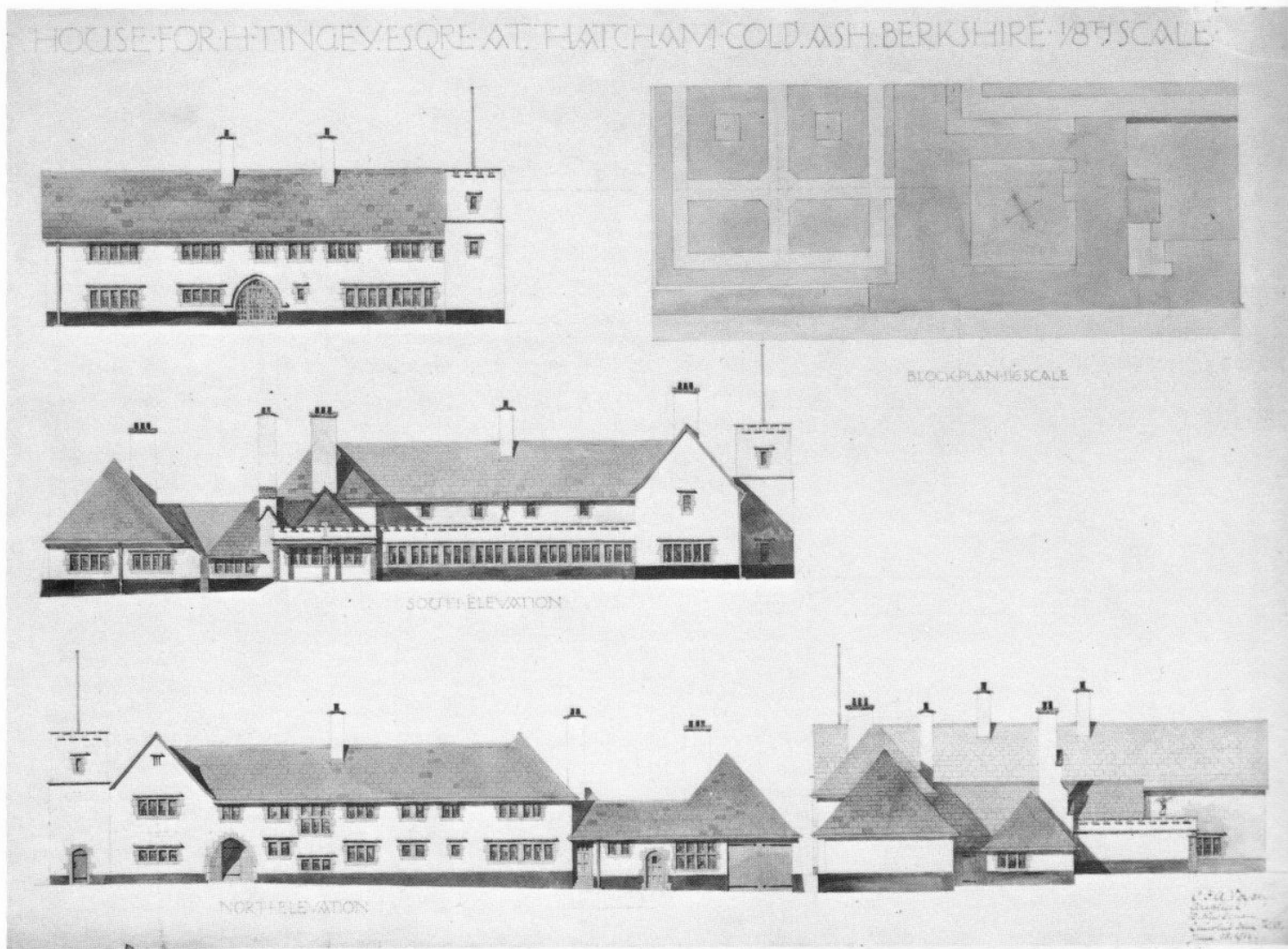


There were no major executed buildings in the last thirty years of Voysey's life and career; there were, indeed, none that would merit being called substantial. The reason is not that Voysey was unwilling to work, but that the clients stopped coming to him. Since other instances have shown that a well-known architect can be difficult, idiosyncratic and expensive yet still attract more clients than he knows how to cope with, the only conclusion left is that the clients ceased to produce commissions because the Voysey house was not what they wanted. In addition, the implication must be that Voysey was not prepared or able to mould his work into a form that was acceptable to the client. These last thirty years, then, were not busy ones; work trickled in, small commissions often from clients who had used Voysey previously and whose motive in returning to him may have been satisfaction, sentiment or even, one suspects, occasionally charity. Yet there is a considerable interest in these years for the student of Voysey's work, stemming largely from the various unexecuted projects with which Voysey occupied himself. Some were commissions or possible commissions which, for reasons now unknown, failed to be realized; others were competition entries which did not win; mostly even this kind of activity was over by the middle of the 1920s but Voysey was by this time an elderly man, reaching his seventies.

The last executed house of any distinction and size was designed in 1911 for Robert Hetherington to be built in the Malone Road at Belfast (64). It was a simple rectangular house with a hipped roof broken by a single hipped dormer on the garden front. There is also in the design a small stone porch – the appearance and means of construction of the house are otherwise conventional Voysey – though this was omitted in the house as built. In plan the main rooms open off a central hall with a rear staircase, the dining-room being formed to an octagonal shape. The plan includes details of the garden layout and a small summer house.

In 1914 came two designs for houses which – though not built – were substantial in size and indicated not only the continuation of Voysey's interest in the use of an adapted Gothic motif in his work but also a new complexity of form and layout, based on the use of those finishes and materials which we accept as part of his established working pattern. Slightly the earlier of the two schemes – the drawings dated around June 1914 – was a house for H. Tingey. There were several schemes for this house which was to be near Thatcham and Cold Ash in Berkshire; the first, which is illustrated (65), is based on a courtyard layout, the others adopting a T-shape. Roughcast is shown to be used, with a slate roof and stone dressing to the

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.



65
Design for a house near Thatcham and Cold Ash, Berkshire, for H. Tingey, 1914; elevations and block plan. Unexecuted.

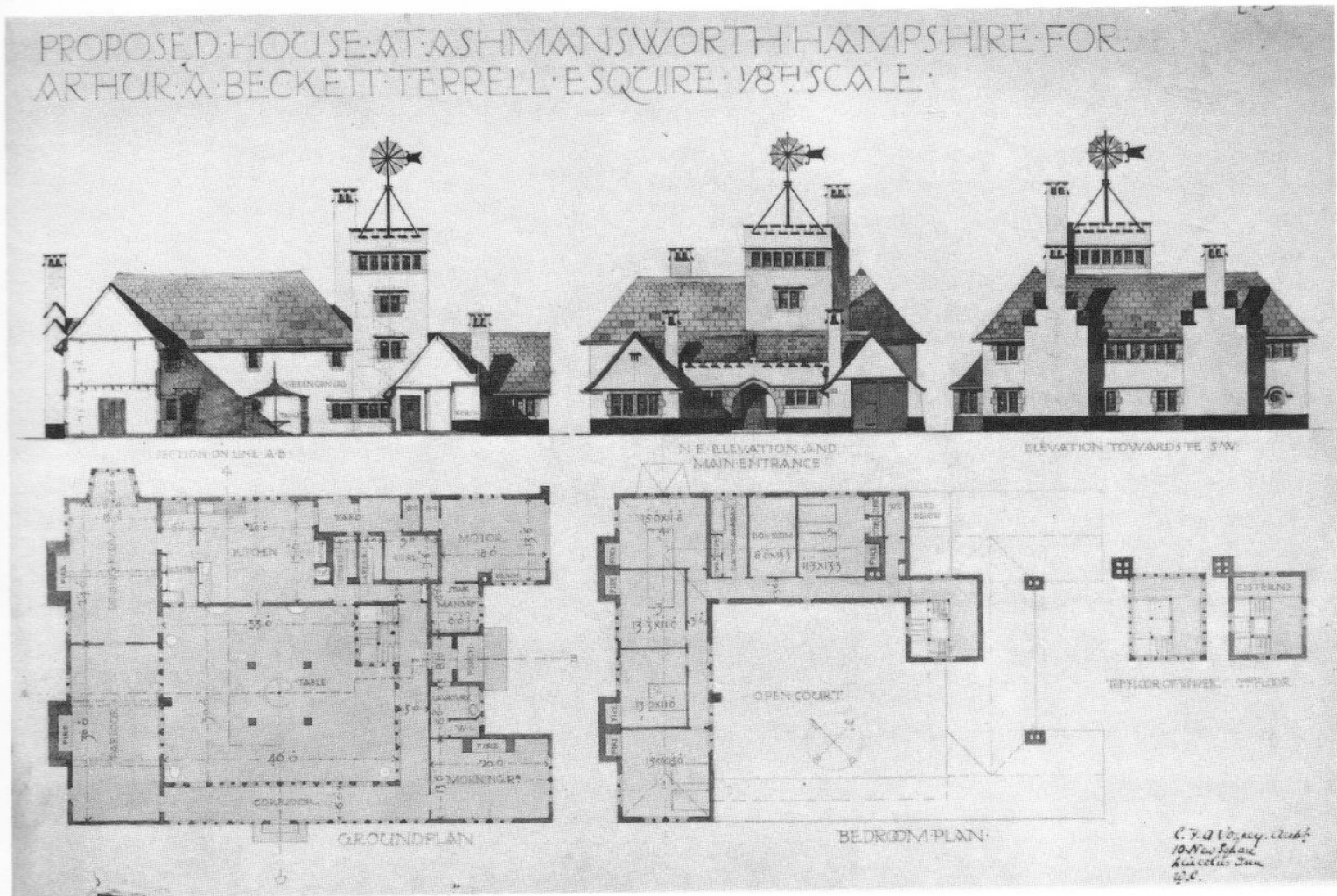
leaded windows. Several features, though, differentiate this design from the houses we are accustomed to see. First is the complexity of layout, indicated best here by the use of the courtyard form and by a variety of roof surfaces and heights which the illustration clearly shows. Eaves and roof lines vary in height and also appear at both first- and second-storey height. Fenestration is irregular, as seen most clearly on the north elevation. Then there is the use of detailing: pointed arch openings of different forms to all the external doors; a square quasi-medieval tower which, ironically, was intended to house thoroughly modern wireless equipment; crenellations to this tower and to the single-storey glazed walkway which closes the fourth side of the courtyard with its continuous strip of fenestration; the figure of a winged archer shown on this single-storey stretch of

roof. This was clearly a house which was seriously discussed with the client, for it evolved through four schemes and it is a great disappointment that, for whatever reasons, the discussions clearly broke down and it was never built.

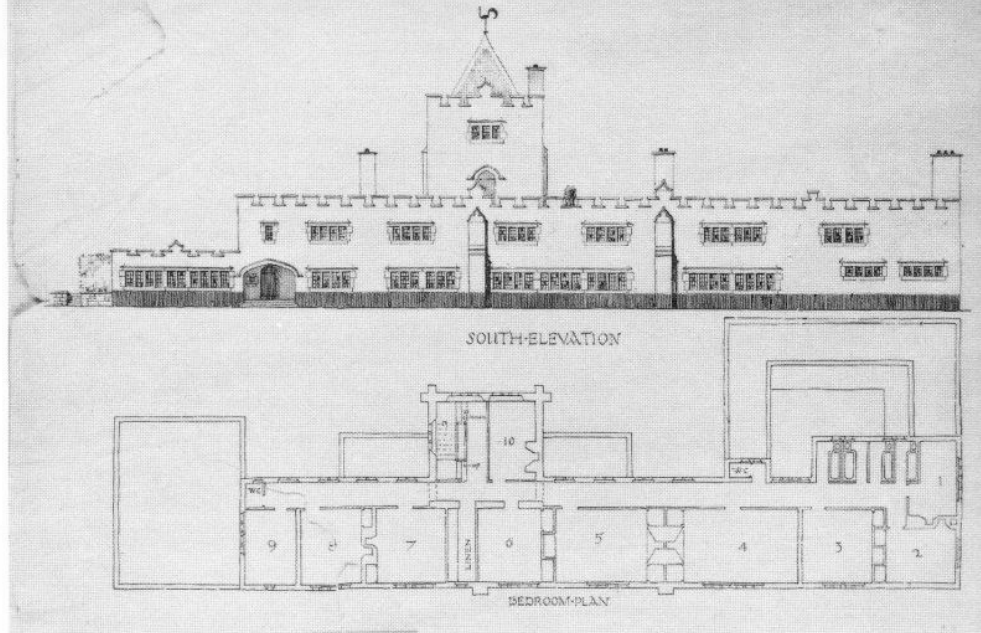
Similar to this proposed house was one which was designed a little later, around October 1914, to be built at Ashmansworth in Berkshire for a client with the delightful name of Arthur aBeckett Terrell. There are many links between this design (66) and that mentioned above. The same courtyard plan form; an intricacy of roof forms which, for Voysey, was quite startling; a square tower and a glazed walkway, both crenellated; the use of the pointed arch to form openings; a figure, the precise form of which is difficult to make out, which is in this case mounted above the main entrance. The main rooms and bedrooms are grouped in the L-shaped two-storey portion of the house, running along the north-west and south-west sides of the square. There are in addition single-storey projecting rooms flanking the main entrance, one housing a 'motor shed', the other a morning-

66

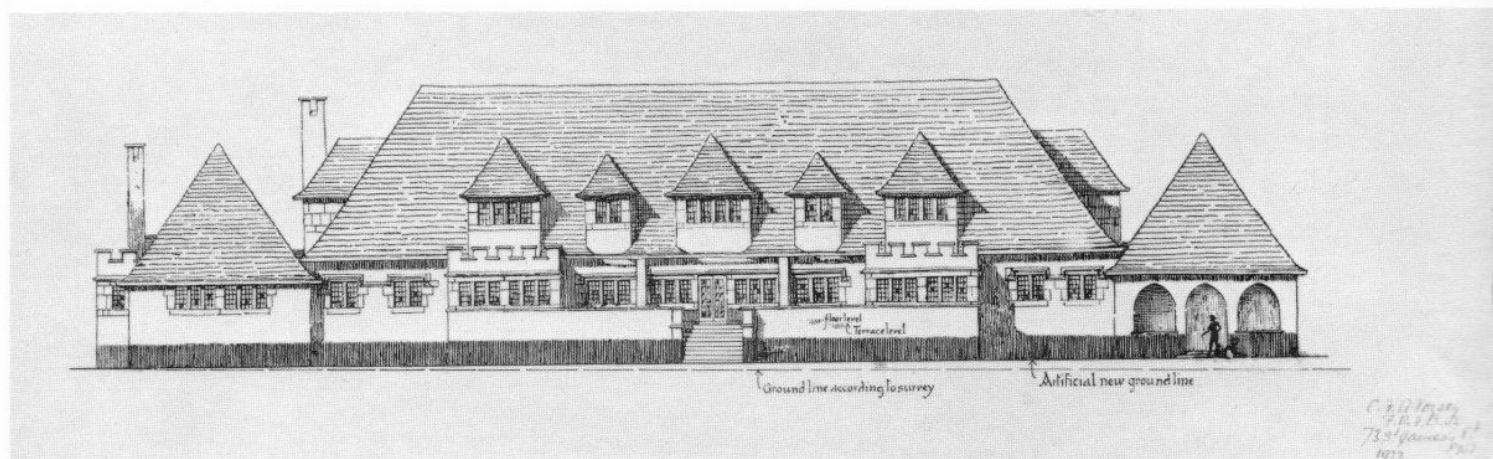
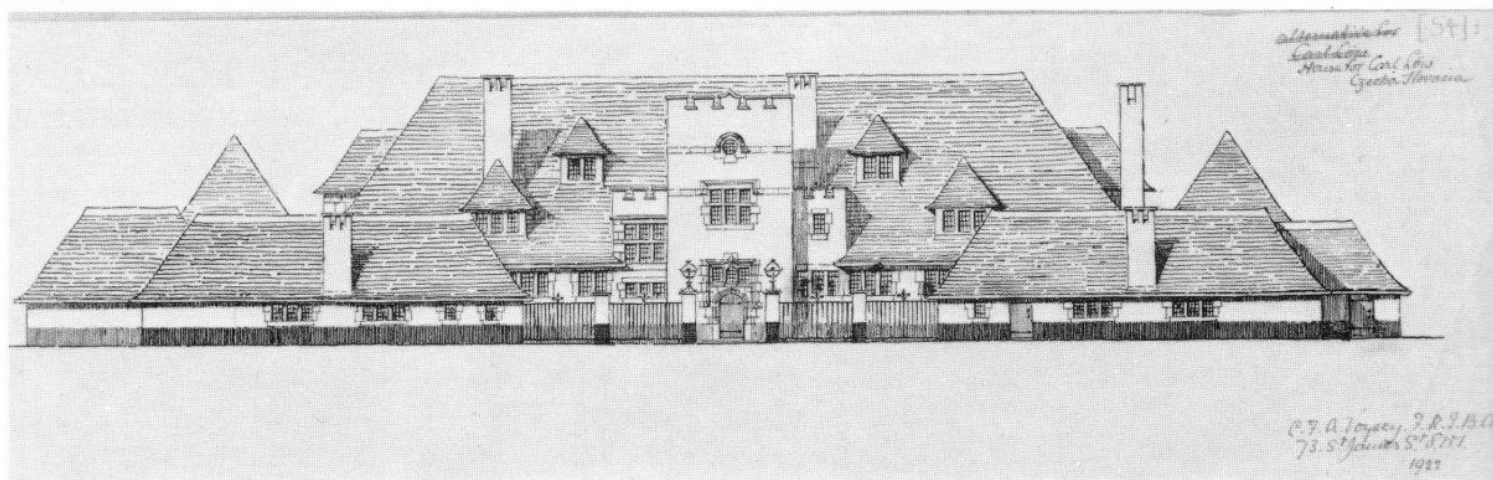
Design for a house at Ashmansworth, near Newbury, Berkshire, for Arthur a Beckett Terrell, 1914; elevations, sections and plans. Unexecuted.



67
Design for a house at Laughton, near Market
Harborough, Leicestershire, for W. Taylor,
c.1920; line drawing of south (entrance)
elevation and first-floor plan. Unexecuted.



68a and b
Design for a house at Jihlava, Czechoslovakia,
for Karl Löwe, 1922; line drawings of front
and rear elevations. Unexecuted so far as is
known.

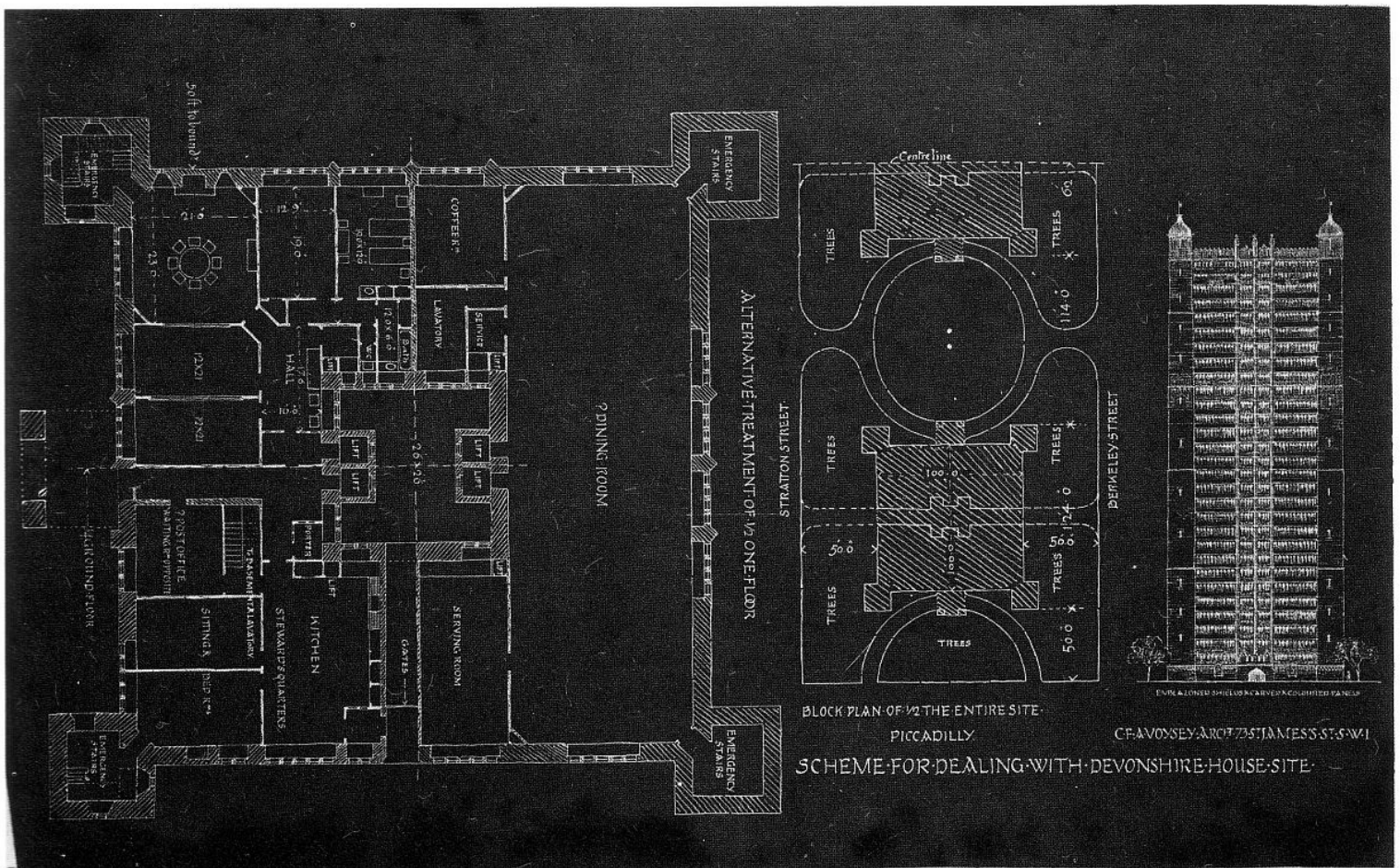


room. The glazed corridor then links this room with the rest of the main rooms. A windmill perched on top of the tower adds a final air of incongruity to this design.

In their move towards a domestic form of greater complexity and with a freer use of decorative detail – we might infer that a greater luxury of material and finish were also implied – these two designs point to a wish to move into a more ambitious type of domestic architecture. That the desire for bigger commissions may have been stimulated largely by the failure of any commissions at all to appear is a possibility. However the more reasoned and reasonable view is that Voysey did wish to produce a new style of rather more lavish buildings at this stage in his life. The same impression is gained from two unexecuted designs of a few years later, just after the Great War, again the two designs appearing close together and with obvious links between them. The earlier and smaller dates from 1920, though Voysey's own *Black Book* notes, erroneously, that the design is of 1929. The house was designed for a client named William Taylor to be built at Laughton, near Market Harborough (67); the facing materials are conventional, roughcast with stone dressings. The layout is a long, rectangular two-storey block; here, though, resemblances to the typical Voysey house cease. This design is for a house with a flat roof and a prominent tower on the north front, housing main entrance and staircase. The detailing is more overtly and consistently Gothic in form than anything Voysey had previously produced; crenellations run all round and the wall buttresses are capped with ogee-shaped mouldings. Symmetrically placed on the centre line of the south elevation – the tower is off-centre on the north – is a single, large grotesque figure, crouched between two crenellations. A steep pitch roof rises from the top of the tower, capped by a weather-cock, though a second scheme retains a flat roof instead. There are various other differences in the second scheme but it is essentially similar. This house designed for Taylor is again, like the two designs of 1914, a substantial and elaborate venture displaying a continuing fascination with the use of adapted Gothic forms; while the designs of 1914 appeared to be Voysey houses tempered by the addition of Gothic detailing, this 1920 project is more outspoken and would, in the climate of post-war domestic architecture, have been a decided oddity if built. Two years later, in 1922, another chance to design a very substantial house came Voysey's way. This time it was from the very unlikely source of a Czech client, Karl Löwe, who wanted a house to be designed for building in his native country. It is unlikely, though not absolutely impossible, that the building was erected; certainly Voysey did not himself supervise the building, and no house stands so far as is known in this original form. There were two schemes for the house, the earlier of which is shown (68a and b). Both schemes were for a house E-shaped in plan with a central projecting porch and side wings closed by an iron fence running the width of the front. In elevation the first scheme employs roughcast with stone dressings; the steep pitched roofs run down to eaves at ground-floor window level, against which the substantial crenellated porch contrasts by rising sheer to three-storey height, the full height of the main house. The front elevation has four dormer windows, hipped, two at first- and two at second-floor level. On the rear elevation the two bay windows are square with crenellations over and the first floor (there is on this elevation no second) is lit by a row of five hipped dormers, three large and

two small. Ranges of outbuildings left and right are all single-storey and emphasized by steep pitched hipped roofs. Two factors are evident; first is the visual complexity of the scheme, by contrast with any of Voysey's earlier work; second is the heavy emphasis on symmetry, broken only by the main chimney-stacks. This again is not an element that one expects to see in Voysey's work. Both of these features are carried through into the second, revised scheme for this house; indeed here the effect is one of even greater formalization which contrasts oddly with the vernacular, rural style of the work. This scheme has a centre bay with a gable flanked by castellated bays with a belfry and lantern over. On the front are six small dormers at first-floor level, two larger and hipped at second floor; on the rear are now shown nine dormers at first-floor level, five large and four small, alternating. Both schemes are impressive and it is this project, backed by the earlier for the Laughton house, that makes one wish that Voysey had continued to build in the later part of his career. The move from the austerity of the styling of his earlier houses to the Gothic indiscipline of those few buildings around 1910 appears now to be resolved and a rustic vernacular lives comfortably side by side with the Gothic stylistic motifs. The sense of plain form is as strong as ever but less restrained so a greater freedom and complexity emerge. In plan also, although these late schemes do not achieve a great subtlety, they demonstrate a clear willingness to change and to try something new. It is a sad irony that at the very time when he could have produced something substantially different from the work of his early years, his considerable reputation seems to have temporarily sunk so far that no client came forward. Also it is sad that it may well have been that very post-war austerity and shortage of cash that, while it encouraged the development of a major new domestic vernacular revival based on those small rural houses that Voysey had excelled at building, excluded him from making his move to more substantial projects.

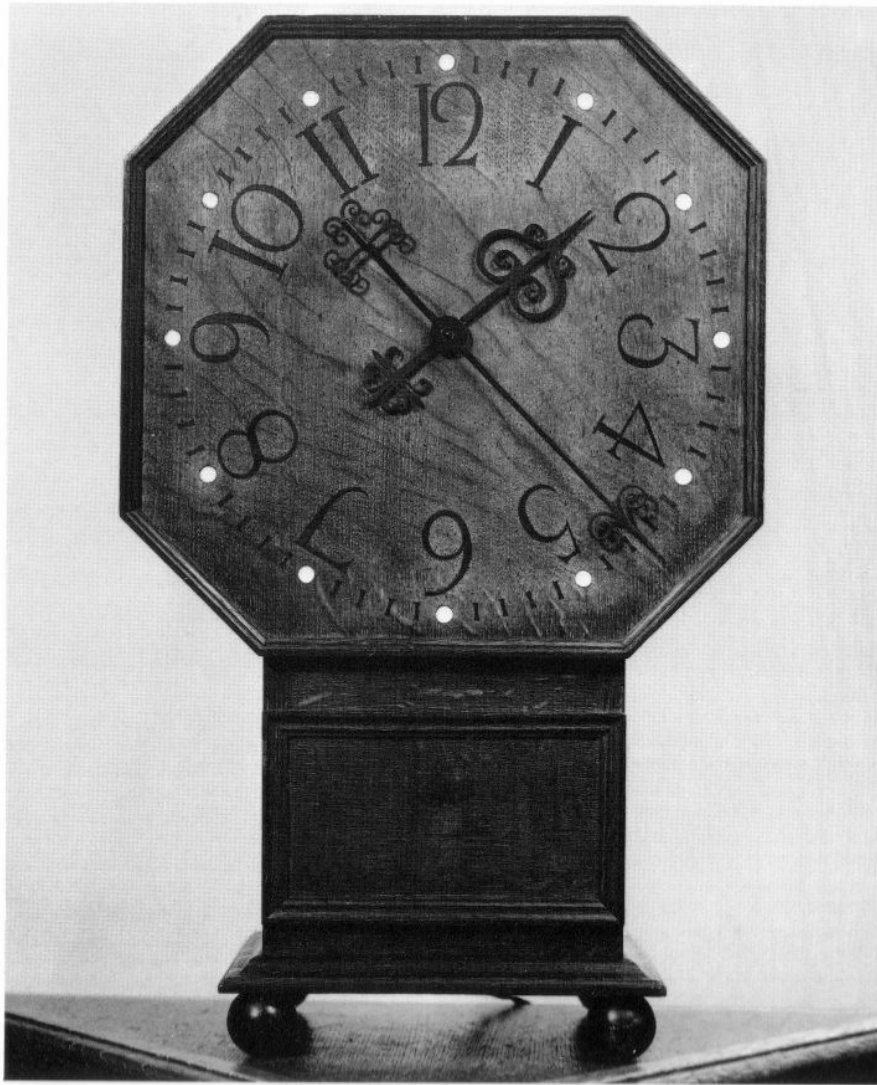
Public building was never a field into which Voysey made any inroads; there had been a few projects earlier but nothing was built. In 1901 there was a design for a Grammar School at Lincoln, in 1904 an unsuccessful competition entry for a Museum and Library at Limerick. Both had strong affinities with the Sandersons factory described in chapter 4. In 1914 came another competition entry, again unsuccessful, for Supreme Courts in the City of Ottawa, a competition arranged by the Canadian Government. Voysey's scheme was frankly Gothic, as one might have expected from this period of his life. The detailing is Perpendicular and quite restrained, except on the dominant central gateway and tower with its profusion of crockets. These schemes all lead up to what was the most substantial and the most curious of the designs for public buildings which, if built, would have had a radical impact on central London. In 1923, following the demolition of the old Devonshire House in Piccadilly, facing where Green Park Tube station now stands, there was a competition for the design of its successor. Voysey suggested in a letter to the *Builder*, accompanied by a sketch design (69), that three identical tower blocks should be built for residential use. In form the blocks as sketched suggest nothing so much as the hand-painted clock case of 1895 described earlier; four massive corner towers – housing emergency staircases – support a carcase of



69
Design for the Devonshire House site,
Piccadilly, London, a competition entry, 1923;
specimen plans and elevation. Unexecuted.

thirty floors grouped round a central lift and light well and offering a range of living accommodation and services, including large communal dining-rooms and shops. It is a curious blend of two ideas: Baillie Scott had been putting forward some twenty years earlier² a scheme for what he called 'Co-operative houses', with a justification which rings strangely to modern ears used to the ramifications of the high-rise controversy:

Anyone who has penetrated to the less fashionable outskirts of a modern town must have observed those long rows of mean dwellings which encroach on the surrounding country, and must have felt what a melancholy thing it must be to live there. One cannot but think that there should be some better way of living than that which finds expression in these sordid streets . . . In this matter the savage who decks his primitive dwelling with brightly painted carving is more advanced than we, and of all the habitations of man, surely none have quite reached such an expression of sordid meanness as the modern street of suburban villa residences.³



70
Clock designed by Voysey for himself or a
member of his family, c.1910-12.

Baillie Scott goes on to suggest that functions such as cooking and heating should be communal though he points out the basic problem of the conflicting claims of privacy and comfort competing with those of convenience and economy:

... for while, as the copy-book maxim says, 'union is strength', the strength of the community is generally obtainable only at some sacrifice of its individuals, and while the bundle of arrows is not so readily broken as the single shaft, their feathers may be sorely ruffled by their close contact with each other.⁴

Voysey goes a little further than this in the Devonshire House scheme in that not only the means of comfort and ease – communal eating and heating – are involved but also provision of other services and on a much larger scale than Baillie Scott was suggesting. What is strange is that Voysey is also echoing the type of thinking which was to lead, at its height, to the *Unités d'Habitation* of Le Corbusier, typified by that at Marseilles begun in 1947. This puts a simplistic gloss on the complex issue of the developments of the past eighty years in mass housing; it is made to clarify not that vexed issue but the simpler one of Voysey's own thought processes. One suspects that Voysey's ideal lay a good deal closer to the Baillie Scott of 1906 than the Le Corbusier of 1947, that his aim was not so much the 'vertical city' as the 'vertical feudal village' though it is not clear in this case quite who the Squire was to be. The loosely medievalized cladding of his proposed structure certainly bears out this interpretation. Nevertheless the Devonshire House proposal is an intriguing part of Voysey's thinking at this time and not to be dismissed too lightly. It is ironical that the man who, more than any other single designer, produced in the 1890s the model on which the ribbon development mass housing of the 1920s was to base its units was, while that very mass housing boom went on, giving a kind of tacit support in his Devonshire House scheme to the ideas propounded by a new generation – and a very different one – of architectural activists. We often hear of an implicit link between Voysey and the founders of the Modern Movement so it is pleasing to be able to see at least the outlines of an actual or explicit one.

These were the major architectural projects of the latter part of Voysey's life. From the Devonshire House scheme in 1923 until his death in 1941 there was practically nothing built of importance and only the occasional scheme which attracts notice, such as another unsuccessful competition design for a large Exhibition Hall in Manchester in 1933. In 1931 a retrospective exhibition of his work was held at the Batsford Gallery, indicating that his reputation was still alive; the occasion was sufficiently important for Sir Edwin Lutyens to contribute the catalogue foreword. The formal honours which one would expect to accrue to a man of Voysey's reputation did accrue through this long period, but slowly. In 1924 the Mastership of the Art Workers' Guild; in 1936 he was made Designer for Industry by the Royal Society of Arts; only in 1940, the year before his death, was he awarded the Royal Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects.



71
Toilet glass, pre-1919.

Furniture designs, 1910–41

Voysey's production of furniture designs after 1910 mirrors the progress of his architectural work; first the output changes noticeably in type, then it drops sharply off to almost nothing. An oak clock case of c.1910–12 (70) has all the plainness of what we regard as traditional Voysey furniture; the untreated oak surfaces are relieved only by simple mouldings and metal fittings, in this case absolutely plain spherical bronze feet. The face has a standard Voysey numbering, yet the hands are remarkably intricate in their design. The form of the clock also, though compact and uncluttered, has the juxtaposition of square base with octagonal face; the noticeable change in this design is that, unlike all of the furniture large and small previously produced, its form is not architectural. The emphasis on structure – as for instance in the way that the supports, corner posts or legs, of his furniture are always stressed in the construction – has gone and this clock simply stands in a form calculated to house its working parts and make its face clearly visible. The toilet glass of 1919 or a little earlier (71) shows an increase in the use of moulding and contour; the form of this piece, with its freer curves



⁷² Contemporary photograph of a sideboard or carving table; it is thought that at least two examples were made, the first in 1912, the second c.1923, and one example survives.

and the use of a profile bird's head as a handle for the wooden ratchet which fixes the angle of tilt, recalls Voysey's first furniture design, the Swan chair. This is not so surprising when we remember that the Swan chair was based, more freely than was customary with Voysey, on medieval and post-medieval precedent. If these two pieces suggest, in an oblique way, a move away from the austere discipline we expect of Voysey and towards a concern with the use of medieval motifs, how much more so does the carving table (72) which seems to have been designed originally in 1912 and re-used much later in 1923. The dominant feature is the group of four carved angels – the carving is by William Aumonier – which are singing grace grouped around the surface of the table. It was not unknown for Voysey to suggest the use of carved figures as cappings for supports on his furniture; a plain round or square cap was the usual, with sometimes a mushroom finial being suggested in drawings. This use, however, of overtly medievalized carved figures harks back to another early piece, the hanging cupboard which dates from pre-1896 (see 26) and has two medievalized carved figures as cappings. Certainly the carving table has the air about it of a piece of furniture intended for use at least in a vicarage or vestry if not in a church itself.

A good many years after these designs Voysey produced his last, and the contrast is interesting. In the intervening years there had been, according to the *Black Book*, a good deal of furniture of which we retain no record at all. Much of it, we can assume, was made up from existing earlier designs, perhaps slightly modified to suit. There are enough instances of this recorded for us to know that it happened frequently; there is, though, the possibility that other new designs may exist, unknown to us. What is certain is that, probably in 1934 which is the date the *Black Book* gives us (it is not reliable) a suite of furniture was produced for Voysey's niece Ella and her new husband, Robert Donat. There was also a scheme, in 1936, to build a house for the couple in Hampstead but this was abandoned. Part of that suite is shown (73) and it is clear that the Gothic motif is now firmly allied to Voysey's established style of furniture design. The piece is, as ever, impeccably made and the use of turned stretchers on the stool should also be noted; wood turning was not a feature which ever appeared in earlier work.

Even disregarding the decade before his death when Voysey might quite decently and deservedly have been in retirement it is clear that his energetic career had a very long tail and that this was probably not of his choosing. In view of the suggestions we have that in those years he was capable of producing interesting work and work which showed a clear development from what went before, this is cause for great regret. It does seem that he was the victim partly of history – the day of the country house and substantial private patronage was over – and partly of a personality which, in professional though not by all accounts in private terms, was too unyielding. It is an unresolvable dilemma for had he been more flexible and compromising by nature he would never have been able to contribute as extensively as he did and may well have remained simply part of the second-rate group of late Victorian and Edwardian architects. Nevertheless one's feeling is that these long years of enforced inactivity were not particularly happy ones for Voysey.

73
Dressing table and stool for Mr and Mrs
Robert Donat, 1934.

