

Gavin knows where the bodies are buried

By JEN REWELL

The peaceful grounds of Karrakatta Cemetery invoke a strong sense of duty in Claremont man Gavin Wilkinson, who feels strongly that the graves of World War I soldiers should be left undisturbed.

“We have an obligation to remember them,” Gavin said.

It was a vague interest in his own family’s history that began Gavin’s long campaign to raise the level of respect for Australian soldiers buried at Karrakatta.

And his perseverance has helped many other families, who are now able to pay their respects at the gravesite of their relatives.

In April 2017, Gavin was looking for the grave of his great-uncle James Burrows, who was a soldier in World War I.

Gavin knew James had been buried at Karrakatta, and he was hoping to find the grave and pay his respects.

But, to his shock, the grave was in an area that had been “renewed” between 1997 and 2001 by the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board (MCB), which runs the cemetery.

“There was nothing but a sandpit,” Gavin said.

The renewal process removes headstones and fresh graves are dug in between existing graves.

“Cemetery redevelopment allows cemetery authorities to maximise the use of land to



Above left: Victor Carter and his new wife Elizabeth in 1915. Right, Gavin Wilkinson pays his respects at Victor’s grave, which now recognises his World War I service. Photo: Paul McGovern



ensure the sustainability of the cemetery”, a government paper said in 2023.

While the remains of James Burrows were still in situ, the granite AIF headstone was nowhere to be seen.

40 others

Determined to honour his great-uncle, Gavin tracked down the headstone and negotiated for it to be replaced.

“Along the way, I discovered more than 40 other affected graves,” Gavin said.

In 2020, James’s Burrows’s headstone was reinstated, much to the delight of Gavin, who visits regularly.

“Once his headstone was

reinstated, using this as a precedent, I asked that the others be reinstated as well,” he said.

“They deserve the same level of respect as my great-uncle.”

Working with the RSL, Gavin has talked to government departments and ministers, the Office of Australian War Graves, and the MCB to try to keep soldiers’ headstones on their actual gravesite.

One family whose father’s gravesite was due to be renewed were told they would have to pay \$3000 to save it.

The family of World War I veteran Victor Carter, who was wounded twice in France and did not see his daughter until she was four years old, is one

of the families helped by Gavin (*Grave concerns at cemetery*, POST October 21).

“We cannot thank you all enough for the support and advocacy you provided in getting the memorial in place for Victor,” a family member told Gavin.

Never forget

“It would not have happened without you. It means more than can be expressed in words, not only to my mother but many members of the family.

“We will never forget Victor and the sacrifices he, his generation and those that followed made. This memorial now in place will help to ensure the future generations of our family

to do the same.”

After so many years, Gavin has an encyclopaedic knowledge of where each war grave is hiding at Karrakatta.

He can pinpoint graves hidden behind trees or in lush gardens that have been planted during modern beautification efforts.

He points out the headstone of “4268 Sapper William Barnett, 3rd tunnelling company” whose headstone is concealed by a large prickly cactus.

Gavin pauses on a footpath and explains that underneath the bitumen is a soldier’s remains.

“Right where you’re standing,” he says.