My Sad Libraries:
A Pilgrimage around the Extant Syon Abbey MSS and Incunabula,
by
John Adams
Member, Syon Abbey Research Associates
In books we find the dead, as if alive;
These are the masters, who instruct us without the rod,
Without anger and without seeking any reward.
If you approach them, they are never asleep;
If you interrogate them, they do not hide themselves away;
If you mistake their name, they never complain;
If you are ignorant, they do not laugh at you;
Books, you are generous and make us generous too:
You give to anyone who asks,
And set us free, your servants.

Adapted from Richard de Bury, AD 1344
“His Philobiblon is considered one of the earliest books to discuss librarianship in depth.”

One by one they appear in
the darkness: a few friends, and
a few with historical
names. How late they start to shine!
but before they fade they stand
perfectly embodied, all

the past lapping them like a
cloak of chaos.

The Foreword

This is an account of my pilgrimage around Britain in 2011-14 to look at the surviving wreckage, as evidenced by its catalogue, of a great monastic library – that of Syon Abbey, whose buildings and library are now under Syon House in Brentford, near London. This account takes in a monastic love story, of sorts; the intricacies of a mediaeval library cataloguing system; the ephemera of a beeswax droplet, and of a thread of what may be very early green silk. I have made no major finds, either of new MSS or books. But there have been a number of small increases in knowledge, not least my own.

The story begins in 1415, the year of Agincourt, with Henricus Quintus, Fundator Huius Domus de Syon. Syon Abbey (Bridgettine, 22 February 1415 to 28 November 1539, and refounded again at Syon, 1 March 1557 to May 1559) was one of the last major monastic foundations in England.1) It had a reputation for literacy and austerity amongst its 60 sisters and 13 ‘brothers’ (in fact ordained priests); the men, not without some debate and murmuring, were subject to the Abbess, as was the Confessor General. They followed the Augustinian rule, but had their own Syon Additions to this (which are still extant) and they used the liturgy of their mother house at Vadstena in Sweden, drafted by Saint Bridget herself.2) Syon also attracted both postulants and widows from the aristocracy, and seems to have had a northern bias, perhaps Lancastrian, in its community members.

The house was suppressed in late 1539 following a trumped-up case of praemunire (i.e. an impingement on the King’s legal rights) in which the Bishop of London, their Visitor, was complicit. But it was, and still is, the boast of the nuns that they did not sign the away the deeds, and departed without handing over the keys or great seal. They had already seen one of their company hanged, drawn and quartered for opposing the supremacy of Henry VIII in religious matters (Richard Reynolds on 4th May 1535 – ‘heavenly supper to follow their sharp breakfast taken for their Master’s sake’ he is reputed to have said, watching the similarly obdurate Charterhouse Carthusians being disembowelled before him, still in their coarse grey garb.

1 See British History on-line, Religious Houses: House of Bridgettines, pages 182-191. There was an earlier re-enclosure, but directly across the River Thames, at Sheen, in November 1556. http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol1/pp182-191

2 British Library, Arundel MS 146. The Sisters’ Additions to the Rule of St Saviour; 15th century, Middle English.
The community was then scattered to the four winds. Some stayed in England in a private house in Denham in Buckinghamshire with the Abbess Agnes Jordan and continued to celebrate the Bridgettine liturgy; others went to a sister house in Flanders, returned briefly under Mary Tudor, only to flee a second time on Elizabeth’s accession. They eventually found refuge in Lisbon under the protection of the Spanish king, where they were replenished by novices from England, until their final return to Devon in the 1860s – with a few precious books and manuscripts still in their possession. The Order has however finally been overtaken by other perils: old age and lack of new vocations; the only English pre-reformation order to survive the Reformation intact, is now (2015) no more.

Syon had a great library, and towards its end, a great librarian: Thomas Betson (d. February 1517), who tried but failed to bring order to a rambling mediaeval collection of MSS and a growing number (perhaps one third) of the newly-fangled printed books. He was responsible for over 1700 volumes, containing perhaps 8000 different titles, which had often been bound together with complete disregard for any congruity of sense. It appears to have been a lending library. The catalogue, after a while, runs into the sand, and by the last entries in 1526 (ten year’s after Betson’s death), it was probably more of a hindrance than an aid to finding books, like the imagined catalogue of the Library of Babel in Borges.

Towards the end, like a precursor of the destroying angel, there begin to appear books against Luther in the catalogue, (but none by him), including Henry VIII’s own Adversus Lutherum. In the decade from 1525, Syon was in fact publishing books by its renowned community of preachers and theologians, but its traditional piety could not stand against the new critical mood, and by 1539 its fate, and that of its library, was sealed.

We are also fortunate in having a depiction of Betson in about 1500, on a devotional broadsheet – the sort of ephemeral piece that might have been given to Pilgrims who had attended the famous Syon Pardon (at Lammastide – August 1). It shows Betson, identified by his initials ‘TB’, kneeling, apparently outdoors kneeling on grass, below an image of the Virgin and Child. He is heavily tonsured, and wearing the robe of a Syon Deacon – with an emblem of five red tongues of fire for each of the major doctors of the church. The original copper plate was found by

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3 Now in Exeter University Library, Special Collections.

4 “A 1 contains Horace’s satires bound with St Thomas of Canterbury’s life” Bateson, Catalogue.

Joseph Strutt, who mentions it in his Bibliographical Dictionary (1785). This must be one of the most curious and unexpected of Syon survivals – and a direct link into the production of printed materials, if not to the Brothers’ Library itself. Betson was in fact not only a librarian, but also a copyist of Syon manuscripts⁶, and one of the first Syon authors to be published, writing a devotional book – a sort of catechism with prayers.⁷

Betson’s catalogue still survives,⁸ covering only the men’s library. We have no catalogue for the sisters’ library, or for the sacristan’s many mass and altar books, which must have graced the two major, and twelve minor altars at Syon. Of Betson’s vast labour, only about 43 books and manuscripts survive⁹ – perhaps only three percent of the 1700 or so volumes. John Bale, a former priest who turned strong

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⁸ See: Cambridge University, Corpus Christi College, MS 141: Registrum bibliothecae de Sion

anti-catholic, had a sight of a number of the Syon books – what he calls *ex spoliis Syon*\(^{10}\), and gives a vivid and credible fate for all the monastic libraries:

*A great number of them which purchased those superstitious mansions* [i.e. the monasteries] *reserved of those library books, some to serve their jakes* [as toilet paper], *some to scour their candlesticks, and some to rub their boots. Some they sold to the grocers and soap sellers*…..\(^{11}\)

The first part of this paragraph fills us with despair at the short-sightedness of our ancestors. The last phrase gives us hope that elements of the Syon Library lie somewhere disregarded in Europe. The author has searched for long for those 50 medical books owned by Syon, listed in the catalogue and identifiable by their *secundo folio* as to date and place of printing, but so far without success. There appears to be nothing new from Syon in the Wellcome Institute, the British Library, the John Rylands in Manchester, nor the libraries of the Society of Antiquaries or the Royal College of Physicians. Syon Library books do not seem to have arrived in Lisbon with the sisters in 1594 – at least the National Library and the Ajuda Library appear to have no printed volumes that match any in the *Registrum*.

We are fortunate that Betson implemented or perhaps extended a mediaeval filing system for the library\(^{13}\), where books were given a shelf number in the correct category – running from A to V (certain letters did not yet exist in the alphabet –

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\(^{10}\) See pxxviii Introduction, Mary Bateson (1898) *Catalogue of the Library of Sion Monastery, Isleworth*. C. J. Clay and Sons, Cambridge University Press. This pioneering work also gives an in-depth and more objective analysis of the constitution of the library and its history, than here. See [http://www.archive.org/stream/catalogueoflibra00syonuoft/catalogueoflibra00syonuoft_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/catalogueoflibra00syonuoft/catalogueoflibra00syonuoft_djvu.txt)


\(^{12}\) Unless they are in the part of the Portuguese Royal Library, which was sent to Brazil in 1810 and 1811. “The books from Royal Library that went to Brasil became the initial collection of Brasil National Library (nowadays: Fundação Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro - [http://www.bn.br/](http://www.bn.br/)). These books are usually organized under the collection title “Casa Real Portuguesa”. Pers. Comm. Fatima Gomes, Biblioteca da Ajuda, 28 April, 2015. But the original Royal Library is reputed to have been destroyed in the Lisbon earthquake of 1753.

\(^{13}\) It is however noticeably not as comprehensive as that of Dover Priory from 1389 where we have a full guide to the shelf system and book classes, probably written by the librarian, John Whitefelde. See: Bodl. MS. 920. Whitefelde also used a version of the *secundo folio* system. Dover had only 450 volumes at this date – though like Syon, each volume might contain many titles – up to 30 in one book at Dover. See: *The Library of Dover Priory: Its Catalogue and Extant Volumes* By C. R. Haines, M.A., B.D., F.S.A. in *The Library*, (1927) s4-VIII (1): 73-118. doi: 10.1093/library/s4-VIII.1.73
WXYZ being absent, along with J).\textsuperscript{14} The section B, for example, contains the 55 medical and astrological volumes – perhaps not such a strange combination for the times. There are only two survivors.\textsuperscript{15} Each individual book had the details of its catalogue number, title and donor. It also showed the first two words of the second page – the so-called 2º or secundo folio – as a unique indicator, since the layout of text in any one MS would have varied from copyist to copyist.\textsuperscript{16} The same system was carried over to printed books in the Registrum, though each copy of an individual print run would then be identical.

All this information, an early ‘unique identifier’, was written out in red and black on an oblong vellum strip about three inches by two (7.2 x 4.8 cm), and covered for protection by a piece of transparent cowhorn, the whole held down by a brass frame, pegged through the leather cover onto the wooden boards by small copper nails, some with distinctive ‘floral’ heads. These Syon labels still survive on a small number of volumes. Even where they have vanished, a distinct pattern of pinholes in the leather and the wooden boards shows where the label was attached to the rear cover by the tiny nails. It is possible that this was an ‘in-house process’ carried out by Betson or a colleague, since the critical vellum label with accession number and other details would have to have been compiled by the librarian.

And the past being utterly different to the present, the books were displayed flat on the shelves, with the rear cover facing up, showing the details.

Betson’s thoroughness at Syon may be contrasted favourably with the equally extensive library at Glastonbury, where no such labelling system appears to have been used, and its scattered volumes are now unidentifiable – only one has so far been found.

\textsuperscript{14} There is a suggestion that the pattern of survival of Syon book classes represents the way in which, in a collapsing abandoned library room, only books from certain sections in the centre of the room, might have been recoverable.


\textsuperscript{16} This use of the \textit{secundo folio} allowed Bateson to identify accurately over 400 printed books in the \textit{Registrum}. Gillespie has managed to extend this to 488. There may however be reprints with the same \textit{secundo folio}, since printed books are of course more mechanical in their reproduction than MSS. For a detailed discussion see: \textit{The Secundo Folio and its Uses, Medieval and Modern} by James Willoughby, The Library (2011) 12 (3): 237-258. doi: 10.1093/library/12.3.237.
The intrinsic interest of this library to a retired bank clerk with antiquarian leanings should be apparent. The author decided to visit and view all the extant Syon Abbey material in Britain and Ireland – a sort of latterday pilgrimage that began in 2011, and was not quite complete by late 2015 – Paris has been covered, but Syon volumes in Belgium and Germany and elsewhere outside the UK have still not been examined, though the available catalogue descriptions are entered in the companion PDF on the extant Syon materials.  

I had however looked at most of the various Syon Abbey materials in over thirty libraries; including Aberdeen University, Alnwick Castle, the British Library, the Cambridge Colleges, Archbishop Marsh’s Library in Dublin, Durham University and Cathedral, Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities, Lambeth Palace Library, the National and the Ajuda Libraries in Lisbon, the London Metropolitan Archives, Lichfield Cathedral, Lincoln Cathedral Library, Manchester’s John Rylands and Chetham Libraries, the National Archives at Kew, the Oxford Colleges, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Society of Antiquaries in London, Westminster Abbey and Worcester Cathedral; and, confusingly, the Sion College Library collection at Lambeth (no relation to Syon Abbey) - over 200 books and MSS in all.

A full list of extant Syon Abbey material in book and MSS form will, it is hoped, be available in late 2015. This will include not only the surviving 43 books and MSS identified as being from the Library, but also the other 200 or so items in which Syon Nuns and Priests, and their relatives, wrote their names or their marginalia – a very mixed bag indeed.

Most of these documents have been examined before by a variety of experts, starting with Mary Bateson who made a pioneering study of the Registrum in 1898, indeed, her publication of the Registrum, at a time when only a handful of original items from the Syon Library were known, can be said to have led to the total of 43 books now known. In 1915 Margaret Deanesly unpicked the emotionally charged but doomed relationship of Sister Joanna Sewell and Brother James Grenehalgh –

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17 A List of Extant Printed Books and Manuscripts from Syon Abbey Library, according to the Abbey Registrum, with their Current Location & Some Extant Printed Books and Manuscripts Associated with Syon Abbey Authors and the Syon Community. JS Adams, 2015. (PDF).

18 Bateson, Mary (1898) op.cit. above.

19 Prof. Gillespie may have recently (2012) located another in the Exeter Library University Special Collections - Reductori moralis libri quatuordecim by Pierre Bercheur. Alas, another theological volume of c.250 unnumbered and unreadable and probably unread pages.
covered next below.²⁰ From the 1900s onwards M.R. James, of ghost story fame (a librarian might think of ‘The Tractate Middoth’) catalogued many MSS in Britain including those of Syon (covered in the Extant MSS PDF); and in 2001 Professor Vincent Gillespie re-examined the whole Syon Abbey Registrum, using ultra-violet light to reveal hidden entries. His comprehensive 600 page study is unlikely ever to be equalled.

**Individual MSS and printed books.**

**The Two Bibliophiles: An Interlibrary Loan Love Story across the Thames.**

The doomed romance of James Grenehalgh, a Carthusian monk at Sheen just across the River Thames from Syon Abbey, and Joanna Sewell, a nun professed at Syon Abbey in 1500, is relatively well-known amongst Syon scholars. Brother Grenehalgh sent Sister Sewell a number books (of which five survive) that he had laboriously copied out over the months, with their initials intertwined - JG and JS.²¹ These included ‘The Bonfire of Love’ by the mystic Richard Rolle of Hampole, a Yorkshire mystic, whose own relations with women were apparently open to criticism. How Grenehalgh first saw Joanna Sewell is unknown – perhaps at her profession as a nun in 1500. She could have been in her early twenties, since a novitiate was required before a postulant could be accepted at age 21.

On the discovery of the coded correspondence, Grenehalgh was questioned by his superiors, removed from Sheen to the Coventry Carthusians, and then, on remaining obdurate, was sent to their Kingston-upon-Hull house. The trials of a contemplative vocation of someone with Lancastrian origins, now in a Yorkist stronghold, at a time when England’s weather was dominated by wet summers and freezing winters, does not bear too close examination. He was dead by about 1530. We do not know his age.

²⁰ Deanesly, Margaret (1915) The *Incendium Amoris* of Richard Rolle of Hampole (Manchester University Press) [http://lollardsociety.org/pdfs/Rolle_IncendiumAmoris.pdf](http://lollardsociety.org/pdfs/Rolle_IncendiumAmoris.pdf)

²¹ British Library BL Add 24661, Richard Rolle, Incendium Amoris. 15 c. Copied by Grenehalgh for Joanna Sewell. Cambridge University, Emmanuel College: MS 35 (1.2.14); Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MS Lat. Th. D. 27, ff. 196v-200v; Philadelphia, and Rosenbach Foundation H491; Cambridge University, Corpus Christi, MS 137. All these books have the intertwined monograms of JS and JG.
But Joanna Sewell remained at Syon, dying in 1532 – perhaps aged around 53, and was, still is, buried there with 20 of her sisters, iuxta gerras, beside the convent screen, made of cast iron which had been shipped from the mother house at Vadstena in Sweden in the late 1400s. We do not know whether she was publicly upbraided for her ‘defautes’ in the Chapterhouse by the Abess, but we do know from the Syon Additions to the Rule what happened by way of ‘Bodily Discipline’ to those sisters who committed serious errors. After baring their back and shoulders, come the lashes, not soft or easy, nor limited in number:

‘Ther scahl not be yeven for the discipline but five lasches, but yf the defaute be of the more grievous defautes, or els that sche or they schewe any token of rebellion, then the discipliners schal not cese till the abbesse chargeth them to cese. And the laches in disciplines owe not to be to softe or to esy, but moderately scharpe, after the commandment of the abbes.’

One wonders if the penitents were allowed the remedy mentioned in Thomas Betson’s 1500 Herbal22 – probably the last monastic herbal compiled in England, Dioscorea communis, Black Bryony – known in French as l’herbe aux femmes battues… and favoured by women injured ‘in stumbling upon their hasty husbands fists’ according to Gerard in his Herbal.

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22 Thomas Betson Notebooks, Cambridge University, St John’s College MS.109. A transcription of the Herbal section was published in 2015 for the 600th Anniversary of the Foundation of Syon Abbey. (The Syon Abbey Herbal, John Adams and Stuart Forbes, 2015).
Grenehalgh had sent his ghostly sister Joanna a copy of Walter Hilton’s *Scala Perfectionis* in English, from the press of Caxton in 1494. Both Sewell and Grenehalgh appear to have added their initials to this volume separately; but there is also an extremely strange piece of marginalia. Set within a sketch outline of the floorplan of a church (perhaps that of Syon Abbey Church itself, and if so, the only representation we have) is the ornate name of Joanna Sewell, protected on all four sides by *Sanctus Salvator, Maria, Birgitta, and Sanctus Augustinus*. Above this is an imprecation to repel ‘*O tormose serpens*’ [*O twisted serpent*]. Clearly Joanna was going through some emotional crisis, and needed spiritual assistance.

*The Bonfire of Love,* another offending Grenehalgh volume is strangely poignant: It contains on fol 18v the combined monograms of Sewell and Grenehalgh (as ‘IGS’). There are also a number of catchwords, featuring ‘amoris’ and ‘inebrias’ and perhaps also too many illuminated ‘S’ letters for comfort, (no doubt for Sewell). On the vellum on the last page is written in a firm hand, perhaps masculine, *‘Amor Dei Vincit Omnia’* (*The love of God overcomes all things*) - which for English readers can only bring to mind Chaucer’s prioress. At the end of the book is also written, in a good hand: *‘Mens est tibi’*. (*My thoughts are with you* – perhaps a half-remembered quotation from Ovid.)

And then in a less clear hand: ‘*Gentle Jesu have mercy on me, Joanna*’ And below that, *‘anno domino millesimo quin…..*’, possibly *‘In the year 1500’*, the year of Joanna’s profession as a nun of Syon. And then more lines of handwritten text, but the ink wiped away, wet and blurred, made forever illegible, perhaps by tears. A great novelist would need no more, might even indeed be unable to improve on this.

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23 In 1898 this was in Britain, in the possession of Lord Aldenham. Currently Philadelphia, Rosenbach Foundation H491.

24 Reproduced as a frontispiece by DEANESLY, Margaret (1915) in the *Incendium Amoris* of Richard Rolle of Hampole, Manchester University Press.


26 Two sisters at Syon had access to a copy of Chaucer’s *Parliament of Foules*: ‘Syster Anne Colvylle’, ‘Systyr Clemens Trys<?>burght’ (Thraseborough) have set their names to Oxford University, Bodleian Library: Laud Misc 416.

27 Though the Herbal in the Betson Notebooks (probably pre 1500 and hence before the JS and JG coded letters, contain, under Sycamore,
But there is a curious footnote to this literary exchange of love correspondence. The *Philosophia Monachorum* copied by Grenehalgh, carries an inscription purporting to be by Joanna Sewell on the first page, at the top, in large bold letters. The writing is unlike other examples of her hand, and looks more like a man’s writing:

“Qui me renouuit Altissimus eum benedicat. JS”
May the Most High bless him who has made me anew. JS

It is unclear to what uses, if any, this apparent attribution to Sewell may have been put.

**Beeswax, Book Marks and Foretabs**

**Aberdeen University Library: MS.134** – The Mirrour of oure Ladye has been much examined. But no-one had so far noted on f.71r. a small tear-drop of bright yellow beeswax, with perhaps the indentation of a tiny fingernail.....no other Syon MS seems to have wax gutterings, certainly none with this intimate personal signature. The dating is uncertain – between 1460 and 1519. It carries the inscription ‘This booke belongyth to syster Elizabeth Monton.’ She was professed 15 August 1518. And perhaps it is her fingernail signature too.

The wax was drawn to the curator’s attention; learned correspondence by email ensued. But the conclusion was that only intrusive techniques could prove the date of the pollen – pollen from willows along the Thames at Syon would have been a fine signature mark. This book is all the more precious, since it was found at the Cape of Good Hope. One can only imagine that it found its way with Sister Elizabeth to a Bridgettine house in the low countries in 1539 or the 1560s, and then was taken by Dutch Boers to the Cape....

There is a curious parallel to the droplet of wax: The Syon Martyrology, which records the deaths of the religious of Syon and their benefactors, has a leather and metal clasp, still functioning. Hidden behind the clasp is a small yellow and brown stone or piece of resin, holding two metal or wooden plugs in place – possibly a running repair, replacing the original rivets. The Martyrology was begun in the

one small strange entry for a monastery: ‘Sicomorus ficus fatua is at gode for them that ben love sike.’ F91v.

28 Cambridge University, Corpus Christi, MS 137, *Philosophia Monachorum* and twelve other texts.
15th century, and continued into the 1700s, having left Syon in 1539, and passed via Flanders to Lisbon, and back to England in the 1850s.

The early bookmark threads and the foretabs are indicative of Syon Abbey books and MSS. The threads in each case are finely woven, and mainly now faded green or red; some at least may be of silk. Others appear to be coarser – perhaps linen. It would be interesting to know their composition, what dyes were used (vegetable or mineral), and whether they were affixed by a book-binder outside Syon, or given over to someone in the Abbey. If they are indeed silk, it raises the intriguing question of whether Mulberry trees at Syon House predate the 17th century, and were of the right variety to raise silkworms.

At a practical level, it is interesting that so many of the foretabs, which are merely folded over sections of ribbon, or occasionally vellum, have remained glued onto their vellum pages for six centuries, given the limited range of vegetable glues (bluebells, for example, were used), or the animal or fish glues that must have been available.29

A clue to the place of origin of the threads is a curious link between two printed books - Caxton copies of the 1488 Nicolas Love translation of the Life of Christ.30 One is on vellum – Susan Purefeye oweth this booke – a literate nun who appears to have corrected a number of misprints by hand. The boards to this have become detached from the text, but still have the fine-weave green marker attached to them – now held in place by crude string stitching, and looking more like a header band. The same kind of marker is attached to the paper version, which was probably not at Syon. This seems to suggest that perhaps the printer, rather than the Abbey, was responsible for attaching the page markers.

At Exeter, in the special collections, one of the MSS with which the nuns returned to England in the 1800s still has a solitary three quarters of an inch of green thread attached.31 This is similar to threads on BL Arundel 146.32 It was drawn to the

29 Erler op.cit. points out that ‘BL Additional MS 5208, another Syon manuscript written partly by Betson, carries in its initial letter traces of dried glue suggesting that, in a manner similar to the Guildhall Syon manuscript, something was pasted in at this point.’

30 British Library IB55119, Bonaventura (attrib). STC360

31 Exeter University Library, Special Collections (previously at Syon Abbey, South Brent), Fragment 1.

32 See fol.47, British Library MS Arundel 146 Additions to the Rule of St Saviour, and fol. 5 British Library Harley 3432
attention of the curator, since it has survived the long and at times tumultuous journeys across Europe. In a few years it would probably have vanished forever.

Exeter University also has an exceptionally rare book from Syon, of which it is the only known copy in Britain - *Mary Magdalene’s Funeral Tears* by Robert Southwell, S.J., dating from 1592. Southwell was executed in 1595, in the usual barbaric manner. This was a popular book, which went through six editions, and is full of striking metaphors and arguments for the catholic faith. Yet, in common with about half of all books published before 1700, it has shrunk to this single extant copy.

‘Access To The Materials’

Nearly all libraries now have web catalogues and remote ordering facilities. This must be in marked contrast to the pioneering work of James and Ker, with their probably leisurely but frustrating peregrinations around University and Cathedral libraries. A detailed email request to several Cambridge college libraries produced four replies almost within the hour, (St John’s where the Betson Herbal is lodged; Emmanuel which has a Grenehagh[34] and an *Adversus Lutherum*[35]; Gonville and Caius which has a Grenehagh monogram[36], and Corpus Christi – Syon Deacon Clement Maydestone’s direct account from his father of the execution in 1405 of the Archbishop of York for treason).[37] They immediately confirmed appointments to look at 15 named items of Syon material. Some librarians helpfully corrected my catalogue references for more modern entries. This is service of a high order.

Access to the books themselves is usually via provision of photo ID and a recent utility bill with address. This is of course becoming more difficult, as many utilities now encourage customers to accept email invoicing. A number of libraries require a letter of introduction – our own from the Duke of Northumberland’s Archivist (an informal member of SARA[38] and our occasional host at Syon House) proved invaluable in opening doors. Cambridge University Library requires a letter of invitation listing the items to be consulted – rather more demanding, but thankfully not necessary for most institutions.


[34] Cambridge University, Emmanuel College: MS 35 (I.2.14).

[35] Cambridge University, Emmanuel College: MS 32.6.49.

[36] Cambridge University, Gonville and Caius MS 127/65.

[37] Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS. 197, fols. 85-98.

[38] Syon Abbey Research Associates.
Libraries also vary enormously in their copyright policy. Exeter is magnanimous – free photography of any text; the London Metropolitan Archives (full of excited Eastenders researching family trees) charge a small fee. Other libraries, such as the National Archives at Kew are equally welcoming. The British Library had however firmly set its face against photography until recently. Where photography is not allowed, microfilm is sometimes available to buy – though how the individual researcher can read these at home is problematical. Glasgow’s Hunterian provided a CD version within three days, of the earliest medical treatise in recognisable English by Gilbertus Anglicus39 (d. by c.1230) which was in Syon Library. The section on the dreaded toothache is the sole to be picked out, in bright red.

St. John’s College Cambridge was however the star. They provided the text of Betson’s Notebook on microfilm (which we transferred to digital images at a friendly local printer) and then allowed us to upload the images to Dropbox40, subject to the usual copyright caveats and attribution requirements. This means that interested scholars can now look at our transcription of the Betson’s Herbal and a section of his rough draft of the Ryght Profytable Treatyse and compare them with the original.41 The text can be magnified on-screen, to bring up the smallest details of Betson’s hand. To this ageing non-technical person (and perhaps to many others) this may be a useful way forward.

We were also fortunate to have our attention drawn by Professor Richard Beadle of St John’s to the watermarks in the paper of Betson’s notebook – photographs of these too are on Dropbox. The watermarks are so varied but so common (mainly a bull’s head) that attribution to any one date seems difficult. Their variety perhaps suggests that Betson may have acquired or been given some remaindered printer’s stock.

39 Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunterian 509 (V. 8. 12) Tractatus de medicinis in anglicis, Syon Abbey Registrum B.40.

40 Betson’s Notebook and its watermarks can be viewed on Dropbox at: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/xxhmrt8w8v0e3kp/AAB0DWfsDmD1p6mr71W1AcFGa?dl=0

41 Eventually published by Caxton c. 1500.
The View From The Library Stacks.

The Glasgow Hunterian, and Aberdeen University’s ice-cream library building, provide some of the best views, away to the hills. The British Library is of course superb and efficient, and has good, though pricey, catering, but it is somehow claustrophobic and daunting – the only view is of yet more unread books. The Wellcome across the Euston Road is subdued, helpful and imposing – a sort of 19th century Magisterium. But the crown must go to the Society of Antiquaries off Piccadilly – a gentleman’s club of a library, in a gilded eighteenth century dream of Adam style – members only, and tea in the Fellows’ room at 3 o’clock. It is close to Green Park underground, and hence Victoria or King’s Cross. Lambeth Palace, next to the Thames, is by contrast a long walk from anywhere. Westminster Abbey Library is a small haven of peace, but is in the rafters, perhaps part of the monastic dormitory.

The Oxford and Cambridge College libraries are of course unique. Trinity Cambridge Library is imposing, high-ceilinged, bright. St John’s Oxford is low, cool and quiet. Corpus Christi Cambridge is warm and welcoming, and home to the Syon Abbey catalogue - Registrum bibliotheca de Syon42 and to Dr Christopher de Hamel, the current guardian of this key volume, and author of a celebrated work of Syonalia.43 The Library at Magdalen College, Oxford (where the lady in question spells her name without an ‘e’ – unlike her Magdalene Cambridge counterpart) has a fine internal structure, and was hosting when visited a useful display of early herbals and surgical books.

Exeter University Library Special Collections is an unexpected home for Syon MSS, but it was in the West Country that the returning Bridgettines settled on their return in the 1860s. Now housed in an ecclesiastical residential home, Sister Ann Smyth, the last Abbess of Syon has made wise provision for the curation of what original Syon MSS and books the sisters brought back from Lisbon, as well as for the accumulation of publications in the 150 years since then. The Special Collections sit on a hill, next to the ascetic but uplifting University Chapel, overlooking Exeter Cathedral, the Exe estuary, and the sea. A library with seagulls.

Manchester can boast two libraries with Syon MSS: one is the most beautiful neo-gothic building in Northern Europe, the red sandstone John Rylands on Deansgate. But it has had an expensive and tasteful refurbishment, and the MSS are

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42 Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS141: Registrum bibliotheca de Syon, The catalogue of the Brothers’ Library of Syon Monastery, Isleworth.

in the modern annexe, behind double-locked security doors. Further down Deansgate, the Chetham chained library, by contrast, is the real gothic – a warren of ancient draughty corridors and staircases, around a cloister. Its sole Syon MSS was brought to me in the dark oak reading room, where Marx and Engels had worked. I was left completely alone with the text….and possibly the ghost John Dee, who was Warden here for an unhappy time in the 1600s, and had managed to obtain a Syon Abbey MS for his collection at his London home in Mortlake, just across the River Thames from Syon.44

But for sheer continuity and style, little can beat the library in the upper chapterhouse of Lichfield Cathedral. Even on a December morning, the natural light was sufficient, and the glazed 12th century floor tiles shone gently. The ghosts of long-dead librarians leaned over my shoulder, approvingly. And a Hebrew psalter, attributed to Catherine of Aragon, with its decoration of Tudor roses and pomegranates on the leather cover.

Or, on a cold May day in 2013, the hawthorn in the Cathedral close in full bloom, to go up a steep spiral staircase with a rope rail to the roof space housing Worcester Cathedral Library. There to see another Syon volume, donated by Confessor General John Fewterer – 700,000 words, with no marginalia; another of the Great Unread Books.45 And the chantry, next to the high altar of Arthur, Prince of Wales, first husband of Catherine of Aragon, with its decoration of Tudor roses and pomegranates on the stonework.

The catalogues.

Electronic catalogues can be a quirky and demanding tool: The British Library MSS Catalogue filings, for example, may be either e.g. ‘40,000’ or ‘40000’ and the inclusion or exclusion of the comma may be critical to the electronic search. On occasion the use of a full stop at the end of a reference may also be essential produce results (e.g. ‘40,000.’) Patientia docet. A more serious concern is that the lack of paper records to consult cuts out the possibility of serendipitous finds – but it would of course be even more fascinating to be able to roam the shelves of the libraries, to see which volumes lie neglected there.

44 Oxford, Bodleian, MS Barlow 49 (SC 6414): Excerpta…ieronymyi et Augustini and 11 other titles, by Robert Grosseteste. This is the Syon Registrum entry N.16 and is now in two parts: Bodl MS Barlow 49 (SC 6414), fols 1r-56v and Corpus Christi Oxford MS 245, beginning at fol.86 (see Gillespie, Corpus p270 and also http://parkerweb.stanford.edu/parker/actions/manuscript_description_long_display.do?ms_no=245).

45 Worcester Cathedral Library Sel. B.50.3: Franciscus de Mayronis super quatuor Libros sentenciarum, Item questiones quolibetttales eiusdem. Printed in Venice between 1504 to 1507. This was item D.106. in the Syon Registrum.
One irritating and new cataloguing habit is to quote book and MSS dimensions in metric terms. Of course many MSS have margins which been cut back in size over time, but books produced in England must originally have been measured out, perhaps commissioned even, in inches, and often still approximate to these.

**In The Worst Possible Taste: The Lucretia and Cleopatra Bookbinding.**

What is also noticeable in my survey of the extant books is the large number of breviaries, processional and books of hours which belonged to individual nuns: some 60 of these have survived. In its short 114 years from February 1415 to November 1539, and its brief restoration from 1556 to 1558 under Mary Tudor, Syon had around 265 sisters. These may have shared psalters as they processed and sang – there are joint inscriptions in some. But the books seem to have been their individual possessions, and as such went with them when they retired on state pensions in 1539, often to new small communities in the houses of various Catholic sympathisers – the most famous being at Denham in Buckinghamshire, under the last pre-reformation Abbess, Agnes Jordan, who is buried in the church there, under a brass memorial in pride of place before the high altar.⁴⁶

Among the books attributed to the Sisters, is one in Lambeth Palace Library - a small book of private prayers. The leather front cover shows in relief a named portrait of *Lucretia* standing between two columns holding a dagger to her breast, and a second named portrait of *Cleopatra*, prostrate on the ground with two long asps at her breasts. These two famous female suicides (one for chastity, the other for despair over a lost lover) must be unusual as a cover motif for a ‘Book of private prayers’, even moreso for a Bridgettine nun’s devotions.⁴⁷ ‘Probably rebound in Louvain’ is one explanation. Doubtless continental bad taste.

Similar lapses in taste may be detected in the interesting illustrations in an almanac and prayerbook owned by Sister Clemence Tresham (d.1567), now at the British Library. The month of November depicts a physician attending to a sick man in an armchair, and holding up a glass flask of urine – which has been hand-coloured a rather sickly shade of orange.⁴⁸ By December the patient is illustrated dying in bed, and a tonsured priest with stole is administering the last rites. But earlier, in May that year, young men and maids are heading eagerly for the woods, together ....

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⁴⁶ Description of visits to Denham Church and Southlands Manor also on Syon Abbey website.

⁴⁷ Lambeth Palace Library MS 3600 (formerly Z.e 37) *Preces Privatae*.

⁴⁸ British Library c.35.a.12. ‘Sarum Use Primer’ – a calendar and almanac.
Cures and Poisons

It is also to be wondered whether, in an enclosed community of 60 women and 25 brothers, a volume entitled *De Venenis* – On Poisons, and by Grosseteste, might not be dangerously inflammatory material. It turned out to be the contrary: an innocuously disappointing devotional tract, on the religious remedies to spiritual poisons. The Syon Registrum has however a whole section (class B) devoted to medicine: on diagnosis, herbalism, urinology, anatomy and bloodletting, as well as guides to leading a healthy life and of course to medical astrology. It includes texts on taking the pulse (perhaps difficult in the case of an enclosed nun) and on urine, perhaps a more useful way to do remote diagnosis of the sisters’ ailments. Also on various fevers (tertian and quartan – probably localised forms of Malaria) and their cures; on strokes, abscesses, suppositories.

There were also long alphabetic lists of the names of herbs, in both English and French, with instructions for gathering and preserving the, flowers, seeds and roots, and the most suitable times to undertake this; how to make ointments; and a tract on medical weights and measures. Indeed, some of the books were on the required reading list of the Paris and Montpellier medical schools – indicative of a wider knowledge of acquired learning and also folklore, than we might otherwise believe. It is here, rather than in the tomes of dull theological debates, that we most feel the loss of a body of transmitted knowledge, and not just at Syon. Glastonbury, for example had at least half a dozen volumes in Anglo-Saxon from before 1100, including a herbal. Syon, founded only in 1415, does not appear to have had anything of comparable antiquity.

Syon Books I Would Like To Have Read

Reading medieval library catalogues, particularly in the Gillespie edition of nearly 600 pages, is an occupation which some would certainly classify as ‘sad’ – and not in any sympathetic sense. But there are occasional titles which catch the eye in this equivalent of a medieval Waterstones Bookshop. It would, for example, have been interesting to look over the tantalising item B.1 (e) in the astrology section – ‘Geomancia qua non licet Christianum uti’ - ‘Geomancy which it is not permitted for a Christian to use’…Or perhaps to glance at B.5jj: two short pages - ‘Libellus de remediis contra Pestilenciam’ and wonder what ineffectual herbs and remedies stood between this small community, and recurrent bouts of Black Death – there were at least six outbreaks of Plague from 1438 to 1531, and several of the English ‘Sweating Sickness’ – which may have been an antique version of SARS. It might also have been intriguing to read the Pseudo-Augustine *de maleficiis in vigilia Sancti Johannis Baptiste*, to see what witches really got up to at midsummer.49

49 N 64w in the Registrum.
As a Bridgettine foundation, Syon of course possessed a complete set of *The Revelations of Saint Bridget*. The main surviving book is a vast ‘coucher’ – 21 ½ inches long, 15 inches wide, and 4 inches deep. It cannot be easily lifted – hence the name. The pages have a new and unread look to them, and at 302 folios, the end result is a tome approaching 740,000 words. One imagines it can only have been a display piece. It might easily have required the skins of several hundred calves, and perhaps taken a year to copy out. It is brought to you on trolley by British Library staff.

And finally a book for librarians and for those religious, reciting matins in a dim and smoky church, awash with incense. At B.6.f and g in the Syon Catalogue is the *Tractatus in anglico de medicinis & unguentis & eorum usu & confeccione….pro languentibus oculis et visu reparando* (A tract in English concerning medicines and ointments, and on their use and making, …for weak eyes and for improving the vision.)

**St. Thomas Aquinas – five centuries in three libraries**

Of some interest, for complicated and serendipitous reasons, is the Lambeth Palace Library *Tabula in omnes libros sancti Thome de Aquino* - a huge 886 page index to the works of St Thomas Aquinas, printed in Venice in 1497. This volume, now rebound, has the original Syon vellum library label, written in a gothic hand in red and black ink, retained on the inside on the second page.

This label, about one inch by three, would originally have been on the exterior rear cover, under a piece of transparent horn, and hammered into the wooden boards by up to 12 distinctive copper nails in an oblong copper frame. It shows the title, the *secundo folio* as a unique identifier, and the name of its donor to the library – here the Confessor General John Fewterer (d. 1536).

The book donors’ names were important, since they were prayed for on the anniversary of their deaths. Fewterer left 76 volumes. Each donated book was marked with the words ‘*ex dono*’ before the name. Clearly, the cultivation of ‘Friends of the Library’ has long antecedents.

After a stay of some 40 years at Syon Abbey Library until 1539, the Aquinas volume went AWOL for a century, at the time of the reformation, then made a three

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50 Founder of the Bridgettine Order, and adviser to Popes, Kings and Emperors while alive; canonised in 1391; Feast Day on 23 July; appointed Patron Saint of Europe in 1999. A reasonably successful career, in this life, and the next.

51 British Library Harley MS 612 - *Revelaciones sanctae Brigittae.*
century sojourn in Sion College Library in London (in no way connected to, and not to be confused with, Syon Abbey) from 1630 to 1996. It is now in Lambeth Palace Library. It still has all the pristine marks of the Great Unread Volume – a fate shared by several other Syon weighty theological works, of use perhaps only to those preparing Syon’s famous sermons.

Unnoticed so far by the cataloguers, however, is Fewterer’s name, perhaps even his signature, faintly written in ink in a spidery hand, at the top of the first page, as Johs ffewterer. On the very last page may also be seen, written in ink, but perhaps not by him, ‘Liber tituli quondam Richardi Whitford.’ (d.1542?). It is unusual to have three such attributions tying a particular book to Syon.

When Stuart Forbes (a fellow SARA member) and I made this discovery at Lambeth, and were whispering loudly over it (to the chagrin of the librarian, since only one person may, in theory, look at any one book at any one time) we were joined by a matching third, black-suited, white-haired figure – James Cawley, an eminent mediaeval scholar, whose wife, is an authority on Syon….our secret was out into the wider Syon Scholars Community. Such is serendipity. And perhaps other volumes await discovery – as Bale said of the books:

……and some they sent over sea to the bookbinders, not in small number, but at times whole ships full, to the wondering of the foreign nations.

Perhaps they are still there. European and American libraries call in siren voices. And what exactly is Betson’s Registrum K.48, (SS1.658) doing at the Xanten Stiftsbibliothek in Germany……?

John Adams,
Member, Syon Abbey Research Associates (SARA)
Fellow, Society of Antiquaries, London
FINIS
and unpaid Book Fines

Even in time of Henry VIII, Thomas Betson, that diligent librarian, had written in the margin of his catalogue against one title, the single ominous Latin word ‘caret’ – ‘missing’. Five hundred years later, it is what must be the longest overdue book with the highest outstanding fine on record. It was last seen in the Syon medical astrology section, and is called ‘Predicting Future Events’, next to a volume on the ‘Virtues of Stars, Stones and Herbs’. I would like to have read these. Mihi carent: I really miss the libraries you ruined, Thomas Cromwell, and mad, bad, sad, bluff King Hal.