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COLLECTING 'THE MAGNET' COMIC

THE EXTREMELY COLLECTABLE BOYS' COMIC
WHICH INTRODUCED BILLY BUNTER TO THE WORLD

BY GARY HOWMAN

Of all the boy's papers (or comics) issued in the first half of the twentieth century, few are remembered with such affection or collected with such enthusiasm as "The Magnet". This famous Fleetway House publication ran for just over thirty-two years and was only halted by the severe paper shortage caused by the Second World War. Unfortunately, "The Magnet" was not revived after the war and although the characters from it appeared in various other forms, including books and on television, nothing really equalled the appeal of the original comic.

Original copies of "The Magnet" are now quite difficult to find. Due to the paper they were printed on they don't wear too well if they are handled too much and inevitably the great majority were thrown away years ago. Even the copies kept by the Amalgamated Press (the paper's publishers) and Frank Richards have disappeared without trace. It seems most of the unsold copies

were sent to be pulped when everyone was striving to help combat the chronic shortage of paper during the Second World War. Even the copies stored by the publishers mysteriously disappeared over forty years ago and have never been recovered.

UNOBTAINABLE

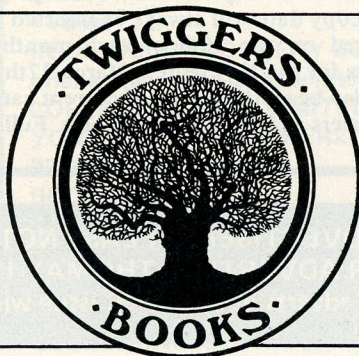
The result is that most copies offered for sale nowadays are usually only in Good or Poor condition. Few copies turn up in Very Good condition and Fine and Mint copies are virtually unobtainable. Values of "The Magnet" vary according to date, the colour of the cover and condition. A complete guide to current values is printed in the bibliography at the end of this feature.

The first and last issues of the comic and copies from the year 1930 are the rarest and therefore the most expensive. Many issues of "The Magnet" have been reprinted in volume form by the Howard Baker Press and this has resulted in a drop in value for the

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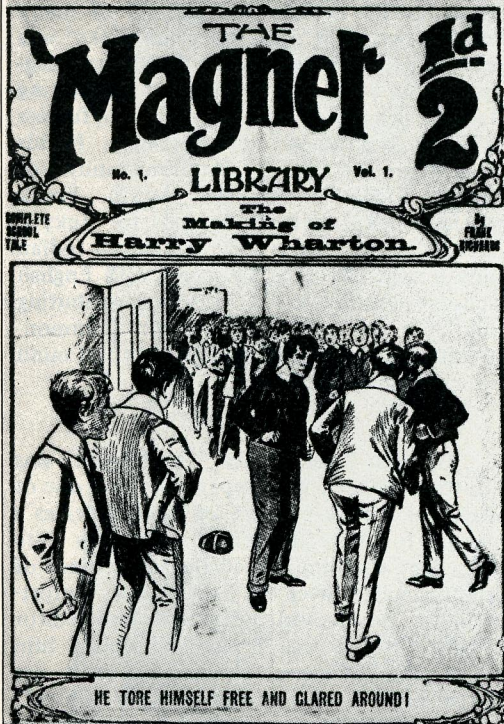
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No. 1. NEW STORY BOOK!



The first issue of "The Magnet", dated February 15th 1908 and now worth £50 in VG condition.

original magazine. I don't think that even Howard Baker Ltd. have a complete set as some volumes contain a note of thanks to individual collectors who have supplied rare copies for the purpose of reprinting. It is probably best, therefore, to concentrate on collecting the issues not available as reprints but at the same time keeping an eye open for other original copies selling for a reasonable price.

In 1908, 32-year-old Charles Hamilton was (among other things) writing the weekly stories for the boy's comic "The Gem" under the pseudonym Martin Clifford. These stories dealt with the adventures and day-to-day life of a group of boys led by Tom Merry, at a public school called St. Jim's. "The Gem" proved to be so popular that its publishers, the Amalgamated Press, decided to launch another comic along similar lines. So Percy Griffith, the editor of "The Gem"

came up with the title "The Magnet".

When Griffith asked Hamilton jokingly if he could write "The Magnet" as well as "The Gem" every week, Hamilton immediately agreed. Griffith then asked for the first story and advised Hamilton to find a new pen-name. After some thought Hamilton decided on a name that was to become more familiar to him than his own, Frank Richards. Frank came from Scott's Frank Osbaldistone whilst Richards came from a relative's christian name pluralised into a surname. His first story under this new name was published in the first issue of "The Magnet" which was dated February 8 1908 and cost a halfpenny in its bright red cover. The story was called "The Making of Harry Wharton" and introduced Greyfriars School and its various inhabitants to the outside world.

REMOVE

Two of Frank Richards' most loved characters appeared in the first issue, Head Boy and Captain of the Remove (Lower Fourth Form) Harry Wharton and the most famous schoolboy of all time, Billy Bunter. Wharton was a boy of fine character, honest, reliable and a good friend but with a quick temper and a surplus of pride. Bunter had few redeeming features, he was greedy, untruthful, fat as a barrel, fatuous and unscrupulous whenever food was concerned. As "The Magnet" progressed Bunter acquired more of his famous trademarks notably his ventriloquial skill, his postal order that never arrived and his inquisitiveness. It is interesting to note that in the early issues of the comic Bunter is very much a background figure, usually in the audience rather than the centre of attention. It was not until the early 1920s that he became more like the Bunter that is remembered so vividly today.

REPRINTED

The first issue of "The Magnet" has been reprinted in a Howard Baker Annual (No. 75) but an original copy in good condition is still worth around £45-£50.

Issue 2 of the comic saw the arrival of another popular character, the noisy, flaxen-haired Bob Cherry who later became one of Wharton's closest friends. Cherry was a hearted, boisterous, healthy boy who liked



Frank Richards, the creator of Billy Bunter, pictured in 1946 aged 70. Richards continued to write Bunter stories until his death in 1962.

nothing better than a strenuous outdoor life. He was also a dedicated admirer of Marjorie Hazeldene of nearby Cliff House School who was first mentioned in Issue 5. The girls of Cliff House became so popular from their occasional appearances in "The Magnet" that they were given their own paper in 1920 entitled "The School Friend".

It is generally agreed by "Magnet" enthusiasts that the standard of the stories declined for a year or so after the first couple of issues. The reason for this was that Richards was using his best material for "The Gem", and "The Magnet" suffered accordingly. The most interesting stories from this early period are those concerning the arrival of new boys at Greyfriars, characters who later disappeared from the comic or those that began to develop personalities.

Issue 6 entitled "Aliens At Greyfriars" is of particular interest as it includes Hurree Jamset Singh's arrival at Greyfriars. Singh or 'Inky' as he was called on account of his dark skin, was a native of Bhanipur in India

and was a prince in his own country. This did not appear to impress the boys of Greyfriars as he became the subject of many mild racist jokes over the years. 'Inky' was also remarkable because of the strange English he spoke and for his habit of misquoting famous English proverbs: "the boyfulness will be boyfulness", for example. In his autobiography ("The Autobiography of Frank Richards", Skilton, 1952), Frank Richards explained the reasons for 'Inky's' arrival at Greyfriars: "By making an Indian boy a comrade on equal terms with English schoolboys, Frank felt he was contributing his mite towards unity of the Commonwealth and helping to rid the youthful mind of colour prejudice".

CUSHION

The first illustrator of "The Magnet" was Hutton Mitchell who apparently used one of his sons with a cushion up his jumper as a model for Billy Bunter. His drawings were excellent and emphasised the importance of the characters over the background. Unfortunately he proved unreliable and editor Percy Griffith was forced to replace him after only 39 issues. The second artist was Arthur H. Clarke who also drew for "Chips", but his illustrations were not as effective as Mitchell's since the characters all appeared to be very similar and the masters old-fashioned. Clarke died in 1911 whilst actually drawing a Greyfriars scene and his place was taken by the longest serving "Magnet" artist, Chapman, who remains the most popular and famous illustrator thanks to his marvellous drawings and easily identifiable characters.

DRAWING

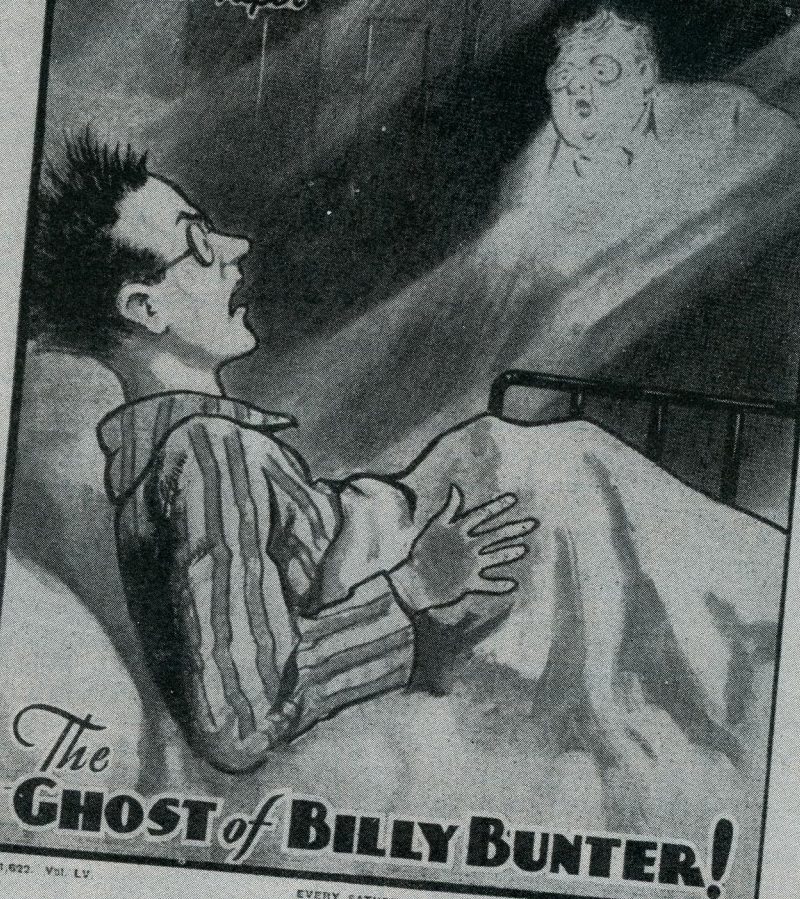
Issues 2 to 39 are now particularly collectable, perhaps due to the interest in Clarke's drawing. Although Nos. 2-10 have been reprinted, original copies sell for between £15 and £20 each in Very Good condition.

Other important characters introduced during this period include tough, sensible Yorkshireman Johnny Bull, who first appeared in Issue 151 in 1910. Bull (who had the irritating habit of always being right) was the last member of the Famous Five (or Co., as they were sometimes

"Harry Wharton's Secret!" Great School and Detective Adventure Yarn.

The Magnet 2^D

*Billy Bunter's
Own Paper*



The
GHOST of BILLY BUNTER!

No. 1,622. Vol. LV.

EVERY SATURDAY.

Week Ending March 18th. 1939.

A typical salmon-coloured cover of "The Magnet", from March 1939 (issue no. 1622). For the last couple of years of its publication, "The Magnet" was given the subtitle "Billy Bunter's Own Paper".

Running theme:
at Greyfriars: Brutal Attack On Form Master . . . Assailant Escapes!
(Full colour inside.)



THE MIDNIGHT FEASTERS!

Who Hacked Master? - This week's powerful and dramatic story of Harry Wharton & Co.

During the late Seventies, Howard Baker Press Ltd. issued a series of facimiles of single copies of "The Magnet", like this reprint of a 1930 issue.

known) to arrive at Greyfriars. The Famous Five (not to be confused with Enid Blyton's later creations) comprised leader Harry Wharton, Bob Cherry, kind but unremarkable Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull and Hurree Singh. The Five were virtually inseparable in and out of school and shared many adventures together – usually with Bunter tagging along. Another important arrival was millionaire's son Herbert Vernon-Smith, who appeared in the story "The Bounder Of Greyfriars", the title of which later became Vernon-Smith's nickname. 'Smithy' as he was called gained his name due to his foolhardy, rascally ways which were perhaps not fully representative of his real character. Other notable arrivals included Gerald Loder, the bully of the Sixth (Issue 66), duffer Alonzo Todd (125), Fisher T. Fish (150), and the 'Fool of the Fifth', Horace Coker (Issue 143). Coker was a convincing character whose stupidity knew no bounds

and who had no idea what minding his own business meant.

From Issue 106 the price of "The Magnet" rose to one penny, but more important changes were soon to come. In 1911 the editor of "The Gem" and "The Magnet", Percy Griffith, suddenly left for some unknown foreign destination and was heard of no more. He was replaced by Herbert Hinton, his deputy, who was, according to Richards, far more agreeable than his predecessor but did not allow his authors any greater freedom. Fortunately neither of these changes affected the paper's quality or its popularity, and both actually increased under his editorship. The other change, that of the illustrator, was warmly welcomed by "Magnet" readers. The new illustrator was C.H. Chapman who was instructed to copy Clarke's work and for a couple of years he produced drawings that are very similar to his predecessor's. Gradually, however, Chapman's own style began to show through as the characters became more individual and recognisable. Chapman was the first illustrator to put Bunter in check trousers, the reason being that readers were confusing him with stocky Johnny Bull. He remained with the comic until its demise and it is indicative of his talent and popularity as a Greyfriars artist that he was asked to replace R.J. Macdonald as illustrator of the Bunter books in the 1950's.

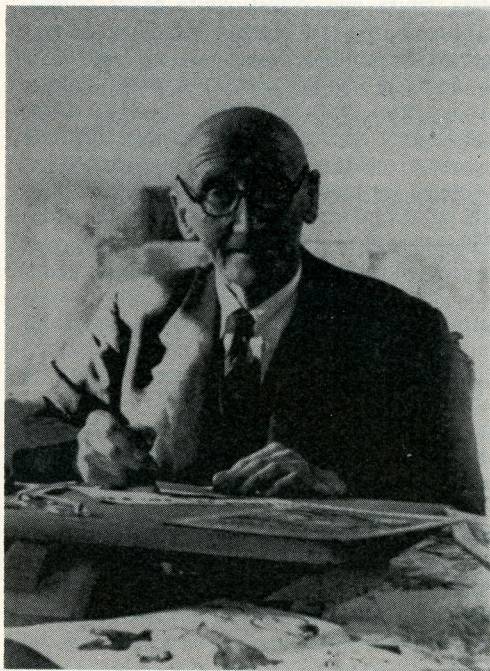
WORLD WAR

The popularity of "The Magnet" continued unabated for another three years until the outbreak of the First World War. At the time Frank Richards was travelling abroad and his movements became a cause for concern to editor Herbert Hinton. Soon Richards found himself writing a Greyfriars story under the watchful eye of an Austrian soldier. It is hardly surprising then that his writings suffered. The resulting paper shortage and lack of other materials all contributed towards the most unsatisfactory period of the comic to date. Tales by other writers began to appear under Frank Richards' name and many of these were of only average standard.

In 1915 a Greyfriars story competition was held and some of the winners went on to write substitute stories for the paper

when Richards was unable to produce a story. The competition winners included William Catchpole, L.E. Ransome and William Gibbons. Other substitute authors who later became famous in their own right included S.E. Austin, F.G. Cook, S. Rossiter Shepherd and Edwy Searles Brooks. The various editors of "The Magnet" also contributed odd stories (especially John Pentelow) as did other Amagamated Press authors. The last published substitute story was entitled "Speedway Coker" and appeared in Issue 1220 in 1931, its author being trade journalist M.F. Duffy. At the time it seems that few readers could tell the difference between substitute stories and Richards' originals and it is only with the benefit of hindsight and the opportunity to compare stories that the differences become apparent.

As the war progressed further changes occurred at Fleetway House that concerned "The Magnet". First of all had come another cover change in September 1915 when the much loved red cover was replaced with a



(Above) C.H. Chapman, the longest-serving illustrator of "The Magnet", who began work on the comic in 1911. (Below) One of Chapman's illustrations, taken from the issue dated April 8th 1939 (no. 1625).



"I say, any more eggs?" asked Bunter anxiously. "No, that's the lot, fathead!" answered Bob Cherry. "But there's only six here!" said the fat Removite. "Ain't you fellows going to have any, then?"

plain white one. These white cover copies, although produced during wartime, are not as valuable as one would expect. Issues 397 to 549 are worth around £10-£12 whilst issues from 550-769 fetch £8-£10. After 1914 many of the paper's younger staff left to join up, C.M. Down being the first to go, followed by many others, until Hinton himself left for the Coldstream Guards in 1916. Following Hinton's departure a writer was hastily appointed the new editor and given the difficult task of guiding the paper through the war. The new editor was John Pentelow who was the most controversial of all. The main criticisms were that he included far too many of his own stories in the paper and that he took it upon himself to kill off a popular character, Arthur Courtney. Many readers were horrified at this arbitrary decision but it is fair to say that many were confusing Courtney of Greyfriars with Courtenay of nearby Highcliffe School. Also, it has recently been suggested that the order to dispose of Courtney came from above. With regard to the

criticism that Pentelow monopolised the story writing, it is difficult to see what else he could have done with most of the other substitute authors away at war.

INDIFFERENT

The majority of the stories between 1916 and 1919 were of indifferent standard and it is very difficult for the new "Magnet" reader to distinguish substitute stories from originals. The most interesting stories from the war years are those that feature new arrivals or those of topical interest. New boys at Greyfriars included Vernon-Smith's close friend Tom Redwing (issue 518), Sir Jimmy Vivian (471), Napoleon Dupont (540), while the first mention of Billy's sister Bessie Bunter came in issue 528. One of the funniest stories concerned Bunter going to a different school, St. Jim's. Other memorable series included the Famous Five in Belgium, the Clavering series and Wally Bunter at Greyfriars. The price of "The Magnet" rose to 1½d with issue 529 in 1918, although this does not appear to have affected the paper's

"In sheer desperation Billy Bunter made a grab at James Duck and hurled him in Vernon-Smith's way. Bunter flew out of the gates like a runaway steam-engine." An illustration from March 1939 (no. 1622).





Gerald Campion, who played the part of Bunter in the BBC Television series of 1960.

popularity.

When the war ended many of the former staff returned to Fleetway House and their old jobs. Editor Herbert Hinton regained the editorial chair whilst Pentelow was transferred to other papers. Unfortunately, Hinton was disgraced over the matter of a plagiarised Greyfriars story and had to leave the Amalgamated Press. The fourth and last editor was Charles Maurice Down who had gained valuable experience working under both Griffith and Hinton. Looking back it is easy to see that Down was the most successful editor. He was sympathetic and understanding in his dealings with Charles Hamilton and was rewarded with an unbroken run of marvellous school stories and a big rise in circulation.

GOLDEN AGE

Issue 770 in 1922 had a bright, new blue and yellow cover and also a new price, 2d. This issue began what is known as the comic's "golden age" and from this date on the stories improved tremendously until they reached a peak from which they were never to fall. After 1925 Hamilton was giving "The Magnet" priority over "The

Gem" and the resulting stories stand as the best work of his entire career. In that year he wrote an excellent long series dealing with Harry Wharton at odds with his friends and form master. This theme was so popular that it was repeated in 1932 with equal success. Other standout subjects included Loder as Captain of the School, the Famous Five and Bunter in the South Seas and the Remove walk-out to High Oaks School. These issues published between 1922 and 1930 in the famous yellow and blue covers are now quite collectable and fetch around £6-£8 if in good condition.

PROMINENCE

The years after 1927 marked the rise to prominence of Billy Bunter. He gradually became the most important (if not the most popular) character in the magazine, and featured in many excellent series. Issue 1069 in 1928 began the Bunter the Circus Proprietor series, and other memorable series included Bunter in Hollywood (1929), Bunter the Billionaire (1934), Bunter in Africa (1931) and Lord Bunter in 1938.

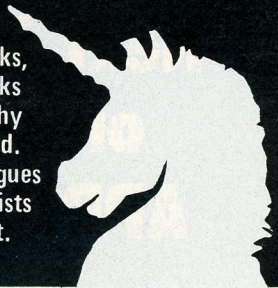
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GROUP OF SOME OF THE MEMBERS OF THE REMOVE FORM AT GREYFRIARS.

Back Row: (Reading from left to right):—Vernon-Smith, John Bull, Wun Lung, Micky Desmond, Harry Wharton, Bulstrode Percy Bolsover, Tom Brown, Lord Mauleverer, Peter Todd, Alonzo Todd, Hurree Singh.
Front Row:—Frank Nugent, Billy Bunter, Mr. Quelch, Bob Cherry.

An example of an early Chapman illustration for "The Magnet" from 1913. Note the difference between the portrayal of Bunter here and in the later illustrations shown on pages 9 and 10.

One of the best ever involved the efforts of Arthur Carter, Bunter's cousin, to get Bunter expelled from Greyfriars, and this ran for quite a while in 1938. Bunter's importance

was emphasised when the cover changed to a salmon colour in late 1937 and the paper was subtitled "Billy Bunter's Own Paper".

The only other character in "The Magnet" who could rival Bunter was Horace Coker, the duffer of the Fifth Form. Editor C.M. Down thought Coker not only the best but also the most realistic of all Hamilton's creations. He encouraged Hamilton to feature Coker more and due to some excellent stories concerning Coker's exploits he became more prominent in the paper. Down also believed that Coker could overtake Bunter in the popularity stakes if he was developed enough. Whether you agree with Down or not, it is noticeable that the best Coker stories ever written came during his

**Next issue
on sale
APRIL 20**

period of editorship. These put Coker in innumerable situations and guises including cricketer, photographer, hiker, kidnapper, rebel, detective – the list is endless. Coker was also the character who appealed most to the girl readers of “The Magnet”, and many letters were received praising him and requesting his inclusion in future stories.

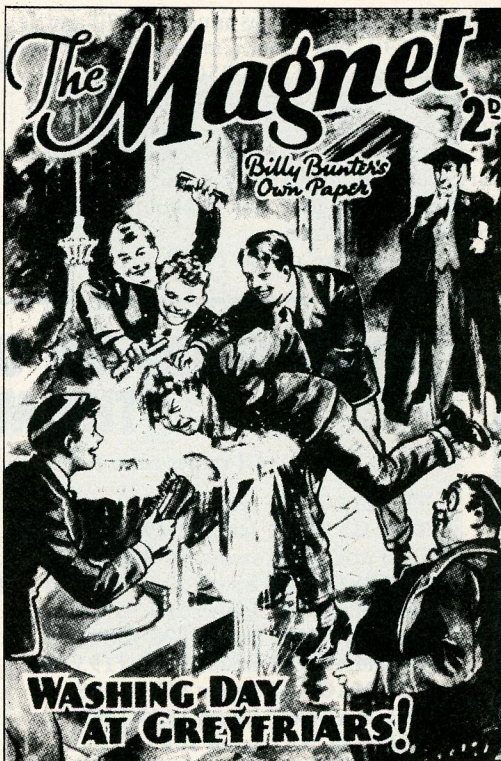
PAPER SHORTAGE

In 1939 came the Second World War and for a while it looked as though “The Magnet” was going to survive the paper shortage, even after the collapse of “The Gem” in December 1939. However, it was not to be and on May 18th, 1940 the last issue appeared, entitled “The Shadow Of The Sack”. It featured Harry Wharton in the lead role and promised to be another exciting series, but how it ended we shall never know. Hamilton actually wrote four more stories in this series but the only manuscripts were lost during the war and were never recovered. The last issue of the comic is now quite desirable and is worth around £10.

There were various spin-offs from “The Magnet” and it is worth mentioning these. In 1919 C.M. Down (then Chief Sub-Editor) devised the idea of issuing yearly annuals featuring stories of characters from “The Gem” and “The Magnet” entitled “The Greyfriars Holiday Annual”. Aimed primarily at the Christmas market, these annuals were dated the year after their publication (a common practice even today) and ran from 1919 to 1940. At first Charles Hamilton wrote new stories under his various pseudonyms, but in later years old stories were reprinted. Today these “Holiday Annuals” are highly sought after and fetch £5-£7 each.

LIBRARY

The other related publication was the book-sized “Schoolboy’s Own Library”, another of C.M. Down’s ideas, which lasted 411 issues and ran from 1925 to 1940. These books were issued at the rate of two or three a month and comprised stories in book form which had appeared as serials in one of a number of Fleetway House publications. Abridgements from “The Magnet” accounted for 184 of the 411 issues, and stories from “The Gem” and other



The final “Magnet”, dated May 18th, 1940.

Hamilton papers also appeared. Many of the “Schoolboy’s Own Library” titles leave a lot to be desired, as when they are compared with the original stories it is glaringly obvious that much editing (some of it extremely drastic) has been carried out. However, they are quite collectable now and are worth £2-£4 depending on their condition.

In 1969 the Howard Baker Press began reprinting copies of “The Magnet” in volume form, beginning with “Billy Bunter in the Land of the Pyramids”. Each volume contained seven or eight copies of “The Magnet”, usually in groups of a particular series. To date something like 85 volumes have been published, and it is to be hoped that this admirable series of reissues will be continued.

The Howard Baker reprints have naturally lowered the demand for the original comics, but some are still worth considerable sums. I have seen copies of the

first issue on sale for as much as £70 and as little as £40, but I feel a more realistic price is in the region of £45-£50. The last issue, No. 1683, is also quite difficult to come by and fetches about £5 in good condition. It must however be remembered that prices vary tremendously and that the values given at the end of this article should only be treated as guidelines.

It is indicative of the popularity of "The

Magnet" that Billy Bunter is still a household name these days. Although Bunter has appeared in many other forms, it is thanks to the original paper that he ever appeared at all. "The Magnet" is arguably the most famous boys' comic ever, and although original copies are increasingly scarce, everyone can borrow or buy the reprints and be amazed at how well the stories stand up today.

PRICE GUIDE TO ORIGINAL ISSUES OF 'THE MAGNET'

All values refer to comics in VERY GOOD condition

THE MAGNET Issue 1	£45-£50
THE MAGNET Issues 2-39	£15-£20
THE MAGNET Issues 40-396	£12-£15
THE MAGNET Issues 397-549	£10-£12
THE MAGNET Issues 550-769	£8-£10
THE MAGNET Issues 770-1141	£6-£8
THE MAGNET Issues 1142-1193	£18-£20
THE MAGNET Issues 1194-1558	£4-£6
THE MAGNET Issues 1559-1682	£2-£4
THE MAGNET Issue 1683	£8-£10
GREYFRIARS HOLIDAY ANNUAL (any issue)	£5-£7
SCHOOLBOY'S OWN LIBRARY (any issue)	£2-£4

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

SIGNIFICANT DATES:

First issue published Feb. 15th 1908

Last issue (No. 1683) May 18th 1940

First white cover - Issue 397 (1915)

First yellow/blue or orange cover -

Issue 770 (1922)

First salmon cover - Issue 1553 (1937)

ORIGINAL COVER PRICES:

Issues 1-103 ½d

Issue 104 1d

Issue 105 ½d

Issues 106-528 1d

Issues 529-769 1½d

Issues 770-1683 2d

EDITORS:

Percy Griffith (1908-1911); Herbert

Hinton (1911-1916); John Pentelow

(1916-1919); Herbert Hinton (1919-21);

Charles Down (1921-1940).

ILLUSTRATORS:

Hutton Mitchell (1908); Arthur Clarke

(1908-1911); C.H. Chapman (1911-1940);

Leonard Shields (1926-1940).

From 1926 to 1940 Chapman and Shields shared the work on "The Magnet".

ADVERTISERS PLEASE NOTE:
THE DEADLINE FOR ADVERTS IN THE MAY ISSUE IS MARCH 27th
The deadline for adverts in the JUNE issue will be APRIL 25th