

ABOUT WISEMANS FERRY, ST ALBANS AND THE FORGOTTEN VALLEY

You may find it interesting to learn more about the area and its history. Wisemans Ferry is dominated by the mighty Hawkesbury River, the longest navigable river in Australia. The journey through the "Forgotten Valley" from Wisemans to St Albans and beyond provides a unique insight into the lives of pioneer settlers in a setting of undisturbed picturesque landscapes. No other place so close to Sydney offers the visitor such a memorable experience of journeying back in time, yet for most of the year the traveller will move along roads and tracks as uncrowded as they were 150 years ago.



SOME HISTORY OF THE AREA

The land around Wisemans Ferry and the Macdonald Valley was settled mainly by emancipated convicts well before the first land grants in 1810. The colony flourished and by the 1840's the population peaked at approximately 1,200. Wisemans Ferry was on the original route linking Sydney with the Hunter region. Part of the Old Great North Road, built by convict labour in the early 1800's, still exists today and is a wonderful example of Australia's early heritage. As you descend into Wisemans Ferry from the south, the convict-built stone walls and culverts can be seen supporting the road. On the northern side of the Hawkesbury across from Wisemans Ferry one of the most remarkable and important engineering feats is preserved in the Dharug National Park. This section of the Great North Road is known as Devines Hill and the massive stone walls and ramparts are a must for all visitors to the area. Much work has been done in recent years to protect the Great North Road. In 2010 the Great North Road was world heritage listed as one of the best surviving examples of large-scale convict transportation and the colonial expansion of European powers through the presence and labour of convicts.

Solomon Wiseman, charged in London for theft, was sentenced to death but his sentence was commuted to transportation and he duly arrived in Sydney on 20 August 1806. An astute businessman, Wiseman obtained 80 hectares of land in the Hawkesbury in 1817 and by 1819 had established an inn at Wisemans Ferry called The Sign of the Packet. This was destroyed by floods and he built another on higher ground called Cobham Hall. It survives to this day and is now part of the Wisemans Ferry Inn. Wiseman continued to acquire land along the Hawkesbury where a river crossing was feasible on the basis that a road would be built to link to the Hunter Valley.

In 1827 Wiseman was granted the right to operate a ferry to carry passengers and livestock across the river. When work on the Great North road started, he obtained the contract, worth \$6,000 a year, to feed the convict labour. In 1832 the government acquired the ferry lease by claiming the crossing was essentially part of the main road. The ferry is now run by the RMS and operates free of charge, 365 days a year.

TOUR THE AREA

Our tour will take you across the Hawkesbury on the main ferry, up the Macdonald Valley (or the Forgotten Valley as it is known to the locals) to St Albans. Here you will cross the bridge over the Macdonald River and return to Wisemans Ferry at Webbs Creek. The journey of some 30kms will take you back in time seeing some classic examples of early settlement and visiting other places of interest. You will find a map of the Forgotten Valley in Reception.

EXPLORING WISEMANS FERRY

Before starting your tour of the valley we suggest you might like to visit the following:

❖ **Wisemans Ferry Cemetery**

From the Retreat turn back up the hill from Wisemans Ferry township about 50 metres and turn east on Singleton Road which leads to the Wisemans Ferry Cemetery. Here you will find the graves of many of the pioneers of the district including Solomon Wiseman and a first fleeter. Note the part played by the river in many of the settler's lives. There are inscriptions recording drownings, horse accidents and one particularly poignant one of a woman and her three young children dying, only to be followed a year later by the husband and father. One can only speculate on what happened to this family.

❖ **Ferry Artists Gallery**

Run by a group of local artists, the gallery is just across the road from the Retreat in the shopping arcade and is well worth a visit.

❖ **Statue of Solomon Wiseman**

You will find this in the main street near the shopping arcade. Sculptured in bronze by Guy Evans, the statue was commissioned as a Bicentennial project in 1988. Old ferry timbers, wheel and a winch drum from the ferry DMR 8 form the surrounds to the statue.



THE TOUR

Turn left out of the Retreat and follow the road to the Ferry. The oldest ferry in Australia, it is operated by the RMS and is, in effect, part of the Great North Road. It runs 24/7, 365 days a year and is FREE!

Start your trip up the Forgotten Valley by turning left off the Ferry on to Settlers Road.

THE CONVICT TRAIL

About 500m up Settlers Road you will see a gate on the right hand side (park on the left - hand side of Settlers Road). This is the World Heritage listed Convict Trail or The Great North Road. The Great North Road, carved out of Hawkesbury sandstone by chain gang convicts, is a magnificent achievement. Each piece of sandstone was precision-shaped and placed perfectly to create walls of enduring strength. In fact, the massive buttressed walls, with the exception a few washaways, still stand in perfect alignment, nearly two centuries after construction. The National Parks and Wildlife Service have provided informative signs explaining the road's unique features.



On the summit of Devines Hill (a walk of about 1km) you can see the remains of a stone quarry as well as Hangmans Cave. This cave, complete with a carved bench and steps, has a natural hole in its roof. Folklore in the region asserts that this hole made the cave a suitable place for hanging errant convicts. More likely, the cave provided storage for gunpowder or a resting place for guards. On the lower sections of Devines Hill there are two examples of convict graffiti, which consist of initials carved high on the wall.

More details are available at Reception.

FINCH'S LINE

Finch's Line, the first attempt to build a road to the Hunter Valley, was convict-built in 1828 but later abandoned because it had too many sharp turns for coaches to manage. Now a good road for walkers or cyclists who are reasonably fit, this road starts at the top of Devine's Hill.

Return to your car and continue along Settlers Road to St Albans a journey of about 20km mostly on sealed road. Note the many stands of poplar trees - originally planted for the match industry - fortunately now preserved since the industry moved overseas and the invention of disposable lighters!

ST ALBANS OLD GENERAL CEMETERY

Before you reach St Albans you will find this old cemetery on the left of Settlers Road approximately 3.3km south of St Albans (17km north of the Wisemans Ferry crossing). The cemetery was established during the 1820s although several sections (General and Roman Catholic) were washed away by successive severe floods. Monuments are predominantly 19th century sandstone headstones commonly semicircular topped and of simple Georgian style. These monuments feature elegant Roman, Italic and Copperplate scripts. The cemetery records the principal pioneers and pioneering families of the Valley including Sternbeck, Thompson and Bailey. The cemetery documents the initial close knit pioneer community, its descendents and their relationships during the 19th and 20th centuries.

ST ALBANS

St Albans is a step (or two) back in time and there you find the Settlers Arms, built as an Inn in 1836 and still operating as such today. A great place to stop for lunch on your tour.

Cross the bridge at St Albans and return to Wisemans Ferry via St Albans Road.

WEBBS CREEK FERRY

This is the other ferry that crosses the Hawkesbury at Wisemans Ferry - also operating 24/7/365 and FREE. Turn left off the ferry, and make your way back to the Retreat.