

Biographical detail of Charles Francis Annesley Voysey's life is skimpy; there are no primary sources, no detailed diaries, not even any retrospective autobiographical account. The sources for this brief account are principally the published details given by Mr John Brandon-Jones;¹ secondly, additional details and anecdotes supplied by members of the Voysey family and others who knew him personally.

Voysey was born in 1857; at the beginning his life was unorthodox and in view of the dominant events of his early life that word is particularly apposite. He was born at Hessle, near Hull and the family soon moved to Healaugh in Yorkshire, a parish of which his father was vicar. The family numbered six children of whom Voysey was the eldest boy, kept firmly in check, we understand, by two elder sisters. The rural, even wild, environment at Healaugh would have provided Voysey, in his first fourteen years, with a strong sense of English vernacular domestic architecture. In 1871 a complete and startling change happened in the family circumstances: Voysey's father was deprived of his living and expelled from the Church of England. The details of this expulsion are not relevant except in the picture they give us of the father as a strong-minded man following his own convictions to extraordinary lengths and a man of unorthodox thinking, both in the religious sense and in a broader context. The outcome was that in his early teens Voysey found himself in the totally different environment of Dulwich in South London. Whether unsettled by this momentous family event or, more likely, as unyielding to unwelcome circumstance as his father, he rejected one aspect of the change; after a spell at Dulwich College Voysey was withdrawn and put under a private tutor. The College can supply no information on Voysey's progress while a pupil there or the specific reasons for his leaving. There had been no school at Healaugh; this absence of conventional education might account for Voysey's erratic spelling, evident in the captioning of his drawings and in those few manuscripts which survive. More important, it might account for a narrowness in his thinking, a lack of flexibility, to which his writings testify. From private tutorship Voysey moved directly to apprenticeship to J.P. Seddon, to whom he became an articled pupil in 1874. There was an architectural tradition in the family through the grandfather, Annesley Voysey; this may have influenced the choice of profession and facilitated the entry to a distinguished practice where Voysey remained articled for five years, then as assistant for a short spell.

After another short spell in the office of Saxon Snell Voysey closed this phase of his life by working for about two years in the office of George Devey. By 1882 he

was working on his own and for himself. His time with Seddon and with Devey was undoubtedly important in his evolution as a designer. Yet the temptation in thinking of his career is to say that it was what he forgot when he left the tutelage of these men rather than what he learned from them that is most important. History lends a kind hand here since we actually know only fragments of the development Voysey underwent in the years between 1874 and 1882; the very few drawings that do survive from that time tell us little. Certainly he did not emerge with his future style ready formulated and the first years of his own architectural practice must have been difficult from two points of view. He had, in his own terms, much to learn before the style we think of as typical Voysey even began to emerge. While it was emerging few jobs came his way. So he was struggling to develop and struggling also to pay his way. John Brandon-Jones tells us:²

It was not for several years that his practice grew large enough to occupy his full time, but he refused his father's offer to write to friends and wellwishers on his behalf. Voysey felt that a client should choose his architect because he had a liking for the man and his work, and that the advice of an architect so chosen would be more readily accepted than the advice of an architect chosen to favour a friend, or as an act of patronage.

This represented the highest of ideals; since Voysey was in his personal tastes a frugal man and also a bachelor then life probably was not too hard. By 1884, though, he was engaged and in 1885 married.

His wife can be only a shadowy figure in any account. She seems to have wielded no discernible influence on Voysey's professional life and architectural development. There are no anecdotes or accounts to cast a light on her personality or character. What the Voyseys' social life was one can only guess. Yet it does seem likely that the beginning of their relationship propelled Voysey along a course that contributed substantially, in the end, towards the forming of his overall reputation. Voysey had an acknowledged respect for the work of Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo and there grew up a substantial friendship between the two. Mackmurdo was a few years Voysey's senior, having been born in 1851; this few years' difference meant that while Voysey was still struggling to find a foothold his friend was becoming established. So it is quite plausible to accept, as Brandon-Jones suggests,³ that Mackmurdo gave Voysey substantial help in establishing a trade in pattern designs for wallpapers and textiles. It was in 1883 that Voysey sold his first design to Jeffrey and Co.; it was therefore probably in that year – the year of Mackmurdo's famous design for the binding of *Wren's City Churches* – that this particular relationship between them was set up. It was also in this year that Voysey met Mary Maria Evans, his future wife. With his thoughts tending towards marriage and the responsibilities which for a man of his serious temperament that would entail it is not surprising that he looked to a means of livelihood which had so readily presented itself. He had a great facility with pattern, a subtle eye for colour. A pattern was a self-contained thing which did not require one to work for months in the presence of a prosperous and possibly difficult client with fixed ideas as to how he would like his new house to look. The

manufacturers, attuned to the idea of the 'Morris' fabric or paper, would soon be gearing up for the new 'Art Nouveau' so it was a good time to break into the business. In the event Voysey's success in this field must have surprised him as well as pleasing him enormously and the income which he received from this side of his activities was to provide a steady income throughout his life. Some of the friendships and relationships which he set up as a result of this work were also to have impacts elsewhere; work for Essex and Co., for instance, gave him not only some of his steadiest commissions for patterns but also the friendship with Richard Walter Essex and resultant architectural commissions. He also came into prolonged contact with the Morton family which produced, as well as high-quality textiles and carpets, several personalities whom Voysey must have found stimulating; that story, though, is better told elsewhere.⁴

If Voysey's contact with the world of pattern design did come about in this way then the uneasy way in which his work sits next to his three-dimensional design is easier to accept. If anyone doubts that this uneasiness does exist then we should let Voysey speak for himself:

A wallpaper is of course only a background and were your furniture good in form and colour a very simple or quite undecorated treatment of the walls would be preferable; but as most modern furniture is vulgar or bad in every way, elaborate papers of many colours help to disguise its ugliness. Although elaboration makes confusion more confounded, yet if you have but enough confusion the ugliness of modern life becomes bearable.⁵

This view was expressed in 1893 when Voysey was established as a designer of flat pattern, not yet fully established as an architect. It is not the intention in this chapter to go beyond outline and into detail, yet it needs to be stressed that, though he was a natural and inventive pattern designer, Voysey believed that the use of elaborate and colourful pattern in domestic settings was usually misguided. Regardless of this, the important biographical fact is that from the date of his marriage Voysey had at his disposal a means of income which drew on some of his major talents, helped to build him a reputation and brought him into contact with the sort of people who were in a position to advance his progress into a genuine architectural career. That this was his main wish there seems no cause to doubt.

By the middle of the 1890s Voysey found himself with quite as much architectural work as he could handle and the majority of his total output and of his best work was then carried out in little more than a dozen years. By the outbreak of the Great War his practice was in decline; from then on, though he lived to be an old man of eighty-three, dying in 1941, he worked relatively little. This last quarter century of his life, the start of which is conveniently signalled by the publication of his *Individuality* in 1915, has its own specific interest to the student of Voysey.

This interest will be examined in the relevant chapter; in biographical terms there is very little to note in these later years. Voysey spent them, from 1917, in a flat at 73 St James's Street. In these years he again lived alone and, also as in his early years of practice, he worked from his home. From the day the Voysey family arrived in Dulwich he seems to have had no lasting desire to leave London. His

first years of practice were spent in Broadway Chambers, near the present site of New Scotland Yard in Westminster. After three years here his marriage in 1885 led to a move to Streatham Hill where he lived at 45 Tierney Road until 1890. The family then moved from South to North London, to Melina Place, St John's Wood until 1895, then to another St John's Wood address, 6 Carlton Hill, until 1899. Here the pattern was broken as the family moved to a house designed by Voysey himself, The Orchard, which was built at Chorleywood just outside London. This also meant that he could no longer work so conveniently from home as he had so far done so he set up a separate studio, initially at 23 York Place off Baker Street where he worked until 1913. Then followed a few months at 25 Dover Street and four years at 10 New Square, Lincoln's Inn. Finally, in 1917, he moved himself and his diminished practice into 73 St James's Street where he lived and worked until his death in 1941.

That there is so little biographical material available does combine with a great sense of privacy throughout his life, on Voysey's part, to leave us without a very clear idea of the sort of person he was, his personality, his interests and patterns of life. These matter little for a consideration of his work so this is no great loss. Indeed since there is a strong temptation to use personal information as a basis for interpreting the principles of an artist's work it might be a positive gain that we know so little of Voysey. We have to judge him by his work. But if for no other reason it is intriguing to know a little of the personality that stood behind the work so there can be no harm, having very briefly sketched the uneventful shape of Voysey's life, if we dwell for a few paragraphs on the character of the exceptional man who led this apparently unexceptional life.

Two contrasting sides appear in Voysey's personality; first is almost the stereotype of the strict, high-principled purist; severe, often difficult to deal with, yet undeniably and above all honourable and honest; a character containing a good deal of the puritan or the Quaker:

... 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 . . . He was the sort of man you would never dream of taking any liberty with. You would probably have hesitated to introduce yourself. Automatically he commanded your respect.⁶

Yet on the other hand:

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.⁶

These comments are the views of the actor Robert Donat who some years before Voysey's death married Ella Voysey, his niece and the daughter of his favoured youngest brother Ellison. Voysey designed various things for the young couple, of whom he was obviously fond; these included some furniture, perhaps the last

he ever designed, which was made and survives (see 72); and a house in Hampstead which was not built. Robert Donat's few paragraphs on 'Uncle Charles' were written and delivered as an obituary on radio and subsequently published in the *Architects Journal*. They are the closest thing we have to a subjective description of Voysey written by somebody who knew him well, liked and admired him and had the power of evocative writing. It is therefore an important though very sketchy record. It is supported by the only other source of first-hand information from people who knew him well, the comments of surviving members of the family. These bear out the point that Voysey was a man of great strength of will and stringency in his professional dealings; yet in his personal dealings capable of great warmth and kindness.

While this is not a stunning conclusion it does help to make sense of someone whose work on the one hand showed an austerity of white or plain oak surface and a lack of elaboration of detail in an age which tended towards the worship of complexity in design; yet on the other hand included designs for soft and delicately coloured patterns, the principal images of which were bird, leaf, flower and fruit. To this picture of an austere but warm kindness we only need to add the notion of a sense of humour to capture the basic qualities. Even when expressing the most severe and puritanical of his ideas Voysey sometimes slipped, easily enough to make it seem quite natural, into a dry humour. It was his obsession that all objects surrounding him, even down to the smallest, should be the epitome of their type. This was a lofty enough ideal and one which most of us would find finicky and off-putting, even from as respectable a source as Mr Voysey. Yet somehow we can go along with it when he puts it in this way:

Cold vegetables are less harmful than ugly dish covers. One affects the body and the other affects the soul.⁷

Particularly since we also have the account of a family member who recalls that the same man could be taken to eat in a restaurant and comment as he sat: 'I may not be hungry but, thank the Lord, I am greedy'.

Finally in this introductory chapter it is vital to add a reminder. Very few people, designers or others, have been fortunate and talented enough to stand completely distinct from their generation when their work is considered. To claim that Voysey was such a person would be extravagant; in any case our judgement of this would be highly subjective. Many people might agree with the author that there is indeed something quite distinctive about going into a Voysey house and that the only other architects of that generation to equal that distinctiveness are Mackintosh and Lutyens. That judgement is very open to accusations of modishness, of fashion-following, particularly now when Art Nouveau is much in evidence on the coffee table and in the Portobello Road. But at the least most people would agree that, like it or not, there is a distinct newness or difference about a Voysey house in its time and context. That is the necessary reminder: it may look to us now like a better-conceived element of suburbia but a Voysey house, in its day, had a complete freshness about it. It is in the essence of that freshness that it has subsequently been copied and in the copying lost. It is important to let the feeling of freshness work on us when we look at Voysey. This feeling is one that was picked out by Sir Edwin Lutyens in 1931, when Voysey's

reputation was just starting to revive after some years of neglect:

No detail was too small for Voysey's volatile brain, and it was not so much his originality – though original he was – as his consistency which proved a source of such delight. Simple, old-world forms moulded to his own passion, as if an old testament had been rewritten in vivid print, bringing to light a renewed vision in the turning of its pages, an old world made new and with it, to younger men, of whom I was one, the promise of a more exhilarating sphere of invention. This was Voysey's achievement – Fashions, as they ever have and ever will do, come and go. Hail! then to those men amongst whom Voysey stands, who give new kindling to the old flames to warm and cheer conviction in a living future.⁸

It was echoed ten years later, by J.M.Richards, in his obituary notice on Voysey's death:

Into this stuffy atmosphere blew a breath of fresh air . . . It is difficult for us today to appreciate the extent to which Voysey was a revolutionary, for we are surrounded by the indirect descendants of his small houses, debased almost beyond recognition but yet representing, however inadequately, a way of living infinitely more humane than the way he helped to break away from.⁹