

# Ace of diamond finds

## WARREN ATKINSON

Geologist

**Born:** Launceston, 1935

**Died:** Perth, aged 82

Warren Atkinson had an experience that falls to few men — to walk over the world's richest diamond deposit and play a key role in sending these small symbols of affluence to the women of the world.

Experienced geologists say that diamonds are harder to find than gold — but higher rewards are commensurate with that effort.

Argyle was a monster among diamond finds. Not all the small bits of crystallised carbon were immensely valuable but the flood of stones astonished the hardened diamond traders of Antwerp, a marketing centre for the trade.

They gasped as the first shipments were casually trundled through the streets of the city's diamond quarter in tea boxes. The flood of stones in the early shipments from a lonely mine in Australia's Kimberley region had begun to overflow the local customs house and the small Argyle staff had been told to take them away.

Warren, the typically nonchalant geologist, had been in charge of the painstaking exploration that found the Argyle deposit and remained with the consortium that mined it for the rest of his working life.

At its peak, Argyle produced 40 per cent of the world's diamonds (but much less when compared in dollars).

The consortium, led by what is now Rio Tinto, performed logistic miracles to establish a vast open-cut mine and build the sophisticated system needed to extract the little bits of carbon, grade them and send them on to the cutters and polishers.

The open-cut is now closed but diamonds still come, in a more limited flow, from an underground mine.

Warren Atkinson worked with Rio Tinto from the time he graduated in geology until his retirement, over an almost bewildering array of mining ventures.

His most precious discovery was his wife Midge, who he met in London. They were married in 1966 and returned to Australia after he had completed his PhD.

He worked on several projects throughout Australia and the Pacific.

Then he was transferred to an industry that was enjoying a boom similar to that which encompassed diamonds a few years later — nickel.

The Poseidon boom had begun one of Australia's biggest speculative outbreaks, with fortunes won and lost within a year or two.

He took control of the Rio Tinto team at Menzies, north of Kalgoorlie, at a time when the company's exploration program was performing poorly.

He quickly introduced



Warren Atkinson introduced helicopters to exploration with Rio Tinto.

solutions. One was to introduce helicopters into the exploration program. They were even more important when Warren later moved on the Kimberley in the search for diamonds.

The innovative use of helicopters (their cost would have excluded their use by some of the explorers in the region) transformed Rio Tinto's program.

One of Warren's geologists, Michael Tuite, recalls a chopper breaking down, leaving him stranded in the bush overnight, with a small bottle of water.

He was found the next morning at first light. The first man to leap out of the rescue machine was the boss, Warren Atkinson, carrying a bottle of cold water.

A major nickel deposit was found by the team but has not been in Rio Tinto's ownership for many years.

Warren worked on a number of projects in the following years before being sent to the Kimberley for the great diamond hunt.

The group of companies funding the search (with Rio Tinto the dominant force) spent millions on searching the vast area that they regarded as prospective.

The discovery of promising indications at Ellendale created great excitement in the stockmarket. But the consortium decided this was not the main prize and sent their impressive exploration teams to other sites.

Meanwhile, explorers swarmed into a region hardly known to most Australians but, as with nickel a few years

earlier, the excitement quickly subsided.

This was not the case in Warren's team. He organised his resources like a general conducting a campaign. His love of aircraft made the planning of his sampling program, deploying helicopters and fixed wing aircraft, a stimulating challenge.

Because other companies were in the field, and the consortium did not yet have tenure over the promising country, decoys were used — trucks were sent in directions not close to the promising sites to deceive other explorers.

Warren was closely associated with the discovery of deposits of diamonds in a creek, and following it back revealed the rich source.

The discovery was extraordinary. In an industry where one rarely sees a diamond in a mine (their production is measured in carats per hundred tonnes) small clusters of them were found in depressions in the creek bed. At the deposit itself, they were embedded in ant hills.

Warren managed the project, commissioning it in 1983. By then he was a world authority on diamondiferous kimberlites (the technical description of the ore body). He left the project soon after and retired in 1997, after spells in Brisbane and London.

Warren relished discussions about mining matters in retirement and recalling his years of discovery.

He is survived by his wife Midge and three children John, James and Kate.

**John McIlwraith**

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