

# Reaching out from the past: WJ Sanders restores a valuable ecclesiastical artefact originally crafted in their workshop

**S**ydney's magnificent St Mary's Cathedral is a very fine example of the Victorian Gothic style and is one of Australia's most beautiful buildings. The cathedral was designed by William Wilkinson Wardell (1823-1899), a significant English architect of Victorian Gothic working in Australia. It follows the English geometric Gothic style with the main façade based on Notre Dame, Paris. Wardell worked on the cathedral from 1868 to 1882.

Wardell, a great follower and admirer of the work of Augustus Pugin, one of England's most renowned architects, migrated to Australia in the 1860s due to health reasons. He maintained a relationship with many of the English contacts and companies that both he and Pugin had worked closely with for many years. One such company was ecclesiastical designer and manufacturer John Hardman & Co of Birmingham who was commissioned to design and make the many beautiful stained glass windows depicting scenes from biblical history. These were installed in St Mary's Cathedral between 1882 and 1928.

The Cathedral offers a wonderful showcase of artistic works and craftsmanship by both European and Australian artisans.

William Wardell died in 1899, and his plans for the cathedral were completed by John Francis Hennessy (1853-1924) and his son Jack from the Sydney architectural firm Hennessy and Hennessy. They designed the crypt. St Mary's, complete with the southern nave opened 2 September 1928.

## Solid silver font basin and dome

A description of the newly completed baptistery that is part of the southern nave reads: 'The Baptistery is enclosed by a delicately designed brass grill and doors. The marble font that contains a solid silver basin is hooded with a remarkable silver dome. The font base carved from Royal Siena marble is the beautiful work of Anselm Odling.'

The remarkable silver dome and the solid silver basin were in fact crafted by Sydney company W J Sanders. It appears there are no existing records regarding the design of the font. We are not sure whether the design was



the work of William Wardell or that of Jack Hennessy. We also do not have records of exactly who commissioned W J Sanders to make the font dome and bowl.

We do know that for many years there were photographs of the silver font dome on the wall of a leading Sydney jeweller no longer in operation. There is speculation that they may have been commissioned by the architect to supply the font and in fact employed W J Sanders to make it.

William's son John took over the company following William's untimely death in the late 1940s. He guided the company until the 80s. Over the years he has been extremely generous in sharing with us many aspects of the W J Sanders company history.

Just prior to his recent 80th birthday we informed John that the company was about to restore the St Mary's baptismal font and that our search for information regarding it had

been fruitless. John very kindly put pen to paper with the following letter.

Dear Dennis,  
Regarding the Baptismal Font Cover from St Mary's Cathedral, the information, which I have, and the details of which I am aware, are as follows:  
The Baptismal Font Cover was made in sterling silver in 1928 to commemorate the occasion of the '1928 World Eucharist Congress' which was held in Sydney that year. It was made in the workshop of, and under the supervision, of my father William John Sanders. The workshop was then situated on the 4th floor of Bowen's Building, 1 Lee St., Railway Square Sydney.  
My understanding that it was then reputed to be the largest piece of silver work ever undertaken in Australia and probably still is. The photograph in the archives which illustrates the Cover under construction in the workshop, shows Silversmiths Wainwright and Rassmussen together silver soldering the ribs, as the size of the solder run necessitated maximum heat. Much of the ribbing work and hand shaping would have been hand raised by specialist hammerer Sam Goodby, an English trained craftsman who specialised in hammering and hand raising of sterling silver.  
The figure of John the Baptist surmounting the pinnacle was cast in silver, and the fine detail hand chased by Louis Somme an expert in repoussé work.  
Together with the specialist silver spinners, polishers, and finishers, the construction involved every aspect of craftsmanship associated with Silversmithing at that time, and was an enormous undertaking for a relatively small firm.  
Unfortunately there are no existing records that show the cost at the time. It would certainly be interesting to know!  
It is also interesting that it has come back to the company for renovation some 80 years later, but still apparently in good working condition.



Do hope this information is of some interest and help.

Regards,  
John Sanders

## THE RESTORATION

### Assessing the damage

From some of the old photographs taken at the time of the completion of the font it appears the silver dome (weighing in excess of 40 kilograms) when in use, was lifted up by a triangular pulley system that suspended the dome over the top of the font while the Baptism ceremony took place. We assume this could have proved a somewhat dangerous procedure as the system was altered sometime later. A set of wheels set on a pair of parallel tracks was attached to the sides of the dome allowing for the dome to slide to the rear of the bowl.

We suspect that at some time the dome may have been dropped and quite badly damaged. The ribs had come adrift and were crudely re-soldered using lead solder, something a reputable silversmith would never do. The bowl had a metal division inserted across the diameter at some time, this had also been lead soldered to the silver bowl.

### Restoration process

Much of the restoration work required the removal and cleaning away of the lead solder. Once this was accomplished, re-soldering was with silver solder. A number of dents were removed from the bowl and the dome and new rails were made to support the sliding dome.

All parts were then highly machine hand polished. Once restored, the dome and bowl were taken back to the Cathedral and re-installed into the beautiful Royal Siena marble base ■

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