

KENT – A WRITERS’ WORLD

(Part Two: Frank Richards (the Creator of Greyfriars))

By Rowland Powell

Some seventy years ago I finally convinced my mother that I should have a weekly magazine like my school chums – something like ‘Hotspur’, ‘Wizard’ or ‘Adventure’ – so that I could join the make-believe world created by those papers like my fellows.

Imagine my reaction when my mother, in her wisdom and to my dismay, handed me ‘The Gem’ which recounted the adventures of Tom Merry, Monty Lowther and Arthur Augustus D’Arcy, all members of School House at St Jim’s.

My disappointment did not last very long, however, as I soon became engrossed in the lively tales of a master story-teller, Martin Clifford. From that moment in 1932, until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 brought an end to the publication of ‘The Gem’ due to the shortage of newsprint, I was well and truly hooked.

This state of enjoyment was something of a family tradition as both my mother’s younger brothers had surrendered to the tales of St Jim’s as had she and my grandmother, whenever they could get the paper away from the two boys and my mother



An impression of Frank Richards in old age by my cousin, the artist, Lesley Wallis.



Frank Richards' house, Rose Lawn, captured on camera by his niece, Una Hamilton Wright, in 1939.
(Courtesy Una Hamilton Wright)



Percy Avenue, Kingsgate, showing the white gates of Rose Lawn on the right exactly opposite Manderville, the first bungalow on the left. (Courtesy Una Hamilton Wright)

left me with the happy mental picture of my gran chuckling away to herself as she consumed the latest episode.

For most of that time I swapped my 'Gem' with my best friend for his copy of 'The Magnet', a similar weekly boys' story paper by Frank Richards all about Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, Bob Cherry and Billy Bunter at Greyfriars School somewhere in Kent.

What neither of us knew at that time was the fact that Martin Clifford and Frank Richards were one and the same man whose real name was so submerged by his many pen names, twenty-eight in all, that his own was known only to his family, his publishers and his most ardent fans, many of whom are still alive today.

Charles Harold St John Hamilton was born at 15 Oak Street, Ealing, in 1876 where he spent the earlier years of his life. I only mention this because although I was born in Deal, Kent, I too lived a few of my earlier years in Ealing – albeit in the mid-1920s – where my parents had the baker's shop on the corner of Oak Street.

Charles Hamilton or Frank Richards, as he preferred to be known in later years as his Greyfriars stories gathered momentum, was a remarkable man whose writing career spanned sixty-eight years from the age of seventeen, when he left school to be a professional writer following the acceptance of his first story, an adventure, for publication in a boys' magazine for which he received the princely fee of five guineas.

During that time he achieved a published output of at least seventy-two million words – the equivalent of one thousand novels – though that is not necessarily the final figure for even as late as 1988 previously undiscovered works of his were still coming to light.

His earlier work was produced at a rate of fifty words a minute in a neat small handwriting. That would be no mean feat for a professional typist using an electric typewriter.

It was not until 1900 that he bought his first typewriter, an upright Remington, which travelled with him wherever he went, home or abroad, in order that he might keep up his daily five thousand word output. He never dictated to a secretary as he could type faster than he could talk, believing that writers must work fast to be any



Was this the building that inspired Frank Richards to create Greyfriars School? The Greyfriars Monastery in Kent. (The copyright of this picture belongs to The Oaten Hill Press, Canterbury, and the author, Derek Ingram Hill, which I accordingly acknowledge)



Or is this the original inspiration for Greyfriars School? Port Regis, Broadstairs, is now a Nursing Home as can be seen by the modern extension on the right of the picture. The original building is reminiscent of many illustrations seen in both 'The Magnet' and 'The Gem' magazines.

(Courtesy of Mrs Angela Townsend, Port Regis Nursing Home, Broadstairs)

good while slow writing made for heavy reading – and no one could accuse Frank Richards of the latter.

While his range of stories covered Westerns, Romances, Marine Adventures and Detective Mysteries it was his hilariously addictive school stories for which he became legendary first with 'The Gem' appearing in 1907 and the 'The Magnet' in 1908.

Despite the fact that St Jim's was the earlier of his creations it was his stories of the boys from the Remove at Greyfriars that became the most popular.

Greyfriars, which was reputed to be situated on or near the Kentish Coast, soon became the 'Alma Mater' of millions of readers through the weekly stories in 'The Magnet'. There have been many claims as to the whereabouts of Greyfriars but none has ever been substantiated.

Although Billy Bunter was originally introduced by Frank Richards as a peripheral member of the Remove, his character soon developed to outstrip his contemporaries and survive the closure of 'The Magnet' in 1939 to reappear after the war as the hero of thirty-eight novels, five television series and several stage productions, much to the delight of his creator who had endured six unrewarding wartime years away from his home in Kingsgate, Kent.

He bought Rose Lawn in Percy Avenue, Kingsgate, in 1926 having first sent his Clyde Cottage housekeeper, Miss Beveridge, house-hunting in Thanet, considering it to be a much healthier place for him to live.

The great attraction of Rose Lawn for Frank Richards was the sea at the end of the road as he had always enjoyed being near water having spent leisure time on the Thames with one of his brothers in his earlier years. The fact that there were corn-fields at the bottom of his garden also suited his somewhat reclusive style of living. He would appear to have found the spiritual home of Greyfriars at last, somewhere he also wanted to share with his sister Dolly and her daughter Una for he bought Mandeville, a bungalow opposite Rose Lawn, just for them.

Despite the fact that he never married Frank Richards led a full but solitary life preferring the companionship of Dolly, his niece Una, Edith Hood, Una's Nanny and Frank's housekeeper, and his cats.

He will, perhaps, be remembered as much for his amiable eccentricities as for his writing, often wandering the lanes around his home on his bicycle as he pondered over his next story; invariably, he would come back to his forty-year-old Remington typewriter still wearing his cycle clips as he tapped away on the keys, a style of dress which when combined with his skullcap and pipe, presented a picture, especially in his later years, of a grand old man at peace with himself, with life and with the world at large.

Although he never actually attended public school he was, nevertheless, a keen scholar of the classics, especially Latin, unlike Billy Bunter, who provided many 'howlers' in his frequent clashes with Henry Samuel Quelch, the gimlet-eyed, angular and impressive master of the Remove, over the former's Latin translations.

Frank Richards had a lifelong belief that one should always try to exercise one's intellectual powers whenever possible, a belief that he put into practice in 1951 when he engaged a tutor 'prepared to read Latin verse with a backward pupil'. One



Cover from an original 'Magnet' dated 1930. (Courtesy of Bob Acraman, Chairman of the Greyfriars Club)



A facsimile of 'The Magnet' dated 1939, one of many reproduced by the Howard Baker Press in 1975 to meet demands from new and old fans. (Courtesy of Bob Acraman)

can only imagine the amazement when the tutor first set eyes on Frank, 'a venerable old gentleman wearing a skullcap'. For nine years up to 1960 they read together the whole of Horace, most of Lucretius and much of Cicero, Frank impressing his tutor, A.D. Newman, with his fantastic memory.

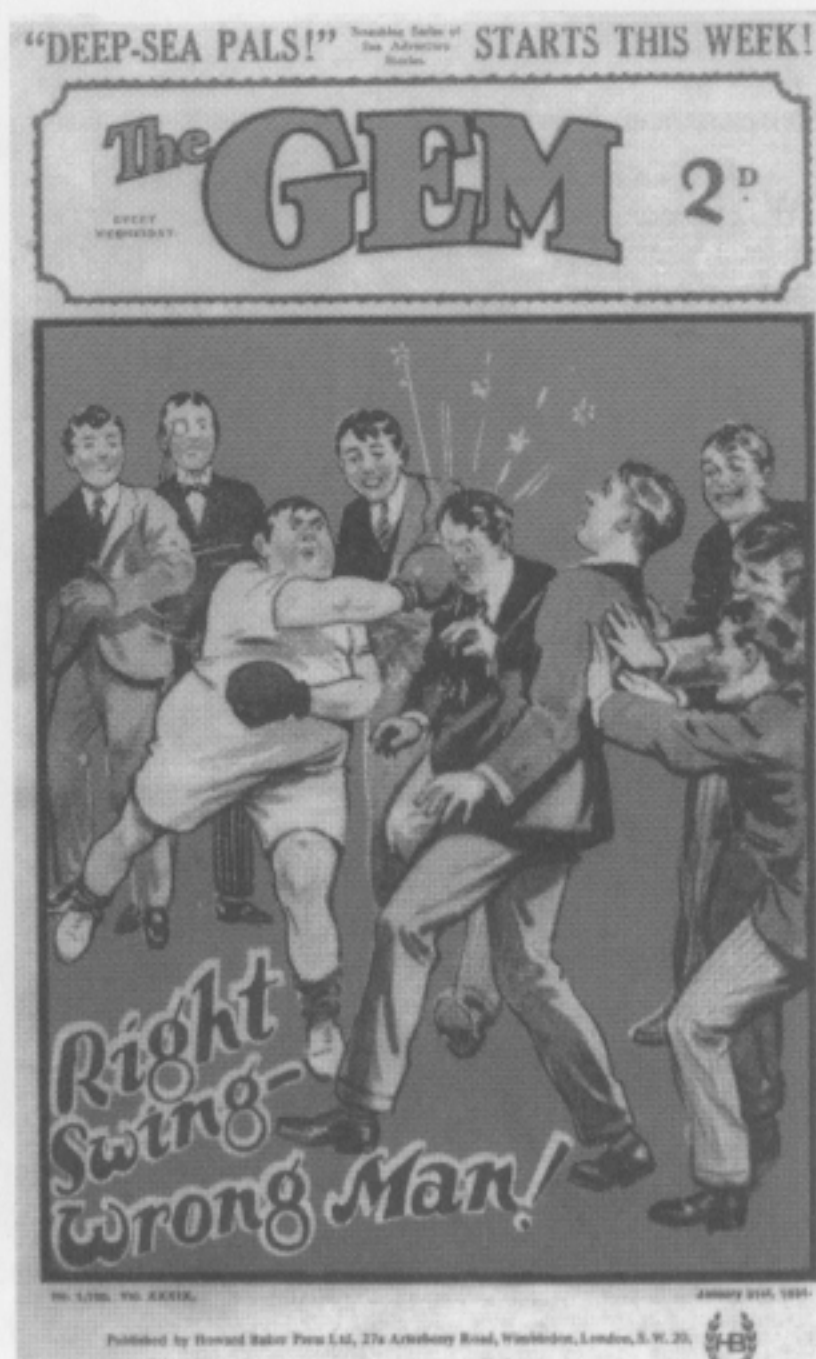
One of Frank Richards' proudest moments was the publication in the 'Times Educational Supplement' of 30th June 1961, six months before his death, of a Bunter story written entirely in Latin entitled 'Ultio Bunteri'.

When he died, on Christmas Eve 1961, he left behind a legacy of good, wholesome literature that was unique enough to live on in the shape of his favourite creation, the horrendous Billy Bunter who, thanks to Frank Richards, could be said to have achieved immortality.

Frank's memory is also kept alive in privately-owned Charles Hamilton museums, The Greyfriars Club, the 'Greyfriars Gazette and Story Paper Collectors' Digest', a quarterly publication concerned with boys' and girls' papers with strong emphasis on Charles Hamilton.

In 1998 and again in 1999 Broadstairs and St Peter's Town Council presented a Programme of 'Celebrity Connections', a Festival celebrating Frank Richards. For a

Cover from a facsimile copy of 'The Magnet' companion magazine, 'The Gem', dated 1931, also from the Howard Baker Press. (Courtesy Bob Acraman)



whole week there were Forums, talks and visits to Rose Lawn and Port Regis, the latter being one of the claimants as the inspiration for Greyfriars. Among the visitors and speakers during the Festival were Una Hamilton Wright, the great man's niece, Mary Cadogan, editor of the 'Story Paper Collectors' Digest' and Gerald Champion who played Billy Bunter in all five television series.

Memorabilia and artefacts of Frank Richards, kindly loaned to Broadstairs by Mr Bob Acraman, Chairman of the Greyfriars Club, will be put on permanent display in a new Media and Arts Museum to be opened, hopefully, later this year.

Sources of information

Mrs Una Hamilton Wright, Frank Richards' niece, whose biography of her uncle is due to be published later this year.

Pam Porritt, Celebrity Connections Festival Administrator for Broadstairs & St Peter's Town Council.

Mr Bob Acraman, Chairman of the Greyfriars Club, whose continuous activities on behalf of the club help keep the memories of Frank Richards alive.