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Voysey today: everywhere you look

Voysey Society Lecture 3 November 2017

Timothy Brittain-Catlin

Of course my starting point for this evening is that you all know a lot more about the details of Voysey's houses than I do, so this is a talk about how much of what he achieved can be seen in unfamiliar ways. How you can look at not just one of the masterpieces but the smaller works as well and see different and unfamiliar things. And that's going to be my way in to showing how you can see traces of Voysey's work in places where you don't necessarily expect them today.

One of the oddities of campaigning for twentieth-century buildings as I do for the Twentieth Century Society upstairs is that I have had to familiarise myself with recent periods of history and get to learn more about them. We discovered only a few years ago that post-modern buildings in London, even major ones, were disappearing at an amazing rate. When I was an architecture student in the 1980s these buildings were thought to be the work of the devil. Even though I saw them going up at first hand, and read about them at the time in the architectural press, I didn't really know what was going on behind the scenes. The mainstream modernist interpretation of them was so dominant that the only place to get a different view was in the magazine *Architectural Design*, and to me as an architecture student that had a cliquey and American character with that I didn't feel at home with.

I had grown up on Alastair Service's magnificent *Edwardian Architecture and its Origins* in which the theme of Englishness was everywhere. That's almost certainly the place where I read about Voysey's work for the first time. It took a kind of genius on the part of the Modernists that they managed to weave a story in which Voysey's work was part of an experimental German movement to create mass-produced architecture. That was the Pevsner line. I get on trouble from time to time because I still think that Modernist writers are perfectly entitled to invent whatever story they like in order to tell the tale they want to tell. But likewise it does mean that there is a responsibility on people who challenge the simple Modernist version of architectural history to come up with a story that is just as good. No single description of a great piece of architecture is ever going to do it justice, because in the end it is the house, the building, that counts and not the story. But stories and metaphors are useful to remind

us why buildings are important or memorable, and that's where contemporary postmodernism has a role to play in explaining why Voysey's architecture is still so valuable. Even more significantly, history seems to show that these new stories are invaluable when conveying to architecture students why they should go and seek out and remember certain buildings, and what they might look for when they are there. Voysey's reputation will of course always persist, because the buildings are often so extraordinary, but our culture is mostly literary and we sometimes have to work hard to establish key buildings of any kind in people's minds. It's also worth saying that decisions to protect historical buildings are primarily political, in the broad sense, so to have a story that works politically can be invaluable.

I'm now in the process of working out what that story might be. Generally speaking, I think that one of the problems of late Victorian and Edwardian building is that they are seen in surprising isolation. The images and often the original photography are of so high a standard that it is tempting to say that what they look like at first glance is the most important thing. These things are of course very important, and they are underrated today in architectural education, but they are not the whole story. They are one element in much bigger stories which are about a whole range of people and ideas over a long period of time, and when one looks at these in their historical context new ways open up as to how we might speak and write about them.

This is the first house by Voysey that I knew as a child – the studio in St Augustine's Road in Barons Court. Of course it stood out because all of the other houses in the street were red brick ones. It was also of course the house that most resembled Osbert Lancaster's Art Nouveau cottage, and so it came as no surprise to learn much later from Wendy Hitchmough's book that it was praised by *The British Architect* magazine as being 'an artistic little house'. Now, one of the lessons I have learned about interesting buildings is that very often the most surprising and important aspects of it are simply staring us in the face and we can't see them. In the case of this house, and many more – the one in Turnham Green is obviously another – it's not the fact that it looks different: everyone can see that. It's the question of why it looks different. *What* was it that the architect was trying to say?

Well, we all know that it would have been no use asking Voysey. One of the most striking aspects of his writing was in common with every architect I have ever studied – with the possible exception of Vanbrugh, and Adolf Loos – that he had little to say about his own buildings that is of any use to anyone

other than an indicator of the times he lived in, and the friends and clients he made. Here's a test that you can try out with any architect you have ever met – is what they are saying about their own building actually true? And does it matter anyway? Traditional art historians place a great deal of emphasis on written and archival sources, but architects never should. One of the greatest mistakes in architectural history, in my opinion is, that people took Pugin seriously when he talked about truth and honesty and so on – because Pugin was such an important figure to Voysey, we'll come back to him later. Pugin talked in these terms because that's what people did at the time, and because he wanted jobs from leading churchmen. Truth in the religious sense has a bit – a bit – to do with his architecture but he was in the end an architect and what he wanted to do was to reset standards in aesthetics and in architectural construction, which is neither a romantic nor a pious thing to do. You can see this very clearly if you go beyond the propaganda and look at his letters and his more helpful later writing. The Smithsons talked their strange language because firstly they were trying to impress their more glamorous art world friends and secondly because they wanted to influence public housing and the more radical left-wing voices in the debate. There is a great example in Miles Glendinning's book *Architecture's Evil Empire*: he points out how Daniel Libeskind described his project for the Grand Canal Theatre for Dublin, which is a spiky, shattered, glass and steel building, as 'very contextual', rooted in the city's 'traditions', when it clearly is nothing of the kind. There's no particular reason why visual people should be good at or even interested in words, and by definition an architect can't know what the future significance of a design is going to be, because that significance has not yet happened. And furthermore, you won't get a Heritage Lottery Fund grant if you don't use Heritage Lottery language.

Thus you won't get very far if you take Voysey's descriptions of his own aims. My favourite one – and it says a lot about him and about the period, but little that is helpful about his architecture: it's one of many that simply lists the qualities of building: 'reverence, love, justice, mercy, honesty, candour, generosity, humility, order and dignity'. You could, I think, work your way through those and point out examples of how to illustrate each one of them. But it would be a bit of a waste of time. Because what Voysey was getting at was essentially something less literal, as I'll explain.

Let's try to address this by putting Voysey into his professional context. It's generally true of architects that they learn a great deal, and more than they usually admit, from the people they worked well with early in their career. The influence of Saxon Snell and his hospital architecture is usually pointed out because it is white and smooth, and no doubt it was also true that working in a practice like that, which

had a high level of technical expertise, it was possible for the young Voysey about efficient ways of planning and working. Both those aspects are generally understated in architectural history. But Voysey was only there for a short period. It seems to me that if you want to see what the architectural story might really be about, you need to go back to his final employer before setting up on his own – George Devey.

Devey is one of the most underrated figures in British architectural history, a distinction he shares with John Claudius Loudon and Charles Ashbee. I think that in all these cases it is quite hard to point out to laymen what exactly it was that they achieved. Loudon was of course a critic and a writer, but Devey and Ashbee for sure are what you might call ‘Architects’ architects’ – that is to say, it can take a bit of first-hand experience of the practice and design of architecture to be able to see the greatness of what they achieved. Devey at least has the great benefit of apparently never having tried to explain his buildings with unhelpful language. You just look at them and see what they are doing. And even then, it isn’t clear to many people what the achievement is, because the buildings aren’t obviously attractive. At first sight you might think that picturesque architects did the picturesque stuff better than Devey did, and rational ones did the rational stuff better, and got more attention for it. Furthermore, some of Devey’s really remarkable houses have been demolished, so let me explain a bit of what I think Devey was doing so that we can see why it feeds in to the continuing importance and appeal of Voysey’s own work later on.

Devey’s career began in the late 1840s – when high-art architecture was thanks to Pugin changing very fast indeed – and continued until the Norman Shaw era of the mid 1880s, so he sits in a very critical area in the development of architectural ideas. The most significant theme is indeed the Pugin one – that building is about the quality and practicality of construction before it is about anything else. There are three projects of Devey’s that I want to show you – two from the start of his career in the late 1830s and early 1850s, and one completed in the late 1870s not long before Voysey started to work for him.

The early ones are close to Penshurst Place in West Kent. These are cottages at Leicester Square, just outside the gates (which Devey also designed) to Penshurst Place, and built for the owner, the first Baron De L’Isle. If you cast your mind back to the 1840s, and the point at which the gothic revival takes off, there is a good deal of writing in the professional press about the qualities of new construction, and some praise for late medieval buildings – so long as the latter were vernacular – but no one is talking about the two things together. In fact it is generally true that the architectural press

until recently relatively little to say about adding to or working with old buildings, which is the principal occupation of most architects. But here is Devey doing it consciously – you can't tell what is old and what is now, apart from some fairly minor and detailed solecisms. This is a novelty. Pugin did actually design half-timbered cottages, but he never built any, and for reasons of their own, the new and young generation of gothic revivalists abhorred them. What Devey was doing, I think, is this – he was entering into the history of the old buildings, uncovering their construction and their materials, and working with these to emphasise them, work out their logic and make them explicit. It shows a reverence for building tradition as it does for constructional sense, and it seems to by-pass the worries about copying superficially from history. Of course every second good-quality house extension does this nowadays – it was completely new then.

This is the second building from the start of Devey's career and it's very close to the first – the barn at South Park, just north west of Penshurst, of 1850. You can see something similar here. First of all, you can't work out what is old and what is new; some of the structures are old, in part. Jill Allibone's excellent book points out that you can't really tell any more what vernacular farm buildings in the area looked like when Devey was looking at them because they have all been either demolished, or gentrified beyond recognition. What you actually see a lot of around there is new, or partly new cottages by Devey; he also built estate cottages in large numbers for the Rothschilds in Buckinghamshire, and to some extent you might even say that the pretty English village is one of Devey's inventions. Real villages certainly weren't thought to be particularly pretty until the early nineteenth century, and only then after a lot of work.

Now, this is the late Devey building – St Alban's Court at Nonnington in East Kent, of 1875-9. This is the house which seems to be built on top of the remains of an earlier stone building – you can see it here on the main house, but also on the small estate cottages. Of course you can say that Devey was making a kind of joke about the pretensions of the owner, William Hammond, who might have preferred somewhere ancient but had to make do with a new building. But that is to underestimate Devey. I think that he was now abstracting historical elements – such as the idea of the stone – and isolating them so as to emphasise the timelessness of the building – the opposite of the claim that St Alban's Court is 'fake-old'. It suits the mid-Victorian mentality to very well to see it in terms of a scientific experiment that abstracts a sense of age and turns it into an objective building block, a demonstration of useful facts, and one that can be done on any scale, such as at this lodge. You are looking at the construction and you are aware of a sense of history, and yet you are aware that this is all

new and logical. Some of Devey's other large buildings that have now gone – here are two of them – are clearly not actually Jacobean: they are buildings that extracting and abstracting elements from Jacobean architecture, emphasising and magnifying their structural role and making you look at them. We are looking in other words at a kind of constructed archaeology which tells stories about history and tradition without actually being old at all, and certainly not fake-old. In fact Mark Girouard long ago described Devey's work at Penshurst as 'rural archaeology', and that is exactly right, I think – it is a good scientific phrase to suit a scientific method of looking at buildings.

Jill Allibone makes it clear how Voysey himself especially early in his career, revisited Devey themes and Devey proportions, for example in ornamental gables and in timberwork. Here's a project for a country house with an octagonal hall, of circa 1889 – look at the Devey gables. They reappear in that Egyptian house, don't they? Voysey's sanatorium design even has a spot of Devey's decorative brickwork. As you would expect, his very first published designs look the closest to Devey's work. But the ideas behind them lasted much longer. Voysey wrote a lot about the qualities of old English building, and also said that his own long-low houses imitated them. But, you might say, they don't – surely the well know, long low houses, which Voysey says somewhere look as if they are lying down to sleep, are so bright, so striking, so cheerful and so awake that they are actually the antithesis of anything historical? And the exaggeration of the geometries of the outlines and details are surely very far from being historical. After all, this is what the modernists thought.

Modernists – postmodernist – now, let's get to the point of all this. The place to start is an obvious example – Norney. Norney as you will all know appeared in public consciousness with the film *Carrington* in 1995. The timing is very good for our purposes. I remember well reading Stuart Durant's description of Norney in his *Architectural Design* monograph of 1992, sounding a little puzzled about its façade which had so annoyed Ian Nairn when he wrote the *Surrey Pevsner*. The entrance side is peculiar. Voysey has abstracted a baroque pediment and put it above the entrance to his house. But in fact the whole house is composed of abstracted elements of other things. The 'Jacobean' gables and mullions are versions of Devey's abstracted gables and mullions. The curved lead roofs are blatantly Jacobean – they come from houses like the old Holland House in London. They are not really historical ones, or direct quotations. The useful white render plays the role of holding it together visually, especially given that Voysey's own elements tend to be in strongly contrasting colours. So one way of looking at these buildings can be to look out the individual elements and see where they came from – in fact, about as far away from the modernist view of them as it is possible to

be. I don't know, but I would have thought that it must have appealed to the film Carrington's director and writer, Christopher Hampton, to have a building that sent out conflicting messages about the building's historical inspirations for the denouement of a film about a complicated three-way relationship. The story is unresolved and so is the house.

Now, I mentioned that Stuart Durant's book came out in 1992 and I remember very well that at the time there was a search on for the historical roots of postmodernism. To give you a little historical perspective on that: it begins in Britain in 1980 when Terry Farrell, consciously aware of the magazine *Architectural Design* and what is going on in the United States, designed Clifton Nurseries for Lord Rothschild – a building that was memorably described at the time by the critic Martin Pawley as the 'Barcelona Pavilion' of postmodernism, a judgement justified, I think, with the passage of time. What Farrell was doing here, so he himself said, was to look out for the historical details of the buildings around about, for example of the Royal Opera House and the Theatre Royal, and put them onto his own building so that they held together in a logical way. From 1982 the British architects Dixon Jones started work on the Mississauga city hall, in Ontario, a building which I thought was a suitable one to bring to the attention of members of the Voysey Society, and the architect Leon Krier was publishing his impassioned drawings which show classical buildings as being composed of identifiable elements. The on the whole regrettable affair of the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery went up in the mid-eighties, as did many of Terry Farrell's most significant postmodernist designs. His famous and now gone TV-AM annoyed critics because the front, back and interior were all in different styles and did different things to remnants of old buildings depending on the mood. At Comyn Ching on Seven Dials he broke the first rule of SPAB – he remodelled an old complex of buildings in such a way that you cannot tell what is old, and what is new, spinning out and emphasizing historic details, exactly like Devey, in fact. Then towards the end of the decade he designed three huge buildings which, like Clifton Nurseries, were intended to draw from the historical details of the buildings around them but now did it at an urban scale – Alban Gate, Embankment Place, and Vauxhall Cross. The final buildings in this brief history of British Postmodernism that I want to show you are both designed by John Melvin in the Essex Road: the teacher's accommodation block for St Paul's Girl's School in Brook Green in Hammersmith, which took elements from Gerald Horsley's school building along the road of 1904, and finally these flats in the Essex Road designed for the Mercers' Company. They trumpeted, all the elements of house that had been missing from 1960s and 70s new housing – door, window, roof, entrance, attic, chimney. John took all these and exaggerated them, pulling them together with red brick and Portland stone instead of Voysey's render. That building was completed in 1992, the same

year that Andreas Papadakis, the postmodernist par excellence, published Stuart Durant's book. By the way – John Melvin remodelled and designed an extension to Papadakis' own house, and you will be surprised to hear that it was in the Tudor style and not classical at all. I would say that there was every evidence that architectural readers were looking for sources and ideas about where the idea of collecting and expressing historical details came from, and that the *Voysey* volume provided countless examples of it that would confound the modernists.

Furthermore – I think that *Voysey's* last projects, when he was in his gothic passion, are even more Devey like, because of course they are not actually really gothic – they are Jacobean. Lodge Style looks like a Pugin drawing, possibly even like a Pugin house. And Pugin's houses were not gothic, in fact. They were in a vernacular Jacobean style where he exaggerated all the features he liked. In these houses he only used pointed windows for domestic chapels, for example. If he liked a feature, he used it again and again and again – he did this with the window of the ancient Anglican rectory in Marlow, and with various curved sections of stone mouldings that he found at Kenilworth Castle. In fact actually – hold on to this thought for a moment – Lodge Style can also be seen as a version of a Regency kind of architecture, the ornamental cottage, but with proper post-Pugin gothic detailing, an intriguing and attractive combination. Compare *Voysey's* famous buttresses to what Pugin was doing with, at his Handsworth convent – marking the structural divisions. Here is Rampisham of 1846, and what you can see is that the gables are steeper – 60 degrees, in fact – than a Jacobean farmhouse would be, because Pugin wants to draw your attention to them and think about what they are doing structurally. The origins are houses like this famous one, the late sixteenth-century Much Wenlock Priory. And this is evidently what *Voysey* did too. Because of its overall appearance, at Lodge Style it becomes obvious that *Voysey's* famous characteristic buttresses are something of a quotation from Pugin too – Pugin used them internally to emphasise precisely how a roof was held up, as you can see here from his cloister at Handsworth. But as Wendy Hitchmough points out, *Broadleys* has quotations from Regency seaside architecture in it, with its smooth white bow windows. So when you see them, you are looking at not a Regency bow, but what an architect does with a Regency bow a hundred years after the Regency.

So what we learn from all this is that what *Voysey* was doing in many of his houses was constructing an architectural story that was unique for a particular place out of disparate parts, and in this case one of the stories he was referring to was not the gothic revival in general but Pugin's only chapter in it – in common with all of Pugin's many other late-nineteenth-century admirers, *Voysey* was unable to say in words exactly what it was that he admired about Pugin's work – hence those long stuttering lists – so

this is how he did it. There is an intentional kind of sadness about that, I think, especially at Lodge Style, and especially when the surviving eighteenth-century traditions at least were slipping away and the gothic revival ones increasingly industrialised, and Pugin himself in danger of being forgotten. You identify the bits that matter – you draw from them the historical associations and the traditions they came from, including their moments of revival – and discover a building that can only have emerged from the present time. That's the theme that runs through Pugin, Devey, Voysey, Farrell and Melvin. In that respect at least, the modernists were right.

So now I'll return to my starting point – the Britten studio in Barons Court – and how I couldn't see what was staring me in the face. The thing that everyone remembers about it is the pair of brackets under the porch that have the profile of a face cut into them. These were seen rather like the caryatids on the otherwise modernist Highpoint in Highgate – something slightly silly that let the modernist show down. But unlike the caryatids, the funny faces were not a joke or an aberration. They were the whole point. The house like many of Voysey's can be seen as a collection of beautiful things. It is very significant that – as Wendy Hitchmough points out, that Voysey was always happy to add to or alter his own houses: he didn't see them as what Jonathan Meades calls a single 'art object' – completed perfect artefacts. They were in a process of growing, of taking the story with them. It's sometimes forgotten that there are architects who like to see their buildings in this way. It's also perfectly logical if what you really like is medieval and Tudor building.

Perhaps the most interesting thing I discovered when talking to the British postmodernists I referred to above is quite how interested they were in late Victorian and Edwardian architecture, and how much they disassociated themselves with American postmodernism – I've mentioned John Melvin and St Paul's Girl's School, and Sir Terry has written that one of the most influential buildings for him when he was a student at Newcastle was this one: Shaw's Cragside. Because Charles Jencks and Andreas Papadakis were so effective as spokesmen for the movement, and because the most infamous postmodern building the Sainsbury Wing, was designed by Americans with a keen sense of self-promotion, there is a tendency to think of the whole movement here as being American. But it wasn't.

There were some things in common however, and they can lead us to an idea of how we might interpret Voysey's work in the light of everything that has happened over the last three decades. What you might call the intellectual wing of postmodernism had a number of key positions. The first was simply a revolt at the idea that architecture was leading inevitably towards some kind of scientific future and a pseudo-

scientific appearance to go with it, and that everything else was a waste of time. Postmodernists of all kinds dislike the term ‘pastiche’ because they would claim, and I must say I agree with them, that there is no rule about how or when buildings should be built in a particular style. If it is an attractive and effective design, it isn’t pastiche – it’s a building like any other good one. Secondly comes the idea that ornament is not just a decoration; it taps in to very old ideas about how part of a building can represent something much bigger and older than itself, and at best it comes out of a coherent and consistent language which overall means something – in fact, can mean a lot. This lay behind the thinking of W. R. Lethaby, who was precisely Voysey’s contemporary and whose *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, published as Voysey’s career was taking off, is precisely about that; but it is also the basis for some British postmodernists, for example John Outram, the architect of the Judge Institute in Cambridge and of several houses which are covered in ornament that follows languages that he devised. And finally, American postmodernism began with the idea that new architectural work can say something about the original fabric of a house. A really nice example of this is the mid-70s Claghorn House in Princeton, by Michael Graves, where the extensions are supposed to represent in symbolic form the way the original house was built and grew. Here are Terry Farrell and Charles Jencks outside the house they remodelled in Notting Hill which gives a pretty clear indication of what that was about.

That particular aspect became really much more of a British post-modern characteristic, to the extent that it is everywhere present here and almost non-existent in American postmodernism. But there are other distinctly British aspects of it too. These get hidden because British architects have a long and proud history of not intellectualising what they do. They just do it. One of the oddities of nineteenth-century architectural history is that everyone in Europe is taught a completely different version of it from that which we have here. Over there they hear about aesthetic theory, about rationalism and historicism, and about Semper, whereas over here we get the gothic revival, the restoration of historic churches, the pragmatism, the importance of good construction. And so there has not yet been any attempt at putting the British elements of postmodernism into any kind of theory. And I think that this is where Voysey can help us, as it is clear to me that there are elements in his work which are part of a very long story about the recurrent role that Jacobean architecture plays in British architecture

Because Jacobean architecture seems unstoppable – it keeps bouncing back. Anyone here who has read about the gothic revival, Pugin included, knows that the gothic revivalists hated it more than anything else – for its lack of structural and constructional purity, its funny imitation of Italian classical or Flemish details, and its lack of ‘development – the ability to grow and develop in the way that both

gothic and classical architecture did. Some of the most violent language deployed by the revivalists was applied to neo-Elizabethan and neo-Jacobean architecture. Modernist critics, who copied their language of violent assault from the gothic revivalists, hated English neo-Tudor housing, for example in the London suburbs, even more than they hated classical revivals where at least they could point, at best, to some kind of neo-rationalism if they wanted to. Yet back it comes. The 1830s were full of it – in fact if you want a useful rule of thumb, neo-Tudor and Tudor Gothic architecture appear precisely during the rule of King William IV in 1830-1837, presumably inspired by Joseph Nash's *Mansions of England in the Olden Time*, all ready to be knocked down by the coming gothic revivalists. Nash's is a book that tells through its illustrations a great story about what England is supposed to stand for – hospitality, restfulness, colourfulness and joyfulness. It was extremely popular and it provided the background for the era's bestsellers – the historical novels of Walter Scott. But then along comes Devey who already by the 1850s is reviving it. Norman Shaw's architecture is frankly Tudor by the 1870s, when Devey is still building, and by the 1880s Voysey is joining in. There are some other major buildings – for example Rhinefield and Danesfield by W.H. Romaine-Walker, which are doing neo-Tudor on a grand scale. Of the countless neo-Jacobean and neo-Tudor houses across England from about 1910 right through to the 1930s you need hardly be reminded. The modernist critics silenced it for about thirty years – but a building like the magnificent Jerwood Library, at Trinity Hall in Cambridge by Freedland Rees Robert, shows that there is life in it still. It's true that these are mostly neo-Tudor rather than neo-Jacobean – which is more expensive to do – but nevertheless it is true that it is perfectly possible to trace the history of British architecture through examples like these and still be representative of what is happening across the country, and in every decade.

So that's the 'story', as postmodernists might say, behind Voysey's architecture. It is part of a running theme about what makes the English the way they are, and what they respond to. You can do this unsubtly, like all those interwar villas, or you can do it very subtly indeed, as Voysey did, where you have to work out for yourself where all the various details came from – where he himself might have seen them and where. To give you an example of the process: my opinion on those brackets in Hammersmith, and the ones in Perrycroft, for example is that they are a late-Victorian or Edwardian version of those grotesque, or 'artisan mannerist' Jacobean figures you get on timber screens at houses like Hatfield. The art of the great architect is to make one think a bit rather than quote directly, and also to make you feel that you are connecting with something bigger than yourself. This is precisely what Voysey was doing. But I think he was also doing something else that neo-Jacobean architects have

done – mourning the loss of these qualities in the mainstream architecture of the day, and also I think expressing a sadness at the way in which the mainstream critics, whether goths or modernists, were attacking buildings they thought beautiful, and also emphasising to an irrational extent the appeal of the new, when not everyone likes the newness of buildings. From what I know about Voysey as a person, that would appear to make sense.

It's possible to see this as something entirely positive – that these themes are long term ones and that they will reappear. Of course – as indeed your webpage for this talk has illustrated, there are new Voysey-like houses going up. Some people might be better at this than others. But in the end we will see more of them, and they will be better, if architects felt able to be aware of the tradition that they were tapping into, to be more conscious of how they use the elements and not to be embarrassed about it. The modernists did not defeat us any more than the gothic revivalists did. And then there will be more Voyseys in the future, which can only be a good thing.