Gold pioneer William Tipple Smith finally gets a headstone at heritage-listed Rookwood Cemetery

Posted Yesterday at 1:06pm, updated Yesterday at 2:42pm

Lynette Silver, a historian and relative of William Tipple Smith, wrote a book about Tipple Smith's claim to being the first man to find gold in NSW. *(ABC Illawarra: Justin Huntsdale)*

Until recently, the first man to discover gold in New South Wales was buried in an unmarked grave in Sydney's Rookwood General Cemetery.

Father-of-six William Tipple Smith died a poor man in 1852, and it has taken almost 170 years to recognise that he was the first man to strike gold in New South Wales.

Now, thanks to a campaign by his descendants and financial contributions from the NSW Government, Rookwood Cemetery, BHP and the public, his grave site is no longer unmarked.

"This is a man who didn't ask for much, just 500 pounds from the government to cover his expenses of finding his goldfield," historian and descendant Lynette Silver said.

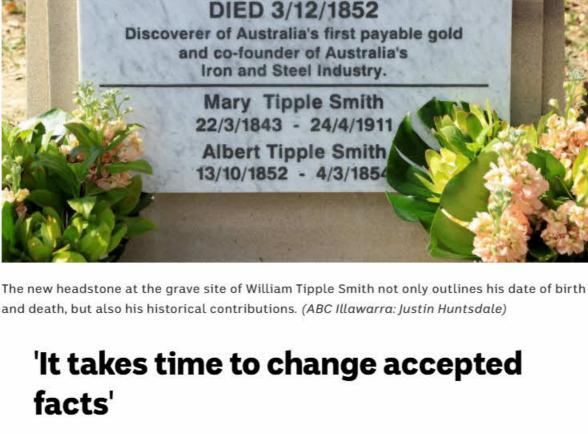"Because of political expediency, he was vilified, his reputation was trashed, deliberate lies were told about him saying he brought the gold from California and he died a broken man.

Key points:

- A headstone has been unveiled to mark the grave of gold, iron and steel pioneer William Tipple Smith
- Tipple Smith was the first man to find gold in NSW, but his achievement has only just been recognised
- His great-great-grandson Bill Hamburger Snr says seeing the headstone at Rookwood Cemetery is a lifelong ambition fulfilled

"He died a pauper with six children, so it's nice to see he's got his just desserts after all this time."

The new headstone at the grave site of William Tipple Smith not only outlines his date of birth and death, but also his historical contributions. *(ABC Illawarra: Justin Huntsdale)*
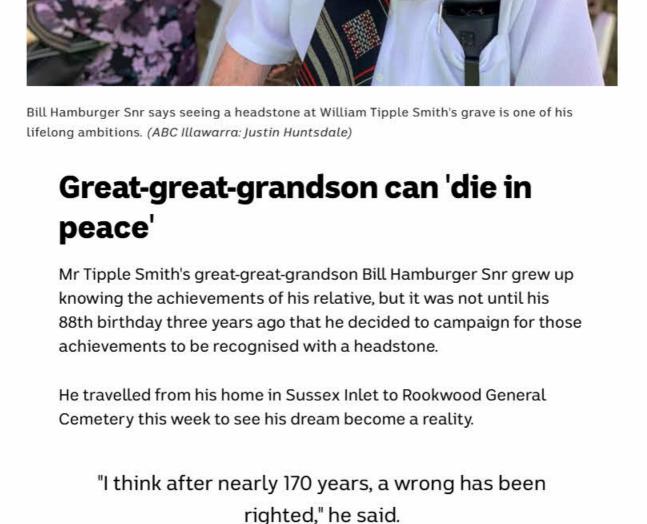
'It takes time to change accepted facts'

Ms Silver is the author of A Fool's Gold, the story of how she proved Mr Tipple Smith's claim to first discovering gold near Bathurst in NSW.

She said the headstone paid tribute not only to Mr Tipple Smith's work as a gold prospector, but his contribution to manufacturing in Australia.

"History moves slowly and it takes a long time to change the accepted facts," she said.

"To have the NSW Government backing this and partially paying for the headstone that says William Tipple Smith was the first man to find gold in NSW and was the co-founder of Australia's iron and steel industry is a double whammy.

"It acknowledges his two great contributions to Australian history."

Bill Hamburger Snr says seeing a headstone at William Tipple Smith's grave is one of his lifelong ambitions. *(ABC Illawarra: Justin Huntsdale)*

Great-great-grandson can 'die in peace'

Mr Tipple Smith's great-great-grandson Bill Hamburger Snr grew up knowing the achievements of his relative, but it was not until his 88th birthday three years ago that he decided to campaign for those achievements to be recognised with a headstone.

He travelled from his home in Sussex Inlet to Rookwood General Cemetery this week to see his dream become a reality.

"I think after nearly 170 years, a wrong has been righted," he said.

"It will be one of my life's ambitions for my family come to fruition.

"I hope now that I can die in peace because all my brothers and sisters have gone and I'm the last remaining member of my family [of 12 children]."

William Tipple Smith's burial site used to be an unmarked grave between two headstones at Rookwood Cemetery. *(Supplied: Lynette Silver)*

Another significant story for heritage-listed cemetery

The 290-hectare Rookwood Cemetery in Lidcombe lays claim to being the oldest, largest and most multicultural working cemetery in the southern hemisphere.

Alongside the new headstone for Mr Tipple Smith is a small informational plaque outlining his contribution to the gold, iron and steel industries.

"When we heard about this story, we realised how important it was for such a significant person to have a headstone and have their story told to the community," Rookwood General Cemetery spokesperson Crystal Lindsay said.

"Our stonemasons are here and able to do this kind of work and the family have worked very hard over a long period of time to have this event come together.

"For Bill Hamburger Snr it's certainly a very joyous moment."