

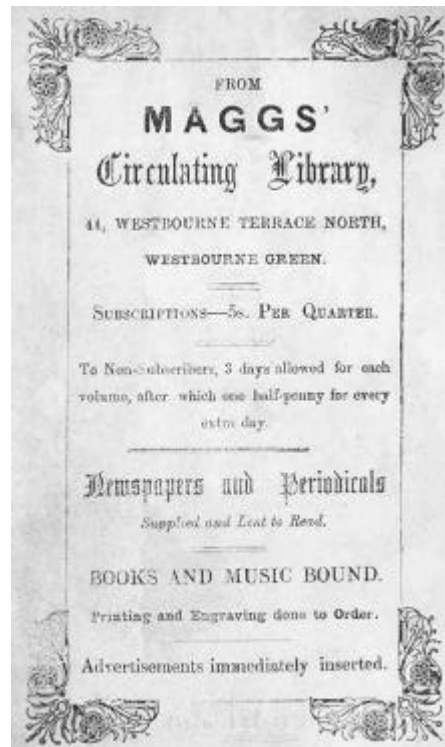
An Introduction to the History of Maggs Bros.



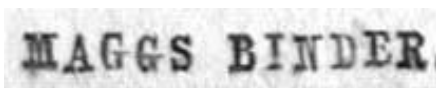
Uriah Maggs' shop at 159 Church Street

The firm of Maggs was founded in the 1850's, probably in 1853, by Uriah Maggs, who at the age of 25 had left his home town of Midsomer Norton in Somerset to set up in business in London. Like many migrants of all times, he never got far from his port of entry, and set up shop firstly in Westbourne Terrace and later in Paddington Church Street, both shops still close to the Great Western Railway terminus of Paddington.

He ran a general stationer's, newsagent's and bookseller's business in the style of the day, lending and selling books and newspapers, and built the business into a flourishing concern. Although it is unlikely that he had a bindery himself, he did offer bookbinding as a service, and we have one rare "Maggs Binding", in heavy brown morocco, signed at the foot of the front free endpaper. The



The earliest piece of Maggs ephemera



transformation into a specialist bookdealer took place over the next fifteen years, and by 1870 the main thrust of his business was "Second-

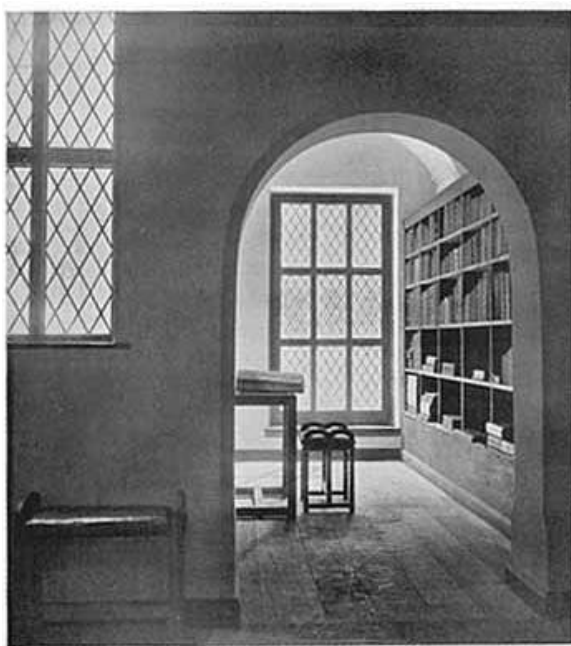
Hand Books, Ancient and Modern, in all Classes of Literature."

All four of Uriah's sons eventually joined the business, taking over on his retirement in 1894. The initial Maggs Brothers of the firm's title were Benjamin and Henry, later joined by Charles and Ernest. This was a period of rapid expansion for the rare book trade as the gradual relative decline in

prosperity of the European aristocracy brought increasing quantities of rare books on to the market. At the same time the great tycoons of the United States were beginning to form their incomparable collections and the collecting of rare books was becoming an important part of a fashionable life on both sides of the Atlantic.



The first catalogue issued by Uriah Maggs



MEDIAEVAL ROOMS, 34 & 35 CONDUIT STREET, LONDON

The firm prospered in this climate, and in 1901 moved to the Strand, then the centre of the London antiquarian book-trade. A further move in 1918 led them to 34/35 Conduit Street, (off New Bond Street, on the site now occupied by the Westbury Hotel) where the architect John A. Campbell designed them a bookshop of some style, partly as a replica of a monastic library with beautiful custom made furniture, much of it re-used at their next premises. The year 1938 saw the firm moving again, this time to 50 Berkeley Square, where it still

remains. It was to be a lucky move, for the Conduit Street premises were completely destroyed in the Blitz: in the brochure announcing the move the firm had unwittingly announced "The demolition of our premises at 34 & 35 Conduit Street, W1, scheduled to take place in 1940." 50 Berkeley Square, although initially criticised as being too far from Bond Street (all of 300 yards!), has turned out to be almost perfect. To quote the same brochure "The 18th Century house is ideal in many ways. Its rooms are many and spacious . . . It retains its 18th century character with fine decorated ceilings, Adam fireplaces of singular beauty,



The Americana Room at Conduit Street

in the former stables.

The house has had two distinguished tenants since its completion in 1740: the British Prime Minister George Canning in the early 19th. century, and the famous ghost – or should it be ghosts, for there are several different and apparently contradictory tales of the manifestations encountered here. You can take your pick from a pair of legs coming down a chimney, a “feathered thing”, and the present writer’s favourite, the “nameless horror”. By 1907 the ghost was so famous that Charles Harper, in his *Haunted Houses* could write that “the famous ‘haunted house’ in Berkeley Square’ was long one of those things that no country cousin come up from the provinces to London on sight-seeing bent, ever willingly missed.” Despite many all-night sessions, on fire-watch during the Second World War and more recently (oh, the joys of computers), there have been no strange reports during the present tenancy, but we still feature in the guide books of haunted houses and are used to dealing with a steady flow of inquiries. A “virtual tour” of the building can be seen at www.maggs.com/virtualtour.

At the same time as maintaining the London offices the firm also had a branch in Paris from around 1933 until the 1950’s (interrupted by the removal of much of the stock to Germany in 1940), first at 140 Boulevard Haussman and later at the Rue de la Boétie, overseen by Dr. Maurice Ettinghausen, one of the great bookseller/scholars of his age. It was Ettinghausen and Ernest Maggs who pulled off the greatest bookselling coup of the era, when in 1932 they successfully negotiated with the government of Russia to acquire not only a Gutenberg Bible, the first printed book of circa 1455, but also the celebrated *Codex Sinaiticus*. This is one of

and torch extinguishers outside the front door. It is situated in the heart of Mayfair, easily accessible, in one of the most beautiful squares in London.” Antiquarian booksellers are typically good tenants of interesting buildings (they have more important things to spend their money on than building works), and the house is for the most part unaltered since its last modernisation over 100 years ago. The pantries are still lined with large white ceramic tiles, there is a massive cast-iron cooking range in the old kitchen, and the chief cataloguer in the military department works between the iron railings of a stall



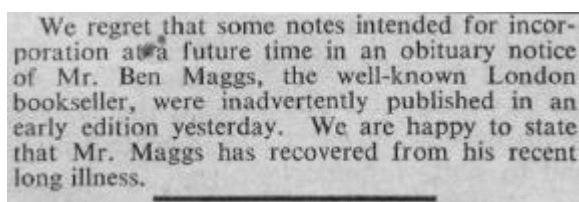
Ernest Maggs shows off the Codex Sinaiticus to the staff: a newsreel camera happens to be the earliest Bible manuscripts known (c. AD 350), containing the whole of the New Testament and part of the Old in Greek. It had been unearthed in the mid-nineteenth century at St. Katherine's Monastery in the Sinai desert by the German scholar Friedrich von Tischendorf, who "persuaded" the monks to present it to his patron and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Emperor of Russia. In the 1930's the Russian government, desperately short of hard currency was selling off components of the great Russian libraries and art galleries, now nationalised. In 1931 Ernest and Dr. Ettinghausen travelled to Leningrad (the food situation was so bad that Ettinghausen later claimed to have survived on a diet of canned sardines he had brought with him) and there bought the Gutenberg Bible (pre-sold to Martin Bodmer) and began the negotiations which were to lead to their purchase of the Codex on behalf of the British Museum in 1933. Maggs have thus handled two Gutenberg Bibles in their history, the one described above and the Dyson Perrins copy bought at auction in 1947 for a record price for a printed book of £22,000, on behalf of Sir Philip Frere, and a few years later resold it to Mrs. Doheny of California, this latter copy now the only one in Japan.

The negotiations for the Codex began with an asking price of two hundred thousand pounds and an offer of forty thousand, before the final price of one hundred thousand was settled on, by a long way the most expensive book in the world at the time. The British government was to put up half of the purchase price, and the balance was raised in a public appeal orchestrated by Sir Frederic Kenyon, retired director of the British Museum and President of the Friends of the National Libraries. When predictable objections were raised to spending public money on a book, Kenyon made the fine rallying call "Where millions are spent on the material needs and amusements of the people, may not £100,000 be properly spent on their minds and souls?"

The 1920's and 1930's were a golden era for book-collecting and during these

years the firm handled some extraordinary material. They sold Napoleon's letters to Josephine (to the French Government), dispersed the library of the Comte de Chambord (King Henri V of France), helped King Manuel II of Portugal form one of the greatest libraries of Portuguese and Latin American books and manuscripts, sold the papers of the Earls of Huntingdon *en bloc* to the Huntington Library of California and issued a catalogue containing six block-books bought by R.E. Hart of Blackburn, Lancashire for cash, and now at Cambridge University Library. The collection of Napoleonica formed by his doctor, Vignali, and sold by Maggs in the early 1920's, famously included Napoleon's mummified *membranum virilis*.

Ben died in 1935, having been allowed the rare pleasure (shared with Mark Twain and Sabine Baring-Gould) of reading an exaggerated account of his own death earlier in the year, and Ernest continued in the business right up to his death in 1955.



We regret that some notes intended for incorporation at a future time in an obituary notice of Mr. Ben Maggs, the well-known London bookseller, were inadvertently published in an early edition yesterday. We are happy to state that Mr. Maggs has recovered from his recent long illness.

The members of the next generation of the Maggs family were to be Clifford, Frank & Kenneth, now cousins as well as brothers. Clifford was the firm's incunabulist and medieval manuscript expert, a bookseller of the highest integrity, who was proud to boast in 1969 of a predecessor's "superb disregard of commercial value" in doing "as long a note, amounting often to an essay, for a book worth two or three guineas as for one valued at several hundred." This is a temptation the firm still falls into from time to time today, and indeed we are proud of the fact that although we regularly handle books and manuscripts of the very highest quality (in 1998 we set a new record for the most expensive printed book when buying for £4,200,000 a copy of the first book printed in England, Caxton's Chaucer), we also handle books at more affordable price levels, hoping to be able to offer something for the enthusiasts of all means. The present writer remains moved by the description given by Dr. Christopher de Hamel, now one of the world's leading experts on medieval manuscripts, of the encouragement given him by Clifford when only a young man, with no money to speak of, and many thousands of miles away in New Zealand.

Kenneth specialised in English literature, and was responsible for several series of catalogues as well as the *Mercurius Britannicus* series of bulletins, initially and optimistically promoted as a monthly, between 1933 and 1968. Frank Maggs was one of the great specialists in travel books, producing several great series of catalogues, and was actively involved in the formation of the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich. Three members of the family still work in the firm, its chairman John, who like his father Frank is a specialist in travel books, with a

particular enthusiasm for cartography; Bryan, one of the world's leading authorities on the history and technique of bookbinding; and Edward, managing director and specialist in modern literature and illustrated books.

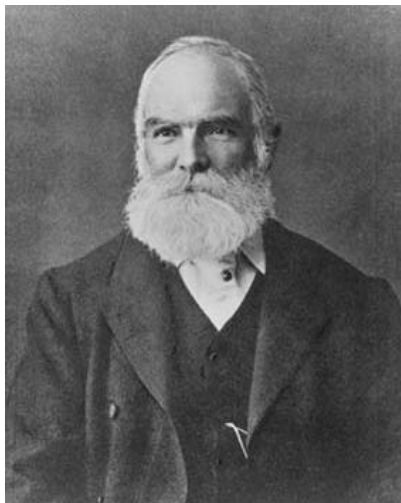
One of the great assets of the firm has always been its extraordinary loyal staff, among whom have been and still are, many of the greatest experts in their areas. Dr. Ettinghausen has been mentioned above, who worked closely with Sarah Laredo, largely responsible for the great Americana catalogues mentioned below; many customers today will remember with affection Bill Lent, who was with the firm over fifty years, but not all realised that his father had spent thirty years working for Maggs before that, making over eighty years between them. Indeed staff turnover is so low that in the year 2000 the 21 employees and directors of the firm have between some 340 years of service, making an average of over sixteen years a head. Brief resumé's of current specialists can be found at www.maggs.com/departments.

The most lasting legacy of the firm is probably the extraordinary series of catalogues, now approaching 1,300 in number, many in series such as *Bibliotheca Americana* and *Voyages and Travels*. Although the bulk are relatively routine reflections of what was in stock at the time, many are considerable works of scholarship and are now valuable reference works in their own right. Among the more significant are *The first three Books printed in South America*, (1932, one of a series of astonishing specialist Americana catalogues, 30 copies printed at the Curwen Press); *Food and Drink Through the Ages, 2500 B.C. to 1937 A.D.* (1937, 767 items) *Bibliotheca Aëronautica* (1920, 1494 items and believed to be the first specialist rare book catalogue on aviation); *Colonel Lawrence of Arabia; his original manuscript Autobiography* (1936); *Curiouser and Curiouser, a Catalogue of strange Books and Curious Titles* (1932), the fulsomely titled *The Art of Writing, 2800 B.C. to 1930 A.D. Illustrated in a Collection of original Documents written on Vellum, paper, Papyrus, Silk, Linen, Bamboo, or inscribed on Clay, Marble, Steatite, Jasper, Haematite, Matrix of Emerald, and Chalcedony* (1930) and the pioneering *Les debuts de la Photographie* (1939).

In modern times we have had a series of scholarly catalogues on British bookbindings by Bryan Maggs, specialist catalogues on *The English Theatre from the Restoration to 1800* (1980), Dr. Samuel Johnson (1983) and T.E. Lawrence (1985), and in 2000 an autograph catalogue including an item from every year of the nineteenth century. For information on current catalogues, please see www.maggs.com/catalogues.

Maggs Bros. Ltd. have been antiquarian booksellers by appointment to H.M. King

George V, H.R.H. The Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII), H.M. King Alfonso XIII of Spain, H.M. King Manuel II of Portugal, and are currently favoured with the Royal Warrant to H.M. Queen Elizabeth II.



Uriah Maggs