

Meeting Maggs

Peiser, Spunaugle

On a cloudy Wednesday morning in London, we stepped into the well-kept Georgian building housing [Maggs Bros Ltd. Rare Books & Manuscripts](#) at 46 Bedford Square, not sure what we were hoping for. We rang the doorbell.



Front door of Maggs Bros Ltd. Rare Books & Manuscripts, 46 Bedford Square, London

Buzzed in, we entered a bright room, light glinting off the plastic bookjacket covers of

the modern firsts lining the shelves along the perimeter. In the center, three staff sat around a large table, posted in front of iMacs. At a small desk at the threshold, a staffer looked up pleasantly over his computer and greeted us. “How can I help?”

There’s always a bit of trepidation when we’re asked such an open-ended question. How does one begin to tell a story spanning oceans, wars, institutions, and about a hundred years? How much does one ramble on to an employee of one of the most prestigious rare booksellers in England?

We started slowly: we had been working with the archives of Maggs Bros at the British Library for a week and a half, we said, looking for information on our Detroit women collectors, and we wanted to visit the shop. A man seated at the center table spun around in his chair—the only rolling chair in the moderns room—and introduced himself as Ed Maggs. Someone was immediately dispatched to make us tea.



Kenneth Maggs (1900-1959)

Ed Maggs is the son of John Maggs and great-great-grandson to the original Maggs. Ed was happy to talk about the firm's history, leading us up the staircase where each successive Maggs Brother, nephew, son, cousin was pictured beginning with the very first, Uriah Maggs, in 1853. We were most excited to put a face with the name of Kenneth Maggs (1900-1959), who carried out correspondence with Thelma James during the late 1930s and early 1940s, and whose initials we had seen for several days in the archive. Our pawing through years of his correspondence showed that Kenneth Maggs treated James with the same courtesy extended to large-scale purchasers, even though James was buying only a handful of volumes per year, and even then, items never costing more than £2. James even received the same discount as the Bodleian Library: 10%, which she insisted on with each purchase.

Further up the staircase were photos of the prior locations of the firm, including that of 34/35 Conduit Street, where James first corresponded with them before they moved to 50 Berkeley Square. One photo showed the bombed remains of the Conduit Street storefront—lost to the Blitz just after their move.

Polished floors and bookcases displaying attractively arranged vellum-bound books greeted us on the next floor. Ed casually took a seat in the center of the room, and gesturing to two desks toward the windows, introduced us to the specialists of early British books, Robert Harding and Chris Stork—forgetting our names briefly, but recounting to his colleagues every detail we had quickly relayed downstairs about Marguerite Hicks and Thelma James. Also tucked behind iMacs, Robert and Chris effortlessly volleyed comparisons between ours and other female collectors, and suggested further avenues for research we might try—their mice busily clicking all the while.

Ed spoke of other female book collectors from the period, listing memoirs and biographies that cited Maggs Bros. The staff expressed pleasure that the archive was useful to us. “We have recently found some more things while moving to this location,” Ed told us, though sadly, we won’t be in London long enough to make use of them now. Perhaps that is for another trip.

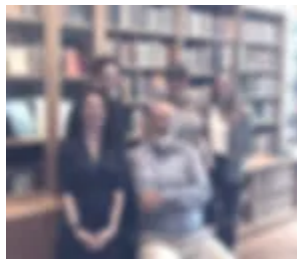
Back on the ground floor and settled in with our tea, various staff members wandered in, one recounting his humorous interaction on the bus, another employee conducting research on a Tolkien manuscript. Ed succinctly explained some mysteries in bookseller marks we had been puzzling over for months, and was a wealth of knowledge about the history of the trade. He told several anecdotes about his grandfather's business dealings during WWII, noting that the soldier's uniform was a great equalizer—“you never knew if it was regular Joe or a Rockefeller come into your shop” he said—and for booksellers, it didn’t matter. Because they were often dealing in foreign currency, the rare book trade continued throughout the War while other trades bowed to wartime needs. “It was a great time for collecting in the American Midwest,” Ed told us, confirming that Hicks and James were indeed part of a larger pattern of American collectors snatching up copies during those fraught years.



Close up of Marguerite Hicks Collection intake inventory, listing Maggs Brothers Catalogue [#829](#) "Shall We Join the Ladies?" (1955)

Many of the staff sheepishly recalled the 1955 Maggs catalogue with the dated title, "Shall We Join the Ladies?" This token catalogue devoted to early English women's writing was part of Oakland University's intake of Hicks' collection in 1971 (though no longer with the collection—likely tossed as ephemera). Our research reveals that Hicks did indeed purchase items from this catalogue, though the archives we consulted in the past week maintained no correspondence from James in the 1950s. It appears that either there was a hiatus in Hicks' collecting, or that they briefly dealt with other dealers before returning to Maggs.

We left the shop fortified by tea and enriched by Ed's stories. Before our exit, Ed gifted us glossy catalogues featuring a history of Maggs Bros' various homes in London, and celebrity mementos from their archives to commemorate this latest move.



The Marguerite Hicks Project & Maggs. Front Row: Dr. Megan Peiser, Ed Maggs. Back Row: Prof. Emily Spunaugle, Bonny Beaumont, Alice Rowell

Ed's gift to us brought our project full circle: only days before in the Maggs archive at the British Library, we had uncovered Thelma's note to the firm, dated June 19, 1939, thanking them for the "beautiful booklet on your new quarters" sent to her and Hicks, honoring the firm's move to Berkeley Square. James also writes that she is "anxious to see it in person before too many years." "I do want to come to England," she continues, and promises: "when I do you can be certain that the fine new shop of Maggs Bros will call to me first of all."

Now, exactly eighty years later, standing on the Bedford Square doorstep, we felt pleased to continue the relationship between the Marguerite Hicks Collection and the Maggs family firm.

**photos in this post by Megan Peiser and Emily Spunaugle. Thanks to Maggs for permitting photographs.*