

AFTER burial records destroyed by flood and timber headstones destroyed by fire, the graves of Chinese shepherds will now be honoured by a granite memorial in the St George cemetery.

The Memorial to the Amoy Shepherds will be unveiled on March 30 to commemorate sojourners who left their famine-ravaged villages in Amoy, now known as Xiamen, who came under five-year contracts in the mid-1800s.

About 300 journeyed here as indentured labourers, working as shepherds and labourers tending to more than 450,000 sheep.

Most never made the journey home to their village, unable to pay their way on their minimal wages.

The project to provide a significant memorial began recently with former mayor Robert Buchan's interest in memorials.

The Sunnybank Chinese community came onboard, and the St George Chinese Community Memorial Committee was formed in April 2017.

In July 2018 the first sod was turned on the build. This memorial will honour the unmarked graves, replacing a small marble headstone that was erected after the fire.

The granite memorial is emblazoned with an artwork designed by local student Daisy Brown, showing how her ancestors, the Kamilaroi people, allowed the Chinese labourers to enter their land along the Balonne River.

Alongside the drawing, a 1300-year-old Tang dynasty poem is inscribed.

A descendant of the Kamilaroi and Chinese peoples, Wayne Long, will perform the Welcome to Country ceremony at the event.

Patron of the committee and Balonne Shire Council mayor Richard Marsh said the memorial was historically and culturally significant, allowing the region's diverse communities to reflect on the history of the region and its heritage.

"We worked with the Chinese community around Sunnybank to find the place for the memorial in the cemetery here, but this initiative and fundraising was driven by them and they deserve full credit for the project," Cr Marsh said.

A booklet that chronicles the history of the sojourners and the creation of the memorial is available at the St George Newsagency and Balonne Shire Council.

It reads: "if they could hear us, those now lying in peace in St George cemetery, and elsewhere on stations and cemeteries across the Darling Downs, we would like to tell them that we now enjoy the freedom and bounty of this land".

The Memorial to the Amoy Shepherds ceremony will be held on Saturday, March 30 at 4pm.

Balonne Beacon (Qld), 27 March 2019