

By Steph Gardiner

SYDNEY, AAP

To me, Windsor, west of Sydney, has always been a great place to stop, revive, relieve. Making regular trips from central western NSW to the central coast as a kid, it was the best place to stop for a break. But, of course, there is a lot more to Windsor than its fast food joints with their reliably clean toilets.

About 15 minutes' drive from Windsor's town centre lie several historic villages, including Wilberforce and Ebenezer. Although I packed several maps to help me find interesting spots in the area, plenty of signs led me to historic sites I hadn't planned to see.

As I pulled up outside Ebenezer Church, with its sign proclaiming it as Australia's oldest, I was glad I took the unplanned right turn. With the Hawkesbury River quietly flowing just metres away, the atmosphere was incredibly tranquil. About 100 graves lie around the church, mostly those of the European settlers who established it in 1809.

Ted Brill, a local who became involved with the church because of his love of history, said 15 families came from London to settle in the area in 1802.

Eight of the families all went to church together in London's Covent Garden and decided to come to Australia as free settlers.

In 1808, they formalised their community and each family put 10 pounds towards the building of the church and school.

The church will celebrate its bicentenary in June next year.

Brill said the committee is trying to get in contact with all descendants of the settlers who built the church.

They stretch from Perth in the west to North Island in New Zealand and they're all keen to have this as part of their family story," he said.

Stirred by the history of the area, I went in search of more. Each time I saw a brown street sign indicating a historical site, I took the turnoff. Driving back towards Wilberforce, I stopped at St John's Anglican Church, built in 1859. Nobody was around, but I briefly explored the church grounds and came across a sun dial on the side of the church wall with the initials JW underneath.

The dial commemorates John Wenban, the parish clerk and schoolmaster who died seven months before the building was finished. There is also plenty of history for sale in the Hawkesbury Valley. I pulled over to explore Kent pre-loved furniture in Wilberforce, which had interesting antique pieces spilling out the door.

Dainty tea sets, kitsch statues, printed tiles, ornate mirrors and furniture were packed into each room.

I bought a delicate English red painted tea cup and saucer for \$15.

For those less interested in history, wineries and vineyards line the narrow, winding roads of the villages outside Windsor.

I stopped in at Jubilee Vineyard Estate in Ebenezer for some impromptu winetasting with owner Alison Hayek. Hayek eagerly let me taste five of the estate's wines. She even taught me a trick of sucking air through your teeth into the wine, which she said "opens up the flavours". It's true, the underlying tastes in the wine came alive in one breath. Jubilee's 2008 White Chambourcin was the best of a very good bunch. Hayek moved to Ebenezer from Sydney with her husband Ray because she wanted somewhere

for their four sons to run around. She said it is a close, easy-going community. "What I love is your neighbours will pop in with a head of cabbage," she laughed.

The next day, I took a professional tour of more of the area with Ryan Thompson of Good Az Gold Tours.

Thompson's tour company conducts a variety of relaxed tours of the Hawkesbury, as well as bus and coach hire.

Some of the tours take visitors along the Hawkesbury Harvest Farm Gate Trail - a community-run project which encourages people to buy local produce straight from the farm gate.

Thompson enthusiastically drove me around - from Sackville Ferry to Kurrajong Village - pulling over at some of his favourite places. We stopped at Tebbutt's Observatory, historic Macquarie Arms pub and St Matthew's Anglican church.

Thompson said producers came up with the Farm Gate trail as a way to overcome development in the area. "They said, 'What are we going to do about the urban sprawl, how do we stop houses overtaking this harvest land?'

"Because the Hawkesbury is known as the food bowl of Sydney."

He said consumers and producers both benefit from buying and selling locally rather than relying on large supermarkets.

Our first stop was Talai Estate Winery, where we were warmly welcomed by its owner David Moss.

Moss, a retired salesman, said his winery and vineyard is an "out-of-control hobby".

"It started off as a bit of a challenge because a mate of mine planted 100 vines and he was bragging," Moss said. "It was something I'd always wanted to do anyway, so I planted 3,000."

On the door of his house, a sign read: "On this site in 1897 nothing happened". But it's hard to believe nothing was happening on this site at any point in history. While building his winery, Moss discovered fossilised footprints of a *Paracyclotaurus davidi* - an animal which looks like a frog with a fish tail.

The footprints were found under three metres of solid rock in an area that used to be a swamp and are now displayed in his cellar.

"They're 220 million years old, these are older than dinosaurs," Moss said.

Next, Thompson took me to Enniskillen Orchard in Grose Vale, where I met owner John Maguire, one of the founders of the Hawkesbury Harvest. Maguire is passionate about encouraging people to try local, fresh produce. People come in here and they don't know what figs are or they have never tasted a raspberry," he said.

He said there was a constant battle in the area to keep developers away from prime land.

"If politicians only realised what value you they had so close to the city - most people would give their right arm for areas like this.

"It's not just about making money, it's a way of life."