William Wilkinson Wardell, the eldest son among the five children of Thomas Wardell and his wife Mary, nee Dalton, was born in the London district of Poplar on 27 September 1823. He was baptised in the Anglican parish church at Poplar on 3 March 1824. The Wardell family was well known in the area and Thomas Wardell, although not a wealthy man, would have been able to give his children a good education according to the standards of the time. William Wardell, a reticent man, tells us nothing of his early life but his brother Herbert, born in 1830, was educated at Stocks School in Poplar, an educational establishment of good standing imparting a classical type schooling, and it is reasonable to surmise that William attended the same school. There is a family tradition that he spent a period at sea before being articled firstly to W. F. East, a London architect, and then to an engineer by the name of Morris, who was engaged both in general practice and on railway surveys throughout Britain.

Wardell's work on the railway surveys took him to almost every part of Britain in an age when most people travelled but rarely from their own areas. In particular, it took him to the old cathedral cities where he was able to inspect the great monuments of England's Catholic past. In later life he told a friend, Father John Ryan of St Ignatius' Church in Melbourne, that he was so impressed with the standard of this medieval work that he sought an explanation in the faith and religious convictions of the unknown builders. In 1843, aged twenty, he was received into the Catholic church and remained a fervent and devout Catholic for the rest of his life. Wardell's conversion to Catholicism has striking similarities to that of Augustus Welby Pugin who also entered the church through an appreciation of ancient art and architecture. At about the same time, Wardell's brother, Herbert, and his sister, Mary, were received into the Catholic church.

Wardell thus began a different life and moved in new circles. Through his membership of the Stafford Club, a club for converts run by leading Catholics, he met Pugin and must undoubtedly have come under his influence.
William Wilkinson Wardell, pictured in 1858 on his arrival in Melbourne. (All illustrations supplied by the author)
St Mary's, Clapham, London, designed by Wardell in 1849.
Holy Trinity, Brook Green, London, designed by Wardell in 1851.
At the same time, he was probably introduced to the Catholic hierarchy of Britain, whose members must have been immediately impressed with his ability, for at least thirty churches were erected to his designs over the next twelve years. These were in addition to numerous other buildings including schools, convents and monasteries. However, the practice was not confined to ecclesiastical buildings, and other works were commissioned, including the British Consulate at Smyrna, in Turkey. Late in 1847 Wardell married Lucy Butler, also a convert to the Catholic church and sister of Robert Butler, factor to the estates of the Earl of Shrewsbury. Robert Butler, an Oxford graduate, was a former Anglican clergyman who had been received into the Catholic church some years earlier in Rome. Probably through him William Wardell made the acquaintance of Newman and the other leaders of the Oxford Movement. Perhaps more importantly, he was introduced into the artistic and literary circles which met at Alton Towers, the Staffordshire residence of Lord Shrewsbury. These included the architects Pugin, Scott and Hansom; the glass and metal craftsman, Hardman of Birmingham; and the ceramics manufacturer, Minton - all Catholic converts.

Much work and a great reputation came Wardell's way in the years before 1858. A testimonial from Lord Petre, patron of the arts, refers to his 'acknowledged position in the first rank of English architects'. He was undoubtedly influenced by Pugin, 'but his architectural philosophy seems to have been quite different, and he did not emphasise the use of the Gothic Revival style to the dismissal of other styles. He was, of course, an architect and an engineer and perhaps had greater practical ability than many of his colleagues. Like Pugin, he was greatly concerned with all the decorative details for the interiors of his churches, but he obviously did not feel the need to design all fittings himself, and had complete confidence in Hardman's work. An interesting example of artistic and scholarly collaboration between the three men is the altar plate from the London parish church of Brook Green, now in the British Museum; this was designed by Pugin, along lines suggested by Wardell, and manufactured by Hardman.

The fifteen years after Wardell's conversion to Catholicism were ones of intense activity and he literally wore himself out. He seems to have been readily accepted at all levels in London. In 1850, aged only twenty-six, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects. In 1851
he was granted the freedom of the City of London, and in the following year he was elected to that most prestigious of the ancient guilds, the Company of Fishmongers. He was also elected an associate, and later member, of the Institute of Civil Engineers. He visited Europe at least twice between 1850 and 1855, and on the second of these recorded visits he was appointed a member of the Société Francais pour la Conservation et la Description des Monuments Historiques. At the same time, Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc was appointed an honorary member of the Royal Institute of British Architects and it is interesting to speculate whether these two events were connected in any way.

William Wardell was at the peak of his career and directing a flourishing architectural practice when he decided to emigrate, for reasons of health, to Australia. He left behind him friends and colleagues, an interesting and vigorous intellectual life, and a vast stock of buildings to testify to the excellence of his work as a revivalist architect. His reputation preceded him and his arrival was awaited eagerly, particularly by the leaders of Melbourne's Catholic community. Armed with several folios of plans for buildings completed in Britain, with many references and testimonials, and certainly, as the father of a numerous family, with considerable courage, Wardell arrived in Melbourne in September 1858.

Wardell was undoubtedly the best qualified and most distinguished architect to come to Australia last century. His arrival in Melbourne was fortuitous for the young colony, which had received its independence barely eight years previously and which was struggling to assert itself. In March 1859 Wardell was appointed inspecting clerk of works and chief architect in the Department of Works and Buildings. Within two years, he was promoted to inspector-general of public works, with the right of private practice. For twenty years he exercised a dominating influence on the design and erection of public buildings. In addition he provided plans for numerous church buildings throughout Victoria, although he was not allowed to supervise the erection of any works done in private practice. The overwhelming complaints of contemporary architects that Wardell held a monopoly over building commissions in Victoria testify to the fact that he, more than any other person, impressed a personality upon the appearance of the colony. The enormous volume of highly detailed correspondence maintained in the records of the Public Works Department gives ample evidence of the breadth and
scope of the department's activities, with Wardell as its guiding and powerful inspiration. The demands on him covered a wide area: there were lighthouses, court houses, post offices, gaols, lunatic asylums, water supplies, jetties, and defence installations. Wardell's detailed knowledge of all the activities taking place within his department is quite clear from the letter books of the Public Works Department. Nothing, no matter how trivial, could happen without his personal approval, and his autocratic approach, so typical of 19th century architects, ensured that an extremely efficient office produced buildings of great quality and beauty. All this came to an end in 1878 when Wardell was dismissed from office by the infamous Berry ministry of the Victorian Government. He moved to Sydney, where he was in private practice for the rest of his life.

Several houses were erected to designs either supplied or supervised by William Wardell. Chief among these are Government House and the now demolished 'Cliveden', in East Melbourne. Government House, said to be the greatest vice-regal residence erected in the British colonies in the nineteenth century, is a strikingly original Italianate design which, despite its great scale, emphasises simplicity and restraint. The beautiful tower, long a Melbourne landmark, is the only external area where finely worked detail is the over-riding consideration, giving a suggestion to those viewing it from afar of the sumptuousness of the interiors. 'Cliveden' must have been a magnificent commission for him and he entrusted the supervision of its construction to his son, Herbert. It was a lavish house of some seventy five rooms, beautifully fitted out with furnishings imported from Britain and Italy, emphasising in a most elegant and refined manner Wardell's ability to handle the classicism of the new boom style of the 1880s.

One of Wardell's closest friends and patrons in Australia was Sir George Verdon, a cultured and refined man who loved Gothic architecture. In his youth he had known Pugin, and his friendship with Wardell may well have been of long standing. Through Verdon, Wardell received commissions to provide designs for the E.S. and A. Bank's head office in Melbourne and branches in Sydney and Adelaide. Correspondence reveals that Verdon knew what he wanted; for the Melbourne head office he was able to provide Wardell with the support needed to produce one of the really great monuments of the Gothic Revival. The influence of English Gothic is
Government House, Melbourne. Wardell's elegant touch is apparent in the tower, throne and service yard.
considerably less in this building, with its obvious debt to Venice but, as opposed to Venetian Gothic, simplicity and rationality prevail in the overall concept. The remarkably ornate interior is in beautiful contrast to the restraint of the exterior. The Union Bank and the Bank of Australasia also commissioned buildings from Wardell, mainly in New South Wales and in 'Italian Palazzo' style.

Wardell's Sydney period, from 1878 to 1899, was extremely productive, particularly after he accepted Walter Liberty Vernon as a partner. The principal buildings from this period, in addition to the banks, were the New South Wales and Union Clubs (the former now partially demolished) and huge complexes of warehouse and commercial buildings. Of these, the Grafton Board Warehouses and the offices of the Australasian Steam and Navigation Company survive, the latter still dominating the lower Rocks area.

Wardell is probably best known in Australia for his cathedrals. It must have been the great ambition of every architect of the Gothic Revival to design a cathedral but Wardell was unique in that he received six such commissions in Australia. Two of these buildings, the cathedrals of Melbourne and Sydney, are amongst the largest and greatest churches erected anywhere by architects of the Gothic Revival. In area, they are surpassed only by the Catholic cathedral in New York; nothing comparable was attempted by the Catholic church in Britain. No-one more than he would have been aware that the development of a cathedral had traditionally taken place over centuries, and that only rarely was it the work of one man. But in Melbourne and Sydney he was able to see both buildings substantially in his own lifetime.

Fortunately in his clients, Archbishops Goold and Polding, Wardell had sensitive and understanding men who were well acquainted with Gothic architecture and who allowed him complete freedom to realise his great visions. A study of both buildings to try and trace their derivations is an interesting academic exercise and, certainly, features from the English medieval cathedrals can be discerned. What does emerge, however, is William Wardell's ability, as architect and engineer, to draw upon the wealth of the past and to create highly original buildings of acute aesthetic sensibility. He was always aware of his responsibilities to future generations; nowhere is his quest for perfection more evident than in his
cathedrals. The cathedral at Lismore in New South Wales expresses the same philosophy, but on a smaller scale, and is an excellent essay in the 'decorated style' of the thirteenth century. St Mary's Cathedral in Hobart was erected to Wardell's plans and supervision was entrusted to others. Structural faults became apparent at an early stage and much of the building was replaced, the present cathedral bearing only a superficial resemblance to Wardell's concept. In Ballarat, the large parish church of St Patrick was extended by the addition of transepts, crossing, chancel, and chapels, to become a cathedral when the diocese was established in 1874. For the Anglican diocese of Perth, William Wardell supplied plans for a cathedral but these were not proceeded with, as he refused to compromise his convictions by agreeing to economies insisted upon by the diocese.

William Wardell's contribution to the architecture of nineteenth century Victoria includes some twenty parish churches in Melbourne and country districts. With one exception, St John's at Toork, these were erected for the Catholic Church and are, or were, characterised by simplicity and by plain decoration. His strong belief, in the Gothic tradition, in the inherent quality of materials precludes excessive use of ornamentation and the buildings stand out as essays in perfection of materials, as well as design. They are all different, but are readily recognised as William Wardell's work by their emphasis on superb proportion and asymmetry. Two stylistic variations of 'Early English' design are used: the first is a simple hall church plan, as at Heidelberg; the second is a plan of nave and aisles with chancel, chapels, sacristies, and porches attached to the main structure. Of the latter group St Mary's at East St Kilda, an excellently-preserved church, is the most intact example of Wardell's ecclesiastical work in Australia. Nowhere is it more evident than in this church that ornamentation only serves as an enrichment of the whole.

Numerous schools, colleges, convents, and presbyteries were erected to Wardell's designs. Two important surviving examples are the Christian Brothers College in Victoria Parade, East Melbourne, so obviously reflecting Irish Cistercianism, and above all, St John's College in the University of Sydney, a building which he emphasised was 'not for this generation only, nor for the next, but for those who will exist in centuries yet far removed from us'. It is an outstanding example of Wardell's ability to adapt early precedents to new design.
St Mary's, East St Kilda, c. 1897.
St Mary's, East St Kilda.
Two simple bluestone country churches designed by Wardell, at Koroit (upper) and Port Fairy (lower).
Inveni Quod Quaesivi - I have found that which I sought. William Wardell adopted this motto for his coat of arms in 1843 when he was received into the Catholic church. His conversion brought about a spiritual tranquility and satisfaction which remained with him for the rest of his life, allowing him to pursue his quest for perfection through erecting religious and secular buildings for the glory of God and as scholarly and studied examples of the best of revivalist architecture, interpreted in a highly individualistic manner. Wardell's genius is that he was essentially a practical man who looked at architecture as an architect and as an engineer, and who used strong spirituality and absolute conviction to produce world-class buildings of superb quality and feeling. For many years William Wardell's contemporary fame and reputation were largely ignored. It is only in recent times that his true place in the cultural history of nineteenth century Australia has been recognised.

Wardell died in Sydney in November 1899, still busy with his practice. The day before his death he had completed detail drawings of the side altar for St Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne.