

The History of the Bubble Book

Whilst carrying out an audit of the social history store at Burymead in Hitchin we came across two interesting children's books which we have decided to share with you. They are called Bubble Books and are titled 'The Merry Midgets' (1917) and 'The Pie Party' (1920). The following is a brief history of the company who published them.

The story of the Harper-Columbia Bubble Book series begins in 1917 in the USA when Ralph Mayhew, an employee of Harper came up with the idea of producing a series of books for children which included records which sang to the reader. Mayhew promoted them with the tagline 'Harper Columbia Book that Sings'. The price of the books varied over time, on their first release they were retailed at \$1.00 in 1917, which then increased to \$1.50 in 1920, \$1.25 in 1921 and then finally in 1922 returned to the original price of \$1.00.



The success of the Bubble Book series resulted in Harper Columbia making a deal with British publishers Hodder and Stoughton Ltd in order to create a British edition of the books. On UK editions; as we have at Burymead the publisher is Hodder-Columbia, a reflection of the deal between the two companies. Sales of the series were good but began to tail off in the early to mid 1920s when the patent for the series was purchased by Victor Talking Machine Company in 1924. On obtaining the patent Victor published a series of six Bubble Books; the new editions were larger and had double sided records which appealed to the public who embraced the new format; this was reflected in Victor's decision to manufacture a phonograph decorated with images from the Bubble Book series, this was priced at \$18.00.



By 1930 sales began to fall, perhaps as a result of the economic situation following the Wall Street crash of 1929. In 1930 Ralph Mayhew regained the copyright and Columbia began production of the Bubble Book once again in partnership with Dodd, Mead and Company. In the following two years production was wound down and ended with the release of records from Bubble Books 13-16 alongside the Clarion recording label.

The historical importance of the Bubble Book series is reflected in their inclusion in the Library of Congress (USA) as part of the National Recording Registry. In 2004 Bubble Book #1 was added to the registry because of its importance as the first children's book and record series.

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