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La Bella crew member Jack Denham, who died in 1905, finally gets headstone in Warrnambool Cemetery

- Gus McCubbing

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Harry Ferrier, Warrnambool Mayor Tony Herbert, and Grave Tales co-authors Helen Goltz and Chris Adams next to Jack Denham's new headstone. Picture: Morgan Hancock

For over a century a young sailor whose life was cut short after his ship ran aground had been laid to rest in Warrnambool Cemetery without a headstone – until now.

Jack Denham, a 17-year-old ship boy, had already survived one shipwreck in 1905 but didn't have the same luck on November 10 that year when the La Bella, carrying a load of timber from Auckland, rolled off the coast of Warrnambool.

With members of a local lifesaving boat away, fisherman William Ferrier, 25, made off in a dinghy to save the crew of the La Bella.

And while Mr Ferrier managed to save five sailors, despite carrying an injury, Mr Denham was one of eight crew members who perished. Mr Denham was then buried on November 23,

1905, and laid in the unmarked grave for 113 years until Friday, when Warrnambool Mayor Tony Herbert unveiled his headstone.



ETERNAL: Laurence Ferrier poses with a photo of the rescuer and the survivors of sinking of La Bella. Picture: Morgan Hancock

But when Mr Denham's plight featured in Helen Goltz and Chris Adams' book *Grave Tales: Great Ocean Road – Geelong to Port Fairy*, momentum soon gathered to change this, with \$1 from every paperback copy sold donated to the headstone, while Markwell and Swan Memorials committed to matching the sum.

Mrs Goltz, a journalist by trade, said the story of Jack Denham immediately grabbed her attention.



REMEMBERED: Laurence Ferrier with a photo of the rescuer and the survivors from the sinking of the La Bella. Picture: Morgan Hancock

“It must have been a great adventure for him ... we have lots of young school-leavers these days who go and have a gap year but Jack went off to work at sea,” she said.

“And you feel for him because that could have been the start of something big – he might have been a captain or something like that, but he never got the chance.

“We had to do a lot of digging around for the story because there were lots of versions floating around – things get changed or embellished over the years.”

“In those days they tended to bury you where you fell, because families didn’t have enough money to move the bodies and there weren’t the facilities needed. But Warrnambool is his permanent home now - he can look out on the water and he was a young lad who wanted to be on the water.”

The grandson of La Bella rescuer William Ferrier, Harry Ferrier, said it was an honour to be present at the unveiling of the headstone and commemorate the 113 years passed.

“Thanks to Helen and her partner for finding Jack's resting place and putting together a lovely tombstone for him,” he said.