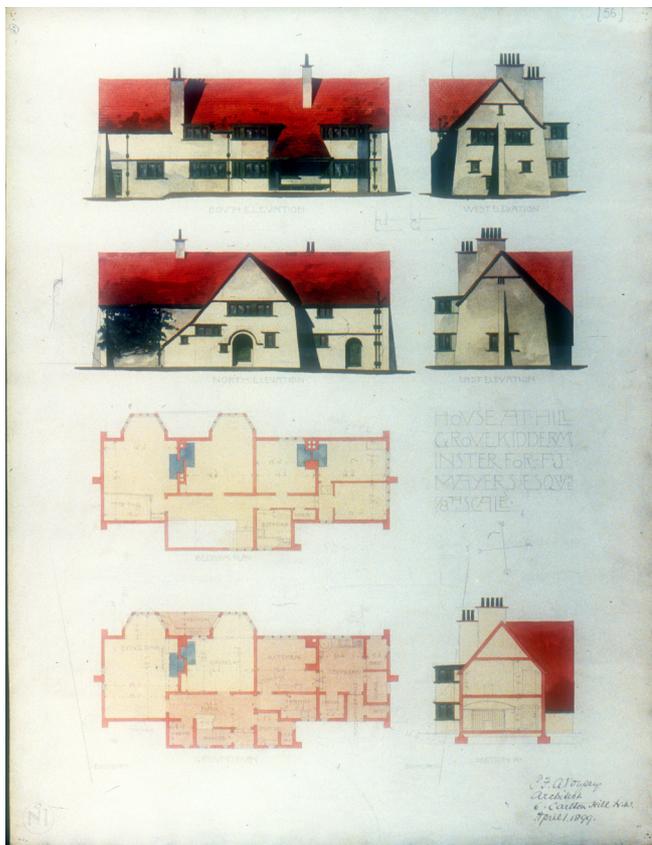


## Oakhill – an Arts and Crafts education.



### Introduction.

Looking back to when we bought Oakhill, it is difficult to imagine that at such a time of global financial turmoil, we would ever have found, let alone bought, a house designed by such a recognisable name as C.F.A. Voysey. We had sold our old house, and completed on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007, which was the day Northern Rock announced it had problems and the property market went into meltdown. We had already decided to move into rented accommodation before looking around to see what was on the market. We had viewed several houses when a friend of my wife's, knowing

we were looking for a house, suggested we look at a house in Kidderminster which had been designed by a world famous architect called C.F.A.Voysey. The house had not been on the market all that long and interestingly we later discovered it had been advertised not just in this country but also in America. Both my wife and I had similar responses (and I will now apologise to all people reading this article) - who's Voysey? My wife's friend told us a little bit about the Arts and Craft movement, and I was slightly less embarrassed about our apparent total ignorance of Voysey when both my wife and I knew of William Morris and his work (and at this point I will apologise to the late C.F.A. Voysey and all his descendants as well!). Our curiosity had been stimulated, however, and I decided to do a little research on this gentleman called Voysey.

The first thing I did was Google 'Voysey' and was impressed to see that this produced 'about 440,000 results in 0.28 seconds!' On looking at some of these links it became increasingly apparent that Voysey was a name associated with considerable greatness.

It just so happened that we were seeing an architect friend a few days later and so I decided to seek his view on the Arts and Craft movement and C.F.A. Voysey in particular. When I asked him if he had ever heard of Charles Voysey, he laughed and said it was a bit like asking me, a doctor, if I had ever

heard of Alexander Fleming and penicillin. When I then went on to say that we would be looking at a house in Kidderminster in the near future that had been designed by C.F.A. Voysey, he was not only astonished that there was such a house, but intrigued - possibly even a little jealous? - to hear that we would be looking around it with a view to purchasing the property.

This conversation was largely duplicated by the two other architect friends I also spoke to about Oakhill and Voysey, and is the start of a process of education not just my wife and I, but also our children, have undergone about all things Voysey.

### **A History of Oakhill.**

On the 14<sup>th</sup> July 1899, two Kidderminster corn merchants, Samuel Harvey Loynes and Josiah Harvey sold a single lot of land (no 16) of 2816 square yards on the apex of a new road called Hill Grove crescent, to a carpet designer called Frederick John Mayers. The plot of land was situated approximately one mile away from Kidderminster train station on the other side of a hill, and had splendid unspoilt views across the Worcestershire countryside, with very little residential development of the surrounding area. Frederick Mayers paid the sum of three hundred and seventy three pounds, twelve shillings and six pence (approximately £130,000 in today's prices) for the land, and interestingly had already commissioned C.F.A. Voysey to design a house for this plot of land as indicated by the dates on the design Voysey produced that is now held in the RIBA collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum – the date on this design is April 1899 – about three months before the sale of the land was completed. We can only assume that the two men knew each other through their shared interest of carpet designs as both men had designed carpets for the local manufacturer of Tomkinsons. Frederick Mayers later went on to write a book called 'Carpet Designs & Designing' in 1934 in which he makes reference to Voysey and his carpet designing ability in not entirely flattering ways:

'For the purposes of this book the last two named (C.F.A. Voysey and Arthur Silver) must have a brief mention as they became more closely concerned with carpets than any others in the (Arts and Craft) movement, Morris himself excepted. Voysey was first and foremost an architect, but could not be content with designing less than the whole furnishings of his houses, and everything he touched was instantly marked by his personality and freshness of outlook. For several years he enjoyed a well merited success, the "Voysey Style" in spite of its severity, its uncompromising individuality, and various idiosyncrasies of its creator, became a widespread popular "vogue", not only in England, but also abroad. In his carpet designs, he was rigidly insistent on absolute "flatness", and quietly coloured patterns that always made an excellent basis for the decoration of a room. Curiously, however, although so intensely "logical" in most ways, he never quite realised that a carpet has to be looked at from all directions. Nearly all his carpet designs were obviously wallpapers adapted for weaving. This was a mistake that Dr. Dresser was always careful to avoid.' It would be interesting to know exactly what he thought of the house that Voysey had designed for him some 35 years earlier!

## Oakhill – The house

Oakhill is described in the National Heritage list for England as 'Two storeys. Irregular fenestration. Rough rendered. Tiled roof. Central gabled projection with 5 – light window; 4-light window to gabled left-hand section; casements, including one to right with leaded panes. A round-headed doorway. Rear elevation has deep eaves swept down between parapeted 2- storey canted bays with leaded lights; long rectangular casement windows to ground floor; French window', whilst in the Buildings of England and Worcestershire Oakhill is described as 'Late c19...built for the carpet designer F.J. Mayers by C.F.A.



Voysey, 1899. Typically roughcast, with sloping buttresses, irregular green painted casement windows, and tiled roof.

Asymmetrical entrance front, the main, more or less central gable with round-headed doorway; projecting gabled wing, left. The garden front is even more characteristic, its right half with two

canted bays (for dining and drawing rooms), the roof sweeping down between them. The left half is plainer, with a tall chimney as punctuation mark. Inside, a standard Voysey staircase doubling back above the front door; otherwise mostly altered. No 51, opposite, roughcast, quite small with hipped roof, may also be by Voysey, perhaps built for the coachman.'

What is interesting is that the original RIBA design of the house has obviously been changed over the years. Apart from some slight changes to the interior, the most notable change is an extension to the left of the front of the house described above as 'a projecting gable', which is not shown on the original design and whose footprint is not visible on old ordinance survey maps until well after 1903. Further evidence of this was found on discovering the original servants call boxes in the attic – there are in fact two separate boxes, one that correlates to all the rooms on Voysey's original design, and a second smaller box that correlates to the two new rooms created by the extension. The extension does appear to have been carried out incorporating many of the styles and materials used in the original part of the house so it does seem to fit with the time line we have, although we are not aware of whether or not Frederick Mayers used Voysey to design the extension.



### **Restoration work – some interesting findings.**

Interestingly, both the windows in the original building and those in the extension are of the same design and construction – a fact we discovered when we had all the windows stripped of the paint that had accumulated over the years and was stopping many of the windows opening and shutting properly. There were in fact several layers of paint on all the windows and it was possible to see some of the colours that the window frames had been painted in the past, and although the bright yellow paint we noted on many of the frames is surely not something the great man would have approved of, we did also find evidence of the more traditional green we have seen on other Voysey houses.

The hinge supports and screws on the window frames are all made of brass, an ornate back plate behind the window handle also having a brass fitment on it with the cap on



the pivot of the handle also being made of brass. All the windows, including those in the extension, carry the same manufacturer's serial number. Furthermore the doors into the extension are both of the same style as the doors in the rest of the house and also carry the same beehive style door handles and escutcheons (which were also painted over but have now been painstakingly cleaned). It is also notable that the reversible bolt door locks, as manufactured by A. Brown and Co, Birmingham, on all the interior doors are the model 'The Prize' No 174, whereas those to the extension are 'The Challenge No 177', possible a later version of 'The Prize No 174'. All this seems to suggest that when the extension was built, the then owner went to the trouble of trying to ensure consistency with the original building.

This obviously assumes that the windows and doors in Oakhill are original and this inevitably remains to be seen. We have, however, managed to find an Alfred Brown and Co, builders' ironmongers of 81 Smallbrook Street, Birmingham who were advertising in Peck's Trades Directory of Birmingham in 1897, suggesting that the doors and possibly door furniture could date from that era. One thing that does stand out for all the woodwork is the quality of the wood that has been used. The tradesmen who stripped down the windows and the wooden frames for us commented that they have never seen such knot free wood in window frames before. We have found what we believe to be one of the original doors in the loft that is still painted but we intend to have it stripped down if only to inspect the quality of the wood!



One of the Voysey designs that had caught our eyes on researching Voysey was the decorative Bird ventilation grill used in many of his interiors. Oakhill sadly does not have these wonderful grills, other than one in the library, which was an addition after we had decorated the library. All the grills in every

room had been painted over so we decided these had to be cleaned up. On doing so we discovered that the ventilation grill consisted of a cast iron frame surrounding an ornate patterned solid brass grill.

Of interest was the small logo on top of each cast iron frame which we initially thought was suggestive of the Voysey heart logo but with a scrolled line underneath. On researching this logo further, we have seen the same logo on a Voysey item at Blackwell in the Lake District. Although we have not been able to find the origin of that logo, and although the 'heart' design may just be wishful thinking on our behalf, the inevitable association with Voysey is reassuring.



Fireplaces have always been an integral party of a Voysey home and in this respect, Oakhill seems to conform with tradition. There are fireplaces in every bedroom upstairs as well as the dining room, living room and library downstairs. The fireplaces in the bedrooms are all cast iron with the two fireplaces in the larger bedrooms being identical, whereas the remaining three fireplaces are all of different styles. The grates on four of the five fireplaces,



however, are all identical suggesting a commonality of origin, the only non-conforming fireplace being the one found in the bedroom in the extension. We have found a fireplace for sale identical to the fireplaces in the large bedrooms that is described as 'a spectacular Art Nouveau fireplace with stylised fern panels. The hood has a simple linear design with a Macintosh influence.' This fireplace was from an Arts and Crafts house in Birmingham c 1908 once again suggesting a time line for these features. Unfortunately however, there is no manufacturer's mark on either the fireplace that is for sale, or on the

Oakhill fireplaces so the trail ends there for the moment.

The four fireplaces in the original part of the upstairs had carpets right up to the grates, but when we replaced one of the bedroom carpets we discovered that the fireplace in this room actually had a tiled hearth that had been concealed under the carpet. On discovering the tiles in this bedroom, we checked all the bedrooms and found similar tiles (albeit with varying degrees of damage) under all the carpets. We have since had the carpets cut back to reveal these tiles in all of these four bedrooms.

The fireplace in the living room is quite simple in comparison to the ones upstairs, consisting of a black stone surround and hearth with a light stone backing. It is quite large, but, quite frankly, something of a mystery to us! There is nothing I can find to suggest if this is the original fireplace or indeed any indication as to its origins. What is interesting, however, is that on the plans in the RIBA collection, the fireplace has extensive tiling all around it. We were therefore pleasantly surprised when tidying up the bottom of the garden, to find fragments of obviously hand made tiles as well as one or two complete tiles in a green colour that we have seen around other Voysey fireplaces. At some stage it would seem these were removed from the fireplace, perhaps when the



original one was replaced?

The one feature that people who visit the house always seem to notice is the lamp above the main entrance. It is a large Arts and Crafts lantern, which stands some 70 cm high. This had been painted a very dark green and looked decidedly neglected when we first move in to Oakhill, the glass panels being broken and covered in moss, and the bracket attaching the light to the wall being badly corroded in places. This therefore

became the object of a very pleasing cleanup and restoration process, which showed the lamp to be made of copper with a cast iron support and bracket. There appear to be no manufacturer's marks on the lamp, but it is now back, unpainted, in its rightful place above the door.

The over riding perception that occurs to us in the light of the little bit of restoration work we have carried out is the quite simply meticulous attention to detail and superb quality of material that were used in the construction of Oakhill. There is no doubt in our minds, that the craftsmen and workers involved in Oakhill's construction were also attentive to detail. Perhaps the discovery of three slightly crude lead coins with the very recognisable George and The Dragon motif seen on Sovereigns on them, that had been placed very carefully side-by-side on a joist under the floorboards of the main



bathroom shows this. We had had a leak in the ceiling above the cloakroom by the front door, which inevitably required the floorboards to be taken up leading to the discovery of these coins. We gather this was often done to bring good luck to the house and its occupants although we do wonder if the great man would have known or approved of his workmen doing this.

### Living in a Voysey house.

It really has been an education for my wife and I, along with our four children, to live in a house which plays a very small part in this country's heritage. You inevitably become absorbed into the intricacies of the Arts and Crafts movement and learn about some of the other great names associated with it, such as Benson, Knox and Mackintosh, to mention but a few. It has also been interesting to see how our new enthusiasm for all things Arts and Crafts has rubbed off on our children with our eldest, very much the artist of the family, fully appreciating the artistic significance of the Arts and Crafts movement, and all of the other three children (including an eight year old!) often recognising the 'Voysey influence' in houses we drive past.

We can also claim some artistic connection with this era, my wife's great great grandfather being Thomas Woodall, brother of George Woodall, both of Cameo glass fame. The brothers worked in nearby Stourbridge during the 1880s and we have often wondered if the Woodall brothers and Voysey knew

of each other's work or even ever met. They certainly all shared a common interest in design and artistry as well as significant reputations.

The house itself receives many plaudits from all who see it whether they know of Voysey or not, and it isn't uncommon to see people standing at the bottom of the drive admiring the house and wanting to know more about it. One of the biggest disadvantages however, is that with every thing you do to the house, you invariably uncover something which raises more questions about the house's history which you have to investigate further.

In purely practical terms, as a 19<sup>th</sup> century house, Oakhill really doesn't do too badly at all when it comes to 21<sup>st</sup> Century living. The actual layout of the house suits a large family well, and although not far from what is now the centre of Kidderminster, the surroundings are quiet except for the occasional audible 'toot' from the steam engines of the nearby Severn Valley railway, very reminiscent of the bygone era Oakhill was built in. Oakhill's position is at the top of a hill on the apex of a bend in the road with the rear of the house facing south with a mature garden containing some wonderful trees. Whilst there are now houses all around, this aspect makes for considerable privacy, with only the roof of a neighbouring house being just visible on the left at the bottom of the garden. We have, however, seen aerial photographs from the 1930s which showed that the area was still undeveloped from a property perspective and this does make us wonder what the view must have been like from the back of the property, perched as it is, on a hill. If there is one criticism all our family makes of Oakhill, then that is that it is a cold house when climate change brings us the winters we have had over recent years, but perhaps that is more of a reflection of 21<sup>st</sup> century people depending on central heating for warmth rather than using all those wonderful fireplaces as they were intended?

### **A work in progress**

The exterior of the house is complete although the gardens need some attention. Many of the rooms are also complete, the two rooms that we are most proud of being two of the smallest rooms in the house. Firstly the wine store, which when we arrived was nothing more than a broom cupboard and general junk store, but has since been fitted out with solid oak wine racks and storage cupboards courtesy of the same company who have done work for the Savoy Hotel in London, and secondly the cloakroom. The latter has the additional attraction of having been decorated with the spectacular Demon wallpaper courtesy of Trustworth Studios in America. We anticipate



however, that Oakhill will be a long-term project, our aim ultimately being to restore the house to as close to what it would have been like in its prime, but with the realistic expectation that the house can be lived in by a large family in the twenty first century.