

The life and achievements of renowned 19th century British architect William Wardell present the modern researcher with a wealth of information worthy of exploration. Born and baptised in London in 1823, Wardell’s relocation to Melbourne marked the beginning of a significant period of architectural achievements for urban Australia, which included the design and construction of Sydney’s St Mary’s Cathedral. Whilst Wardell is most commonly associated with the commission of St Mary’s and St Patrick’s Cathedral in Melbourne, his extensive work in the planning and development of St John’s College, is more than worthy of recognition. The architect not only designed and oversaw much of the construction of the College, but is also responsible for a motto that has featured throughout the College’s history and continues to inspire Johnsmen and women today. In order to appreciate the significance of Wardell’s contribution to the University College, an understanding of his beliefs and influences must first be established.

Wardell was raised and educated in London where he became a qualified engineer before eventually working for architect W.F. East.¹ The formation of a professional relationship with famous architect A.W.N Pugin had a number of influences over the young Wardell, which included his conversion to Catholicism at age 20². Pugin, often referred to as the Father of Gothic Revival, has also been described as “one of the most continuously, persistently and intensely creative artists of all time.”³ The Gothic or Gothic Revival style of architecture favoured by Pugin and adopted by Wardell features the use of high roofs and spires, pointed arches, exposed wood structural beams, gargoyles and long narrow windows reaching a point at

¹Ursula De Jong, *Wardell, William Wilkinson*, Oxford Art Online, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/subscriber/article/grove/art/T090684>, viewed 29th September 2012.

²Jacqueline Banerjee, “*William Wilkinson Wardell 1823-1899*”, The Victorian Web, <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/architecture/wardell/index.html>, (accessed 24th September 2012).

³ Paul Johnson, *Creators: From Chaucer to Walt Disney*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2006), p. 148.

the top⁴. Pugin believed that Gothic architecture embodied the purity of the Christian faith, even asserting that the pointed arch was a product of the Catholic tradition.⁵ Both Pugin and Wardell were strong advocates for the Gothic style as the most skillful and aesthetically pleasing form of architecture as well as its status as the official Christian style. Being the most renowned of the Gothic Revivalists at the time, Pugin was well liked by Catholic officials and commissioned to design many cathedrals and parish churches in Britain before his death in 1852 at age 40. By this point, Wardell had also completed designs for over thirty churches and city buildings including schools, convents, monasteries and orphanages. For Wardell, Pugin’s death marked the beginning of his rise to prominence as one of the most sought-after Gothic-style architects in England and eventually Australia.

Wardell’s arrival in Australia in 1858 was the result of ill health within the family, forcing him, his wife, and one of their children to relocate to a more moderate climate. In December of the same year, he was chosen as the architect to design and supervise the construction of St Patrick’s Cathedral in Melbourne – a great honour for Wardell who had developed a unique style incorporating English and French designs. This style was evident in the plans for the new Cathedral, which has since been described by one author as “Australia’s greatest Gothic Revival building.”⁶ During his first year in Australia, Wardell also made an application to be considered as the designer of a Catholic College that was to be erected at the University of Sydney – an institution already renowned for its Gothic style architecture. Wardell’s official appointment as architect of the College has been attributed to Archbishop John Bede Polding. “The role of the Archbishop in recommending Wardell’s proposal to St. John’s Council was critical”⁷ as it was

⁴ M. Edd, *The Seven Key Characteristics of Gothic Architecture*, Exploring Castles, http://www.exploring-castles.com/characteristics_of_gothic_architecture.html, (accessed 27 September 2012).

⁵ A.W.N. Pugin, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, (London: Weale, 1841), p.54.

⁶ Brian Andrews, *Creating a Gothic Paradise*, (Hobart: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, 2002), p. 215.

⁷ Ursula De Jong, “William Wardell’s 1859 St John’s College: A rare realization of Pugin’s ideal Catholic College?”, *Fabrications* 20, no. 2 (2011): 97.

his appreciation of the gothic style and confidence in Wardell that influenced the decision. Polding had a deep belief in the “importance of beauty, dignity and reverence in the setting and performance of the liturgy”⁸ - a belief that corresponded with the ideas of Pugin and Wardell concerning Christianity and its intrinsic relationship with grand Gothic architecture. Polding hoped to erect a building that met these great expectations and created “a rival to St. Paul’s in splendour and tradition.”⁹

Wardell’s official plans for the building of St. John’s were submitted in May 1859. The design reflected a strong Puginist or modern gothic influence - as many had come to expect from Wardell’s work. Pugin had asserted his ideas of the perfect college in *True Principles*, where he included “the solemn quadrangle, the studious cloister, the turreted gatehouse, the noble refectory with its oak beamed roof, the mullioned windows and pinnacle parapet, and lofty tower of the church.”¹⁰ Pugin believed these features were all exemplified by the Gothic-style colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, one of which, Magdalen College, is said to have inspired Wardell’s design for St. John’s¹¹. Wardell planned a sandstone H-pattern for his first and only Australian college, with the right wing to comprise of the chapel and refectory on the first level, with a grand staircase leading up to these from the ground floor. The left wing was to contain mostly student accommodation, and the ground floor of the bar crossing the H designed for administration and academic’s quarters. A tower, designed to stand two and a half times the height of the chapel, was also included in the plans, which closely resembled the grand bell tower built at Magdalen College.

⁸ Brian Andrews, “*St Francis Xavier’s Church, Berrima, New South Wales*”, The Pugin Foundation, http://www.puginfoundation.org/assets/Berrima_essay.pdf:1, (accessed 27 September, 2012).

⁹ A.G. Evans, *William Wardell: Building with Conviction*, (Ballan: Connor Court Publishing, 2010), p.122.

¹⁰ Pugin, *True Principles*, p. 54

¹¹ Evans, *William Wardell: Building with Conviction*, p. 125

The submission of these plans marked the beginning of extensive negotiations between Wardell and the Council Fellows, who were concerned by a number of the plan’s details¹². Council members could not understand why the chapel was not situated on the ground floor, and were apprehensive about the costs associated with building such a large tower. Wardell wrote back to the Council in order to justify his designs, stating “the rule is that the Chapel should be on the principal floor and that there should be no rooms over it.”¹³In addressing the Council’s concerns regarding the grand church tower, Wardell made one of his greatest contributions yet:

“You are about to build not for this generation only, nor for the next, but for those who will exist in centuries yet far removed from us; and you have with an admirable zeal proposed a work which will vie with the noblest of those edifices that bless and grace the souls of the old countries...What you do now do well – even if the funds at your immediate disposal require it to be less in quantity than your generosity intended.”¹⁴

Wardell advised the Council to put their best efforts towards ensuring the College would be built to meet the great expectations of Wardell and the Archbishop, and to create a historically significant building that would be a source of pride for multiple generations. The phrase “what you do now do well” has been adopted by the College as a guiding principle in the everyday lives of its residents.

From his residence in Melbourne, Wardell continued to correspond and disagree with the Council Fellows over matters concerning the final design, however construction of the College began in mid 1859. During this period, Wardell was working as the

¹² *ibid.*, p.125

¹³ Wardell to Gorman, 6 July 1859, St John’s College Archives.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

inspector-general of public works for the Department of Works and Buildings in Victoria, with a contract that allowed him to continue his private practice. The tenuous relationship between Wardell and the St John’s Council continued to deteriorate throughout his time in Melbourne. The Council Fellows became frustrated by the lengthy delays in correspondence and felt that Wardell should have relocated to Sydney where they felt he was needed on a daily basis.¹⁵ Meanwhile, commitments to the Public Works Department were gradually making it more difficult for Wardell to make regular visits. Disagreements between the College and their architect reached a head during the preparations for the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone, for which Wardell was only able to arrive five days prior. The Council deemed this unacceptable, and after several months of correspondence, Wardell offered them his resignation.¹⁶ This was accepted in July 1860, although disputes over unpaid work continued for a further twelve months. The position was taken over by fellow English architect Edmund Blacket, who endeavored to stay true to Wardell’s original design.

William Wardell moved on to designing many public buildings in Melbourne after his resignation as architect for St John’s College. His work for the government continued until his dismissal in January 1878, by which stage Wardell had designed the Royal Mint, the Treasury, Custom House, the General Post Office and Government House, which resulted in his nickname as “The Man who designed Melbourne.”¹⁷ In 1878, Wardell relocated to Sydney where he continued to oversee the building of St. Mary’s Cathedral – a project he had begun almost a decade earlier. He died in November 1899 in his North Sydney home, by which point neither St. Mary’s or St. Patrick’s Cathedrals were officially completed. Whilst many will remember Wardell as the architect of two of Australia’s most grand Gothic Cathedrals, the residents of St.

¹⁵ Evans, op. cit., p.139.

¹⁶ Wardell to Gorman, 2 December 1859, SJCA.

¹⁷ *William Wilkinson Wardell 1823-1899*, <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/architecture/wardell/index.html>.

John’s College will continue to acknowledge his role as the architect of both their home and their motto.

Reference List

Andrews, Brian, *Creating a Gothic Paradise*, Hobart, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, 2002.

Andrews, Brian, “St Francis Xavier’s Church Berrima, New South Wales”, *The Pugin Foundation*, http://www.puginfoundation.org/assets/Berrima_essay.pdf:1.

Banerjee, Jacqueline, “William Wilkinson Wardell”, *The Victorian Web*, <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/architecture/wardell/index.html>.

De Jong, Ursula, “Wardell, William Wilkinson”, *Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T090684>.

De Jong, Ursula, “William Wardell’s 1859 St John’s College: A rare realization of Pugin’s ideal Catholic College?”, *Fabrications* 20, no. 2 (2011): 86-107.

Evans, A.G., *William Wardell: Building with Conviction*, Ballan: Connor Court Publishing, 2010.

Johnson, Paul, *Creators: From Chaucer to Walt Disney*, London: Weale, 2006.

M, Edd, “The Seven Key Characteristics of Gothic Architecture”, *Exploring Castles*, http://www.exploring-castles.com/characteristics_of_gothic_architecture.html.

William Wardell to Chairman John Gorman, 6 July 1859, St John’s College Archives, Camperdown.

William Wardell to Chairman John Gorman, 2 December 1859, St John’s College Archives, Camperdown.