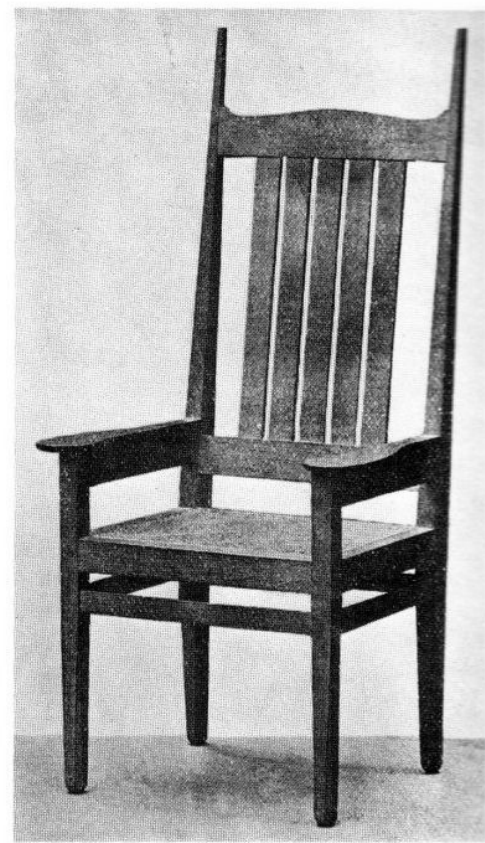


## Chapter 5 Furniture Designs, 1898–1910 and the Voysey Interior

A mean man will inevitably tend to shabbiness in the hidden parts of his work; he will put deal bottoms to his satinwood casket, and fasten up his joinery with screws or nails to save the labour of dovetailing or mortising. How often we see effectiveness in the place of genuine quality. What looks rich but is only brainless elaboration. An anxiety to appear clever rather than to be clever, to make a show to create applause and attract attention, are all due to love of self more than love of virtue for its own sake.<sup>1</sup>

Voysey had two principal concerns in designing the furniture to be used in his houses and he sums them up in this statement: first to produce a design which eschews ‘brainless elaboration’, that is to say which adopts the minimum of stylistic trickery and ornament consistent with usefulness and appearance; second to seek, not ‘effectiveness’ but ‘genuine quality’, to ensure that the work produced is made to a high standard of craftsmanship. The third clue which he offers to his general philosophy of working is the link he so clearly draws between the attainment of the ideal of well-designed craftsmanship and the satisfying of a moral imperative, the search for ‘virtue for its own sake’. If we tend to forget that Voysey was both a devout Christian and a committed and consistent moralist, such statements – and they are frequent in his writings – will remind us of it.

It is almost uncanny to see the way in which Voysey’s output in 1898 and 1899 suddenly rose to a frenzied rate; the houses of those years we have already seen but their planning did not leave him without the time to produce some of his best-known furniture – and his best – in that brief period. Two chairs from 1898, both widely seen in his interiors (48 and 49), use a similar seat and support structure and an exaggeratedly high back. One incorporates the heart motif which has become a Voysey trademark; a single broad splat is pierced by two hearts, one inverted, the splat being formed to follow and emphasize their shape. The second has a back formed simply of five slats or lathes, arranged vertically. Both chairs are in oak, Voysey’s favourite wood. The legs are tapered and chamfer gradually from a square to an octagonal section; this also is a Voysey trademark which will in future be referred to simply as the ‘chamfered leg’. The stretchers are plain, rectangular in section and slender; the seat frame is similarly simple with only a curved moulding to relieve the front lower edge. The back supports taper almost to a point and continue some inches above the top rail, exaggerating further the attenuated



effect. The seats are of rush though a leather finish, natural in colour fixed with close set round-headed bronze tacks, was sometimes used instead. The finish was clean from the plane, no wax, varnish or stain being used – another Voysey trademark. If this was the typical Voysey chair from these years, 1898 also produced the standard cabinet design, later repeated in several slightly differing forms; it will pay to look at this as closely as the chairs since it also establishes several recurring features and principles. The example shown (50) is the Kelmscott cabinet of 1899, unusual in the degree of brass ornament used but differing only in proportion from the first known use of this form, which was for a music cabinet. Both pieces, as indeed very probably the first examples of the two chairs, were produced for one of Voysey's best clients. W. Ward Higgs. At this date Voysey was preparing for him an interior at 23 Queensborough Terrace, Bayswater in London. The carcase of the cabinet sits on a wider frame with four tapering legs, plain stretchers and a simple moulding to the bottom edge. A simple moulding joins frame to carcase. There are two doors with long strap hinges terminating in heart shapes – in this case the hearts are incised with bird shapes. The piece is capped with a heavily overhanging moulded cornice rail, slightly wider than the bottom frame and with a plain flat top. It is not large – few of Voysey's pieces were – its overall height being only 133 cm. The original finish would as usual have been white oak with no dressing, the brass detail left unpolished, though as with most



extant pieces a polish has subsequently been applied. In this case, because the cabinet was made to house an edition of the Kelmscott Press Chaucer, brass plates are attached incised with the words, 'Kelmscott Chaucer'; these plates are laid on red leather which emphasizes the lettering and a contemporary account also refers to a 'vermilion enamelled interior', though no trace of this remains. This piece was unique though several cabinets of similar form and construction were made.

Other pieces were also produced at this period. One was a magnificent dresser (51), an adaptation of the traditional form of such pieces, first made between 1898 and 1900 and later repeated; as with the cabinet there were several known similar designs, including one for H.G. Wells at Spade House. The square supports have square caps to them and another typical feature – seen also in the double bed dealt with earlier – is the carrying up of the supports above the finished height of the piece. The same square, capped supports, carried up over the main structure, are seen in the writing desk or bureau of 1899 (53). This has a fall front with vertical strap hinges, a glazed cupboard below and recessed glazed cupboard above. It is tall, at 219cm only 10cm shorter than the dresser, its height emphasized by a width of only 60cm. Both pieces were in the first instance made for the same client as the Kelmscott cabinet, Ward Higgs; the bureau also was probably later repeated, a design existing for a wider version differing only in detail.

At the end of the decade Voysey was certainly employed in making furniture for his own house, The Orchard. Some pieces used in the house – for example the bed and chest of drawers and the hand-painted clock mentioned in an earlier chapter – were moved from earlier homes but much was specially made, including a cabinet of the Kelmscott type, a wash-stand, a plain wardrobe and various chairs. The interiors of The Orchard will be dealt with and illustrated later.

The use and re-use of basic designs was not unique to Voysey but the consistency with which he did, throughout his career, tend to alter existing forms to new needs is marked. It is largely explained by the importance of proportion in his work and his view that a difference of proportion gave new characteristics to a shape that was similar to another. He writes:

The sense of proportion being one of temperament far more than learning and education, one of feeling far more than thought, will, if sincerely exercised, stamp any work of art with the character that is the unique possession of its owner. It should be a spontaneous expression and never deliberately formularised. When a designer consciously fixes a scale of proportion for his own use it becomes a mannerism and eccentricity, appearing like self-advertisement, when all the while it should be as unnoticed in its birth as our own voices are to ourselves. Or when proportions are borrowed, all personal quality is hidden and the work strikes us as commonplace and without life, interest or distinction. The mathematicians' maxims of Greek proportion leave us starved and cold, as if in the presence of death.<sup>2</sup>

This was written considerably later in Voysey's life, in *Individuality* published in 1915, but it is a fair representation of the view he had held for most of his working career.

To speak of the importance of proportion in design is to say everything yet to





52  
Dining chair with arms and leather seat,  
c.1902.

53  
Bureau with a fall-front writing desk and  
glazed cupboards, 1899.

54  
Contemporary photograph of an easy chair  
with dark velvet upholstery, 1900.

say nothing; it is on a par with saying that the ability to write is an important quality for an author to possess – the importance lies in the author's individual awareness of language and the use he makes of whatever special gift or aptitude he may have. The gift itself is a much more personal matter, rarely susceptible of definition; so Voysey's gift for the manipulation of proportion was one of the principal keys to his success as an architect and designer. We see it best in comparing pieces of his work. The dining chair of 1902, for instance (52), is basically the same chair as the lathe-back chair of 1898. It differs in the decorative detail of the back which here is a single broad splat, a single sheet of oak, keyed with exposed dovetails into the back rails and incised with a single heart; it has the same form and structure, the chamfered legs, tapering rear supports, simple decorative curve detail to top and bottom rails, plain stretchers and a choice of seat covering. The proportions are as different as can be – the chair here is broader, lower, the relationship of all its parts to each other changed. It retains absolutely the 'personal quality' which Voysey speaks of above, for the proportions and details he has given it are his own; so does its earlier fellow. Here, in the use of proportion in this way, lies the key to and the demonstration of Voysey's designs; here also lies the explanation of the apparent similarity between many of his designs; the possibility that the critic might turn round and complain of a lack of range is answered by the question, range of what? Voysey chose not to evolve hosts of differing shapes and forms – it is quite beyond doubt that he could have done so had he wished. He chose instead to deal with fineness of proportion.

This single-heart chair subsequently appeared in a range of sizes, some fine, lightweight and delicate, some heavy and chunky; it went into a limited form of production made by F.C.Nielsen; the design was also adapted for production and sale at Liberty's. The latest manifestation of a variation on this range of chairs, the double-heart back, the lathe back and the single-heart back was a chair of 1907 made for the Essex and Suffolk Equitable Insurance Company for use as office furniture.

As has been said earlier, Voysey's favoured material was oak with no finishing treatment of polish or varnish, in conjunction with metal fittings, brass or bronze, which were allowed to dull naturally. The exceptions to this use of materials are few: a mirror frame of 1901 design was 'to be carved in hard wood and gilded [this piece can be seen in the background of 59]; the grain of the wood is not to be filled up'; a clock case, undated on the drawing but made between 1903 and 1906, was in ebony and the drawing notes, 'figures and minutes inlaid with ivory. The whole case to be ebony. Ivory pins for mortices'. The other interesting departure from oak lay in the very few pieces of upholstered furniture. These we know to have been made up for there are contemporary photographs, though no examples survive. An easy chair, first drawing dated Feb. 1900 (54), existed in a number of coverings and with differing arm detail. The frame is oak and much of it is left exposed, the padding being added at strategic points. The structure of the chair resembles that of the dining chairs. Totally different in idea is the tub chair of 1902 (55), high-backed with ribbed padding and upholstery, the back flaring out distinctively at the top. There is no precedent for this in Voysey's work, and no successor. The covering material is not known though it certainly was not one of





55  
Contemporary photograph of a tub chair,  
upholstered, 1902.

56a  
Contemporary photograph of a folding table  
made without metal fixings, 1907.

his own patterned fabrics! It is the only instance of a piece which was upholstered, the timber carcase being completely hidden.

Working on into the first decade of this century Voysey seemed to develop a distinct taste for furniture made without the use of metal. Two such pieces are known and more than one instance of each is known though none appears to survive. Both are tables; the first of Dec. 1903 (this can be seen in 60) has noted on the drawing, 'Oak table, no nails or screws to be used in construction'. The second, of May 1907 (56a), has the note, 'Circular folding table to be made in oak entirely without metal of any kind'. Both tables adopt the principle of supports radiating from a central wooden boss though the folding table – a kind of gateleg with two fixed and four hinged legs – is of far greater constructional complexity as the drawing (56b) shows. The client for this was E.J.Horniman and it was used, as contemporary photographs show, in Garden Corner (see 63). One should also note here that Voysey's earliest furniture design, the Swan chair (see 10), relied in its construction on pinning and pegging with wood alone. It is also generally true that Voysey relied no more heavily on conventional metal fixings in his furniture than he had to; he tended to favour the dowel pin and the use of carefully made joints fixed with glue rather than the quicker and cheaper possible alternatives which metal could have provided but which would have been quite foreign to his notion of what was proper.

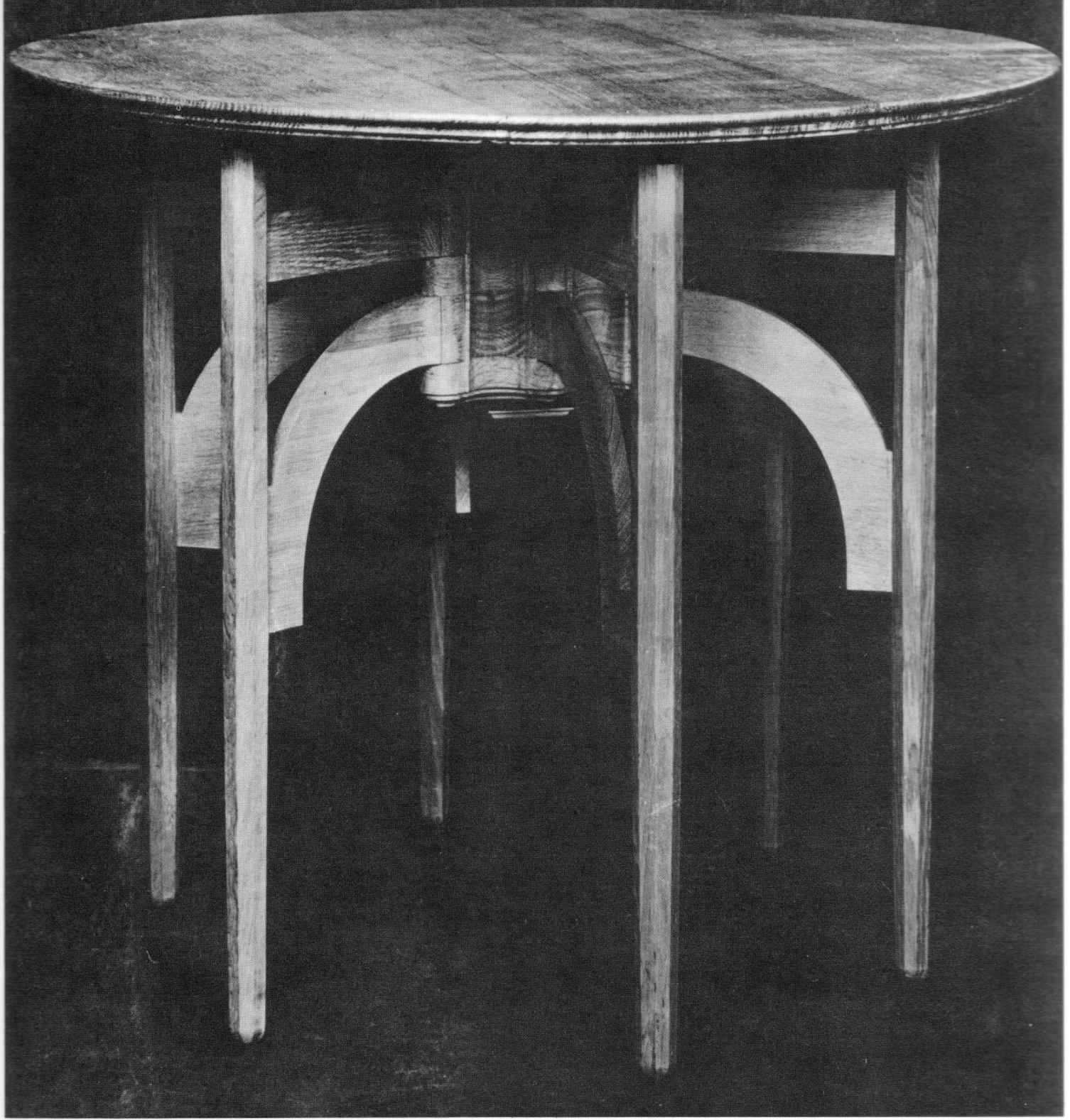
One last piece in the survey of the furniture of these years is an oddity, but too distinctive not to mention. Like many of the above it was made up and more than one instance is known; there are photographs but no example survives. The piece is a Chesterfield, though this is a slightly fulsome name for the austere bench seat (57) which, in Voysey's view, was to be used without cushioning. The frame is fitted with lathes of oak to form seat and back, the lathes each dovetailed into the supporting rails. The broad flaps each side are supported on fixed quadrant arms. It is a sad comment on the vagaries of taste that one of these Chesterfields is known to have been banished some years after its manufacture to the garden. Its austerity and structure were thought more appropriate there, and there it stayed until it fell to pieces.

By the end of the decade the changes which were becoming evident in Voysey's architectural work began to permeate into his furniture; there was not much made after about 1907 so the change is not so definite or so easy to trace. This will be looked at in chapter 6 but now, having surveyed briefly the type of furniture Voysey chose to make in these most productive years of his career, we turn to those interiors where he was given a free hand to fit and furnish and where evidence survives to show the use he made of these chances.

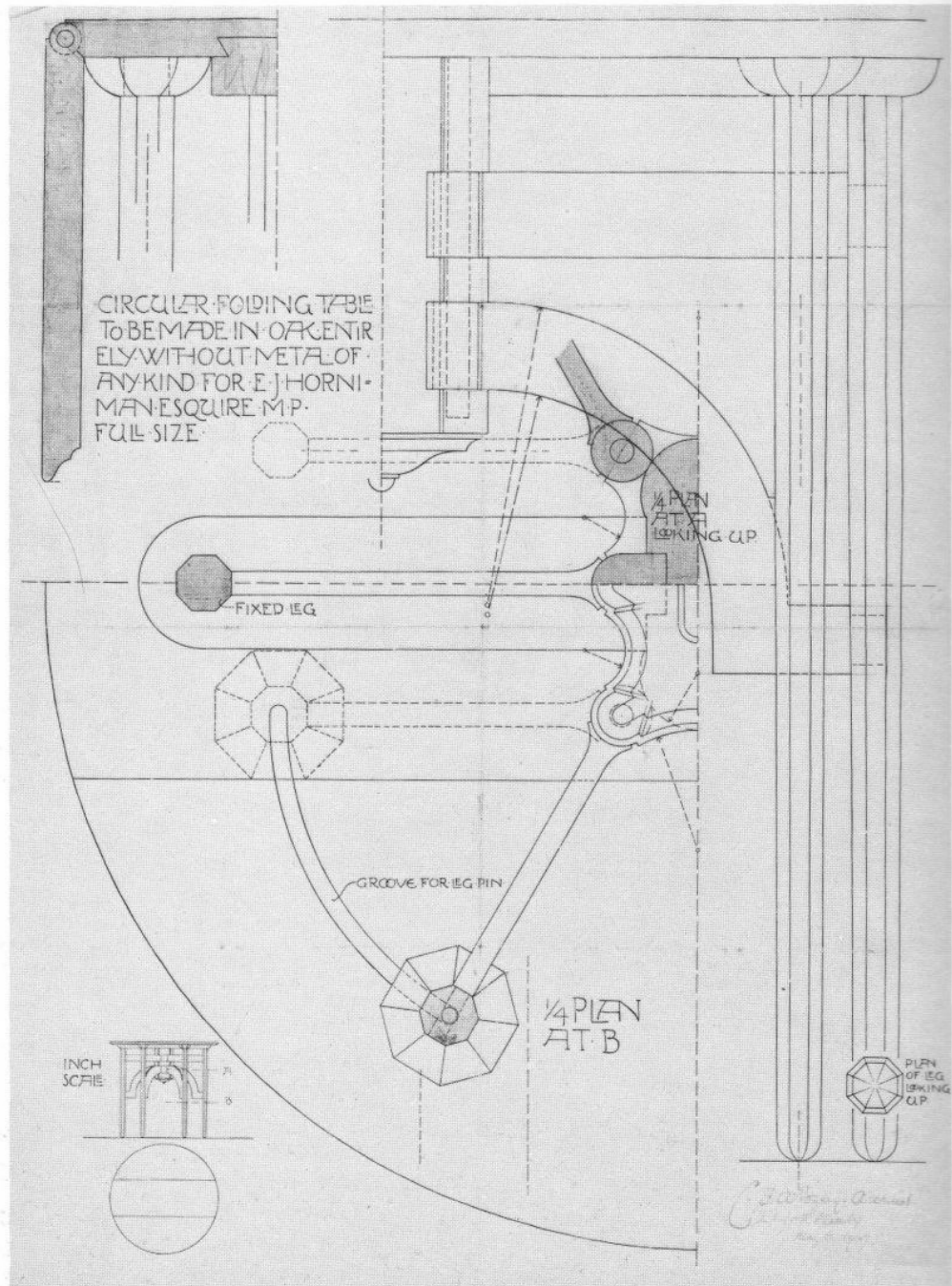
### The Voysey Interior

Voysey had a strong general awareness of what was required of the domestic interior, though his means of achieving what he thought desirable were not conventional. He shared the preoccupation of his day concerning the importance of the family home:

In the category of qualities of general need we should put repose,



56b  
 Design for a circular folding table, 1907, as  
 shown in 56a; the design for E.J. Horniman for  
 use at Garden Corner, Chelsea.



cheerfulness, simplicity, breadth, warmth, quietness in storm, economy of upkeep, evidence of protection, harmony with surroundings, absence of dark passages or places, evenness of temperature, making the home the frame to its inmates, for rich and poor alike will appreciate these qualities.<sup>3</sup>

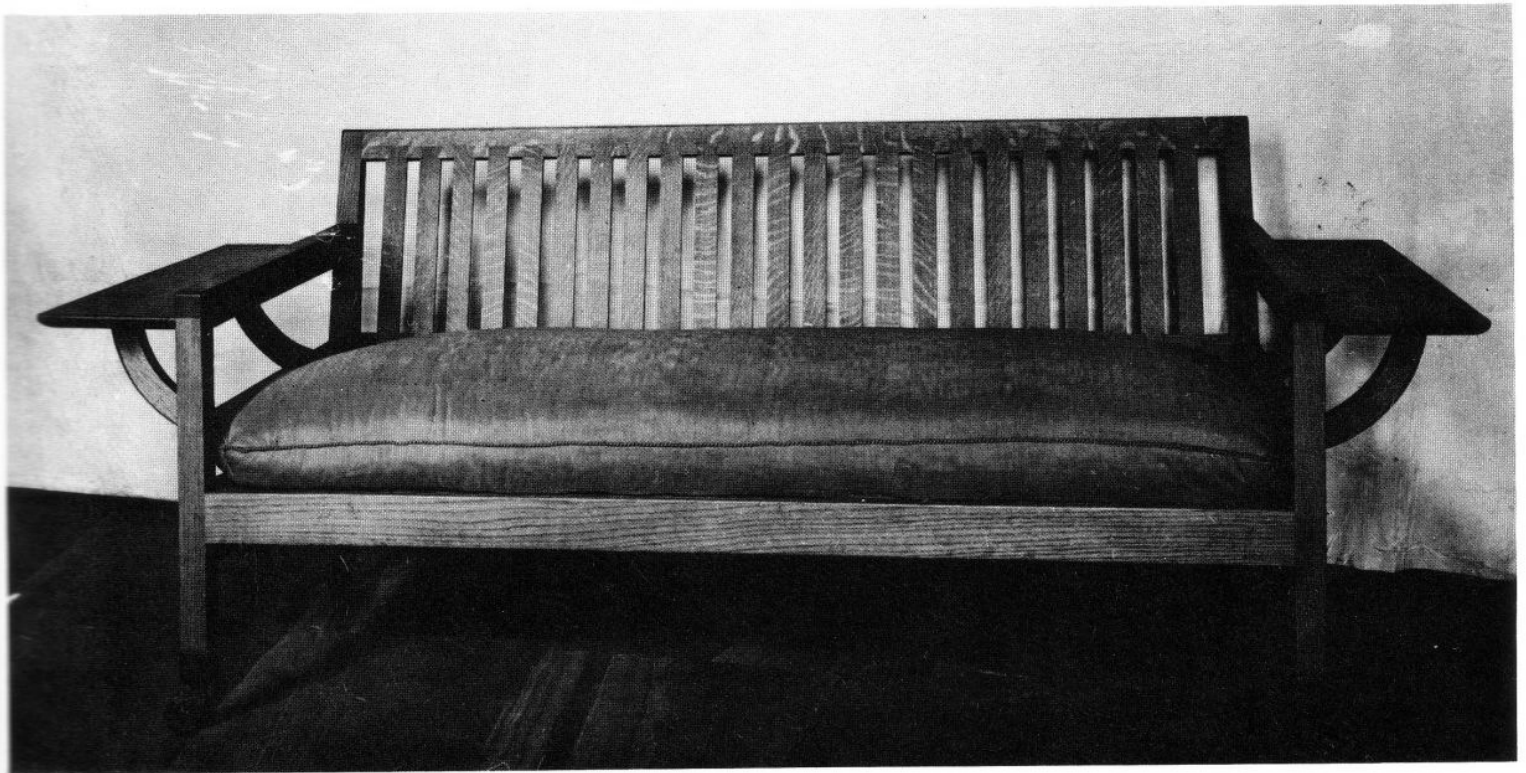
This is far more than a practical concern with housing; it is almost a mystique created about the sanctity of the security and the comfort of life at home, of family life. As it was a matter on which Voysey, and many of his contemporaries, whether architects or designers or not, felt deeply, so the failure to achieve the necessary standard excited strong feeling. Voysey was particularly harsh on the failure of designers to offer satisfactory domestic surroundings in which an adequate life could be conducted. He felt strongly outraged when rooms were crammed with bad furniture or covered in badly designed papers and fabrics; he deplored the effect this would have on the occupants:

We can produce the sensation of a drunken brawl by our combination of various coloured articles.<sup>4</sup>

What is more, his standards were high and he often objected on grounds too subtle for most of us to conceive though we might in retrospect sympathize and agree:

The disturbance of the senses is often very subtle. You go to call on a friend; you leave the York stone pavement and stand on mosaic or tiles, then on cocoanut mat, then, possibly, on polished wood and then

57  
Contemporary photograph of a Chesterfield,  
c.1907.



on pile carpet; all varying sensations in rapid succession, which are more or less destructive of repose according to the sensitiveness of the visitor.<sup>4</sup>

The resolution of the problem is, at least in outline, quite simple:

We cannot be too simple . . . we are too apt to furnish our rooms as if we regarded our wallpapers, furniture and fabrics as far more attractive than our friends.<sup>6</sup>

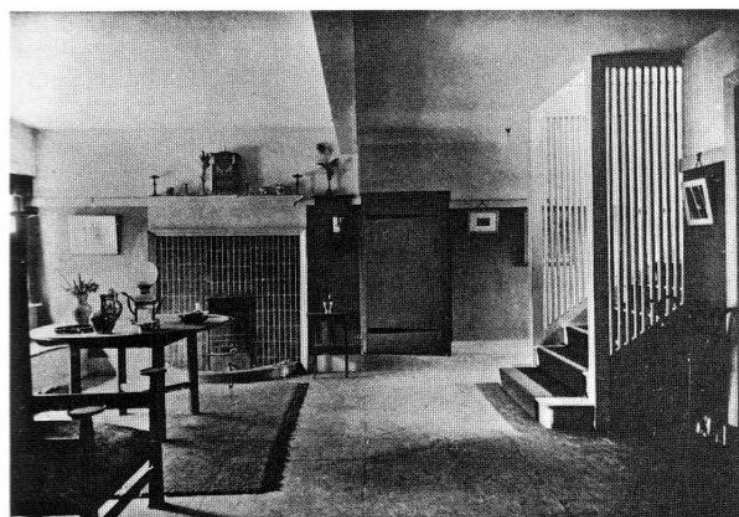
The principal buildings in which Voysey had more or less a free hand to construct a finished interior are 23 Queensborough Terrace (1898–9); his own house, The Orchard (1899); Hollymount, near Beaconsfield (1905–6); The Homestead at Frinton (1905–6); Garden Corner in Chelsea (1906). These are the main ones, all well documented; there were also schemes for two clients in Birkenhead, fitting out rooms in existing houses beginning in 1902. It is notable that the two most lavish of these, Queensborough Terrace and Garden Corner, were adaptations to existing houses. The individual pieces made for Queensborough Terrace have, in most important cases, been mentioned individually in earlier chapters and no more will be said of this interior. Garden Corner, which was in many ways a similar project though several years later, will be looked at in some detail.

The typical Voysey room is notable, first of all, for its lowness, emphasized by low door architrave height – anyone of or slightly over six feet in height will collect a few bruises before he learns – and a low picture rail, lower than door

58a

Contemporary photograph showing the study at The Orchard, Voysey's own house at Chorleywood, c.1900.





58b  
Contemporary photograph showing the hall  
at The Orchard, c.1900.



58c  
Contemporary photograph showing the  
dining-room at The Orchard, c.1900.

height. Doors are cottage-like, planked not panelled; chimney-pieces usually, in the main rooms, tiled. Ceilings are plain, white, without cornice mouldings of any sort. The walls below the picture rail – which is plain, not moulded – might for preference be panelled with plain, vertical boarding, either white oak as the furniture or, more economically, deal painted white. Failing that, a plain, painted surface or, very occasionally, a patterned paper. Floors might be a plain, natural finish – oak boarding, again, or quarry tile or slate – with, in the more comfortable family rooms, perhaps a patterned carpet. These points are borne out well in three contemporary photographs showing the study, hall and dining-room of The Orchard at Chorleywood arranged as it was shortly after it was built (58a,b,c). Into this very unfussy interior were introduced, surprisingly, quite a lot of small objects – ceramics, lamps, pictures, clocks and general knick-knacks (including de rigueur a vase of honesty and a peacock feather or two) giving to the whole a well lived-in appearance. An exactly similar impression is given by one of the Birkenhead rooms (59) a couple of years later than The Orchard; materials here are plain, though of the best quality, and there is similar evidence of a good sprinkling of small ‘art-objects’ about the place. Here oak panelling is used – the budget at The Orchard perhaps did not permit of this expensive finish – and the chimney-piece is tiled in large squares, probably of the rich green-blues that Voysey favoured. The brass fender is to Voysey’s design as is, almost certainly, the light fitting; on the wall can be seen a circular gilded mirror with low-relief carving. The photograph is presumed to show the dining-room of 1902 for Mrs van Gruisen, at Bidston Road, Birkenhead though Voysey did in the same year work at another house for a Miss McKay, also in Birkenhead.

From 1905 to 1907 Voysey worked on two buildings where he handled both construction and fitting out. These were Hollymount, at Knotty Green near Beaconsfield for C.T.Burke; and The Homestead at Frinton-on-Sea for S.C.Turner. The drawing-room at Hollymount (60) shows the small, circular



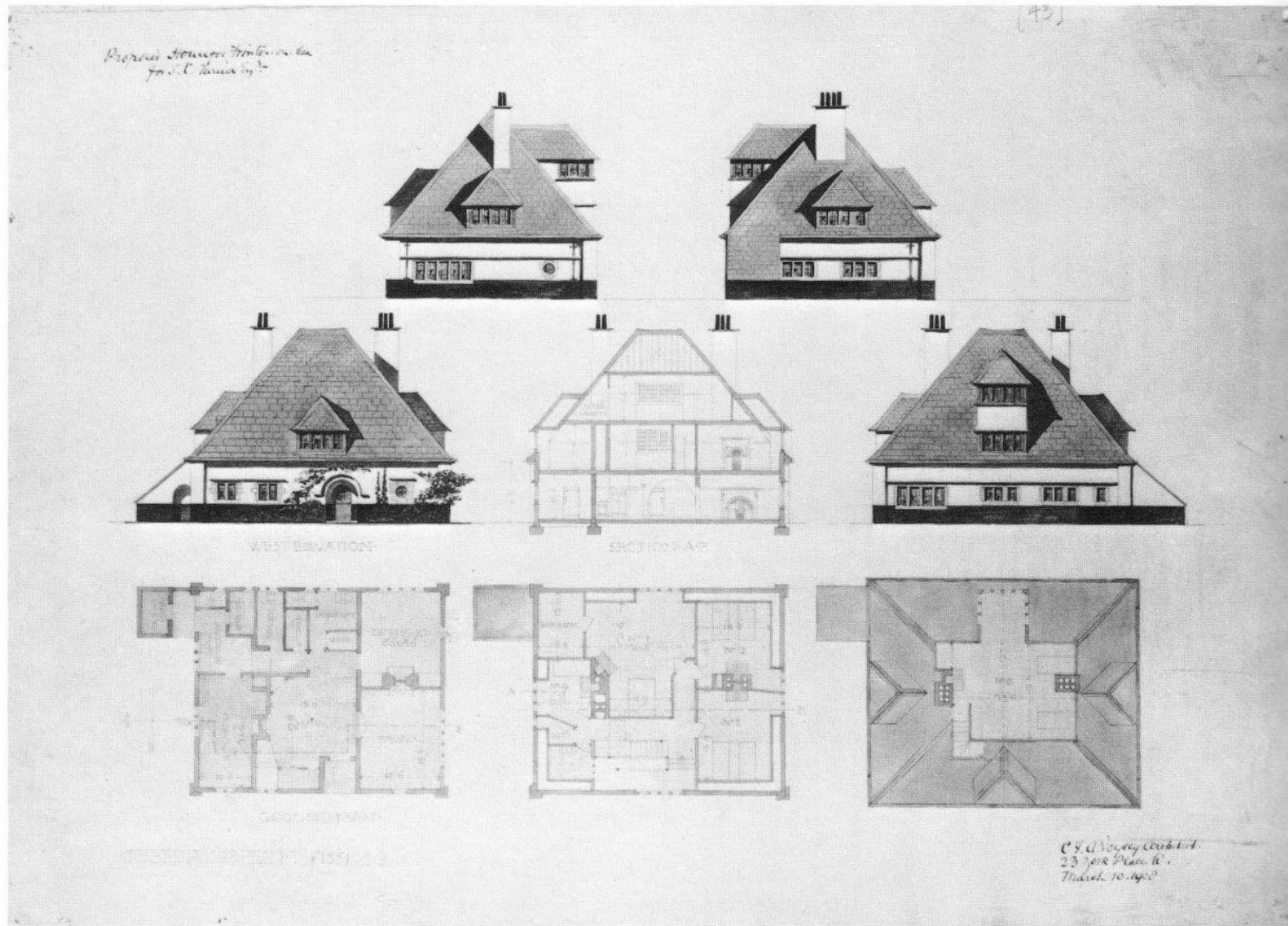
59  
Contemporary photograph showing the  
dining-room of a house at Birkenhead, c.1903.



60  
Contemporary photograph showing the  
drawing-room of Hollymount for C.T.Burke  
at Knotty Green, c.1907.



61  
Contemporary photograph showing the  
drawing-cum-billiard-room at The  
Homestead, Frinton-on-Sea, for S.C. Turner,  
c.1907.



62

Design for a house at Frinton-on-Sea, Essex, for S.C. Turner, 1908; elevations, cross sections and plans. Unexecuted.

window opening which Voysey favoured and used in many houses to cast a little extra light into the fireplace area without depriving it of the sense of enclosed comfort. The liking for a very high mantelpiece shows clearly, and the clutter of small objects. The lamp, fire-irons and fender are all to Voysey's design. The circular table mentioned above is clearly seen and two versions of the single-heart chair; also a plain carpet with patterned frieze, again Voysey's work. The piano also is interesting; Voysey designed, early in the 1890s, two piano cases, one of them complex and ornate; towards the end of that decade he also designed a slightly plainer case for production by Messrs Collard and Collard. The case shown here appears very similar to that design.

The Homestead was built for S.C. Turner, an important client and a bachelor

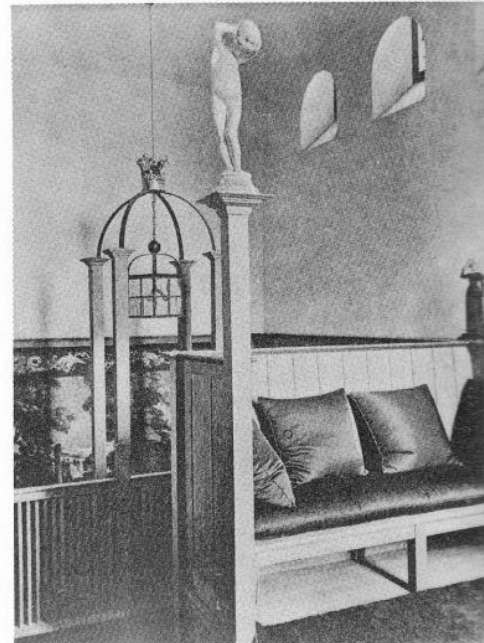
who was prepared to give Voysey a free hand both to build and to furnish his sea-side home. The house is L-shaped and medium-sized, the feature of the ground floor being a large billiard-cum-sitting room, clearly an all-purpose relaxation and entertainment room (61). The heavily beamed ceiling is notable, as is the almost excessive austerity of the white tiled inglenook with its flat arch top, the plain whitewashed walls with exposed beams over, the quarry tile floor only partially carpeted. The set of fire-irons unfortunately almost mask the panel of four tiles with bird and flower motifs which are a token contribution to breaking the austerity of the tiled surface. The chairs are interesting; two of the standard easy chairs as noted above and an unusual variation on the lathe-back chair. The billiard-table is also by Voysey, a design from circa 1899 originally drawn for the Revd Grane for Norney and later sold to Thurston and Co., the billiard-table makers, who offered it as part of their regular range. In the background can be seen a Chesterfield, also mentioned above. The external appearance of this house is shown in 44. Strangely – by way of digression – Voysey made drawings from Nov. 1907 to mid-1908, when The Homestead was already built, for another smaller house for Turner at Frinton; one of these schemes is shown (62), dated March 1908, and it is a pity that one of the intriguing small designs was not executed. Why Turner should have planned another house in this way is not known, unless he felt that The Homestead was too big for him alone.

The second really substantial commission for fitting out an interior, some years later than 23 Queensborough Terrace, was the house on the embankment at Chelsea, belonging to E.J.Horniman for whom Voysey had built Lowicks at Frensham; for this project, known as Garden Corner (designed 1906–7), Voysey had a very free hand and, apparently, a large budget. He began by mercilessly lowering the ceiling heights where he thought it necessary, as is clearly shown in (63a). With this preliminary carried out he added excellent fixtures such as the staircase (63b) and bedroom furniture (63c). The library (63d) featured a beamed ceiling and the glass-fronted cupboards with elaborate glazing pattern as fitted some years before at New Place at Haslemere. Into this carefully prepared interior was added a wide range of furniture, perhaps the key piece being a four-poster bed (63e) which unfortunately does not survive, so far as is known. Capping each post is the figure of a bird, presumably in cast bronze and looking like the standard fitting which Elsley and Co. produced for Voysey, which is a realization of Voysey's mystic comment:

You shall perch four eagles on my bedposts to drive away bad spirits, as the Byzantines believed, and rest my fire irons on the backs of brass cats, not dogs, for cats are the most faithful fireside dwellers.<sup>7</sup>

In fact this interior seems in many ways to be a working out in practice of the precepts which Voysey put forward in his lecture, now several times quoted, delivered to the Carpenters' Company in 1909 and subsequently published. It seems therefore fitting to look at the illustrations of Garden Corner to the accompaniment of Voysey's own words:

You will arrange my rooms with their furniture so that each piece has the place most suited for its use, with light helping to make it more

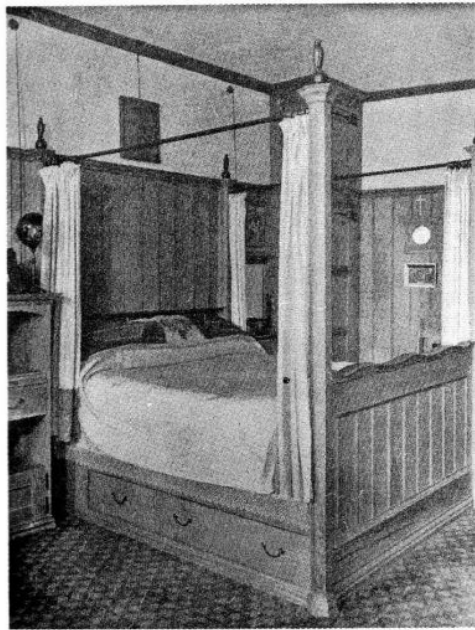


63a  
Contemporary photograph of Garden Corner, Chelsea Embankment, London, for E.J.Horniman, 1906-7, a complete installation of an interior by Voysey into an existing house. The drawing room, c.1908.

63b  
Contemporary photograph showing the head of the staircase at Garden Corner, c.1908.

63c  
Contemporary photograph showing fitted furniture and chimney-piece in one of the bedrooms at Garden Corner, c.1908.

63d  
Contemporary photograph showing the library at Garden Corner, c.1908.



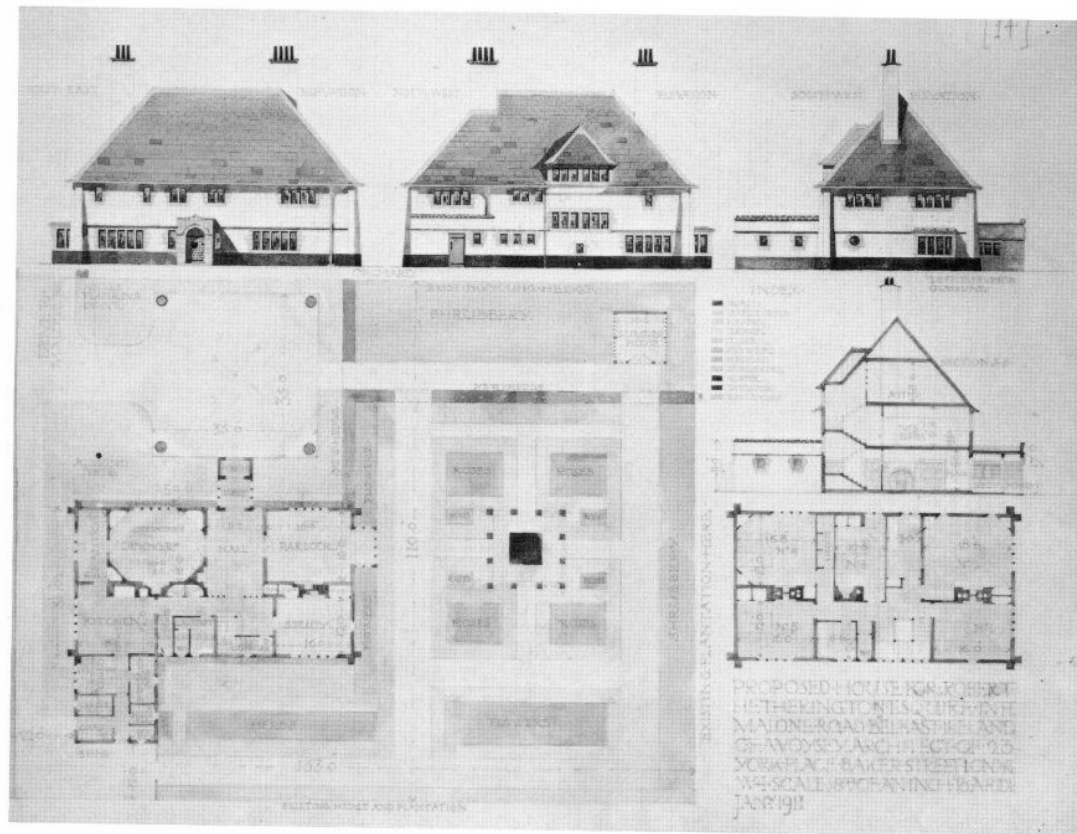
63e  
Contemporary photograph showing the four-poster bed installed in the master bedroom at Garden Corner, c.1908.

useful, so that we feel no single bit of furniture is quarelling with or harassing another, and everything shall have its useful purpose. Thus proportion and grace and the intention to serve a useful purpose will provide the very best elements of beauty, and ornaments will be little required. If you give me one or two in each room, such as pictures and sculpture, they will be infinitely more impressive alone than when in a crowd. You cannot listen to two people talking at the same time, so we don't want a thousand ornaments to be bawling at us all day long.<sup>8</sup>

From door furniture to four-poster beds, picture-rail moulding to tiled chimney-pieces, Voysey liked to have every detail of his houses and their contents under his control where possible. His approach was not conventional; often this is given away by his throwaway lines which also, incidentally, give us the clue to his keen sense of humour. From start to finish Voysey sees himself, the architect, providing a setting in which a life-style can be lived out to the fullest and in which a strict ideal is suggested and, sometimes, imposed:

I want no finger plates, because they suggest that I keep dirty fingers in my house.<sup>9</sup>

His rule as architect over client would be, if he could manage it, a despotism, albeit a benevolent one. The key to understanding the surroundings which Voysey aimed to produce for his clients is to see that he did feel a religious fervour about his work; he did feel it to be proper to evangelize, architecturally speaking, in order to convert the client to his point of view. He did respect the right of the client to have strong feelings – the correspondence quoted in chapter 4 with Cecil Fitch demonstrates this clearly – but the client had to fight to have this right recognized. Like most missionaries, Voysey would bully if he could, would give in on certain points if forced to in order to gain the main ground, and if he saw too many of his cherished ideals slipping away in the fight with the client, would throw up the commission, however good, to preserve his integrity.



64  
Design for a house in Malone Road, Belfast, N.Ireland, for R.Hetherington, 1911; elevations, section and plans. Executed substantially as shown here with the porch omitted.