

Pearl, Tony ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6367-1387> (2013) Voysey textile designs at the Cummersdale Design Collection. The Orchard, 2 . pp. 21-27.

Downloaded from: <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/5479/>

*Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.*

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

**provided that**

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
  - a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

**You may not**

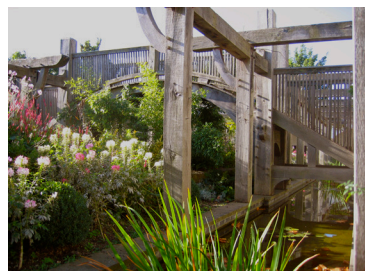
- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing [insight@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:insight@cumbria.ac.uk).



*The garden when reopened*



*Recent view of the bridge*

location with all round views for their supervision of the park. Below are modest facilities for the provision of refreshments and for the administrative duties connected with the management of the sports pitches. A small servery dispenses refreshments through a hatch into a re-formed courtyard, with views through the existing archway to the formal garden and in the opposite direction, to the young children's play area opposite. The glazed lookout is framed in iroko timber and the new west wall is clad in matching iroko boarding. The slimline overhanging roof and open canopy are finished in terne-coated steel.

At the time of commissioning the work, RBKC was committed to reopening the Voysey garden and allowing the public to enjoy its quiet tranquility. However, very soon after it opened utilitarian gates were installed to prevent access to the bridge and shortly afterwards the whole garden was again locked, due to safety concerns about the shallow water of the moat and lack of guarding on the bridge. In 2011, RBKC conducted a new consultation about the condition of the whole park, and the lack of access to the Voysey garden was raised by many respondents as regrettable. The park management team consequently undertook to develop a team of volunteers to supervise the opening of the area at various times in fine weather. When I visited at the beginning of September, I found the gates open and a group of children playing rounders on the adjacent grassed playground. The planting has matured well and although the buildings and pergola could do with some further maintenance, after 15 years it is gratifying to find the garden well loved.

As the centenary of the creation of the park approaches, it is certainly to be welcomed that the public for whom it was built are still enjoying Voysey's only urban park.

*Recent view of central part of the garden*



Consultants team for the Voysey garden:

Architects: Julian Harrap Architects  
 Quantity Surveyor: Sawyer & Fisher  
 Structural Engineer: Hockley & Dawson  
 Historian: Wendy Hitchmough  
 Landscape Architect: Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall

All photos included with this article are taken by, and copyright of, Julian Harrap Architects

## Voysey textile designs at the Cummersdale Design Collection

*Tony Peart*

The Cummersdale Design Collection, owned by the John Lewis Partnership, is a remarkable working archive of over 25,000 textile designs, which provide a comprehensive overview of the evolving trends, fashions and design movements of the last 200 years. Until the summer of 2012 the collection was housed at the Stead McAlpin print works at Cummersdale, a small village on the outskirts of Carlisle in the north of Cumbria. Although known to some textile designers and scholars, the collection's geographic remoteness from London and the south east meant that it was rarely visited and, as a result, its true significance as a resource has yet to be widely appreciated. The collection has recently relocated to a purpose-built heritage centre at John Lewis's Odney Club in Cookham, Berkshire, and is due to open in September 2013. In its new, more accessible home, the archive will attract many more design scholars and hopefully its immense value as a unique resource will be more widely recognised and fully exploited.<sup>1</sup>

For the design researcher the sheer volume of material available in the collection is both exhilarating and daunting. For the last few decades the archive has been lovingly and diligently curated by Alan Cook (former manager of the collection) and Alan James (former print manager of Stead McAlpin). They have organised the collection chronologically and recorded all those designs which bear an artist's signature. However, a huge amount of material remains to be identified, documented and studied by the specialist scholar.

The collection contains a veritable "Who's Who" of 19th century designers, including examples by: A W N Pugin; Christopher Dresser; William Morris; John Henry Dearle; Lewis F Day; Lindsay P Butterfield; Harry Napper and Cecil Millar. The archive also contains hundreds of designs from Arthur Silver's Silver Studio and the previously undocumented designs by C F A Voysey that form the basis of this article.

What is now named the Cummersdale Design Collection was, for nearly two centuries, the design archive of the fabric printers Stead McAlpin. The business was established in 1835 at Cummersdale, Carlisle, by Thomas McAlpin (1777-1849) and his stepson John Stead. Remarkably, the factory has remained in continuous production to the present day. The contents of the archive come from a number of sources and were assembled over a long period of time. It was company policy to actively acquire the designs and equipment of competitors who had ceased trading. The earliest designs, dating from 1799, were acquired when Stead McAlpin purchased the design collection of the Bannister Hall Print Works on its closure in 1893. Ten signed Voysey designs dating to the late 1880s came into the archive from this source. The remaining



*K 8915*



*C 9859*

The opening times for specific research by appointment will be 10am-4pm weekdays. The collection will also be open to the general public between 10am-4pm on Saturdays. Contact: Judy Faraday, John Lewis Partnership Heritage Centre, Odney Lane, Cookham, Berks, SL6 9SR



C 9854 (top)  
K 7075 (bottom)



C 9860 (opposite top)  
K 8903 (opposite middle)  
C 9871 (opposite bottom)

2  
The earliest decorative design previously recorded, no 655 in the Voysey Drawings Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects, is inscribed with his Tierney Road address and must therefore date from after June 1888.

3  
"A H Mackmurdo", *The Studio*, 1899, Vol XVI, p 189.

4  
The Cottage, Bishop's Itchington, Warwickshire.

5  
Copper roller printing was invented by Thomas Bell in 1783.

Voysey designs were commissioned directly by Stead McAlpin or were printed by Stead McAlpin as contract printers for other textile firms.

Voysey's earliest design in the collection, C9834, is signed and dated September 1887 and has some claim to being his earliest recorded decorative design.<sup>2</sup> At this date Voysey was 30 years old and living at 7 Blandford Road, Bedford Park. He had been married for two years and had been in independent practice as an architect for five years. Voysey was advised by Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo (1851-1942), of the Century Guild, to take up decorative design as a way of supporting himself until he became fully established as an architect. The "advice, encouragement and sympathy"<sup>3</sup> Mackmurdo offered was far sighted. Although Voysey established his architectural practice in 1882 and sold his first designs for wallpaper in 1883, he had to wait a further five years until his first house was built in 1888.<sup>4</sup> His flair as a designer of pattern was remarkable and would ultimately outlast his career as a practising architect. Of the generation who immediately followed William Morris (1834-1896), the towering figure of the decorative design of this period, Voysey would arguably become the most widely known and influential. At this time, early in his career, the influence of established designers such as Lewis F Day (1845-1910), Walter Crane (1845-1915) and, in particular, Mackmurdo, has been widely recognised and documented. Design C9834 is unusual in Voysey's oeuvre as it so clearly shows the influence of William Morris. Both in structure, use of symmetry and colouring, C9834 is very close to Morris's Lodden, designed three years earlier in 1884. Although futile, it is tempting to speculate whether this design is typical, or atypical, of the lost designs that preceded it.

All designs in the collection with a "C" prefix were produced for the firm of Bannister Hall of Higher Walton near Preston. The company, which specialised in the printing of calico, was first established in the 1780s and was one of the first to take up copper roller printing.<sup>5</sup> This was the method used to print all of the designs Voysey supplied to the company. Roller printing, or machine printing as it is known in the trade, involves engraving each colour of the design onto an individual copper roller. The design of the pattern repeat, either a single repeat or exact multiples, is dictated by the roller's circumference. Once engraved, the rollers are chromed to help protect the delicate copper. At this time machine printing was restricted to around four colours, as is evidenced by Voysey's designs. Varying the depth of the engraving could create different tones within a colour. The designer exploiting areas of "fall-on" could also create the illusion of extra colours. Here one colour is printed across another to create a third. A close scrutiny of Voysey's designs shows him occasionally exploiting both of these techniques. Roller printing was widely used at this time by the print trade as it provided a more cost effective alternative to the highly labour intensive, and therefore expensive, hand block printing.

Designs C9854 and C9856 have both had Voysey's address carefully removed from the bottom right hand corner. Slightly later designs, created when he was residing at 45 Tierney Road, Streatham Hill, have not. This would indicate that these designs, along with the consecutive C9857, which today only exists as a printed sample, were executed

in early 1888 while still living at Blandford Road, before moving to Tierney Road in June of that year. The design K7075 also dates to early 1888 but, unlike the previous Bannister Hall examples, the "K" prefix indicates that it was commissioned directly by Stead McAlpin. This is Voysey's first design for the firm. It is dated April 1888 but, as Voysey has crossed out the Blandford Road address and inserted Tierney Road, it can be assumed that it was not delivered until after June of 1888. These designs of 1888-89, which also include more designs for Bannister Hall, C9858, C9859 (in both a blue and yellow colour way) and C9860, show a designer familiar with the work of Walter Crane, Selwyn Image and A H Mackmurdo, but still far from finding his own individual voice. The designs writhe restlessly across the sheet. Edges are fussy with intricate and jagged, linear brushwork. Widely differing colour palettes, limited by the colour restrictions of machine printing, are used and then dropped.

Four years later in "An Interview with Mr. Charles F. Voysey Architect and Designer" (*The Studio*, 1893, Vol I, pp. 232-237) Voysey would advocate the simplification and stylization of the designer's subject matter. This was known as "conventionalizing" at the time. These designs are a snapshot of a man part-way on the journey to what would become his "mature" style. When compared to the designs Voysey chose to illustrate *The Studio* interview they could almost be by a different hand. They exist in an unresolved state; although they are partially "conventionalised", they also contain too many jarring, naturalistic elements. By the time of *The Studio* interview the naturalistic elements had been expunged and a unique voice was emerging. In the interview Voysey advocates selection, analysis, balance, repetition and individual taste as the key to producing work with a human interest. He goes on: "If he (the designer) does this although he has gone directly to Nature, his work will not resemble any of his predecessors; he has become an inventor." At this stage Voysey is still a follower.

His use of such unrestrained, dynamic designs with their large scale motifs and vivid colouring for furnishing fabrics is undoubtedly explained by Voysey's thoughts on wallpaper design – his designs make little distinction between the two disciplines. He expounded to *The Studio* in 1893: "A wallpaper is of course only a background, and were your furniture good in form and colour a very simple or 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." He went on: "There is no doubt that it is better to have large and bold than small and timid patterns, both in papers and printed or stencilled friezes. If you wish to reduce the effect of its scale and force, these can be modified in the colouring." The fact that Voysey could be so critical of the taste in furniture of the people who would potentially become his clients, in this his first, major magazine feature, speaks volumes. Here is a man with little in the way of self-doubt; an uncompromising, outspoken designer who speaks his mind without couching his words more diplomatically. The "difficult" Voysey of later years is already here, fully formed.





C 9834 (top)  
K 7966 (bottom)

C 9858 (opposite top)  
K 8953 (opposite bottom)

The two final Bannister Hall designs in the collection, C9867 and C9871, do capture the emergence of what would become Voysey's characteristic "mature" style. Both designs were produced while he was living at Tierney Road and probably date to late 1889 or early 1890. He would move to Melina Place, St John's Wood, in March 1891. The patterns, and in particular the linear elements, are becoming simplified and strengthened. The fussy edges are fast disappearing, being replaced by graceful, dynamic curves. The underlying structure of the design is much more evident, resulting in a greater feeling of order and control. The colour palette is starting to exhibit his characteristic preference for muted greens and blues. The chaotic urgency and visual confusion of the earlier designs has gone; to use his own words Voysey is becoming "an inventor".

Chronologically, the next Voysey design in the collection is K7966, dated 4th October 1895 and printed by Stead McAlpin for Warner & Sons. At this date Warner's were well-established weavers, commissioning designs from many of Voysey's avant-garde contemporaries, but would not become printers in their own right until the 1920s. This design, named Saladin when produced by the wallpaper firm of Essex & Co in 1897, is quintessential Voysey. Clearly delineated edges, visually interesting contrasts of scale, negative space reduced to an absolute minimum, the inclusion of a bird, a habit that almost became a cliché, the closely related tones and colours of the blue-green palette, lifted with touches of contrasting red and yellow.

Alexander Morton & Co, with Stead McAlpin acting as their contract printers commissioned virtually all the remaining Voysey designs in the collection. Alexander Morton (1844-1923) came from a weaving family and founded his company in his place of birth, the village of Darvel, Ayrshire. Darvel had a long history as a centre for independent handloom weavers and the company began in 1867 when Alexander employed neighbouring weavers to produce a range of curtain nets, which were to be enthusiastically embraced by the furnishing trade. The company grew quickly and by the 1890s had diversified into most areas of woven textile production. Morton's were first and foremost a family concern and by 1895 the management of the firm had been taken over by Alexander's sons James and Guy. Their cousin Gavin Morton headed the company's design studio. It was James Morton (1867-1943) who understood the commercial importance of embracing contemporary design trends and actively sought to commission work from the leading designers of the day. Voysey was approached immediately upon James taking joint control of the company in 1895. By the following year, a close and what was to prove long lasting understanding and friendship between the two men had been established.<sup>6</sup> The commercial success of the designs that Voysey created for Morton's was such that by 1897 they had entered into a five-year contract, renewed thereafter on a yearly basis, where for the sum of £120 per annum Voysey would provide a minimum of 10 original designs and his exclusive services in the field of all woven textiles other than carpets. Voysey, at the height of his powers as both an architect and decorative designer, wrote to James Morton in 1896:



<sup>6</sup> Jocelyn Morton, *Three Generations in a Family Textile Firm*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, p114.



“You will find in all my designs a clearly marked contrast between the small, rich, intricate or elaborate parts of the design and the plain simple bare pieces. This is the quality that produces ‘breadth’ – breadth is on the side of simplicity and repose.”<sup>7</sup>

Between 1900 and 1902 over 40 new Voysey designs were introduced into the firm’s tapestry ranges making him the most important freelance designer working for the company at that time.

The recent discovery of over one hundred of Voysey’s carpet designs for Tomkinson Carpets of Kidderminster, as featured in the first issue of *The Orchard*, filled an important gap in the Voysey design record.<sup>8</sup> Previously less than a handful of carpet designs had been recorded. Lodged within the Cummersdale Design Collection are a few more.

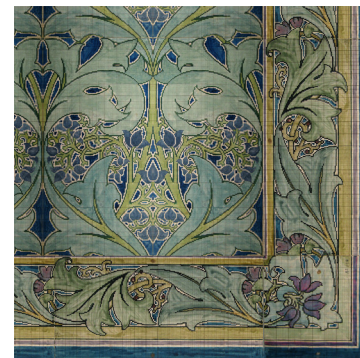


Voysey’s involvement in designing for Morton’s hand-knotted Donegal carpets, which went into production in 1898 in Killybegs, County Donegal, is well documented. Frustratingly, the original designs are now lost. Less well known is that he provided designs for a collection of woven carpets that Morton’s manufactured during the 1890s; their Caledon range. Caledon carpets were machine-made, flat-woven tapestry carpets, or “art squares”, as they were known at the time. Initially made at Darvel, their production was transferred in 1900, along with virtually all of Morton’s weaving activities, to a new base in Carlisle. Introduced as a cheaper alternative to Kidderminster carpets, they were described by James L Caw in *The Art Journal* (March 1900 p80): “The chief elements in the designs are flowers and foliage, drawn in a flat conventional style, and treated in a manner broad and simple.”

It would be satisfying to claim designs K8903 and K8916, both attributable to Voysey on stylistic grounds, as lost Donegal designs, however a sceptical approach must be adopted. It should be pointed out that Donegal carpets were, and are, extremely durable. The fact that no extant carpets featuring these designs have been recorded makes it more than likely that these are examples from the Caledon range. Also, at this date, the Donegal range was just becoming established and the designs for the hand-knotted carpets would almost certainly have been required at Killybegs. A final argument that supports the Caledon attribution are the dates they were first printed by Stead McAlpin, 17th October 1903 and 11th January 1904 respectively. Executed on point paper, these are patterns that were obviously designed to be woven, not printed. It is likely that when no longer required by Morton’s for their original purpose, they were transferred to Stead McAlpin to be block printed, Morton & Co not being in a position to print in-house until as late as 1912. This reinterpretation of the designs in a different medium was no doubt an attempt to extend their commercial life. Within the Cummersdale Collection are fents – printed cotton samples – of both. The individual squares and stepped edges produced by working on point paper have been slavishly preserved, creating an unsatisfactory, awkward and blotchy effect in the printed versions.

A further small group of designs, all on point paper and all created for Morton during 1903 and 1904, are likely to include some by Voysey.

C 9857 (top)  
S 3662 (middle)  
C 9856 (bottom)



K 8916 (left)  
C 9860 (right)

Most appear to be designs for woven tapestries, although one or two follow the convention of utilising crosses rendered in red and green, identifying them as designs for net curtains. Two in particular can be strongly attributed to him on stylistic grounds. Design K8915 was with Stead McAlpin by 12th January 1904. It is a delicate, relatively simple design of wild flowers which are rendered in a manner that is very close to those that feature at the base of Voysey’s iconic hand-painted mantle clock of 1895, now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>9</sup> A formal, repeat pattern of tulips and bluebells, K8953, dated 25th February 1904, executed in rich blues, greens and reds, relates closely to a design sketch of c.1902 in the Drawings Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects.<sup>10</sup>

Almost 20 years pass before we reach the final Voysey design in the Cummersdale Design Collection. Signed and dated December 1923, design S3662 was printed by Stead McAlpin for the firm of William Foxtan Ltd. The design is very similar to another work, also produced in December 1923 in the RIBA Drawings Collection.<sup>11</sup> The design motifs of flowers, foliage and birds have all been central to Voysey’s grammar of design since the 1890s, but other elements have subtly evolved. Now there is a greater flamboyance in the treatment of the delineating edges. Employing a consistent, white outline across the design, irrespective of the object it defines, creates a unifying effect. Contrasts of scale are reduced but the closely matched tones of the design are thrown into sharp relief against the tonally darker background creating a sparkling, filigree effect. Voysey, now in his 60’s, also shows himself to be receptive to the spirit of the age by employing a typically vibrant 1920s colour palette.

At this point Voysey’s career had come full circle. His work as a practising architect was all but over and he would only design a few more pieces of furniture. Voysey was no longer a fashionable designer and he found it much harder to sell his work. However, the sheer quality of his textile and wallpaper designs ensured that they did sell and continued to be commercially produced into the 1930s. Voysey was the greatest decorative designer of his generation, his reputation as a designer of pattern preceded his fame as an architect. It somehow seems appropriate that he would spend the final years of his professional life, as he had started, producing wonderful decorative designs.

7  
Morton, pl 16.

8  
Stuart Durant, “Voysey’s designs for Tomkinson Carpets”, *The Orchard* Number One, 2012, pp38-42.

9  
V&A accession number: W:5:1, 2-1998.

10  
RIBA Voysey Collection: no 698. Illustrated: Stuart Durant, *The Decorative Designs of C F A Voysey*, Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1990, p26.

11  
RIBA.Voysey Collection: no 753. Illustrated: Durant, p79.