

the lansell legacy

Let's be honest Fortuna Villa is an ugly building – but it's the biggest and the best and the most beautifully ugly building in Bendigo.

- Geoff Hocking

Don't get me wrong I have a soft spot for Lansell's architectural monument to eclectic bad taste. I grew up a stone's throw from his front door. You could sit on my mother's back-yard dunny with the door open and see Lansell's palm trees swaying in the breeze. Years after it was handed over to the Army Survey Regiment you could hear the 'reveille' in the morning, not quite the changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace, but they did make quite a lot of noise.

My grandfather went to school with young George Victor; occasionally they made the journey along Chum Street together, up to Specy Hill. Grandpa walked while George travelled by pony trap. It didn't bother either of them, this obvious display of privilege, or difference in fortune, because young George knew that he was just the same as the other boys, just a hell of a lot richer, and my grandfather couldn't care less. Both boys came from the same emigrant stock, whose families had abandoned their homes to find a better one in the colonies. The homes both built for themselves are still there; one is enormous, and the cause of much angst in the city, the other a modest little miner's cottage also in need of love and attention that doesn't bother anyone.

My grandfather and his mates used to climb across from the great sand-dump on the south-side of Chum Street into Fortuna along the flume that crossed the road. They sailed themselves back out again. The flume has long gone, and the sand-dumps where I, like my grandfather before me, also played as a kid gradually carted away.

On my mother's wedding day my father snuck into Fortuna and watched while two of his army mates dived into Lansell's ornamental lake and plucked a water lily for her corsage. On my mother's Chum Street mantelpiece she still has a picture of herself in her wedding dress, taken on Boxing day 1943, holding the 'Fortuna Lily' in her hands.

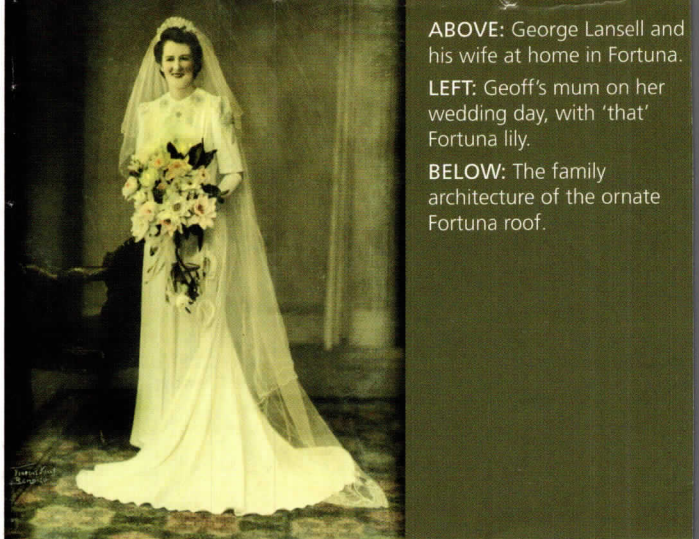
I learnt about the process of colour-separation for printing at Fortuna. On open days, or maybe it was a visit with a YMCA leadership group, when we were shown around the Army print shop. I remain incredulous at the sheer size of the plate camera they operated at Fortuna; it had a bellows that stretched for about 30-feet [10 metres] and made enormous film negatives for the maps they produced there for the Army. The print shop also seemed to me to be gigantic: great big thumping litho machines, dark and mysterious film processing and colour laboratories, Fortuna was a state-of-the-art facility, there at the leading edge of what it did in Chum Street and I loved it.

I knew men who worked there. Tommy Chisholm was there from the end of the war until his retirement; and Eddie Esposito (his wife's family had built the Goldmines Hotel on the northern edge of Lansell's property during the great days of the goldrush). Both men had been in the 38th Battalion with my dad, as had George Victor Lansell, who had been commissioned captain in the 38th in 1916, rising to Lieutenant-Colonel in 1927 and after retirement had worked to raise a Volunteer Defence Corps in north-west Victoria in the early days of World War II. Sir George Victor Lansell served the men of his beloved 38th for many years after the war as president of the Bendigo branch of the RSL.

I remember Sir George coming into the YMCA when I was little kid in my white shorts and white t-shirt with its red triangle sewn on the front. Sir George was a very nice man. He was gentle, shy even, interested in everyone and remembered his boyhood days in Chum Street. Checking his biography I learn that he brought the Harro Knitting Mills to Bendigo, had interests in the Advertiser, and the Bendigo Art Gallery, among other things, which may explain how we as young YM boys had excursions to all of these places and I now thank him for it. I learnt how stockings were made, watched Clearads make blocks for the Addy and watched those great presses rumble on into the night.



ABOVE: George Lansell and his wife at home in Fortuna.



LEFT: Geoff's mum on her wedding day, with 'that' Fortuna lily.

BELOW: The family architecture of the ornate Fortuna roof.



My auntie worked as a cleaner up at Fortuna for years, after my paternal grandmother died, and she was freed from those apron strings. She strolled down Chum Street every day with her bag in her hand, around the front gates and under the wrought iron arch, to spend her days dusting the mantelpieces, mopping Lansell's inlaid floors and polishing his great Italian marble baths.

You see, I have a soft spot for Fortuna. I have known it all my life and I want the best for it.

I reckon so much of the latter day building should be removed. We should be able to enjoy Lansell's magnificent overblown architectural collage in all its pomp and grandeur.

I reckon they should sell off the Booth Street side, build a string of terraced cottages and then flog the rest off to the Sultan of Brunei's younger brother Prince Jefri – THEN, he spends unknowable millions on it, transforming it into a luxury hotel, spa resort, reception and convention centre, with coffee shops overlooking the lake and a small pleasure craft in which we could float casually by from which to gather water-lilies. Gentlefolk, dressed in livery, could welcome us at the front door and carry our portmanteau to our gloriously overdecorated rooms with sumptuous beds and deep marble baths filled with hot steaming water in which rose petals have been scattered. Now that would be living – Lansell-style!

One of my past international students now works for Prince Jefri, should I give him a call?

Afterthought: In 1969 I attended Technical Teacher's College, which then was housed in Lansell's city residence at Lansell Grove, Toorak. Now that's a long way from Chum Street. ■