

RUTH Hopkins has extensively researched Bendigo's Cornish history and has published a book on the subject.

She believes her version of the story of the Lansells and Fortuna is closer to the truth than the article published in the Advertiser on September 11:

"Geoffrey Blainey has written that Lansell did not make money initially from his mining investments, but then "engaged experienced Cornish as consultants and won" — these consultants being the numerous Cornish mine managers and miners whose knowledge and skills he employed.

"As far as can be gauged the petition for his return had nothing to do with his mining acumen, but more with a belief that he had some magical quality which would help revive the field.

"The placing of the coffin, if this story was indeed true, is certainly symbolic of the miners' feelings about him at this period in particular, but not because of disputes over mine ventilation and lung disease; this came later.

"At the period mentioned Lansell was seen as the leading voice in a move to reduce the miners' wages; also he had allowed his mines on the New Chum Reef to flood, which had a domino effect on other mines, throwing many miners out of work.

"Whatever the facts of the coffin tale, it gave him an opportunity to say he did not know he was so hated by the miners and possibly to escape a loveless marriage.

"One of his bad mistakes, it would appear, was his marriage to an Irish colleen, born Bedelia Mary Mulganney.

"Perhaps it was the unhappy marriage, or perhaps she was already a confirmed alcoholic, which brought out tendencies to become violent when inebriated and then embark on a pub crawl.

"Either way, her cause of death at the age of 38 is shown on her death certificate as fatty degeneration of liver and effusion of the brain.

"She died at the Lansell residence in St Kilda Road, Melbourne, on September 20, 1880.

"Perhaps the saddest feature is that, unlike most deaths which seem to have been registered by a relative or someone close to the deceased, there seems to have been no one close enough to Bedelia to do this and it was registered by the undertaker's assistant.

"Also gleaned from the Advertiser following her death, her husband contested her will.

"This was worth about £500 and left to her poor Irish relatives. £500 was then a lot of money to most people certainly, but of little consequence except malice perhaps to Lansell.

"Now to Mrs Edith Lansell, nee Bassford. She came from a good family with relatives of some social standing in Bendigo.

"However, her father died and her mother, like many widows forced to make a living, opened a boarding house.

"Edith took a position as housekeeper at Fortuna.

"How far a relationship, as such, developed before Lansell's departure overseas, which the Bendigo Advertiser noted at the time as taking place in Easter, 1879, is not known.

"In any case by 1883 they were in residence at the Grand Hotel in Charing Cross, London, and Lansell's secretary Isaac Edward Dyason notes in his diaries that reports were filtering back from London that, although unmarried, Edith was in a noticeably interesting condition.

"They were eventually married on August 12, 1883, in a Registrar's Office and a son, whom they named George Victor, was born on October 3, 1883.

"At the time of the nuptials he was aged 59 and she was 27.

"I believe I have come to a reasonable conclusion to all of this, particularly given the times' somewhat outlandish behaviour.

"However it is only supposition.

"Dyason's accounts of Mrs Bassford's state of mind at this time are interesting also and while she is obviously worried about her daughter's ultimate fate, she is enraptured at news of the marriage, but does not seem to be aware of the pregnancy.

"Sometime after the birth of the baby, later to become Sir George Lansell, money was sent for a first-class passage for her to join the happy family in London.

"However, while leading figures might have sought the return of Lansell in their address of 1883, the Eaglehawk miners were obviously infuriated enough to write to the Argus protesting against it.

"So for those who believe that there may be some sort of apparition at Fortuna, perhaps it is poor forsaken Bedelia.

"Or perhaps it is a manifestation of those miners whose tragic lives and deaths ultimately contributed to the impressive edifice.

"I feel most grateful to those who over the years have contributed to maintaining Fortuna in the condition it is today.

"It stands as a genuine symbol of the mining era on which Bendigo was built and my hope is it will remain as a centre, where all may see the glory and remember also perhaps the tragedy of the city's origins."



SIR GEORGE LANSELL: miners were infuriated by news of his return.

EDITH LANSELL: housekeeper who became mistress of the house.
Picture courtesy Bendigo Art Gallery.