

The drawings at the RIBA

Provenance: Nearly all the drawings at the RIBA were originally kept in Voysey's rooms at St James's Street in the same two chests designed by Voysey himself in which they eventually came to the Institute. When in 1941 illness made it impossible for Voysey to continue living on his own, his son carried him off to Winchester, where he spent the last few months of his life, and the chests were removed and sent to a place of safety along with the treasures of the RIBA Collection. In 1943, in accordance with his father's wish, Charles Cowles Voysey presented the drawings to the Institute as a permanent memorial.

The drawings cover all the varied aspects of Voysey's work, and include 88 designs for buildings, 8 designs for extensive alterations or additions to buildings, 260 designs for furniture, 226 graphic designs and 208 designs for wallpapers and textiles. This represents the great majority of Voysey's surviving drawings, and only the wallpaper and textile designs are surpassed by the V & A's collection, which has recently been enriched by a number of designs from the Morton textile firm. There are only a few gaps in the RIBA's collection which should be mentioned. Nine out of the forty-five buildings known to have been executed by Voysey (discounting stables, cottages, lodges &c attached to houses) are not represented. These are: The Cottage, Bishop's Itchington, Warwicks, c.1889; the final design for the Forster house at Bedford Park, London, 1891; the Wentworth Arms Inn, Elmesthorpe, Leics, 1895; the pavilion at Oldbury Park, Birmingham, 1899; The Orchard, Chorleywood, Herts, 1899 (drawings for which are at the Geffrye Museum, London, and in the collection of Brian Blackwood); Priors Garth, near Puttenham, Surrey, 1900; White Cottage, Lyford Road, Wandsworth, London, 1903 (drawings for which are at the house); Tilehurst, Bushey Grange Road, Bushey, Herts, 1903; and the final design for the bungalow at Barnham Junction, Sussex, 1909. Also unrepresented are the unexecuted, early designs for buildings in a somewhat immature picturesque style inspired by Devey. This last omission may have been deliberately made by Voysey himself, who went through his drawings and other effects in old age, adding signatures to the drawings, making additions to the 'Black Book' (his own list of his works) and collating cuttings and photographs into a scrapbook, now in the possession of his son.

Because the drawings cover such a span of years and such a wide variety of designs, they give a good idea of how Voysey worked. Changes can be discerned over the course of his career: John Brandon-Jones discusses above Voysey's development as a designer of houses, and Peter Floud first described Voysey's development as a wallpaper designer (*Penrose Annual*, LII, 1958, pp.10-14). But what is remarkable is that despite these changes Voysey's designs retain a high degree of consistency: they show how in a single-minded way he worked out solutions to functional and visual problems according to his principle of fitness for purpose, and then reused the same solutions over a period of years, sometimes modified or added to. And they also show how unified was his approach to design, whether he was dealing with buildings, furniture or decorative work.

The very appearance of the drawings displays a remarkable uniformity and neatness which reflects Voysey's character and ideas. The methodical régime in Voysey's office has already been described (see John Brandon-Jones, 'C. F. A. Voysey' in *Victorian architecture* (ed. P. Ferriday), 1963, pp.276-277), and Voysey apparently kept such strict control over his

assistants that only very slight differences in the drawings betray the presence of different hands. H. Gaye and H. Stevens are the only draughtsmen's names inscribed on drawings.

Most drawings, with the exception of the ones belonging to the later, less successful years which are made on poorer quality paper, are on half-imperial sheets of Whatman paper which exactly fitted the drawing board which Voysey designed for himself. The drawings are treated in a similar way whatever they are for. They are fitted economically on to the sheet and are carefully labelled in a script designed by Voysey himself, with occasional misspellings which betray Voysey's unconventional education. The client's name is almost invariably given with full titles – Voysey was very aware of social distinctions. Except in the case of later drawings, which are often in pen, plans, elevations and sections are usually drawn in with precise lines in hard pencil and are often washed in clear, bright colours. Voysey disliked the greenery-gallery of what he called the 'Spook school' (see *Magazine of Art*, II, 1904, p.211), and there are some finished perspectives in gay, almost garish watercolour.

There are no topographical drawings of buildings: the only study drawings are of plants and birds and the occasional figure motif; there are no preparatory drawings, such as the thumbnail perspectives made by other architects such as Philip Webb; and there are few alternative designs. These omissions could be due to selection, but they consort very well with what is known of Voysey. Cowles-Voysey says that his father drew with ease and confidence, seldom using an eraser. Voysey was against working from sketches of other people's designs: '... there is a wide difference between the influence of memory not deliberately referred to, and the determined espousal of a pre-existing design. What you can remember is your own, what you sketch you steal' (*Individuality*, 1915, p.88) and advocated that the designer should '... gather his knowledge of form by making careful diagrams of flowers and plants, by drawing plans and elevations and sections, he will then learn the true form of every part, with its structural relation of parts' (*ibid.*, p.13).

The drawings for both houses and furniture show clearly how Voysey evolved certain types, and then repeated them many times.

In a house of any size the main house and offices are usually contained in separate blocks which are either placed side by side (as for example at the house near Puttenham, c.1896-97, [117] & Fig.9, or Norney, near Shackleford, 1897, [125] & Fig.13) or are at an angle to one another (as for example at Broadleys, Windermere, 1898, [138] & Fig.15, or Littleholme, Frinton, 1906, [41] & Fig.32). Frequently the entrance lobby, sometimes with the stairs, is in a separate projection (as for example in the house at Kidderminster [56], or at Littleholme, Guildford, c.1906 [40]). There are other features which continually reappear: for example a pair of bay windows with a veranda in between (as in the house near Puttenham, c.1896-97, [117] & Fig.9, or in Moorcrag, Windermere, 1898, [139] & Fig.20); or stone-walled terraces (as at Broadleys, Windermere, 1898, [138] & Fig.15, New Place, Haslemere, 1897, [49] & Fig.14, or The Pastures, North Luffenham, c.1901, [109] & Fig.25); or pitched roofs with cross-gables (as in Norney, near Shackleford, 1897, [125] & Fig.13, or The Pastures, North Luffenham, c.1901, [109] & Fig.25). And of course the typical Voysey details, such as the white roughcast, the iron casement windows with stone dressings and the elegant iron gutter brackets, reappear constantly.

The same consistency can be seen in the designs for furniture. Designs,

once formulated, are repeated many times, as can be seen in the case of the lathe-back chair which is first seen in a design with a watermark of 1891 [208] and appears last in a design of c.1921 [228]; or the case of the chair with the splat pierced by a heart-shape, which is first seen in a design of 1898, [210] & Fig.53, and last appears in a design of 1908 [225]; or again in the case of the easy chair with the lunette-shaped top, which is first seen in a design of 1900 (see Fig.58) and is last seen in one of 1908 (see note to [212]). In his later years, when he was turning towards more traditional forms, Voysey reused his old furniture designs, but added more details as can be seen for example by comparing a design for a chair of 1902 to a design for a commode of c.1919 [255].

When Voysey submitted furniture designs to manufacturers they were usually either copies or near copies of designs made earlier for individual clients (for example this happened in the case of a billiard table design [183] and a piano design, [320] & Fig.73). This process also operated in the case of metal fittings: for example a light fitting designed for Broadleys, Windermere, appears in an Elsley catalogue (see note to [891]). In turn, when Voysey was designing for individual clients he could specify standardized fittings of his own design, and there are many inscriptions on his designs for furniture referring to fittings by their catalogue numbers.

Voysey's unified approach to design is demonstrated in the way in which he designed his furniture on the same Puginian principle of assembling clearly separate parts which indicate their purpose, which he followed in his designs for buildings, and in the way in which he uses certain forms, to different scales, in both buildings and furniture. Examples of pieces of furniture formed out of clearly separate parts are a writing table designed for S. C. Turner in 1906 [425], which consists of a pedestal type desk with on top a pair of paper cases of a type designed in 1896 (see [317]), and a settle designed for R. W. Essex in 1903, [330] & Fig.75, which is made up of a reading chair, two small cupboards, bookshelves and a ledge. A striking instance of similar forms appearing in architecture and furniture can be seen by comparing a clock case designed in 1895, [240] & Fig.108, with a stable gateway designed c.1897, [117] & Fig.12. The slender posts topped by thin, cornice-like capitals which are used so often in furniture designs reappear as piers in the design for the Sanderson factory at Chiswick, c.1902, [63] & Fig.42; and the corner buttresses used so often in designs for houses reappear as corner posts in a design of 1895 for a chest of drawers, [233] & Fig.61.

Voysey's designs are also unified by his typical flat, stylized decorative motifs which appear everywhere in a great variety of mediums and to quite different scales. Hearts appear everywhere from bed backs and chair backs to letterplates, hinges and bookplates. The birds and berries which appear in a piano music rest [324] or a hinge, [416] & Fig.83, or the stylized trees which appear in a screen [92].3, can easily be paralleled in designs for wallpapers and fabrics. In some cases exactly the same motifs are used in different contexts: the same roundels depicting country characters appear in stained glass as are used in a wallpaper design (see note to [134]) and the same depiction of Love and the Pilgrim appears in both a book cover and a poster (see note to [637]).

Many of the drawings are particularly interesting either because they show designs which, though executed, no longer retain the appearance which Voysey intended or because they show objects, such as pieces of furniture or ephemera such as letterheadings, posters &c which may well have been executed, but can no longer be traced.

Few of Voysey's houses retain their original bright colouring: in the drawings they have pristine white walls which contrast with the red of tile copings, chimneypots and curtains, the bright green of drain pipes and water butts, the black of gutter brackets and tarred plinths and the

gay colours of flowering creepers. Time has wrought even greater changes in the gardens, and in order to see the neat appearance which they were supposed to have, with shaped beds and clipped shrubs, formally laid out, it is necessary to look at such drawings as those for the gardens at Lowicks, Frensham, 1895 [40].3 & 4, at New Place, Haslemere, 1897 & 1901 [49].1 & 8, or at Henley-in-Arden, 1909 [51].1 & 2 & Fig.37.

There are a large number of drawings for unexecuted designs which, though sometimes not the most exciting drawings aesthetically, are very revealing about aspects of Voysey which are not usually stressed.

Voysey is associated with simple white houses with low, spreading lines. But when, as in a town, the site was not unrestricted, he favoured a tower house design. The only design of this sort which he executed is the Forster's House in South Parade, Bedford Park, London, but there are other, unexecuted designs, such as a design of c.1889 for an unspecified town site [165], a design of 1903 for Bognor [20] and another design of 1903 for Bedford Park, [88] & Fig.28. Voysey's strikingly simple houses were built for middle-class clients. But he was a believer in the social hierarchy, and his designs for aristocratic clients were more traditional. For example an unexecuted design of 1895 for Lord Lovelace [111] has relief sculpture in stone and carved window frames, and an unexecuted design of 1904 for Lady Somerset, [78] & Fig.29, is in stone with a formal entrance tower. There are also unexecuted designs which suggest that even when designing for the middle classes Voysey would have abandoned his usual roughcast more often if given the chance: examples are a design of c.1898 for a house at Glassonby, [45] & Fig.17, and the design of c.1903-04 for Bracknell Gardens, Hampstead [65]. When Voysey's architectural practice began to decline in the years preceding the First World War his ideas on house design were becoming more conservative. The only executed design which shows this trend is the house of 1909 at Combe Down [34], but there are several unexecuted designs which show rather eccentric experimentation with courtyard plans, towers, crenellations and Gothic arches (see designs of 1914, [7] & Fig.38, and [130], of c.1920 [57] and of c.1922 [54]).

Voysey is rightly famous for his houses and indeed built few other types of building, apart from his fascinating factory at Chiswick, [63] & Fig.42. But it is interesting to see in his unexecuted projects how he approached other sorts of buildings. His designs for large public buildings, for example for the Ottawa Government buildings, c.1914 [113], and for Wimbledon Town Hall, 1927 [96], were straightforwardly Gothic; his design of 1910 for office blocks, [91] & Fig.45, has a rather forbidding brick façade with plain, uniformly spaced windows; a 1923 design for flats, [68] & Fig.49, is a Gothic tower block; and a design of 1901 for a school, [61] & Fig.41, has a stone exterior with statues on the apex of two of the gable ends. Voysey's idea for a telephone box of 1923, [914] & Fig.120, was a colourfully heraldic, Gothic design.

It is also interesting to see from unexecuted designs what Voysey's attitudes were to older buildings. His somewhat unfortunate design of c.1907-08 [30] for additions to the Colchester office of the Essex & Suffolk Equitable Insurance Society reveals that he was quite prepared to tamper with a Classical building which he probably considered dull and alien; whereas in 1910-11, when his designs for a convalescent home at Holmbury St Mary were turned down, he was deeply reluctant to tamper with a vernacular, old English barn in order to convert it for a new use (see note to [52]).

In conclusion, the drawings at the RIBA give a very complete picture of Voysey as a designer. They show every aspect of his work from buildings to bookplates, executed and unexecuted, at its best and sometimes at its worst, and they give an insight into the way in which a very original mind worked.