Photo: Elliott and Fry.

C. F. Annesley Voysey (1857-1941).

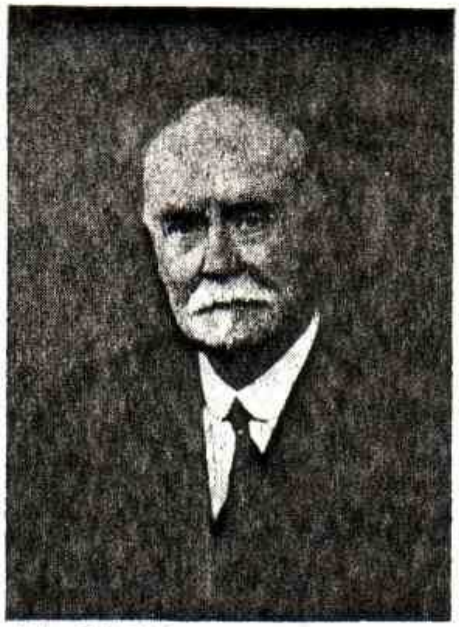


Photo: Lafayette.

Sir Reginald Blomfield (1856-1942).

VOYSEY AND BLOMFIELD

A Study in Contrast

BY MARTIN S. BRIGGS, F.R.I.B.A.

ON seeing the title of this article, the reader will presumably ask: "Why bracket these two men together? What on earth is the connection between them?" My answer or excuse is simply that, having had to make a simultaneous study of their respective lives and work for another purpose, the contrast between them appeared to me so striking and so illuminating that it suggested the following brief essay. Like those two famous literary rivals of a generation ago—H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett—they were contemporaries, they came from a similar stratum of society, and they both became notably successful in their chosen profession; but, again like Wells and Bennett, they differed profoundly in their physique, mentality, temperament, ideals, ambitions and outlook on life. So, while Voysey and Blomfield were born and died within a year or two of each other, while both were reared in country parsonages and both became celebrated, there is hardly any other respect in which there was the slightest resemblance between them.

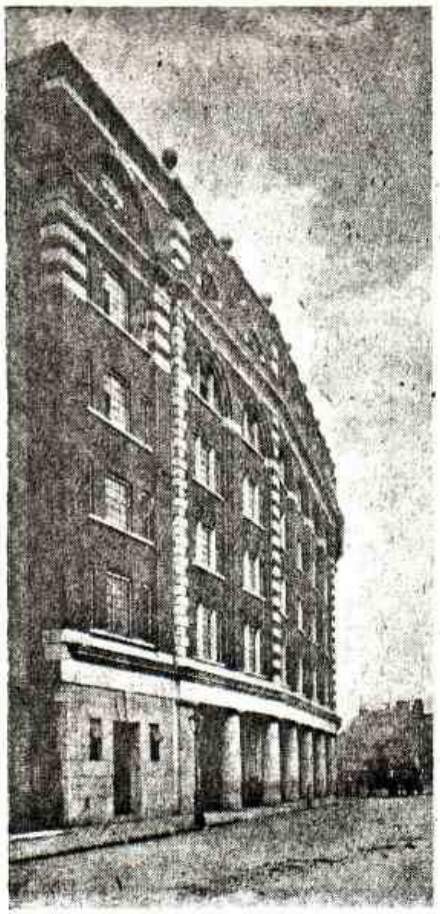
Even the similarity in their parentage is more apparent than real. Voysey's father, the Rev. Charles Voysey, was a graduate of Oxford and a clergyman of the Church of England, facts which suggest orthodoxy at least; but he was expelled from his Church in 1871 on account of his heterodox views, more especially because of his inability to accept the doctrine of everlasting punishment. He then proceeded to establish a sect of his own, and preached in the famous Theistic Church in Swallow-street, off Piccadilly, for nearly 30 years. Dissent may have been in his blood, for his great-great-grandmother was John Wesley's sister, and his son, C. F. A. Voysey (1857-1941), the architect, was proud of his family tree (going back far beyond the Norman Conquest), which he drew out in his beautiful and characteristic lettering on an enormous sheet of paper. He resembled Wesley so closely that on one occasion he sat as model for a portrait of the great evangelist. He was himself something of a freethinker and a rebel.

Sir Reginald Blomfield (1856-1942) was also a stormy petrel in his way and loved to attack established institutions, yet was never really unorthodox. His father, too, was a country clergyman, but his mother was the daughter of a famous bishop. Sir Reginald tells us in his *Memoirs* that his ancestors in the 17th century were nearly all on the Puritan side, and adds: "This engrained Puritan, or perhaps one should say rebellious, instinct may account for certain abnormal elements of a rather uncertain character," i.e., his own. Those *Memoirs*, by the way, published in 1932, provide most racy and amusing reading. They tell us everything we want to know about him, as he saw himself, up to his 75th year; and one could wish that Voysey had left us an equally vivid record of his own less spectacular career, about which information is rather meagre.

The childhood of the two men presents a vivid contrast. Voysey, the eldest of a large family in straitened circumstances, seems to have been a timid, repressed little boy, a slow learner who could not read till he was nearly 14; and his education up to that date was undertaken by his father. He then went to Dulwich College, but was regarded there as an unsatisfactory pupil and left within two years, thereafter undergoing a short spell of private tuition. Blomfield describes with gusto his own childish escapades, and states that at seven years old he was reported as having "the strength of Hercules and the temper of the Devil." He was duly sent to "a fashionable private school at Brighton" in 1865, where he "received 16 thrashings in one term." His subsequent passage through Haileybury was entirely satisfactory, for he ended his schooldays there as captain of his house and a member of both the XI and the XV. In 1875 he won a leaving scholarship to Oxford and also a Stapledon scholarship at Exeter College. A year earlier, Voysey had been articled, at the age of 17, to J. P. Seddon, an architect of the Gothic Revival school, and his latent artistic ability soon developed, so that even before his five years pupilage was over he was de-

"The Pastures," North Luffenham, Rutland (1901).
C. F. A. Voysey, Architect.

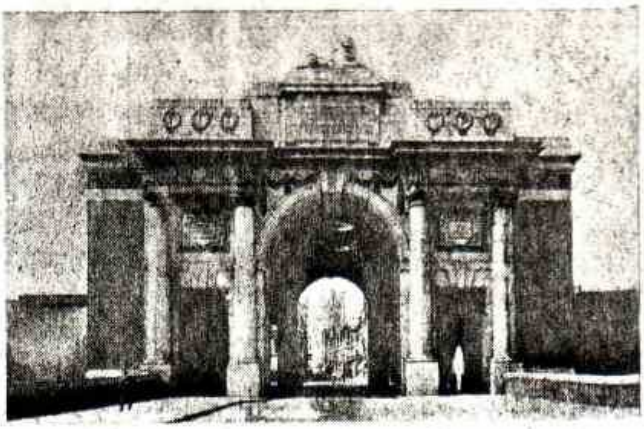
"Moor Crag," Windermere (1898).
C. F. A. Voysey, Architect.



Warehouse, Greycoat-place, Westminster (1895). Sir Reginald Blomfield, Architect.

signing buildings on his own account. Meanwhile, his formidable contemporary was doing brilliantly at Oxford, playing cricket and Rugby football on several occasions for the University though never obtaining a Blue, but working so hard that in 1879 he secured a First Class in Greats. "I attended some of Ruskin's lectures," he writes, "but I heard so much about Ruskin and so little about anybody else that I gave it up. The atmosphere of rapt adoration with which Ruskin and all that he said was received by the young ladies of Oxford was altogether too much for me." He remarks that at this stage he was "keenly interested in art in a very amateur sort of way," but attributes his choice of a profession to the circumstance that his uncle, Arthur Blomfield, whose office he entered in 1881, "was already a successful architect." However, uncle and nephew did not agree, and Reginald left the office within two years after a mysterious "misunderstanding," the first of many in his lively career. Voysey likewise disclaimed any divine call to architecture, and stated in later life that he entered the profession merely because it was at that time the only one which did not insist upon an entrance examination; but heredity may have unconsciously influenced him, for his grandfather, Annesley Voysey (1794-1839), had been an architect. When his pupilage was over, he became an assistant to George Devey, whose lucrative practice consisted mainly of huge country houses in the neo-Elizabethan style.

In 1884 we find the two men more or less abreast, for both started independent practice in London about that time. Blomfield had previously spent three months in touring France and Spain, and returned with a crammed sketchbook and the illuminating discovery that he did not like Gothic. Voysey never travelled, and throughout his life he disapproved of foreign travel for architectural students. For the first few years of practice both men had a lean time. Voysey's commissions before 1890 or thereabouts were mostly small buildings, many of them for artists or manufacturers encountered as a result of his designing of furniture, wallpapers and fabrics and other decorative accessories with which he filled up his time and his purse when architectural work was lacking. His buildings in those early years resembled the work of Norman Shaw and George Devey in their quasi-Elizabethan style, with brick or half-timbered gables and other features characteristic of the period. Almost from the beginning they were illustrated in the technical Press, especially in the *British Architect*, and one published but imaginary design—for a small house—is said to have brought him his first commission. His chief buildings at this stage, the South Devon Sanatorium and a hotel adjoining, display nothing of the famous Voysey manner that was soon to emerge, but we find it as early as 1889 in a house at Bedford Park, where extreme austerity, roughcasted walls, and rows of small leaded windows with square mullions revealed the embryo of his future style, and indicated a break with the work of Shaw, Devey and Ernest George. It may be noted here that Voysey married in 1885, Blomfield in 1886, courageously (or rashly) considering their stage of worldly progress.



The Menin Gate, Ypres (1923-26). Sir Reginald Blomfield, Architect.

Blomfield, like Voysey, did not find practice to be easy going at first. The enormous list of his executed buildings, published in the *R.I.B.A. Journal* (vol. L, p. 88) after his death, contains very few examples earlier than 1890, and most of them were small houses or minor alterations to churches. So he, like Voysey, sought for some means of augmenting his slender earnings and found it in writing, to the great benefit of posterity, thanks to sound scholarship acquired as the result of a thorough classical education. He began with articles on Sussex ironwork and half-timbered houses; then came a series on English architects of the Renaissance. His first book, *The Formal Garden in England*, published in 1892, was followed in 1897 by his masterly *History of Renaissance Architecture in England* in two volumes, and in 1901 by his delightful *Short History* of the same period. His researches for these books brought him into touch with many influential and aristocratic owners of great houses and gardens, and soon led to important commissions to alter, enlarge or restore several historic mansions, such as Apethorpe, Brocklesby Park and Chequers, during the ensuing decade. One other design of his earlier days must be mentioned here: the fine and massive warehouse for the Army and Navy Stores in Greycoat-place, Westminster, where his preference for traditional Renaissance forms is not so evident as in his later work.

In 1905, then, we find Blomfield with his foot on the ladder, but better known as a scholar than as a practitioner; whereas Voysey had shot right ahead as a most original designer of houses, mainly in the country. His reputation abroad was even higher than in England, for the German writer Hermann Muthesius had published between 1900 and 1904 several books on domestic architecture in which Voysey's work was lauded to the skies. It was about 1900 that both Voysey and Blomfield came into my youthful ken. Blomfield was one of the Committee that founded the

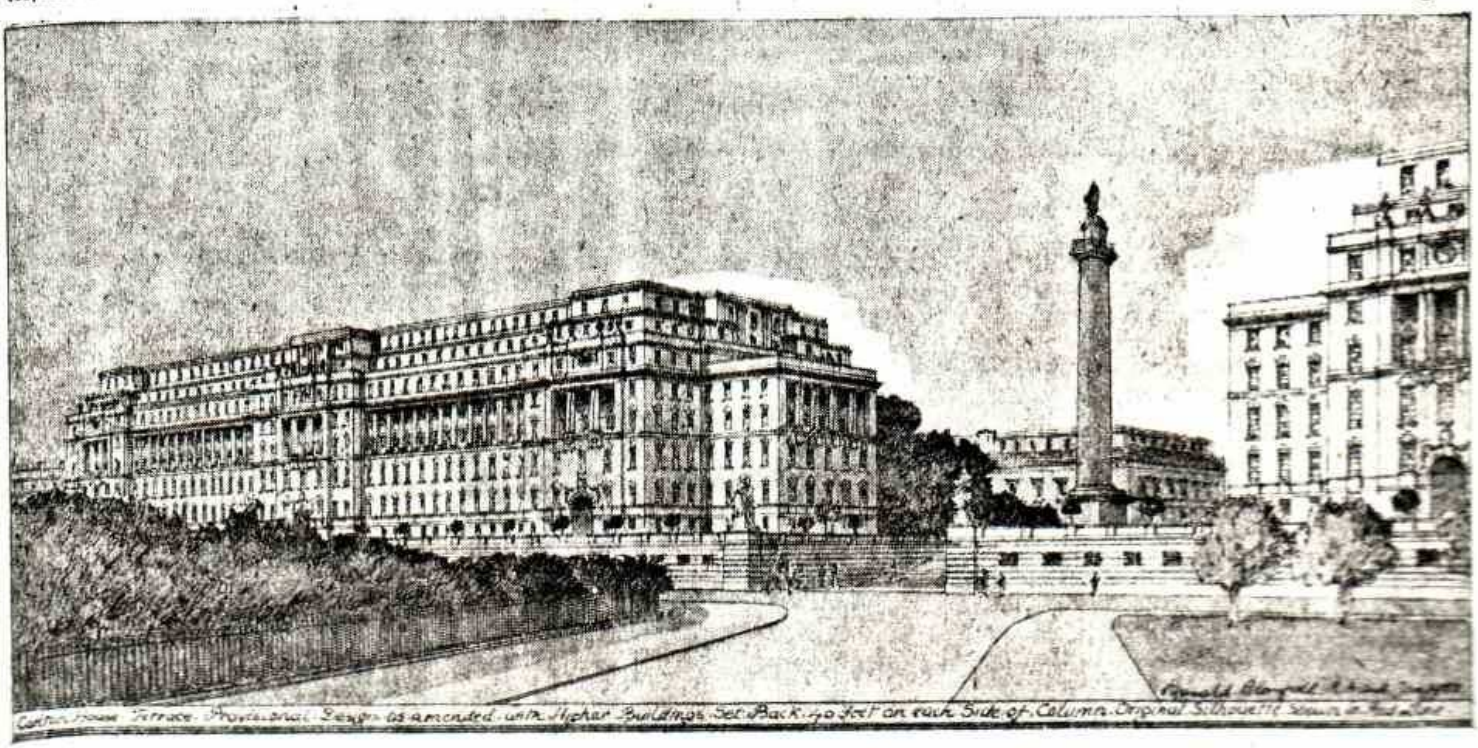
"The Orchard," Chorley Wood, Herts. (1900). C. F. A. Voysey, Architect.

Architectural Review in 1901, and he contributed to it regularly till 1905, when he had a dispute with the proprietors. Out of my meagre pocket-money I subscribed to the *Review*, and read his learned articles with awe and his *Short History* with pleasure; but I experienced a real thrill when I saw two genuine Voysey houses on the shores of Windermere, with all the characteristic features and individual tricks of design that had been made familiar to us in the provinces by the *Studio* magazine and to Londoners at every exhibition of the Royal Academy. A year or two later, the president of our local architectural society visited Voysey at his house in the hope of inducing him to give us a talk in Leeds, and told us, on returning, how the great man's study formed a harmonious colour-scheme, which certainly included carpets, curtains, wallpaper, blotting-pad, and—I think—quill pen.

Voysey had, in fact, established a vogue; and, almost up to the First World War, he designed a vast number of houses in a style which was entirely individual, and, so far as he could contrive it, consistent. Probably most of his patrons were so anxious to possess an authentic Voysey house, during the so-called "Mauve Decade" of the 'nineties, that they gave him his head; but, when they proved recalcitrant, he was quite capable of resigning his commission. Generally speaking, his prescription for a country-house at any date between 1890 and 1914 (his productive period) required an asymmetrical but not eccentric plan, rough-casted brick walls with battered buttresses at the angles, rooms 8 feet high regardless of size, steeply pitched slate roofs with gables, chimneys sometimes battered and always capped with black chimney-pots, a black plinth, long low leaded windows with square stone mullions and dressings, square-framed oak panelling in the principal rooms (if possible), and architect-designed mantelpieces and ironwork. He often said that an architect ought to design everything in the house down to the toothbrushes, and approached nearer to that ideal than anyone else, before or since his day. This is not the place for a long list of his country houses, but the home he built for himself at Chorley Wood in 1900, and christened "The Orchard," is an example of his work at its best, and remains substantially unaltered. "Spade House" at Sandgate (1899-1900), for H. G. Wells, figures in Wells' *Autobiography* as a successful venture, Voysey being explained as "that pioneer in the escape from the small snobbish villa residence to the bright and comfortable pseudo-cottage." That is not a bad description. Voysey was certainly the most active person in the revolt against Victorian fussiness and "period stuff." His houses, though simple and very English, were not cheap, and they were full of little mannerisms. The harmony that he generally achieved throughout was a great merit.

Apart from country houses, his output was relatively small. There were town houses in Chelsea at Hans-road and Swan-walk, various studios in London, a couple of country inns, a cottage hospital, Atkinson's perfume shop in Bond-street, and a remarkably "functional" little factory for Sandersons at Chiswick (1902). He competed unsuccessfully for three public buildings, but those designs were far below his domestic standard. He frankly disliked classical architecture, Georgian or otherwise, regarding it as un-English, and remained a Gothicist at heart. A strenuous and rapid worker, he did most of his drawing himself, leaving the rest to his pupils. He used a hard pencil and eschewed indiarubber. He would make complete sketch-plans for a house, or a design for a wallpaper, in a single week-end. In professional politics he took no part, and here the contrast with Blomfield is particularly striking. Voysey was thoroughly at home in the Arts Club and the Art Workers' Guild, of which he became Master in 1924, but he kept aloof from the R.I.B.A. until that Institute elected him a Fellow in 1929. In 1940 he was awarded the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture. The outbreak of war in 1914 extinguished his large practice, but his vogue had begun to wane before that. From 1917 onwards he lived alone in a service flat in St. James-street, spending much of his time at the Arts Club, always ready for a chat and an argument. In the last 25 years of his life he continued to do some desultory designing for manufacturers, and executed a few war memorials, but his day was done.

Meanwhile Blomfield had risen to eminence. He continued to write, producing his important *History of French Architecture from* 1494 *to* 1774 in four volumes between 1911 and 1920. Other and later books, besides several volumes of collected articles and lectures, were his own *Memoirs*, (1932), *Modernismus* (a witty and slashing attack upon new fashions in architecture, 1934), and biographies of *Vauban* (1938), and *Norman Shaw* (1940). His professional career became a series of triumphs punctuated by controversies. He joined in the terrific battle over registration at the Institute in 1891, contributed to the famous symposium, *Architecture: a Profession or an Art?* and resigned from the R.I.B.A.; but returned to it in 1905, did valuable service on the new Board of Architectural Education, and filled the office of President with great distinction in 1912-14. In 1913 he was deservedly awarded the Royal Gold Medal. He joined the Art Workers' Guild in 1885, but resigned from it in 1894—another disagreement! He was also a member of the Arts Club, and was Chairman in 1915 when he resigned owing to yet another dispute. Naturally he knew Voysey well, but there is no mention of him in the voluminous *Memoirs*, and they were poles apart. Voysey was an artist pure and simple, Blomfield a scholar and a



politician as well. He became A.R.A. in 1905, Professor of Architecture at the R.A. in 1906, and R.A. in 1914, but severely criticised much of the Academy's organisation. He really enjoyed controversy, and describes various "excellent fights," including the famous battles over the London City Churches, Waterloo Bridge and the projected Charing Cross Bridge. His last conflict occurred in 1932, when the public, who had come to regard him as *arbiter elegantiarum* and a crusader for saving historical monuments, were scandalised to learn that he had submitted designs for a tall office-building in Carlton Gardens and that the Royal Fine Art Commission, of which he was a prominent member, had hastily approved it. People speedily realised that this block would dominate and interrupt the sky-line of Nash's Carlton House Terrace as viewed from St. James's Park. An influential "Carlton House Terrace Defence Committee" of 400 members was formed. Blomfield retaliated with a pugnacious and able speech at the Authors' Club, derided Nash's architecture and his range of hollow cast-iron "Doric" columns, and published a design for rebuilding the whole of Carlton House Terrace. There was a heated debate in Parliament early in 1933, but the scheme had gone so far that it could not be stopped, and the building in Carlton Gardens was duly completed as we see it now.

His amazingly frank *Memoirs* record three major disappointments to his boundless ambition: his failure to become Surveyor to St. Paul's Cathedral, Chief Architect of New Delhi, and President of the Royal Academy. His self-confidence was phenomenal, even if justified, and few scholars would have written a book-review so scathing as one of many pages that he published in 1902, before he became really famous, about a volume by a professional colleague. His practice grew rapidly, developed not only by his ability and his immense capacity for work, his massive scholarship and his Oxford background, but also by his considerable social gifts. A man of fine presence and physique, he could play nearly all games well (whereas Voysey played no games), persisting with cricket till he was nearly 70, with tennis long after that, and with billiards to the end.* He took up hunting at 48, was handy with a gun, and fitted easily into country-house life. He was indeed a man of many talents. Above all, he possessed immense vitality and enjoyed life in all its aspects with Elizabethan gusto.

He was over 80 when he fell off a ladder while trimming a tall hedge, and broke his arm, but a few weeks later he suddenly appeared in London to collect his tennis kit! Legends grew up about him. On one occasion, he is said to have timed the speakers at a R.I.B.A. gathering with an hour-glass and relentlessly called them to order with an auctioneer's hammer. He kept a hassock handy in his billiards-room so that he could relieve his feelings decorously by kicking it whenever he missed a stroke.

The impressive list of his executed buildings includes the Menin Gate and much other work for the Imperial War Graves Commission in 1918-26, the remodelling of the Regent-street Quadrant and adjoining buildings in Piccadilly Circus in 1910-30, Lambeth Bridge, an art gallery and a public library at Lincoln, the "Headrow" at Leeds, the United University Club in Pall Mall, Lady Margaret Hall at Oxford, and a host more. It is all "scholarly" architecture, too scholarly for some critics, and it is reminiscent of the French and English masterpieces of the Renaissance that he knew so well, but unquestionably Blomfield was a great man and deserved all his success, which he earned by sheer ability and hard work.

It remains to be seen whether Blomfield will rank higher than Voysey in the gallery of the immortals. In 1931, a critic wrote in the *Architectural Review* that "only in England is Voysey not taken at his true value, for he is dismissed as '*art nouveau*' or even 'arty,' and the extravagances of new architecture at the end of Victoria's reign are considered more of a joke than they really are." That was only 17 years ago, but fashion in architecture is very fickle, and now his reputation is rising again. Admittedly, he was mentor to C. R. Mackintosh, a recognised pioneer of the so-called "Modern Movement," but he showed little enthusiasm for the cosmopolitan style that began to penetrate England between the wars. Such houses as "The Orchard" at Chorley Wood will always make an appeal to men of my generation; we grew up with that tradition and it is very English. But only a rash man would dare to prophesy whether future historians will regard the burly and jovial octogenarian in the billiards-room of the Athenaeum as a greater architect than the quiet little figure sipping his sherry in a corner of the Arts Club, and dreaming, perhaps, of the days when his work was the cynosure of half Europe.

* A member of *The Builder* staff well remembers an occasion, shortly before Blomfield's death, when, on unrolling a set of drawings for his inspection, a rubber band flew off and struck Sir Reginald in the face. "Dammit, boy," cried the outraged architect, "you've spoilt my billiards eye."—EDITOR.