



COLLECTING THE Magnet

THE PAPER WHICH INTRODUCED
US TO GREYFRIARS SCHOOL
IS STILL VERY POPULAR
WITH COLLECTORS, AS W.O.G.
LOFTS & D.J. ADLEY REVEAL



In the early years of this century, the Amalgamated Press – then the largest publisher of magazines in the world – were never slow to cash in on the popularity of any paper. Usually they followed the simple formula of issuing a ‘Companion’ to an existing title. Sometimes this proved very rewarding, though occasionally less so. Many of their readers could only afford one publication a week on their limited pocket money, so the circulation of one or other of their titles was bound to suffer – and, in the long run, one had to be axed.

TACTIC

But when the tactic paid off, the rewards were great – and never more so than in the case of ‘The Magnet’. Percy Griffith had launched the green-covered half-penny ‘Gem’ in 1907. Then he carried out an experiment in issuing adventure and school-boy stories in alternate weeks, which proved that the school story editions quickly sold out, while the others remained on the newsagents’ racks unsold. With this evidence of the popularity of school stories before them, the directors of Amalgamated Press instructed Griffith to think up a title for a companion paper to ‘The Gem’, with the stories to be written by the same author,

Charles Hamilton. And so ‘The Magnet’ was born – with advertisements announcing “The Editor draws your attention to The Magnet, the draw of the year”!

Charles Hamilton adopted the pen-name ‘Frank Richards’ for the new venture, and created the legendary Greyfriars School, which he set in the county of Kent, near the village of Friardale, and not far from the sea. The first Greyfriars story, dated 13th February, 1908 and entitled “The Making of Harry Wharton”, dealt with the sending away to school of a very spoiled, self-willed young boy, an orphan who had been raised by a maiden aunt. The boy’s uncle and guardian, Colonel James Wharton, had come home from army duties to find the boy entirely out of control, and had decided that sending him to boarding school was the only solution. The first few ‘Magnet’ stories dealt with the boy’s trials and tribulations at his new school. He turned out to be a decent type, and a born leader, eventually becoming Captain of the Remove.

DOMINATE

In these early stories, then, Harry Wharton was established as the chief source of interest, together with the Famous Five. They appeared in every issue, and it was only later that Billy Bunter began to dominate proceedings in ‘The Magnet’.

Many collectors may not realise that there were several proposed designs for the first issue of ‘The Magnet’ before the final decision was made. Advertisements in ‘The Gem’ early in 1908 show a different ornamental design to the one finally used, while a proof page shown to one of the writers by an old editor had no schoolcap on the

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The very first issue of 'The Magnet' appeared as a companion to the Amalgamated Press's 'Gem' on 15th February 1908. It now holds pride of place in any collection and sells for up to £50.

ground in the cover illustration of a group of boys in a mêlée. Most important of all, however, was the original colour of the paper, described as 'golden' in editorials of the time. Through exposure to light over the last 80 years, all these early 'Magnets' have changed colour, to the point that they are now brick-red in hue – hence the familiar term 'Red Magnets' used to denote the early issues.

CLOUD

Despite the immediate success of the paper, 'The Magnet' had editorial problems in its early years. Percy Griffith left the Amalgamated Press in 1911 under a very large cloud, owing more money than Billy Bunter did on the strength of his expected postal orders! His successor, H.A. Minton, fared even worse a decade later, as he was dismissed in 1921 after plagiarising an original Greyfriars story. Neither man had



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The colour of the front covers of 'The Magnet' changed many times in its 32-year history. Originally printed in red, by the time this issue appeared in August 1921 the cover was blue and white.

lived up to the high moral standards of 'the old school'.

The 'Red Magnets' from issue 1 to issue 396 are by far the most valuable today, with the first issue being worth a minimum of £50 in Fine condition. Amalgamated Press also published about a dozen special double Christmas and Summer numbers that are now worth several times the price of a normal issue, with prices beginning at around £20 per copy.

PRESSURES

From issue 397 onwards, the supply of dye started to run out, as the pressures of the Great War took their toll. Instead, Amalgamated Press began to use a blue-bronze type of ink, which gave the covers a blue-and-white appearance. At the same time, 'Magnet' readers had to endure a reduction in the size of the paper, from 32 to 16 pages.

The paper wasn't only suffering from

production difficulties. The war-time editor, John Nix Pentelow, had extreme difficulty in getting copy from Frank Richards at this time, so he had to use many stories by other writers, to the point where he wrote a great deal of the contents himself. But although the readers may have noticed that these stories weren't quite up to par, they would have been reassured by the 'Frank Richards' by-line on each piece. Only adulthood and hindsight allows us to see the failings of those stories not written by Hamilton.

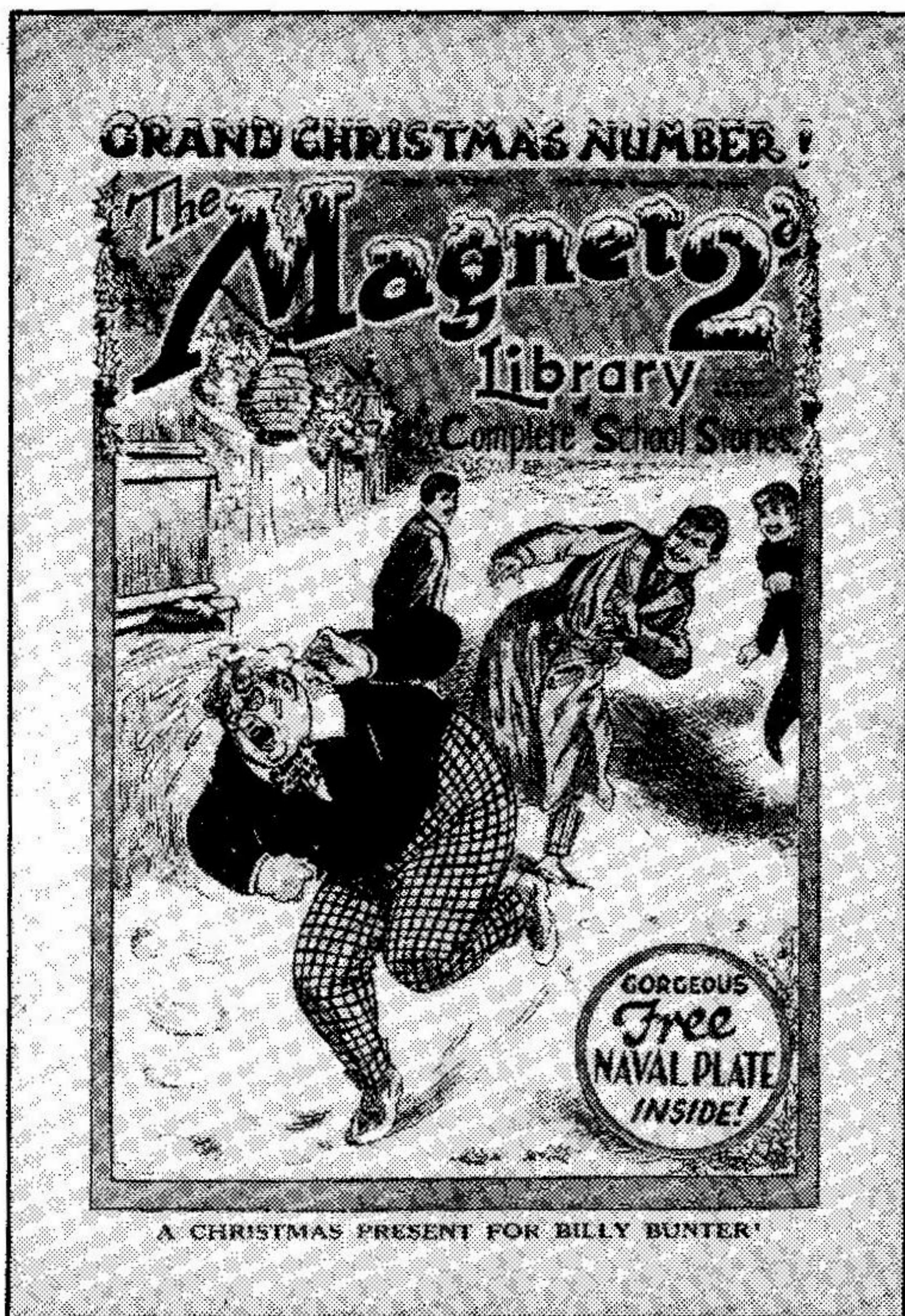
Because of the lack of involvement from Frank Richards, however, these issues of 'The Magnet' are among the least collectable today — which is surprising, given that they are also quite scarce. But collectors tend to want them only to complete long runs of the paper, rather than for any merits of their own.

PEAK

The downturn in the fortunes of 'The Magnet' was to prove shortlived, however, as the next era of Greyfriars tales showed Frank Richards to be at the peak of his powers.

About a year after C.M. Down had taken over from H.A. Minton in charge of the paper, it was decided that — with war-time economies now at an end — 'The Magnet' should be brightened up in appearance. From issue 777 in 1923, the colour of the 'Magnet' was changed to orange/yellow and blue, and the number of pages was increased. For the next decade, 'The Magnet' was a blend of attractive design and fine stories; no wonder, then, that this is regarded by many collectors as the paper's classic era.

C.M. Down was to remain associated with 'The Magnet' for the rest of its life, but from the mid-1920s onwards, he had to contend with the increasing dominance of the D.C. Thomson papers, which were poaching readers from Amalgamated Press titles. One of the biggest blows came in 1933, when the Dundee-based Thomson firm brought out a rival school story paper entitled 'The Hotspur'. Its main feature was Red Circle School, with its lazy schoolboy 'hero' Dead Wide Dick, and excellent character studies among the masters like Mr Smugg. 'The Magnet' suffered an immediate drop in circulation, and C.M. Down was even asked to attend a directors' meeting where he was



Copies from the 1920s fetch about £3-£4 today, but the special double Christmas issues are very sought-after and worth about 50% more than other issues. This particular issue is from Christmas 1924.

faced with copies of 'The Hotspur' ranged across the desk, and told to try and mould 'The Magnet' on similar lines! His feelings can easily be imagined.

In 1937, an editorial announced that they were going to revert to the original 1908 colour of 'The Magnet', but someone must have been colour-blind, as the first issue with the new design, No. 1553, had a cover that was a shade of salmon pink, which did nothing to improve sales. Behind the change was the need to cut costs by using cheaper printing materials, in an effort to make up for the declining sales. In retrospect, some collectors feel that this period also saw a decline in Frank Richards' writing skills, though the topical themes of Nazi spies, gas masks, and air-raids did enliven the paper over the next few years.

The very last 'Magnet' was No. 1683, 'The Shadow of the Sack', issued in 1940. It was intended to be the first of a series of

tales about Harry Wharton, which would have made up the third Harry Wharton Rebel series. Although next week's instalment was advertised, it never appeared, and ever since enthusiasts have been trying to locate the original manuscripts, though without success. It appears that they were destroyed along with other office records in the possession of director Harold J. Garrish, head of Juvenile Publications, who had them in safe keeping. After his death in the 1950s, however, his office was cleared out. His original intention had been to use Frank Richards' manuscripts in small instalments in the comic 'Knockout', which had the subtitle 'The Magnet' for a while; but 'Knockout' readers were satisfied with their own Greyfriars stories, in the large shape of a Billy Bunter comic strip that eventually ran longer than 'The Magnet' had done.

C.H. Down freely admitted to us years ago that 'The Magnet' had not sold well during its final six years. It had slumped from 200,000 copies down to 41,660 by 1940. But this cannot detract from the fact that Greyfriars is still the best-loved fictional school of all, with generations of readers

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By far the most popular character in 'The Magnet' was Billy Bunter of Greyfriars school. In fact, most of the Bunter stories were issued in 38 books published by Skilton/Cassell.

continuing to remember the famous characters and stories that were so real to them. And unlike much juvenile literature, Richards' stories can be read with just as

much enjoyment today as when one was a youngster.

At least six complete collections of 'The Magnet' are known to have been in existence, the owners including headmasters, a doctor and even a Hollywood film star. But as a couple of these owners have died, their collections have been split up. Curiously, to our knowledge no complete set has been offered at auction, or through a specialist dealer, and the cost of such a collection would probably be prohibitive to the average collector. Its value could be anything from £7,500 upwards, depending on binding and general condition.

BOOKS

Greyfriars stories appeared in many different forms in the post-war years, perhaps the best being the Skilton/Cassell Billy Bunter books that ran to 38 volumes between 1947 and 1965. Some of these are now collectors' items in their own right. A full list of all post-war Greyfriars stories can be found in our own publication "Greyfriars Since The Magnet", distributed by Happy Hours Ltd. of Leeds. But despite their many attractions, none of these later stories can really compare with the original vintage tales that appeared in 'The Magnet' in pre-war days, when the famous school at Friar-dale in Kent gave so much pleasure to so many readers – as, indeed, it continues to do today.

PRICE GUIDE TO 'THE MAGNET'

A guide to current values for individual issues in Very Good condition

	£
ISSUE NO. 1 — February 15th 1908	40-50
1908-1910 (1/2d, red covers)	5-6
1911-1915 (1d, red covers)	4-5
1908-1915 double numbers	6-10
1915-1922 (blue and white covers)	3-4
1922-1930 (coloured covers)	3-4
1931-1933 (coloured covers)	2-3
1934-1937 (coloured covers)	1.50-2.50
1938-1940 (salmon coloured covers)	1-2
ISSUE NO. 1683 — May 18th 1940 (last issue)	2-3

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