Recognition at last for gold discoverer

By Elisabeth Edwards

A ceremony at Sydney's Rookwood cemetery in early September has corrected the history books about who made the first discovery of payable gold in NSW.

The face of Australia changed forever when gold was discovered in significant amounts at Ophir, north of Orange, in 1851.

Diggers flocked to the area and soon gold was discovered elsewhere – at what became Lucknow, just east of Orange, and numerous other places around NSW and Victoria.

It had been known for some time that gold could be found west of the Blue Mountains and discoveries of small amounts had already been made near Wellington, at the Fish River between Rydal and Bathurst, and in the Vale of Clwyd near Hartley.

When the Reverend William Branwhite Clarke found gold at the Cox's River near Hartley in 1844 while searching for fossils, he took a sample to NSW Governor Gipps. "Put it away, Mr Clarke, or we shall all have our throats cut," the Governor is alleged to have said.

While the Colonial Government was fearful of the mayhem that would be caused if significant amounts of gold were found, it did offer a reward of £12,000 to the person who discovered the first payable gold in NSW.

William Hargraves stepped up to claim the reward and was also made commissioner of Crown Lands in the gold district.

Hargraves neglected to mention that while he taught local men John Lister and brothers William and James Tom how to make and use a wooden gold washing cradle as well as gold panning methods, it was Lister and William Tom who actually found the first significant gold.

Lister and Tom pursued their case for many years and it was not until December 1890 that they were recognised as the discoverers of payable gold. Sadly, Lister died before hearing the outcome.

Earlier this month the story took an interesting turn when another man, William Tipple-Smith, was recognised as the true discoverer of payable gold in 1848.

Tipple-Smith found gold on the western slopes of the Blue Mountains in 1847 and sent samples to geologist Roderick Murchison in London but nothing came of it. Then in 1848 he found 3.5 ounces at Yorkey's Corner near Ophir and took the sample to the Colonial Secretary in Sydney, offering to reveal the location for £500, but he heard nothing.

Later, the Colonial Secretary claimed that Tipple-Smith's gold actually came from California, but this was untrue. Tipple-Smith suffered a stroke in May 1851 which affected his speech and left him partially paralysed.

Bill Hamburger, left, stands at the grave of his great-great-grandfather, William Tipple-Smith, now recognised as the discoverer of the first payable gold in Australia.

He was incensed when he heard that Hargraves had been given the award and appealed to the Crown.

Nothing eventuated and Tipple-Smith died in December 1852, leaving a widow and seven children and a tarnished reputation for allegedly trying to defraud the government.

His story was forgotten until 1985 when a relation, historian Lynette Silver, found correspondence proving his innocence. She wrote a book, 'A Fool's Gold: William Tipple-Smith's Challenge to the Hargraves myth'.

The final act in this colonial saga was the dedication of a headstone over Tipple-Smith's previously unmarked grave acknowledging his discovery. Present at the ceremony was his great-great-grandson, 91-year-old Bill Hamburger, whose lifelong ambition was to see public recognition of his ancestor's contribution to the colony.

Besides discovering the first payable gold in Australia, Tipple-Smith is also remembered as the co-founder of Australia's iron and steel industry at the Fitzroy Iron Works at Mittagong.