



Skippers cemetery's solitary Chinese grave

In the Skippers cemetery lies the grave of **Hoy Yow Koo** . . .

THE GRAVE of **Hoy Yow Koo** (family name **Koo**) is a much-photographed reminder of the many Chinese diggers who worked in some of the most inhospitable and coldest places in the district. His name is recorded as Ah Quay on the brass plate at the cemetery entrance. However, he did not starve to death as stated.

He arrived from China in 1883 at the age of 47. A physically strong man, he lived and worked alone at Skippers Creek for a number of years. His hut was close to the road leading to the quartz mine. In 1902, he was one of 10 Chinese working up and down the Shotover River. Among his friends was the well-known Wong Gong.

Given the many Cantonese Chinese who worked on the goldfields, one would imagine there would be many Chinese graves in the Skippers cemetery. However, those early arrivals never intended to stay. Many of their bodies were eventually exhumed and returned to China for their spiritual salvation. In 1902, in a second mass exhumation, 499 bodies were shipped on the ill-fated *Ventnor*, which sank off the Hokianga coast.

Hoy Yow was befriended by the Rev Alexander Don, a Presbyterian minister who last visited him in December 1903. Don recorded the names of more than 3000 Chinese. **Hoy Yow** is number 519 in Don's roll and named "Sea Possessing", Don's literal translation of his name. In October 1904, he was bringing a letter from Sea Possessing's sister-in-law, advising that she had received some sovereigns and pleading for him to return to China as there had been death and hardship.

Sadly, the letter arrived too late. **Hoy Yow**, who had been mining in the Shotover River, had fallen to his death by the Skippers bridge six months earlier, on April 12, 1904, aged 55 years. His body was not returned to China because there were no more mass exhumations after 1902 and the cost of repatriating a body from the Skippers would have been prohibitive.

His grave site is surrounded by a wrought-iron fence and marked by his headstone inscribed with his Chinese origins, translated as: "Jung Yup County, Sar Village, **Hoy Yow Koo**, Elder, place of grave". No dates are shown. At some earlier time, this headstone had been broken and then recemented to the base adding extra thickness and a perpetual tilt. It was customary in those early years for visitors to leave a few coins when visiting graves for the family to use for the spiritual needs of the deceased. The practice today is burning token paper money at the graveside.

During 1998, coins were glued to the base to prevent them from being washed into the grass. Over the years, many coins have been deposited by visitors, but at a recent tidy-up, the pile of coins was collected and donated to the Queenstown Lakes District Council for cemetery upkeep.

An unobtrusive collection dish has now been provided to hold further donations. Thankfully, a century later, the legacy of **Hoy Yow** will continue to benefit all those who are buried around him.