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FLEETWAY HOUSE IS NO MORE

by **W.O.G. Lofts**

Its appearance in pre-war days was that of a large imposing white building, with the distinctive feature of a large clock outside. Over the last decade, with the erection of skyscraper office blocks around it, it now looks small in comparison. Its whiteness has turned to a dirty grey, and the hundreds of staff and stream of visitors that once graced its portals are now gone. Once a hive of industry it is now deserted, and even the war memorial plaque by the entrance steps has been ripped from the wall to be erected elsewhere. I refer of course to The Fleetway House, shortly to be demolished to make way for the developers - the home for over fifty years of the mighty Amalgamated Press, and one of the worlds biggest publishers. for several generations of children they produced weekly and monthly the cream of boys/girls papers, comics, and the yearly Annuals.

It is curious, that I must have walked up those marble steps into Fleetway many hundred of times, yet on each occasion one had a feeling that one was entering a holy domain. Perhaps it was simply the thought that in this very building were created and produced some of the finest papers and characters of all time in the history of juvenile publications. Probably the first person I met was Harold J. Garrish then Director of juvenile papers, and once a writer himself. He was certainly a mine of information on the old authors and artists going right back to the Harmsworth Brothers days. Then there was Bill fisher, the jovial, red faced editor of the Rainbow comic group. Jackie Hunt, then on Princess and formerly editor of Detective Weekly. Reg Eves and E.L. McKeag of the School Friend girls group of papers - not forgetting John L. Wheway. Cecil Graveny of The Nelson Lee Library. Phil Davis and Jack Le Grand of Film Fun. Bill Pike who edited the Rookwood tales in The Boys' Friend, and was now on the picture Libraries. Basil Reynolds of the nursery comic Tynyots. Len Pratt editor of the Sexton Blake Library had just retired, but it was here I first met W. Howard Baker whose task was to modernise the famous Baker Street Detective. At a later date, I used to see regularly Chris Lowder who some years previous had been a schoolboy correspondent. Chris had won rapid promotion from a junior sub-editor to editing the comics Buster and Lion. Many of these former editors have long passed on, but they were all friendly and co-operative in answering my endless questions, and are fondly remembered.

I would however have loved to have visited Fleetway in pre-war days, and seen especially the Magnet and Gem offices. By today's standards the offices and corridors were very small and narrow and of course very old-fashioned. H.W. Twyman editor of the Union Jack called them 'cubby holes' and 'watertight compartments', but there was a sort of cosiness and friendliness, and intimacy unmatched by today's large glass window office blocks. There used to be brown uniformed girl messengers with pill-box hats, and smart tall ex-guardsman commissioners complete with medal ribbons in attendance. In the main waiting room on the ground floor hung a large framed original front cover of a Christmas double number of the Rainbow drawn by H.S. Foxwell the main illustrator. It disappeared from the wall one night (so I was told) and even the detective powers of Sexton Blake and Nelson Lee failed to recover it!

The Amalgamated Press commenced as Harmsworth Bros. in 1888 in Tudor Street. Later they moved to Bouverie Street, and in 1912 settled in Fleetway House. In the late fifties the name of the firm was changed to Fleetway Publications, and most of the papers moved next door to a brand new building aptly named New Fleetway House. I can remember this period avidly, as in moving out of the old building they cleared out the old files of periodicals that had been left in offices from defunct comics and boys papers. they simply dumped them into dustbins hundreds of Vols. of Boys' Friend Libraries and comics such as Puck and Sunbeam, as well as numerous women's magazines.

By 1972 I.P.C. had taken over Fleetway Publications and New Fleetway House was sold, so back went the staff once again to the old building. Around 1975 I.P.C. decided that all the various groups of papers and magazines scattered around Long Acre (formerly Odhams) and Southampton Street (formerly Newnes & Pearson) as well as Fleetway House, should be housed in one building. So in 1976 they all moved over the new skyscraper building at King's Reach on the south side of the River Thames. Old Fleetway House was still used by a few commercial papers and storing purposes, but it was eventually sold to the developers and by 1978 will be no more.

If there are ghosts at Fleetway House, what stories they could tell? Especially of the many unusual visitors. The staff of The Magnet well remember a gentleman by the name of Vernon-Smith arriving in a towering rage, demanding to see the editor, and protesting at the bad light his name was presented in the Greyfriars stories. Groups of small boys wanting to know the exact location of Greyfriars. St. Jim's, and Rookwood so that they could play then at football. Anxious people with problems trying to see Sexton Blake, convinced that he must have worked there writing out his adventures. Then mistaking H.W. Twyman the Union Jack editor and his office boy as Sexton Blake and Tinker. The characters were so real to so many, many readers.

There is a rumour going round, that some valuables were buried beneath the main pillar at Fleetway House, when it was being built. Whatever the demolishers find, nothing could be more valuable to me than to have had the privilege of meeting so many editors of the old papers at Fleetway House.

