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Voysey's Metalwork - Postscript

In the thirty-two years that have passed since Ruth Allford presented her dissertation much new material has come to light regarding Voysey's activities as a designer of metalwork.

This postscript is intended to supplement and clarify some of the content of Ruth's original paper.

Voysey's earliest recorded metalwork designs are captured in the 'Black Book' [27] where an entry for 1884 records: 'Designs for and working drawings for crematory urns' with the client named as a J.C. Hanham. This is a remarkably early date as cremation had only just been made legal in February of that year. Further crematory urns are recorded in 1889 (for a Mrs Herriot) while a third design, for a Miss Pidgeon was executed and exhibited the same year at the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society exhibition. [28]

Voysey is well-known for his cast-iron fireplaces and cabinet fittings and these too arrive relatively early in his career. Designs for chimney pieces, grates and associated press advertisements were provided to Lewis & Co. in 1888 and by 1890 a new form of 'Save All' fireplace was being manufactured by the Birmingham firm of Parkes Brothers.[29] In respect of cabinet fittings, an unexecuted design for a window treatment with fitted cupboards, executed in August 1890 for The Quarto Imperial Club is the earliest design to show Voysey's use of strap hinges.[30] This design features elaborately profiled 'Gothic' strap hinges clearly showing the influence of Voysey's hero A.W.N. Pugin. However, within a few years, these would evolve into the simplified, streamlined designs featuring

silhouetted birds with which he is synonymous. With the benefit of hindsight, Voysey can also be credited with inspiring a younger generation of architects and designers such as Baillie Scott and Mackintosh (along with many commercial furniture manufacturers) to take up the use of decorative strap hinges a practice which had fallen out of fashion many years earlier with the demise of the Gothic Revival.

The line illustration (*figure 3*) featured in the January 1895 edition of *The British Architect* features a compilation of Voysey's metalwork design from the preceding few years. The largest, most elaborate hinge was designed for a 'Lady's Work Cabinet' exhibited at the 1893 Arts & Crafts Exhibition and was executed by William Bainbridge Reynolds (1855-1935). [31] Reynolds initially trained as an architect under John Dando Sedding and later George Edmund Street before turning to 'Art Metalwork' design and manufacture in the early 1890s. Voysey and Reynolds were lifelong friends, probably first meeting when they were both arted pupils in the 1870s and by 1892 Reynolds had joined Voysey as a member of the Quarto Imperial Club. Although the name of Thomas Elsley Ltd. is now synonymous with the manufacture of Voysey's metalwork theirs was a relatively short commercial arrangement of approximately ten years (c.1896-1906). William Bainbridge Reynolds had a much longer working relationship with Voysey. He was his favoured manufacturer in the years prior to the arrangement with Elsley and, following its dissolution, took up the manufacture (to order) of the Voysey cabinet furniture previously made and retailed by Elsley. Bainbridge Reynolds, an excellent craftsman and designer in his own right, ran a small workshop and foundry in Camberwell (later Clapham) where he also undertook work to commission for most of the leading architects of the day. However, this was a modest facility that only had the capacity to manufacture in relatively small quantities. Early in his career this was not an issue for Voysey as he was ordering bespoke pieces for his

architectural and furniture projects as and when they were required. As his reputation as a designer grew, it is understandable that he would turn to a manufacturer (Elsley) who could potentially monetise his metalwork designs by manufacturing them on a commercial basis and even more importantly, promote and retail them to the public.

The Voysey designed metalwork manufactured by Thomas Elsley Ltd. was widely illustrated in contemporary publications both at home and abroad with *The Studio* featuring photographs of three strap hinges and a cabinet handle exhibited at the 1899 Arts & Crafts Exhibition.^[32] A lavishly illustrated catalogue: *Designs by CFA Voysey Architect* was also issued c.1905-06, featuring over seventy individual designs for architectural hardware and this, combined with the widespread press coverage, has created the impression that this was a commercially successful venture.^[33] In reality, this was almost certainly not the case, with Voysey's metalwork designs appealing only to a niche and wealthy clientele. For example, a single strap hinge retailed for the equivalent of approximately £80 at today's prices taking them beyond the budget of most amateur makers. Another issue was the designs themselves which were so characteristically and recognisably 'Voysey' in style. This precluded their use by any other architect who wished to maintain any sense of their individuality when specifying fixtures and fittings for their own architectural projects. Ironically, it is likely that Voysey himself was Elsley's biggest customer as during this period he was at his busiest as an architect with most of his houses featuring a wide array of Elsley manufactured hardware. The issuing of the catalogue was probably a last-ditch attempt by the company to promote a failing range, but it was unsuccessful. A firm the size of Elsley's was entirely profit-motivated and so within a year or two of the catalogue's issue, Thomas

Elsley Ltd. ceased commercial production of Voysey's designs. Subsequently the production of many of the cabinet fittings featured in the catalogue passed to William Bainbridge Reynolds but these were now only available as special orders.

For the execution of hollowware (inkwells, jugs, vases etc.), Voysey had to look elsewhere as Thomas Elsley Ltd. was primarily a manufacturer of architectural fittings, not hand-crafted domestic ware. The designs for these pieces first appear around the turn of the twentieth century with some of the earliest being manufactured by the metalworker Richard Llewellyn B. Rathbone (1864-1939). These include simple, raised vases in copper and the well-known, domed-topped inkwell that could be supplied as a single, double or even triple version. Rathbone was known to Voysey through his good friend, Arthur Simpson the Kendal furniture maker who used Rathbone cabinet fittings on much of his furniture. A selection of these simple pieces (*figure 29*) were exhibited in the Applied Art Court at the Educational Exhibition, St. George's Hall, Liverpool in late 1900.^[34] The inkwell was also exhibited at the 1903 Arts & Crafts Exhibition alongside a range of hollowware including a five-piece silver tea service (*figure 30*), a kettle on stand and jug and washbasin (*figures 19 & 20*) all made by Alfred Newey a Birmingham based metalworker. Although striking and remarkably austere for the time, these pieces are not original and clearly show the strong influence of pieces executed by The Birmingham Guild of Handicraft (*figure 31*) to the designs of Arthur Stansfeld Dixon (1855-1929) which Voysey would have seen and inspected at previous Arts & Crafts exhibitions. In this area of his design practice Voysey was demonstrably a follower and not a leader.

It was not until the 1910 Arts & Crafts Exhibition that Voysey exhibited any new domestic metalwork. The bulk of these pieces were initially designed for his own use, executed in silver by Barnard and Sons (*Figures 11, 12 & 13*) and remained in the possession of the family until relatively recently. Subsequently some of these designs were available commercially (on a very limited basis) with Arthur Simpson exhibiting some at his showrooms in Kendal. In a letter to Simpson dated 2 December 1909, Voysey reveals that these will be sold at cost to the retailer (Simpson) as if any percentage was added for himself: “we should over-weight the price and then no one would buy. I don’t want any profit. I only want the things to sell.” [35] This is a remarkable attitude when one considers the very difficult financial situation in which Voysey found himself – a situation that would continue to dog him for the next thirty years. Only ten months later, in another letter to Simpson, Voysey reveals that he cannot speculatively commission a wooden clock case from him because:

“I fear I could not stand the expense. I have only £10 left in the bank and not many pounds in hand and when or where the next will come from Heaven only knows. The outlook is very black & I find it hard to keep ones mind at rest.” [36]

Voysey’s career as a designer of metalwork mirrors his career as an architect and designer of furniture, textiles and wallpaper. He was at his most prolific during the years that fell around the turn of the twentieth century, essentially 1893-1910. In his declining years he did design a few further pieces in metal, but these were all unique commissions for private clients. [37]

Notes

- 27** Voysey's personal record of his architectural projects - RIBA Archive at the Victoria & Albert Museum (reference VoC/1/1).
- 28** Illustrated in: Livingstone, K., Donnelly, M. and Parry, L. *C.F.A. Voysey Arts & Crafts Designer*. London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2016, p. 274.
- 29** Black Book
- 30** The Quarto Imperial Club was an informal group of architects and designers who met regularly to discuss one another's designs. These were executed on quarto sized sheets of paper and made in response to a specific architectural or design challenge set in advance of each gathering. Two volumes of the compiled drawings are held at the RIBA Archive at the Victoria & Albert Museum (reference VOS/133 & VOS/134).
- 31** Illustrated in: Livingstone, K., Donnelly, M. and Parry, L. *C.F.A. Voysey Arts & Crafts Designer*. London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2016, p. 165.
- 32** *The Studio*, vol. 8, October 1899, p. 44.
- 33** Copy at RIBA Archive (reference VoC/6/14/10).
- 34** *Architectural Review*, vol. 9, January 1901, p. 40.
- 35** Voysey – Simpson Letters, RIBA Archive (reference BrJo/Box 5/5).
- 36** Ibid.
- 37** See: Livingstone, K., Donnelly, M. and Parry, L. *C.F.A. Voysey Arts & Crafts Designer*. London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2016, pp. 269-272.

Illustrations

Figure 29 *No caption required*

Figure 30 *Silverware made by Alfred Newey (illustrated in Kunst und Kunsthandwerken
Vol.11, 1908)*

Figure 31 *Voysey's inkwell (front right) alongside pieces designed by Arthur Stansfeld
Dixon for The Birmingham Guild of Handicraft (private collection)*