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Voysey's Work at Westminster School

Tony Peart

The Black Book, Voysey's personal record of his architectural projects, contains the following three entries for Westminster School: 1894 – 'Bookcases for Ashburnham House'; 1895 – 'Lamp for library'; 1899 – 'New bookcases etc. and decorations at Ashburnham House'. Curious to discover more and conscious that this work has never been documented I speculatively sent an e-mail to the school enquiring if any of these items remained in situ? I received a very quick and helpful response from Elizabeth Wells, the school Archivist and Records Manager. Attached to her e-mail were two period photographs of the interior of Ashburnham House with Elizabeth wondering if any of the various bookcases and light fittings pictured could possibly be by Voysey? However, before we consider these photographs a short history of Ashburnham House will provide a little context for Voysey's work there.

Ashburnham House (*figure 1*) is a mostly seventeenth-century, Grade I listed building sitting in the shadow of Westminster Abbey on Little Dean's Yard. It served as the London home of the Earls of Ashburnham and for many years was believed to be the work of Inigo Jones (1573-1652) although it is now widely attributed to the architect John Webb (1611-1672).¹ In 1739 it was sold to the Dean and Chapter of Westminster and became the home of the sub-dean. After much legal wrangling it came into the possession of Westminster School in 1881 serving as the school's second day-house.



¹
*View of the exterior of
Ashburnham House, 1880, by
the photographer Henry Dixon
(courtesy The British Library)*

Shortly after acquiring this new building it was decided to convert some of the first floor into a library and museum with the masters contributing to an establishment fund. This proved to be insufficient and the matter was further complicated by the retirement of the school's long-serving headmaster Charles Broderick Scott in 1883. Scott requested that any testimonial given in recognition of his service be used for the school rather than be given as a personal gift. A lively debate ensued with many 'Old Westminsters' even questioning the need for a school library and suggesting the money be spent on more useful things such as swimming baths! However, by early 1884 a room on the first floor had been fitted out with bookcases and the Scott Library was established.² Four years later in 1888, the Reverend George Herbert Nall (1861-1940) was appointed Librarian, a position he would hold until 1922. Under his pro-active stewardship a catalogue was compiled, and new books were regularly added to the library's holdings. Nall's policy of active acquisition soon necessitated the need for more shelf space and this led to the commissioning of Voysey to design a new run of bookcases in 1894.

²
The Greene Room photographed
c.1900

Of the two photos Elizabeth provided, one was quickly discounted as containing nothing designed by Voysey; a photograph of the



drawing room (then used as the school reading room) taken c.1900. Fortunately, the second image of what is called the 'Greene Room' (figure 2) manages to capture in some detail what are recognisably two of the three Voysey designs. This is extremely fortunate as Ashburnham House has been subject to gradual change over the years and none of this work now survives – the photograph is all that remains. It depicts a clutter of furniture: tables; mismatched chairs; display cases and globes all sitting awkwardly in an elaborately decorated mid-seventeenth century interior. Prominently featured centre left is the Voysey designed lamp and to the right, within the alcove, are the Voysey bookcases. The photograph must have been taken around 1900 and shows the room in use as both library and school museum and looking very different to a photograph taken c.1882 when it was used as a dining room. This earlier image (figure 3) shows the space that Voysey would have surveyed prior to commencing his work on designing the bookcases in 1894. Close inspection of the photograph reveals that the woodwork is executed in stained or fumed oak and in their austerity and simplicity the bookcases appear to make no concession to the richly decorated environment into which they are inserted. In this respect they are reminiscent of Voysey's commissioned extensions to existing houses which tend to belligerently ignore the buildings

³
The Greene Room photographed
c.1882 when still in use as a
dining room (RA Collections)





to which they are attached. However, on closer inspection it seems that the very top section of the bookcases loosely mirrors the proportions and height of the adjacent entablature, which is carried on a pair of Corinthian columns, prominently jutting out into the room on either side of the alcove. The bookcases are surmounted with Voysey's characteristic hand lettered alphabet (placed above each press) with the central 'F' press decorated either side with a small, sculpted figure of a scholar standing atop a tall, slender, tapering pilaster (figure 4). The presence of these figures confirms that these are the first set of bookcases that Voysey designed as a surviving example (figure 5) is signed the sculptor William Reynolds-Stephens (1862-1943) and dated 1894.³ Close examination of this figure reveals it to be stylistically much closer to other sculpted figures designed by Voysey than any of Reynolds-Stephens much more naturalistic work. This raises the possibility that this was a collaborative project between the pair, with Voysey creating the design, either as a drawing or modelled in plasticine, and Reynolds-Stephens executing it in bronze. It is unclear how the commission came about: all that is certain is that Reynolds-Stephens and Voysey

4 above
Detail of figure 2, showing
Voysey's fitted bookcases

5 left
The single example of the scholar
figure remaining at the school

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by kind permission of the
Governing Body, Westminster
School

were well-known to one another through their membership of the Art Workers' Guild and the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society. As for funding, there is a strong possibility that the scheme was either personally financed by the school librarian, the Rev. G H Nall – he was appointed housemaster of Ashburnham House in the year of the commission – or was funded from library subscriptions that Nall controlled. Certainly, no mention is made of the work in the minutes of the Governing Body or in the school magazine and Nall's is the only name recorded in Voysey's expenses book in respect of his work at Westminster School.

As previously mentioned, the second Voysey designed piece recorded in the photograph is the extraordinary hanging lamp which, like the bookcases also makes no concessions to its surroundings. This probably unique piece (for which no design drawing survives) was clearly designed to house an oil lamp. The dome immediately above the lamp would reflect a gentle, diffused light down onto the scholars working below with the large, spherical counterweight above making it height adjustable. Ashburnham house gained electricity in 1898 and it seems that wherever possible the existing oil lighting was swiftly and unsympathetically converted to electricity. The results of this have not been kind to 'the look' of Voysey's lamp and a re-creation has been provided (figure 6) to show how it would have originally appeared. The profiled birds and tulip motif surmounting the edge of the upper shade are typically 'Voysey' with variations used later to decorate electric hanging lights manufactured by Thomas Elsley. However, this is a relatively early foray into metalwork design for Voysey and many of the decorative details – especially the use of gracefully curving profiles – show the strong influence of the metalwork designed by Arthur Stansfeld Dixon for The Birmingham Guild of Handicraft. Voysey would have seen examples of their work reproduced in contemporary magazines and at the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society exhibitions. It is likely the manufacture of the lamp was undertaken by Voysey's preferred metalworker at this date, William Bainbridge Reynolds (1855-1935).

Regrettably, the final commission of 1899: 'New bookcases etc. and decorations at Ashburnham House' must remain a mystery. This is the only commission that is recorded in Voysey's 'White Book', his book of expenses covering the years 1897-1936. Here brief entries made during July 1899 reveal that the woodwork must have been undertaken by Frederick Müntzer, whose Mayfair and Chelsea based decorating firm executed much interior architectural woodwork for Voysey. As for the 'decorations' supplied to the school, frustratingly we have no clues as to either the form they took or how extensive they were.



6
Photoshop reconstruction of
the hanging lamp as it would
originally have appeared when
first installed in 1895

1
Although some architectural historians believe William Samwell (1626-1676) was the architect.

2
See: Shaw, B R, *The Scott Library*. <http://archiveblog.westminster.org.uk/?p=204>

3
Information provided by Elizabeth Wells, the Westminster School Archivist