

Book and Magazine Collector is published on the third Friday of each month. Here are the dates for the next two issues:

ISSUE

ADVERTISING DEADLINE

OCTOBER ISSUE (on sale 17 September) .....24 August

NOVEMBER ISSUE (on sale 15 October) .....21 September

## A NATIONAL INSTITUTION

**D**uring the war, Frank Richards received a letter from one of his fans asking him why he was no longer writing about Greyfriars School and its raucous inmates. "Billy Bunter is gone forever," Richards replied, adding: "Perhaps, after so long a run, it was time for Harry Wharton & Co. to make their final bow."

As we all know, Richards couldn't have been more wrong about this. Only a few months later, he was approached by the publisher Charles Skilton who suggested that they should collaborate on a series of 'Billy Bunter' books. The first of these, *Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School*, was published in 1947, and was so successful that Richards went on to produce a further 38 before his death in 1961.

In this month's main feature, Alex Kernaghan takes a close look at the series, considering the contributions made by the two illustrators, R. J. MacDonald and C. H. Chapman, and clearing up the confusion over the rarer titles. He also reviews the current prices of the various books in the series.

Billy Bunter was described by one reviewer as "a national institution". The same could be said for another of our subjects this month: *Radio Times*. This remarkable magazine celebrates its 70th anniversary on 28th September, and so now seems a fitting moment for us to look back at its fascinating history. As Tim Cockin and Wallace Grevatt reveal in their article, right from the very beginning it has been an attractive as well as an informative publication, featuring work by artists such as E. McKnight Kauffer, Edward Ardizzone and Paul Nash. Some of the 'special issues' from this period are very collectable and fetch up to £100 today — not bad, considering that they originally cost only 2d!

This month we also have an article on collecting theatre programmes. In the 1890s, theatres offered their customers a fascinating range of souvenir publications, including miniature scrolls, portfolios containing photographs of the cast and lavish programmes bound in satin and silk. One company even developed a see-through programme that could be read in the dark by holding it up against the stage lighting! Karen Faulkner describes these and many more collectable items in her feature.

Finally, I must draw your attention to Richard Dalby's article on Michael Crichton. Despite the huge success of the film, *Jurassic Park*, Crichton is *not* a new arrival on the literary scene. In fact, his first novel was published over 25 years ago, and he's written plenty more since! He's bound to become a very collectable author thanks to *Jurassic Park*, and so now's the time to start buying those first editions.

Our other articles this month feature: comic novelist F. Anstey; Nobel Laureate William Golding; and illustrator Walter Crane.

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# FRANK RICHARDS' 'BILLY BUNTER' BOOKS

BY ALEX KERNAGHAN

When the Amalgamated Press papers the *Gem* and the *Magnet* ceased publication in — respectively — December 1939 and May 1940, Frank Richards found himself in something of a jam. For more than 30 years, the two publications had provided him with a

regular outlet for his prodigious imagination. Now suddenly, with the onset of war and the resulting paper shortages, the two famous titles had sunk without trace — and Richards' income with them. "Fairy gold," he later wrote, "could not have dissolved more abruptly."



When the *Magnet* went under in 1940, Richards was approaching 64 years of age — hardly the most favourable time of life in which to start a new career. Lesser mortals might have balked at the prospect, but not Richards. Apart from anything else, he had no choice but to soldier on. In matters of money, he had not been astute. He had no savings, and his Amalgamated Press shares had plummeted in value. Their sale left him with barely enough to pay his taxes.

## EVACUATED

In July 1940, in common with thousands of others who lived along the east coast of England, he was evacuated from his comfortable cottage in Kent, and was forced to move to a rented house in London. He arrived, as he put it, "in happy time for the bombings" and remained in the capital for the duration



"with the nightly Hun roaring over the roof — and the typewriter, once more, going strong."

He wrote reams about Carcroft, the new school he had dreamed up, and managed to sell some of it to Hutchinson's little magazine, *Pie*. He began his 'Jack of All Trades' series, started his memoirs (which eventually appeared, substantially re-written, under the title *The Autobiography of Frank Richards* in 1952), wrote verse and song lyrics and made up crossword puzzles — but very little of it sold.

## INCOME

His only regular source of income was the £5 honorarium paid to him each week for the 'Billy Bunter' comic strip in the *Knockout*. The war years were as bleak for Richards as they were for millions of others, and it wasn't until the conflict ended that any semblance of normality returned to his life.

Even then, it was Bunter that publishers wanted! Unfortunately, Richards could not oblige. In 1921, he had sold — for a tidy sum — all rights to his 'Greyfriars' and 'St. Jim's' characters to the Amalgamated Press, which meant that stories about them could only appear in papers belonging to A.P. When asked why he no longer produced 'Greyfriars' yarns, Richards replied: "Billy Bunter is gone forever. The Amalgamated Press prohibit me from writing stories for any other publisher, and I am getting a little too old to enter into a legal wrangle. Perhaps, after so long a run, it was time for Harry Wharton & Co. to make their final bow and retire from the scene."

Happily, however, a small London publisher, Charles Skilton, was to change all



*Billy Bunter's Benefit*, published by Charles Skilton in 1950, was the sixth of the 'Bunter' books. Copies in their distinctive yellow jackets now sell for up to £30.

that, bringing Frank Richards renewed good fortune — and Billy Bunter to millions of delighted readers!

In 1946, while on his honeymoon in Scotland, Charles Skilton came across an article on Richards in a copy of *Picture Post*. Immediately, he had the idea of publishing

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## BILLY BUNTER'S DOUBLE



**FRANK RICHARDS**

*Billy Bunter's Double* (Cassell, 1955) was the last 'Bunter' book to be illustrated by R. J. MacDonald. His place was taken by ex-*Magnet* artist, C. H. Chapman.

the latter's 'Greyfriars' stories in book form. "Of course, it was unlikely that a famous author would consent to write for an unheard-of publisher," he later wrote, "but one could try. I little realised at the time how pleased he must have been to receive my letter!"

In late 1946, Richards visited the offices of the Amalgamated Press. To his immense relief and delight, the controlling editor, Montague Haydon, gave his permission for the 'Greyfriars' tales to be published in book form. For the first time in 50 years, Billy Bunter was to appear between hard covers!

The first volume, *Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School*, was issued in September 1947, price 5/-. Because of post-war shortages, it was printed on very thin paper, with the result that the book was little more than half-an-inch thick. Nevertheless, all 25,000 copies were sold within a few weeks. "Fathers and

sons," proclaimed the *Evening News*, "will be contending for its possession. Bunter is a national institution."

Richards worked out that the book was roughly equal in length to two of his *Magnet* stories, and suggested an equivalent rate of payment: 30/- a thousand words. Skilton, however, persuaded him to accept a contract based on royalties, which meant that by the time *Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School* had reached its fourth edition, it had already earned Richards over £1,000 — compared with his original fee of £90!

The book was reprinted a total of three times by Skilton, making a total print-run of 40,000 copies. Today, you can expect to pay upwards of £50 for a good, clean copy in a jacket — irrespective of edition.

Because the illustrator, R. J. MacDonald, suffered a serious accident while gardening

*Just Like Bunter* was published by Cassell in the second half of 1963, almost two years after Richards' death. It was copyrighted to his sister, Una Harrison.

## JUST LIKE BUNTER



**FRANK RICHARDS**



and was ill for some time, there was a delay of 13 months before a follow-up volume appeared. In fact, there were two, *Billy Bunter's Banknote* and *Billy Bunter's Barring Out* appearing simultaneously in October 1948, priced at 7/6 each. Both titles sold out "immediately", according to Skilton, and that he was still experiencing production problems is evident from his remark that "many more copies would have been sold had they been available." Each of these books, and all the subsequent titles in the series, were issued in the same uniform 'livery' — the famous yellow dustjackets.

From 1949 onwards, Skilton published two new 'Billy Bunter' titles a year at intervals of roughly six months, beginning with *Billy Bunter in Brazil* (March 1949) and *Billy Bunter's Christmas Party* (October 1949). That year, he also decided to experiment with a 'Bessie Bunter' book, issuing *Bessie Bunter of Cliff House School* — the first story to feature Bunter's fat and fatuous sister for 30 years — that same autumn under the pen-name 'Hilda Richards'. The jacket artwork was identical to that on the 'Billy Bunter' books.

## DISASTER

The undoubted popularity of the latter — total sales in the first year-and-a-half topped 60,000 copies — convinced Skilton that a companion series featuring Bessie would also be a sure hit with readers. However, the experiment proved to be a complete disaster: thousands of copies piled up unsold in Skilton's office, and remained there for several years. Indeed, it's likely that they were passed on to Cassell when they took over the series in 1952. The book was certainly never reprinted, and it has even been suggested that Cassell had the unsold copies pulped.

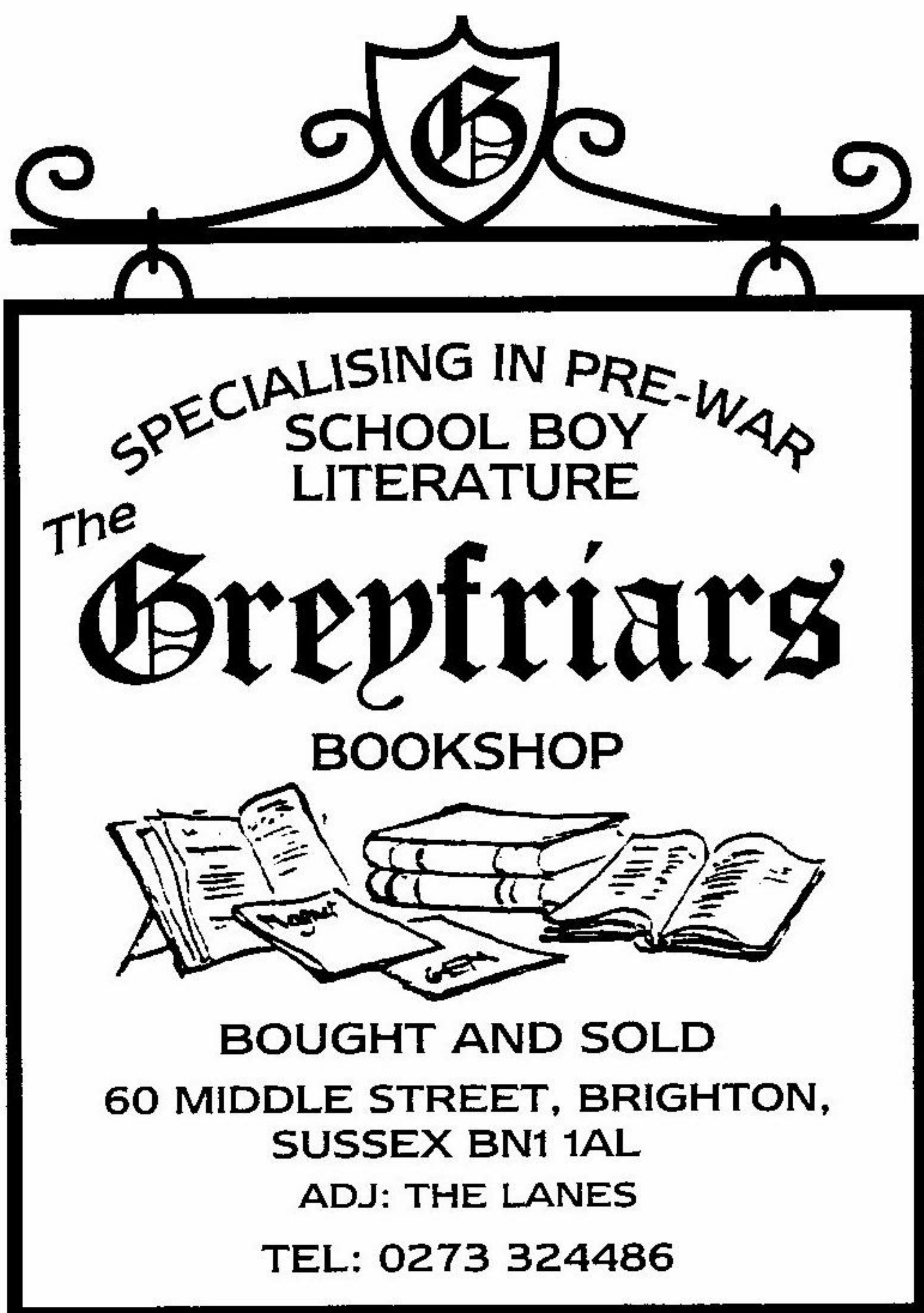
Whether or not this was the case, the book is undoubtedly scarce today, with Good copies in dustjackets fetching anything up to £50 — something of an irony considering that Skilton couldn't give them away when the book first came out!

Richards went on to complete a further five titles for Skilton, the last of which was *Billy Bunter and the Blue Mauritius*, published in March 1952. This is another rarity: for some

reason, the book was not reprinted, which means that even reading copies are now thin on the ground. A clean copy in a jacket — and, as with all the early 'Bunter' books, this is the best that you can reasonably hope to find — would sell for up to £50 today. Incidentally, some early Cassell 'Bunters' have *Billy Bunter and the Blue Mauritius* incorrectly listed as being "published by Cassell". This is a mistake: the book was only published by Skilton (although what was left of the stock passed to Cassell when they bought the rights to the series).

The success of the novels, paradoxically, placed too great a strain on Skilton's limited financial resources. He just could not print enough books to meet demand and so, in 1952, he sold the rights to 'Billy Bunter' to the much larger Cassell & Co.

Thankfully, Cassell had the good sense to stick with a winning formula, and they issued the books at the old rate of two-a-year and in the same distinctive yellow dustjackets. The cloth bindings of the Cassell editions were actually considerably better than Skilton's and,



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'The Goodies' meet Billy Bunter — Tim Brooke-Taylor, Bill Oddie and Graeme Garden, stars of Radio 2's recent series, *The Billy Bunter Stories*.

as each book had a different coloured binding, even jacketless copies look good on the bookshelf — good news for the budget collector!

The first volume to be published by Cassell was *Billy Bunter's Beanfeast*, which came out in November 1952. This was followed by *Billy Bunter's Brainwave* and *Billy Bunter's First Case* in July and October of the following year.

Cassell also reprinted many of the earlier Skilton titles, usually two or three times, such was the demand for them. Within a year of the takeover, total sales of the 'Bunter' books had exceeded 150,000 copies.

The illustrations in the early titles were provided by the Scotsman, R. J. MacDonald, already famous for his fine drawings in the old *Gem* (although he was *not*, as stated on the Skilton dustjackets, "Frank Richards' collaborator in the *Gem*" — an assertion which would not have pleased Richards, who was fiercely protective of his creations). MacDonald worked on the series until his death in 1954, the last book to contain his illustrations being *Billy Bunter's Double*, published in March 1955.

His place was taken by C. H. Chapman. Chapman

had been a prominent artist with the *Magnet* from 1911 until its demise in 1940. Born in Thetford, Norfolk, on 1st April 1879, Chapman originally trained as an architect and was a careful and painstaking worker. It was Chapman who had first put Billy Bunter into check trousers, and who added the telling touches that made characters such as Harry Wharton, Johnny Bull, Horace Coker, 'Smithy',



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Skinner and others so readily identifiable. (He also had the distinction of drawing the first pictures of Bessie Bunter, which appeared in *Magnet* No.582 in April 1919 — six weeks before she became a regular in *School Friend*.)

Richards and Chapman had met — quite literally bumping into each other — at the Amalgamated Press offices as early as 1912, and by all accounts the two of them got on famously. They had much in common, not least their age, their slight stature and their sparkling sense of humour.

The first of the 'Bunter' books to be illustrated by Chapman was *Backing Up Billy Bunter* (September 1955), and he worked on all the subsequent 22 volumes. It is his Bunter — rather than MacDonald's — that is best remembered today. Chapman died in 1972, at the ripe old age of 93.

## NUMBERED

From *Lord Billy Bunter* (No.18; April 1956) onwards, all the Cassell books — including reprints of the earlier titles — are clearly numbered on the spine and on the reverse of the title-page. It should be noted, however, that, where reprints are concerned, the numbers do not necessarily reflect a book's place in the sequence. For instance, the third edition of *Billy Bunter the Bold*, issued in July 1960, is numbered '7', when it was actually the fourteenth novel in the series. This is simply because Cassell decided not to reissue *all* the early books, and ignored the 'gaps' when they came to number the ones that they *did* reprint. (The bibliography at the end of this article gives the correct order of publication.)

The series reached an important milestone in August 1957 with the appearance in that month of the 21st 'Bunter' book, *Billy Bunter Afloat*. Its dustjacket loudly proclaimed, "YAROOH! YOU CHAPS, THIS IS BUNTER'S TWENTY-FIRST!", and, in acknowledgement of this great event, a laurel wreath was printed on the spine of the book. It was also the first title in the series to feature the Billy Bunter bust motif that was to appear on the spines of all the subsequent volumes, including reprints.

Another curiosity is No.29 in the series, *Billy Bunter at Butlin's*, first published in

## BUNTER THE STOWAWAY



**FRANK RICHARDS**

Although illustrator C. H. Chapman was at his brilliant best for *Bunter the Stowaway* (1965), his work on the remaining three titles in the series was well below par.

June 1961. This was issued in two different editions: the standard one in the usual yellow jacket, priced at 9/6; and a special edition for the Butlin's Beaver Club. The latter was given away free to club members and so, inevitably, the paper and binding were of poor quality. Even with the jacket, copies of the Butlin's edition are worth no more than £3, compared with between £15 and £20 for the standard one.

## INDUSTRIOUS

Sadly, the next book in the series, *Bunter the Ventriloquist* (No.30; October 1961), was the last to be published during Richards' lifetime. He was, by then, 85 years old and — although he was as industrious as ever — his eyesight was failing and he increasingly had to take to his bed. He passed away peacefully at his home in Kent on



Christmas Eve 1961. His fame had never been greater and, at the time of his death, the 'Bunter' books had sold over half-a-million copies. His passing was reported widely in both the national press and in newspapers abroad.

Cassell still had eight titles in hand, and in March and September 1962 they published *Bunter the Caravaner* and *Billy Bunter's Bodyguard* (Nos.31 & 32). The following year brought *Big Chief Bunter* and *Just Like Bunter* (Nos. 33 & 34), the former copyrighted to the 'Trustees of the Estate of Frank Richards' and the latter to Una Harrison, Frank Richards' sister.

### ILLUSTRATOR

There are signs in the last of these books that the illustrator, C. H. Chapman — who was by then 84 years old — was losing some of his 'touch' although, curiously, his work for the next title in the series, *Bunter the Stowaway* (March 1964; No.35), was as brilliant as ever. However, this was not the case for the last three books, the illustrations for which are rather below par.

More seriously, it is doubtful whether this final trio of works — *Thanks to Bunter* (September 1964; No.36), *Bunter the Sportsman* (April 1965; No.37) and *Bunter's Last Fling* (September 1965; No.38) — were, in fact, penned by Richards (although they are all copyrighted to his niece, Una Harrison Wright). Certainly the master's touch is markedly absent, and it seems likely that they were 'ghosted' by another writer, working from unused television scripts.

Strangely, the dustjacket of *Bunter the Sportsman* is golden in colour, rather than the usual yellow — someone obviously botched up the colour-matching! One other point worth noting is that the announcement at the end of this book incorrectly gives the title of the next work in the series as *Bunter to the Rescue*. However, when this volume appeared, it contained the following note from the publishers: "This story was originally titled *Bunter to the Rescue*, but as the last of the Billy Bunter Series, and with the agreement of Mr. Richards' family, it has been given its present title, *Bunter's Last Fling*."

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Later that same year, in honour of Richards and his brilliant series of books, Cassell published *Greyfriars School — A Prospectus* by J. S. Butcher. With the appearance of this work, the Cassell/Greyfriars saga finally came to an end.

Since we published our first article on Frank Richards and his 'Billy Bunter' books in September 1986, prices have risen sharply. Then, you could pick up first editions of most of the books — in Very Good condition, with dustjackets — for around £6 or £7. Today, you'd be lucky to find the same volumes in Good condition *without* the jacket for that price. In fact, a Very Good copy with jacket of *any* of the 'Bunter' books will now set you back at least £20 to £25, despite the fact that many of the later titles are quite readily available.

It's true that none of the last 13 titles, from *Bunter the Bad Lad* (1960) onwards, was ever reprinted and they are therefore only

*Despite the doubts over their authorship, the last three 'Bunter' books still sell for up to £30 today. A complete set of all 39 novels would be worth hundreds of pounds.*

## BUNTER THE SPORTSMAN



**FRANK RICHARDS**

## THANKS TO BUNTER



**FRANK RICHARDS**

*Thanks to Bunter* (1964) and its two sequels lacked the sparkle of the earlier books, and it seems likely that they were not, in fact, written by Frank Richards.

available as firsts. Even so, by the late 1950s, the first edition print-runs were in the region of 50,000 copies, and the 'Bunter' books were already becoming collectable, with the result that their original purchasers often shelved them away carefully to ensure that they remained in good condition.

Good copies are not, therefore, particularly scarce: it's just that demand has increased so much in recent years that values have spiralled. Some dealers are advertising VG copies with jackets for £25 each, regardless of whether they're first or fourth editions. The high prices are a reflection of the books' continuing popularity.

The collector who has managed to assemble a complete set of all 39 'Bunter' books (including the solitary 'Bessie Bunter' title) has made a good investment — if his



or her prime motive for acquiring them was financial, which is doubtful. For those of us who have yet to complete our collections, the news is less welcome. Our only options are to pay the going rate, or settle

for copies in less than pristine condition.

Personally, I'm going to wait. I suspect that prices have peaked, and that they will eventually fall to a level that better suits my pocket. Of course . . . I could be wrong!

## BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FRANK RICHARDS' 'BILLY BUNTER' BOOKS

A guide to current values of first editions in Very Good condition without dustjackets.

Prices in brackets refer to books with jackets.

### 'BILLY BUNTER' BOOKS

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BILLY BUNTER'S BANKNOTE (Charles Skilton, 1948) .....	£8-£10 (£20-£30)
BILLY BUNTER'S BARRING OUT (Charles Skilton, 1948) .....	£8-£10 (£20-£30)
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BILLY BUNTER AT BUTLINS (Cassell, 1961) .....	£5-£8 (£15-£18)
ditto (Butlin's 'Beaver Club' edition) (Cassell, 1961) .....	£1-£2 (£2-£3)
BUNTER THE VENTRILOQUIST (Cassell, 1961) .....	£8-£10 (£20-£30)
BUNTER THE CARAVANNER (Cassell, 1962) .....	£8-£10 (£20-£30)
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