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Voysey's tile design for J C Edwards, Ruabon

Tony Peart

The recent purchase of four previously unrecorded Voysey tiles has prompted this short piece exploring Voysey's relationship with the Welsh ceramic manufacturer, J C Edwards.

Voysey supplied tile designs to a small number of companies: the Pilkington Tile and Pottery Co. of Clifton Junction, Manchester; Maw & Co of Jackfield, Shropshire; J C Edwards of Ruabon, Denbighshire and in the mid-1930s Dunsmore Tiles of Campden Hill, London (who frequently produced their designs on Minton blanks).

Of all the manufacturers he designed for, the best documented is his work for the Pilkington Tile and Pottery Company. Commencing c.1896,¹ Voysey created a wide range of designs for moulded, transfer printed and tube-lined tiles and was still speculatively sending the company designs well into the 1920s.

Unfortunately in the case of J C Edwards, apart from the tiles themselves (which can be attributed to Voysey on stylistic grounds), there is currently no documentary evidence linking him to the firm.

The discovery of large quantities of high quality Etruria Marl clay in the Ruabon area of North Wales in the mid-19th century heralded the beginning of a ceramic industry that would ultimately grow to employ approximately 2,000 people. The scale of the industry was such that the village of Ruabon gained the nickname "Terracottapolis".

James Coster Edwards (1828–1896) established his company in 1870,² making a range of earthenware goods and bricks. The company quickly expanded and he built the Tref-y-Nant Works, where he also began to manufacture sanitary pipes and firebricks. By 1896 the firm had grown to be the largest in the area, employing a thousand workers and producing some two million items per month. By the 1890s the firm was producing a wide range of glazed tiles alongside its terra-cotta wares.

Today, the most commonly encountered of all Voysey's tile designs is "The Demon" (figure 1), a six-inch, moulded teapot stand, clearly marked with the J C Edwards backstamp and produced in a wide range of colourways. That such a utilitarian piece has survived in relatively high numbers would seem to indicate that they must have been manufactured on a large scale. Originally designed in 1889 in a vibrant palette of reds, yellows and oranges, "The Demon" was originally intended to be used as wallpaper (figure 2). Even from a modern perspective, a wall covering featuring a grotesque devil crawling through the fires of hell seems a bizarre proposition and, unsurprisingly, it seems to have never found a buyer. However, a diabolical figure surrounded by warming flames does seem a much more appropriate motif with which to decorate the surface of a teapot stand! The fact that this design was illustrated in 1893 in *The Studio*³ has raised some questions as to whether this

1
Voysey designs were first exhibited by Pilkington's at the fifth exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1896

2
Many sources cite the start of the firm to 1903, but this is incorrect and also falls after the death of Edwards! By 1883 the company was large enough to issue a substantial catalogue containing hundreds of moulded terracotta designs, describing itself as manufacturers of "Brick, Tiles and Terra Cotta". The National Art Library, Pressmark: 96.S Box 1

3
Anon. An Interview with Mr Charles F Annesley Voysey, Architect and Designer. London: *The Studio*, vol. 1



Figure 1 – “The Demon” teapot stand, J C Edwards (left)

Figure 2 – “The Demon” (detail), design for a wallpaper, 1889 (below)

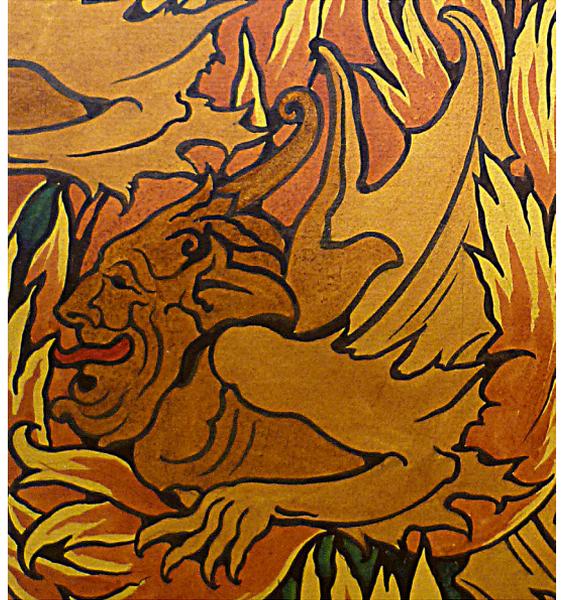


Figure 3 – “Bird” lustre tile, J C Edwards (above left)

Figure 4 – “Bird” tiles demonstrating the repeat pattern (above)



Figure 5 – “Halcyon” printed fabric (detail) c1893 LACMA (left)

was an officially commissioned design or simply an image the factory appropriated and re-drew in a slightly simplified form.

The discovery of a further three unrecorded designs, along with other circumstantial evidence, would now seem to indicate that the relationship between Voysey and J C Edwards was indeed a professional one. The first design, a red lustre tile (figure 3) with a J C Edwards backstamp, features a bird amongst scrolling garden foliage and was supplied as a pair (the other being a mirror image) allowing a flowing, Gothic repeat pattern to be created (figure 4). This rhythmic design is very similar to a wallpaper and carpet design of c1890.⁴ The central bird motif is a reworking of one that features in a c1888 design⁵ that was sold to G P & J Baker Ltd. and produced as a printed cloth (figure 5) c1893.

The second and third designs, moulded in low-relief (figure 6) also form a pair and seem to have been designed specifically for tiles. They are a more naturalistic (and, one would therefore surmise) earlier version of a more stylised pair (figure 7) that would be supplied to Pilkington's in the late 1890s.

Crucially, the fact that none of these designs was illustrated in any contemporary publication leads to the supposition that they must have been supplied to the company by Voysey himself. The relatively early dates of the wallpaper and textile designs upon which they are based, coupled with the use of red lustre decoration, gives us tantalising clues as to the approximate date Voysey was supplying these designs to Edwards.

William De Morgan first introduced his lustre tiles in the late 1870s. These highly influential tiles proved popular with wealthy clients but were very expensive. By the late 1880s many other manufacturers had introduced their own, cheaper versions, primarily the firms of Maw & Co and Craven Dunnill, (both of Jackfield, Shropshire) and of course, J C Edwards. An Edwards catalogue described their lustre tiles as; "Rivalling the finest Mediaeval Italian and Spanish examples, combining with the gorgeous effects of burnished metals the iridescent colours of the rainbow." However the fashion for lustre tiles was rapidly fading by the early 1900s.

The careers of Lewis F Day (1845–1910) and Voysey frequently overlapped: both were members of The Art Worker's Guild; they often provided textile and wallpaper designs to the same companies and also seem to have had parallel careers in the field of tile design. Day started providing designs (often for execution in lustre) to J C Edwards in the late 1880s⁶ and continued until he signed a contract of exclusivity with the Pilkington Tile and Pottery Co in 1896.⁷ It also seems probable that Voysey, too, created his designs for Edwards before his involvement with the Manchester firm. This when taken into consideration with the other circumstantial evidence outlined above, seems to place them in the early to mid 1890s; certainly no later than 1896.

4
S Durant, *The Decorative Designs of C.F.A. Voysey*. Lutterworth Press, 1990, p43

5
Collection of Los Angeles County Museum: AC1995.250.47

6
J M Hansen, *Lewis Forman Day*, Antique Collectors' Club, 2007, p177

7
Ibid, pp185–199

8
Fired Earth 1000 Years of Tiles in Europe, Richard Dennis, 1991, p129

The author is only aware of these four Voysey designed tiles for J C Edwards: the “Bird”; the pair of moulded “Flower and Leaf” designs and “The Demon” which, apart from appearing as a teapot stand, has also been recorded as a red lustre decorated tile.⁸ There may be more awaiting discovery.

VOYSEY'S TILE DESIGN FOR
J C EDWARDS, RUABON

Figure 6 – “Flower and Leaf” moulded tiles,
J C Edwards



Figure 7 – “Flower and Leaf” moulded tiles,
Pilkington's Tile & Pottery Co

