

Time to SPARKLE at

Creating bespoke pieces of beautiful jewellery is all in a day's work for local silversmith Aimi McKeown - and now the opportunity is available for members of the public to try their hand at making their own rings and bangles at one of her workshops. News Editor **HELEN MACHIN** went along to her Sheepy Magna premises to find out more.

I WAS just 11 when I decided I wanted to be a journalist - never wavered in my choice - and never regretted it; I've always loved words. But I must also confess to a secret love of jewellery - a magpie delight in shiny, shiny things.

Thus I have, over the years, often wondered what it would be like to be a silversmith - to be able to magically transform a dull bit of metal to 'a thing of beauty'.

So when I stumbled across a Facebook post showing handmade silver earrings, I was naturally drawn to it - and was surprised to find a silversmithing workshop just a few miles from Tamworth. A phonecall or two later, I arrived at Insilver, in the pretty village of Sheepy Magna.

Like me, Aimi McKeown admitted a love of shiny and sparkly stuff since early childhood - and also like

me, she dabbled with bead jewellery kits in her youth. And now aged 43 she is living her dream - creating her own pieces of jewellery.

When we meet, I am slightly jealous of her armful of bracelets, and impressive assortment of rings (all her own creations) - and a little uncertain of my ability to make anything that I would actually wear. But chatting to Aimi soon puts me at my ease "no-one leaves here without having a piece of jewellery they are proud to wear."

And so we begin. After a brief demonstration, I choose to make a 'd' shaped traditional ring.

Firstly I use a jeweller's saw to cut off a piece of silver, then anneal it - heating it with a blowtorch (carefully supervised!), to make it more malleable.

Then I dip it into the 'pickle,' a solution to remove marks, and then

Insilver's Aimi McKeown; inset, a ring made by Herald News Editor Helen Machin; below, some of Aimi's rings and, far right, at work in her workshop in Sheepy Magna



into a bowl of cold water before drying it and taking it back to the workbench, where Aimi shows me how to shape it on the mandrel, using an

animal hide hammer which will not dent the metal.

Once I have it in a reasonable shape, overlapping at each end, it's time to saw off the excess, push the ends of the ring together and take it back to the heat.

Aimi tells me how to add the flux and a couple of specks of silver to solder the join - and then fires up the blowtorch again.

This is the tricky part, it seems to take a while and my arm aches with the effort as I wait for the solder to melt. Then it's back into the pickle and the water. I am left with a ring shape of dull, grey metal.

Then I return to the workbench, where I file away the excess solder, then use various emery papers to ensure the entire ring is smooth and free of any rough edges.

It still looks a bit GREY to me - and Aimi's constant reassurances that the polishing will make all the difference are starting to sound unlikely.

The polisher is rather noisy, using a foot pedal like that on a sewing machine to determine its speed. I didn't quite get the hang of it and definitely exceeded the speed limit several times whilst des-

perately trying to keep a grip on the ring. But - after a few minutes, wow! What a difference! That dull grey circle is a gleaming piece of jewellery which any magpie would covet. And I love it.

Aimi learnt her craft on a two year silversmithing course at Nuneaton College when she was 18 and was awarded a grant from The Prince's Trust to buy the equipment she needed to set up a small business. But when she had her two daughters, she set aside the jewellery making for a while and became a classroom assistant, seeking a job which would allow her time off during the school holidays.

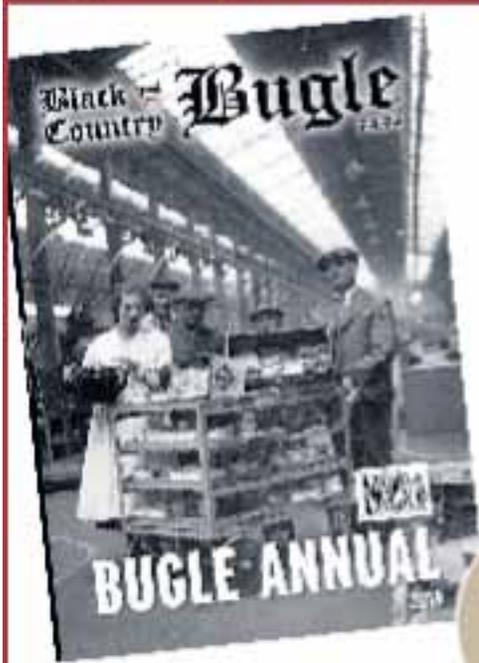
Five years ago she took the plunge and decided to go back to silversmithing, working from her parents' home in Sheepy.

"Mum was a florist and had a workshop at home, and I had some of my jewellery displayed in the shop. Then when mum decided to retire, I took on the shop. I come from an arty engineering sort of background - dad is an engineer and mum's always been artistic."

Her pendants, rings and bangles are displayed for sale in glass cases in the shop and just a year ago, she decided to

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