

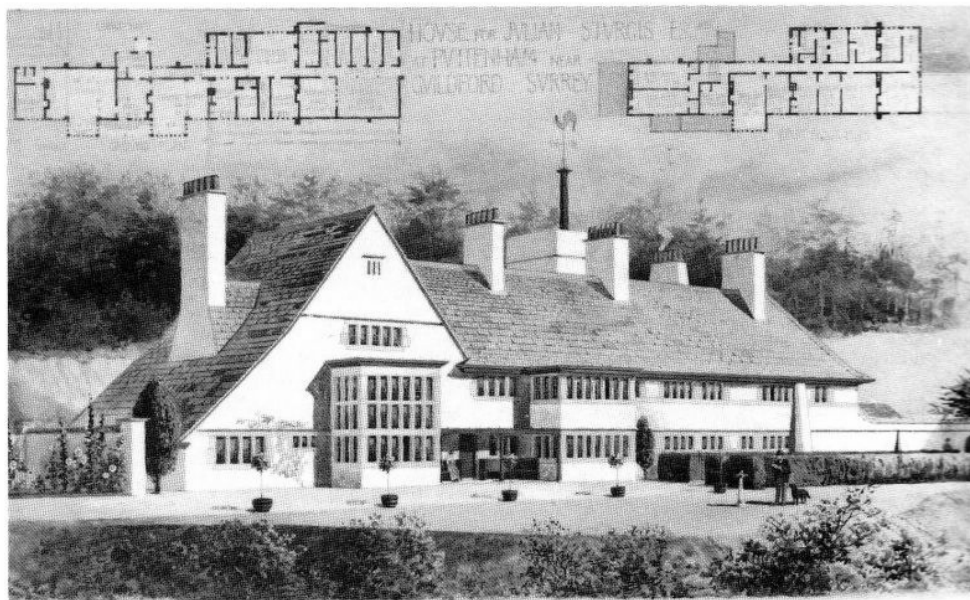
Chapter 3 **Some Important Experiments, 1895–7**

The single most important house designed by Voysey was Moor Crag, the drawings for which are dated 1898. There were some earlier designs which were direct precursors of it and houses in later years which did not owe it a great deal. Yet if one sat down to list the qualities which go to make up the ideal Voysey house and then cast around for the house which, in its finished form, most closely approached fulfilling these qualities or requirements, Moor Crag would be the one. In speaking in this chapter of some 'important experiments' which immediately pre-date that house, this is to be borne in mind. The architectural content of this chapter covers a small group of houses, the principal two being Norney (now Norney Grange), near Shackleford, and New Place, originally called Hurtmore, in Haslemere; both were designed in 1897 with later additions. These houses were unlike anything Voysey was to design later; on the other hand both owed a good deal to some of the earlier designs, notably to Perrycroft which is discussed above. With this in mind it might seem odd to refer to them as 'experiments'. Something which sits on the basis of past work and does not lead anywhere does not seem a prime candidate to be so called. However, as indicated in the previous chapter, Voysey was coming in 1895 to a watershed. He was beginning to achieve a limited success and to be seen as some sort of promoter of an avant-garde; he was beginning also to show considerable confidence in his approach to architectural and other design problems but he had not done a great deal of work, not completed many buildings and not achieved yet a real fluency in his work. The buildings to be considered in this chapter were important in that – as will be shown – they marked his final and most important experiment with fluency in design. Without them, Moor Crag and the other mature Voysey houses could never have happened.

In this period of three years or so Voysey also began to produce the style of furniture which we now see as typical of him; between 1895 and 1898 he evolved most of the patterns of furniture which he used, both as one-off pieces and as more or less regular lines, throughout his career.

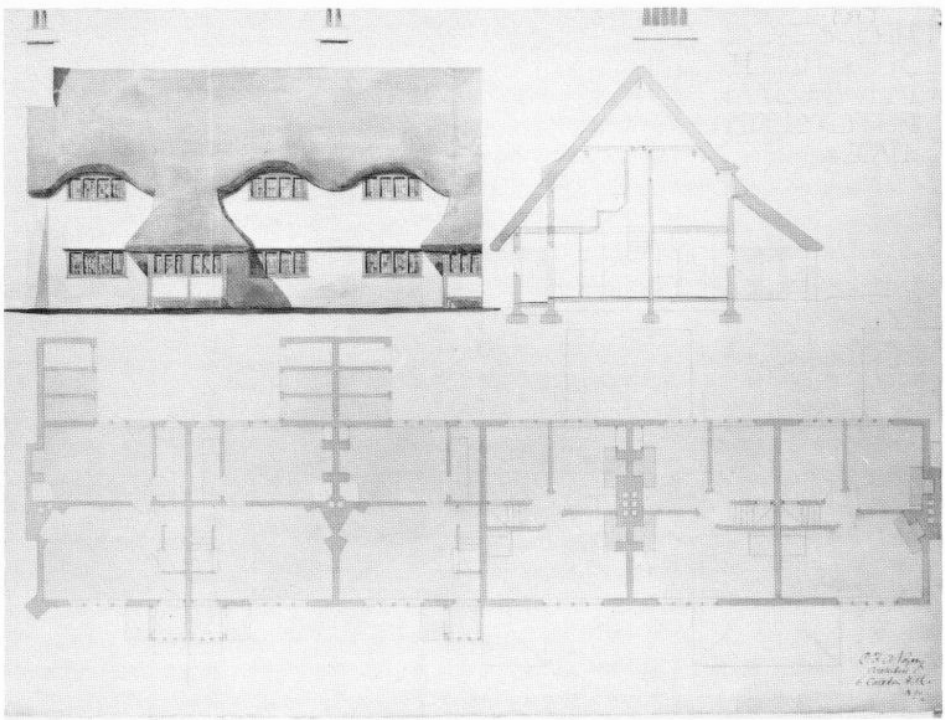
Of the projects which were under way in 1896, the year before the masterly efforts of Norney and New Place, three are notable: the house for Julian Sturgis on the Hogs Back near Guildford; the group of workmen's cottages at Elmesthorpe, outside Leicester, for the Earl of Lovelace; the studio and living accommodation for A. Sutro at Studland Bay in Dorset. They evince three very different styles.

Perspective watercolour and plans, inset, for a house, now called Greyfriars, on the Hog's Back near Guildford, Surrey, for Julian Sturgis, 1896–7. This watercolour, signed H. Gaye, was exhibited at the Royal Academy, 1897.

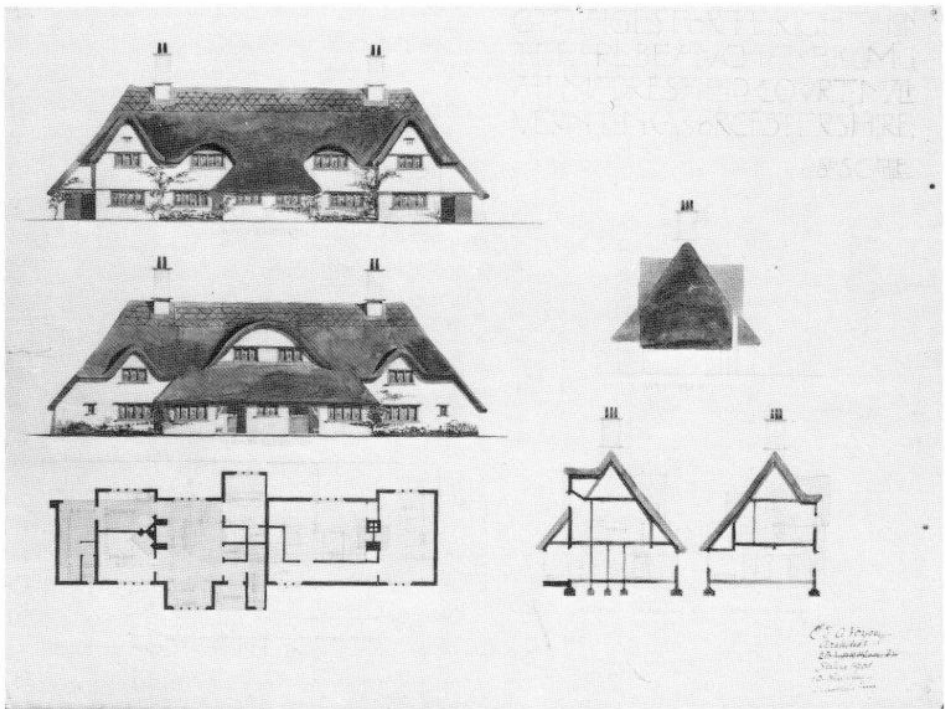


The Sturgis house has been known as Merlshanger and Wancote; today it is called Greyfriars and it is most convenient to use that name in referring to it. As seen in the elevation and plan (16) it is of the type of long, narrow house which Voysey repeated several times; here the narrowness is partly necessary since the steeply sloping site on the scarp slope falling south off the Hogs Back does not allow of much depth; equally important, this layout allows as many rooms as possible the benefit of the splendid view. This house clearly looks forward to Moor Crag, particularly in the bold sweep of the roof from the cross gable down to eaves below the top line of the ground-floor windows. The row of six cottages designed for one of Voysey's aristocratic occasional patrons, the Earl of Lovelace, for his estate outside Leicester, is one of few designs by Voysey for a terrace of housing for working-class occupancy – the development for Henry Briggs's colliery at Whitwood, Yorkshire (see 41) is the only other significant example which was built. In addition there was a proposed design for cottages for the Earl of Beauchamp for Madresfield Court, Malvern Link, of 1901, and one or two other minor schemes. The Elmhurst cottages are as can be seen (17) quite unextraordinary in general design and layout; their interest lies in the whimsical arrangement of the thatched roof and this is even more apparent in the proposal for thatching the Madresfield Court cottages of 1901 which are mentioned above (18). Thatch had two main attractions for Voysey; first it was a traditional and assertively vernacular material; second it had a plasticity in use which slate or tile lacked, it could curve and flow over the roof and around the windows. This is precisely the effect Voysey sought in the roofing at Elmhurst and even more in the proposal for Madresfield Court. The thatch flows down to cover the porch, parts and flows around the dormers. The effect is whimsical, exaggerated, romantic; above all it is superficial for when we look at the Elmhurst cottages

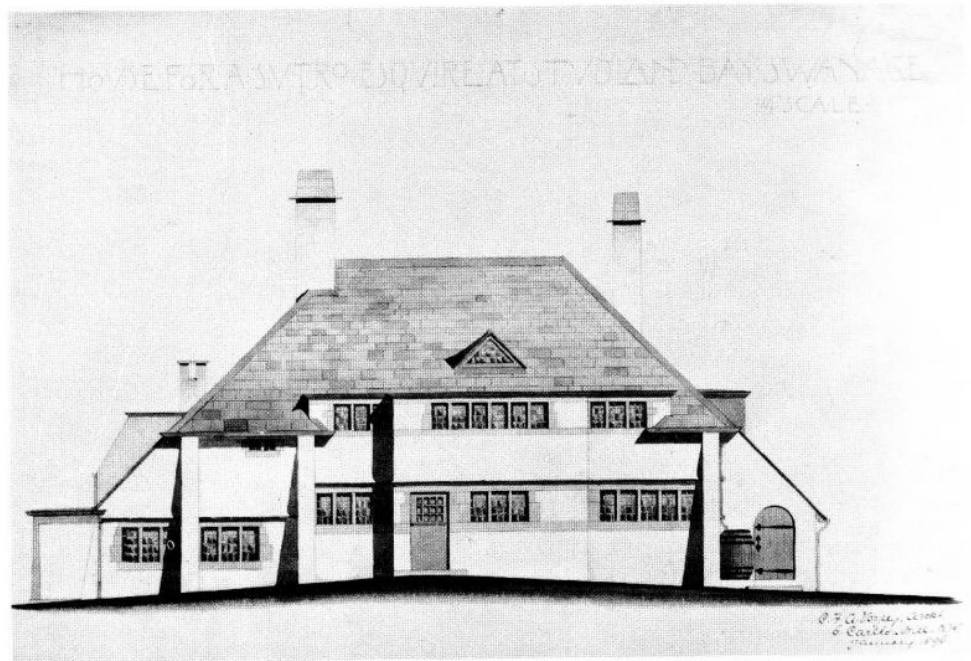
17
Design for a terrace of six thatched cottages at Elmesthorpe, near Leicester, for the Earl of Lovelace, 1896. Front elevation, cross-section and ground- and first-floor plans. The cottages were executed and still stand, although with slated roofs.



18
Design for a pair of thatched cottages at Madresfield Court, Malvern Link, for the Earl of Beauchamp, 1901. Elevations, sections and plans. Unexecuted.



Design for a house and studio at Studland Bay, Swanage, Dorset for A. Sutro, 1896. Front elevation, substantially as executed; some insensitive alterations to the house have now been made.



now, their thatch replaced by slates applied after a fire in 1914, they seem very ordinary. This does help to demonstrate a recurring feature of fascination for Voysey; this was the way in which the arrangement of wall and roof in his houses could be varied for visual effect. Its basis is an exaggeration of the possibilities of the pitched roof form – the gable, the bay window and the dormer being placed in eccentric relationship to the pitch of the roof. So in Voysey's work we see gutters carried out and across in front of windows; roof pitches running down and around projecting bays; or, as in the present instances, thatching being shaped around fenestration in an unexpected and unorthodox way. This is something to bear in mind as various houses are examined and as the rationale of Voysey's work is discussed, for it is not an accidental, nor an unimportant feature. Indeed this variety in the treatment of roofs, this emphasis on their importance, is one of the dominant characteristics which emerge in the development of Edwardian domestic architecture in the vernacular style.

If Greyfriars shows the way Voysey's work was moving in 1896 and Elmhurst the scarcely hidden romanticism which overlay a desire to play with conventional forms, then the studio for Sutro at Studland Bay was typical of the small Voysey house of artistic pretensions. It shows a greater practice in coping with the problems of site, a greater fluency, and is altogether an accomplished building (19). It echoes the 'Small House for an Art Lover' which seems to have been the staple for the first designs of Voysey's generation of Arts and Crafts architects. Yet it also reminds us again that Voysey was by now several years into his career as an architect and had acquired both clients and skills.

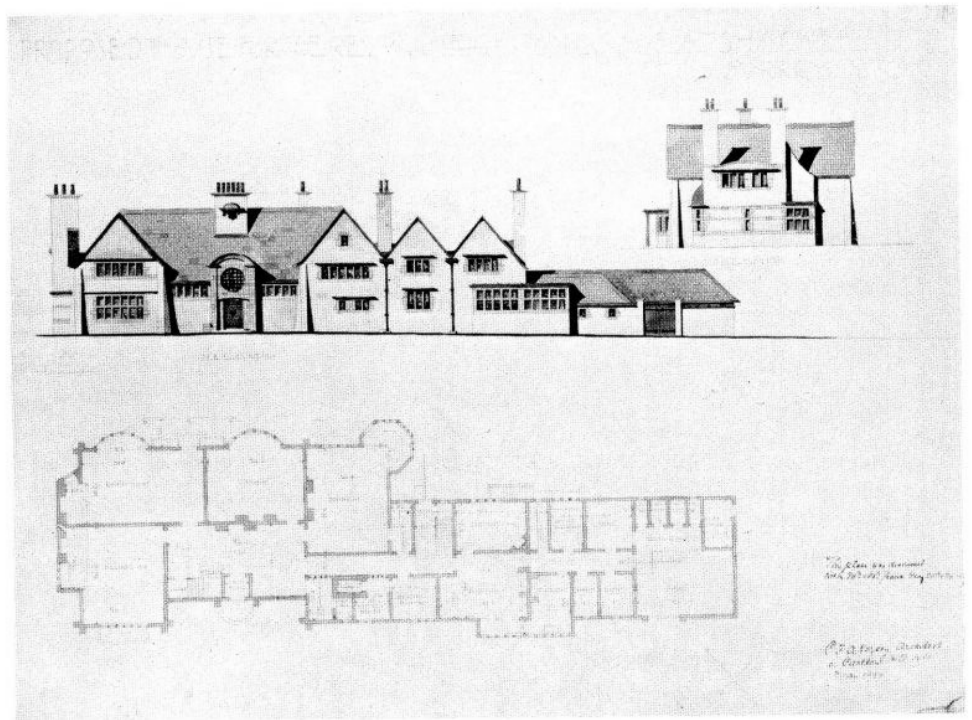
Norney

The 'proposed House for the Revd Leighton Grane at Shackleford, Surrey', appears in a first design dated May 1897 and was, as is noted on that drawing, 'discussed with Mr and Mrs Grane May 29th and 30th 1897'. The proposed house was to occupy a level site in open Surrey countryside, only two or three miles south of the recently built house on the Hog's Back. Ten miles south lies Haslemere where the other important house of this year, New Place, was to stand. It is apparent that on several occasions the building of one house in an area seems – as also at Malvern and on the shores of Lake Windermere – to have created a spate of work for Voysey. For a man whose clients often seemed to come to him in a haphazard way – one does not know at all, for instance, how the Revd Leighton Grane came to ask him to build a house – this does suggest quite strongly that people reacted locally to a house being built. They must have seen the house of a friend or acquaintance and as a result approached its architect and commissioned work for themselves. This, naturally, is the way in which much architectural commissioning will come; yet it seems too arbitrary a way in which to establish the practice of one of the best-known architects of a generation.

The first design for the Leighton Grane house, to be called Norney (20a), shows the house much as built. It has been suggested that Voysey's plans were fully worked out in his mind before he put pencil to paper and that he rarely altered a scheme. This is not generally so; there is ample evidence of the re-working of

20a

First design for Norney, near Shackleford, for the Revd W. Leighton Grane, 1897. With the exception of the polygonal bay and other details the plan shows the house as built; some elevational details differ.





20b
The garden front of Norney.

schemes through several stages. The designs for the White Horse Inn at Stetchworth for the Earl of Ellesmere, designed in 1905, run through a whole series of re-drawings until Voysey finally emerges at a seventh revised plan. With Norney he does seem to have known what he wanted for there were only small changes of detail which differentiate this first proposal from the house as built (20b and 20c). In plan form the main house is unchanged although the finished house has a longer service wing, of three cross gables rather than two. Decorative and stylistic features have, however, been changed. Where the first drawing has three bow windows to the garden front the house has only two, with square gables over a round bow such as we will also see at Haslemere. The eccentric arrangement of the left-hand bow on the drawing, which wraps round the corner of the room in octagonal form, is lost. The prominent entrance porch is altered but remains in the same character. The south-east elevation (20d) has not, in the drawing, acquired the strong modelling which is one of the most interesting features of the house as built, with its ogee and semi-circular roof curves. These features turn what is

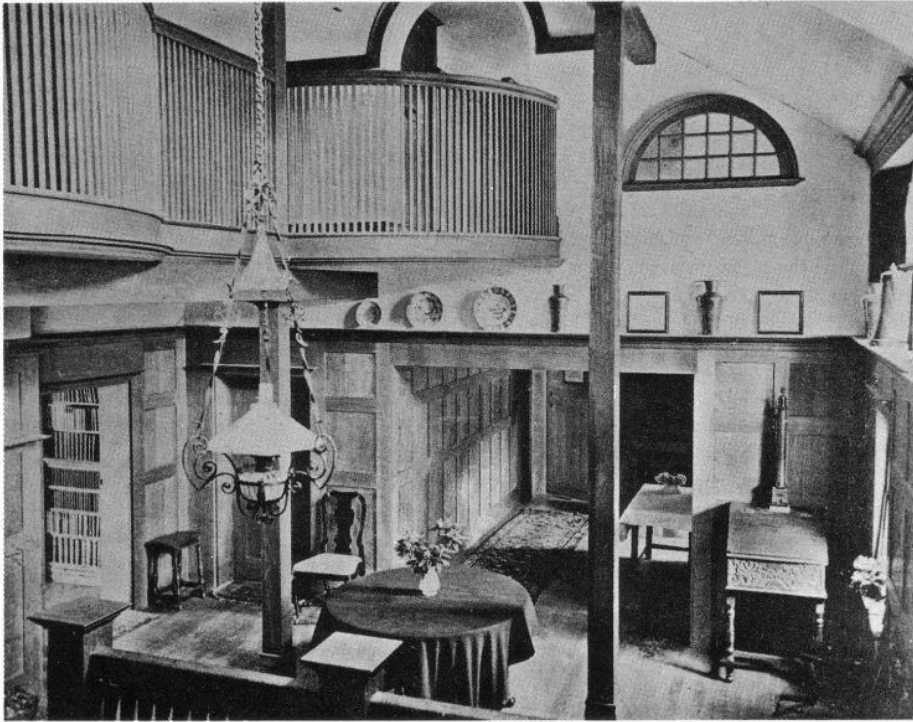


20c
Detail of the main entrance of Norney.



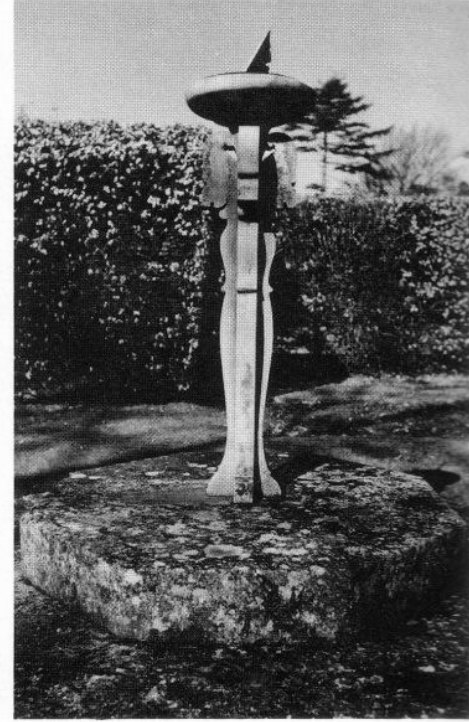
20d
The (south-east) end elevation of Norney.

basically a simple bay housing the ingle-nook into a dominant shaping of this end of the house. On the whole the house shows a strong symmetry and regularity on the garden front. There is a simplicity in this layout which is reflected in the, by now, standard use of roughcast and stone window dressings. Against this uniformity and sense of order are the several quite abrupt emphases: the heavy overhanging of the gables over the main window bays; the very prominent porch; and, echoing the shape of the porch on the end elevation, the bay already referred to. This sense of the dramatic in what is, after all, only a medium-size house is carried on inside in the very emphatic layout of the hall (20e). The ground plan and form of the house are otherwise, for Voysey, quite standard. The impression for the visitor is of a basic order overlaid with a strong eccentricity which gives the finished building a very pronounced and pleasant sense of tension. This certainly reflects the characteristic of the architect which we see also in his pattern designs, the interplay of a sense of order and a sense of fantasy and invention. At Norney we see another sign of it in the garden sundial (20f) of stone set on a column which



20e
Contemporary photograph of the hall at Norney, showing the double-storey height and avoidance of diagonals.

20f
Detail of the garden sundial at Norney; it is of stone on an octagonal base, the support cross-shaped in section with an identical grotesque profile carved into each arm of the cross. Believed to be contemporary with the house.



is a four-sided profile grotesque caricature, possibly based (Voysey's caricatures often though not always were) on his client's face. This use of the grotesque has already been seen in the porch of the studio for Britten (see 7b) with its wooden supports shaped to a caricature head and will be seen in several future designs, both of furniture and of fixtures for houses.

In plan Norney shows a cluster of rooms grouped around the hall with the service rooms added in a long line continuing along the garden front. The hall itself is a large area, two floors in height with a gallery landing. This hall best exemplifies Voysey's ideas on the hall in domestic houses, which he expressed in an article in the *Studio*; he writes:

Spaciousness and ample superficial area are essential qualities in a good hall, the effect of which excessive height tends to limit and destroy. The horizontal lines of a gallery or of long, low beams will contribute towards the effect of spaciousness and repose. For the same reason all diagonal lines should be avoided, such as ramping or raking handrails and strings, all of which tend to destroy repose. Whatever size the hall may be, its length and width should have preeminence over its height.¹

This is very much the line and style of argument that Voysey was to develop in all his polemics; the key words we grow to recognise are repeated and hammered home as 'repose' is here. Even while we recognise the force and sincerity of the argument we are aware of a certain eccentricity, especially when we come upon such statements as:

It is the modern craze for high rooms (originating in foreign travel) which has led to the destruction of all effects of repose. Doors, windows and even furniture appear as if 'stood on end'. Verticality and unrest are our gods!²

Voysey never travelled abroad; it is doubtful whether his journeys outside Britain exceeded a long weekend in Holland with members of the Art Workers' Guild. In addition to the idiosyncrasy of this remark Voysey also introduces here one of his major and recurring themes, the relationship between 'verticality' and the effect of 'unrest'. This idea runs through his work and will emerge again and again. Another emphatic remark in this article on the domestic hall, relevant to Norney as to all Voysey houses, is:

The effect of spaciousness and repose cannot be produced by the contents of old curiosity shops. You must choose your hall furniture and ornaments as carefully as you choose the first words to a stranger on his arrival, if you would produce on him an effect of peaceful friendship and homely bliss.³

These are the beginnings of the developed Voysey argument that the home is chiefly a place of comfort, not of show, for the inhabitant and a place of welcome for the visitor or guest.

New Place

Towards the end of 1897 Voysey was at work on the proposed house at Haslemere, a few miles south of Norney; his client was A.M.M. Stedman, who had founded in 1889 the publishing firm of Methuen and Co. In 1899 Stedman assumed the surname Methuen which accounts for some confusion over the client's name. In 1916 he became Sir Algernon Methuen, and lived at New Place until his death in 1924. His house was designed in 1897 with various outbuildings – cottage, summer house, motor-house – added in the next few years; it has a formal garden layout designed by Voysey, partly with the house, partly in 1901. New Place has the advantage over Norney of a sloping site; the house is orientated east-west with the main entrance on the west side and the main rooms facing south. Since the site falls away quite steeply to the west this provides the opportunity, which Voysey always seemed to enjoy and to respond to, for differing levels and terracing. Thus, for instance, the south or terrace front has a doorway leading from the hall to a terrace into which two short wings – housing the drawing-room and study – project (21a,b). The study has a single-storey bay front with curved, leaded roof. The drawing-room has a bay, also round, which like the garden front bays at Norney rises up two storeys to a projecting gable. Here, though, the bay also drops below the terrace to a third level; so although the flanking wings to the hall are in plan balanced, they vary in elevation from one to three storeys in height. New Place also, like Norney but unlike most of the later houses, favours consistent use of the curve. There is a round-headed porch to the front door, echoed in a semi-circular drip course on the adjacent chimney-stack (21c), which exactly reflects the form used over the ingle-nook at Norney. Against this curve is contrasted a square, flat-roofed ground-floor bay and the row of three bedroom



21a

New Place (originally called Hurtmore) at Haslemere for A.M.M.Stedman, later Sir Algernon Methuen, 1897. The terrace front, showing the terrace wall, the three-storey bay window and, to the left, the entrance front.

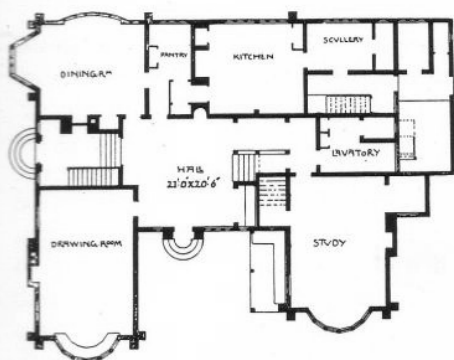
21b

The terrace front of New Place, from the terrace.



21c

The entrance front and main door of New Place; the arched porch rests on stone corbels carved into each of which can be seen a grotesque profile. The typical down-pipe brackets and castellated hopper also show clearly, as used on many of Voysey's houses.

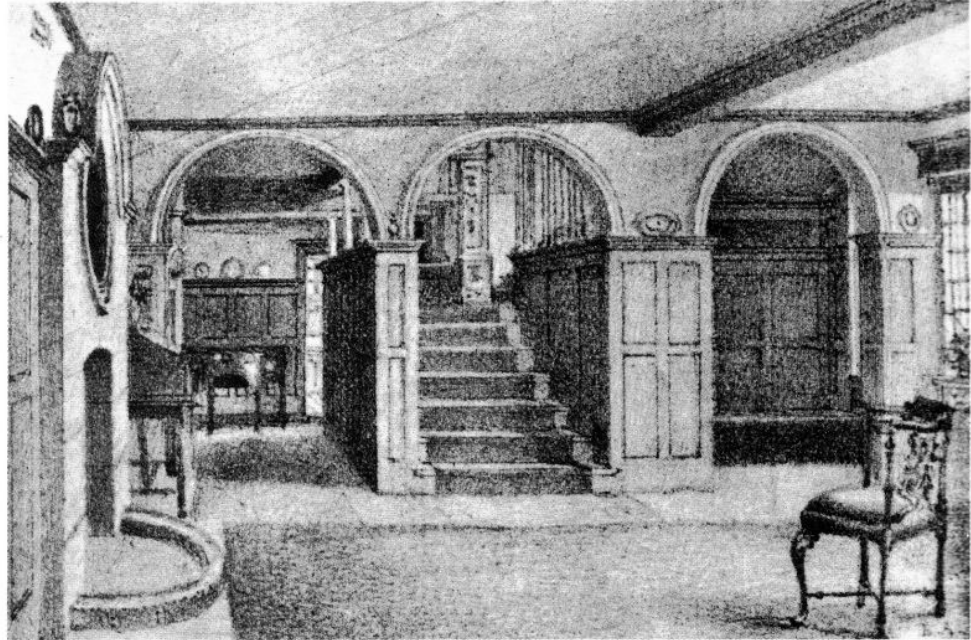


21d

The ground-floor plan of New Place.



Contemporary drawing of the hall at New Place showing the three arched openings, balanced by the chimney-piece to the left.



windows which break the line of the projecting eaves as they break up into the roof slope, each with its small flat roof. On the terrace front (21b) is a similar contrast; the curved roof to the bay already mentioned and the adjacent curved garden arch are set against a row of three gables at different heights, that over the door having a projecting bell housing echoing the large projecting gable adjacent. There is a further curve to the drip course on the chimney-stack rising above this door. New Place is approached by a curved drive and this, and the slope of the site, hides the house until the visitor is quite near. It also has the roughcast finish and stone dressings which we can now take for granted as features of the developing Voysey house.

The plan form (21d) and internal arrangements of New Place reflect that it is the most elaborate house Voysey ever built, with lavish internal fittings though unfortunately he was not given a free hand to use his own moveable furniture. Despite this considerable scale of attention and expenditure in internal fittings the layout and idiom are very close to Norney. Stylistically, the hall (21c) shows the half-round motif taken from the exterior and repeated, in the chimney-piece, the fender and the row of three round-headed arches. One leads through to the study, the centre one leads direct to the stairs, the third is blind with panelling and a bench seat. The same repeat of the half-round motif from outside has been seen in the hall at Norney, though otherwise the two halls are very different in character. At New Place, again as at Norney, the main rooms are grouped around the entrance hall, the drawing-room and study forming two flanking projecting wings on the terrace front to which reference has already been made. The hall is of conventional ceiling height which is to say, it has the relatively low ceiling that Voysey always

favoured – except where he deliberately used a double-storey height – even in the largest of his rooms. The large and prominent chimney-piece demonstrates effectively that Voysey thought of the hall as an area to be used, not simply a place of reception and circulation; it was the focal point of the house. He has emphasized this at New Place by having the main entrance, the garden entrance, the stairs and main rooms all opening directly off it. There was at the turn of the century a considerable sense among the more progressive of the domestic architects of the importance of the hall, expressed not in practical but more in emotional terms. This was founded clearly on a sense of the past, on a conception of the domestic building in particular of Tudor England – but not primarily the Tudor of romantically whimsical half-timbering, though this played some part. Voysey offered as his contribution the article quoted above, in which he also said:

The hall should receive its guests with composure and dignity, but still with brightness, open arms and warmth; warmth of colour as rich and luxurious as you like but above all things sober and resposeful . . .⁴

M.H. Baillie Scott also contributed at some length to this debate; his sense of the English tradition of the hall was based more firmly on an historical sense than Voysey's, which rested on the demonstrable need for the kind of facilities which his halls offered. Baillie Scott writes:

Of late years there has been a great revival of the hall as a central feature in a house . . . the hall is to be a place where the family may assemble round the fire in the evening, without being disturbed by servants passing through it, or without being obliged to hastily decamp on the arrival of an unwelcome visitor.⁵

This was written in 1895; a few years later Baillie Scott again took this subject up in the *Studio*:

In seeking for a basis for the plan of a small house it may be well to follow the evolution of the complex modern house; and in tracing this back to its source it will be found that it originally comprised but one apartment – the hall or house-place, as it was called – and if its development from this primary form is followed it will be found that it consisted chiefly in the formation of special cells for special purposes.⁶

He comments that from the original hall-house the prominence and physical size of the hall dwindled with its importance. Eventually it became a mere 'lobby' until in 'modern times':

. . . amidst other features and details of the past, the hall became again a somewhat notable feature in the plan and was considered almost an essential adjunct to the 'artistic house'.⁷

A similar argument, in more detail, is put by Charles Harrison Townsend in his Introduction to a book which was reprinted by the *Studio* in 1901, indicating the public and professional demand for information on the topic. This was Nash's *The Mansions of England in the Olden Time*.⁸ Harrison Townsend, in his own highly successful architectural practice, played as big a part as Voysey and Baillie Scott in establishing the hall as a strong feature of much domestic architecture of these years.

Both Norney and New Place were substantial and successful works which

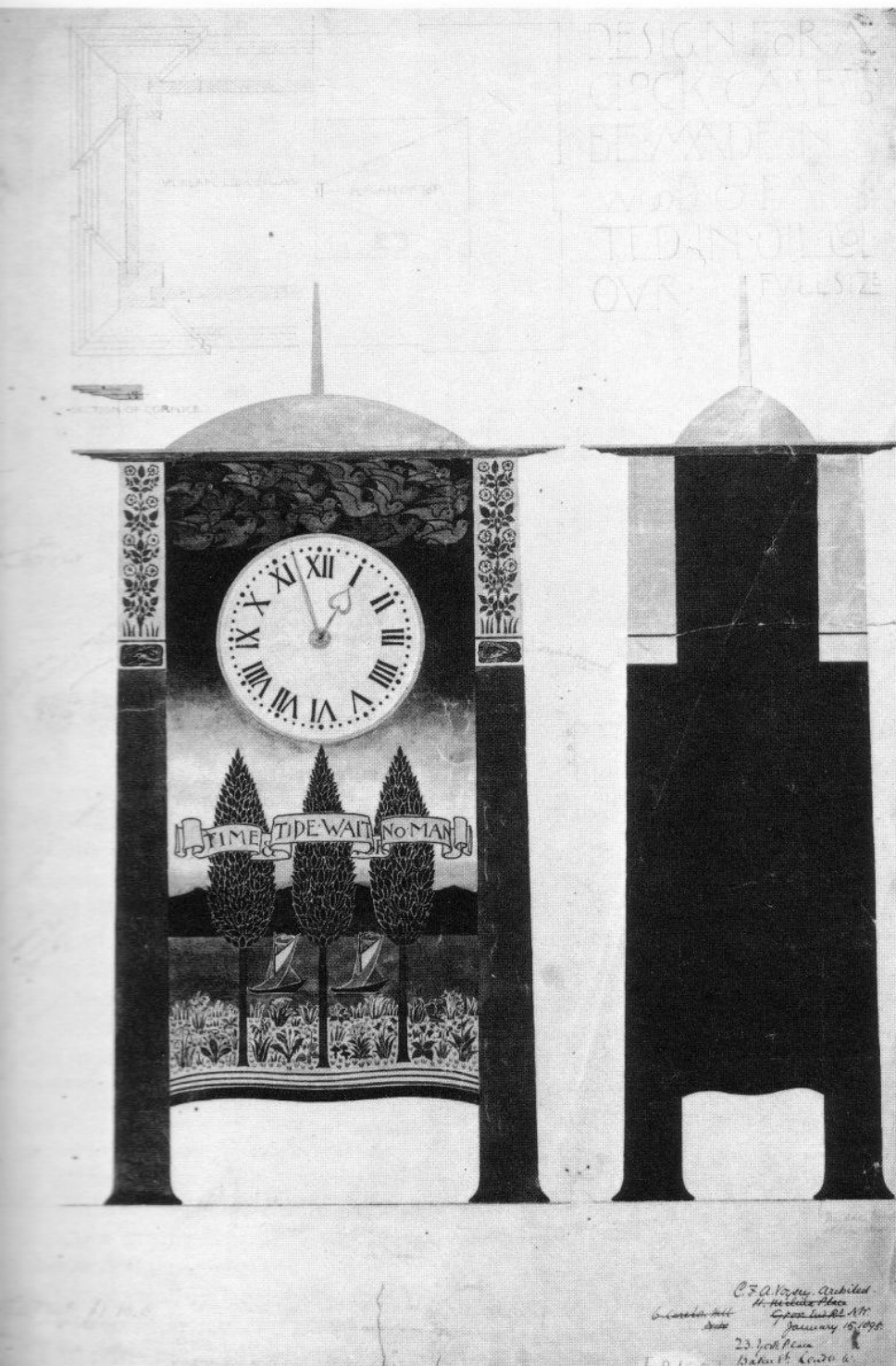
finally established Voysey as a recognized domestic architect; they also demonstrated that he was, as in the way outlined above, contributing to the practice of domestic architecture in accordance with the progressive architectural thought of his age. His houses of 1896–7, of which the two discussed above are the most important, show a definite sense of tradition and also a willingness to innovate. The blend which has been referred to, of simplicity with a richness of feature which was muted in most of Voysey's later work, was a part of his development, separating him from the relative eclecticism of his first years of practice and the further maturing of his style in the last two years of the century. With the building of Norney and New Place in 1897, Voysey made a place for himself in the history of British architecture.

Experiments in furniture, 1895–7

In April 1894, as we have seen, Voysey was telling the members of the RIBA that he was 'groping in the dark, struggling to find out the true laws which govern fitness and beauty'⁹ for the design of furniture. This was the cry from the heart of a young designer; in the same talk he came a little closer to the practicalities of the problem when he said:

We must restrain the carver, the inlayer, the polisher and the metal-worker and be careful that the thought in their design is as good as its execution. Also encourage them to concentrate ornament, and cease to use it as a means of hiding cheap construction and bad workmanship and material.¹⁰

To put this remark in perspective, it was made in a climate where the progressive movement in furniture design was already much as Voysey suggested it might be. The Art Workers' Guild, of which he had been a member for a decade, was setting the right standards; C.R. Ashbee and the Guild of Handicraft were at work and in the public eye; the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society had also been founded for a decade and its influential and well-publicised exhibitions were promulgating standards of taste which on the whole conformed to Voysey's wishes. The list of designers and craftsmen who were established in this kind of work goes back as far as the Aesthetic Movement starting in the 1870s and including E.W. Godwin and Christopher Dresser; Voysey's own mentor Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo had been producing ten years previously clean uncluttered oak furniture, largely devoid of ornament and relying on cleanness of line for its effect. In Voysey's own generation there were designers like himself set to produce good furniture, men like Walter Cave and M.H. Ballie Scott. There were also the firms of artist-craftsmen like A.W. Simpson of Kendal, set up in 1889, who would do a great deal of work with and for Voysey. It was a busy field in which Voysey chose to participate and he entered it with an enthusiasm and a disregard for opposition or competition typical of all his work. One of the outstanding features of Voysey's furniture designs is the use of bronze or brass fittings – a range of hinges, door handles and knobs, locks, escutcheons, keys – to his own design; these were made by the firm of Elsley and Co. and it is a mark of the success of these designs that they became a commercially available range of items. Voysey had realized the

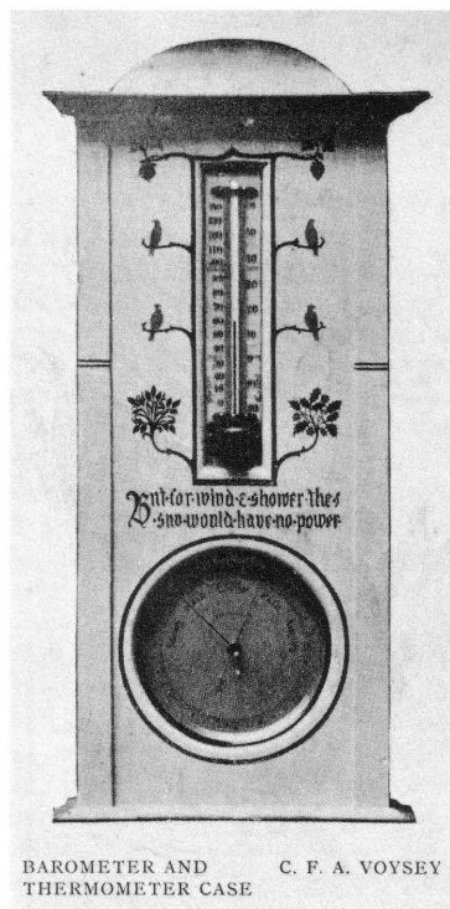


22

Design for a clock case in softwood, 1895, the decoration to be applied in oil colour. Various colour and other notes can just be made out, and a price of £1.10s for the woodwork from Cootes.

23

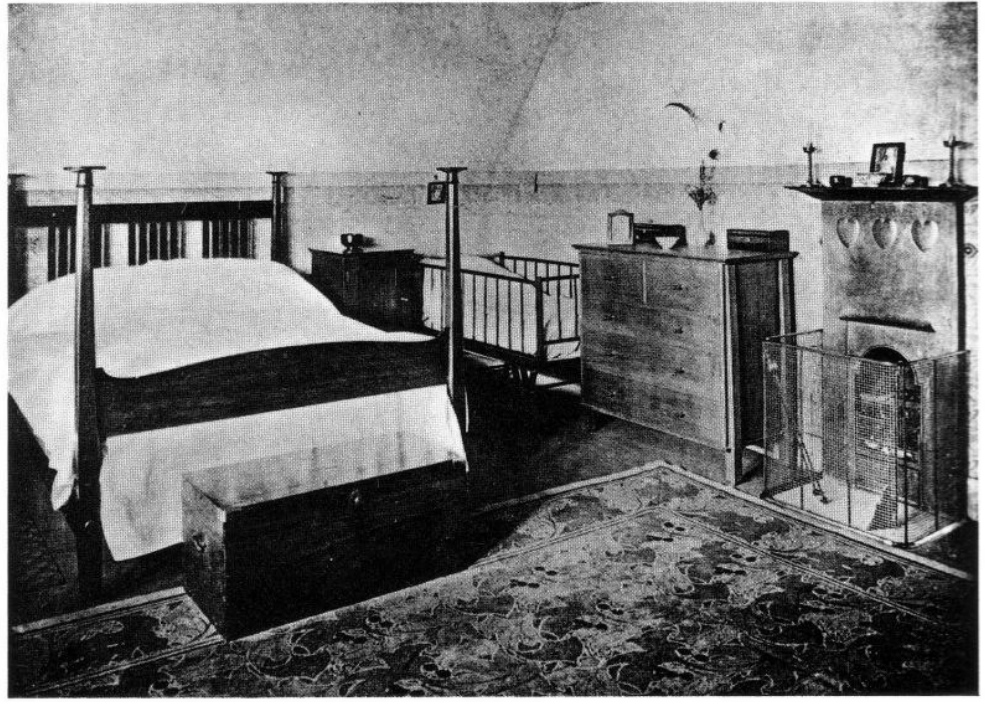
Contemporary photograph of a wooden barometer and thermometer, c.1895, case hand-painted in oil colour.



BAROMETER AND
THERMOMETER CASE

C. F. A. VOYSEY

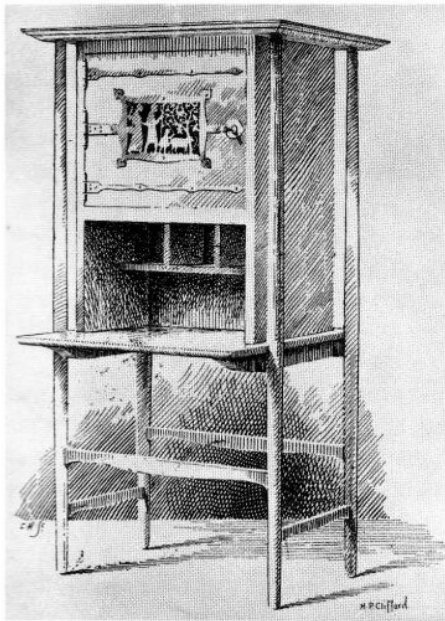
The bedroom of The Orchard at Chorleywood, c.1900, from a contemporary photograph. The bed, chest of drawers and bedside cupboard are by Voysey; also the carpet, candlesticks and fire-irons; and the cast-iron chimney-piece which is identical to that shown in detail in 30g.



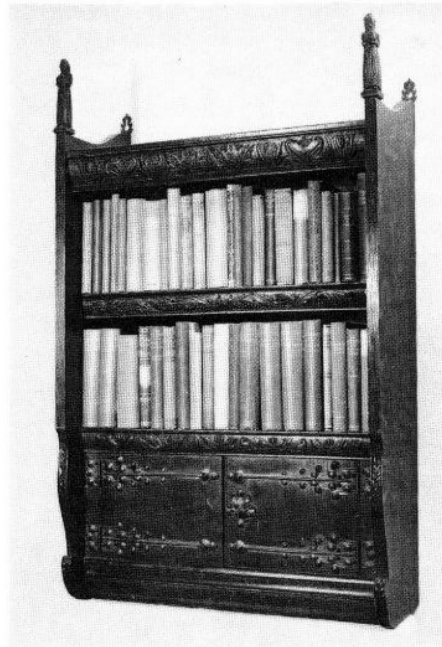
importance of such details as this in the early 1890s; in the drawings for Perrycroft, for instance, is a design for the elaborate front-door hinges for that house. There is also a design made for that house of two of the most often repeated fittings: a strap hinge terminating in a heart shape incised with the outline of a bird eating a cherry, and the small, slender profiled knob which became a standard fitting for all cupboard doors and drawers. This drawing, though undated, is in a run of Perrycroft drawings dated from Dec. 1893–Jan. 1894.

In the design of houses the years 1895–7 were experimental in that Voysey, searching for accomplishment in his work, adopted a style of work which he later dropped. In his designs for furniture and interior fittings those same years were experimental in that he evolved, from the few and slightly inelegant furniture designs of earlier years which we have seen above, the basis of the complete range of furniture which he was to produce for the rest of his life. By 1898 most of the recognizable and distinctive Voysey furniture designs had appeared; the years 1895–7 laid a very solid foundation for these.

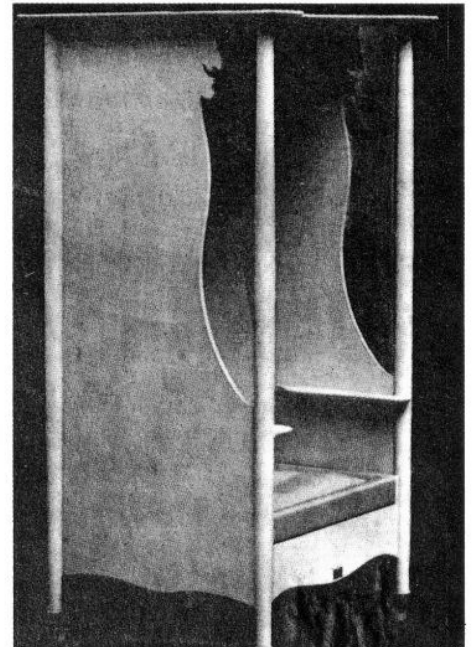
1895 began with a design which is not typical, but is one of the most distinctive and best known of Voysey's output. It is a clock-case originally made for himself, though possibly repeated in this form for a friend; a case of similar form was also produced in small quantities without the decoration and in aluminium. Softwood, rare for Voysey, was used for the original and the distinctive feature is the elaborate hand-painting, by Voysey himself (22). The design is dated Jan. 1895 and there is a sister design (23), similar in form though attenuated and less elaborately



25
Contemporary line drawing of a writing desk, designed 1895 for W. Ward Higgs; the metal fittings are of brass, the incised panel originally laid, the design for the piece notes, on 'blood red leather'.



26
Hanging cupboard and bookshelves, pre-1896, to a design made for the Home Arts and Industries Association. Various features are unusual, not least the pressed metal strap hinges and fittings, which differ in detail from those shown on the design and from any other of Voysey's metalwork.



27
Contemporary photograph of a bedroom chair, designed 1896, the frame to be either softwood or oak, the seat of canvas slung like a deck-chair. Note the grotesque profile cutaways in the sides. The client is not known and the piece is not known to survive. It was made by A.W. Simpson.

painted, for a barometer case. Both designs are architectural in their form, which favours plain surface, clearly expressed construction and simple moulding.

Also from 1895 are designs for a bed and chest of drawers which are shown (24) in Voysey's own bedroom at The Orchard, his house at Chorleywood (see 35). The bed is a good example of a repeated design; in 1895 one was made for Horniman, presumably for use at Lowicks; a second and third were made over the next half-dozen years, one for Moor Crag at Windermere (see 30) and the third, as shown, for Voysey himself. The three are identical, the design for each being traced afresh with the name of the new client added. These designs for bed and chest of drawers were typical and instantly recognizable as Voysey's work though distinctively part of his early output. The bed with its tall capped posts belongs clearly, too clearly for Voysey's mature taste, to the Mackmurdo tradition; the chest of drawers, sturdy and solid, is reminiscent of such early work by Voysey as the massive table of 1889 shown above (11).

If the small hand-painted clock-case (above) is the best-known small Voysey piece then another design of the same year – the design is dated Feb. 1895 – is surely the best known, though again not the most typical, large piece. This is the oak bureau or 'Writing Table' (as it is described on the design) made for W. Ward Higgs. For Ward Higgs Voysey carried out, at 23 Queensborough Terrace in London, the fully fitted interior from which much of the best surviving Voysey furniture comes. The bureau (25) stands on slender legs of octagonal section – the device of chamfering the supports from square to octagonal section, used here and on the bed described above, became a distinctive trademark – which continue to

the height of the moulded cornice at the top of the bureau. The carcase is slung between them, supported at desk-top and cornice level. The elegant lines of the piece are enhanced by a decorative panel in incised brass originally laid, the design notes, on blood-red leather. The panel depicts one of Voysey's beloved pastoral scenes of a strong medieval flavour. It is stressed on the design that the brasswork is not to be lacquered. Voysey does not, in this instance, specify the finish of the timber but we can take it that it was to be left clean, 'without stain or polish'. In conjunction with the unlacquered brass which would quickly dull we get a clear picture of a piece finished in scrubbed, clean oak and dull, greyish brasswork. This is how a piece of Voysey furniture was, without doubt, intended by its designer to look.

Another piece of furniture appeared in 1896 which, though distinctive and appealing like the bed and drawers, represented an unsuccessful experiment. This was the hanging cupboard and bookshelves (26). Its fascination may be that it reveals the beginnings of Voysey's working and social relationship with A.W.Simpson, the furniture designer and maker of Kendal. Certainly they had met by 1896; the A.W.Simpson firm had been established in 1886, and there is a strong resemblance between this piece and several to Simpson's own design included in his trade catalogues. It seems likely that in designing this piece Voysey was influenced by Simpson's work and tried something new. Neither before nor after did he produce anything similar; the carved medievalized figures surmounting the piece do recur in his work, as does the low-relief carving, but the form of the piece does not. It was made up, in 1896 at the latest though possibly earlier, for the Home Arts and Industries Association; it was in oak and it is noted on the design: 'These figures [i.e. the two figures surmounting the piece] to be very squarely cut and not at all realistic in detail'.

Bearing in mind that these were years of experiment and of forming a style the final piece of furniture in this chapter (27) may not come as a surprise. In form it resembles a porter's chair though, as an appreciative writer in the *Artist* notes, that was not the intended use:

The painted bedroom chair looks cumbersome, but is not. Being very light in make and on castors it moves with a touch. This chair would be invaluable to an invalid, it is so snugly protected from draughts, and the slung seat is most comfortable, yielding as it does to every movement of the body.¹¹

It stands on four corner supports, full height and round in section, infilled on three sides with planked panels and capped with an overhanging canopy. The infill panels are relieved by curved bottom edges and cutaways at the side outlining a grotesque head. The seat is slung canvas, the woodwork probably deal, painted a pale blue-green (the drawing for this piece, dated Feb. 1896, includes quotations for construction in both oak and deal; the chair is illustrated in the *Studio*¹² as by Simpson, whose quotation is for deal construction). Whatever the intention of this idiosyncratic piece – the drawing describes it as a 'bedroom chair', the inference presumably being that in the chilly bedroom of one's Voyseyesque 'House for an

Art Lover' one needed to be shielded from draughts – it is fascinating. Whether more than one was made is not known; certainly it is not known to survive and the drawing – contrary to Voysey's usual practice – does not name a client. The assumption therefore is that it was made speculatively by Simpson for the 1896 Arts and Crafts Exhibition at which it was shown.

To conclude this chapter here are some comments from the columns of Voysey's enthusiastic and consistent champion, the *Studio*:

For if few people can afford to have furniture specially designed for them, there are still fewer who, having the means, possess also the taste to put the idea into execution and courage enough to face the result. To have a room furnished differently from those of one's neighbours would seem to be considered an affectation today – or at least, the worst crime known to 'society' – bad form. Otherwise we might find Mr Voysey's services had been secured, not by a few here and there, but by many an owner of the palaces constantly springing up in London.¹³

We have no great knowledge of Voysey's views on 'society'; he is said to have been inclined to snobbery, very aware of the social standing of his client. He never seems to have pressed for duplication of his designs though we know that one of his most favoured furniture makers, F.C.Nielsen, did go into limited commercial production with one or two designs. So, flattering as the above comments were, they might not have found favour with the designer, particularly with their implication that it might in any sense be considered bad form to have a roomful of Voysey's furniture! More perceptively the same writer comments:

If you can appreciate the reticence and severity of Mr Voysey's work, you can no longer tolerate the ordinary commercially designed product. His furniture deserves elaborate and patient study, for its one aim is 'proportion, proportion, proportion' and that is a quality most elusive and difficult even to appreciate, much less to achieve.¹⁴

Voysey's own words, reflecting his view at this point in his career, included the comment:

Simplicity in decoration is one of the most essential qualities without which no true richness is possible. To know where to stop and what not to do is a long way on the road to being a great decorator.¹⁵

The sort of issues raised here – the value of simplicity, the use of ornament, uniqueness versus quantity production, standards of commercial design – all come together in another of those unusual projects with which Voysey was sometimes associated. Again this appeared at the 1896 Arts and Crafts Exhibition and again we have no idea how it was originated; a model was exhibited and there is no reason to believe that it ever went into production:

A striking instance of a commonplace item of daily life made artistic by virtue of fine properties is the lamp-post shown in a model, by Mr Voysey. Unless you regard the emblazoned arms of the City of London as decoration, it owes little to ornament. But the square lantern, and the harmonious balance of the various component parts, must not be overlooked. A hundred men could ornament a lamp-post, but very

few could design one. This instance of an artist's power to embody a fresh idea without departing unduly from an accepted type, supplies as good a moral as the show affords.¹⁶

Whether the object is a house, a writing desk or a lamp-post Voysey is now taking a very firm stand in his design work; his ideals are proportion and simplicity allied to quality of workmanship; without any perversity or sense of irony he can see simplicity as an essential quality of richness. He carries us along with these views, which defines in fact why his work still appears so striking and successful. He certainly seems to have swayed his contemporaries for by 1896 one of them can write:

The 1896 Exhibition does justice to this artist, and he fully supports our expectations; for, despite treading now and then on firmly established prejudices, his vivid personality is one of the chief factors in modern design – one that cannot fail to have immense influence on the design of the coming century.¹⁸

The value of contemporary critical comment can be ambiguous; it is a commonplace that often the age in which work is carried out or innovations made cannot accurately judge its worth; a commonplace also that critics do not really know their stuff. This does not seem true of the year under discussion where, allowing for the occasional flight of extravagant fancy, the critics seem to have their standards clearly established and their judgements sound. The *Studio*, for instance, inclines to praise rather than to blame and we must bear that in mind. However it also inclines to praise Voysey more consistently and highly than most of his contemporaries. The judgement that it, and other periodicals, offer us on the progress of Voysey's career is sound and valuable. Just as important is the insight that they offer, often by allusive comment rather than direct statement, as to what was, in those years, seen as the norm and what was an original departure from that norm. It is reassuring that the things we find to be fresh and startling about Voysey's work – or so we think – were thought equally original when first designed. The comments of contemporary critics therefore offer a valuable yardstick, the comparison of their own judgements with ours providing a truer evaluation both of what was going on and of its significance.