

The Irish girl whose name lives on in Queensland

BRISBANE'S oldest family funeral firm has its roots in the 1870s and even more remarkable, it has stayed in the same family for six generations. Kate Mary Smith would have been proud of her legacy, writes DOT WHITTINGTON.

It's the stuff of fairytales - the story of an Irish girl who migrates to remote Australia during the potato famine and then, while not being a stranger to hardship, grief and loss, proceeds to establish a dynasty that lives on into the 21st century.

Kate Mary Farrell was born in Dublin in around 1847. Within the next two decades, 1.5 million of her countrymen would migrate in search of a better life in America. Others, like Kate, would make their way to Australia as part of the largest immigrant group after the English during the latter half of the 19th century.

As a teenager in 1864, she boarded the ship *Fiery Star* bound for Queensland.

She made her way to Somerset, a settlement at the very tip of Cape York Peninsula for which the new Queensland Government had high hopes in the early years after its separation from NSW.

A bêche-de-mer station had been established on the Torres Strait island of Albany about 20km east of Bamaga, in 1862. Port Albany was surveyed but after an inspection by Governor Bowen, it was decided to build the settlement on the adjacent mainland at Somerset.

It was named after the First Lord of

the Admiralty, the Duke of Somerset, and in the year before Kate arrived, had been established by police magistrate and gold commissioner John Jardine who had visions for the town to be a major port.

Also arriving in Somerset, in July 1864, was John Smith, an infantryman with the Royal Marines who had been born in London in 1839 and arrived on the HMS Salamander.

He became a water police constable and while he was still a soldier, he was also paid by the Queensland Government to work as a carpenter.

John and Kate married in Somerset in January 1868, when Kate was 21 and John 29. Their first child, John Thomas Smith is likely to have been the first white child born on Cape York Peninsula.

John was injured in an attack on the marines and suffered two serious spear wounds. It was serious enough for him to be sent to Sydney to recover. Kate and John settled in Sydney for a few years and returned to Brisbane with three children in 1874. They went on to have another four children.

John set up shop as a cabinet maker in Elizabeth St, based almost opposite the newly-built St Stephen's Cathedral. He



John and Kate Smith

was also called upon occasionally to make a coffin. Brisbane was expanding rapidly, and it was not uncommon for a cabinetmaker or carpenter with a horse to also work as an undertaker.

The family lived in South Brisbane and in 1883, purchased the undertaking business of William Walsh. With Kate a Catholic and John Church of England and a prominent Freemason, they built many contacts on all sides in the emerging city.

Alas, John became ill, suffering from consumption and weakened by his old injuries from two decades earlier, died a few months later in May 1886, at just 42, leaving a family of six.

Kate had been running the business for some time with the assistance of her oldest son, John and after her husband's untimely death, stepped up to show her

true mettle. She learned how to embalm, a necessary skill in a hot climate but a rare one for a woman at a time when it was unusual for women to even attend funerals much less work in the industry.

She was to become Brisbane's first female funeral director. At first, she traded under their established name of John Smith but soon changed the name to K.M. Smith - it would not have done at all to have Kate Smith running a funeral business in those times.

More than a century later, it is still K.M. Smith with her great grandchildren, siblings Allen and Denise Smith, directors and Allen's son Liam the chairman.

Kate Mary Smith continued to guide her business through World War I and the Great Depression. She died on June 13, 1932 and is buried in Toowong Cemetery with her husband. Her surviving six children married into well-known families between 1893 and 1915. The death of a daughter in 1930 meant she buried four of her children.

Kate Smith was recently recognised as a significant businesswoman in Queensland's history when she was inducted into the Queensland Business Leaders Hall of Fame.