

Information sheet no. 5:

Our Rich Heritage

The majority of the Cessnock Local Government Area (LGA) lies upon the Traditional Custodian country of the Wonnarua Nation and also includes Darkinjung and Awabakal lands.

Within the lands of the Wonnarua Nation are many significant Aboriginal sites. Our LGA is home to many localities and places with Aboriginal names and histories. Mount Yengo, located in Yengo National Park, is of particular significance. This is the place where Baiame jumped to return to the spirit world after he had created lakes, rivers, mountains and caves. When Baiame jumped towards the sky, the force flattened the top of Mount Yengo, and that flat top can still be seen today.

Towns, villages and localities in the local government area bearing Aboriginal names include Kurri Kurri, Wollombi, Congewai, Nulkaba, Laguna and Kalingo.

The significance of the Great North Road

The Great North Road was built to link Sydney with the Hunter Valley to the city's north. After ten years of construction in 1836 the convict-built road reached Wollombi and in doing so connected the Hunter Valley to the Hawksbury district and the city of Sydney. New settlers moved north and settlements grew. It also allowed new transport routes going south, allowing easier movement of goods from Maitland, to Wollombi and then on to the Central Coast and eventually Sydney.

From Wollombi the Great North Road continued on to Singleton, creating a transport corridor which also connected Singleton to Wollombi to Sydney. It also branched off at a T-junction at Wollombi, creating a transport going east, to Cessnock, Maitland and the river port of Morpeth. The road is so significant it is listed on the Australian National Heritage List and the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Wollombi's central position on the Great North Road saw it become a prosperous commercial and administrative centre boasting its own court house, bank, three hotels, a post office and a resident Police Magistrate.

In Wollombi convicts were used to clear the native forests and newly arrived farmer-settlers grew maize, barley, oats, wheat, tobacco and potatoes. There was also a significant timber industry which harvested the beautiful cedar and rosewood trees which grew plentifully in the local area and gave nearby Cedar Creek its name.

By 1858 the population of the Wollombi Valley was 1,519. By comparison, in the same year the sleepy hamlet of Cessnock had between seven and eleven adult residents. For most of the 19th century Wollombi remained the largest settlement in what is now the Cessnock LGA.

Today Wollombi is a significant tourist destination with a strong heritage economy. Visitors come to the town to admire the beautifully preserved heritage buildings, visit the old court house (now a museum) and take a hiking, cycling or driving trip along the historic Great North Road.

The rise and fall of ‘the coalfields’

When significant coal deposits were discovered in the Hunter Valley in the late 19th century it generated rapid and extensive land settlement across the Cessnock LGA. The current pattern of townships, road and rail transport, the location of hotels and residential streets still reflect this earlier industrial landscape, one which soon dominated the area. Colliery companies built towns adjacent to their mines and rail lines to and from pit tops.

Men poured into these newly formed towns, or swelled existing small townships, to work in the local coal mines. The local population grew rapidly. It is estimated tens of thousands of men worked in over 30 collieries at the height of the mining boom. Coal mines were established at: Abermain, Aberdare, Abernethy, Bellbird, Branxton, Cessnock, Greta, Heddon Greta, Kearsley, Kitchener, Kurri Kurri, Millfield, Neath, North Rothbury, Pelaw Main, Pelton, Stanford Merthyr and Weston.

The collieries dominated the social, cultural and working lives of the residents. So much so that large swathes of the Cessnock LGA were known as the South Maitland Coalfields, the Northern Coalfields, or simply ‘the coalfields. Coal mining was dirty and hazardous, with the industry responsible for a significant number of work-place deaths and injuries. An undocumented number of miners, possibly the largest group affected by the occupational hazards of coal mining, suffered long-term health effects created by working underground.

Despite coal mining being a tough life for the miners, the industry brought local prosperity to the Cessnock LGA as service industries sprang up to support the newly created ‘coal towns’. Cessnock became an important retail, commercial and administrative centre with a vibrant social and cultural life.

This ‘coal-rush’ became the impetus for considerable and far-reaching social and economic change which continued for decades, well into the mid-20th century. The coalfields in the Cessnock LGA were the most extensive in NSW until the collapse of the underground coal mining industry in the 1960s.

The Hunter Valley: Australia’s oldest vineyards

Grapevines were planted in Sydney soon after European arrival in 1788 and as settlers moved north and west up towards the Hunter Valley and the Hunter River the colonial government authorities actively encouraged the planting of vineyards. The first major planting in the Hunter Valley was in 1825 on land between the rural settlements of Branxton and Singleton.

These early vigneronns were passionate about their craft, with vineyard owners travelling to Europe and South Africa to gather cuttings from overseas vineyards in order to expand the varieties of grapes they grew. In 1847 the Hunter Valley Viticulture Society was founded. Its aim was to expand the knowledge of viticulture,

improve planting and harvesting techniques, improve the quality of the grapes grown and expand the variety under cultivation.

Most of the early vineyards of the Hunter were located in the northeast section of the valley in the fertile alluvial plains along the Hunter River. The river functioned as a road, providing an easy transport route for the wine down to the port of Newcastle and on to Sydney. Part of the success of the early Hunter Valley wine industry was due to this proximity to Sydney, which linked the Valley to the city and allowed the development of trade networks.

By the mid-19th century wines from the Hunter Valley began to attract international attention and acclaim. At the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1855 Hunter Valley wines won many awards and in the official report for the exhibition, the tasting panel judges wrote:

‘The [Hunter Valley’s] wines included white wine akin to those of the Rhone; red light wines like those of Burgundy; Mousseux varieties with a bouquet, body and flavor equal to the first Champagnes; Muscat and other sweet wines, rivaling the Montignac of the Cape.’

But there was even a more prestigious recognition. A sparkling wine from the Hunter Valley beat the French champagnes for the honour of being the champagne of choice to be served at the table of Emperor Napoleon III during the closing ceremonies of the Paris Exhibition.

By the 1860s, vineyards began to move further south and west towards the foothills of the Brokenback range near Pokolbin and Rothbury, today a centre of production for world-renowned wines of every kind.

The heritage of this area is a source of pride for local residents and vignerons. Our local iconic wine is widely considered to be Semillon, but the wide variety of wines sets the region apart, including Shiraz, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Verdelho.

Today this part of the Hunter Valley is known as ‘wine country’, home to award-winning cellar doors and restaurants, fine food production and dining and is also a major entertainment centre hosting major international acts in our vineyards. It is a major NSW tourist region, with a long and venerable history.