

Charles Francis Annesley Voysey

Charles Francis Annesley Voysey, eldest son of the Rev. Charles Voysey, was born in 1857 at Hessle, near Hull, in Yorkshire, where his father and uncle were then running a school. A few years later, after a short period in Jamaica, his father became Vicar of Healaugh, a small Yorkshire village near Tadcaster. Voysey was taught at home by his father, who was by far the most important influence on the son for the rest of his life. The Rev. Charles Voysey was a remarkable character, an unorthodox clergyman who was eventually deprived of his living and expelled from the Church of England for denying the doctrine of everlasting hell, after a trial for heresy. This took place in 1871 and the family then moved to London. The young Voysey was sent to Dulwich College, but he failed to settle down at school and left after eighteen months to complete his education under a private tutor.

In 1874 Voysey became an articled pupil to J. P. Seddon and remained with him as pupil and assistant until 1879, when he went for a short time to the office of Saxon Snell, a specialist in hospitals and work-houses; he did not find this work congenial and in 1880 was glad to accept an offer to join the staff of George Devey, with whom he spent a couple of years before setting up on his own account.

Voysey took an office in Westminster towards the end of 1881 or early in 1882, and his practice began slowly with small alterations and surveys. In 1883 he entered for the competition for the new Admiralty offices but was unplaced: none of his drawings has survived. In 1884 he joined the newly formed Art Workers' Guild and in the same year became engaged to Mary Maria Evans, to whom he was married in 1885.

During the period of waiting for more substantial commissions Voysey produced designs for wallpapers and textiles. A. H. Mackmurdo, at that time a close friend, had given him the necessary technical information for this work. Voysey's earliest designs, made during 1883, were sold to Jeffrey & Co., and by 1890 he was also working for Turnbull & Stockdale. In 1893 he obtained a regular contract from Essex & Co. for wallpaper designs and in 1895 a similar contract for textiles from Alexander Morton. He also worked for Woolams and for Wylie & Lockhead.

At the time of his engagement he designed a house for himself, hoping to get a friend to advance the money for building. The house was not built, but in 1888 the plans were published in *The Architect* and were seen by M. H. Lakin, who asked him to build a similar house at Bishop's Itchington. This was his first complete building and soon led to other commissions.

During the late eighties Voysey began to show in his work the characteristics which in a short time made him a celebrity. His earlier designs, all unexecuted, were strongly reminiscent of Devey and of the more romantic buildings of Norman Shaw. A series of his designs was published by *The British Architect* from 1889 onwards. In the later examples Voysey turned away from picturesque, many-gabled elevations, rambling plans and extravagant construction, producing instead neat and economical designs for small houses with simple rectangular plans, hipped roofs of low pitch and walls of roughcast brick. Voysey recorded that several of his early clients were Quakers who were attracted by the plainness of his work and encouraged his pursuit of simplicity. It is also possible that the development of his new style had some connection with the fact that in 1890 he moved from a commonplace brick villa in Streatham to a charming small Regency house in Melina Place, St John's

Wood. This house was faced in white stucco and had wide eaves and a low slate roof.

In the later nineties Voysey designed two or three houses for richer clients, and by comparison with earlier and later work these are almost fussy. New Place, Haslemere, Norney, near Shackleford, and Sir Walter Essex's house facing Tooting Common, designed in 1897, all show a type of semi-classical detail that Voysey soon abandoned. In fact he seems to have tired of these details even before the Essex house was built: he prepared a revised and simpler design and, when this was turned down by Lady Essex, he threw up the job and handed over to Walter Cave, who built a house on the lines of Voysey's first scheme.

In 1898 Voysey was working on designs for several houses in the north of England. Only two were actually built, Moor Crag and Broadleys, both on the road from Bowness to Ulverston. These houses, though comparatively large, revert to the simplicity of earlier and smaller work. Broadleys has a hipped roof with wide eaves characteristic of earlier work at Perrycroft, near Malvern. Moor Crag was designed a few months later and was given a roof of 50 degree pitch with cross gables, at either end; this type of roof was used in many designs during the next few years, including his own house at Chorleywood designed in 1899 and completed in 1900. Spade House at Sandgate, near Folkestone was also designed in 1899 for H. G. Wells.

It is worth remarking that although Wells and other progressive writers and artists of the period were among Voysey's clients and admirers he had no sympathy with the socialist ideals of William Morris or the Fabians. He remained a firm believer in the established order of things and thought that every man should keep his proper station in life. He placed the architect somewhere between the gentry and the upper servants!

During the period from 1900 to 1907 Voysey was working on some of his most satisfactory houses and also designed much of his best furniture. The early influences of Devey, Shaw and Mackmurdo had been outgrown, and every detail of his work was drawn from personal experience of building and the crafts. Unfortunately his increasing conviction that he had the only right answer to every problem combined with attacks of illness to make him more and more touchy in his dealings with clients. He felt that compromise was wrong and that any sacrifice of principle to expediency was out of the question. His inflexibility undoubtedly lost him a number of clients in the years immediately preceding the First World War.

In 1909 Voysey designed a small stone house for his friend A. W. Simpson at Kendal, and in this case there was complete understanding between the architect and the client, who was himself an expert craftsman. Another building of the same date was Lodge Style, a 'Gothic' bungalow on the outskirts of Bath, and at this time Voysey introduced noticeably Gothic details into a number of his designs, perhaps as a protest against the popular Wren revival.

Voysey's architectural practice virtually ceased with the outbreak of war in 1914, but in the 1920s he continued, or reverted to, his work as a designer of papers and textiles. He made a number of charming drawings for Morton Sundour fabrics, and as late as 1925 the Essex Wallpaper Co. still advertised that their latest pattern books included 'many papers by C. F. A. Voysey, the Genius of pattern. These supply the Something Distinctive for which you are looking'. His architecture had gone out of fashion with the rise of 'Banker's Georgian', but in the

spring of 1927 an interesting series of articles on his work was published anonymously in the *Architect & Building News*. Possibly the author was Voysey's friend H. B. Creswell, who was often a contributor to that paper, certainly the articles marked the first sign of a revival of interest in Voysey's work. In 1931 the Batsford Gallery staged a Voysey exhibition in association with *Architectural Review*. This was inspired by John Betjeman, who wrote an article on the man and his work in the *AR* of October 1931. A few years later Nicolaus Pevsner was writing of Voysey in his *Pioneers of modern design* and also in the Dutch *Elseviers maandschrift*, while in Denmark Kay Fisker was praising his work in an article entitled 'Tre pionerer fra aarhundredskiftet'.

In 1936 Voysey was one of the first to be awarded the newly established distinction of Designer for Industry by the Royal Society of Arts, and in 1940, a year before his death, he received the RIBA Gold Medal. Voysey was never quite sure whether to be pleased or amused or distressed by his rediscovery and the honours that followed; but he certainly felt that many of those who sung his praises had completely misunderstood his philosophy and the lessons that he had tried to teach.

One of Voysey's last appearances as a lecturer was in February 1934, when he addressed the Architectural Society of the Bartlett School, with Professor Richardson as Chairman. A summary of his talk was printed in *The RIBA Journal*, XLI, 1934, p.479. At the Bartlett Voysey repeated many of the ideas that he had put before the Architectural Association in 1911 in a lecture entitled 'Patriotism in architecture'. He deeply distrusted foreign travel because, as he said: 'Each country has been given its own characteristics by its Creator and should work out its own salvation ... The best architecture in the past has always been native to its own country and has grown out of a thorough knowledge of local requirements and conditions. Requirements include body, mind and spirit. Conditions include Climate and National Character.' Commenting on the contemporary scene, he said: 'Modern architecture is pitifully full of such faults as proportions that are vulgarly aggressive, mountebank eccentricities in detail and windows lying down on their sides. Like rude children we have broken away and turned our backs on tradition. This is false originality, the true originality having been, for all time, the spiritual something given to the development of traditional forms by the individual artist.' In this last lecture, as always, Voysey stressed the need for self-control, and in conclusion he said that 'All true culture depends upon the love of truth, the love of beauty and the love of God, and can never grow otherwise'.

Forty years earlier, in an interview published in the first volume of *The Studio* in 1893, Voysey is quoted as saying: 'It is not necessary for artists to be bound merely to tradition and precedent, or to be crammed to overflowing with the knowledge of the products of Foreign nations. They should use their God-given faculties, and if they have thoughts worth expressing, the means to express them sufficiently are, and always will be, at hand. Not that we need shut our eyes to all human efforts, but that we should go to nature direct for inspiration and guidance; then we are at once relieved from restrictions of style or period, and can live and work in the present with laws revealing always fresh possibilities.'

In everything that he said or wrote about design Voysey returned again and again to the necessity for a proper respect and reverence for the Creator and all the works of Nature. When he spoke, as he often did, of 'fitness' he was not thinking of the material fitness of the functionalist or the exponent of structural expression. To Voysey a house was not a machine for living, it was a *home*, and home to him meant spiritual as well as material shelter, a place in which mind and spirit as well as the body could find rest and comfort.

The foundation upon which Voysey based his faith was the early teaching received from his father. The Rev. Charles Voysey had come into conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities of his day because, as his son put it, 'He believed in a Good God instead of an Angry One!' Voysey was a boy of fourteen when his father was deprived of his living and the event left a lifelong impression. Up to that time he had been taught at home by his father and had had little companionship of his own age; his three brothers were too young to make suitable playmates, and his father's position as vicar of a small Yorkshire village tended to cut him off from the children of the neighbours. His two elder sisters were boarders at a school to which Ruskin was a frequent visitor, so it was only to be expected that he was introduced to Ruskinian ideas at an early age.

When the family removed to London Voysey was sent to Dulwich College, but with his background it is not surprising that he did not find it easy to fit into the life of a public school. After a short and unhappy period he was removed and continued his education under a private tutor until the time came to choose a profession. In 1874 he was articled to J. P. Seddon, with whom he got on very well and by whom he tells us he was soon given the opportunity to paint the walls of a church with life-size angels and also to design a large mosaic wall panel for the science section of a college (presumably this was at Aberystwyth). Decorative work of this kind must have made a pleasant change from the routine tracing and detailing usually allotted to an architect's pupils.

Voysey said later that the choice of an architectural career was suggested by the fact that his grandfather, also Annesley Voysey, had been one of the old style engineer-architects who built harbours and lighthouses as well as domestic buildings. This earlier Voysey practised for some years in Jamaica, where he built among other things a church in an Italianate-Romanesque manner, and he died in the West Indies at a comparatively early age. The Rev. Charles Voysey had therefore some knowledge of the profession to which he apprenticed his oldest son, and several of his friends were architects, among them George Devey who became a member of the Theistic Church established by Voysey after his arrival in London. On completion of his articles young Voysey remained for a time as assistant to Seddon, and then after a short period under Saxon Snell he was glad to accept the offer of a job with Devey.

Both Seddon and Devey were interesting men, and Voysey was lucky in coming under two such masters. Seddon was an early member of the Architectural Association, and he has been quoted as telling that body that: 'We want neither a new nor a universal style, we should know nothing about styles; the very name is a hindrance to architects, however useful to the antiquary.' And again he said: 'Let us leave to posterity our productions and be sure that if we work simply, neither copying nor striving for singularity, we cannot so far emancipate ourselves from the feelings of our own age and country but that they will give an impress to our work, though we may not discern it for ourselves.' The quotations already given from Voysey's lectures are sufficient evidence that he never forgot the teaching of his first master either in his theory or in his practice.

Under Devey there were different lessons to be learned; Voysey came into contact with country house design on a big scale and with work of the highest quality, carried out for clients who could afford and appreciate the best craftsmanship of the time. He was also fortunate in being given practical experience as resident architect, or clerk of works, on some of Devey's smaller buildings and he travelled to Ireland on survey work; this greatly increased his self-confidence in dealing with practical matters, and he fully appreciated the value of the training. Looking back in later years, Voysey criticized Devey because he considered that much of his design was no more than brilliant pastiche. In the long run

it was probably the teaching of Seddon that made the greater impression, but the influence of Devey can certainly be seen in Voysey's early published drawings for a series of houses designed for imaginary clients.

It would be interesting to know whether it was Seddon who introduced Voysey to the writings of A. W. N. Pugin, which became his primary source of inspiration in later years and of whom Voysey wrote in *Individuality*, 1915, p.89: 'Pugin designed to the best of his ability to meet the requirements and conditions which were presented to his mind, classifying them and anointing them with his devout spirit, allowing his moral sentiments to play like a dancing light on every detail.' Voysey greatly admired the New Palace of Westminster and attributed all that was good in it to Pugin, saying that no one could compare with him for knowledge of Gothic and Tudor architecture and that for all his knowledge he managed to avoid falling into the habit of copying. 'Search the Houses of Parliament from top to bottom and you will not find one superficial yard that is copied from any pre-existing building.'

Pugin had laid down the principle that 'There shall be no features of a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction and propriety', and this remained at the back of Voysey's mind in every design that he made. He followed Pugin in his belief that each part of a building should be clearly seen and should indicate its purpose. Pugin had also said that 'An edifice which is arranged with the principle view of looking picturesque is sure to resemble an artificial waterfall or a made up rock, which are generally so un-naturally natural as to appear ridiculous'. It was probably because he saw signs of this weakness in some of Devey's designs that Voysey was afterwards critical of his master's work.

When it came to the consideration of ornament in building Voysey followed Pugin rather than Ruskin. He believed that any decoration that was used should have a meaning, and he had a lifelong interest in symbolism, which he used not only in details of his buildings but also in the design of book plates and badges, and in his designs for textiles and wallpapers. Voysey believed that although it was possible to have architecture without decoration, provided that the proportions and materials were good, not even the most exquisite and elaborate decoration could save an ill-proportioned building and turn it into architecture. In his book *Style and society*, 1971, p.13, Robert Macleod, writing of Pugin, says: 'If his arguments were successful in drawing attention away from stylistic superfluities to a more fundamental consideration of his principles, it would in the end dilute the archaeological fidelity to Gothic forms which was the other half of his gospel. And in the end this was what happened.' Something of the sort certainly happened in the case of Voysey; in some of his early designs there is clearly a Gothic, or Tudor, element, but this was eliminated in his maturity and only returned in some late works as a protest against the Wren revival.

Among his immediate seniors Voysey rated Norman Shaw very highly, he also admired the work of Butterfield, Brooks, Bentley, Sedding and Oldrid Scott. He said that it was from Bodley, Burges, Godwin and Mackmurdo that he learned that nothing was too small to deserve the attention of the architect. He admired Morris as a designer, but had no use for his socialist theories; when John Betjeman offered to lend him a book by Morris he replied: 'Many thanks for the offer of Morris's book. I do not feel I want to read him. He was too much of an atheist for me.' However, in an interview published in *The Builder's Journal* in September 1896 Voysey said of Morris: 'It is he who prepared the public mind and educated it, and who has done for me what I might not have been able to do for myself, made it possible for me to live.' On another occasion he said that after visiting the Morris Shop he did not dare to go again lest he be tempted to copy!

It is curious that although there are frequent mentions of Shaw, Morris

and Macmurdo in Voysey's notes and published writing there is no direct reference to Philip Webb. Yet of all the architects in practice in the latter part of last century Webb's uncompromising approach seems the nearest to Voysey's, and Webb above all lived up to Voysey's ideal as expressed in a letter to *The British Architect* in August 1912, when he wrote of 'struggling to keep up the dignity and honour of the profession by resisting the tradesman's attitude to commissions. If a painter is commissioned to paint a picture the one who commissions him does not order him how to do his work, but leaves him free and accepts the result ... It is because the public have no knowledge of or interest in art and are saturated with shop-keeper's ideas, that this principle has to be fought for ... I have done my best all my life in this direction, and have lost many a commission in consequence.' Webb, like Voysey, would throw up a commission rather than compromise. Another similarity lies in their approach to planning: Edwin Gunn said of Voysey: 'His plans often looked primitive but they worked' – a remark that could be applied with equal justice to many of Webb's buildings. Both Webb and Voysey regarded with suspicion the brilliant but theatrical effects achieved by Shaw, effects that must have had something to do with the ultimate corruption of the young Lutyens. Voysey considered Lutyens by far the ablest of the younger generation and maintained that it was his conversion to the Palladian style, more than anything else, that destroyed the prospect of a natural and healthy development of architecture in England. Shaw and Lutyens, whether in Classic or Romantic mood, could never for long resist the temptation to spring a surprise and often thought more of the impression on the visitor than of the comfort of the family.

Voysey, like Webb, was a builder of houses to be lived in, and writing of human needs in relation to domestic architecture he noted the following essential qualities: 'Repose, Cheerfulness, Simplicity, Breadth, Warmth, Quietness in a storm, Economy of upkeep, Evidence of Protection, Harmony with surroundings, Absence of dark passages, even-ness of temperature and making the house a frame to its inmates. Rich and Poor alike will appreciate these qualities.'

Some of the qualities that Voysey tried to give to his houses were obviously abstract or symbolic, but he also had ideas on the practical side of building that were unconventional and progressive in their day. He advocated solid ground floors to do away with the cold, damp air spaces below. He fed his fireplaces with air from outside the house, to avoid draughts, and for ventilation provided air flues alongside his smoke flues (an idea that he may have picked up during his short period with Saxon Snell, who was a pioneer in sanitation and ventilation). Voysey believed that a low room with proper ventilation saved heating costs and was at the same time more friendly as a living space; he also claimed that his iron casement, set in stone mullions, was less liable to rattling and more economical in upkeep than a timber window, although admittedly the Voysey window was more costly in the first place.

Voysey outlined his method of design as follows: 'Put down all the requirements in tabulated order of importance then all conditions, from which two lists you will be able to formulate a third – of materials. Then ask the everlasting *Why are we doing this at all?* Let motive strike the keynote of the tune of ideas, the key and rhythm of your song. You want, we will suppose, a home with all the qualities of peace and rest and protection and family pride, the privacy and mutual enjoyment, the hospitality and large hearted generosity of proportion. The doors will be wide in proportion to height, to suggest welcome – not standoffishly dignified like a coffin lid for the entrance of one body only. Then in the offices for the servants use, let them be cheerful and not shabby and dark, – someday men will be ashamed to do ugly things, and cheap and nasty treatment of servants will be regarded as dishonouring to the

master. – we must have light, bright, cheerful rooms, easily cleaned and inexpensive to keep. Not mocking the abodes of the wealthy, but sincerely sufficient for our use. This manner of going to work is the exact opposite of the usual method which is to seek the books and museums, or monuments of ancient time, or worse still the example of foreigners, and so to save personal thought and enquiry. – Forms that are stolen not only make us ridiculous, but leave our faculties starved and our characters degraded.’

Voysey was a small and slightly built man with light blue eyes and sandy hair which thinned and receded at an early age. A good portrait by Meredith Frampton exists in the collection of the Art Workers’ Guild, and there is a watercolour caricature in the Arts Club.

Shortly after his death Robert Donat, who was married to Voysey’s niece, broadcast a personal study of ‘Uncle Charles’ from which the following passages are quoted:

‘If you had wandered through various rooms of the Arts Club in Dover Street, London, any time after eleven o’clock in the morning until about the same hour at night, you would almost certainly have noticed an elderly gentleman with features greatly distinguished by the cut of his nose and the arch of his brow, the extraordinary sensitiveness and pugnacity of his mouth, and the distant, dreaming look of the visionary in his eye. Probably the first thing you would have noticed was the narrow, immaculately clean starched collar, the colour of which was the brightest thing in the room. It was a beautiful blue. You would probably also have noticed that the collar of his jacket had no lapels. He designed all his clothing himself, and he had a rooted objection to anything that harboured dust or dirt of any description. Therefore there were no unnecessary nooks and crannies in his clothing, nor even cuffs to his trouser bottoms. He was clean and prim and gentle, but of firm disposition.

‘He was the sort of many you would never dream of taking any liberty with. You would probably have hesitated to introduce yourself. Automatically he commanded your respect. There was nothing forbidding about him and yet there was aloofness and distinction in abundance.

• ‘If I have conjured up a vision of a very sweet, gentle, kind old gentleman I have only half succeeded, because there was so very much more to him than that. You may have got the impression that butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. It certainly wouldn’t unless it happened to be the very best butter. But if there was the slightest defect in the butter I’m afraid, without more ado, he would have spat it out. He liked only the best of everything.

‘Of all his remarkable attributes, the most remarkable thing about him, I think, was his smile. It was a lovely smile. There was more kindness and more simple delight in humour and more sheer affection in that smile than in any smile I have ever beheld. One of his greatest friends was his brother [Ellison Voysey]. To see these two brothers together was always a delight. They were both inordinately fond of oysters, and on one or two occasions I had the pleasure of taking them out to a famous restaurant on Piccadilly Circus and watching them consume a dozen or two of the best. But consume is an inadequate word – a ridiculously inadequate word – to describe the gradual disappearance of those oysters.

‘Neglected he was, to a certain extent, but neglected by his own choice. He drew apart from the world, like many a great artist before him, simply because he couldn’t altogether cope with his work and with the world at the same time. He chose his loneliness, but he didn’t particularly like it. He had all he needed and more, and his rooms in St James’s Street, though simple, were extremely comfortable and were filled with beautiful things of his own designing.’

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