch stop?
- ❖ Guess who was mistakenly given a key to the driver's room? And what did she do with it?
- ❖ Guess who had to borrow money so that she could get the cash discount?
- ❖ Guess who got lost in Lightning Ridge (none of us are sure how) and had to flag Ray down to get back to the motel?
- ❖ Guess who set off the fire alarm at 11.30 in the evening?
- ❖ Guess who was seen fanning the smoke detector dressed only in her nightie?
- ❖ Guess who fell asleep on the bus and ended up with the lollies all over the floor?
- ❖ Guess who won the bowls when Bill and Albert had a roll up on the greens?
- ❖ Guess who went swinging in Dubbo?
- ❖ Guess who spent the most money? (This one was hotly contested!)

If you think you can turn to the end of the newsletter and find out the answers, you are sadly mistaken. What happens in Lightning Ridge, stays in Lightning Ridge!

Feedback from our travellers

Hello Probus Members. Just a little note about our lovely trip where we had 32 Georges Hall Members and 10 from Sylvania Probus Club. It was a really lovely trip, all the members got along but there were some times where a few devilish things were going on. (Note from Sue, most of these are covered in the "Guess Who" section). We had a great time and it was a lot of fun which our club is all about. Thank you all for all the work in organising this trip and looking forward to the next one.

Norma and Max Jenkins

Our trip to Lightning Ridge was short and unforgettable, plenty of laughter, landscape and good old Aussie hospitality. Our first stop was Tamworth, a very comfortable motel to enjoy a good rest after a very long day on the road. Day two was another long day on the road and we were very glad to reach our motel at Lightning Ridge. The weather was warm and sunny.

We visited many different places and it was interesting to compare the different housing styles. The sunsets were amazing, especially from the lookout, whilst having a champagne and nibblies.

We had one bit of excitement when, in the dead of night, our smoke alarm went off. No smoke, no fire. Our neighbour, Norma came in, throwing a towel at the culprit to try and stop the noise. It was a real thrill to win the opal pendant, a lovely birthday present.

Due to mobility issues, I didn't get off the coach at every stop, but due to some wonderful, thoughtful fellow travellers, I was well looked after. Many thanks to those who walked back with us to the motel after dinner every night, checked on me regularly and made sure I got my champagne and strawberries at the sunset.

Andrea Best

I would like to second Andrea's thanks for all the support she received. With my balance issues, I found the terrain in Lightning Ridge quite difficult (and I don't think I was alone there). There were times when I panicked, but there was always somebody there to give me support. That's one of the things I love, going away with our Probus club. You are always surrounded by friends. We have lots of fun but we always look after each other. Thank you, everyone.

Sue Brown








Ode To Lightning Ridge

(The Ray version) Thank you Ray for being such a good sport.

Ray set off on a coach one day,
From Sydney Bound, a tour to play.
Seven days to Lightning Ridge
Adventure calls beyond the Bridge

Today he's seen the emu stride,
Kangaroos that bound so wide.
An echidna wandering slow,
And treasures where the opals glow.



They wandered through a cactus farm
Where spines and shapes held desert charm
Two people lost, yet none to fear,
There's only one street guiding here.

Their tour guide, Regan led the way
Though sometimes lost poor Ray each day.
At "Pub in the Scrub" they came to munch
On tasty hamburgers for lunch.

Some toured the Chamber, carved by hand
And marvelled in the underground land.
While others with sweet smiles that day
Bought cake for Andrea's birthday.

They ventured down a mine so deep
Where shadows linger, secrets sleep.
And locals told of opals rare,
With stories woven through the air

A tree branch struck against the coach,
A bang that made the whole crowd broach.
A scream, a laugh, then on they rolled,
With tales more precious far than gold.

At sunset Ray poured champagne bright
With nibbles shaded by fading light.
The western sky, a fiery crest,
They watched the colours sink to rest.

Now homeward bound their journey flies
Through Parkes and Orange, Bathurst skies.
To Sydney's streets, their stories spun.
Ray's grand adventure, finely done.

Ode To Lightning Ridge

(The Sue version)

We left bright and early on Sunday
And did lots of driving that day.
But Lightning Ridge's a long way away
There was even more driving on Monday.

Two Probus Clubs shared the bus
In all there were 42 of us.
From Sylvania and Georges Hall
Looking forward to fun, one and all.

I'd never been to this area before
And was amazed by the wildlife galore.
We saw echidnas, emus and roos,
And two beautiful black cockatoos.

Our wonderful driver was Ray
Who managed a look of dismay.
Ray, no pressure, no fuss
But will you please write a poem for us?

We started Tuesday with cactus
And then it was back on the bus.
Our tour of the area was second to none
Regan's commentary was lots of fun.



Some people then went shopping
But the rest of us were hopping
To the artesian bore baths, if you please
Where the water was 42 bloody degrees!

Regan was back the next day
And this tour blew us all away.
Grawin was a sight to see,
Where people live as rough as can be.

A place where old trucks go to die
And rusty machinery laying nearby.
Where homes are from another world
Where building regs have never been heard.

Dirt roads, mile after mile,
But the war memorial made us smile.
Its out in the middle of nowhere
But looked after with love and care.

Part of our intrepid band
Ventured to Chambers of the Black Hand.
There were 84 steps up and down
Where sandstone sculptures abound.

We finished with our trivia night
Where try as hard as we might
Cathy's answers stumped us all
But there were chocolates for one and all.

Thursday, the sun stayed shining
And we learned all about opal mining.
Went down stairs to a walk in mine
And didn't those hard hats look divine.





That evening in the Ridge was the best yet.
We were presented with a glorious sunset.
Ray plied us all with nibbles and wine
Gave us a spectacular last minute time.

When I think of the places we've been
And all the things that we've seen
I know I'm not alone when I speak
Lightning Ridge is truly unique.

Thanks to my fellow travellers, every one
We all pulled together and had fun
And what can we say to our hero, Ray
Thank you so much. Hip, hip, hooray.

