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In harmony with landscape

*Perrycroft, Colwall, Herefordshire
The home of Mark and Gillian Archer*

Mary Miers admires the skill and enthusiasm
behind the revival of one of C. F. A. Voysey's
earliest houses in the country

Photographs by Paul Highnam

INNOVATIVE, unpretentious and harmonious, the domestic architecture of C. F. A. Voysey has an enduring appeal and the capacity to inspire a passionate enthusiasm for his work. A measure of this success must surely be the unusually high number of his houses that remain in loving private hands. Many of their owners are in contact with each other in a sort of loose affiliation of Voysey devotees, and a Voysey Society has recently been mooted. Few architects of his generation have attracted such an appreciative following.

Notable among this informal club of Voysey enthusiasts are Mark and Gillian Archer, who bought Perrycroft (**Fig 1**) near Malvern in 1999, and live here with their two boys. When they took it on, the house had been owned for



← Fig 1 left: Perrycroft from the south-west. ↑ Fig 2 above: The entrance front. The bay with the porthole was a later addition by Voysey, who also designed a lodge and stables

the plans published in 1894 in *The British Architect*—which described it as ‘a long, white-fronted cottage... [that]... for comfort and simple artistic expression it would be difficult to surpass’—but it also attracted the attention of the foreign architectural press. Although a modest country retreat rather than a country house at the heart of an estate, Perrycroft had a budget of £5,000, which allowed Voysey to design something larger and more lavish than his first commission for a house in the country—nearby Walnut Tree Farm at Castle-morton of 1890. (His best-known houses tend to be found in groups—in the Lake District and the Surrey Hills, and here, overlooking the Malvern Hills, where he also designed an unexecuted house for himself in 1897.)

Perrycroft was built for John William Wilson, a Liberal politician from a Quaker family whose father had co-founded a Birmingham chemicals company. Wilson was typical of Voysey’s clients: middle-class liberals—industrialists, MPs, artists and writers. He became MP for North Worcestershire in 1895, when, like Voysey, he was in his mid thirties and full of youthful idealism. The present owner, Dr Archer, who is treasurer for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, but has become something of an expert on Voysey and his work at Perrycroft, suggests that, for both architect and client, the house represented a refreshing break with the past.

Voysey’s plans and drawings, dated 1893 and 1894 and now in the RIBA collection, show how the original design, comprising a high-walled, towered complex with half-timbering, gables and dormers reminiscent

of Devey’s Old English style, was pared down to something more clean-lined and economical. The overall feel is unmistakably modern, although thick, roughcast walls and grey slated roofs make reference to the traditional vernacular, and certain picturesque elements characteristic of Voysey’s work are incorporated. Familiar features include the long, horizontal lines counterbalanced by massive, thrusting chimneystacks, the battered buttresses and slightly swept, oversailing eaves on curved metal brackets,

unbroken runs of windows tucked up under the eaves, bracketed oriels and ogee-shaped leadwork (Fig 6).

The house is built on a terrace cut into a steep slope, from which it stands out boldly white, making the most of superb views from its principal elevations. To the south, the eye is drawn up to the Iron Age fort known

as British Camp and westwards roll the Herefordshire hills. House and garden are conceived as one, the vistas from within and without tied in to the overall composition, but there is no attempt to tuck Perrycroft into the hillside, so that it blends seamlessly into the landscape, and little self-conscious rustic detail. Instead, Voysey used texture and palette to reflect the ‘colour, shape and texture of the hills and trees’, offsetting the vivid green of the external detail against whitewashed roughcast walls swathed in creeper. One of the Archers’ greatest triumphs has been their discovery and reinstatement of the original Light Brunswick Green chosen by Voysey to ‘harmonise with the greens of the surrounding trees and hills’. It took two attempts to get the exact shade, but they have now achieved a scintillating green ➤

‘All Perrycroft needed was some sympathetic new owners’

30 years by the Boys Brigade, during which time it served as a hostel and succumbed to an inevitable degree of institutionalisation. The Boys Brigade painted all the external woodwork black, sacrificed bathroom fittings for communal showers, removed the original kitchen and commandeered the gardens as an assault course. Mercifully, however, almost everything else survived intact. All that was needed was some sympathetic new owners with an eye for Voysey’s highly individual aesthetic and the patience to tease it back to life. The Archers have proved themselves more than equal to the challenge.

When it was built in 1895, Perrycroft was Voysey’s most substantial house and one of his earliest in a rural setting. Its effect on his career was significant; not only were



↑ Fig 3: The drawing room, with a carpet woven to Voysey's *Donnemara* design and one of Perrycroft's distinctive marble fireplaces

(Fig 5) the colour of newly mown grass, the vibrancy of which is derived from using specially made lead paint mixed with natural pigments suspended in linseed oil. The juxtaposition of green and white perfectly echoes the colours of the garden in early summer, with its variegated wooded banks and lawns, and creamy borders of anemiss and aquilegia.

The house is planned around two sides of a courtyard, the well-lit service wing entered through the base of an ogee-roofed tower. Approached from above, this entrance front (Fig 2), with its series of projections and roofs and the vertical thrust of the tower and chimneys, is very different in feel to the long, level sweep of the garden front, with its unbroken roofline and horizontal proportions. Here, the partly jettied upper floor and veranda-like window seat recess, projecting bay windows and tapering buttresses, cast sharp-angled shadows. The contrasting moods of the two elevations is typical of many Voysey houses.

The interior of Perrycroft conveys the feeling of calm and economy of plan that were guiding objectives of Voysey's domestic architecture. In an article published on February 19, 1898, *COUNTRY LIFE* championed his unpretentious weekend retreats as the 'ideal cottage in modern garb... [which]... manages to make utility the basis for aesthetic expression They are comfortable and lasting, with a curiously home-like appearance, that makes them harmonise with pastoral scenery in a way few modern houses have done before. They are well planned.'

The principal rooms—drawing room (Fig 3), library and dining room (Fig 4)—are ranged along the south front, with generous bay windows overlooking the garden and distant hills. On the north side, the hall, with a simple staircase, is lit from above by a run of windows on the first floor, and there is a suggestion of a third wing beside the porch containing a smoking room (now

playroom). The rooms are low-ceilinged—Voysey disliked 'the modern craze for high rooms... which has led to the destruction of all effects of repose'—and uncluttered. 'We cannot be too simple,' he wrote, and his insistence on restraint and on a unifying consistency of beauty in every part extended almost to a moral imperative—'simplicity requires perfection in all its details'.

Among the drawings for Perrycroft are Voysey's designs for the symbolic ironwork decoration on the wide oak front door, and for hinges and ventilation grilles featuring naturalistic detail and his favourite heart and bird motifs, which became popular when commercially reproduced by Elsley & Co.

The playfulness of Voysey's ironwork detail is counterbalanced by the austerity of the surface finishes, which demonstrate his preference for plain plaster walls devoid of decorative mouldings (the only panelling is to details such as cupboard doors and



window-seat recesses). Although he was a leading designer of textiles and wallpaper, Voysey preferred unpapered walls in his own interiors, believing that pattern was necessary only to divert attention from ugly furniture. It is not known how much involvement he had with the decoration of Perrycroft. Certainly, a photograph reproduced in *The Studio* in 1901 shows that the hall was papered, and the Archers found small scraps of Voysey and Morris papers when they were redecorating.

They decided to respect Voysey's true aesthetic and not to reintroduce wallpaper, but instead to paint the ground floor in restful neutral shades, with bone-coloured woodwork. These tones are more flattering than white to the slender-columned chimneypieces, which are a notable feature. They belong to a small group (see also at Norney of 1897) that Voysey designed using marble set into simply cut surrounds—later, he tended to use green tiles. The Connemara marble is particularly beautiful for its swirling sea colours.



↑ Fig 4: The dining room. The window-seat recess in the corner catches the morning sun



↑ Fig 5 left: Lily-decorated rainwater hopper.



↑ Fig 6 right: A detail of the entrance front

The Archers lived in the house when they were renovating and allowed the architecture to guide them in recapturing the spirit of Voysey, rather than slavishly re-creating every detail. The result feels quite contemporary, but then, as Dr Archer notes, 'there's a lot that seems modern in his designs—the informal, "open-plan" design, the un-stuffy simplicity, the light and airiness of the rooms'.

Mrs Archer is a designer who has completed several restoration projects; after studying fashion design, she trained as a textile conservator and worked with the National Trust. She is particularly interested in how interiors work as spaces to live in, and the effect that surface tone and the simple juxtaposition of uprights and horizontals can have on the lightness of rooms. At Perrycroft, the principal rooms are flooded with light through generous square or shallow-bowed bay windows. The curtains all have coral linings, replicating the colour always shown, along with green for wooden windows, in Voysey's perspective watercolours. Only in the drawing room has Mrs Archer introduced colour to the walls—Farrow and Ball's Folly Green, to draw the garden in. The carpet, hand-woven in Pakistan, is a reproduction of Voysey's

sinuous tulip and rose *Donnemara* design, its slubby weave imitating that of his originals, which were woven in Donegal.

In furnishing the rooms, the Archers have remained faithful to the architect's uncluttered aesthetic, mixing simple country furniture found in local auctions with a few good Arts-and-Crafts pieces, notably a handsome Voysey cabinet and a desk he designed in collaboration with Baillie Scott. They have also had some pieces made, such as a kitchen dresser imitating a Voysey design. Complementing the furniture is their collection of ceramics—simple, chaste pieces that emulate the spare beauty of the architecture.

The Archers' other great triumph has been the re-creation of the garden and woodlands, to be featured in *COUNTRY LIFE* later this year. Here, they have unearthed ponds, paths, and a rockery, re-created beds in accordance with surviving plans, restored the pinetum and cultivated a wild wooded garden on the hillside. The revival of Perrycroft has brilliantly recaptured Voysey's conception for the house and garden as a complete work of art. It is a dream fulfilled, but one that could not have been achieved without considerable knowledge and dedication, and the willingness to put in many hours of sheer hard work. 🐾