

The Opalton Field, also called the Fermoy Field was one of the largest and most extensively worked opal deposits in Queensland. It is a good example of typical opal country in western Queensland and offers the visitor the opportunity to experience first hand the remoteness and harsh conditions endured by the opal miners. Mining activity on the field is mostly limited to small-scale hand mining but some larger operations using heavy machinery are present in the surrounding area.

The Opalton Designated Fossicking Land was established in 1995 under the *Fossicking Act 1994* by the then Department of Mines and Energy, with the co-operation of the Winton Shire Council and the landholder to provide for tourist and recreational fossicking.

Access

The Opalton Field is located about 124 km by road south-southwest of Winton. Travelling from Winton take the Jundah Road (mostly unsealed) and travel 15 km, turn left and travel a further 109 km (unsealed road) past Weona Homestead to Opalton. Visitors are requested not to call at 'Weona'.

Queensland's opal fields

The opal fields are within a belt of deeply weathered Cretaceous sedimentary rocks known as the Winton Formation, which extends in a north-westerly direction from the New South Wales border at Hungerford stretching west of Cunnamulla, Quilpie, Longreach and Winton to Kynuna, a distance of about 1000 km.

Fossicking for the opal

The Opalton area attracts large numbers of visitors and is popular with tourists as a place to "speck" or "noodle" fragments of opal or ironstone matrix from the surface or from the spoil dumps of old

workings. However, known areas of shallow ground, such as the old Brilliant Claim area, may offer the more serious fossicker a chance to dig and find that outstanding gem.

Requirements

A person fossicking for opal is required to be the holder of a Fossickers Licence issued under the *Fossicking Act 1994*. Licences are available for individuals, families, clubs, educational organisations and commercial tourist operators for terms varying from 1 month to 12 months. Fees vary accordingly. Licences are normally valid for the whole of the State, although they may be issued for local areas if desired.

Fossickers Licences can be obtained locally from the Mining Registrar, Winton and the Opalton Outpost store at Opalton.

Hand tools only are permitted (no machine mining). Commercial mining activities still occur in the Designated Fossicking Land and numerous mining claims and a mining lease (ML6032) are current (see map); **these mining tenures must not be entered without the written permission of the holders.** Pegs mark the corners of each tenure.

Camping

The Opalton community has established a bush camping park with shade shelters, water, toilets and showers adjacent to the area. A small fee applies. Limited supplies are available at the Opalton Outpost store. Camping is also allowed in the Opalton Designated Fossicking Land for a maximum period of 3 months. A Fossickers Camping Permit is required, which can be obtained for the payment of a small fee from the same outlets as for licences.

Precautions

The best time to visit the opal fields is April - September. Summer should be avoided due to the high temperatures and possible heavy rains making road access impossible in some areas.

Road conditions should be checked with the RACQ or local police. Emergency supplies including food, water, first aid kit and vehicle spares should be carried when travelling in remote areas.

Fossicking around old shafts requires care and attention to safety at all times. In particular, avoid the loose edges to open shafts and always keep children under supervision. Do not enter shafts; unstable ground, bad air, and snakes or spiders are some of the hazards that may be present.

For information on fossicking safety refer to the Department's web site www.nrm.qld.gov.au and go to (Do's and don'ts of tourist and recreational fossicking in Qld) at <http://nrm.dnr.qld.gov.au/mines/fossicking/fossicking.html>

Code of conduct

To protect the area for the future and to minimise conflict with other visitors, please:

- Make safe any excavation on leaving.
- Remove all rubbish and dispose of properly.
- To avoid erosion, keep vehicles to established tracks.
- Do not interfere with the vegetation, stock or wildlife.
- Control pets so they do not annoy others, stock or wildlife.
- Minimise noise from radios, vehicles etc.
- Avoid lighting fires in dry conditions and keep a 2m diameter cleared space around fireplaces.

History of the Opalton Field

The Opalton deposit was discovered in 1888, but an earlier discovery at Horse Creek some 45km to the southwest was being worked at that time. Only minor opal mining occurred on the field until 1893 when specimens were taken to Fermoy Station, and a man named McLenan went out and began working the "Brilliant Claim".

Other finds followed. The very rich, "Conway's Claim" was discovered in 1895. A small rush took place, and some 500 to 600 men were on the field in 1896. The good seasons and the availability of horse feed and water as well as the then flourishing township attracted miners. By the early 1900s the field was almost abandoned, and apart from a few old residents, the township was deserted.

For further information:

*The Mining Registrar
Winton District Office
PO Box 230
Winton Qld 4735
Telephone (07) 4657 1727
Facsimile (07) 4657 1760*

*The Chief Executive Officer
Winton Shire Council
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OPALTON DESIGNATED FOSSICKING LAND

