

Claire K. Clement – PhD Dissertation Summary

Title: ‘Processing Piety and the Materiality of Spiritual Mission at Syon Abbey, 1415-1539’

This dissertation examines the intersection of spiritual values and material life at Syon Abbey, a wealthy Brigittine double monastery in late medieval England. As an institution it was, paradoxically, directed primarily toward an evangelical goal, while being focused on contemplative women who were strictly enclosed. In this dissertation, I assert that this apparent contradiction was resolved through a high degree of collaboration between the abbey’s religious women and men. I argue that Brigittine monasticism, and that of Syon in particular, was uniquely attuned to metaphors and meanings of materiality, which enabled the abbey to transform the women’s mundane material life of food, clothing, architecture, work, finance, and even bureaucracy, into spiritual fruits to be shared with the Syon brethren through dialogue within confessional relationships, and subsequently, with the laity through the media of sermons, sacraments, books, and conversation.

I use the abbey’s extensive household financial accounts in conjunction with Brigittine writings and monastic legislative documents to examine the intersection of ideal material life and its spiritual meaning on the one hand, and the abbey’s *lived* materiality as reflected in its internal economic and administrative actions, on the other. The central question is the degree to which Syon’s material life was one of luxury in keeping with what the Order’s founder, Saint Birgitta, would have seen as worldly excess, or one of moderate asceticism, in keeping with the Brigittine Rule.

Major findings are that in most respects (financial management, gender power, officer appointments, clothing, and some aspects of food), Syon’s materiality was lived in accordance with the *Rule* and the Brigittine mission, but that in some respects, it erred on the side of elite display and consumption (the majority of food items and the architecture and decoration of the abbey church), and in others, the source material is too incomplete to enable conclusions (the decoration of monastic buildings and the distribution of alms). In addition, by analysing the income from boarding of visitors and offerings from pilgrims, I examine the degree of Syon’s impact on the laity and how it changed with the approaching Dissolution, concluding that the abbey had a significant impact that declined only when legal restrictions were applied.

Processing Piety and the Materiality of Spiritual Mission
at Syon Abbey, 1415-1539

By

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This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History at the
University of Cambridge

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration. It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution. I further state that no part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the History Faculty Degree Committee.

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Note on Names, Dates, and Currency

Generally this study refers to offices rather than specific individuals. In both cases, the chosen name/title in the text reflects the one most commonly found in the sources.

In the vast majority of the Syon accounts, the account covers the period Michaelmas to Michaelmas – i.e. the late medieval English fiscal year. For this reason, the majority of the term is covered by one year. Therefore, for readability, any single date (e.g. 1523) for which the reference is a Syon household account includes the period of the previous year after Michaelmas (e.g. Michaelmas 1522 to Michaelmas 1523). The single exception to this is the Journal Book account, which covers an eight-week period in a single year.

The English currency in this period was pounds (£), shilling (s.) and pence (d.), with 12d. to a shilling, 20s. to a pound, and overall 240d. to a pound. Marks were also still used as a price reference, and were equal to 13s 4d – or two-thirds of a pound.

Chapter 1:

Syon Abbey and the Materiality of Brigittine Mission

In the prologue to the late fourteenth-century *Brigittine Rule*, received by St Birgitta of Sweden in a vision, Christ likens existing monastic orders to vineyards that once ‘brought forth right good wine’ for a long time, but no longer. Now, he says, ‘I see that the wall of the vineyard is destroyed, the keepers sleep, and thieves enter in.’ Monasticism no longer bears the fruit it once had, by which ‘the thirsty were refreshed, the cold took heat, the proud were made meek, and the blind were lightened.’ Monastic orders had failed in their duties toward the world. But now, Christ claimed, he would begin a new order: ‘I shall plant me a new vineyard.’ And, ‘of this vineyard, many vineyards being long time dry, shall begin to be renewed.’ Not only would this new order renew monasticism, but it would serve an explicit evangelical purpose: ‘Into this vineyard shall I therefore send keepers that sleep not in the night. I shall set a wall by godly charity. I shall establish therein the roots of good will which shall not be undermined by the moles of fiendish temptation. ...I shall thereof make sweet the grapes of opinion and devotion to many.’¹ By these statements, Christ and Birgitta set a clear mission for the monasteries of this new Brigittine Order: to renew monasticism and spread piety, by careful stewardship of a spiritual sanctuary existing both in physical space, and in the heart of each Brigittine religious. In this protected space, the virtues of charity, good will, and resistance to temptation would be able to grow, and the religious assigned to cultivate them could then share them with others. The practical processes by which one Brigittine

¹ James Hogg, ‘The Rewyll of Seynt Sauioure and A Ladder of Foure Ronges by the which Men Mowe Clyme to Heven: edited from the MSS. Cambridge University Library Ff.6.33 and London Guildhall 25524’, *Analecta Cartusiana*, 183 (2003), 60-61. ‘brow3t furth ry3t giid wyne long tyme.’, ‘But nowe I playne me that the walle of the vyne3erdes is distroyed , pe keepers slepe, and theuys entyr in...’, ‘What were thes vyne3erdes, but religions and institutes of holy faderys, of whiche pe thirsty were refresshed, the colde toke hete, the prowde were mekyd, and the blynde were li3tenyd.’, ‘I shal plante me a vyne3erde of newe....’, ‘Of this vyne3erde many vyne3erdys beyng long tyme drye, shal begynne to be renewyd....’, ‘Into this vyne3erde shall I therfor sende keperes that slepe not in the ny3t. I shall sette a wall by godly charite. I shalle stablisse therin the rotys of good wylle which shall not be vndymnyd of mollis that is of ped fendys temptacionis.... I shall make swete the grapys of opynion & deuocion therof to many.’

monastery, the English Syon Abbey, strove for such aims and navigated the complications posed by its wider society, are the subjects of this study.

The *Brigittine Rule* was, Birgitta claimed, dictated to her word-for-word by Christ in a vision. The new Order was to be founded in the honour of his mother, Mary, with special liturgical services written in praise of her and in sympathy with her motherly suffering during Christ's Passion. The structure of each new Brigittine monastery should reflect the Early Church, in the days after Christ's Ascension – a time when Mary was the head of the community, sharing her wisdom, knowledge of the Incarnation, and understanding of Jesus with his followers. For this reason, each Brigittine abbey was to be headed by an abbess. The Order was 'for women first and principally', but the 60 sisters in each house were to have 13 clerics in the monastery to sing the divine office, celebrate Mass, hear confessions, and preach to the sisters and the public alike. Assisting them were four deacons (symbolizing the four Doctors of the Church), and eight lay brothers. One of the priests was to be elected to the office of confessor general – a position which supervised the men and all sacramental services at the abbey. Altogether, the total of 85 religious in each monastery was meant to symbolize the 13 apostles (including St Paul), and the 72 disciples.²

Syon Abbey was a prominent and praised example of a Brigittine monastery. Founded in 1415 by King Henry V, it was the only house of its Order in England, and one of the wealthiest of women's monastic houses in the country at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries. The religious men of Syon were instrumental in securing the recognition of the Brigittine Order as a whole at a time when double monasteries were under threat, and Syon members of both sexes were outspoken opponents of Henry VIII's divorce and break from the Catholic Church. The abbey had an impressive library, and was a key player in the writing and early printing of English-language books for lay audiences. Syon also offered a significant indulgence, attracting numerous pilgrims, and counted among its friends such Tudor-era lights as Lady Margaret Beaufort, Thomas More, Erasmus, Katherine of Aragon, Bishop John

² Hogg, 'Rewyll', 61. 'This religion þerfore I wylle sette, ordeyne fyrst & principally by women....' Virginia Bainbridge, 'The Bridgettines and major trends in religious devotion c 1400-1600: with reference to Syon Abbey, Mariatroun, and Marienbaum', *Birgittiana*, 19 (2005), 232.

Fisher, and Mary Tudor – all testaments to the abbey's wide influence on lay spirituality.³

In a climate of increasing anti-monastic rhetoric, Syon was one of only a few religious houses singled out as moral exceptions to a perceived large-scale monastic decay in the lead-up to the Dissolution, with the Chronicler Charles Wriothesley calling it 'the most virtuous house of religion in all England'.⁴ In the last two centuries, historians have concurred, contrasting Syon with the majority of late medieval monasteries and nunneries, which have traditionally been considered materialistic, worldly, and lacking in spiritual vocation.⁵ Recently, scholars have revised the story of late medieval monasticism, emphasizing the vibrancy of monastic life in the late medieval period, and arguing that while it was perhaps different in character from the monastic life of earlier periods, this was the result of conscious processes of reform; monasticism was 'far from in decline.'⁶ Research in the last few decades has shown

³ The main reference is still George James Aungier, *The history and antiquities of Syon monastery, the parish of Isleworth, and the chapelry of Hounslow, compiled from public records, ancient manuscripts, ecclesiastical, and other authentic documents* (London: Nichols and Son, 1840). In addition, see: Fletcher, etc John Rory Fletcher, *The story of the English Bridgettines of Syon Abbey* (Devon: Burleigh Press, 1933); F. R. Johnston, 'Religious houses: house of Bridgettines: Syon Abbey', *Victoria history of the counties of England: a history of the county of Middlesex* (Victoria history of the counties of England, 1; Oxford: Oxford University Press (for the Institute of Historical Research) 1969), 182-91.

⁴ G.W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the remaking of the English Church* (London: Yale University Press, 2005), 167; E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham, 'Introduction: Syon Abbey and its books', in E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and its books: reading, writing and religion, c1400-1700* (Studies in Modern British Religious History; Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 1-38, 9; James G. Clark, 'The religious orders in pre-Reformation England', in James G. Clark (ed.), *The religious orders in pre-Reformation England* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2002), 3-33, 19; David Knowles, *The religious orders in England*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948-59), vol 3, 159, 219, 460; Kathleen Cooke, 'The English nuns and the Dissolution', in John Blair and Brian Golding (eds.), *The cloister and the world: essays in medieval history in honour of Barbara Harvey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 291; Ann Hutchison, 'Syon Abbey preserved: some historians of Syon', in E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and its books: reading, writing and religion, c1400-1700* (Studies in Modern British Religious History; Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 228-51; Michael Tait, *A fair place: Syon Abbey 1415-1539* (San Bernardino, CA: Self Published, 2013), 163.

⁵ For the traditional view, see: R. H. Snape, *English monastic finances in the later middle ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 173-74; R.N. Swanson, *Church and society in late medieval England* (Oxford, 1989), 249; Eileen Power, *Medieval English nunneries, c.1275-1535* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 498; John Tillotson, 'Marrick Priory: a nunnery in late medieval Yorkshire', *Borthwick papers, York*, 75 (1989), 17; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 209, 16; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 460; Joyce Youings, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), 14; Joan Greatrex, 'After Knowles: recent perspectives in monastic history', in James G. Clark (ed.), *The religious orders in pre-Reformation England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002), 35-47, 43.

⁶ Janet Burton and Karen Stöber, 'Introduction', in Janet Burton and Karen Stöber (eds.), *Monasteries and society in the British Isles in the later middle ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), 1-10, 2; Clark, 'Religious Orders', 10-16; James G. Clark, 'Humanism and reform in pre-Reformation English monasteries', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th Ser*, 19 (2009), 57-93; Martin Heale,

that nunneries, especially, were considered devout, useful members of society by their local communities, and that many male monasteries also maintained high levels of spiritual life, despite having fallen somewhat from the earlier ideal.⁷ In this new climate of research, Syon appears less remarkable as a hold-out of morality in a sea of corruption.⁸ The fact that it was singled out for praise suggests, however, that it was more moral than most, or at least was judged as such by contemporaries still holding to the traditional ideals.

Despite Syon's reputation for strict adherence to the highest ideals of monasticism, which proved frustrating to Henry VIII's commissioners, Thomas Cromwell eventually found a way to suppress Syon Abbey on a technicality. Most sisters were pensioned off, while others took the community into exile. After a brief respite during the reign of Mary, when the abbey was reconstituted in Isleworth, Syon's tenure there was ended for good at the accession of Elizabeth I, at which time the English Brigittines, with the help of the Spanish ambassador, fled into exile on the Continent. After centuries of residence there (in the Netherlands, France, Spain, and finally Lisbon), the community was finally permitted to return to England in the nineteenth century. It remained a living, though dwindling, community until 2012.⁹

While scholars have often repeated the positive assessment of Syon by its contemporaries, few have conducted studies that directly test the abbey's adherence to

'Training in superstition? Monasteries and popular religion in late medieval and Reformation England', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 58/3 (2007), 417-39; Roberta Gilchrist, *Contemplation and action: the other monasticism* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1995), 107; Marilyn Oliva, *The convent and community in late medieval England: female monasteries in the Diocese of Norwich, 1350-1540* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), 7, 154-7, 77; Caroline Barron, 'Introduction', in Caroline Barron and Matthew Davies (eds.), *The Religious Houses of London and Middlesex* (London: University of London, School of Advanced Study, 2007), 5-24, 9; Eamonn Duffy, *The stripping of the altars: traditional religion in England, 1400-1580* (London: Yale University Press, 1992); Martin Heale, *Monasticism in late medieval England, c.1300-1535* (Manchester Medieval Sources; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 23, 33.

⁷ For example, see: Oliva, *The convent and community*; Paul Lee, *Nunneries, learning and spirituality in late medieval English society: the Dominican priory of Dartford* (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2001); Valerie Spear, *Leadership in medieval English nunneries* (Studies in the history of medieval religion; Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005); Heale, *Monasticism in late medieval England, c.1300-1535*; Clark, 'Religious Orders'; James Clark, *The Benedictines in the middle ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011).

⁸ Jones and Walsham, 'Introduction', 11-12.

⁹ Tait, *A fair place*, 160, 87-90; Ann Hutchison, 'Syon Abbey: dissolution no decline', *Birgittiana*, 1 (1996), 253.

monastic ideals, and thus the factual foundation of its reputation.¹⁰ The great focus of research on the abbey has instead concerned its intellectual produce, its political and social connections, and the nature of its devotional expression.¹¹ These studies have

¹⁰ Works focusing primarily on aspects of Syon's material life are limited to Ulla Olsen, 'Work and work ethics in the nunnery of Syon Abbey in the fifteenth century', in Marion Glasscoe (ed.), *The medieval mystical tradition in England: Exeter Symposium V* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992); Mary Erler, 'Syon Abbey's care for its books: its sacristan account rolls, 1506/7-1535/6', *Scriptorium*, 39 (1985), 293-307; R. W. Dunning, 'The building of Syon Abbey', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 25 (1981), 16-26; Robert Dunning, 'The muniments of Syon Abbey: their administration and migration in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 37 (1964), 103-11; Richard Farrant, 'The Birgittine abbey of Syon: the archaeological evidence', in Claes Gejrot, Sara Risberg, and Mia Akestam (eds.), *Saint Birgitta, Syon and Vadstena: papers from a symposium in Stockholm, 4-6 October 2007* (Stockholm: Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, 2010), 27-36. Works which include some discussion of Syon's financial or administrative life include: Power, *Medieval English nunneries*; Brian E. Morris, 'The south-western estates of Syon monastery in the later middle ages', (University of Kent, UK, 1977); Nancy Bradley Warren, *Spiritual economies: female monasticism in later medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); H.T. Jacka, 'The Dissolution of the English nunneries', (MA thesis, University of London, 1917); Elizabeth Makowski, *A pernicious sort of woman: quasi-religious women and canon lawyers in the later middle ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Spear, *Leadership in medieval English nunneries*; Hans Jacob Cnattingus, 'Studies in the Order of St Bridget of Sweden: The crisis in the 1420s', *Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis*, 7 (1963); Johnston, 'VCH, House of Bridgettines'; Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*; B. Spencer, 'Pilgrim souvenirs and secular badges', in B. Spencer (ed.), *Salisbury Museum medieval catalogue* (2; Salisbury: Salisbury and Wiltshire Museum, 1990); Brian Spencer, *Pilgrim souvenirs and secular badges: medieval finds from excavations in London* (London: Museum of London, 1998); Lisa Eckenstein, *Woman under monasticism: chapters on Saint-Lore and convent life between A.D. 500 and A.D. 1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896).

¹¹ See, for example, Vincent Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood: reflections on the lost library of Syon Abbey', in A. S. G. Edwards (ed.), *The English medieval book: studies in memory of Jeremy Griffiths* (London: British Library, 2000), 185-208; Vincent Gillespie, 'Syon and the new learning', in James G. Clark (ed.), *The religious orders in pre-Reformation England* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2002), 75-95; Alexandra da Costa, *Reforming printing: Syon Abbey's defence of orthodoxy, 1525-1534* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Virginia Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: women and learning c.1415-1600', in E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and its books: reading, writing and religion, c1400-1700* (Studies in Modern British Religious History; Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 82-103; Ann Hutchison, 'What the nuns read: literary evidence from the English Bridgettine house, Syon Abbey', *Medieval Studies*, 57 (1995); Sue Powell, 'Preaching at Syon Abbey', *Leeds Studies in English*, 31 (2000), 229-67; Mary Erler, 'Syon's "special benefactors and friends": some vowed women', *Birgittiana*, 2 (1996), 209-22; Nancy Bradley Warren, 'Kings, saints and nuns: gender, religion and authority in the reign of Henry V', *Viator*, 30 (1999), 307-22; Neil Beckett, 'St. Bridget, Henry V, and Syon Abbey', in James Hogg (ed.), *Studies in St. Birgitta and the Birgittine Order* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1993), 125-50; Fletcher, *Syon Abbey.*, Roger Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon: the spirituality of the English house of a medieval contemplative order from its beginnings to the present day', *Analecta Cartusiana*, 68/2 (1984); M.B. Tait, 'The Bridgettine monastery of Syon (Middlesex), with special reference to its monastic uses', (Oxford University, 1975); Christopher de Hamel, *Syon Abbey: the library of the Bridgettine nuns and their peregrinations after the Reformation* (Otley: Roxburghe Club, 1991); Anne Bagnall Yardley, *Performing piety: musical culture in medieval English nunneries* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and its books: reading, writing and religion, c1400-1700* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010); Rebecca Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', in Rebecca Krug (ed.), *Reading families: women's literate practice in late medieval England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), 153-206; J.T. Rhodes, 'Syon Abbey and its religious publications in the sixteenth century', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 44 (1993), 11-25; Claire M. Waters, 'Holy familiars: enclosure, work, and the saints at Syon Abbey', *Philological Quarterly*, 87/2 (2008), 135-62.

shed some light on the degree to which the abbey lived up to its ideals in overt spiritual and social expression. Despite very extensive financial records preserved in the UK National Archives, however, we actually know very little about how well Syon lived in accordance with its ideals in more material aspects. This is a significant gap in our understanding of medieval monasticism, and of Brigittine monasticism in particular, because in these worldviews, even the most mundane physical experience could be as expressive of spirituality as prayer. In order to understand how Syon Abbey may have expressed its spirituality in its material living, we must first understand both medieval beliefs about materiality and spirituality more generally, and Brigittine convictions about the connection between the two. It is to these concerns that we now turn.

The Spirituality of Medieval Materiality

There was an inherent contradiction in medieval monasticism – a yearning for and glorification of the spiritual over the physical (or ‘fleshly’) on the one hand, and a belief in the body’s eventual glorification, on the other. The body and its needs were thought to be both the instigators of sin, and the potential vessels for holiness in the world. For those seeking the most perfect spiritual life possible within the physical world, the dichotomous body became a location of deep anxiety and constant debate. The history of medieval monasticism and its many reform movements may be seen, in many ways, as a single long-term debate about the most efficient and intensive way to infuse imperfect, bodily human lives with perfect spiritual meaning and expression.

Medieval culture had a significantly different understanding of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual than is common today. Long interested in the relationship of body and soul – and the ability of this relationship to help or hinder salvation, thinkers in the later medieval period increasingly sought to understand the nature of matter more generally, and to determine how God acts through the material world. These were important concerns in a religion centred on the physical incarnation of the divine, concerns subject to contentious interpretations towards the onset of the Reformation, when sensory experience was increasingly associated with

idolatry.¹² In the medieval mind, the material world was seen as both the location of salvation, and a threat to salvation itself.¹³ On the one hand, matter and the senses were believed to be the place of connection between humans and the divine. God was regularly seen as acting through physicality, notably through the Incarnation and the Eucharist, but also through sacred objects and even mundane material. Because of this, the material world was one way in which humans could communicate with the divine.¹⁴ Bodily experience could have deep spiritual meaning, since, due to the Incarnation, all bodily events were potential manifestations of God's grace.¹⁵ The ultimate spiritual goal of the later middle ages, reflected in movements such as the *Imitatio Christi* – the imitation of Christ in his physical experience – was therefore connecting with God *through* matter, not avoiding it entirely.¹⁶ Body and soul were not as dichotomous in the medieval mind as might be assumed by modern, post-Enlightenment thinkers.

On the other hand, despite this potential for divine connection, matter could also be seen as a threat to salvation. The material world and the senses used to perceive it were believed to be corruptible and easily manipulated by the devil.¹⁷ But while matter was seen as imperfect, God could, it was thought, redeem and lift it up.¹⁸ The senses, likewise, held great power, for good or ill. They provided an opportunity for people to exercise free will, but also contained the danger that such free will would be used in a disordered fashion.¹⁹ While God could redeem imperfect material, evil could make the imperfect seem perfect, and vice versa; God truly redeemed matter, while evil only made matter *seem* redeemed.²⁰ The key to balance was discernment –

¹² Claire M. Waters, *Angels and earthly creatures: preaching, performance, and gender in the later middle ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 96; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian materiality. An essay on religion in late medieval Europe*. (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 33, 285; Matthew Milner, *The senses and the English Reformation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 2, 4, 343, 47; Alexandra Walsham, 'The Reformation and "the disenchantment of the world" reassessed', *The Historical Journal*, 51/2 (2008), 497-528.

¹³ Bynum, *Christian materiality*, 34-35.

¹⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, 'The sacrality of things: an inquiry into divine materiality in the Christian middle ages', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 78/1 (2013), 3-18, 16-18; Bynum, *Christian materiality*, 285; Milner, *Senses*, 7.

¹⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption: essays on gender and the human body in medieval religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 202, 35.

¹⁶ Bynum, *Christian materiality*, 250.

¹⁷ C.M. Woolgar, *The senses in late medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 13; Milner, *Senses*, 4, 43-44, 87-88.

¹⁸ Bynum, *Christian materiality*, 178, 219, 65.

¹⁹ Milner, *Senses*, 2-4, 14, 87-88.

²⁰ Milner, *Senses*, 43-44, 87-88.

through training, guidance, and the close management and monitoring of contact with all physical and sensory inputs.²¹ Without such close monitoring, dealing with the senses could be a cause for great anxiety.

Knowing the true moral nature of material objects was crucial. Late medieval culture held that material objects themselves were imbued with specific moral meanings – either dangerous, or beneficial.²² Though evil could manipulate one to seem like the other, the true nature of the substance was what affected those who came into contact with it. The senses, it was believed, transmitted not only the smell, taste, and texture of physical objects, but the moral and spiritual qualities of the matter as well.²³ Sensation was in fact seen as itself a physical process, a movement of physical effect from the object to the perceiver. It was, as Milner puts it, ‘a possession of the human body’ by the qualities of a sensed object or experience.²⁴ The senses were seen both as the gates to the body, through which the devil might enter, and as divinely created channels, allowing for intake and expression of goodness.²⁵ There is an assumption here of a mechanical effect – a lack of free will in the face of sensory input.

The possibility for discernment, and thus free will, comes in with the ability to decide which matter to expose one’s body to. The food eaten, clothing worn, and objects seen, were believed to have extraordinary potential to affect an individual’s spiritual well-being. Asceticism was therefore seen not as a rejection of the body, but as an elevation of the body which made it easier for the soul to access God.²⁶ This suggests that though matter was the location of salvation, it could only serve as that point of contact with the divine after special preparation of the body or material to be used. Ascetic practices helped the religious person focus on the spiritual rather than the physical, sharpened perception, and emphasized the inferiority of the senses and materiality compared with human will and thought.²⁷ They were also important elements in the *Imitatio Christi*; learning to be like Christ meant learning to sense like

²¹ Milner, *Senses*, 51, 53, 58-59, 65.

²² Milner, *Senses*, 43-44, 87-88.

²³ Woolgar, *Senses*, 13.

²⁴ Milner, *Senses*, 64; Woolgar, *Senses*, 28.

²⁵ Woolgar, *Senses*, 13, 17.

²⁶ Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption*, 182.

²⁷ Milner, *Senses*, 76.

Christ – learning to see, smell, hear, and suffer like him.²⁸ This spiritual meaning of physical practices was reflected in the day-to-day piety of monasticism, in which even the most mundane chores and individual or group consumption choices might be undertaken as expressions of devotion.²⁹ In this sense, spirituality extended well beyond the boundaries of pure devotion into every aspect of monastic life. And so material life and mundane action could be as central to the monastic identity as contemplation.

And yet, despite this importance of both body and soul, materiality and spirituality, in relationship, so many studies of monasticism focus on one to the exclusion of the other. On the material side, more attention has been paid to the scale and management of monastic estate properties than to the consumption habits of the religious themselves, and even less so to the spiritual meaning of the latter.³⁰ This stems in part from the greater interest of past historians in capital and income rather than expenditure and consumerism. Medieval economic historians have in general tended

²⁸ Milner, *Senses*, 76.

²⁹ Claire Walker, *Gender and politics in early modern Europe: English convents in France and the Low Countries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 163-5; Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 16, 113, 16; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast: the religious significance of food to medieval women* (London: University of California Press, 1987), 6, 25-26, 29-30, 193, 209-10, 58.

³⁰ Major studies of monastic estate and financial management include: Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Holy entrepreneurs: Cistercians, knights, and economic exchange in twelfth-century Burgundy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 4-5; Janet Burton, *The monastic order in Yorkshire, 1069-1215* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 276; R. B. Dobson, *Durham Priory, 1400-1450* (Cambridge studies in medieval life and thought, 3rd Ser., 6, 1973); R.A.L. Smith, *Canterbury Cathedral Priory: a study in monastic administration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943); R.A.L. Smith, 'The financial system of Rochester Cathedral Priory', *The English Historical Review*, 56/224 (1941), 586-95; R.A.L. Smith, 'The central financial system of Christ Church, Canterbury, 1186-1512', *The English Historical Review*, 55/219 (1940), 353-69. Studies which discuss, but do not focus on, financial and administrative management in nunneries include: Joann McNamara, *Sisters in arms: Catholic nuns through two millennia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 273; Tillotson, 'Marrick Priory'; Coburn V. Graves, 'Stixwould in the marketplace', in John Nichols and Lilian Thomas Shank (eds.), *Distant echoes: medieval religious women* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1984); Jackie Mountain, 'Nunnery finances in the early fifteenth century', in Judith Loades (ed.), *Monastic studies: the continuity of tradition* (Bangor: Headstart History, 1991), 263-72; Bernice Kerr, *Religious life for women, c.1100-c.1350: Fontevraud in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Oliva, *The convent and community*; John Nichols, 'The internal organization of English Cistercian nunneries', *Citeaux*, 30/1 (1979), 23-40; J.N. Brown and D.A. Bussell (eds.), *Barking Abbey and medieval literary culture: authorship and authority in a female community* (York: York Medieval Press, 2012); J.B.L. Tolhurst, *The ordinale and customary of the Benedictine nuns of Barking Abbey: Sanctoale: University College, Oxford, MS 169* (Henry Bradshaw Society, 2010); Winifred M. Sturman, 'Barking Abbey: a study in its external and internal administration from the Conquest to the Dissolution', (University of London, 1961); Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and material culture: the archaeology of religious women* (London: Routledge, 1997); Warren, *Spiritual economies*; Werner Roesener, 'Household and prayer: medieval convents as economic entities', in Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Susan Marti (eds.), *Crown and veil: female monasticism from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 245-58.

to focus on the supply side – estates, farming, and trade, and much less so on consumption. This has been changing, however, with food consumption, both lay and monastic, especially receiving increased interest.³¹ The studies of monasteries, however, have focused primarily on identifying patterns of monastic consumption with a view toward what they can say about consumption in wider medieval society, and have been less concerned with assessing the degree to which that consumption reflected the stated values and spiritual aims of the monastic Orders in question. The spiritual context of work, institutional structures, and administration have received slightly more attention and calls for further research, but are rarely considered in combination with a systematic examination of standards of living.³²

Brigittine Materiality

While materiality was central to the monastic project and to late medieval spirituality in general, it was especially important as a metaphor and way of life to Saint Birgitta and her Brigittine Order. Birgitta put a great deal of emphasis in her writings on material details and material metaphors for spiritual processes, probably derived from her extensive personal experience with practical things. Born into the nobility of Sweden, Birgitta married at the age of thirteen, raised eight children, and served as counsellor to the Queen of Sweden. Literate, she was able to read and write Latin as

³¹ For lay consumption, see: C.M. Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', *Journal of Medieval History*, 36 (2010), 1-19; C.M. Woolgar, 'Fast and feast: conspicuous consumption and the diet of the nobility in the fifteenth century', in Michael Hicks (ed.), *Revolution and consumption in late medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), 7-25; C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition* (Medieval History and Archaeology, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Christopher Dyer, 'English diet in the later middle ages', in T.H. Aston et al. (eds.), *Social relations and ideas: essays in honour of R.H. Hilton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 191-216; Kate Mertes, *The English noble household, 1250-1600: good governance and politic rule* (London: Blackwell, 1988); C.M. Woolgar, *The great household in late medieval England* (London: Yale University Press, 1999); Mark Dawson, *Plenti and grase: food and drink in a sixteenth-century household* (Totnes, Devon: Prospect Books, 2009). For monastic consumption, see: Miranda Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets: Durham Cathedral Priory, 1420-1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Barbara Harvey, *Living and dying in England, 1100-1541: the monastic experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Philip Slavin, *Bread and ale for the brethren: The provisioning of Norwich Cathedral Priory 1260-1536*, ed. Nigel Goose (Studies in Regional and Local History; Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2012).

³² E.g. Giles Constable, *The reformation of the twelfth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 261; Jeffrey F. Hamburger, 'Introduction: histories of female monasticism', in Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Susan Marti (eds.), *Crown and veil: female monasticism from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 1-11, 8-9; Knowles, *Religious orders*; Clark, *Benedictines*; Barry Collett (ed.), *Female monastic life in early Tudor England: with an edition of Richard Fox's translation of the Benedictine rule for women, 1517* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 28; Lee, *The Dominican priory of Dartford*, 6; Warren, *Spiritual economies*, viii.

well as her native Swedish, and took care of wide-ranging administrative duties as head of a large noble household.³³

In fact, one central metaphor of Brigittine materiality is that of household management. Birgitta extended the common medieval metaphor of holy woman as the Bride of Christ to its logical, practical conclusion. A bride was, after all, also a wife, who assisted her husband in managing the goods and people of his household, and in bearing his children.³⁴ Birgitta believed that in becoming the Bride of Christ, she had also become the daughter-in-law of Mary, and Christ's wife in a practical sense. Therefore, because the whole world was Christ's household, it was, she believed, her household as well, and it was her responsibility to tend to its affairs.³⁵ We see here that Birgitta's spirituality is inherently material and practical in perspective. As Morris notes, her *Rule* also applied this perspective directly. In it, we see her concern with the details of bedding clothing, fabric, food, and many more items of practical life.³⁶ As a good housewife translates love into the material sustenance of food and domestic order, Birgitta – and the women of the Brigittine Order who were meant to model themselves after her – laboured *materially* to produce and express piety, for the benefit of the world. This has echoes of another of Birgitta's material metaphors – that of the physical process of motherhood, which Birgitta used as an analogy for her public speech and apostolic role. She also instructed the sisters of her Brigittine Order to model aspects of this. As Mary's role in the Incarnation brought Christ into human bodily form, the sisters were to bring Christ into the material world through their own deeds.³⁷

The most telling material metaphor used by Birgitta to direct her Order's spiritual mission was that of the 'new vineyard', discussed at the beginning of the present chapter, which used explicit images of economic production and management to

³³ Bridget Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999); Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the voice of prophecy* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001); Katherine Zieman, 'Playing Doctor: St Birgitta, ritual reading, and ecclesiastical authority', in Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (eds.), *Voices in dialogue: reading women in the middle ages* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 307-34; Bainbridge, 'The Bridgettines and major trends in religious devotion', 228.

³⁴ Sahlin, *Voice of prophecy*, 21, 50-51.

³⁵ Sahlin, *Voice of prophecy*, 92-94.

³⁶ Morris, *St Birgitta*, 163.

³⁷ Sahlin, *Voice of prophecy*, 106.

symbolize the spiritual task set out for the sisters and brothers of the Brigittine monasteries. We see in this passage several material items: wine – the drink to refresh the thirsty, give heat to the cold, make meek the proud, and lighten the blind; a wall, surrounding the vineyard, yet destroyed, replaced by a new one built ‘by godly charity’; keepers – those watching day and night over the enterprise of grape-growing, wine-making, and wine-distribution; thieves – those who threaten the growth of the grapes and thus their distribution as wine for the thirsty; roots – of good will; moles – of ‘fiendish temptation’, who threaten to undermine the roots; and grapes – devotion, made sweet and pleasing to many. Finally, there is the vineyard itself, the location and enterprise in which the fruits would grow, the wine would be made, the wall be built, the moles be fended off. And from this vineyard and its fruits, all of the existing, faulty vineyards with their broken walls and thieves, would be renewed.³⁸ Birgitta gives us an image of a pleasant, bustling, agricultural enterprise, whose overarching purpose is to provide good will, refreshment, and enlightenment to a world neglected by its crumbling competitors.

Birgitta was not the first founder of a monastic Order to use metaphors of materiality in a description of spiritual mission. The *Rule of St Benedict*, written 800 years earlier, also used a metaphor of production process in describing the monastic way of life. To Benedict, the monastery was a ‘workshop’ in which monks honed the ‘tools of spiritual craft’, and earned wages (rewards from God) for their spiritual labour.³⁹ Little is said, however, of the final recipients or buyers for the monks’ spiritual crafts. What is different about Birgitta’s vineyard metaphor is that it specifically mentions producing wine in order to *distribute* it. Therefore, the reason to toil in growing the metaphorical grapes was specifically in order to make metaphorical wine to benefit others. There is, then, a clear evangelical mission at the heart of the Brigittine vineyard metaphor.

As all of these material analogies were central to the Brigittine concept, materiality thus helped shape the mission of the Order, and therefore gave Syon its very identity as an institution with a spiritual mission. There are important questions, however,

³⁸ Hogg, 'Rewyll'.

³⁹ Benedict of Nursia, 'The Rule of St. Benedict in English', Timothy Fry (ed.), (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1982), Chapter 4.75-4.78.

about how the arrangement reflected in the analogy would have worked in practice. How did the metaphorical vineyard of Birgitta's *Rule* actually function in a given monastery? How did the abbey organize its religious members, lay staff, and resources to produce and distribute the wine and 'grapes of good devotion'? What role did the enclosed, contemplative nuns play in cultivating and distributing this piety? How did their own individual ascetic lives affect the 'fruits' available for distribution? How did that materiality of food, clothing, shelter, and work produce the spiritual wine of world renewal? The central question here is the intersection of spiritual and material on the collective, institutional level, and how the individuals, embedded within that collective context, might have seen their vocations and their daily, mundane materiality in its light. How did this weaving together of material and spiritual create a single tapestry of daily meaning for the organization as a whole?

Furthermore, how did their actual standard of living, as opposed to the ideal described in the *Rule*, reflect the materiality of the vineyard and household metaphors? How did their *lived* materiality compare, not only with their own sense of mission and identity, but also with the expectations outsiders had of them in an era critical of monastic excess? Some scholars have examined materiality and sensation from the point of view of sacraments, holy objects, and the senses.⁴⁰ The study of the spiritual meaning of *mundane* materiality, has, however, been more limited, as has the investigation of these themes in a specifically monastic context.⁴¹ In neglecting the lived materiality of Syon's life, scholars have also neglected a significant aspect of Brigittine spirituality. The present thesis seeks to remedy this gap in understanding by joining this analytical context to a systematic quantitative study of a specific lived materiality, enabled by the quantitative and analytical methods of economic history, and a close study of the working financial and bureaucratic documents of Syon Abbey.

⁴⁰ Bynum, *Christian materiality*; Bynum, 'The sacrality of things: an inquiry into divine materiality in the Christian middle ages'; Woolgar, *Senses*; Milner, *Senses*; Paul Freedman, *Out of the East: spices and the medieval imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); John N. King (ed.), *Tudor books and readers: materiality and the construction of meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴¹ Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*. Quantitative studies of monastic economy necessarily address some of this, by comparing the consumption of the religious to that of the laity, but none examine deeply the spiritual meanings and implications of that consumption. See, e.g. Harvey, *Living and dying*; Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*; Slavin, *Bread and ale*.

There are additional reasons a study of this sort has not been approached before. Traditionally, historians have examined late medieval monasteries with a view to understanding the origins and progress of the Reformation, or have neglected them altogether – dismissing them as decayed and irrelevant because supposedly inexorably declining towards the Dissolution. Monasteries of the period have rarely been examined in their own right, and early sixteenth century monastic houses in particular have been neglected.⁴² The study of material standards of living in monasteries has had other limitations. Previously, studies touching on this have focused on men's monasteries, citing a lack of sources for the study of women's monasticism.⁴³ In the last three decades, nunneries have been the focus of more interest. Much of the recent work, however, has concentrated either on nunneries of earlier periods, or on the smaller, poorer houses with fewer sources, rather than large institutions like Syon for which there is ample evidence.⁴⁴ Syon certainly has attracted extensive scholarship, but few have been interested in the more institutional aspects of Syon's existence – blinded, perhaps, by the bright riches of its spirituality, intellectual life, and social connections. This can also be seen in part as a consequence of the larger trend in monastic studies away from institutional approaches and into the 'cultural turn'.⁴⁵

More attention has been paid to the relationship between the sexes in female monasticism, an intriguing problem for a lifestyle requiring both separation of the sexes, and the female need for exclusively male-administered sacraments. Much of this research has also revolved around the question of why most female monasteries were smaller and poorer than their male counterparts, and what distinguished female monasticism from male, with most scholars finding the origins in different societal objectives for houses of the different genders.⁴⁶ This conclusion is in some ways the

⁴² Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, ix; Clark, *Benedictines*, 255-56, 309-10, 16; Clark, 'Religious Orders', 3.

⁴³ Knowles, *Religious orders*.

⁴⁴ Sally Thompson, *Women religious: the founding of English nunneries after the Norman conquest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Sharon Elkins, *Holy women of twelfth-century England* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Oliva, *The convent and community*; Janet Burton, 'The Yorkshire nunneries in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries', *Borthwick papers, York*, 56 (1979); Janet Burton, 'Yorkshire nunneries in the middle ages: recruitment and resources', in John Appleby and Paul Dalton (eds.), *Government, religion and society in northern England, 1000-1700* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997); Marjorie.J. Harrison, 'The nunnery of Nun Appleton', *Borthwick Papers, York*, 98 (2001); Mountain, 'Nunnery finances in the early fifteenth century'; Tillotson, 'Marrick Priory'.

⁴⁵ Burton and Stöber, 'Introduction', 1.

⁴⁶ Penelope Johnson, *Equal in monastic profession: religious women in medieval France*, ed. Catharine R. Stimpson (Women in Culture and Society; London: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Gilchrist,

natural result of a focus on small institutions and the majority. Syon is perhaps best seen as an exception to these cultural norms.

Sources for the Material Life of Syon Abbey

The claims about a lack of source material for the study of nuns, particularly concerning their household administrations and material way of life, do not hold up in the light of existing archives. There is a great deal of wonderful source material about nuns which is as-yet unexplored. The Syon household accounts have barely been studied until the present thesis, and the accounts of Barking Abbey and other nunneries in England have only been briefly analysed.⁴⁷ One example that has recently come to light is the extensive collection of personal letters from Katrina Lemmel, a nun at the Brigittine abbey of Maria Mai in Bavaria, to her family members – letters which contain a great deal of information on her abbey's household finances.⁴⁸ Another example is the *Buch im Chor* of Anna von Buchewald, prioress of Preetz, noted recently by Hamburg.⁴⁹ It is true, however, that case-studies of the financial administration of medieval nunneries have tended to rely on very limited sources or short series of accounts.⁵⁰ Kerr's study of the English Fontevraud houses, for example, depended on sources for which the longest continuous record was only eighteen months.⁵¹

The sources available for Syon Abbey's expenditure and material life are much more extensive, and include long series of both the household and estate accounts, the *Brigittine Rule*, and the detailed *Syon Additions to the Rule*. The *Brigittine Rule* and the *Syon Additions* are major sources for both the spiritual outlook and the daily life

Contemplation and action: the other monasticism; Burton, *The monastic order in Yorkshire*, 125, 45-6, 74; Penny Schine Gold, 'Male/female cooperation: the example of Fontevraud', in John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank (eds.), *Medieval religious women, vol 1: distant echoes* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 151-68, 123.

⁴⁷ Sturman, 'Barking Abbey: a study in its external and internal administration from the Conquest to the Dissolution', in Brown and Bussell (eds.), *Barking Abbey and medieval literary culture: authorship and authority in a female community*.

⁴⁸ K. Lemmel, C. Schleif, and V. Schier, *Katerina's windows: donation and devotion, art and music, as heard and seen through the writings of a Birgittine nun* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

⁴⁹ Hamburger, 'Introduction: histories of female monasticism', 1-2.

⁵⁰ Mountain, 'Nunnery finances in the early fifteenth century'; Graves, 'Stixwoud in the marketplace'.

⁵¹ Kerr, *Fontevraud in England*, 147.

of the abbey religious, and they have been used by a number of scholars.⁵² Despite its concern for some symbolic aspects of the Order's material life, the *Brigittine Rule* did not go into a great deal of detail about ideal daily practical life in Brigittine monasteries. In fact, the *Rule* states explicitly that Cistercian or Benedictine brothers should be enlisted to create additions to the *Rule*. The group which composed Syon's *Additions* seems to have based them partially on documents originating from Vadstena, the Swedish mother house of the Brigittine Order.⁵³ Syon appears to have been sceptical of Vadstena's *Additions*, however, and desired a return to the 'true' intentions of Birgitta; the *Syon Additions* were, as Anderssen argues, written to replace the Vadstena regulations with something more in alignment with the ideals of the English house.⁵⁴ Syon was also privileged within the Order, and its *Additions* reflect its unique rights as given by the 1425 papal bull *Mare Anglicanum*.⁵⁵ The *Additions* were composed sometime between the date of that bull, and 1473, when the text was revised by a committee of religious men.⁵⁶

Syon's *Additions* were divided into three sets: one for the sisters, one for the lay brothers, and one for the priests and deacons. Each was a detailed description of the ideal daily actions of each group, similar to the household ordinances popular in the increasingly bureaucratized household and royal governance structures of later medieval England. The mid to late fifteenth century was a time in which the nobility was increasingly concerned to systematize the practical running of their large, institutional households, and in which government itself was increasingly

⁵² Hogg, 'Rewyll'; James Hogg (ed.), *The Syon additions for the Sisters from the British Library MS. Arundel 146*, ed. James Hogg (The Rewyll of Seynt Sauoure : and other Middle English Brigittine legislative texts, 4; Salzburg: Analecta Cartusiana, 1980); James Hogg (ed.), *The Syon additions for the Brethren and the Boke of sygnes from the St. Paul's Cathedral Library MS*, ed. James Hogg (The Rewyll of Seynt Sauoure : [and other Middle English Brigittine legislative texts] 3; Salzburg: Analecta Cartusiana, 1980). Studies of Syon using these: Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon'; Tait, 'Bridgettine monastery of Syon'; Yardley, *Performing piety*; Erler, 'Syon Abbey's care for its books'.

⁵³ James Hogg, 'Additions of Prior Peter Olsson', *Analecta Cartusiana*, 32/9 (1990), 92-123; Sara Risberg, 'Liber usum fratrum monasterii Vadstenensis: the customary of the Vadstena brothers. A critical edition', *Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis. Studia Latina Stockholmiensia*, 50 (2003), 10-20. For discussion of these documents and their relationship with the Syon Additions, see Elin Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses: perspectives on the Birgittine Rule in two texts from Vadstena and Syon Abbey: a critical edition with translation and introduction* (Stockholm: Stockholms Universitet, 2011), 7-11, 18, 37; Morris, *St Birgitta*, 163.

⁵⁴ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 15, 8, 12, 37.

⁵⁵ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 37.

⁵⁶ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 37.

bureaucratic.⁵⁷ The ordinances written for them were, in modern terms, ‘staff manuals’ for royal and noble organizations, detailing the general responsibilities of each officer, and even the minutest details of their duties in regards to ceremony, material management, and accounting. Just as lay household ordinances each described and enforced a total institution imbued in every aspect with social and political meaning, the *Syon Additions* were a reflection of the monastery as a total institution, in which even the smallest and most mundane aspects of life were infused with spiritual meaning.

Of the original three sets of *Syon Additions*, only the *Additions for the Sisters* and the *Additions for the Lay Brothers* have survived in nearly-complete form, and of the additions for the priests and deacons of Syon, only a fragment has been found. To make up for the missing priest and deacon additions, it is possible to supplement the remaining fragments with Vadstena’s *Additions of Prior Peter* and *Liber Usum*, and with Syon’s seventeenth-century *Lisbon Additions*, which contain additions for all of the men.⁵⁸ Given known differences between Syon and Vadstena regarding the responsibilities of the men versus the women, in the former case, and changes in practice after the Dissolution, in the latter, these are unlikely to be fully reflective of the life of the fifteenth and sixteenth century Syon men; in the absence of a document that is, however, they offer useful clues to how the men’s lives may have been configured.⁵⁹

Some degree of caution must be adopted in using the *Syon Additions*. They are, above all, statements of ideals, not of certain actions, and one must be careful to test life in theory against life in reality. It is also not clear to what degree the Syon women had any input in the creation or modification of the *Additions*, and therefore to what degree they represent the women’s own standards for their lives.⁶⁰ These texts also

⁵⁷ Kim M. Phillips, 'The invisible man: body and ritual in a fifteenth-century noble household', *Journal of Medieval History*, 31 (2005), 143-62, 145, 52, 54; Mertes, *English noble household*, 51. See, for example, A.R. Myers (ed.), *The household of Edward IV: the Black Book and the ordinance of 1478* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959); and *The good wife's guide (Le ménagier de Paris): a medieval household book*, trans. Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

⁵⁸ Hogg, 'Additions of Prior Peter'; Risberg, '*Liber usum fratrum*'. For information on the *Lisbon Additions*, see: Ellis, '*Viderunt eam filie Syon*'.

⁵⁹ Cnatingus, 'Studies in the Order of St Bridget'; Tait, *A fair place*.

⁶⁰ Tait, *A fair place*, 308-14; Cnatingus, 'Studies in the Order of St Bridget'.

represent the Syon ideal in a specific period – the span of time between 1425 and 1473 in which they seem to have been created. While the *Additions* are known to have been a regular part of the daily life of the Syon men and women, it is not inconceivable that the attitude of the religious towards them may have changed through time.⁶¹

The reason for the relative neglect of Syon Abbey material life must be attributed in part to a longstanding unfamiliarity with the full extent of surviving Syon household accounts.⁶² There are currently 216 household and obedientiary accounts for Syon at The National Archives in Kew. In addition, the archive has nearly 1,000 estate accounts for the Syon, and over 150 other financial and legal documents produced by or related to the abbey. King's College Cambridge also holds records related to property disputes with Syon.⁶³ Despite this vast wealth of manuscript evidence, most authors who have referred to any Syon household accounts have relied on the few that were printed in Aungier, in Blunt's edition of *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*, or in Eileen Power's *Medieval English Nunneries*.⁶⁴ Neither Aungier, Blunt, nor Power seem to have been aware of any additional accounts.⁶⁵ Dunning does seem to have examined many of the existing records in the course of his study on the history of the abbey's muniments, but by no means all. He referred to the 'over four hundred ministers' accounts relating to Syon property', several court rolls, rentals, and deeds which were preserved in the Public Record Office (National Archives).⁶⁶ Dunning never mentions the household accounts, and would surely have recorded a higher number of ministers' accounts in general had he been aware of the scale of the archives' holdings.

⁶¹ Saetveit Miles examines the use of the texts at Syon: Laura Saetveit Miles, 'Scribes at Syon: the communal usage and production of legislative manuscripts at the English Birgittine house', in Claes Gejrot, Sara Risberg, and Mia Akestam (eds.), *Saint Birgitta, Syon and Vadstena: papers from a symposium in Stockholm, 4-6 October 2007* (Stockholm: Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, 2010), 71-88.

⁶² The existence of the Syon household accounts and the absence of studies using them has been noted by a few recent scholars: Greatrex, 'After Knowles: recent perspectives in monastic history', 43; C. Paxton, 'The nunneries of London and its environs in the later middle ages', (Oxford University, 1992), 1-2; Gilchrist, *Gender and material culture: the archaeology of religious women*, 71.

⁶³ For an integrated catalogue of Syon sources at The National Archives, King's College, Cambridge, and other archives, see <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/results/r?q=Syon+Abbey>

⁶⁴ E.g., Olsen, 'Work and work ethics', 142.

⁶⁵ John H. Blunt, *The myroure of oure ladye* (London: Early English Text Society, 1873), xviii; Power, *Medieval English nunneries*; Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*.

⁶⁶ Dunning, 'Muniments of Syon', 109.

It is not at all clear why the true extent of the National Archives' collection of Syon Abbey accounts has been unknown to so many. Dunning traced the movement of the records to the Court of Augmentations after the Dissolution, and they were still there in the early eighteenth century, when Tanner saw in the office a chest from Syon containing numerous accounts and rolls.⁶⁷ The records were kept near Westminster Hall from 1793 until the Westminster Palace fire in 1843.⁶⁸ According to Dunning's analysis of the muniments, they were all carefully organized by Syon Abbey's obedientiaries, and were treated with care in the ensuing centuries.⁶⁹ Thorold Rogers relied a great deal on the Syon household accounts for volumes 3 and 4 of his *History of Agriculture and Prices in England*. Judging from the items for which he recorded prices, he seems to have had access to much of the series of sixteenth-century Cellaress Household Accounts, but perhaps not the Cellaress Foreign Accounts, since he did not record prices of items (such as spices) commonly found in the latter documents at Syon. He seems to have had limited access to the series of Chambress Accounts, referring to entries from only a few years, and seems to have had access to only one or two Sacristan Accounts, given that his analysis of 'church furniture' includes almost nothing of the numerous relevant entries from those Syon documents. Like the editor of the *Myroure*, Thorold Rogers lamented that 'only a small part of this precious collection' of accounts survived.⁷⁰ This begs the question of what happened to the abbey's household accounts in the period between the Westminster Palace fire of 1843, and the 1980s, when Erler seems to have had access to the complete set of currently known accounts.⁷¹

Whatever the history of the household accounts' preservation and cataloguing, it is clear that few scholars have used them for the study of Syon itself. Erler's article looking at the full set of Sacristan Accounts is the most complete, but it focuses narrowly on evidence for books and reading, missing the many fascinating details

⁶⁷ Dunning, 'Muniments of Syon', 109; T. Tanner, *Notitia monastica: or, An account of all the abbies, priories, and houses of friers, heretofore in England and Wales; and also of all the colleges and hospitals founded before A.D. MDXL* (London: William Bowyer, at the expense of the Society, 1744), 324.

⁶⁸ Dunning, 'Muniments of Syon', 109.

⁶⁹ Dunning, 'Muniments of Syon', 109. See below for discussion of the organization.

⁷⁰ J. E. Thorold-Rogers, *A history of agriculture and prices in England. Volume 3* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), ix.

⁷¹ Erler, 'Syon Abbey's care for its books'.

about church décor and management.⁷² To date, no one has completed a study of the sixteenth-century accounts of the chambress and cellaress, the abstracts of the accounts of the treasurers and abbess, and the fifteenth-century Cellaress Latin Accounts which include information on most of household expenditure. A comprehensive study using all of the Syon household accounts is therefore needed, and filled with potential.

The present thesis approaches the Syon accounts both quantitatively and qualitatively. First, as its foundation, I created a database of all income and expenditure items (with volumes bought and amounts paid or received) in the Syon household accounts. Where information on amounts actually consumed by the abbey household were given they have been recorded as well. I then analysed these items quantitatively, determining averages, changes over time, and relationships with other items of consumption, expenditure, and income, to build up a systematic longitudinal analysis of Syon household economic data. In addition to providing insight into the financial state of the abbey and the character of its expenditure and consumption, the findings also shed light on many aspects of Syon's social and cultural life, such as the nuns' commitment to reading (seen in the volume of spectacles purchases), and the popularity of the abbey as a pilgrimage destination – and thus its ability to distribute piety and renew the world per its Bridgettine mission (seen in the volume of offerings given at the Syon church each year). The accounts also have much to offer through a qualitative analysis. They contain many verbal details which are quite telling about the economic activities, social life, and cultural habits of the monastery, such as names of food and drink suppliers, titles and names of prominent visitors, descriptions of pieces of art purchased, clues to power relations between the abbey men and women, allusions to gifts received, and qualitative information about the formation of the accounts themselves.

Just as any medieval text must be approached with caution, financial accounts do have limitations and must be dealt with carefully. They could misrepresent the truth in a number of ways, either through simple error, through deliberate manipulation by staff trying to cheat the Syon obedientaries, through deliberate doctoring by the

⁷² Erler, 'Syon Abbey's care for its books'.

obedientaries to cover errors they perhaps hoped to hide from the abbess, or through deliberate doctoring on the part of the abbey as a whole, to hide some debt or other misfortune from the visiting bishop. These are all potential reasons why the Syon accounts might not represent reality at the abbey. Despite the potential, there is no evidence that these accounts represent anything other than what the Syon women and their clerks believed to be true. One problem does certainly exist with the Syon household accounts. They are not complete as individual series, or as a set. The journal books on which they were based have not survived. There are missing years in each series, and it is also possible that there are entire series of accounts missing (e.g. that of the infirmaress, or that of an almoner, if such an officer existed), though they would probably have been mentioned in the other accounts had they existed. There may also have been full accounts for both the abbess and treasurers, on which the Abstracts of Accounts of those officers were based, and certain lay staff, such as the household steward, baker, granger, and many others, likely had accounts which have been lost. Despite these gaps in knowledge, the Syon household accounts stand out as one of the most complete sets of monastic household financial records surviving from medieval England.

With the combination of the exceptional series of household accounts for Syon, and the excellent detail about ideal material life and its spiritual meaning described in the abbey's *Additions* to the *Rule*, there is a wealth of primary sources available for the study of the standards of living of Syon residents, and how this measured up against the stated goals of their spiritual mission. The surviving sources enable an examination of material life that is embedded in the meaning of that materiality. The present thesis delves into those mundane aspects of life, and the materiality of the less mundane, in order to understand better the way of life of these women and men. It will attempt to ascertain how well the reality of Syon's material life fitted the ideal portrayed in its legislative documents and reputation.

The Vineyard in Practice

Before entering into discussions of specific aspects of Syon's material life, it will be helpful to understand the workings of the abbey as a whole organization, namely, how this complex of functions expressed, was directed toward, and attempted to fulfil, the

abbey's spiritual mission, as outlined by the *Brigittine Rule* and its metaphor of the vineyard. The central question to be answered is: How, exactly, was women's enclosed contemplative spirituality a source for the renewal of the world, and how did their material life reflect that? To answer this question we must look again at the vineyard metaphor. In this passage of the *Rule*, the women are identified as the 'keepers' of the vineyard. The vineyard in turn is the site of production of the 'grapes of good devotion' and the 'right good wine'. The way in which the sisters were meant to produce this fruit of devotion is described well in the *Brigittine Rule*, and with great detail in the *Syon Additions*. The ultimate method of this production of piety was a combination of deep contemplative life, and a spiritually-informed material life. In her other spiritual writings, Birgitta emphasized three central virtues involved in a correct orientation to the material and social world: humility, contempt for worldly riches, and bodily abstinence; and she identified their opposites: the corresponding vices of pride, covetousness, and carnal pleasure.⁷³ Each binary of vice and virtue had both spiritual and material aspects, and each was acknowledged and managed within the legislative texts of Syon Abbey and the framework of the monastic Order. It is in the management of these binaries – in the constant nudging toward the virtues and away from the vices – that the production of piety was to be achieved. By managing the spirituality of their own souls embedded in the materiality of Syon Abbey life, the sisters cultivated the grapes of good devotion that were eventually distributed to the world.

The dual physical and spiritual aspects of the virtues promoted within Syon need some explanation. Bodily abstinence, or asceticism – an avoidance of excessive carnal pleasure – expressed a defined relationship to sexual chastity, food, clothing, shelter, and work. Birgitta believed that the disciplining of the body created the conditions for the soul to begin understanding spirituality.⁷⁴ The willingness to chastise the body, and to increase one's wisdom concerning the connection of spirituality and bodily life was a necessary step in attaining holiness, she believed, and was therefore a fundamental step in the process of creating change in the world. The evangelical

⁷³ Ingvar Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform in the Revelations of St. Birgitta* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1993), 188.

⁷⁴ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 225.

mission of the Brigittine Order must begin, therefore, with the mental and physical discipline reflected in contemplation and asceticism.

Aside from the complete rejection of sexual activity, a non-negotiable factor in respectable medieval (especially female) monasticism, this was not, however, an extreme asceticism. Unlike that pursued by many female mystics of the late middle ages, the version of asceticism advocated by Birgitta for the sisters of her Order emphasized moderation.⁷⁵ The body and its legitimate needs for food, drink, rest, and even joy, must be carefully monitored, but not be denied or despised in themselves. Birgitta saw the created world as very good, since it was made by God. It is only any irrational use of the goods of the world, she believed, which should be avoided. Such ‘disordered’ practices included any excessive use which valued lower things over higher – for example valuing delight in food, drink, and bodily comfort over spiritual betterment and goodness to others.⁷⁶ One did not need to renounce worldly things, so long as they remained means to a greater end, not ends in themselves.⁷⁷

This emphasis on moderation was in keeping with one of the growing currents in spiritual views towards materiality in the later middle ages, in which asceticism was not the rejection of the body, but the *elevation* of the person’s physicality to a state of holiness.⁷⁸ The body was also in fact the location of spiritual opportunities, and so a *means* to holiness.⁷⁹ This trend in belief was especially apparent in the popularity of the *Imitatio Christi*, the imitation of Christ in all of his bodily aspects, in which the spiritual emulation of his holy actions also meant the emulation of his holy physicality, requiring in turn an understanding of the deep spiritual possibilities inherent in all matter.⁸⁰ Traditional monastic historians have seen the decreasing strictness regarding fasting rules and the increases in comfort and wealth of late medieval monasticism as signs of monasticism’s decay, but for Birgitta and others like her, it was expressive of a deeper sense of how material life could embody

⁷⁵ See Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*.

⁷⁶ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 50, 186, 223.

⁷⁷ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 187.

⁷⁸ Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption*, 182; Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 246.

⁷⁹ Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption*, 194.

⁸⁰ Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 250-2.

spiritual goals.⁸¹ Asceticism in later medieval Europe was specifically ‘an effort to plumb and to realize all the possibilities of the flesh.’⁸² That is, an attempt to make the very essence of physicality, experienced by humans in their daily lives, as expressive of spirituality as fully as possible. So thorough was the interaction of the spiritual with the material thought to be, that the possibility for grace was seen to exist within every bodily event.⁸³ This was particularly emphasized by religious women, including those of the Brigittine Order, for whom even the most mundane chores and smallest details of daily life could be experienced as acts of prayer.⁸⁴ Living a good material life was therefore as important to the Syon nuns’ sense of identity as was their contemplation.⁸⁵

This was as true on an institutional level (in terms of collective wealth) as on an individual level. For Syon to succeed as an institution, it had to maintain a balance of collective asceticism and consumption that reflected the balance sought by each individual sister, and which was likewise directed toward the greater goals of the Brigittine mission. Despite Birgitta’s call for a contempt of worldly riches and a rejection of covetousness (as well as pride of social position), she stressed that each house of her new monastic Order should have a substantial initial foundation of great wealth, and close ties to the royal family of its kingdom.⁸⁶ Syon was substantially endowed with lands by its princely founder, King Henry V. The king consulted with numerous specialists to determine the precise amount of land revenue needed to make the abbey perpetually self-sustaining. He then transferred land to Syon from the previously-dissolved alien priories to create a substantial and stable endowment for the abbey, worth over £2,400 in the 1520s.⁸⁷ There were some challenges in bringing all this new property under Syon’s control, caused in part by the Wars of the Roses, but due primarily to Henry VI’s desire to found Eton and King’s College Cambridge and endow them with some of Syon’s lands. These issues were finally resolved by

⁸¹ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol3, 460; Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 6; Heale, ‘Training in superstition?’.

⁸² Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 294.

⁸³ Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption*, 235.

⁸⁴ Ellis, ‘*Viderunt eam filie Syon*’, 16, 113, 16; Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 6, 25-26, 29-30, 193, 209-10, 58; Walker, *Gender and politics*, 163-5.

⁸⁵ Walker, *Gender and politics*, 163-5.

⁸⁶ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 219-23.

⁸⁷ See Chapter 3.

Edward IV, and Syon, unlike some less fortunate Brigittine abbeys, was thereafter blessed with a stable and secure income.⁸⁸

Assuming such a strong foundation of wealth, Brigittine monasteries such as Syon were strictly prohibited from accumulating landed assets beyond what was necessary to support themselves with the ideal number of members, at the ideal standard of living.⁸⁹ Birgitta included in this ideal not only the bare minimum of food, clothing and shelter for physical subsistence, but also those goods that were necessary to express and ensure social status in society and retain the respect of the royals with whom all Brigittine abbeys were meant to be closely connected.⁹⁰ This view of expenditure could allow for more magnificence than was elsewhere thought appropriate, and may have significantly impacted on Syon's willingness to consume luxury goods and services.

It was the ever-expanding accumulation of wealth, such as that so apparent in other great monastic Orders, that Birgitta sought to avoid.⁹¹ Medieval Christianity in general contained a great deal of ambivalence about affluence, especially in its associations with power, and renouncing it was one of the foundations of monasticism.⁹² Monasteries had a tendency to amass it, however, and with it, to accumulate criticism about their rejection of such a fundamental tenet of the ascetic life. Successive waves of monastic reform attempted to re-set religious Orders to property-less times, but ownership, both corporate and private, repeatedly crept back into the standard monastic life of most Orders.

Birgitta's *Rule* responded to both of these issues, but in unexpected ways. Rather than reinforcing prohibitions against wealth, she *required* it for her monasteries. On the one hand, Birgitta may have been aware of the struggles of the Poor Clares to gain a right to the privilege of poverty.⁹³ Seeing this, she may have decided to embrace this

⁸⁸ This wealth will be discussed in Chapter 3 below. For the struggles of Maria Mai in Germany, see: Lemmel, Schleif, and Schier, *Katerina's windows*.

⁸⁹ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 216.

⁹⁰ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 215-16.

⁹¹ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 216.

⁹² Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as mother: studies in the spirituality of the high middle ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 261-62.

⁹³ Joan Mueller, *The privilege of poverty: Clare of Assisi, Agnes of Prague, and the struggle for a Franciscan Rule for women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

ban, and redirect it toward a positive goal. More importantly, however, Birgitta saw a large foundation of wealth as a way to better enable her monasteries to live out the higher elements of the Order's mission. Having more money meant having social and political influence (in this, Birgitta was a realist and keen observer of medieval political society), while simultaneously decreasing the need to solicit benefactors from those same circles. This led to the greater long-term security of the monastery and more time for the religious to focus on their individual and collective production of piety. At the same time, it ensured that the abbey did not itself require alms which could otherwise go to the poor.⁹⁴ In addition, without the need for fundraising, contacts with powerful people could focus on furthering direct spiritual goals, such as the salvation of individuals, and widening the spiritual influence of the abbey in general.

The desire to maximize the monastery's almsgiving was central to Birgitta's plan for the Order's attitude toward wealth and expenditure.⁹⁵ This value was enshrined in the *Rule's* prescriptions about annual surplus. The *Brigittine Rule* specified that at the end of each accounting year, the sisters were to do a close reckoning of what money they had left over, what they needed for the next year, and what was surplus to their true, projected necessities. Anything that was not genuinely needed was to be given away to the poor on All Saints day.⁹⁶ In addition, Birgitta declared that any gift received by the abbey should in turn be handed over to the poor, or to needy churches.⁹⁷ Furthermore, whenever a member of the abbey died, his or her allotment of food and clothing was to be given to the poor until another religious professed in their place, and each year, when the religious were allocated new sets of clothing, rather than accumulating apparel, they should give their old sets to the poor.⁹⁸

All of this close consideration of wealth – the balancing of expenditure necessary for social status, with the limitations on consumerism necessary to maximize available alms, required good management of both resources and people.⁹⁹ Such administrative work was not itself divorced from spirituality, however. Spear has argued that it

⁹⁴ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 219-23.

⁹⁵ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 218-19.

⁹⁶ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 218-19; Hogg, 'Rewyll'.

⁹⁷ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 219-23.

⁹⁸ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 219-23.

⁹⁹ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 77.

would have been difficult for the Syon religious to keep up their contemplative life in the midst of their business in the world – their reception of visitors and pilgrims, and their management of the abbey’s property.¹⁰⁰ Such labour could itself, however, be seen as an integral aspect of Brigittine piety – both as an expression of devotion, and as a means for spiritual growth. According to the *Myroure of Oure Ladye*, a devotional work written for the Syon nuns by one of their brethren, every aspect of daily life was to be an act of prayer, even ‘good besynes’.¹⁰¹

The infusion of spiritual meaning into business (and busyness, in the sense of activity) was something Syon author Richard Whitford recommended, as well, in his *A werke for Housholders, or for them that haue the Gydyng of Gouvernaunce of any Company*, a text oriented to a lay audience, but heavily influenced by the concerns of the Syon women.¹⁰² In this text, he argued that those who hold positions of authority over others must first take care of their own spirituality so they can govern others well, and that all of their governing must reflect and demonstrate that piety. They were advised to pray in preparation for their daily work, avoid idleness, and do no evil works. They were advised, as well, to complete a reckoning of their own actions on a daily basis, including their behaviour, the people they spent time with, what they ate and drank, and everything they did. Through this, they would identify the smallest of their sins, correct them in the future, and be prepared to confess them when the opportunity arose.¹⁰³ This has echoes of the methods of daily material accounting expected of the Syon obedientiaries and their clerks, and is yet another way in which mundane materiality became a metaphor for Brigittine (or in this case, Brigittine-derived) spirituality.¹⁰⁴

This close examination of personal actions echoes Birgitta’s stress on the importance of humility and its corollary, obedience – as set against their opposites, pride and

¹⁰⁰ Spear, *Leadership in medieval English nunneries*, 97.

¹⁰¹ Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 116.

¹⁰² Richard Whytford, *A werke for housholders: or for them that haue the guidyng or gouvernaunce of any company. Gadred and set forth by a professed brother of Syon, Richarde Whitforde: and newly corrected and prynted agayne with an addicion of polici for housholding, set forth also by the same brother*. (London: Imprynted at London : In flete strete, at the sygne of the George, by me Roberte Redman, 1531).

¹⁰³ Collett (ed.), *Female monastic life*, 12-14.

¹⁰⁴ For daily accounting, see Chapter 3

disobedience.¹⁰⁵ This was expressed by the expected acknowledgement by each religious member of their own imperfections, their forgiveness of each other, and their trust in God's mercy.¹⁰⁶ Thus self-scrutiny was an important part of the process of producing piety for eventual renewal of the world, and it existed on both the private, personal level, and the public, communal level.¹⁰⁷ This is one reason for Birgitta's emphasis on the humble, obedient Virgin Mary as a spiritual model for the Brigittines, and it was primarily through the practice of humility and obedience that the Syon community signified their modelling of her.¹⁰⁸ This suggests that there may have been extra stress at the abbey on being satisfied with subsidiary roles in the organization. Following the chain of command was as important to the running of Syon as any large organization, but more so given its monastic status, and the importance of obedience within that system.¹⁰⁹

Hierarchy was necessary in a large bureaucracy and household like Syon, and part of good management was a correct moral attitude toward holding higher office. Birgitta believed that people should control their ambition, and not desire higher offices. 'Moderate honour' was acceptable, however, as long as the holder executed the office with love for everyone, reverence to God, and a correctly caring and un-oppressive attitude toward the lowly. Ultimately, holding office could only be positive when the official recognized 'that what is truly honourable is from God, and that the honour itself is ultimately to be referred to God'.¹¹⁰ If this precept was followed, holding higher office could be seen as a spiritual calling.¹¹¹ This has implications not only for the relationship of subordinate to supervisor within the administrative hierarchy of the Brigittine sisters, but also for the authority relationship of Syon's two genders, with men perhaps being exhorted, through these ideas, to be satisfied with their limited administrative role at the abbey, and not ambitiously seek higher office or material control. In this humility lay their vocation.

¹⁰⁵ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 189; Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 27.

¹⁰⁶ Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 38.

¹⁰⁷ Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 65.

¹⁰⁸ Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 238; Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 191.

¹⁰⁹ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 198.

¹¹⁰ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 194.

¹¹¹ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 194.

Personal spiritual growth could therefore arise from practices of good management and correct orientation towards managerial power. Collett argues that Richard Fox and Richard Whitford, along with Thomas More, each associated with Syon, all had an understanding of monastic spirituality that concentrated on the efficient working of the individual and the community, necessitating the conscientious exercise of authority, and on the vocational skills through which they practiced the ‘craft of religious living’.¹¹² The way to work at the religious craft efficiently, according to Fox, was to clarify and focus on the moral issues involved in the work. By doing so, a person would gain a sense of purpose and direction in her day-to-day work. To these thinkers, authority and the managerial responsibilities that came with it, were not dry and separate from spirituality, but expressive of it as a personal vocation.¹¹³ The Syon legislative documents reflect this, for example in regards to the spiritual qualities performed in the handover of administrative office from one nun to another.¹¹⁴

What we have been speaking of here is a transition point in the practical application of the vineyard metaphor. The exercise of good management through ‘good besynes’ was both a way of *producing* piety – a way of increasing devotion in the individual sisters and in the organization as a whole – and a way of *processing* it – ensuring that it was rendered into a form accessible to the public. The management of property, people, and the day-to-day work of a great household’s life created the context in which the entire process of producing and distributing piety could take place. The administration of the abbey and its material and human resources constituted the ‘overhead’ costs and work of the vineyard. Without it, the growth of devotion could not have occurred within each individual sister and brother and in their collective community, and without it, the venues and processes for increasing devotion in the world would not have existed. Another central part of this processing of piety existed in the very structure of each Brigittine monastery – namely, in its double nature. We have seen how ‘the grapes of good devotion’ could be grown in the vineyard of Syon, and how the administrative management of the abbey served to enable both the growth and the distribution. But how were these grapes turned into the wine to be shared with others? How were the strictly enclosed contemplative nuns meant to

¹¹² Collett (ed.), *Female monastic life*, 29-30.

¹¹³ Collett (ed.), *Female monastic life*, 47-48.

¹¹⁴ Ellis, ‘*Viderunt eam filie Syon*’, 94.

increase devotion among those outside the cloister walls? The answer lies with the role of the men in a Brigittine monastery, and their importance to the Order's mission of evangelical outreach.

There is some contradiction in the gender roles within the Brigittine Order. According to all versions of the *Rule*, the Order was for women 'first and foremost'. These sisters were to lead lives of strictly enclosed contemplative prayer, interrupting that only for manual work, administration of the monastery finances, and management of its staff. On the other hand, Birgitta placed a great deal of emphasis on her monasteries as sites of pilgrimage, and on the external pastoral care services of the brothers. In one of the visions recorded in Birgitta's *Revelations*, Christ instructs her to seek out for her monasteries a grant of the most extensive indulgences available in the late middle ages – those associated with the church of St Peter in Chains in Rome, which she pursued and obtained.¹¹⁵ A pilgrim on many occasions, herself – to Santiago de Compostela, Rome, and Jerusalem – Birgitta emphasized the value of travel to the shrines and relics of saints and the importance of such connections at her monasteries. In the *Rule*, she stated that the Brigittine clerics must 'expound the Gospel each Sunday to all hearers in their mother tongue' and 'preach openly on all solemn feasts'. Such was the emphasis given to this preaching, and the necessity for study and preparation, lest the clerics lead people astray by misunderstanding and misinformation, that the brother assigned to the task on each occasion was given a total of four days off of choir attendance, to write his sermon.¹¹⁶ These sermons must be clear and direct, in order to best edify the laity, and bring them back to the Church and to salvation.¹¹⁷

These activities clearly fit with Birgitta's vision of the Order as a means to renew the world, but are at first glance at odds with its core of religious women 'first and foremost'. Given her emphasis on the work of the Order's clerics as preachers, it would seem that the primary method of transmitting that devotion, that piety, to the world, was through the brothers' sermons, and perhaps through the other aspects of their external pastoral care – hearing confessions of pilgrims, and giving spiritual

¹¹⁵ The *Ad Vincula* indulgence. Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 58, 68, 96-98, 107.

¹¹⁶ Hogg, 'Rewyll'; Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 71.

¹¹⁷ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 72, 150, 53-54.

direction to abbey friends and visitors. Most of the text relating to the sisters, on the other hand, both in the *Rule* and in the *Additions* to the *Rule* written for Syon, focuses on the details of daily life, including personal comportment, attitude, and food; on their financial, administrative and managerial duties; and on their basic collective performance of piety – that is their participation in the divine office and religious processions.

The spiritual impact the sisters were to have on the outside world was less obvious. One of the primary methods of influence was the divine office of the sisters, which Birgitta saw as edifying those who heard it.¹¹⁸ One Syon text written for the sisters, *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*, emphasized the effect that the liturgy had on the entire Christian world. Each sister was to concentrate wholeheartedly on God during the services, and in doing so, she would teach others through example.¹¹⁹ As Waters argues, the Brigittines in fact saw this contemplative musical prayer of the sisters as a counterpart to the preaching of the brothers, and Syon in particular expanded Birgitta's sense of engagement with the world through liturgy.¹²⁰

Another method of sharing the fruits of contemplation was through gentle instruction and admonition through social contact. A passage in the *Additions* suggests that the sisters' mature response to frivolous speech by secular visitors and staff could have a gentle teaching component – an evangelical opportunity and duty for those religious who held administrative office. The sisters were to serve as a good example to outsiders through their speech and behaviour in these encounters, and were to admonish them gently when necessary.¹²¹ Social contacts also gave the women another opportunity for evangelism. Sisters could act as spiritual advisors, to a minor extent, through their written correspondence with family and friends of the abbey. There are a few traces of such letters written by Syon women – most accompanied by presents of Brigittine-style prayer beads, books, printed woodcuts of St Birgitta, or gifts of food at holidays.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 102; Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 24.

¹¹⁹ Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 117.

¹²⁰ Waters, 'Holy familiars', 154.

¹²¹ Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 95, 101; Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*.

¹²² For example, see Robert Norman Swanson, *Indulgences in late medieval England: passports to paradise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 273; and Martha W. Driver, 'Nuns as patrons, artists, readers: Bridgettine woodcuts in printed books produced for the English market', in

The sisters could also be a powerful means of spreading piety by way of example more generally. Birgitta emphasized personal reform as a way to world reform, and believed that Christ tested good people ‘so their stability in the face of hardship can become apparent to the outside world and inspire others’.¹²³ In her opinion, good example was actually a more effective method of attracting people to religion than speech alone.¹²⁴ The ability of enclosed women in general to affect the wider world through example was an accepted understanding of their vocations in the later middle ages.¹²⁵ This understanding was also accepted by some at Syon, such as the priest Richard Whitford, who argued that the sisters should be examples to the laity of good works and manner of life.¹²⁶ Meanwhile, their own spiritual battle within the enclosure, he believed, was an ‘example and light vnto all parsones’.¹²⁷

The Syon women therefore had an important role in disseminating the piety of the abbey. All of these are subtle means of evangelizing, however – in keeping with the home-bound, family-admonishment type of teaching allowed of women in a society that largely banned female public preaching.¹²⁸ When it came to overt spiritual outreach, the *Brigittine Rule* gives more emphasis to the role of the priests, through their several pastoral activities with pilgrims and visitors. This seems to contradict the *Rule*’s depiction of the Order as being both fundamentally engaged in the renewal of the world, and being for women ‘first and principally’. It also seems to contradict one of the fundamental emphases of women’s spiritual life in a Brigittine abbey – the need to model oneself after the Virgin Mary and Birgitta herself. Both of these women are depicted in Brigittine writings in authoritative positions with public preaching roles.¹²⁹

As Claire Waters argues in an intriguing article, however, the saints used as role models in Syon writings modelled a form of cooperative spirituality, in which the

Carol Garrett Fisher and Kathleen L. Scott (eds.), *Art into life: collected papers from the Kresge Art Museum Medieval Symposia* (East Lansing, Mich: Michigan, 1995), 237-68.

¹²³ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 100, 243.

¹²⁴ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 154-55.

¹²⁵ Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption*, 54, 63, 69, 70, 73; Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 74-75.

¹²⁶ da Costa, *Reforming printing*, 15.

¹²⁷ da Costa, *Reforming printing*, 15.

¹²⁸ Waters, *Angels and earthly creatures*.

¹²⁹ Waters, ‘Holy familiars’.

piety performed by the sisters and that performed by the brothers intersected and interacted with each other.¹³⁰ Others have mentioned the multiplying effect that the proximity of genders had: as Christopher de Hamel put it, ‘the scholarship of the men was somehow given authority by the very real piety of the women.... The two communities hardly ever met, but the strength of each lay in the proximity of the other’.¹³¹ These are important insights, but they are limited to abbreviated discussions of spiritual and literary culture. These scholars were not concerned with the mission and functioning of the abbey from an administrative, economic, and institutional perspective. Nor, I think, do they go far enough in their conclusions about intersection, proximity, and the implications of these for Syon’s renewal of the world.

To take up the latter issue first: Waters and others demonstrate that Birgitta and her life were used as role models both for the nuns and for the abbey structure as a whole. However, the full implications of this for the gender collaboration and the institutional functioning of Syon have not been investigated. In addition to the preaching role of the Brigittine priests, Birgitta also outlined their role in acting as confessors for the nuns, and stressed the need for confessors to be available at all times, and for the sisters to confess often. This strong emphasis on frequent confession is unique among medieval religious Orders, and strikingly reflects the saint’s own positive relationships with her confessors. These relationships may also have served as models for a more complete, two-way process of spiritual collaboration between the brothers and sisters in her Order.

Birgitta received many revelations which took the form of conversations with Christ and Mary. Despite the fact that she was literate, able to read and write in Swedish and minimally in Latin, she was directed in one of her visions to hand her writings over to her confessors for translation, verification of their orthodoxy, and elucidation based on important works of theology. Birgitta was therefore a channel of God’s grace and wisdom, who collaborated intimately with certain trusted men in the dissemination of that divinely gifted grace. She was at the same time profoundly committed to increasing wisdom in the world, favourable to female authority of both spiritual and material kinds, and well aware through personal experience of the danger of women

¹³⁰ Waters, ‘Holy familiars’.

¹³¹ de Hamel, *Syon Abbey: the library*.

preaching in public. She had, herself, been accused of witchcraft and would likely have been put to death were it not for her noble status and the many male confessors who heard her tales of visions and believed them to be true.¹³² Taken in this context of Birgitta's attitudes toward female spiritual authority and the value of textual and spiritual collaboration with men, the structure of the Brigittine monastery might best be seen as an attempt by the saint to reproduce the conditions of her public evangelical role for large numbers of women after her. By joining a group of fully contemplative women with a group of part-contemplative, part-apostolic men, in close confessional relationships, she provided a multiplied replica of her own piety-creation and distribution method.

While several monastic influences have been identified for the Brigittine Order, it has recently been convincingly argued by Fogelqvist that Birgitta was attempting to restore the Dominican ideal and in particular its emphasis on a path devoted both to contemplation, and to sharing the fruits of that contemplation with others.¹³³ In one of Birgitta's visions, Christ tells her to go out into the world like the apostles in order to share the 'sweetness' of his spirit with others, instead of keeping her joy-giving personal spiritual experiences to herself.¹³⁴ The saint's writings repeatedly emphasized this concept, and its applicability to contemplatives. Though they would prefer to rest in the 'sweetness' of Christ, they should not remain, she said, but rather go forth to share the joy with others, and to share Christ's words and grace – so that others may be edified through their own personal contemplative light. To refuse this call to help others participate in Christ's sweetness is to be guilty of the sin of sloth. Even those devoted solely to contemplative life, Birgitta stressed, should edify others. In one of her visions, Christ says in reference to contemplatives that 'a fire in a closed, airtight vessel will quickly be extinguished and the vessel will grow cold.' If

¹³² Sahlin, *Voice of prophecy*.

¹³³ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 155-56; Ingvar Fogelqvist, 'The new vineyard: St. Birgitta of Sweden's *Regula Salvatoris* and the monastic tradition', in Alf Hardelin (ed.), *In quest of the Kingdom: ten papers on medieval spirituality* (Bibliotheca Theologiae Practicae Kyrkov Studier Series No 48; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991), 203-44, 227. Ellis sees primarily Benedictine influences: Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 10, 20. Cnatingus, Höjer, and Warren argue for a Fontevraud influence: Cnatingus, 'Studies in the Order of St Bridget'; Torvald Höjer, *Studier i Vadstena klosters och Birgittinordens historia intill mitten af 1400-talet* (Upsala: Almqvist och Wiksells boktryckeri, 1905); Warren, *Spiritual economies*, 13. Nyberg maintains that Cistercian influence is primary: Tore Nyberg, *Birgittinische Klostergründungen des Mittelalters* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1965).

¹³⁴ Sahlin, *Voice of prophecy*, 28.

they want to honour God, they should open their mouths and let the ‘flames of charity’ come out. In this process, they bear ‘spiritual children for God.’¹³⁵ That the character used by Christ to demonstrate this in Birgitta’s vision is a woman, Mary of Bethany, and is discussed while speaking to a woman, Birgitta, suggests that this is meant to be applicable to women in general. Birgitta further reinforces the idea in speaking of the parable of the talents. To her, the talents symbolized the Holy Spirit, a gift which must be returned, multiplied: ‘Those who have received knowledge should benefit themselves by it and instruct others.’¹³⁶ One of her most trenchant criticisms of existing monasticism was, in fact, that the clerics had abandoned their duty to work for the salvation of souls. In addition, too many religious had become complacent about helping save other souls, once they were satisfied that their own salvation was assured.¹³⁷ With such strong statements, it is likely that Birgitta also applied to the women of her Order these requirements to share the fruits of contemplation. These concepts and Birgitta’s use of them, makes clear that Syon’s simultaneously contemplative and evangelical life was not the contradiction or dichotomy that da Costa assumes.¹³⁸

Brigittine monasticism, or at least that practised at Syon in the sixteenth century, can be seen as attempting to institutionalize a form of apostolic opportunity for women which later became prevalent among counter-Reformation nunneries.¹³⁹ Similar to the nuns of those houses, the sisters of Syon seem to have become ‘spiritual conduits’ between their own contemplation, and the lay communities – either indirectly, through the evangelical work of the brethren they influenced, or directly, through the divine office or contact with visitors and staff at the grate. So, the evangelical work of the women was sometimes ‘vicarious’ but they may have understood their identity as being one of an active apostolic life, one that simply took a different form than that of the clergy.¹⁴⁰

Like Birgitta, the women of Syon produced piety by performing it in their daily lives – in their holy manner of speech, the way they walked in procession, the food they

¹³⁵ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 156-57.

¹³⁶ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 157.

¹³⁷ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 69, 149.

¹³⁸ da Costa, *Reforming printing*, 143.

¹³⁹ Walker, *Gender and politics*, 134.

¹⁴⁰ Walker, *Gender and politics*, 171.

ate, and by their efficient management of finances and people. By private reading and prayer, singing divine office, listening to sermons from the brothers, and considering advice received in confession, they grew spiritually as individuals. Their singing, letters, and speech to seculars helped disseminate the wisdom they found, but it was perhaps in the confessional that they were best able to work as channels of piety along the model of St Birgitta. The priest-brothers of Syon, following simultaneously their own individual spiritual paths, could receive this wisdom from the sisters in the course of confession and spiritual direction, combine it with insights from their own reading and prayer, and disseminate it to the wider world through sermons, advice given to pilgrims in the external confessionals, and the books they wrote for lay readers.¹⁴¹ It was therefore the sisters' focus on *individual* personal piety in all of its physical and spiritual manifestations, shared in trust with a close group of men, that enabled the women of Syon to speak out and transform the world. The corporate performance of piety at Syon Abbey was, therefore, composed of multiple individual and group performances, all processed, expanded and refined through close collaboration between the sexes, all within the strictly adhered-to enclosure. In a sense, then, the cloistered theatre of the Syon sisters became the stage on which Birgitta's renewal of the world was performed.

This interpretation of the Syon spiritual process has implications for our understanding of the abbey's broader institutional processes as well. It has become common among historians of female monasticism to speak of the 'spiritual economy' (the trading of prayer for income), and of the 'sacramental disability' (women's need to pay for external priestly services which men's monasteries had in-house – to the ultimate detriment of the women's 'overhead' costs, which impacted nunnery finances in general and their prayer-for-income enterprises in particular).¹⁴² Scholars have often therefore characterized the provision of spiritual services as a kind of

¹⁴¹ According to my study of the Syon financial accounts, Syon Abbey received 6,000 pilgrims every year, on average. For this and more on distributing piety, see Conclusion chapter.

¹⁴² See Warren, *Spiritual economies* for the phrase. This is the traditional framing of medieval nuns' purpose, and is used by, e.g.: Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey'; Brian Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine Order, c. 1130-c. 1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Elkins, *Holy women of twelfth-century England*; McNamara, *Sisters in arms*; Power, *Medieval English nunneries*; Spear, *Leadership in medieval English nunneries*; Thompson, *Women religious: the founding of English nunneries after the Norman conquest*; Burton, 'Yorkshire nunneries in the middle ages: recruitment and resources'; Kerr, *Fontevraud in England*; Knowles, *Religious orders*; Roesener, 'Household and prayer: medieval convents as economic entities'; Oliva, *The convent and community*. For 'sacramental disability' see Johnson, *Equal in monastic profession*.

industry enabling a continued life of prayer for the religious themselves.¹⁴³ But prayers and other spiritual services provided might be more fruitfully thought of as, at least in the Brigittine context, similar to the expensive per-plate dinners of major fundraising campaigns today. The point of the organization was not to produce these services (or in the modern context, serve these expensive meals), but to serve God, the poor, and the spiritually needy. One way they raised money for this was by providing spiritual goods to individual donors. To say that the provision of spiritual services in return for donations was the primary purpose of a Brigittine monastery is akin to saying that the provision of decadent meals is the primary purpose of a major modern charity. Some might cynically argue that the purpose of modern non-profits devolves into such organizational self-fulfilment, but it is not the intended purpose of legitimate charities. Syon's large endowment and the stipulation in the *Rule* that the abbey was not to solicit or accept further gifts, had the result that Syon was freed from the *necessity* to accept bequests in return for prayers for further donors. The abbey had the potential, therefore, to function as an organization oriented more specifically towards the good of the world at large, in function, as well as ideal. To assume that Syon's purpose was to provide spiritual services for bequests in some kind of transaction of 'spiritual economy', is to suggest that it was either not *founded* to fulfil the evangelical purpose set forth for her Order by Birgitta, or that it had *devolved* to the point of pure organizational self-interest. This is not to suggest that other religious houses or Orders did not have the good of the world in mind – certainly even the most enclosed, non-evangelical, contemplative Order prayed for the salvation of the world. Syon itself was enclosed and deeply contemplative – but written into its *Rule* was a clear evangelical mission – a directive to preach to the laity and renew the world.

The Plan of the Dissertation

At the heart of this Brigittine programme of world renewal through personal spiritual growth was the tension between reform, spiritual values, and ideals on the one hand, and the temptations of the flesh on the other. The crux of the issue was how people dedicated to spiritual life navigated the need to exist materially, and how this

¹⁴³ This framing has also been applied to the Church at large. Ekelund et al, for example, speak of 'the retail distribution of salvation.' Robert B. Ekelund et al., *Sacred trust: the medieval Church as an economic firm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 47.

intersection was dealt with in the Brigittine context, with its particular emphases. For the Brigittines in general, and for Syon specifically, the material *was* spiritual. Choices involving physical objects like clothing and food, were *spiritual* choices – between temptation and abstinence, humility and pride, idolatry and holiness. In addition, material choices were fundamentally and explicitly connected to a wider evangelical mission. Good decisions involving food volume and type not only involved personal spiritual issues, but also explicitly impacted both the amount of alms the abbey could give, the kind of example the monastery could set for the world, and the amount of piety or holiness produced – that is, the amount of full spiritual wisdom the abbey religious had to offer to others, as the ‘fruits of their contemplation’. The outstanding financial and legislative sources available for the study of Syon Abbey make it possible to investigate how such choices were handled in a prominent Brigittine monastery.

The investigation begins in Chapter 2 with a look at what labour constituted the ‘good besynes’ of the Syon sisters and brethren. A brief overview of spiritual and intellectual labours is given, before more in-depth examinations of the administrative and manual labour of the religious. The potential impact of such work on abbey spiritual life is then discussed, and the chapter ends with an analysis of the extent to which the religious lightened their load of labour by hiring lay staff. Chapter 3 analyses the abbey’s financial reporting hierarchies and accounting processes, before examining the income, expenditure, and alms-giving patterns of the monastery. Syon’s expenditure is examined in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5, which focus on the quantitative analysis of food, clothing, art, and architecture consumption, while investigating its moral and social meanings. Particular emphasis is given to how the quantitative findings affect the assessment of Syon’s adherence to the *Brigittine Rule*, the *Syon Additions*, and the overall mission of the Order. Finally, the concluding chapter summarizes the findings in the previous chapters, considers the abbey’s attempts to expand its influence, and briefly analyses the degree to which it made an impact on the world.

Chapter 2

‘Good Besynes’: The Religious at Work

In her work on the history of female monasticism, JoAnn McNamara spoke of ‘the alchemy of mysticism’, involving the ‘transformation of flesh into spirit’ through cloistered lives and the mortification of the flesh, a process to which many medieval religious women aspired.¹ The metaphor might be extended in an institutional direction. Through its use of the vineyard metaphor and its processing of personal piety and material resources into the world-renewing ‘fruits of good devotion’, Syon may, in a sense, be thought of as having attained a sort of ‘organizational alchemy’, a transformation of the material into the spiritual through bureaucratic processes. It is how Syon converted money, food, and the labour of human bodies into a spiritual renewal of the world.

The central processes of this bureaucratic alchemy were the transmutation of work into spiritual meaning through systems of financial reporting and money management, discussed in the following chapter, and through structures of hierarchy and decision-making, the subject of the present chapter. Necessary to the latter analysis is an overview of the labour resources available to the residents of the abbey, including the amounts and types of labour of the religious themselves, and the number and kinds of staff they employed. Essential, also, is an analysis of the degree to which these labour arrangements impacted the spirituality of Syon life and reflected Brigittine and wider monastic and societal expectations, and therefore the degree to which monastic work at Syon could be described as ‘good besynes’. It is to these matters that we now turn.

¹ McNamara, *Sisters in arms*, 325.

The Syon Community in Overview

Abbeys of the Brigittine Order were designed to have both male and female religious, making this a double order, and giving rise to tensions over distribution of power between the two sexes. An ideal Brigittine abbey, as designed by Birgitta herself, would have eighty-five religious in total, in numbers symbolic of the early Church after Christ's ascension – including sixty nuns (symbolizing the disciples of Christ), thirteen priests (symbolizing the twelve apostles plus Paul), four deacons (for the four Doctors of the Church), and eight lay brothers, for a total symbolizing the 72 disciples and thirteen apostles. Leading this community was the abbess, its 'head and lady', whose position symbolized that of Mary in her role as the head of the earliest Church, and whose authority covered the monastery's material administration, much of its spiritual direction, and the sisters' daily lives.² Overseeing the day-to-day running of the men's side, and the majority of spiritual direction in the monastery, was the confessor general, who was subordinate to the abbess in material matters, but the final arbiter, in many ways, of the spiritual life of the entire monastery. It is probable that the monastery fluctuated just below and up to its ideal numbers for most of its medieval life. In 1420, when the first religious were professed at Syon, twenty-four nuns, five priests, two deacons, and four lay brothers entered the monastery.³ By 1431, when it moved from its original site in Twickenham (found to be cramped and unhealthy), to its larger Isleworth location, the abbey had built its population of religious up to the ideal of sixty nuns and twenty-five brothers.⁴

The maintenance of this ideal size was often difficult to manage as a fluctuating toll of deaths had to be balanced by new recruits. Syon's population received a blow in October 1488, when the sweating sickness (or 'the sweat', as it was known from its first appearance in England in 1485) reached the abbey. Seven sisters and three brothers, one of whom was the confessor general, Thomas Westhaugh, were lost to the disease.⁵ The abbey escaped both the plague of 1499 and the 'Great Mortality' of

² Hogg, 'Rewyll', Bainbridge, 'The Bridgettines and major trends in religious devotion', 232.

³ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 178-9; Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 38.

⁴ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 52-3.

⁵ Johnston, 'VCH, House of Bridgettines', 182; Fletcher, *Syon Abbey*, 30. For mortality in the monasteries of Canterbury, Westminster and Durham, see John Hatcher, 'Mortality in the fifteenth century: some new evidence', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Ser, 39/1 (1986), 19-38; Harvey, *Living*

1529, but the gradual onset of the Dissolution made a big dent in the abbey population from the mid-1530s.⁶ Syon lost a full one-third of its religious men between 1535 and 1537, one of whom was the abbey priest (now Saint) Richard Reynolds, executed in 1535 for his support of Elizabeth Barton, the ‘Holy Maid of Kent’ who had challenged Henry VIII’s divorce from Katherine of Aragon.⁷ Syon also lost part of its complement of women in its last days at Isleworth, perhaps due to a decline in numbers of new recruits.⁸ At the suppression of the abbey by Henry VIII’s commissioners in 1539, Syon had 51 nuns, 4 lay sisters, and a total of 12 priests and deacons (no lay brothers are mentioned in the pension list from which these numbers are known).⁹ Aside from these disruptions, Syon seems to have had nearly its ideal number of religious throughout the majority of its medieval life.¹⁰

Spiritual Labour and Liturgy

The *Brigittine Rule* was clear that the chief focus of the sisters’ lives was to serve, contemplate and praise the Virgin Mary.¹¹ It was primarily through their personal focus on Marian spirituality that their own edification would occur, their monastic community would be strengthened, and the renewal of the world at large would be effected.¹² The private and personal was, then, the centre and source of their spiritual growth, and the nutritious soil from which the fruits of contemplation would grow. The primary spiritual work of the Syon religious was composed, as at all monasteries,

and dying, 112-45; John Hatcher, A.J. Piper, and David Stone, ‘Monastic mortality: Durham Priory, 1395-1529’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd Ser, 59/4 (2006), 667-87.

⁶ Fletcher, *Syon Abbey*, 30.

⁷ Peter Cunich, ‘The brothers of Syon, 1420-1695’, in E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and its books: reading, writing and religion, c1400-1700* (Studies in Modern British Religious History; Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 39-81, 67. For Richard Reynolds and a detailed discussion of Syon’s role in the resistance to the King’s claim of supremacy, see Bernard, *The King’s Reformation*, 90-105, and 37-70. See also Fletcher, *Syon Abbey*, 32-33; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 216.

⁸ Some new recruits are known to have entered Syon in the 1530s, however. See Tait, *A fair place*, 160, 87-88.

⁹ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 260.

¹⁰ Cunich, ‘The brothers of Syon’, 43; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 261.

¹¹ Ellis, ‘*Viderunt eam filie Syon*’, 120-21.

¹² Ellis, ‘*Viderunt eam filie Syon*’, 110-11, 16, 17, 19; Elizabeth Schirmer, ‘Reading lessons at Syon Abbey: *The myroure of oure ladye* and the mandates of vernacular theology’, in Linda Olson and Katheryn Kerby-Fulton (eds.), *Voices in dialogue: reading women in the middle ages* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 345-76, 349, 58, 60; Yardley, *Performing piety*, 216.

of Mass and the divine office sung eight times a day.¹³ Unusually, however, the Brigittine nuns' Mass, called the 'Lady Mass' at Syon, was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and their offices focused on the mother of Christ and on her role in the Incarnation and therefore in wider salvation history.¹⁴ Other aspects of the women's spiritual practice were meditating, individual reading (discussed below), listening to group spiritual readings, and practising singing.¹⁵ Confession to their assigned priest was also an important aspect of the Syon women's spiritual lives, as discussed in Chapter 1, as was taking the Eucharist on important occasions.¹⁶

The Brigittine men's services were less focused on the Virgin. The priests performed the Lady Mass, but also celebrated the standard High Mass and sung the full complement of monastic offices, according to the local Sarum rite.¹⁷ In addition to these duties, the priest-brothers were expected to preach the gospel in English every Sunday and on all feast days to the laity and all who came to listen. They were also to act as assigned confessors to the nuns and other brothers, and they were allowed to act as confessors for visiting Christians, imposing penances as needed.¹⁸ They were also permitted, in special circumstances, to give spiritual guidance to lay people, and there are several examples of such spiritual direction of the laity by Syon priests.¹⁹ Many of these sacramental and spiritual tasks were related to the status of Brigittine abbeys, and Syon specifically, as sites of pilgrimage. Syon received special permission to give, among many other pardons, the substantial *ad Vincula* plenary indulgence, which promoted pilgrimage to the abbey.²⁰ Those cults of worship most popular in

¹³ Ellis, '*Viderunt eam filie Syon*'. Ellis has studied the religious life of the nuns and monks of Syon, including a discussion of the Sarum rite as it was applied at the abbey.

¹⁴ Warren, *Spiritual economies*, 123; Hogg, 'Rewyll', 63-4; Zieman, 'Playing *Doctor*: St Birgitta, ritual reading, and ecclesiastical authority', 308-09; Yardley, *Performing piety*, 206.

¹⁵ James Hogg, '*Elucidarius*: or explanation of the Rule', *Analecta Cartusiana*, 35/9 (1990), 147.

¹⁶ Risberg, '*Liber usum fratrum*', 35, 38.

¹⁷ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 71; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 100-3; Yardley, *Performing piety*, 204, 206, 24.

¹⁸ Swanson, *Indulgences*, 340; Ben Nilson, *Cathedral shrines of medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), 111; Hogg, 'Rewyll', 73; Vincent Gillespie, 'Dial M for mystic: mystical texts in the library of Syon Abbey and the spirituality of the Syon brethren', in Marion Glasscoe (ed.), *The medieval mystical tradition: England, Ireland, and Wales* (Cambridge, 1999), 241-68, 252.

¹⁹ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 73; Risberg, '*Liber usum fratrum*', 37; Tait, 'Bridgettine monastery of Syon', 211-2; Vincent Gillespie, 'Hid diuinite: the spirituality of Syon Brethren', in Edward Alexander Jones (ed.), *The medieval mystical tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VII : papers read at Charney Manor, July 2004* (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2004), 199.

²⁰ John Wordsworth, 'The national Church of Sweden', *The Hale Lectures, Delivered in St James Church Chicago* (London, 1910), 37-38; Sue Powell, 'Syon, Caxton and the Festival', *Birgittiana*, 2 (1996), 187-207, 199; H. Thurston, 'Syon monastery and its "pardon"', *Tablet*, 11 May (1907), 9;

late medieval England, those of the Virgin, and of the Passion, person, and Holy Name of Christ, were also associated with Syon, likely leading to an even higher draw of pilgrims and creating more sacramental and pastoral work for the men.²¹

The spiritual responsibilities of Brigittine deacons are not itemized in the Syon *Additions*, but are found in Vadstena's *Liber usum*, which states that their burdens and duties were: to minister at the altar, to read the epistle and the gospel aloud, to sing the versicles, to read aloud from the calendar and at meals, and to take care of the altar-cloths and adornments.²² Deacons could be ordained (three at Syon are known to have been), and those who were could hear confessions of the laity, absolve pilgrims, and even preach at pilgrimage times.²³

The work of the lay brothers was primarily to assist the priests and deacons in religious ceremonies, and to take care of the domestic tasks on the brothers side of the abbey, freeing the priests and deacons for more spiritual labours. The lay brethren were assigned to eight-week rotations: in the first week acting as minister to the priest in High Mass, and in the second ministering in 'our lady mass'. In other weeks, they took care of tapers, books, crosses, and the 'schyp' (perhaps a reference to the nave, the literal meaning of which is 'ship'), and in the eighth week they were free of liturgical duties. Detailed instructions were given for each of the weekly duties, including where to stand, and how to incline and kneel.²⁴ Similar detailed instructions were given regarding the ringing of bells and other tasks. Unlike the nuns and priests, the lay brothers were not expected to have a great understanding of the services' spiritual meanings.²⁵ While they were not a part of the choir themselves, they were expected to attend services, listen to the lesson and sermon, and kneel and incline in

Powell, 'Syon, Caxton and the Festival', 199-200; Powell, 'Preaching at Syon', 9. See Conclusion chapter for more on the Syon pilgrimage.

²¹ Diana Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), 96; Bainbridge, 'The Bridgettines and major trends in religious devotion'; Ann Hutchison, 'Reflections on aspects of the spiritual impact of St Birgitta, the Revelations and the Bridgettine Order in late medieval England', in E.A. Jones (ed.), *The medieval mystical tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VII: papers read at Charney Manor, July 2004* (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2004). See Conclusion chapter for estimate of pilgrim numbers.

²² Risberg, '*Liber usum fratrum*', 28.

²³ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 71; Risberg, '*Liber usum fratrum*', 34, 37. The ordained deacons at Syon were Thomas Betson, Clement Maidstone, and Gilbert Spicer: Tait, *A fair place*, 84.

²⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 100-03.

²⁵ Ellis, '*Viderunt eam filie Syon*', 70.

concert with the choir.²⁶ Some seem to have been literate, and may have held as deep a devotion and wisdom as the priests and deacons (as did the Carthusian lay brothers).²⁷

Intellectual Labour

A major concern of historians and academics working on Syon has been the monastery's intellectual labour: the reading habits of the Syon sisters and brothers, the abbey's production of spiritual literature, and its involvement in the early English printed book trade.²⁸ This work has been facilitated by the excellent sources of the fifteenth-century catalogue of the brothers' library holdings, and the numerous bound volumes containing possession marks of Syon sisters, which have been found in a variety of archives.²⁹ The Syon Sacristan Accounts, also, have been mined for information about bookwork at the abbey.³⁰

²⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 14, 18.

²⁷ See below. Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 228; Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 71.

²⁸ See: Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood'; Gillespie, 'Dial M for mystic'; Gillespie, 'Hid diuinite'; Gillespie, 'Syon and the new learning'; Vincent Gillespie, 'Syon and the English market for Continental printed books: the incunabular phase', in E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and its books: reading, writing and religion, c1400-1700* (Studies in Modern British Religious History; Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 104-28; Vincent Gillespie and Anthony Ian Doyle (eds.), *Syon Abbey. Volume 9 of Corpus of British medieval library catalogues* (London: British Library with British Academy, 2001); Alexandra da Costa, 'The King's great matter: writing under censure at Syon Abbey, 1532-1534', *The Review of English Studies, new series*, 62/253 (2010), 15-29; da Costa, *Reforming printing*; Driver, 'Bridgettine woodcuts'; Hutchison, 'What the nuns read'; Ann Hutchison, 'Richard Whitford's *The Pype, or Tonne, of the Lyfe of Perfection*: pastoral care, or political manifesto?', in Claes Gejrot, Sara Risberg, and Mia Akestam (eds.), *Saint Birgitta, Syon and Vadstena: papers from a symposium in Stockholm, 4-6 October 2007* (Stockholm: Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, 2010), 89-103; Jones and Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and its books: reading, writing and religion, c1400-1700*; C. Annette Grise, "'Moche profitable unto religious persones, gathered by a brother of Syon': Syon Abbey and English books', in E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and its books: reading, writing and religion, c1400-1700* (Studies in Modern British Religious History; Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 129-54; Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon'; Roger Ellis, 'Further thoughts on the spirituality of Syon Abbey', in William F Pollard (ed.), *Mysticism and spirituality in medieval England* (London: Boydell & Brewer, 1997); Tait, 'Bridgettine monastery of Syon'; Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: women and learning c.1415-1600'; Mary C. Erler, *Women, reading and piety in late medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey'; Schirmer, 'Reading lessons'; George R. Keiser, 'The mystics and the early English printers: the economics of devotionalism', in Marion Glasscoe (ed.), *The medieval mystical tradition in England. Exeter Symposium IV. Papers read at Dartington Hall, July 1987* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1987).

²⁹ Gillespie and Doyle (eds.), *Syon Abbey*; de Hamel, *Syon Abbey: the library*; David Bell, *What nuns read: books and libraries in medieval English nunneries* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995).

³⁰ Erler, 'Syon Abbey's care for its books'.

Intellectual work was central to the Brigittine vocation of both men and women. The sisters of Syon were exhorted to read extensively and thoughtfully. The *Myroure of Oure Ladye*, a commentary on the Brigittine liturgy written for the Syon sisters by one of the monastery's brethren, stresses the necessity of reading often and carefully, 'to fede your soules therwith, for yt is fode of lyfe'.³¹ The *Brigittine Rule* considered reading the bedrock of the spiritual life of nuns, and several additional books written by the Syon priests for the nuns throughout its pre-Dissolution life reiterated the importance attached to daily reading.³² St Birgitta herself, a model for the nuns, also had extensive experience in reading and writing, and a high level of scholarly interest.³³ She was known to have studied Latin, and some of the Syon nuns clearly had also, some owning books in that language, as well as in French and English.³⁴ Not all sisters found the foreign languages fully accessible, however, and translations of important works into English were commissioned for them.³⁵

Strong evidence for the importance of reading at Syon is provided in the Chambress Accounts, which record purchases of up to ninety-six spectacles with cases annually, the large number indicating that they were likely assigned to most of the religious of Syon, both male and female.³⁶ A Birkbeck archaeological team excavating at Syon found remains of a pair of spectacles lying next to a book clasp, and concluded that these marked the spot of one of the libraries.³⁷ There is no reason to suppose this in the absence of other evidence, however, since both priests and nuns at Syon were allowed to borrow books to keep and read in their cells.³⁸ The spectacles and book clasp found could therefore mark the spot of any area of the abbey where reading would be done, including the dormitory, chapter, choir, and refectory. More

³¹ Hutchison, 'What the nuns read', 222.

³² Warren, *Spiritual economies*, 48; Hutchison, 'What the nuns read', 209, 20-1; Schirmer, 'Reading lessons', 347, 63; Alexandra da Costa and Ann Hutchison, 'The brethren of Syon Abbey and pastoral care', in Ronald Stansbury (ed.), *A companion to pastoral care in the middle ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 235-60, 236-37; Jones and Walsham, 'Introduction', 26; Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 161-2, 70, 92, 97.

³³ Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 161.

³⁴ Hutchison, 'What the nuns read', 212-15.

³⁵ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, 222; Johnston, 'VCH, House of Bridgettines', 183; Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 199; Hutchison, 'What the nuns read', 212, 17.

³⁶ Chambress Accounts. See also Sacristan Accounts. For 8 doz 3 pr spectacles, see TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2293. See Chapter 5 for more on spectacles at Syon.

³⁷ Jonathan Foyle, 'Syon Park: rediscovering medieval England's only Bridgettine monastery', *Current Archaeology*, 16/12 (2004), 555.

³⁸ See below, Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood', 193; Risberg, '*Liber usum fratrum*', 24; Erler, *Women, reading and piety*, 31.

importantly, the volume of spectacles purchased and the likelihood that the majority of Syon religious were assigned a pair, is strong supporting evidence that reading was a common activity for most – in fact as well as in theory.

The reading habits of the Syon men have been the subject of extensive study, often connected with analysis of the many written works they produced. Rhodes has described many of the publications of the abbey, and Gillespie has done a number of studies of the brothers' literary production, as well as their library holdings and intellectual history.³⁹ Alexandra da Costa has more recently added to the discussion.⁴⁰ The intellectual labours of the Syon brethren were intimately connected to their roles as confessors, spiritual advisors, and preachers to the Syon sisters, to pilgrims, and to the many prominent lay friends of the abbey. The Syon priests were expected to study spiritual works intensively and to elucidate them for their various audiences. That their preaching duties were taken very seriously is indicated by the several days off from other duties that each priest was given to read, study, and prepare for each instance of preaching.⁴¹ Their English-language public sermons to pilgrims and other visiting faithful were famous, well-regarded, and central to the Brigittine mission to invigorate the spirituality of the masses.⁴² For this reason, the priests were exhorted to 'use few words and simple language...so that those who come from afar may be able to grasp it, and not be wearied with diffuse speech and oratorical superfluity'. They should not

make complicated divisions of paragraphs and chapters, nor use speech adorned with subtleties, but suit their words to the understanding of their hearers, for what the common people do not understand they are more likely to wonder at than to be edified by....On Sunday, therefore, the preachers of the Order shall expound the gospel for the day and preach Sacred Scriptures, ...according to the needs and understanding of the hearers.⁴³

This focus in Brigittine houses on pastoral care and direction made Syon a leading centre of lay spirituality in late medieval England, attracting such notables as Margery

³⁹ Rhodes, 'Syon Abbey and its religious publications'; Gillespie, 'Dial M for mystic'; Gillespie and Doyle (eds.), *Syon Abbey*; Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood'.

⁴⁰ da Costa, 'King's great matter'; da Costa, *Reforming printing*.

⁴¹ Powell, 'Preaching at Syon'; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 122.

⁴² Hogg, 'Rewyll', 73; Bainbridge, 'The Bridgettines and major trends in religious devotion', 229., Beckett, 'St. Bridgit, Henry V, and Syon Abbey', 129; Powell, 'Preaching at Syon', 5-6.

⁴³ James Hogg, 'A Brigittine legislative collection (Spiritualitat Heute und Gestern)', *Analecta Cartusiana*, 35/9 (1990), 124-25.

Kempe, Lady Margaret Beaufort, Thomas More, and Elizabeth Barton, as well as large numbers of unknown pilgrims, spiritual seekers, and readers of their influential books, printed and distributed widely by William Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde.⁴⁴ Among the most popular of these written tracts were the practical spiritual guides intended for application by secular people.⁴⁵ The mystical needs of the Syon nuns and other contemplatives seem to have been dealt with more extensively by the Carthusian brothers of Sheen, while the Syon men displayed, as Gillespie says, only ‘secular academic brilliance’ in their writings.⁴⁶ The note of disappointment in his analysis suggests a misunderstanding of the primary purpose of the Syon men as translators of personal monastic piety for lay audiences, as discussed in Chapter 1. The books written by the Syon men were always orthodox, but often innovative and challenging, harnessing many ideas from the New Learning.⁴⁷ Richard Whitford, one of the more prolific writers at the abbey, was a close friend of Erasmus, Thomas More, and Bishop Fox. He wrote or translated fifteen books, including two written specifically to encourage spirituality among the laity.⁴⁸ One of these, the *Werke for Housholders*, emphasised the practical ways in which people might live vibrant Christian lives in the midst of secular living, while serving as examples of Christian behaviour for others in their household.⁴⁹ Richard Reynolds was another prominent Syon scholar, and an eminent theologian on par with Bishop John Fisher. He was a fierce opponent of Henry VIII’s break from Rome, and in consequence was executed at Tyburn, eventually being canonized in 1970.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood', 187; Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, 86; Driver, 'Bridgettine woodcuts', 237-9, 50-2; Keiser, 'The mystics and the early English printers', 12; Powell, 'Syon, Caxton and the Festial', 205-7; de Hamel, *Syon Abbey: the library*, 101; Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 202; Ellis, 'Further thoughts on the spirituality of Syon Abbey', 220; Hutchison, 'Dissolution no decline', 245; Bainbridge, 'The Bridgettines and major trends in religious devotion', 225; Virginia Bainbridge, 'Women and the transmission of religious culture: benefactresses of three Bridgettine convents c1400-1600', *Birgittiana*, 3 (1997), 59; Ross Fuller, *The Brotherhood of the Common Life and its influence*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); A. Taylor, 'Into his secret chambre: reading and privacy in late medieval England', in J. Raven, H. Small, and N. Tadmor (eds.), *The practice and representation of reading in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 41-61.

⁴⁵ Gillespie, 'Dial M for mystic', 242.

⁴⁶ Gillespie, 'Dial M for mystic', 242.

⁴⁷ Bainbridge, 'The Bridgettines and major trends in religious devotion', 239; Gillespie, 'Syon and the new learning'.

⁴⁸ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 213; Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, 87.

⁴⁹ Whytford, *A werke for housholders*.

⁵⁰ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 214-5; Fletcher, *Syon Abbey*.

Intellectual labours among the Syon men were not limited to those of the priests. Some deacons at the abbey, such as Thomas Prestius, wrote and translated books, while others were engaged at times in copying work.⁵¹ While there was almost no opportunity for a lay brother to advance to the position of priest or deacon at Syon, some clearly were literate, even contributing books to the brothers' library.⁵² Thomas Betson, for example, authored a catechetical treatise 'promoting religious knowledge and devotion among the simpler members of the community', and compiled the catalogue of the brothers' library.⁵³ While the work of the lay brothers was not of a high intellectual or spiritual character, they could be fiercely defensive of their faith. During the Dissolution, some held their ground against Henry VIII's men longer and more successfully than many of the Syon priests.⁵⁴

Assisting the men and women of Syon in their mental labours were their impressive libraries.⁵⁵ The monastery had three in total: one on the women's side, one on the men's, and a third, shared, repository for service books.⁵⁶ There are indications that books were passed between libraries as needed, but were assigned primarily to one collection or another, and inventoried as required by the *Additions*.⁵⁷ The brothers' library collection is well-known due to the extant manuscript of its fifteenth-century catalogue, which has been edited and published twice, most recently by Gillespie.⁵⁸ This library contained an excellent collection of humanist works, canon law and preaching manuals, and many English printed and non-printed devotional works, all of which attracted prominent lay scholars such as Thomas More and Thomas Gascoigne, chancellor of Oxford University and benefactor of Syon.⁵⁹ The many Syon priests and deacons who had been trained at, and had even taught at, Cambridge and Oxford brought their collections with them; these seem to have been joined with

⁵¹ Hutchison, 'What the nuns read', 221; Tait, 'Bridgettine monastery of Syon', 303.

⁵² Ellis, '*Viderunt eam filie Syon*', 69, 71; Tait, 'Bridgettine monastery of Syon', 242; Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood', 188.

⁵³ Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, 81.

⁵⁴ Ellis, '*Viderunt eam filie Syon*', 70-71; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 228; Bernard, *The King's Reformation*, 170.

⁵⁵ Gillespie and Doyle (eds.), *Syon Abbey*; de Hamel, *Syon Abbey: the library*.

⁵⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 42, 72; Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood', 189, 96.

⁵⁷ Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood', 189, 93; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 42.

⁵⁸ Mary Bateson (ed.), *The catalogue of Syon monastery, Isleworth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898.); Gillespie and Doyle (eds.), *Syon Abbey*.

⁵⁹ Johnston, 'VCH, House of Bridgettines', 183; Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood', 185, 90, 99, 202-3; Gillespie, 'Dial M for mystic', 252, 68; de Hamel, *Syon Abbey: the library*, 90, 101; Powell, 'Syon, Caxton and the Festival', 187.

the brothers' library.⁶⁰ Books were also donated to the library of the brethren by many wealthy merchants, prominent clergy, nobility, and even the printer Wynkyn de Worde.⁶¹ By the early sixteenth century, the collection held 1,400 volumes, and was so impressive that a Venetian visitor remarked that he had never before seen such a quantity of books.⁶²

The library of the Syon sisters may also have held important works, and the sisters likely kept a catalogue of their holdings, though no copy has survived.⁶³ There is substantial evidence, however, that many Syon sisters owned books as personal possessions, giving them access to more volumes than those available in their library. The *Brigittine Rule* and the *Syon Additions* in fact required that each nun entering the abbey must own or acquire certain books.⁶⁴ Wills made before their profession illustrate the degree of book ownership by novices.⁶⁵ Some nuns also obtained books as bequests or gifts, such as prioress Anne de la Pole, who received a copy of St Birgitta's *Revelations* on the death of her grandmother, Cecily, mother to Edward IV.⁶⁶ Some sisters added personal notes to their volumes, such as Agnes Smith, who added the obits for her parents.⁶⁷ Others wrote only their name, claiming possession, such as Margaret Windsor, who owned a book with the inscription, 'Thys Boke ys myne – Margaret and gevyn by master Parker'.⁶⁸ Altogether, the number of books with personal markings by Syon nuns is extensive – presently numbering at least sixty-eight. This is yet more evidence of the importance of reading as intellectual and spiritual labour at Syon Abbey.⁶⁹

⁶⁰ Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood', 188.

⁶¹ Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood', 188; Hutchison, 'What the nuns read', 218; Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 58.

⁶² Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: women and learning c.1415-1600', 100; Gillespie, 'Syon and the English market', 115.

⁶³ de Hamel, *Syon Abbey: the library*, 79.

⁶⁴ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 83., Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 83.

⁶⁵ Erler, *Women, reading and piety*, 96.

⁶⁶ Morris, *St Birgitta*, 2; Bainbridge, 'Women and the transmission of religious culture', 73.

⁶⁷ Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 191.

⁶⁸ de Hamel, *Syon Abbey: the library*, 96; Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 154, 92, 99; Hutchison, 'What the nuns read', 213.

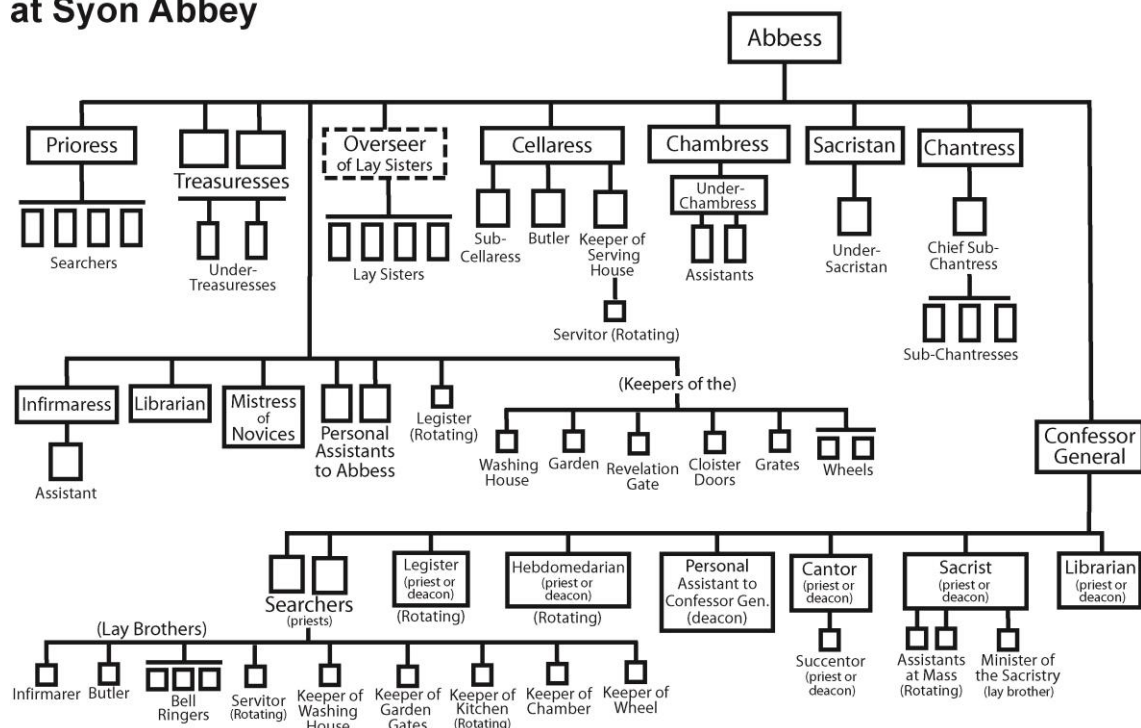
⁶⁹ Erler, *Women, reading and piety*, 36.

Administrative Work of the Religious

While sacramental labour, liturgy, and intellectual work were at the core of Syon's mission and the vocation of each religious, these pursuits, and the impact they could have on the wider world, would not have been possible without the organizational foundation enabled by extensive administrative labour. It is this aspect of the work of the Syon religious that has been neglected by historians, and which is most illuminated by the abbey's household accounts. The *Syon Additions* also offer extraordinary insights into the internal administrative structure of the abbey, allowing the creation of a schematic of organizational relationships and hierarchies. Figure 1 illustrates the large number of obedientiary positions and other monastic offices mentioned in the two sets of *Additions* or found in the household accounts and other sources.

Figure 1

Monastic Administrative Positions at Syon Abbey



A few notes on the schematic in Figure 1 are necessary. First, the existence of the lay sisters at Syon is known only from pension lists at the Dissolution, and it is unknown

for how long such women were incorporated into the abbey's structure. The complications are discussed at length below. There is no direct evidence of an office of nun overseer to the lay sisters at Syon; the existence of such a position is conjectured based on similar arrangements at other nunneries with lay sisters.⁷⁰ Second, despite the existence of only eight lay brothers at the abbey, the illustration includes fourteen lay brother positions. Some of these are rotating, and it is also possible that some duties, such as bell ringing, may have been tacked onto other responsibilities. Ten or more of the thirteen priests and deacons had assigned duties, including that of the confessor general. Of the sixty nuns, forty-one, including the abbess, had either fixed obedientiary positions, or rotating assignments, leaving only nineteen free for reading and contemplation, or convalescence. The impact of these percentages on spiritual life will be discussed below.

Syon's organizational structure was one of centralized hierarchy, but possible flexibility. As Figure 1 shows, this was hardly the pyramid structure of a modern corporation, and there are no long chains of command. The abbey's monastic household was instead reflective of the authority structure of other large medieval households, with shallow reporting arrangements.⁷¹ While administrative authority at Syon was ultimately centralized in the abbess, with her ability to 'hire' and 'fire' all female officers, most officers under her command had relatively few monastic subordinates, themselves. It is clear from the *Additions*, however, that the abbess had little authority over internal administrative work on the men's side of the abbey. While she seems to have had power over finance and material resources throughout Syon, the organization of responsibilities among the men, and appointment of officers in the men's convent was entirely up to the confessor general.⁷² In this sense, Figure 1 is slightly deceptive. The confessor general was semi-independent – the head of the male community's work processes and spiritual life, but appointed by the abbess and subject to her in financial and external administrative matters. Parsing the exact configuration of power-hierarchy and cooperation between the abbess and confessor general at Syon is a complicated matter, which will be taken up below.

⁷⁰ Kerr, *Fontevraud in England*.

⁷¹ Mertes, *English noble household*, 17,22.

⁷² See below.

Two more cautions on the illustrated hierarchy are necessary. The figure is based primarily on the job descriptions given in the *Syon Additions*. These sources, being normative, reflect the hopes of the authors. While they may in large part be based on a real organization of responsibilities in keeping with the trend toward rationalization and formalization in many late medieval households, administrative manuals often exist to correct perceived deficiencies.⁷³ The *Additions* may therefore be mostly reflective of the actual organization, while containing elements of potential. Which was which, and whether the potentials were actualized is impossible to know from the available sources.

In addition to this, even if the *Additions* reflect reality on the nominal level, in the areas of work which were thought to be a part of the abbey's internal administration, there may have been elements of flexibility and informality in the actual fulfilment of these duties which no formalized schema would reflect. As Mertes discusses, the servants in many late medieval households with seeming department specializations in fact had both regular and ad hoc duties which flowed into one another and overlapped. The 'corporate identity' of workers was not fixed, and servants had to be versatile to respond to the needs of the lord of the house, working where and on whatever was required.⁷⁴ These 'amoeba-like splits and rejoinings' could be complicated by other workers who were not formally part of the household, but who sometimes performed household functions.⁷⁵ In Syon's internal administration, a parallel might be found in those lay servants who were hired for domestic work, some of whom may have taken over responsibilities originally assigned to lay brothers or choir sisters.⁷⁶ Despite these blurred boundaries, however, specialization was increasing overall in late medieval households, and in many houses there is evidence for true departmentalization, such as the practice of accounting by department, or transfer of goods and payments from one department to another.⁷⁷ As noted in Chapter 3, there is evidence for the latter in the Syon accounts, and the accounts

⁷³ Woolgar, *The great household*, 83,110; Chris Given-Wilson, *The English nobility in the late middle ages* (London: Routledge, 1987), 93.

⁷⁴ Mertes, *English noble household*, 19-21.

⁷⁵ Mertes, *English noble household*, 17.

⁷⁶ Mertes, *English noble household*, 17. See below.

⁷⁷ Given-Wilson, *The English nobility*, 92; Mertes, *English noble household*, 21, 37; Christopher Dyer, *Making a living in the middle ages: the people of Britain, 850-1520* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), 320.

themselves provide ample evidence of the former. The non-accounting positions at Syon, however, may not have been organizational ‘departments’, but more fluid work systems and assignments. While the *Additions* provide a picture of how Syon saw its division of labour, it is impossible to know with certainty how much coordination or fluidity of work there was in reality. Figure 1 can therefore be only an approximation of the administrative labour structure at Syon.

Administrative Work of the Sisters

Of the large number of Syon women who had some official position in the abbey organization, six in particular were heavily involved in financial administration. These were the obedientiaries – the central monastic officers – who managed and accounted for the income and expenditure of the abbey. These women included the abbess, the two treasurers, the cellaress, the sacristan, and the chambress. The duties of each office, and those of the non-accounting officers, are detailed below. The *Additions* also include descriptions of the expected character and performance of all those selected. According to this source, office holders should be mature, and were to demonstrate economy and responsible use of resources.⁷⁸ They should be always diligent and do their best to see that the goods of the monastery ‘be not spenden in waste, nor deuouered and loste’, lest they might lose the chance to give such money in alms to the poor. The need for efficiency was so important to the writers of the *Additions*, that the threat of negative assessment on Judgement Day was invoked: ‘Knowyng for certeyn that ther is not the leste threde in the clothe, nor the lest crom in the lofe, nor the ferdyng in the tulle, nor the droppe in the vesselle, but that they shal accuse the oweners at the day of dome, yf they be mysspended.’⁷⁹

For these reasons, the obedientiaries were expected to keep careful track of their accounts, scrolls and bills, and answer for everything they spent and received, clearly and ‘without any colour’.⁸⁰ Each officer had certain things assigned to her specific use, and it was a fault punished at the bishop’s visitation if a sister took anything from

⁷⁸ Ruth Rajamaa (ed.), *Arbeits- und Amtsaufgaben der Birgittinnen*, ed. Tore Nyberg (Birgitta, her works, and her five abbeys in Nordic countries, Odense: University of Odense, 1991), 329.

⁷⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 69.

⁸⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 70-1.

another office without permission, or counterfeited or copied any seal or key.⁸¹ They should also be particularly careful ‘knowing to whom, what how moche, and how they delyuer or receyue any thing inwarde or owtwarde and of whom’.⁸² At visitations of the bishop, the officers were examined to see if they served all sisters whatever was needed, ‘charitably and with goode wyll, in dewe and conuenient tymes’.⁸³ Favouritism was forbidden, and they were expected to serve willingly and cheerfully. All officers should be ‘swete and gentel in wordes, softe and prudente in answers, besy and pacient in labours, sad and honeste in maners, not drunkelewe or wastres, not wrethful nor trublous, not light and veyne in wordes, nor ouer grete spekers, but sober, demewre, and chereful to speke to, discrete, pesyble, wyse, sad, circumspect and wele auysed in geuyng and takyng of answers’.⁸⁴ The specific duties of each of these accounting obedientiaries, and the numerous non-accounting monastic officers described in the *Additions*, are detailed in this section.

The Abbess

The abbess, as ‘head and lady’ of the monastery of Syon, had control of all material resources, and, as superior of the women’s side of the abbey, had a wide range of administrative and managerial duties within the cloister. Among these were oversight of daily life, and the variety of decisions that factored into such oversight. She was the only one, for example, who could dictate how much bedding each sister should get, or allow a sister to go into another’s cell, to send or receive letters, to sleep in her cowl, to speak in times of silence, or to speak with a man or secular at the grate without a chaperone.⁸⁵ She was expected to search the cell of each sister at least once a year to ensure that the latter had all necessities but nothing superfluous.⁸⁶ Her responsibility for maintaining the proper conduct of Syon sisters and character of the Syon community was wide. Faults for which the abbess could be punished at the bishop’s visitation included failing to correct the faults of herself or others, ‘wherby infamy

⁸¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 39.

⁸² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 68-9.

⁸³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 9.

⁸⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 68-9.

⁸⁵ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 8, 9, 12-13, 71-72, 158, 67, 77.

⁸⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 200.

groweth to the monastery', and not keeping the regular numbers of religious, according to the *Rule*, without reason.⁸⁷

The abbess's most clear internal administrative duty was the allocation of work. She regularly assigned sisters to specific temporary or one-time tasks, such as the cleaning of the body of a deceased nun.⁸⁸ More substantial was her duty to appoint officers and oversee their activities. Indeed, hers was the principal responsibility in all areas of internal administration on the sisters' side, and collective material administration throughout the abbey household.⁸⁹ The items of inspection upon visitation by the bishop included, for instance, the need to discover 'If al regular clothyng, both to the bed and body, and al oþer necessaryes, be dewly mynystred by the abbes or by her officers, to the brethren and sustres, after ther nede, as the pope hath ordeyned.'⁹⁰ She could, and probably did, keep a copy of the key to each administrative office, and may have monitored the activities of each officer closely.⁹¹ The degree of micromanagement likely depended on personality and the skill of the officers appointed. The abbess also was meant to be present whenever gold or silver was brought to the treasurers from any receiver or farmer or other outside source, to ensure that the sisters received it, stored it, and documented it properly.⁹² In addition, she should receive quarterly, weekly or daily accounts from the main obedientiaries on the sisters' side if she desired, and should always receive a yearly account from each before Halloween – all of which documents she could use to determine the administrative and financial effectiveness of the officeholders.⁹³

The abbess's authority also extended fully into the external affairs of the abbey. The *Brigittine Rule*, *Syon Additions*, and Syon's foundation charter all refer repeatedly to her supremacy in all temporal matters, including money, property, material goods, and the management of the same.⁹⁴ The abbess was required to consult with the confessor general regarding important issues, and to keep him informed, but she

⁸⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 41, 203-04.

⁸⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 34.

⁸⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 65.

⁹⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 43.

⁹¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 205.

⁹² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 186.

⁹³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 206.

⁹⁴ See, for example: Hogg, 'Rewyll', 72-73; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 198, 206; Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 28-29.

theoretically had independent decision-making power in regards to all property, material goods, and staff management.⁹⁵ The *Syon Additions* admonished her to be especially careful in her decisions regarding abbey estates, so that land was used efficiently, and that nothing was sold or left to ruin. She was responsible for the entire financial and physical state of the monastery, and could be punished, at episcopal visitations, for either dissipating the goods of the monastery, or allowing the dilapidation of its buildings.⁹⁶ It is clear that the Syon abbess had a very wide scope of power both within the cloister and in the abbey's dealings with the outside world.

The likely training and background of most Syon abbesses and their prominent London social and political connections, discussed below, made their exercise of this power, in fact, all the more probable, while their apparent co-direction of the abbey's strategic apostolic efforts, and the reputation of at least one Syon woman as 'wilful' and 'competent', give us some glimpses of this power in action.⁹⁷ So too does an analysis of the financial and resource management of the sisters, as seen through the abbey's household accounts. The thousand-plus accounts, charters and other documents pertaining to Syon's landed properties confirm that temporal power was in the hands of the women. In these records, the abbess was shown as the owner, proprietor, or responsible party representing Syon in legal and economic matters.⁹⁸ Some of these documents listed the abbess alone, often by name, such as 'Maud Muston, abbess of Syon', while the majority referred to 'abbess of the monastery of Syon and the convent there,' sometimes preceded by her name, and sometimes not.⁹⁹ In some cases, the personal seal of the abbess was attached.¹⁰⁰ In all of these charters, the lands involved were clearly referred to as belonging to the abbess, as being given to the abbess, or as being in dispute by the abbess of Syon.

The abbess was also consistently referred to in letters by clerks, and other officials involved in estate administration as 'my lady' or 'my mistress', and her servants were

⁹⁵ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 206.

⁹⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 42-3, 198, 202.

⁹⁷ 'wilful': Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 88. In which Agnes Smyth, 'a sturdy dame and wyful' opposes the suppression of the abbey during the Dissolution. 'competent': Erler, 'Special benefactors and friends', 217. She is seen in the household accounts as treasurers from 1524-1528. For direction of outreach efforts, see Conclusion chapter.

⁹⁸ TNA E-series. See bibliography for specific references.

⁹⁹ Maud: TNA E 211/378/B

¹⁰⁰ E.g. King's College Cambridge manuscript: Kings/KC/SYO/1

referred to as ‘my lady’s steward’ (or bailiff, or other staff).¹⁰¹ Syon’s tenants addressed their petitions to the abbess, and it was the abbess who is recorded as appointing proctors for the monastery for legal disputes, or as being the party who sued for outstanding rents.¹⁰² The abbess made decisions concerning at least some of the allocation of income in kind from the estates, and estate accountants needed her blessing to write off debts or dues.¹⁰³ She was active in name in all the disputes regarding the abbey’s properties taken by Henry VI to found King’s College, Cambridge and Eton.¹⁰⁴ She was also the addressee of letters about estate matters, and signed replies herself.¹⁰⁵ The fact that one letter was dated in the nuns’ chapterhouse, where seculars and men were not allowed, suggests that one of the nuns, and possibly the abbess herself, wrote the text of the replies in her own hand.¹⁰⁶ All of this indicates a high level of involvement by the Syon abbess in the external economic affairs of the abbey, and shows that she fulfilled her title of ‘head and lady’ of the monastery. Cromwell certainly treated her as the head; he appealed to her for permission to house Henry VIII’s errant ward, Lady Margaret Douglas, in the monastic precinct.¹⁰⁷ This can be contrasted with the experience of other high and late medieval double monasteries in England, in which men invariably gained temporal power to the detriment of the women.¹⁰⁸

The abbess also seems to have had ultimate control over the Syon staff in the precinct. All monastic officers and main lay staff, ‘all other officers accountable to her outward and inward’, were expected to render weekly and yearly accounts to her, in the presence of some of the sisters.¹⁰⁹ Even the construction and repairs, in which the Syon men were involved in the fifteenth century, were ultimately financially overseen by the abbess.¹¹⁰ Aside from the men’s role in the abbey’s construction, only the

¹⁰¹ See for example, *Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, Henry VIII*, (London: Longmans, H.M.S.O., 1862), vol 1, pt 2, 1423.

¹⁰² *Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, Henry VIII*, vol 1 pt 1, 627; "Deeds: B.201 - B.300", in H C Maxwell Lyte (ed.), *A descriptive catalogue of ancient deeds: volume 1* (London, 1890), 235-44, Devon B.271.

¹⁰³ Morris, 'Estates of Syon', 184-5, 218-9; TNA SC 6/HenVII/82

¹⁰⁴ Johnston, 'VCH, House of Bridgettines', 182.

¹⁰⁵ *Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, Henry VIII*, vol 4, 6621; TNA E 315/436.

¹⁰⁶ TNA E 328/146/iv (54)

¹⁰⁷ *Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, Henry VIII*, vol 11, 994.

¹⁰⁸ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*; Kerr, *Fontevraud in England*; Joseph A. Gribbin, *The Premonstratensian Order in late medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001).

¹⁰⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 206.

¹¹⁰ See below.

abbess and her female officers are mentioned in the accounts as having any responsibilities in the precinct.

The abbesses of Syon were elected by the sisters only, though in the presence (at a grate separating the two sexes) of the confessor general, two additional Syon priests, a skilled canon lawyer, and a notary. The sisters immediately swore obedience to the newly elected abbess, but her consecration by the Bishop of London took place on another date. After that formal consecration, the confessor general and all the brethren of Syon spoke with the new abbess, wishing her long health and prosperity. They interestingly did not vow obedience to her, which brings up questions of administrative power on the male side of the convent, as discussed below.¹¹¹ On the death of an abbess, a council of eight senior sisters was appointed. With the prioress and her searchers, they chose 'a wise sister' to assist the two treasurers in tending to the external affairs that normally fell to the abbess. The chantress received the keys, common seals, and all other physical items normally kept by the abbess. The prioress herself ran the household and took the place of the abbess in the spiritual hierarchy, until another superior was elected. All of these officers were instructed not to pursue any new initiatives or significant changes 'nothing addyng nor lessyng to the gouernaunce vsed before.'¹¹²

In keeping with their broad scope of responsibilities, the personal character expected of the abbesses included traits expected in all other monastic positions. The *Additions for the Sisters* are clear on the type of person who should be considered for the post. At the very basic level, she should be someone born in wedlock.¹¹³ She should be serious, meek, of low voice, impartial, wise, wary and patient.¹¹⁴ As she was to be 'like a mother' to the whole convent, she should also be of good name and fame, honest life and holy conversation, 'sad' (mature) in manner, prudent, sober, chaste, and mild, someone of wisdom, and worthy of the great honour shown her.¹¹⁵ One attribute that perhaps contributed to such respect was her age. Though the *Additions* do not declare a minimum age for the post, in the book of hand signs for use during

¹¹¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 50-62; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 129; Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 81; Tait, *A fair place*, 294.

¹¹² Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 92.

¹¹³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 58.

¹¹⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 29-30.

¹¹⁵ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 198.

hours of silence which was appended to the *Additions for the Lay Brothers*, the sign for the abbess is the sign for woman, added to the sign for age – making it clear that seniority of years as well as of status was probably expected.¹¹⁶ What age this might be is not clear, but it was common for superiors in this period, especially in reformed Orders, to be older than 30.¹¹⁷

It has been suggested by some that another, unspoken prerequisite for the office of abbess was high birth, which, it is argued, was the only circumstance which could provide adolescent training in the arts and practice of household management.¹¹⁸ But several studies have discounted this theory, for nuns in general, and for Syon in particular. Knowles concluded that the majority of recruits to all monastic houses came from the manors and estates owned by the monastery in question, rather than from aristocratic and upper gentry homes around the country, though a few also came from London.¹¹⁹ Oliva concluded in her study of Norwich nunneries that the majority of superiors of those houses were from the lesser gentry, while a smaller number were from the upper gentry and none hailed from the aristocracy.¹²⁰ At Syon, the picture is similar, with abbesses having been drawn from London merchant families and gentry families in Middlesex.¹²¹ Bainbridge calculates that up to fifteen percent of Syon religious members were from London or the Middlesex county area, and many of the abbesses and prioresses in particular were related to citizens of London, members of important livery companies, and Lord Mayors.¹²² She suggests that their elevation to high offices in the abbey may have been a conscious policy designed to capitalize on their existing political and kinship networks.¹²³

¹¹⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 134.

¹¹⁷ Oliva, *The convent and community*, 77, 109.

¹¹⁸ Power, *Medieval English nunneries*, 4, 13, 42-3; Shulamith Shahar, *The fourth estate: a history of women in the middle ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London: Methuen & Co., 1983), 39-40; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 220; Johnson, *Equal in monastic profession*, 167; Warren, *Spiritual economies*, 57-58.

¹¹⁹ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 229.

¹²⁰ Oliva, *The convent and community*, 106.

¹²¹ Barron, 'Introduction', 9; Johnston, 'VCH, House of Bridgettines'; Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: women and learning c.1415-1600', 84.

¹²² Virginia Bainbridge, 'Who were the English Birgittines?: the brothers and sisters of Syon Abbey 1415-1600', in Claes Gejrot, Sara Risberg, and Mia Akestam (eds.), *Saint Birgitta, Syon and Vadstena: Papers from a symposium in Stockholm, 4-6 October 2007* (Stockholm: Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, 2010), 37-49, 43-44.

¹²³ Bainbridge, 'Who were the English Birgittines?', 43.

The majority of Syon abbesses seem to have had an education in Latin and Humanism; it is probable that this background was acquired mainly before their tenure at Syon, and thus that they were drawn from families who placed high value on literacy.¹²⁴ The merchant and gentry upbringing of Syon's women would also have likely given them significant opportunities for hands-on administrative and financial training.¹²⁵ This was a standard experience for both male and female children from craft, mercantile, and landed families alike, and both boys and girls of these classes would acquire at least basic literacy and numeracy.¹²⁶

In addition to this, it was usual in many gentry families to send their children, male and female alike, to another household as adolescents, beginning around the age of twelve, for a stint of service and on-the-job training in household management.¹²⁷ Women were not allowed to profess at Syon until they were eighteen, leaving plenty of time for such training. Any women entering as widows would also have had considerable practical experience in the management of a household, and potentially in legal, social, and political matters, as well.¹²⁸ It is therefore highly likely that the

¹²⁴ Bainbridge, 'The Bridgettines and major trends in religious devotion', 234-5; Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: women and learning c.1415-1600', 102-03.

¹²⁵ Bainbridge, 'Who were the English Birgittines?', 44; Helen Jewell, *Women in late medieval and Reformation Europe 1200-1550* (Basingstoke, Hants, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 152.

¹²⁶ Peter Fleming, *Family and household in medieval England* (London: Palgrave, 2001), 64.

¹²⁷ Fleming, *Family and household in medieval England*, 72-75.

¹²⁸ Spear, *Leadership in medieval English nunneries*, 93. The range of duties expected of a wife, as household manager, is well illustrated in the 1392 *Menagier de Paris. The good wife's guide (Le ménagier de Paris): a medieval household book*. The high level of responsibility and quality of management women were capable of was forcefully argued by Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies* at the turn of the fifteenth century. Christine De Pizan, *The book of the city of ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982). See Jewell, *Women in late medieval and Reformation Europe 1200-1550*, 38, 151. Numerous studies of gentry and aristocratic women have shown them to have had often extensive roles in household and estate management, which they performed with great skill. See Michael K. Jones and Malcom G. Underwood, *The King's mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Kimberly A. Loprete, 'The gender of lordly women: the case of Adela of Blois', in Christine Meek and Catherine Lawless (eds.), *Studies on medieval and early modern women: pawns or players?* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 90-110; F.A. Underhill, *For her good estates: the life of Elizabeth de Burgh* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Ffiona Swabey, *Medieval gentlewoman: life in a gentry household in the later middle ages* (New York: Routledge, 1999); J.L. McIntosh, *From heads of household to heads of state: the preaccession households of Mary and Elizabeth Tudor, 1516-1558* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Barbara J. Harris, 'Space, time, and the power of aristocratic wives in Yorkist and early Tudor England, 1450-1550', in Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn, and Silvana Seidel Menchi (eds.), *Time, space, and women's lives in early modern Europe* (Sixteenth century essays and studies, vol LVII; Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2001), 245-64; Constance Hoffman Berman, 'Noble women's power as reflected in the foundations of Cistercian houses for nuns in thirteenth-century northern France: Port-Royal, Les Clairnets, Moncey, Lieu, and Eau-Lez-Chartres', in Katherine Allen Smith and Scott Wells (eds.), *Negotiating community and difference in medieval Europe: gender, power, patronage and the authority of religion in Latin Christendom* (Studies in the

Syon women, and thus the abbesses, entered religion having had a great deal of training already in household management, including at least a basic introduction to standard household staff organizational structures, authority relationships, resource management, and accounting.

Oliva finds that in the diocese of Norwich, it was the career history of a nun that convinced the convent of her ability to carry out duties of high responsibility.¹²⁹ Superiors there were almost always elected after having held a number of lower offices, and there seems to have been a clear progression upward, from sub-chantress, for instance, to chantress, to cellaress, and so on.¹³⁰ This is compared to male houses in the diocese, which, seem to have had a rota of sorts for office-holding, distinct from potential.¹³¹

Likewise, a glance at the career histories of Syon's abbesses implies that it was probably practical experience and demonstrated competence that determined who was elected to the highest office of that monastery.¹³² Margaret Ashby, for instance, was prioress before her election to the abbacy in 1448. Elizabeth Muston first appears in the surviving accounts as chambress in 1448-9 and remained in that position for seven years, until she was elected abbess in 1457. She was then the longest-serving abbess in the pre-Dissolution history of Syon, remaining the superior until her death forty years later in 1497. Constance Browne first appears as a treasurers in 1498-9, which she remained until 1509. After an apparent break from administrative office until 1514, she returned as a treasurers after the death of one holding that post. She remained treasurers again until the middle of 1518, when she was elected abbess. Though her tenure as superior was relatively short (she died in 1520), she spent a total of twenty years in monastic office. Agnes Jordan was treasurers from 1516-7 to 1518.

history of Christian traditions; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 137-50; Susan M. Johns, *Noblewomen, aristocracy and power in the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman realm* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Helen E. Maurer, *Margaret of Anjou: queenship and power in late medieval England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2003); Barbara J. Harris, *English aristocratic women 1450-1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Diane Watt (ed.), *The Paston women: selected letters* (Library of Medieval Women, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2004).

¹²⁹ Oliva, *The convent and community*, 107.

¹³⁰ Oliva, *The convent and community*, 107-8.

¹³¹ Oliva, *The convent and community*, 109. See Joan Greatrex, 'Prosopography of English Benedictine cathedral chapters: some monastic curricula vitae', *Medieval Prosopography*, 16/1 (1995), 1-26.

¹³² A full list of known Syon obedientiaries and office-holders as seen in the household accounts is given in Appendix A.

She worked with Constance Browne in that office until Constance's election to abbess, at which point Agnes left administrative office for a year and a half. When Constance died, however, the convent chose Agnes as abbess. She remained in this position through the trials of the Dissolution, until the suppression of the abbey in 1539, when she was awarded an annual pension of £200.¹³³

Of the later abbesses, only Elizabeth Gybbes, elected in 1498 and serving until her death in 1518, twenty years later, is mentioned nowhere as a major Syon obedientiary before her election. This is probably due to gaps in the record, however, as there are no Sacristan or Chambress Accounts or indications of the names of those obedientiaries for all but one of the thirty-six years previous. Joan North, the first official abbess of Syon, elected in 1420 (died in 1433), and Maud Muston (elected 1433, died 1447) also do not appear anywhere as office-holders prior to becoming abbess. It is possible that Joan held office at another nunnery before her profession to the new house of Syon.¹³⁴ The complete lack of accounts and record of obedientiary names before 1442, however, means that Maud's administrative background, if any, will remain a mystery. She was related to the Elizabeth Muston who would become abbess ten years after Maud's death. It has also been claimed that their Middlesex family was the source of one more Syon nun and the lay steward of the abbey. She may therefore have received sufficient hands-on training for administration during her upbringing.¹³⁵

The family connection and probable influence of the Mustons may have affected Syon's choice of these women as abbesses, as may other, as-yet unknown, influential connections of the other women selected, but it seems clear that the majority of the women in this position had gained and demonstrated a sometimes significant degree of administrative experience and proficiency before their election. Combining this, their education in Latin and humanism, their age, and the desired personality as set forth in the *Additions*, the picture that emerges of those selected for the highest office is one of experienced, educated, mature, and strong women, who at least strived for the virtues of humility and impartiality. It is clear that, in its selection of the highest

¹³³ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 221.

¹³⁴ F.R. Johnston, 'Joan North, first Abbess of Syon, 1420-33', *Birgittiana*, 1 (1996).

¹³⁵ Barron, 'Introduction', 9.

office in the abbey, the Syon community chose women of training and administrative experience – those who knew bureaucratic procedures – rather than allowing family connections or wealthy patrons to unduly influence selection of officers.

Treasurers

Aside from the abbess, the Syon treasurers held the highest and most centralized economic power in the abbey. According to the *Additions for the Sisters*, the main treasurer was to have an assistant, ‘her felawe’, and this is reflected in all of the Abstracts of Abbess and Treasurer Accounts, which refer to two treasurers each year – the first listed presumably being the senior officer.¹³⁶ The duties of this team were extensive. They were in charge of any ‘outward’ matters of the monastery, if the abbess chose to delegate them, and they were to discharge the delegated duties in the abbess’s name, ‘for to here and answer, indend, and entromet, or meddel’.¹³⁷ The treasurers’ primary duties, however, were to keep all of the accounts and documents, and all of the gold, silver, gifts, and high-value items of the abbey. For this task, they were to be given a treasury house, in which there was to be a great chest with two locks and keys – one kept by each treasurer, so that both would know of all additions and withdrawals.¹³⁸ Such chests were quite standard in large monasteries.¹³⁹

According to the *Additions*, whenever any receiver, farmer, or other person brought them money, the treasurers were to receive it in the presence of the abbess, recording the transaction ‘by tayles or bylles ended with sufficient writyng’, then transfer it to the chest.¹⁴⁰ With more bills and ‘sufficient writyng’, they were then to pay all officers, ‘inward and outwarde, as the office requyreth’, as assigned by the abbess, and to pay all debts in a timely manner.¹⁴¹ The treasurers were also assigned specific expenditure responsibilities. According to the *Additions*, they were charged with providing and paying for medicines, spices, powders, ‘and suche other, after the

¹³⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 186.

¹³⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 186.

¹³⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 186.

¹³⁹ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 328.

¹⁴⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 186-7.

¹⁴¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 187.

disposition of the abbes.¹⁴² The single surviving full Treasures Account records such things, in addition to payment of fees to physicians.¹⁴³ The Abstracts of Treasures and Abbess Accounts indicate that the treasurers spent money on several additional expenses, as well, not assigned specifically by the *Additions*. These are detailed in the analysis of abbey expenses in Chapter 3, and include such things as attorney fees and payments to council members. Such accumulation of miscellaneous expenses by treasurers and bursars occurred at Westminster and Durham as well.¹⁴⁴ These accounts also record expenses for repairs on monastery buildings, which in most years were paid for by the abbess, and for wheat and malt, most of which was generally bought by the cellaress.¹⁴⁵ This suggests that in addition to being a ‘catch-all’ of regular miscellaneous expenses like council wages, the treasurers’ funds were also relied upon to supplement funds for other officers’ regular expenditure responsibilities. This was a common practice at Westminster Abbey.¹⁴⁶

Because the majority of existing Treasures Accounts from Syon are summary abstracts, it is difficult to gain a full picture of the detailed workings of this office. It is clear, however, that the scope of action of the treasurers was wide, and their responsibilities of extreme importance to the working of the abbey. Supervised by the abbess, they controlled the bulk of money at Syon, and were involved in extensive financial receiving, distribution, accounting, and auditing operations. These issues of financial distribution and oversight will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Cellaress

The cellaress also had an expansive scope of work, more complex in many ways than that of the treasurers. Assisted by a sub-cellaress, she was responsible for providing food and drink for the entire monastery – sisters, brothers, and precinct alike, and clothing and wages for servants of the household. She was charged with the keeping and maintenance of ‘all the vessel and stuff’ of the household, and with purchase of all things necessary to all ‘houses of office’ dealing with food, including the

¹⁴² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 187.

¹⁴³ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1790

¹⁴⁴ Barbara Harvey, *The obedientiaries of Westminster Abbey and their financial records* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2002), 63; Dobson, *Durham Priory*.

¹⁴⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1790, SC 6/HenVIII/2182

¹⁴⁶ Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, 33-4.

bakehouse, brewhouse, kitchen, buttery, pantry, cellar, frater, infirmary, parlour, ‘and such other, both outwarde and inwarde, for straungers and dwellers’.¹⁴⁷ The *Additions* describe in detail the types and amounts of food she was expected to provide for the abbey, list the variety of ways it could be prepared, and indicate that the option of preparation style was up to the cellaress, as long as it was ‘holsom and well sesonned, tender and goode’, and served hot.¹⁴⁸ In fact, the *Additions* go into a great deal more detail about the food choices than about the management of the ‘houses of offic’ which prepared the food – the baker, brewer, cooks, and the like. These servants at Syon did not leave bills and documents from which to glean information, as their counterparts did at Westminster Abbey.¹⁴⁹ The Syon Cellaress Accounts fortunately provide copious data on their duties.

In these documents, it is possible to gain a view of much of the work, staff, and life in the Syon precinct. In addition to the food preparation departments listed above, the cellaress also bought supplies and paid wages for staff in ‘the womenhouse’, a building in the precinct never defined, but which seems to have functioned as a boarding house used by both novices and vowesses. She also hired a number of people for work that was not clearly identified with an office or department, but which dealt more generally with agriculture – such as harvesting, helping in the malt garner, shepherding, or gardening – or with support services for food procuring or preparation – such as coopers, smiths, tinkers, tallow chandlers, carters and boat men. It is clear that the cellaress was responsible for overseeing all home farm, garden, and general staff services in the precinct. She also recorded yearly purchases of livery cloth for the servants, and annual expenditure on their wages. Unfortunately, these amounts were given in bulk, and no list of individual staff members receiving these items has yet been found. Finally, the cellaress’s staff was involved in the alms of leftover food given to the poor each day; one year a servant received a reward for ‘helping the baker at the dole’.¹⁵⁰

The *Additions for the Lay Brothers* mention a lay brother butler on the men’s side of the abbey, who was to set out ale and bread for the priests and other brethren three

¹⁴⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 188.

¹⁴⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 189.

¹⁴⁹ Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, 43-4.

¹⁵⁰ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2249; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 22.

times a day, and was to assist the servitors with some after-meal cleaning of the eating area.¹⁵¹ The sisters also had a butler. Her official title was ‘keeper of the buttery and the freytour’, and she, like her male counterpart, was charged with providing drink to the sisters at certain times of the day.¹⁵² Both probably received ale from the precinct brewery run by the brewer who was paid by the cellaress, and supplied ale and beer to the sisters, the brothers, and three staff departments.¹⁵³

The cellaress therefore had one of the most challenging and complicated jobs in the abbey. She was expected to oversee extensive external staff and supervise their operations while meeting them as rarely as possible and never physically entering their offices. She could, however, and likely did, require them to keep books and bring these to her for review and verification against other documents, though none of these staff accounts survive. The cellaresses of Syon probably also relied on the advice and supervision-by-proxy that the lay steward of the household provided, although there are virtually no signs in the sources of his activities.¹⁵⁴ It is possible as well, that the cellaress had visited the precinct offices long before, as a novice living outside the Syon enclosure during her year of proof, a time, perhaps, of administrative as well as spiritual preparation.

Chambress

The Syon chambress had a much narrower set of responsibilities than the cellaress, confined to the clothing and sleepwear of the brothers and sisters, and all linens and bedding inside the monastery. With eighty five religious to clothe, however, this could add up to a great deal of work. According to the *Additions*, the chambress was responsible for the ‘schapyng, sewyng, makyng, repayryng, and kepyng them from wormes, schakyng them by the helpe of certayne sustres depute to her, that they be not deuoured and consumed of moughtes.’¹⁵⁵ The *Additions* indicate that she had a

¹⁵¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 115, 19.

¹⁵² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 65, 174-5.

¹⁵³ See Chapter 4

¹⁵⁴ The position appears in the the *Valor* and the Cellaress Latin Accounts: J. Caley and J. Hunter (eds.), *Valor ecclesiasticus temp. Henrici VIII : auctoritate regia institutus; printed by command in pursuance of an address of the House of commons of Great Britain* 6 vols. (London: Record Commission, 1810-34); TNA SC 6/1106/13 to -25.

¹⁵⁵ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 187.

sub-chambress, and this passage suggests additional helpers as well.¹⁵⁶ Cloth was her main expense, and she was also expected to purchase a number of items related to the manufacture and care of clothing and bedding, such as pins, veils, caps, needles, thread, shoe buckles, washing basins, and soap.¹⁵⁷

The Chambress Accounts also show the hire of regular staff including a wardrober, a tailor and a shoemaker, to create these items of clothing. Other workers were hired by the chambress on a more casual basis for a variety of textile-related tasks such as spinning, dying, grinding shears and knives, mending spectacles, knitting, weaving, and washing blankets.¹⁵⁸ These indications of textile manufacture are strong evidence that the conventional yet controversial late-medieval system of monetary ‘wages’ to monks for clothing allowances was not in effect at Syon, at least not for the bulk of the monastery.¹⁵⁹ While the chambress had a nun assistant as sub-chambress, and hired lay staff outside of the enclosure for these many activities, it is possible (as discussed below) that the Syon sisters in general may also have been involved in textile work, as part of requirements for manual labour. If so, the chambress is likely to have been responsible for overseeing them.¹⁶⁰

Sacristan

The sacristan also had a relatively narrow scope of duties, but these led to some quite evocative entries in her accounts, which list the purchase of numerous figural artistic objects, in addition to a plethora of more mundane items.¹⁶¹ She was charged with keeping all ornaments of the church which were not assigned to the brothers, including chalices, basins, copes, jewels, and relics. Although she did not keep the altar cloths, albs, and towels for the altars, she was expected to see that they were washed and returned to the brothers. The *Additions* specify in detail how the washing and folding of ‘the corporas ones’ was to occur, with no sister touching these cloths

¹⁵⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 19.

¹⁵⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 187. See Chapter 3 for expenditures in general. See chapter 5 for discussion of clothing and bedding consumption.

¹⁵⁸ See e.g. TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2295, -2318.

¹⁵⁹ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 240. See also Chapter 3.

¹⁶⁰ See below.

¹⁶¹ See Chapter 5

without wearing linen gloves.¹⁶² She was also assigned to less expensive or hallowed elements of church accessories, such as wax, lamps, and oil. The church had to be well stocked with candles and other lights to ensure some brightness in the gloom of the large, tall space of the church nave, by which visitors and religious alike could read, admire, and be cheered. Candles were therefore one of the sacristan's main costs. The *Additions* also indicate her responsibility for purchasing communion bread, candles, mats for the church floor, pens, and ink.¹⁶³ The Sacristan Accounts detail her expenditure on all of these items on a regular basis, and other things as well, including soap, flowers, and incense. A more routine daily element of the sacristan's duties was opening and shutting the doors and windows for the nuns' choir and communion places, and lighting and snuffing out candles in the sisters' areas of the church.¹⁶⁴

Two other elements of the sacristan's work are uncertain, but tantalizing: her involvement in bookbinding or illumination, and in embroidery and other needlework. The Sacristan Accounts list purchases of many book-making and illumination materials, which have led Erler to argue, convincingly, that the inclusion of the latter items suggests the sacristan was responsible for the Syon sisters' library, and possibly certain aspects of the brothers' library as well.¹⁶⁵ The sacristan may also have been responsible for much of the needlework done at the abbey. At Vadstena, there were four sacristans who were required to make all the priests' vestments, altar cloths, and other church linens, and to embroider the vestments with gold, silver and precious stones.¹⁶⁶ Each of them was also expected to spend a week each month attending and reading to sisters in the infirmary.¹⁶⁷ In these respects, Syon clearly chose a different path. Only one sacristan position is mentioned in the Syon *Additions* or Accounts, aside from her sub-sacristan, and Syon had a separate infirmaress, with no mention of sacristan helpers. However, any regular or substantial embroidery work by the sacristan is uncertain. On the one hand, she employed an embroiderer on a few occasions, and on the other, the lack of redundant sacristans would have lessened the Syon officer's time to produce such work.¹⁶⁸ Some of the materials she purchased

¹⁶² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 154-5.

¹⁶³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 155.

¹⁶⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 155.

¹⁶⁵ For book-making at Syon, see Erler, 'Syon Abbey's care for its books', 297.

¹⁶⁶ Hogg, 'Elucidarius', 150..

¹⁶⁷ Hogg, 'Elucidarius', 145.

¹⁶⁸ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2305.

could have been used for needlework, however, and it is possible she had more assistants than mentioned in the sources. Needlework was one type of ‘manual labour’ initially expected of all Brigittine nuns, as discussed in detail below, and the general level of Syon sisters’ involvement in this task would have impacted the extent of the sacristan’s work in this area.

The sacristan was also responsible for managing the abbey church. Syon’s church was quite large, with numerous altars, many furnishings to maintain, and thousands of visitors every year, who left their mark through wear and tear on the church fabric and with tokens of their devotion at the shrines. It was, in some sense, an industry of its own – a tourist and pilgrimage site, and centre of devotions for the religious of Syon themselves, which had to be administered and maintained smoothly behind the scenes to ensure an even flow of religious experience. Although the sacristan oversaw the administration of the church, accounting for all funds paid for its furnishing and upkeep (aside from construction and building repairs), she delegated the day-to-day tasks of running it. Aside from the sub-sacristan she was allowed, she employed lay staff to assist. There is some confusion, however, over her use of lay staff versus lay brothers, and the role of the Syon deacon called ‘sextyn’. These complications are discussed below.

Prioress and Searchers

The prioress was the second-in-command to the abbess in spiritual matters, and took on the latter’s spiritual responsibilities when she was absent. She was appointed by the abbess, with the advice of the confessor general and the more mature sisters.¹⁶⁹ The prioress’s position was a long-term office, unlike the other officers who could be appointed or let go every year. Her main duty was to oversee the four ‘searchers’, appointed by the abbess. These searchers, along with the prioress herself, monitored the behaviour of the nuns, making sure they behaved religiously and according to the *Rule*. In case of infractions, they reported the faults in the sisters’ chapter.¹⁷⁰ One of the searchers also monitored the location of the nuns at night, ensuring that all were in

¹⁶⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 182.

¹⁷⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 182-3.

their cells with lights out.¹⁷¹ Because of these responsibilities, the abbess was advised in the *Additions* to carefully choose for these positions impartial women of good example, with good teaching skills.¹⁷² So the searchers could remain examples for the others, the abbess and prioress were never to discipline them while they held office. Instead, in case of a problem, they might be discharged, then re-appointed after completion of a penance.¹⁷³ The prioress was distinguished by being called only by her title, never by her name.¹⁷⁴ There is no indication that she had any special privileges beyond the above, and no separate chamber or set of rooms, as in other places.¹⁷⁵ This was clearly an important office, however, as were the searchers. The rules for daily life and expected behaviour at Syon were extensive and detailed, and the prioress and searchers were likely kept quite busy upholding the spiritual rigour of life in the women's side of the abbey.

Chantress

The chantress at Syon (and her sub-chantress with her) was in charge of leading the nuns' choir, and supervising the divine offices every day – including, it seems, aspects of the men's choir. The appointed woman needed to read music well and have a good voice. She was expected to balance the sides and voices of the choir, and to set the tempo and pitch carefully, so that the sisters and brothers would not wear out their voices, or become sleepy.¹⁷⁶ She was responsible for all the books relating to the divine service, chapter, and frater, and was expected to keep them up to date, uniform, and corrected. Her duties also included recording the names and the profession, renunciation, obedience, and death dates of all the sisters (and for the latter, the brothers as well).¹⁷⁷ Her book-related duties suggest that she may have overseen the sisters' library and perhaps supervised the librarian. Parallel cantor positions in men's monasteries often had this duty, and were often concerned specifically with writing, illuminating, and literary matters.¹⁷⁸ The responsibilities listed in the *Additions* do not

¹⁷¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 184.

¹⁷² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 184.

¹⁷³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 185.

¹⁷⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 182.

¹⁷⁵ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 360.

¹⁷⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 147-8, 50.

¹⁷⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 149.

¹⁷⁸ Knowles, *Monastic order*, 428; Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, 428.

include book repair or decoration, and these activities, if necessary, may have been done by the sacristan or her assistants as part of their more usual bookwork. It is possible that the chantress may even have been under the sacristan in the hierarchy given the similarity of their spiritual, church and book concerns, though there is no direct mention of such a relationship.

Librarians

The men's and women's sides of Syon each had a librarian. On the women's side, she was perhaps subordinate to the chantress or sacristan, though a 1482 library ordinance suggests that the chantress and librarians had separate and equal authority in their various realms.¹⁷⁹ While nothing is known of any of the sisters' librarians, the librarian on the brothers' side in the late fifteenth century up to at least 1506, was Thomas Betson, who organized the holdings and created a new classification system for the books.¹⁸⁰ The *Syon Additions* made clear the importance of books for the abbey, and counted it as a fault at episcopal visitations if any books needed for singing or reading were lacking on either side of the monastery, or if any books were treated badly or left in disrepair.¹⁸¹ In the library ordinance of 1482, the abbess referred to just such a state of disrepair and sought a remedy, stating that she, 'considerynge the greete hurtte and notable dayly Enpayremente of oure singler tresour Bokes of oure Queeres and libraries for defaute of byndynge . wrytynge and notynge of Quayres . necessarie to be hadde and reparede bene moved to purvey this remedye.'¹⁸² The remedy referred to was the hire of a bookbinder; how long the position lasted at Syon is unknown. For the above reasons, the position of librarian on both the sisters' and the brethren's sides, was bound to be one of great responsibility.

¹⁷⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 1; Robert Jowitt Whitwell, 'An ordinance for Syon library, 1482'; *The English historical review*, 25 (1910), 121-3; Erlar, 'Syon Abbey's care for its books', 297. c.f. Olsen, who assumes the sacristan was herself the librarian: Olsen, 'Work and work ethics', 137.

¹⁸⁰ Erlar, 'Syon Abbey's care for its books', 294; Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood', 195, 98.

¹⁸¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 18-19; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 42.

¹⁸² Whitwell, 'An ordinance for Syon library', 122.

Infirmaress

In keeping with many aspects of practical life at Syon, there were detailed instructions on how the nuns should deal with ill sisters, and on the responsibilities and expected behaviour of the infirmaress. This officer had oversight of several infirmary or recovery areas: 'Wherefor like as ther be dyuers infirmitees, so ther owen to be dyuers howses to kepe hem in'. The rooms referred to were the sisters' common parlour, 'for them that be in recouerynge', the infirmary, 'for al maner sekenes', another area 'for them that be distracte of ther mendes', and finally, an area for lepers, 'stondyng fer from al other, so yet that the sustres may come to them and comferte hem.'¹⁸³ While the common infirmary and common parlour seem to have existed at Syon, the other two areas may have been created only when needed – certainly there is no mention of them in the sources.¹⁸⁴ As noted above, the cellaress had charge of providing food for the infirmary at Syon, and there is no evidence that the infirmaress had any dealings with money. It is likely, therefore, that the latter did not supervise a separate kitchen, unlike her counterparts at some major male monasteries.¹⁸⁵ She may, however, have had a small kitchen of her own for boiling water or heating up foods from the main kitchen. Or, she may have used the small kitchen which the *Additions* said should be available to all the sisters.¹⁸⁶

Generally, to maintain strict enclosure, unwell nuns were treated by the infirmaress with purchased medicine, which is recorded as an expenditure in the Treasures Accounts.¹⁸⁷ When such care was not effective, the sister could see a doctor, but only at the gates; physicians were allowed within the sisters' enclosure only in very serious cases.¹⁸⁸ Unlike at Westminster Abbey and some large lay households, Syon does not seem to have had a regular physician on staff.¹⁸⁹ Instead, three Treasures Accounts and Abstracts of Account record payments of fees or rewards to 'Fysysyons & Surgeons'.¹⁹⁰ The plurality and general nature of the statement suggests diverse doctors were hired as necessary.

¹⁸³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 193.

¹⁸⁴ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 21.

¹⁸⁵ Harvey, *Living and dying*, 89; Knowles, *Monastic order*, 431.

¹⁸⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 45.

¹⁸⁷ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1790

¹⁸⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 193.

¹⁸⁹ Harvey, *Living and dying*, 82; Woolgar, *The great household*, 104; Mertes, *English noble household*, 50.

¹⁹⁰ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1790, SC 6/HenVIII/2182, -2183

The infirmaress's preferred character was described in detail in the *Additions*, along with how she should conduct her duties of taking care of the ill. She should be caring, skilled, and physically strong (for helping to lift and clean the bedridden, or helping to support the ill on their way to the church or infirmary chapel). She must also be even-tempered and patient with the difficulties of illness, 'thof one haue the vomet, another the fluxe, another the frensy, which nowe syngeth, nowe cryeth, nowe lawgheth, nowe wepeth, nowe chydeth, nowe fyghteth, nowe is wroth, nowe wel apayed. For ther be some sekenesses vexynge the seke so gretly and prouokynge them to ire that the mater drawenvp to the brayne, alynth ther mendes.'¹⁹¹ In addition to dealing compassionately with their symptoms, the infirmaress changed the clothes and bedding of the ill, provided for their physical comfort through food, drink, warmth, and all other necessities, day and night, and performed the anointing of the sick for them with oil given to her by the brothers. She also took them into the garden for fresh air, and saw to it that they who could, kept the same religious observances of silence and graces as the rest of the convent.¹⁹² The infirmaress undoubtedly had help, at the least her one assistant guaranteed in the *Additions*, but likely more when needed.¹⁹³ Those sisters who were inclined to help ease the suffering of the sick were allowed to come talk to them, but it is possible that there were more official helpers as well.¹⁹⁴ At Vadstena, where there were four sacristans, one of the four was assigned to assist in the infirmary every week.¹⁹⁵ Syon may have found a comparable arrangement.

Lesser Official Positions

In addition to the aforementioned obedientiary officers, the Syon sisters had a number of positions more limited in scope. One type that occurs repeatedly in the *Additions* is that of the guards of the enclosure, so to speak – those women charged with ensuring that all openings between the nuns' cloister on the one hand, and the men's community or the outside world on the other, were shut, locked, and monitored. One

¹⁹¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 194.

¹⁹² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 195.

¹⁹³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 65.

¹⁹⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 195.

¹⁹⁵ Hogg, 'Elucidarius', 145.

or two sisters were appointed as ‘keepers of the wheyles’. Their job was to stand watch by the wheel and grate which separated the men’s and women’s communities, and deliver all things required by the brothers through the said wheel. Only they and the main obedientiaries (treasures, sacristan, chambress, and cellaress) were allowed to pass objects through the wheel to the brothers, or receive anything from them. The keepers were expected to be in earshot of the wheel day or night, ‘that as ofte as they here any ryngyng or knockyng atte whele, nyghte or day, anone they hygh them thyder, at leste one of them, to wyte what the brethren wyll, and to geue them an answer.’¹⁹⁶ They were cautioned to be quiet, and speak only as necessary with the brother on the other side. Other than these keepers, only the main obedientiaries were allowed to converse at the wheel.¹⁹⁷

The sisters also had a keeper of the grates in general, a keeper of the ‘reuelacion gate’, and a ‘keeper of the cloister and dorter doors’.¹⁹⁸ There was also a sister assigned to shut the garden gate at night, who was directed to knock hard on the gate to warn any sisters who might still be in the garden.¹⁹⁹ All of these women, like the keepers of the wheel, were expected to speak only when necessary at these places, and to keep their conversation with men and seculars to a minimum. They were also not to open any gate or door when other sisters were about, to prevent the nuns from being seen by seculars.²⁰⁰ So important were their duties that it was considered a severe, grievous, and punishable fault for them to leave a gate or door to the outside open without an attendant present.²⁰¹

In addition to these positions were the keeper of the washing house, the keeper of the garden and of the fruits thereof (who may have been the garden gate keeper mentioned above), the keeper of the buttery and the frater, and ‘all such other officers’.²⁰² There was also a mistress of the novices whose duties undoubtedly included extensive contact with the postulates living in the precinct, probably through

¹⁹⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 190.

¹⁹⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 191.

¹⁹⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 65.

¹⁹⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 26.

²⁰⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 191.

²⁰¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 16.

²⁰² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 65.

conversations at a grate.²⁰³ The *Additions* also describe certain duties shared amongst the nuns on a rotating basis. There were the ‘servitors’, who served and waited on the rest of the sisters during meals. They were expected to do their duty cheerfully and gladly, and to roast, butter, and heat anything as requested by the sisters eating. They, along with the legister, who was assigned on a rotating basis to read to those eating during the normal sitting, ate together after the rest of the sisters left. These women eating in the second shift were served by the sisters that kept the serving house.²⁰⁴

Some positions are notable for their absence. The abbey does not seem to have had an almoner, for instance; this is perhaps due to the unique requirements of the *Brigittine Rule* regarding alms, as discussed in Chapter 3. If there were lay sisters, a possibility discussed below, then there may have been a choir nun assigned to direct them, as at Fontevraud.²⁰⁵ Some positions common at other monasteries, such as the granger, the warden of churches, the warden of the shrine, the hosteller or guest-master, and the master of the works at Westminster Abbey and other houses, were held at Syon by lay staff, or did not exist at the abbey.²⁰⁶

In addition to all of these titled positions, the *Additions* stated that each officer was allowed one or more sisters as a deputy, at the discretion of the abbess.²⁰⁷ The abbess herself could have two nuns as assistants to wait upon her day and night.²⁰⁸ The *Additions* also specifically list several assistants, such as the subchantress, undersacristan, undertreasurer (who seems to have become more of a co-treasurer by the time of the Tudor-era Syon Accounts), and underchambress, but there were likely to have been quite a few more.²⁰⁹ Given the wide and complicated scope of her responsibilities, the cellaress, in particular, was likely to have had a number of general administrative assistants, in addition to the keeper of the buttery on the sisters’ side and the numerous lay staff under her command. In many large monasteries, in which obediantaries formed separate individual households, each obedientary would

²⁰³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 24.

²⁰⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 171-2, 74.

²⁰⁵ Kerr, *Fontevraud in England*, 139.

²⁰⁶ Harvey, *Obediantaries of Westminster*, 21, 57, 71, 77; Knowles, *Monastic order*, 429, 31.

²⁰⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 65.

²⁰⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 201.

²⁰⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 65.

receive her own personal lay servant as well.²¹⁰ In many large houses, monastic assistants to obedientiaries could take on much larger roles, approaching the power and importance of their supervisors. This was especially the case when the subordinate officer offered to take on responsibilities of other, overwhelmed obedientiaries, or was assigned to the tasks.²¹¹ There is, however, no evidence that Syon had either the personal lay servants, or the expansion of assistant power experienced elsewhere.

Selection and Career Ladder

The abbess was responsible for choosing the major female monastic officers. The Syon *Additions* describe in detail the process of appointment. The abbess could change officers every year, or as often as she saw fit. But this change could only, barring urgent cases, be done in chapter meetings, and in an official, considered manner, not impulsively.²¹² To appoint a new officer to a position, the abbess first called up the sister to be removed from office, received her keys and thanks, and then called the name of the sister to be appointed next, declaring that she assigned the job to her. This new appointee prostrated herself in front of the abbess and protested that she was not fit for the position. The abbess then, if she was sure about her decision, said that she willed it anyway, and handed the keys of the office over to her – the new appointee seeming to have had little choice in the matter.²¹³ After this ceremony in chapter, the abbess, the outgoing official, the new appointee, and some additional experienced sisters, all entered the relevant office chamber to inspect the true state of goods and finances of the office in question.²¹⁴ The abbess may have taken nominations or advice on which sister to select for a position, as in other monasteries, but there is no direct evidence for such a practice at Syon.²¹⁵ She likely followed the guidelines given in the *Additions* regarding the general qualities expected of monastic officers, and the specific talents needed for each position. In addition, an examination of the career histories of known obedientiaries shows that Syon abbesses also saw

²¹⁰ Power, *Medieval English nunneries*, 150.

²¹¹ Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, xiv, xix.

²¹² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 65.

²¹³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 65-66.

²¹⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 67.

²¹⁵ Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, xxvii.

demonstration of these traits through previous administrative experience as an important consideration in appointments of new officers.

The list of Syon women accounting obedientiaries in Appendix A, culled from all of the extant Syon Accounts, demonstrates that a number of sisters held differing administrative positions over time. From all of the detail and variety, a main theme can be discerned. With only one exception, each sister who held more than one of the five accounting obedientiary positions in her life was a treasurers in at least one year.²¹⁶ This suggests either that holding this powerful position was a common aspiration, a last step on a one-way career ladder, or alternately was simply expected of women who had gained managerial and financial experience in other obedientiary jobs. Other evidence refutes the first conclusion. While certainly in some cases, the position of treasurers was the last job held, an equal number of sisters moved on to the cellaress, chambress, or sacristan position after being treasurers. This suggests that there was no hierarchy of status or expertise among these accounting obedientiary positions. The contradiction could be resolved, however, in assuming a relatively small pool of women who were interested or talented in administrative work, and recognizing that two treasurers were needed at a time. The likelihood of any other officer eventually working in this position would therefore be higher.

On another note, no sister is listed in any of these positions after or while being prioress or abbess, suggesting that Syon did not take up the practice of other monasteries, by which the superior took over additional offices to gain centralized financial control.²¹⁷ There also seems to be no doubling-up of other offices, as occurred in some monasteries, such as Westminster Abbey, as an attempt to limit the number and power of obedientiaries.²¹⁸ Only one case of possible overlap exists at Syon: the Isabell Lamborne/ Isabell Langthorne of the 1482 account, in which the former is recorded as treasurers, and the latter as cellaress.²¹⁹ While Syon clerks often changed the spelling of names significantly from one account to another (and even within the same account), the difference here is significant enough that these could

²¹⁶ The exception is that of Margerie Phillip, who was sacristan for many years, and cellaress for part of one year.

²¹⁷ See Chapter 3.

²¹⁸ Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, xix.

²¹⁹ TNA SC 6/1261/4

well be two different people. Other than this, all women who appear as holders of more than one office in the Syon accounts held the positions consecutively, not simultaneously.

Many of these officers held administrative positions for the long term, some remaining in their positions as long as 40 years. Isabell Lamborne, for example, was trearess in 1442 and 1482, a tenure, if continuous, comparable to and contemporary with the longest-serving abbess at Syon, Elizabeth Muston. Her sometime-co-trearess, Elizabeth Herthill, held the next-highest tenure in a non-abbatial office. She was trearess from 1452 to 1482, at least. The fact that the trearess positions, which the abbess could replace annually, remained in the same hands for so long under the same abbess, suggests that the three women had developed strong working relationships. In fact, something akin to a management team seems to have developed at Syon during the fifteenth century, with both Juliane Gailer (cellaress) and Margerie Phelippe (sacristan), having tenures of fifteen years each, overlapping with the tenures of Isabell Lamborne, Elizabeth Herthil, and Elizabeth Muston. Muston herself also served as chambress for at least eight years before her accession to the abbacy, contemporary to these other women, suggesting that working relationships that had been forged when she was an obedientiary continued to be nurtured by her in her position as abbess.

Long tenures were expected of abbesses, who were elected for life. But while annual, even more frequent, changes of incumbent were allowed for other monastic positions, administrative careers of a decade or more were not uncommon among other Syon women who never became abbess. While this is most striking in the fifteenth century, many Syon monastic officers of the sixteenth century exhibited tenures of ten to thirteen years.²²⁰ A significant dissimilarity between the periods at Syon, however, is that in the later years, there was much more overlap in the tenure of different officers, with no long episodes with the same management team. In addition, in the later years, there also appear to have been more women with temporary appointments – with tenures as short as one or two years in a position. While this occurred in the fifteenth

²²⁰ Examples: Kateryn Wey (cellaress), Alinore Scrope (treasures), Kateryn Parteland (chambress), Mary Drury (sacristan), Margaret Vaux (treasures), Margaret Shuldham (sacristan and treasures) and Margaret Dely (cellaress and treasures).

century, the pattern is much more prevalent in the sixteenth-century accounts. Some of these tenures, and those of the more long-term office-holders of the sixteenth century, may have been even longer than the surviving sources illustrate, especially given the many missing Chambress and Sacristan Accounts and the names that they may have recorded. The career histories of Syon's administrative women might have been longer still than even complete accounts could indicate. A sister may have started in one of the minor offices, such as keeper of the wheel, then been appointed to positions of increasing responsibility, one perhaps progressing from librarian to under-sacristan to sacristan to treasurers, another from chantress to searcher to prioress. Without records of such appointments, the complete prosopography of women's administrative responsibilities at Syon unfortunately cannot be known.

Administrative Duties of the Men

Because the women of Brigittine abbeys were given full control of the material resources of their houses, the men of the Order were less frequently and widely involved in administration. They did have some responsibilities along these lines, however, which are outlined in the *Rule* and *Additions*. In addition, some administrative roles seem to have evolved as a matter of convenience, subsiding when circumstances changed.

The Confessor General

The Syon *Additions for the Lay Brothers* give little information about the role of the confessor general. As they were written for the lay brothers, they contain only those aspects of life at the monastery that those men needed to know, including information about the general scope and types of confessor general work, but no details about his responsibilities, what specific decisions he was allowed to make, or what decisions were reserved for the abbess. The *Brigittine Rule* stated that the confessor general should do nothing without the council of the abbess, except regarding the community of the brethren, and the conservation of the Order. The abbess, it said, is the head of the monastery, and should be counselled regarding the needs and goods of the monastery.²²¹ The wording of this passage suggests that the confessor general gave

²²¹ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 73.

advice to the abbess regarding material matters, but that he was restricted in action, and that the abbess was the ultimate superior. The abbess also led the election of the confessor general, who was chosen by the men and women together.²²² According to the *Rule* and *Additions*, he could, like the abbess, have a separate chamber, and he also was allowed an assistant – a deacon.²²³ Just as the sisters must obey the abbess in all things, all of the priests, deacons and lay brothers of Syon were expected to obey the confessor general, who had the power of ‘binding and loosing, correcting and reforming’ the men.²²⁴

This is the extent of knowledge about the confessor general’s role, as shown in the *Syon Additions* and the *Brigittine Rule*. Several documents from Vadstena, however, describe the duties of the confessor general at that monastery, and while there may have been differences, Syon likely used Vadstena’s arrangements as a model. The *Vadstena Additions of Prior Peter* discuss his necessary character. He should be wise, and of ‘ripe experience’, grave, not too zealous or suspicious, patient, and God fearing.²²⁵ The *Liber Usum* discusses his duties in more detail. He was expected to celebrate High Mass on feast days, to administer the Eucharist to the sisters on particular feasts, and to protect the relics of the abbey. He must always be prepared to hear confessions from anyone, and was the designated confessor for the abbess. He should be mindful of his responsibility as a father to sisters and brothers both, and was expected to assemble both the brothers (in their chapter) and sisters (in the locutory), separately, three to four times a year, to ‘exhort to make amends’. Finally, he was expected to manage and supervise the lay brothers in their duties.²²⁶ Like the abbess, when appointing or dismissing an officer, the confessor general entered the office space of that position to ascertain the state of things.²²⁷ Interestingly, nothing more was said of his supervision of the priests and deacons in their administrative or spiritual work. He could apparently leave the monastery on business if necessary, and was expected to appoint an elder brother as a substitute in his absence.²²⁸ The

²²² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 50-62; Tait, ‘Bridgettine monastery of Syon’, 224; Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 81; Hogg, ‘Rewyll’, 73.

²²³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 204; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 94.

²²⁴ Hogg, ‘Rewyll’, 73.

²²⁵ Hogg, ‘Additions of Prior Peter’, 98.

²²⁶ Risberg, ‘*Liber usum fratrum*’, 32.

²²⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 43-4.

²²⁸ Risberg, ‘*Liber usum fratrum*’, 18.

confessor general at Vadstena also was in charge of keeping and editing the monastic diary, a chronicle of abbey and secular Swedish history from 1392 to 1545.²²⁹ While nothing of the sort has been found for Syon, the possibility of one having existed is intriguing. Many of the confessors general of Vadstena had also previously held the position of sacrist on the men's side, and the same career ladder may have existed at Syon.²³⁰

The confessor general is almost entirely absent from the numerous charters, deeds, and other legal documents relating to Syon's landed and spiritual properties, leading to the conclusion that he held little or no official power over estate matters. The *Syon Additions*, however, state that he should faithfully assist the abbess in 'the conseruacion of the gode state and godes of the monastery,' and declare that he was culpable along with the abbess if those properties were not well taken care of.²³¹ There are glimpses of him in temporal dealings which suggest he may have been involved in property management at Syon. One late-fifteenth century letter from a bailiff, for example, refers to the confessor general as someone who would have known about the estate matter at hand, along with the abbess, had they not both died.²³² In 1458, during the disputes with King's College, Cambridge, regarding numerous substantial estates, Robert Bell, 'confessor general of Syon' gave his solemn testimonial about the situation of the St Michael's Mount property. The fact that he had enough knowledge to testify suggests that he was closely familiar with the details of the estates, or that he was brought into the matter to be an influential male voice. He also may have been involved in the issue to a higher degree than normal, due to the presence of a chapel and priests at the Mount, who he likely supervised on some level.²³³ In the 1451 Latin Account, one phrase assigns the confessor a level of power over financial matters not otherwise seen in the Syon sources, stating that the abbess and confessor general (together) allowed for wheat not paid by one William Campyon.²³⁴ All of these fifteenth-century references seem to indicate a close

²²⁹ Claes Gejrot, '*Diarium Vadstenense*: the memorial book of Vadstena Abbey. A critical edition with an introduction', *Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis: Studia Latina Stockholmiensia*, 33 (1988), 2, 71.

²³⁰ Gejrot, '*Diarium Vadstenense*', 71.

²³¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 42, 198.

²³² *Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, Henry VIII*, vol 1, pt 2, 1423.

²³³ TNA E 211/417.

²³⁴ TNA SC 6/1106/19.

familiarity with, even occasional responsibility for, estate matters on the part of the confessor general.

Interestingly, little evidence for such involvement in the sixteenth century has come to light. A letter of unknown date, addressed to the abbess and written in a hand and style common to Syon's late fifteenth-century accounts, mentions the confessor general in an unusual transaction.²³⁵ The letter was written to the abbess by a servant, who declares that he has delivered *to the confessor general* a book or bill listing all the wood received while he was an administrative officer of the abbey, subtracting amounts that the abbess had allowed him in his account. He defends himself against charges of the abbey steward, who has clearly acted as first auditor to his accounts, and reminds the abbess that he and a colleague had once been before her with their inventory of cattle and wood. Defending himself against possible accusations of fraud, he declares that any challengers should be called before the abbess and her council. This interesting document suggests that although the abbess was intensely involved in the accounting and administrative oversight of abbey income, in concert with her council, the confessor general had some role in receiving accounting documents on her behalf, whether as a regular task or only in unusual or urgent circumstances.

One late-fifteenth-century document refers to the confessor general directing some construction works in concert with his 'council'.²³⁶ This is the only reference to such an advisory body specifically associated with the Syon men, unless it refers to the abbey council in general, and therefore to what is elsewhere referred to as the abbess's council. It is interesting that the document specifically mentioning the confessor general's council was one regarding the building works. He may have had a separate group of advisors and staff which focused on the supervision of Syon's construction, in which the abbey priests seem to have been involved. From this point forward, there is almost no evidence of the brothers' involvement in property or staff administration. A single reference is a 1537 letter from the confessor general John Copynger to Thomas Cromwell about a property matter. In it, Copynger relates how he was trying to influence the abbess's decision about who should fill a vacant vicar

²³⁵ TNA E 135 3/12.

²³⁶ Cunich, 'The brothers of Syon', 47.

position in a rectory owned by Syon.²³⁷ Despite the spiritual nature of the issue, the wording indicates that the decision on the matter was understood to be the abbess's in the end, regardless of the confessor's wishes.

With these notable exceptions, the conclusion can be drawn that the confessor general's involvement in estate matters was not significant, and was less so in the sixteenth century (for which more documents survive, but in which he appears less) than the fifteenth (for which fewer documents survive, but in which he appears more). This change is interesting, and though it could be an artefact of the gaps in primary source material, it may also signal some shift in power between the abbess and confessor general over the course of Syon's history. Unfortunately, without more evidence, an increase in female power at the abbey can only be speculation.

Aside from the involvement with building works, there is little evidence for an influence of the confessor general in the household administration. He does not appear as a decision-maker in any of the Syon obedientiary accounts, and there are in fact no references to him affecting matters of primary economic concern to the sisters or the brothers. In fact, there exists a 1482 indenture between Abbess Elizabeth Muston and Thomas Raile, the secular keeper of the brothers' locutory, in which the latter agreed to repair books at the monastery for an additional fee per volume.²³⁸ It is interesting that it was the abbess who officially hired this staff member to work on the brothers' side of the monastery; this confirms the preeminent place of the women in abbey administrative affairs.

The confessor general did clearly have power over the abbey brethren, themselves, however. The *Additions* indicate that he had the sole power to decide on who would fill the few male obedientiary slots, which of the lay brothers would take on what practical and ceremonial duties, and many other aspects of daily life on the men's side of the abbey.²³⁹ The brothers also swore obedience only to the confessor general.²⁴⁰ This lack of official male obedience to the abbess had been a point of contention in

²³⁷ *Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, Henry VIII*, vol 12, 809.

²³⁸ Whitwell, 'An ordinance for Syon library', 121.

²³⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 43.

²⁴⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 50-3.

the early years of Syon, but seems to have been settled on the side of the brothers by the time the *Additions* were drafted.²⁴¹

The confessor general may have had more influence in the household and precinct than is suggested by the Syon Accounts and occasional letters which are available to us. According to the *Syon Additions*, the abbess was in fact expected to take his counsel on important matters touching the monastery, including regarding estate and precinct issues.²⁴² She should, they say, inform the confessor general about problems, and seek his advice before talking about issues with any secular.²⁴³ The *Additions* also indicate that after the abbess was satisfied with the accounts presented to her by the lay staff and monastic officers, she was expected to show them to the confessor general. When he was ‘convinced by the abbess that the account is truly made,’ he should relate the information to the brothers.²⁴⁴

While the confessor general may appear in this passage to have a final stamp of approval on the abbess’s actions, it is important to note that the wording does not indicate any necessary action on the abbess’s part if the confessor disliked her decisions. He must only be convinced that the account was a reflection of the true state of the abbey, in order that what he represented to the brothers was the truth. It is clear from this, however, that the confessor general was meant to be kept informed of the temporal state of the abbey and its holdings, and that the abbess was expected to ask his advice on important matters. There was no injunction for her to follow the advice he provided, so the abbess remained the final authority; however, there was clearly room for convincing, if the personalities of the particular abbess and confessor general allowed. If there were any tensions between them regarding decisions made by the abbess, it would likely have come out in the episcopal visitations, at which complaints were meant to be aired. Unfortunately, the episcopal visitation records for

²⁴¹ For discussions of the early disputes about gender power at Syon, see Cnatingus, ‘Studies in the Order of St Bridget’; Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*; Elin Andersson, ‘Questions and answers on the Birgittine Rule: A letter from Vadstena to Syon Abbey 1421’, *The Journal of Medieval Monastic Studies*, 2 (2013), 151-72, 167. C.f. Tait, *A fair place*, 33, 230-38, 88-97, 328-31, 418-25. who dismisses the investigation of gender issues at Syon as ‘anachronistic in the medieval context’ (p. 33), but nevertheless discusses the Syon gender power dispute at length before arguing that ‘the English Brigittines were out to exalt the status and powers of the Abbess’ (p. 331).

²⁴² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 198-9.

²⁴³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 198.

²⁴⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 206.

Syon have been lost, and the existing sources do almost nothing to fill the gap. It is only left for us to wonder, then, at the exact relationship between the abbess and confessor general regarding temporal matters, the scope of influence any confessor general actually had, and any male/female disputes that may have existed internally behind the cloister walls.

In terms of spiritual power, there is more to be said about the role of the confessor general. While the abbess had a level of spiritual authority over the Syon nuns, the confessor general had a great deal more in some important ways, being the head male in the monastery, in charge of all of the provision of confession, communion, and other sacraments. While Syon's first, non-official abbess, Matilda, claimed the right given to her in the foundation charter to be head of the monastery in both spiritual and temporal matters, the men seem to have won an early fifteenth-century dispute concerning this claim.²⁴⁵ The *Additions* clearly indicate that the confessor general was 'conseruator of the order, and oweth to take hede that al poyntes of the rewle be kepte', among both the brothers and the sisters.²⁴⁶ He was also expected to be consulted by the abbess in her choice of prioress, the main spiritual overseer of the sister's community.²⁴⁷ He appointed the confessors for each sister, and he was the assigned confessor to the abbess, who should confide in him any problems she had in keeping the *Rule*.²⁴⁸ This last role (with the penances it could involve), supports the argument that the ultimate spiritual authority of the Syon community was in the hands of the men.

As in all organizations, the exact nature of the position was likely influenced, in part, by the personalities of the people involved. The role of each confessor general was probably determined, to some extent, by the character and inclinations of the individual man holding the post, and that of the abbess he worked with.²⁴⁹ While Syon clearly systematized much of its administrative duty structure, there was perhaps, as

²⁴⁵ Cnattungus, 'Studies in the Order of St Bridget'; Tait, *A fair place*; Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*.

²⁴⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 75, 198.

²⁴⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 181.

²⁴⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 201.

²⁴⁹ Such personality effects have also been seen in other female monasteries. See Michelle Herder, 'Substitute or subordinate? The role of a male procurator at a Benedictine women's monastery', *Journal of Medieval History*, 31 (2005), 231-42.

in most institutions, room for negotiation. An abbess who especially trusted her confessor general might delegate more outward responsibilities to him than one who did not appreciate his working style. It is difficult to know, therefore, the exact boundaries of action of any particular confessor general.

Priests and Deacons

Owing to the absence of additions to the *Rule* for the priests and deacons of Syon, little is known of the administrative offices held by these groups. According to the *Brigittine Rule*, priests of the Order were to focus on study, prayer, divine office, and preaching, while leaving the more mundane aspects of life on their side of the abbey to the deacons and lay brothers.²⁵⁰ General duties of officers were outlined in the *Additions for the Lay Brothers*, where they were enjoined to be kind, circumspect, wise, and prudent, and to ‘beware that the goods of the monastery be not spende in waste euer hauyng and eygh to the poer peple’.²⁵¹ The *Vadstena Additions* discuss more specific administrative positions, and it is likely that the priests and deacons of Syon followed similar guidelines. One of the priests was appointed librarian for the men’s library, may have kept the register for the brothers’ side, and as in Vadstena, may have performed scribal and correspondence duties for the abbey, and perhaps kept a chronicle.²⁵² Another position of a priest or deacon was the cantor, who at Vadstena, and likely at Syon, was responsible for chanting of psalms. He was certainly expected to oversee the lay brothers in their divine services, and to ‘proclame the lay brethren of al defautes made in the chirche or in any other place longyng to diuine seruise only.’²⁵³ His deputy, the succentor, organized the choir duties of the brethren.²⁵⁴ A choir brother (priest or deacon) served as legister, as well, reading to the brethren at meals.²⁵⁵ As on the sisters’ side, the brothers also had searchers, which seem to have been priests, since the eldest was expected to preside in

²⁵⁰ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 73. See also Morris, *St Birgitta*, 175.

²⁵¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 124.

²⁵² Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood', 189; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 30; Birgitta Fritz, 'St Birgitta and Vadstena Abbey in the scholarly literature published during the jubilee year, 2003', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 29/3 (2004), 277-86, 285; Gejrot, 'Diarium Vadstenense', 26, 42.

²⁵³ Risberg, 'Liber usum fratrum', 46; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 99.

²⁵⁴ Cunich, 'The brothers of Syon', 49, from Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 150.

²⁵⁵ Cunich, 'The brothers of Syon', 49.

the absence of the confessor general.²⁵⁶ The latter could if he desired assign a searcher to oversee each officer on the men's side, though this was perhaps directed primarily to the offices held by the lay brothers.²⁵⁷ The position of hebdomadarian was rotating, the incumbent being appointed on a weekly basis to carry out the task of preparing service books for the religious services.²⁵⁸

Another administrative position held by a priest or deacon was the office of the sacrist. His duties are uncertain, and may have overlapped with those of the female sacristan and her lay staff. Although the sacristan oversaw the administration of the church, accounting for all funds paid for its furnishing and upkeep, she delegated the day-to-day tasks of running it. So much is clear. To whom, exactly, she delegated, and how they in turn divided their responsibilities, is somewhat of a mystery. According to the *Syon Additions*, the abbey had two people with the title 'sacristan' – the nun whose accounts have come down to us, and a 'sextayn, be it prest or dekon', who is known to us only through this line in the additions written for the lay brothers.²⁵⁹ Little is known of his duties. There was a sexten/sextan at Vadstena for a period – a deacon who was responsible for composing and editing the Diary, but this position disappeared from the record after 1465, and it is possible that any additional duties he had were transferred to a layman or secular priest.²⁶⁰

At Syon, the brothers' sexten had a lay brother subordinate, called 'the minister of the sextry', about whom more is known. This man was charged with distributing candles and palms, folding vestments, hanging up veils, and other basic labour related to setting up of the church for services in changing seasons or needs. He was to 'keep the church and its stuff clean and washed', to lock the doors of the church, and to ring bells when only simple sequences were required.²⁶¹ He also was expected to advise the sisters' infirmaress about what anointing goods to have on hand in case of emergency.²⁶²

²⁵⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 38.

²⁵⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 125.

²⁵⁸ Cunich, 'The brothers of Syon', 48, from Risberg, '*Liber usum fratrum*', and Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 55.

²⁵⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 106-7.

²⁶⁰ Gejrot, '*Diarium Vadstenense*', 18, 30-2, 70.

²⁶¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 106-7.

²⁶² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 195.

These passages seem to indicate that the whole of the day-to-day abbey church cleaning, setting up, and general caretaking, was the responsibility of this minister of the sextry. The female Sacristan Accounts, however, contradict this assessment. They show that this obedientiary paid on a near annual basis for cleaning and sweeping of the church, cleaning the altars and other furnishings, and ‘skoring [scouring] of the church stuff’, and in one year spent 4s 10d on ‘wages of working in the Sextry’.²⁶³ In addition to this, she also employed a permanent staff member with the title ‘Sexten’, who received an annual wage of 26s 8d, with a further reward of 3s 4d in most years. It is possible that these employees served alongside Syon’s priest-sexten and the lay brother minister of the sextry. Given the number of pilgrims received at the church annually, the monastery likely saw a high enough traffic of visitors to necessitate extra labour. On the other hand, the abbey may have decided, after the composition of the Additions, that the time of the Syon brethren was better spent elsewhere.

The Lay Brothers

The lay brothers of Syon also performed a number of domestic tasks and held minor offices, in addition to the liturgical duties described above. The *Brigittine Rule* says very little about the lay brothers, stating only that ‘lewde men’ were to assist the clerks with their labour.²⁶⁴ Because of the existence of the *Syon Additions for the Lay Brothers*, however, more detail is known about the specific duties of these men than those of their priest and deacon brethren. Generally speaking, the lay brothers were responsible for serving the priests and deacons in all necessities in the church, at meals, and throughout the men’s side of the monastery. This included specifically making their fires, washing their clothes, shaving them, keeping the garden, ringing the bells, keeping the men’s side clean (clean enough so the priests and deacons did not clean it themselves in frustration), and doing any other thing commanded to them by the confessor general.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1738.

²⁶⁴ Hogg, ‘Rewyll’, 71.

²⁶⁵ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 104-5, 30.

The lay brothers were assigned to many of the lesser duties which occupied some of the Syon nuns as well. Guards of the enclosure, for instance, appear repeatedly in the *Additions for the Lay Brothers*. There was one brother assigned to keep the garden gates.²⁶⁶ Another was a keeper of the wheel, who took food and other needed goods that his counterpart on the sisters' side passed through the wheel. He should also, like her, be present or nearby most of the time, as he was the main point of communication between the sisters and the brothers regarding practical matters. He was, however, forbidden from talking to any sister for idle reasons.²⁶⁷ At this wheel, the food for the men was meant to be received from the women, and the keeper of the wheel was expected to chime the dinner bell when he received the food.²⁶⁸

The duties of those lay brothers who dealt with food were described carefully. There were servitors assigned to serve the meals, and they had very detailed directions regarding when, how, and in what order foods were to be served to the priests and deacons.²⁶⁹ They were also expected to wash the cups and glasses of the brothers, to roast, boil, butter, and heat all requested items, and to clean up after the meal. They seem to have been assigned on a rotating basis, aside from the keeper of the wheel, who was always a servitor on the brothers' side.²⁷⁰ When assigned to the servitor position, a brother was expected to sweep the dining hall one week, and keep the kitchen the next week, cleaning the lavatory and hallways, and bringing in enough coal for the next week. The kitchen seems to have been small – an addition to the main kitchen run by the cellaress. The *Additions for the Lay Brothers* indicate that the lay brother assigned to keep the brothers' kitchen each week would make its fire, dress potage, keep the utensils clean, return broken meats to the sisters for distribution to the poor, and fold up the tablecloths.²⁷¹

There were a number of other small duties around the men's side. One lay brother was assigned to keep the brothers' infirmary, with duties and expected character largely identical to that of the sisters' infirmaress: he should be a man who 'hath god in drede

²⁶⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 124.

²⁶⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 124.

²⁶⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 113.

²⁶⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 113.

²⁷⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 117-19.

²⁷¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 119.

and kan skyl on seke folke'.²⁷² There was a keeper of the washing house, who provided hot water and clean towels for the Syon men to wash their feet with in the mornings.²⁷³ There was also a 'lay brother that kepeth the chaumbre', though there is no indication what his duties might have been.²⁷⁴ It is possible that he kept a store of clothing and accessories for the brothers' side of the abbey, while not having the extensive responsibilities and authority of the sisters' chambress.

Some of the lay brothers were also responsible for ringing bells on days of election of the abbess or confessor general, on feast days, at the death of a brother or sister, and several times daily for the divine offices of both the sisters and brothers. The *Additions* give very detailed instructions about the number of strokes, and length of each peal, and how these notes should be varied given the circumstance or celebration.²⁷⁵ The Sacristan's Accounts record purchase of gloves for the use of these bell-ringers on the brothers' side.²⁷⁶

By far the most extensive and detailed work of the lay brothers, however, was in service to the sacramental and choir work of the priests and deacons. One lay brother was assigned to the office of 'mynyster of the sextry', as mentioned above, and many were assigned to rotating positions.²⁷⁷ Their work mainly included holding tapers, fetching things, ringing hand-held bells, holding books, and otherwise serving at the altar.²⁷⁸ Lay brothers were also expected to work in the garden on the men's side of the abbey, to keep it clean, 'and sette and sowe therin to the comen profite but not to take vp any trees or herbes necessary to sustyr or brother withoute licence of ther souereyne'.²⁷⁹ This garden was presumably in addition to the several mentioned in the Cellaress Accounts, which were staffed by hired lay servants, though some of the latter may have supplanted the lay brothers in the men's garden as well.

²⁷² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 126-7.

²⁷³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 79.

²⁷⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 49.

²⁷⁵ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 42, 71, 76, 109-11.

²⁷⁶ A near-annual expense throughout the Sacristan Accounts.

²⁷⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 46, 73.

²⁷⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 48, 55, 73, 107.

²⁷⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 104-5.

Syon also had, potentially, a number of additional lay brothers of different types. Vadstena had several '*fratres ab extra*' or 'yard brothers' who wore a different habit. Their primary duties were to pass messages between the male and female convents, and to help with bringing things into the enclosure through a type of airlock – a room for transferring bulky goods in and out of the cloister. While they were admitted into the men's convent enclosure and lived by the *Brigittine Rule*, they were also responsible for dealing with whatever business the abbey had with seculars.²⁸⁰ In addition to these were two more 'kitchen brothers' (or *focaries*), who had yet another uniform – a thin habit with a hood.²⁸¹ These various extra 'classes' of Brigittine religious were not mentioned in the *Rule*, but Birgitta herself did allow, in separate writings, for four *fratres ab extra* in each of her monasteries.²⁸² The profession of 'focaryes' (separate from that of lay brothers) is discussed in the *Additions for the Lay Brothers*, however, indicating that kitchen brothers were accepted at Syon.²⁸³ This is supported by the appearance of the word *focarius* in a grammatical aide in the Syon Martiloge.²⁸⁴

Syon seems to have decided against the use of yard brothers, however. The *Mare Anglicanum* specifically prevented the use of *fratres ab extra* at Syon, and this measure was supported by its early leaders.²⁸⁵ This type of lay brother is not mentioned by name in any *Syon Additions* or accounts. There is some evidence that the abbey may have had such members, however. Thomas Boulde, 'a simple brother' at Syon, had 'seen and read diverse letters, writing and supplications some of the abbess, some of the confessor some of all the whole congregation to the king, to lords, and to other diverse'. Boulde was not only literate, he was well-read in the documents regarding the property disputes between Syon and King's College, Cambridge.²⁸⁶ The *Syon Additions* do not indicate any role for lay brothers that would require such familiarity with legal disputes. This suggests either that Boulde had legal skills of

²⁸⁰ Hogg, 'Additions of Prior Peter', 100, 08, 27-8; Risberg, '*Liber usum fratrum*', 28; Gejrot, '*Diarium Vadstenense*', 1; Hogg, 'Elucidarius', 150-1.

²⁸¹ Hogg, 'Additions of Prior Peter', 100.

²⁸² Cnatingus, 'Studies in the Order of St Bridget', 151-52.

²⁸³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 133, 48-50.

²⁸⁴ Claes Gejrot, 'The Syon Martiloge', in E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and its books: reading, writing and religion, c1400-1700* (Studies in Modern British Religious History; Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 203-27.

²⁸⁵ Cnatingus, 'Studies in the Order of St Bridget', 151-52.

²⁸⁶ TNA E 211/417.

particular use to the abbey in this matter, or that the role of the lay brother extended to estate matters. If the latter, it is possible that he was a ‘*fratres ab extra*’. There is also one mention of a Syon lay brother at the Dissolution who was a smith.²⁸⁷ If he worked in the monastic precinct, he was probably considered a yard brother. The existence of such religious at Syon would go a long way toward explaining the ability of the abbey nuns to maintain complete enclosure while receiving goods and managing extensive staff and resources in the secular world. Such external brothers would have formed extra layers of buffer around the purity of enclosure, allowing the nuns, priests, and deacons to maintain their spiritual concentration, and thereby fulfil their Order’s mission more efficiently.

Construction Management

In addition to the official positions described in the *Additions* and other sources, the men of Syon also undertook important administrative tasks related to the construction of the monastery, its precinct, and its church. Nothing of the men’s role in construction is mentioned in the *Brigittine Rule* or the *Syon Additions*, but the *Responsiones Vadstenenses* – answers to the Syon brothers’ questions to Vadstena in 1427 – refer many times to their role in building works. A major concern was whether the brothers were allowed to enter the sisters’ enclosure to inspect the buildings, or to leave their enclosure in order to supervise the construction of the new monastery – specifically to ensure that the buildings were ‘duly and considerately arranged according to the intention of the Revelation in order to avoid unfortunate and erroneous things that are directly contrary to the intention of the *Rule* and the Revelations, as a result of failing supervision.’²⁸⁸

While the supervision of building works would normally seem to be administration of temporal affairs, and therefore under the purview of the abbess and the female obedientiaries of Syon, this passage indicates the direct connection made between the architecture of the monastery, and the fulfilment of the *Rule*. The men’s supervision of initial abbey construction could therefore be seen as a natural consequence of the

²⁸⁷ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 86.

²⁸⁸ Quote: Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 145. Other references: Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 47, 165, 85, 17.

confessor general's role as conservator of the Order and of the *Rule*. So concerned were the brothers with the correct construction of the monastic site that they sent two brothers to Vadstena to measure the grounds of the mother house and inspect its architecture.²⁸⁹ Around 1455, concerns about the construction of the roof of Syon's church prompted the confessor general to write to his counterpart at Vadstena for advice, given that the latter monastery had recently repaired its own church roof.²⁹⁰ The brothers were still involved in the abbey building works in the late 1480s and 1490s, when the confessor general directed some of the construction, in concert with his 'council'.²⁹¹ This is the only reference to such an advisory body specifically associated with the Syon men, unless it refers to the abbey council in general, and therefore to what is elsewhere referred to as the abbot's council. It is interesting that it specifically mentions the confessor general's council in a document on the building works. He may have had a separate group of advisors and staff which focused on the supervision of the abbey's construction.

Manual Labour

The work done by those sisters who were not obedientiaries or assigned to lesser positions was a contentious issue in the early years of Syon Abbey. From the beginning, manual labour had been a central tenet of monasticism. In the early middle ages, monks were expected to engage in a range of domestic work within the cloister, and to work in the fields.²⁹² As Chaucer had his monk outrider note defensively, however, with the passage of time and advances in agriculture, manual labour – whether field work or domestic – became less necessary.²⁹³ As the agricultural surplus increased, and the money economy expanded, servants were more easily hired, for smaller amounts of work, giving monks more time for contemplation. While manual labour was still held up as a monastic ideal by many, the majority of late medieval monasteries that could afford to, employed large numbers of lay staff to take care of manual labour needs.

²⁸⁹ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 29.

²⁹⁰ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 22.

²⁹¹ Cunich, 'The brothers of Syon', 47.

²⁹² Knowles, *Monastic order*, 6-7.

²⁹³ Paul E. Beichner, 'Daun Piers, monk and business administrator', *Speculum*, 34/4 (1959), 611-19, 614.

Syon had a history of disputes regarding the sisters' need to do manual labour.²⁹⁴ In its earliest days, Syon's nuns and Matilda Newton, the first (pre-enclosure) abbess, declared an obedience only to the *Brigittine Rule*, which they believed had come from Christ, through Saint Birgitta. No man-made additions to this *Rule*, such as those from Vadstena, were deemed acceptable.²⁹⁵ These latter expectations were reflected in the description of the women's work given by the Vadstena brethren in their response to a Syon question. The work of the sisters, they stated, 'is to work with wool and linen, to sew, wash, and prepare things that are necessary both for themselves and for the brothers.' They should also serve food to other sisters, on rotation, but should not cook, since they may have kitchen sisters.²⁹⁶ The requirement that the nuns do domestic labour, including baking, brewing, and kitchen work was one of the Syon women's main complaints against the Vadstena *Additions* and one of the main sources of resistance to the application of anything similar at Syon.²⁹⁷

After Henry V stepped in to resolve the dispute by appointing a committee of monks and theologians to review the requirements, the sisters' claims were denied on all accounts, including on the domestic work issue.²⁹⁸ Interestingly, however, the *Syon Additions* written sometime after this meeting do not in fact contain such requirements for domestic work.²⁹⁹ They do include an expectation that the bishop inquire, during his visitations to the abbey, about the occupation of the sisters when they were not at divine service or other conventual services, but the statement is very general.³⁰⁰ The *Additions for the Sisters* seems to be incomplete – the version printed by Aungier has slightly more material than the Hogg edition, and cuts off in the middle of a sentence.³⁰¹ It is possible, therefore, that the missing parts contained information on the manual work and possibly even domestic work of the nuns. It does seem improbable, however, that some hints of such work expectations would not appear in the sections of the *Additions* available to us, which often have small redundant

²⁹⁴ Olsen, 'Work and work ethics'; Cnattungus, 'Studies in the Order of St Bridget'.

²⁹⁵ Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 164-5.

²⁹⁶ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 179.

²⁹⁷ Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 164; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 178.

²⁹⁸ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 178; Johnston, 'VCH, House of Bridgettines', 182.

²⁹⁹ Olsen, 'Work and work ethics', 135.

³⁰⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 22.

³⁰¹ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 184.

elements and repetitions of minor details. Olsen suggests that the absence of manual work topics in the *Syon Additions* indicates that the abbey found it was able to manage with only the general statements of the *Rule* on this account, and that this afforded it a degree of flexibility.³⁰² Another possibility, however, is that the sisters won the war in the end, if not the specific battle of the 1415 theologians' council. The *Additions* were written, then perhaps re-written, decades after this event, and things may have evolved considerably in that time, in favour of the women.³⁰³

The sisters' initial stance seems directly opposed to St Birgitta's apparent intentions, as illuminated by her later *Revelations*. She was dedicated to the idea of balance between active and ascetic life, between meditation and work, and she cautioned that the body tends toward avoiding work and seeking out idleness.³⁰⁴ For this reason, Birgitta believed that it was necessary for the sisters to exercise their bodies with 'discreet work'.³⁰⁵ She also said the sisters should model themselves after the Virgin Mary, who, among other things, served God with her hands. They should therefore do manual labour when not singing the office or reading.³⁰⁶ Balancing the roles of Mary and Martha had been valued in early monasticism, and Birgitta's desire to revitalize Christianity through a new monastic Order relied in part on this ideal of physical toil as a form of spiritual work, a practice of humility.³⁰⁷ In Birgitta's *Revelations*, Christ calls directly for 'laboring bodely to my wyrship'.³⁰⁸ This expectation was also expressed clearly in the *Brigittine Rule*, which states that at any time when they are not at divine service or reading, the sisters must also labour with their hands, and in doing so, come to serve God with their whole selves, not just their mouths.³⁰⁹ In light of these facts, it is striking that the Syon women resisted manual labour. It is probable that a great deal of their sentiment against domestic work came from the prevailing cultural attitude against manual work among those of status.³¹⁰

³⁰² Olsen, 'Work and work ethics', 140.

³⁰³ See Chapter 1: Introduction.

³⁰⁴ Morris, *St Birgitta*, 173; Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 51.

³⁰⁵ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 232.

³⁰⁶ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 232.

³⁰⁷ Claire Walker, 'Combining Martha and Mary: gender and work in seventeenth-century English cloisters', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 30/2 (1999), 397-418, 400.

³⁰⁸ Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 204.

³⁰⁹ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 78.

³¹⁰ Walker, 'Combining Martha and Mary', 399.

The resolution of the crisis may have come through a reconsideration of how bodily labour was defined. The nuns may well have looked at the volume of administrative work required to run the abbey, and considered it manual enough for the *Rule*'s purposes. In addition, in wealthier nunneries, administrative and liturgical work were both commonly seen as labour more 'suitable to their station'.³¹¹ That administrative work could take the place of manual labour was not a far-fetched idea. In the *Rule of St Benedict*, administrative labour overseeing the manual labour which in turn provided for the monastery's material needs of food, shelter, furnishings, etc., seems to have been included in the daily period of *opus manuum*.³¹² For Benedict, the problem was primarily one of idleness, 'the enemy of the soul', and the need to direct physical energies so the religious could afterwards focus on their spiritual work in choir.³¹³ Birgitta echoed this, saying that the purpose of manual labour is 'to make the sisters more fit for spiritual labour'. But she did not encourage creating more opportunities for work, just for the sake of work. If the contemplative had 'the necessities of life' (as they certainly did at Syon), she could focus on prayer.³¹⁴

Manual Bookwork

Evidence for manual labour can be difficult to find at Syon, however. One type which has captured the attention of many scholars is bookwork. The manual copying, illumination, and binding of books, especially of service volumes, but also of literary and legal texts, were normal occupations of monks and nuns throughout the middle ages, even into the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.³¹⁵ Whether the religious of Syon were involved in such labour has been a matter for debate. Certainly, at least some volumes were copied at Syon in the fifteenth century.³¹⁶ Religious of both sexes at Syon's motherhouse Vadstena certainly did copy literature, and even translated books into Swedish.³¹⁷ There is less direct evidence of hands-on bookwork by Syon religious, but certain officers had related responsibilities. Some evidence

³¹¹ McNamara, *Sisters in arms*, 281.

³¹² Clark, *Benedictines*, 105.

³¹³ Clark, *Benedictines*, 105.

³¹⁴ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 141.

³¹⁵ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 234.

³¹⁶ Morris, *St Birgitta*, 7.

³¹⁷ Morris, *St Birgitta*, 169; Gejrot, '*Diarium Vadstenense*', 1; Olsen, 'Work and work ethics', 136-7.

suggests, for instance, that copying was one of the ‘verifiable duties’ of the Syon deacons, though the extent to which they followed this prescription is uncertain.³¹⁸

There is no evidence for any large-scale bookwork, involving numerous members of the religious community at Syon. No scriptorium or workshop such as existed in Vadstena’s sister’s side, is mentioned in any Syon sources.³¹⁹ The abundant purchases in the Sacristan Accounts related to bookwork could have been used by lay staff as easily as the nuns and priests themselves, and there certainly is evidence for such secular hires, as discussed below. It is likely that the Syon sisters did not meet a requirement for manual labour through work in a scriptorium.

Craftwork and Needlework

Another form of manual labour practised by the Vadstena religious, and potentially done by the Syon sisters, was craftwork – especially needlework. It was common for nuns in many medieval nunneries to busy themselves in work periods by sewing purses, gloves, and other objects for gifts, or for sale.³²⁰ Needlepoint was expected of the nuns at Vadstena and other Brigittine abbeys, and the Syon sisters may have participated in similar activities.³²¹ The sisters of Vadstena spent their afternoons in a large workroom either copying, correcting or illuminating books, knitting or embroidering, or making vestments and clothes for the brothers.³²² While working, they were allowed to talk on spiritual subjects.³²³ The abbess assigned tasks to individual sisters, and all went to the parlour to show her their work once a week.³²⁴ Over thirty examples of their embroidery survive, and it has been suggested that their style was influenced by English embroidery by way of Syon.³²⁵ Vadstena’s *Additions of Prior Peter* even required that the nuns each have a needle case attached to their

³¹⁸ Tait, 'Bridgettine monastery of Syon', 303.

³¹⁹ Olsen, 'Work and work ethics', 137.

³²⁰ Olsen, 'Work and work ethics', 139; McNamara, *Sisters in arms*, 282.

³²¹ Hogg, 'Elucidarius', 146; C.B. Rowntree (ed.), *The Altomunster Rule*, ed. James Hogg (A Carthusian world view : Bodleian MS. E Museo 160. A Brigittine legislative collection 35: Analecta Cartusiana, 1990), 89; Olsen, 'Work and work ethics', 136.

³²² Hogg, 'Elucidarius', 147.

³²³ Hogg, 'Elucidarius', 147.

³²⁴ Hogg, 'Elucidarius', 148.

³²⁵ Morris, *St Birgitta*, 169; Olsen, 'Work and work ethics', 138.

girdles as a standard part of their attire.³²⁶ Whether this requirement survived at Vadstena is uncertain. It is clear, however, that no such needle cases appear in the *Syon Additions* or the *Syon Accounts*. Nor is there any mention of a common workroom at Syon, though this does not prove its absence.³²⁷

The *Syon* sources do however give some tentative signs of potential craftwork by abbey nuns. The *Sacristan Accounts* include purchases of thousands of pins each year, along with thimbles, coloured thread, Venice gold (thread made of gold or silver), and silk ribbon, and in 1530 three dozen ‘broches for embroidering’ were bought.³²⁸ The purchase of these items is not clear evidence for involvement of the *Syon* nuns themselves in needlework. As discussed below, the abbey employed embroiderers on occasion, or bought piece-work, such as the numerous embroidered flowers (up to 120 annually), purchased in many years, or the embroidered image of Mary, purchased in 1524.³²⁹ The nuns may have done additional needlework, but there is no direct evidence that these materials were purchased for their use, rather than that of their employees.

Another type of craftwork potentially done by the *Syon* nuns was the making of bead strands or rosaries. These strands were a popular category of pilgrim souvenirs in the later middle ages, and ‘bead pardons’ – indulgences attached to prayers said on beads – particularly rose in popularity through the late fifteenth century, especially as the Marian devotions with which they were associated increased.³³⁰ *Syon Abbey* in fact had one of the most extensive bead pardons in England.³³¹ In addition to granting Brigittine brothers the power to bless purchased rosaries, St Birgitta herself was said to have devised a type of rosary with sixty-three beads, which was sold at *Syon*, and one of which Henry VII is known to have owned.³³² The abbey also sold a separate type of pardon beads, the pattern of which may have been invented at the

³²⁶ Hogg, ‘Additions of Prior Peter’, 108.

³²⁷ Olsen, ‘Work and work ethics’, 137.

³²⁸ These items were common purchases throughout the *Sacristan Accounts*. For quote, see: TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2317.

³²⁹ Embroiderer’s wages: TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2305. For purchase of embroidered flowers, e.g. TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2296, -2300, -2305, -2306. For Mary image: TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2307.

³³⁰ Swanson, *Indulgences*, 271.

³³¹ Swanson, *Indulgences*, 272.

³³² Spencer, ‘Pilgrim souvenirs and secular badges’, 46; Bainbridge, ‘The Bridgettines and major trends in religious devotion’, 230; Hutchison, ‘Dissolution no decline’, 248.

monastery.³³³ It was a string of five beads of three colours in the order of two white, one red, and two black beads. The owner was meant to recite a specific prayer in memory of the Passion of Christ, and in return would obtain a pardon from a specified number of days in purgatory.³³⁴ These Syon-specific bead strands seem to have been made at the abbey. The 1533 Sacristan Account records a payment of 8d for one pound of ‘colored thread for bedes.’³³⁵ While the use of this thread for making bead strands may have been limited to abbey servants, it is quite possible that the nuns were involved in their manufacture.

Domestic Work

If the Syon nuns’ participation in craftwork is elusive, far more so is their level of involvement in daily domestic tasks. In a typical large household or monastery, such chores would have included sweeping and cleaning the cloister and enclosure buildings, laying rushes on floors, washing clothing, changing straw in mattresses, making beds, cleaning shoes, and disposing of garbage.³³⁶ Knowles, in his extensive survey of medieval English monasteries, found no evidence for general domestic work within monastery enclosures, by either lay staff or lay brothers.³³⁷ This conclusion has been rightly questioned by Harvey, who notes the assignment of personal servants to even the lesser monastic officers at Tudor-era Westminster Abbey, and the large number of women doing general domestic duties at that monastery.³³⁸ Knowles’ conclusion is also contradicted by the Syon Accounts. While not suggesting any assignment of personal servants to any nuns, they give small glimpses of general domestic work.

The Syon Accounts provide a good deal of evidence for domestic work outside the monastic enclosure. The Cellaress Accounts record many payments for ‘dryvying of feather bedds’, mending mattresses, and cleaning the steward’s chamber, and include

³³³ Bainbridge, ‘The Bridgettines and major trends in religious devotion’, 230; Swanson, *Indulgences*, 274.

³³⁴ See Chapter 12, and Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, 249-50.

³³⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2314.

³³⁶ Woolgar, *The great household*, 168-70; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 263; Mertes, *English noble household*, 36.

³³⁷ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 263.

³³⁸ Harvey, *Living and dying*, 151, 67.

rewards to women helping and scouring vessels in the womenhouse.³³⁹ All of these domestic duties concerned either the womenhouse (the boarding house for novices and vowesses), or the quarters of major lay staff. The Sacristan Accounts also record payments for sweeping, scouring and ‘beating of mats’, all within the church, and the wording of some entries indicates that those hired were assisting the lay sexten, whose duties seem to have included sweeping.³⁴⁰

Evidence for domestic work within the Syon enclosure is more elusive. According to the *Additions*, the domestic tasks of cleaning, washing clothes, and making fires on the men’s side were clearly assigned to the lay brothers. Despite this, the Syon chambress paid yearly rewards to servants for ‘washing of clothes at the master’s side’.³⁴¹ The permutations of this phrase through the series of accounts make clear that it refers largely to the washing of blankets on the men’s side of the abbey.³⁴² In addition, there is one instance of the cellaress paying a reward to a ‘man helping on the master’s side’.³⁴³ Elsewhere in the accounts, this phrasing seems to suggest domestic service. While these items perhaps indicate a deviation by the lay brothers from the Order’s initial occupational intentions for them, they may instead have been occasional help – an annual cleaning of the blankets, for example, and a one-time cleaning task.

Precisely who had the responsibility for building fires and washing clothes and linens on the sisters’ side is not clarified in the *Additions*.³⁴⁴ These would seem to be tasks under the mandate of the chambress, but even so, it is not known whether those of her subordinates who engaged in domestic work were other nuns, lay servants, or even lay sisters, who were not included in the design of Syon, but may have been included in the *Additions*, and certainly existed at its Dissolution. In 1526, the cellaress gave a reward of 3s 4d to ‘a woman keeping the monastery’ for three quarters.³⁴⁵ Other women were given rewards or wages from time to time, sometimes by first and last

³³⁹ Cellaress Household and Cellaress Foreign Accounts, e.g. ‘maid helping in the womenhouse’: TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2213, vessels: TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2225.

³⁴⁰ e.g. TNA SC 6/HenVII/1738, SC 6/HenVIII/2315.

³⁴¹ For lay brothers tasks, see above.

³⁴² TNA SC 6/HenVII/1731, SC 6/HenVIII/2290.

³⁴³ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2252.

³⁴⁴ Dunning, ‘Building of Syon’, 21; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 32; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 43.

³⁴⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2255 – a Cellaress Household Account.

name, sometimes with the title ‘mistress’ and a last name, but with no indication of function or reason for the reward. Some of them may have been hired for domestic work within the nuns’ enclosure.³⁴⁶ It is also possible that any regular domestic workers who were in fact engaged within the nun’s side, were paid along with other abbey staff in the wages recorded annually in a lump sum item in the Cellaress Household Accounts termed ‘wages of servants of the household’.³⁴⁷

Lay Sisters

Another common option to cover domestic work in medieval nunneries was the incorporation of a lay sister element into the convent’s structure. The *Brigittine Rule* mentions no lay sisters, and as we have seen, Brigittine nuns were initially expected to do their own domestic work, in keeping with the Order’s intention to re-join Martha with Mary.³⁴⁸ The *Vadstena Additions*, however, following a passage in Birgitta’s *Revelations*, added a provision for four *focariae*, or kitchen sisters, with prayers and statutes separate from those of the choir sisters, much as the lay brothers followed different prayer and rules from the priests and deacons.³⁴⁹ The kitchen sisters, according to Birgitta, should carry wood and water, start and keep fires going, assist weaker sisters with their work, and do domestic cleaning.³⁵⁰ While Syon was not bound to obey the *Vadstena Additions*, it did seek that abbey’s advice, and may have instituted the tradition of *focariae* in its own *Syon Additions*. While neither lay sisters nor female *focariae* are mentioned in the *Additions for the Sisters*, the passage in the *Additions for the Lay Brothers* which describes the profession of ‘focaryes’ allows for the possibility that the postulant is a woman.³⁵¹ The *Syon Martiloge*’s inclusion of the word *focaria* in a grammatical aid, alongside terms for sister, priest, deacon, and lay brother, suggests that kitchen sisters were considered a regular group within the Syon community.³⁵² By the Dissolution, Syon certainly had them, as the 1539 pension list includes four lay sisters.³⁵³ As Olsen notes, this was a disproportionately small

³⁴⁶ e.g. TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2255, -2224, -2254, -2208.

³⁴⁷ For quote, see TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2258.

³⁴⁸ Olsen, ‘Work and work ethics’, 131.

³⁴⁹ Olsen, ‘Work and work ethics’, 133.

³⁵⁰ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 142.

³⁵¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 133.: ‘and the same schall be obseruyd of the sustres in bryngyng in and beryng oute of the bere yf it be a woman.’

³⁵² Gejrot, ‘The Syon Martiloge’.

³⁵³ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 89.

amount for such a large monastery, but exactly the number of kitchen sisters allowed by the Vadstena *Additions*.³⁵⁴

The lay sisters at Vadstena were allowed into the enclosure, but were ‘kitchen sisters’ in the true sense – they ran the kitchen, and answered to the choir nuns’ needs at the wheel. They did not eat with the nuns, and were forbidden from mingling with them, but they had access to all parts of the women’s enclosure to clean, carry wood and water, attend to fires, and clean the monastery. The lay sisters also served as a buffer between the choir sisters and the outside world, like their counterparts in Gilbertine monasteries.³⁵⁵ They slept near the gate and kitchen, and were instructed to be nearby at most times in order to receive all goods.³⁵⁶ Unfortunately, nothing is known of the duties of the four Syon lay sisters. The only glimpses of them in the Syon Accounts relate to the different colours of veils purchased by the chambress. In 1529, she purchased two dozen black veils and one dozen white veils.³⁵⁷ According to the *Brigittine Rule*, the nuns of the Order were to wear black veils with white crowns.³⁵⁸ There is no mention of white veils, but lay sisters traditionally wore this colour in Cistercian nunneries, and it may have been similar at Syon.³⁵⁹ The white veils may have been meant for novices in their ‘year of proof’ outside of the monastery, but the *Rule* does not mention them, though it is very detailed about all other aspects of the profession process. It is likely, therefore, that the white veils were purchased for the use of lay sisters. Unlike the lay sisters at Vadstena, however, we can have very little certainty about their duties. As discussed above in regards to the cellaress, the Syon kitchens seem to have been staffed primarily by lay men, and there is no mention in the Syon Accounts of lay sisters working with or for the cellaress in her operations. The functions and specific duties of many sub-obedientiaries are hazy at best, however, and it is possible that lay sisters worked with these women as liaisons with the outside world, for instance as managers of the womenhouse. Such an arrangement

³⁵⁴ Olsen, 'Work and work ethics', 133.

³⁵⁵ Elkins, *Holy women of twelfth-century England*, 79-81; Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 119-21.

³⁵⁶ Hogg, 'Additions of Prior Peter', 100; Hogg, 'Elucidarius', 152-3.

³⁵⁷ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2292.

³⁵⁸ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 63.

³⁵⁹ Nichols, 'The internal organization of English Cistercian nunneries', 33; Janet Burton, *Monastic and religious orders in Britain, 1000-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 103.

existed at Gilbertine houses, where lay sisters were charged with looking after female guests in the monastery's guest house.³⁶⁰

The hire of a woman 'keeping the monastery' in one year suggests that secular women were at least at times involved in the domestic work within the enclosure.³⁶¹ Where then, does that leave the Syon lay sisters? These women may have provided personal service to the abbess or other major obedientiaries on the women's side. Or they may have been the primary domestic workers within the enclosure, for whom additional help was hired when necessary. Perhaps they, like their counterparts at Vadstena, became the watchers of gates and wheels, taking over mundane duties that had previously been assigned to choir sisters, whose role in society, in all nunneries, was increasingly contemplative.³⁶²

The Impact of Bureaucracy

The percentage of Syon sisters involved in some sort of administrative task was very high, and the imposition of yet more non-liturgical labour, in the form of domestic work and other physical tasks, may have eaten into the time for spiritual reflection quite considerably. Olsen calculates that a total of thirty to thirty-five nuns had special duties to perform at Syon, in addition to their spiritual responsibilities of Mass, choir attendance and devotional reading. She allows in addition for ten sisters too old or ill to work, leaving only fifteen sisters with only spiritual duties.³⁶³ As illustrated in Figure 1, however, many more positions may be found in the *Additions* and Syon Accounts than Olsen accounts for. A total of forty-one nuns (plus four lay sisters) had administrative duties. Accepting her figure of the additional ten sisters off duty, this works out to a total of only nine nuns focusing entirely on regular spiritual duties and intellectual work – a small enough number to justify a rejection by the nuns of time-consuming physical labour when lay sisters or lay staff could easily take their place.

The forty-one nuns with special duties at Syon works out to sixty-eight percent of the abbey's choir sisters. This is much larger than the forty percent officeholders at

³⁶⁰ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 124-5.

³⁶¹ See above.

³⁶² Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 121.

³⁶³ Olsen, 'Work and work ethics', 134.

Westminster in the 1530s, or up to half of all Westminster monks at other times.³⁶⁴ This high proportion of religious committed to variably demanding non-spiritual duties could have had a deep impact on the spiritual life of the abbey.³⁶⁵ There was a danger, for instance, that the administrative work would become the most important aspect of the monastery, echoing the large secular household which, Mertes notes, seemed to exist sometimes only to administer itself.³⁶⁶ Syon may have been immune to any harm due to extensive bureaucratization, however, due to its unique perspective on the spiritual value of administrative work. If their administrative work was seen as part of the abbey's mission to produce, process, and distribute piety, and thereby renew the world, it may itself have taken on the aura of a spiritual vocation.

Lay Staff

One solution to the impact of bureaucracy on spiritual life was to employ lay staff, an approach already seen in Syon's hiring of domestic help, kitchen staff, and a lay sexton. This had its risks, however. One of the major charges levelled against monasteries in the lead-up to the Dissolution was a claim of wastefulness, extravagance, and employment of excessive servants. Monastic historians have debated the truth of these assertions, in an attempt to unpack the charges levelled against monasticism in general at the Reformation, and in the course of Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries in particular.³⁶⁷ Secular households, certainly, were becoming more extravagant throughout the later middle ages, especially towards the end of the fifteenth century, as the emphasis on 'magnificence' as a symbol of wealth and power increased. This was especially important for those men and women with an ambition to climb socially, and was often displayed through large numbers of staff.³⁶⁸ These numbers could be quite high, with up to 800 members in the king's household in the fifteenth century, and around 150 servants in the households of earls and dukes

³⁶⁴ Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, xx. Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol.2, 234.

³⁶⁵ Knowles, *Monastic order*, 438; Clark, *Benedictines*, 152.

³⁶⁶ Mertes, *English noble household*, 103.

³⁶⁷ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 260; Heale, 'Training in superstition?'; Heale, *Monasticism in late medieval England, c.1300-1535*, 37, 67-70; Clark, 'Religious Orders'; Clark, *Benedictines*; Harvey, *Living and dying*.

³⁶⁸ Given-Wilson, *The English nobility*, 87-95; Woolgar, *The great household*, 15-16, 21, 68, 197; Chris Given-Wilson, *The royal household and the King's affinity: politics and finance in England, 1360-1413* (London: Yale University Press, 1986), 159.

in the same period. The cost of their upkeep could be as high as fifty or sixty percent of the lord's income.³⁶⁹

Many monasteries appear to have joined this movement toward greater magnificence in servant numbers towards the end of the middle ages.³⁷⁰ Seeing this trend, Birgitta warned against the pride and vainglory in maintaining a large household with superfluous numbers of servants.³⁷¹ If Syon followed her advice in this matter, we should expect lower numbers of staff there than at other major monasteries.

Unfortunately, there is no method of determining Syon's total number of servants with any accuracy. Most compensation of abbey staff seems to have been paid by the cellaress, whose accounts record only the total amount spent on wages each year – an amount ranging between £35 and £47 between 1447 and 1461, and hovering around £50 in most years after 1482, with a high of £60 4s 5d in 1493, and a low of £43 4s 6d in 1500.³⁷² In addition to this large lump-sum of wages were the many individual payments made for other work which seems to have been distinguished by its more casual nature (for example, payments for those helping in the harvest, picking crab apples, and other temporary tasks). The chambress and sacristan also paid out some wages to regular employees who were referred to specifically by either office or name, and some fees to additional casual labourers. In addition, the treasurers paid fees for services to more elite workers. In one year, she spent £27 13s 4d on 'fees of men of lawe & of other Officers of oure councell as Receivor, Solicitor, attorney, & other'. Other costs were £7 19s 6d for 'expenses about the Surveyng of oure lyvelod bothe old & newe', and £20 7s 6d 'paid for diverse medicines with fees and rewards to Fysysions & Surgeons with other expenses'.³⁷³

In addition, each obedientiary spent varying amounts each year on 'rewards' – tips for good service, or bonuses for extra needs. From all of these wages, casual fees, and

³⁶⁹ Given-Wilson, *The royal household*, 28, 159; Given-Wilson, *The English nobility*, 89, 93; Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 43-44; Woolgar, *The great household*, 9; Jones and Underwood, *King's mother*, 158-59.

³⁷⁰ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 260, 63; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 67, 178; Smith, *Canterbury Cathedral Priory*, 199.

³⁷¹ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 211.

³⁷² Cellaress Household Accounts and Cellaress Latin Accounts.

³⁷³ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1790.

rewards, some picture of the lay staff of the abbey can be built up. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1:

Household and Central Staff at Syon Abbey	
<i>Central and Isleworth Administration</i>	<i>Agriculture and Food Preparation</i>
Auditor of the Household	Baker
Auditor of the Land	Brewers (4)
Bailiff of the Husbandry of the Monastery	Butcher
Bailiff of the manor of Isleworth	Butler
Chief Steward	Clerk of the Kitchens
Chief Steward of Isleworth	Cooks (4+)
Clerk of the Auditor	Cooper
Clerk of the General Receiver	Keeper of the Garners
Clerk of the Household	Keeper of the Covent Garden
Clerk of the Household Steward	Master Brewer
General Receiver	Master Cook
Servants of the General Receiver (2)	Miller
Servants of the Household Steward (3)	Shepherd of the Lady's Sheep
Steward of the Court of Isleworth	Slaughterman
Steward of the Household	Under-cook
Steward of the Land	
Understeward	<i>Construction and Repairs</i>
	Blacksmith
<i>Textiles and Apparel</i>	Clerk of the Works
Cordwainer	Masons (2)
Embroiderer	Master Carpenter
Groom of the Wardrobe	Master Mason
Skinner	Senior Bricklayers (2)
Tailor	Senior Plumber
Yeoman of the Wardrobe (Wardrober)	Supervisor of New Works & Master of Repairs
	Under-smith
<i>Transportation and Purchasing</i>	
Carters (2+)	<i>Other</i>
Cator (caterer/provisioner)	Bookbinder
Sumpter	Keeper of the Brother's Locutory
Under-cator	Sexten
Watermen (2+)	Tallowchandler
	Waxchandlers (2+)
Total Minimum Number of Central and Isleworth Staff: 71	

There are some limitations to the data displayed here. The table does not include the large numbers of administrative staff employed on Syon's estates, which, according to the 1535 *Valor Ecclesiasticus* survey of abbey property, numbered forty-six; there may also have been additional lower-level staff and assistants employed in each location.³⁷⁴ In addition to this, the table lists offices that may have only existed at the end of the abbey's life (such as the waxchandlers), near its beginning (such as the master mason), or for only a few years in the middle (the embroiderer may have been one of these). This table does not, therefore, provide a snapshot of a single time. But given the large number of lower-level staff (such as assistants and errand-boys) likely employed by the abbey, but never mentioned in the accounts or the *Valor*, the total of regular staff employed at Syon is certainly much higher than the total of seventy-one given in the table.³⁷⁵ Whether it was so high as to risk provoking the wrath of reformers is, however, unknown.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the many ways in which the labour of the religious at Syon Abbey could have spiritual connotations and consequences. On the one hand, the men's spiritual growth was furthered by Syon's adherence to the gendered work responsibilities embedded in the structure of the Brigittine Order, which created (through the men's material dependence on women) opportunities rarely seen elsewhere in medieval monasticism for male exercise of humility. On the other, the wide range of activities expected of the sisters created opportunities for several kinds of spiritual growth and piety expansion: the modelling of the Virgin Mary within the liturgy, the possibilities for spiritual insight enabled by reading, and the demonstration of dedication to the Brigittine mission required by administrative efficiency and 'good besynes'. The variety of administrative positions also led to a variety of spiritual opportunities: the special patience required of the infirmaress, for example, or the special chastity required of the keepers of wheels and grates.

³⁷⁴ Caley and Hunter (eds.), *Valor*. See map in Chapter 3 for locations and yields of Syon estates.

³⁷⁵ For discussion of these lower-level staff structures, see Woolgar, *The great household*.

These diverse and extensive activities also created perhaps unforeseen consequences in the volume of bureaucratic work required to sustain the abbey and process the piety produced by the sisters and brothers in their spiritual and intellectual work, and in the course of their bureaucratic labour itself. While these administrative tasks left little room for standard manual labour – physical activities which the sisters appear to have largely avoided, whether through the employment of lay staff or the acceptance of lay sisters – this may not, ultimately, have had the adverse consequences to piety that Birgitta and other monastic founders feared. By embracing the spiritual possibilities of administrative work, the Syon women converted it into a legitimate form of manual labour, and transformed bureaucracy itself into a means of personal and world renewal. Furthermore, by ensuring that skilled and experienced people were in charge of the economic resources of the abbey, the Syon abbesses better enabled the monastery to carry out its organizational alchemy - its mission of transforming materiality into the spiritual renewal of the world. It is to the monetary aspects of these resources, and the management of them, that we now turn.

Chapter 3

Organizational Alchemy: Hierarchy and Financial Management

The organizational alchemy performed at Syon – the transformation of mundane materiality to spiritual world renewal – required the labours of many, described in the previous chapter. The present chapter focuses on the financial aspects of the process – on the money itself: the income and expenditure of the abbey – and on the moral connotations of the choices made in the course of financial management. The financial behaviour of the abbey was both a forum for expressing Brigittine values, and a means of directly impacting the world. By managing well its monetary resources, Syon could increase the money available for almsgiving at the end of each year, and could thereby expand the reach of the Brigittine message and its world-renewing properties. Through the means of labour and financial management, the abbey processed the piety produced in the monastic vineyard, and allowed Syon to share the fruits of its contemplation with the world.

Financial Organization and Separate Households

The financial system of Syon was remarkably centralized, with most money going through the office of the treasurers. The cellarer had some minor independent funds, and the abbess had substantial separate income from estates and offerings in the abbey church, but the majority of abbey income was channelled through the treasurers and towards the expenditure of the cellarer, chamberlain, and sacristan.¹ One additional, important, exception to this may have been the money possibly held by the confessor general. In both the *Brigittine Rule* and the *Syon Additions*, there are

¹ See below.

clear statements that the abbess and sisters were given charge of the material necessities of the abbey, and that the brethren should receive all needed goods from the sisters, including clothing, bedding, and any items needed for work.² This suggests that the brethren of Syon would have no need for their own money.

There are at least some suggestions in the sources, however, that the confessor general had access to money separate from that of the sisters. In 1504, the cellaress records receiving 2s 4d ‘of our father confessor’ to make buns ‘for the obit of mother Jone’.³ Another piece of evidence concerns the will of Elizabeth Skynnard, made upon her profession as a Syon sister in 1444, which leaves ten marks ‘to be disposed of for charitable purposes by the Syon brothers under the advice of the confessor general.’⁴ This quote suggests that at the very least, the men did hold money and distributed it as alms. The *Additions* also specify that one of the two chests of the monastery should be kept on the brothers’ side, in the keeping of the confessor general and two brothers, each of whom should have separate keys for the chest’s three separate locks.⁵ The reason the *Additions* give for having chests on both sides, even though the women were in charge of finances, was ‘So that al occasion of sclaunder, be vtterly take away, both outwarde and inwarde.’⁶ While this seems to suggest that the brothers had to approve of the sisters’ use of money on some level, to act as a check against their decisions, it could as easily refer to documents and accounts as currency. If this chest contained coinage, it would have provided ready access to money by the men. If so, however, it would be surprising that no account of the men’s monetary fund was mentioned in any of the numerous Syon accounts available today.

One source may, however, provide evidence of a Syon confessor general dealing with accounts. Found on the flyleaf of a book was an inscription written in the early 1530s, possibly by Syon’s steward, referring to the ‘proceedings’ and ‘reckonings’ of confessor general John Fewterer and the letter-writer. The inscription also refers to ‘a note of his [Fewterer’s] own hand of his account’.⁷ The text unfortunately gives no

² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 203; Hogg, ‘Rewyll’, 62.

³ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1728.

⁴ Virginia Bainbridge, private communication. See also, Sylvia Thrupp, *The merchant class of medieval London, 1300-1500* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 366.

⁵ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 205.

⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 205.

⁷ da Costa, *Reforming printing*, 106.

indication of what matter was being discussed, and it is possible that ‘his account’ and ‘reckonings’ could be used here in a figurative sense, as accounts of conduct, actions or events, rather than of tallies and calculations.⁸ The overall impression is that while men had access to money, it was minor. The numerous instances in which the cellaress, sacristan, and chambress purchased things for the brothers’ side of the monastery suggests that the men did not have a separate financial establishment, and that the financial structure of the monastery was therefore highly centralized and in keeping with the guidelines of the *Additions*.⁹

The largely centralized financial system at Syon contrasts sharply with the prevailing financial organization in most late medieval English monasteries, in which the majority of obedientiaris had separate sources of income, from which they managed the expenditures of their offices.¹⁰ In many houses, this separation of finance led to a separation of life as well, as obedientiaris acquired their own servants, and in most cases, separate household establishments, including lodgings, kitchens, and dining arrangements.¹¹ Often this was tied as well to the ‘wage system’ prevailing in monasteries and nunneries of the period, by which individual religious were given monetary allowances to cover their clothing, food, and other costs.¹² This could lead to further splintering of common life in monastic houses, as religious members split into separate lodging or dining groups along lines of kinship or friendship, enabled by a pooling of their individual ‘wage’ resources.¹³ This breakdown of the common life was decried by monastic reformers, who also argued against it on the grounds that these separate establishments were financially redundant, and therefore wasteful.¹⁴

⁸ See OED ‘reckoning’, ‘Oxford English Dictionary: OED Online’, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). C.f. da Costa, who assumes that it refers to financial matters: da Costa, *Reforming printing*, 106.

⁹ See below.

¹⁰ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 310; Knowles, *Monastic order*, 439, 27; Clark, *Benedictines*, 152-53; R.B. Dobson, ‘The English monastic cathedrals in the fifteenth century’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th Ser, 1 (1991), 151-72., 171.

¹¹ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 1, 273; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 152; Harvey, *Obedientiaris of Westminster*; Dobson, ‘The English monastic cathedrals in the fifteenth century’, 171; Smith, *Canterbury Cathedral Priory*; Smith, ‘The financial system of Rochester Cathedral Priory’; Power, *Medieval English nunneries*.

¹² Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 183-246; Erler, *Women, reading and piety*, 117; Power, *Medieval English nunneries*, 136; Olsen, ‘Work and work ethics’, 142.

¹³ McNamara, *Sisters in arms*, 277, 387.

¹⁴ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 263, 57; Ellis, ‘*Viderunt eam filie Syon*’, 42.

St Birgitta was one of the fiercer critics of these trends in monasticism. Focusing on a return to ideals of communal property, the Brigittine Order was created in direct opposition to any structure allowing wages or property for individual monks or nuns. This is especially important for Syon, since its founder, Henry V, had undertaken a serious programme of monastic reform in 1421, attempting to ban the wage-system and reinvigorate communal life in all English monasteries. The monks of major monasteries created so much opposition to what had been a normal way of life for them for centuries, that Henry ultimately accepted the money system, but it is clear where his preferences lay, and therefore how much importance he likely attached to the reformed way of life in the Brigittine Order.¹⁵ This emphasis was continued by the Syon religious themselves. Richard Whitford, one of the abbey brethren, wrote a commentary on the *Rule of St Augustine* in which he criticized the practice of giving wages to monks instead of providing clothing communally.¹⁶ Given these factors, it is highly unlikely that wages were being paid to Syon religious and in fact no evidence for them is found in the accounts. Instead, as is shown in Chapter 5, below, there is ample evidence for centralized provision of clothing at the abbey.

Even convents with a single unified administrative household might be divided by social tensions or preferences. A common cause of such division in nunneries was the presence of several sets of related sisters. Such kinship held the danger that family loyalties might become more important than the ties of the religious community.¹⁷ Convent designers and monastic Rule writers alike consciously attempted to prevent the formation of close friendships and social cliques among the religious, since these relationships were considered distractions from God and often led to struggles for power within the monastery.¹⁸ It is not known what tensions, if any, might have arisen due to the presence of family members within Syon. The abbey certainly did have a number of relatives within the cloister.¹⁹ It is clear, however, that whatever affinity groups may have existed within the Syon sisters' cloister, they did not evolve into

¹⁵ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 183-4, 240-1.

¹⁶ Ellis, '*Viderunt eam filie Syon*', 48-49.

¹⁷ Erler, *Women, reading and piety*, 19.

¹⁸ Marilyn Dunn, 'Spaces shaped for spiritual perfection: convent architecture and nuns in early modern Rome', in Helen Hills (ed.), *Architecture and the politics of gender* (London: Ashgate, 2003), 157.

¹⁹ See: Bainbridge, 'Who were the English Birgittines?'; Erler, 'Special benefactors and friends'; Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey'; Sue Powell, 'Margaret Pole and Syon Abbey', *Historical Research*, 78/202 (2005), 563-7.

separate dining or lodging establishments. The single exception to this may have been the special status and living situation of the abbess, which was sanctioned by the *Syon Additions*, and was arranged for practical purposes rather than reasons of favouritism.

Separate households for monastic superiors were common in the later middle ages. They had evolved to protect the majority of monastic property from predatory monarchs expecting the first year's income of new vassals' lands, but that and the need to entertain prominent visitors led to the establishment of magnificent separate households to which many monastic superiors came to feel entitled.²⁰ Syon's foundation charter prevented royal money-siphoning after an abbess died.²¹ It is therefore interesting that the abbess's income was at least in some sense separated from the rest of the convent. Perhaps this occurred primarily by tradition. But, as will be discussed below, it seems to be connected, after all, to safeguarding the financial interests of the monastery, which were challenged by Henry VI and his appropriation of Syon estates (specifically, those estates later found in the abbess accounts) to fund his new foundations of Eton and King's College, Cambridge.

The *Additions* stress that the abbess should not seek to be treated differently from the other sisters, demanding neither better food nor better clothing, and owning no extravagant personal property.²² But, the *Additions* also make clear that the abbess was allowed a separate chamber, in which she could meet privately with other sisters, deal with monastery matters, and sleep, drink and eat when she could not come 'in due time' to the frater or dorter.²³ It is unclear, however, whether there was a separate kitchen for her use, and therefore whether she could be considered to have had a fully separate household. There are some minor pieces of evidence in favour of the latter. In the 1455 Latin Account, one item of income is from flotas sold '*de exit coquine dne abbisse*'. However, similar entries later in the same account list flotas sold '*de exit coquine*' only.²⁴ The 1490 Cellaress's Household Account 'diet' section of fresh fish, eggs, milk, and the like indicates that it included charges for the abbess's

²⁰ Knowles, *Monastic order*, 615, 87; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 1, 273-74; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 149; Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, 2-3; Oliva, *The convent and community*, 81-82; Power, *Medieval English nunneries*, 60.

²¹ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 29.

²² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 160-1, 65, 71, 99.

²³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 201.

²⁴ TNA SC 6/1106/22.

household *as well as* the ‘commen household’, ‘both wythynne the monastery’.²⁵ The wording of both of these accounts suggests a separation between the abbess’s kitchen and household, and that of the convent as a whole. However, the rest of the accounts call this into question. In the Latin Accounts of the 1440s, there is no other reference to a separate abbess’s kitchen. In addition, in the twenty-four Syon Abstracts of Abbess and Treasures Accounts available in the National Archives, the abbess’s section on expenses includes subheadings for ‘Building and Repairs’ and ‘Diverse Necessities’ only. If the Syon abbess did have a separate establishment with a private kitchen, a separate sub-heading for this might be expected in the account, if only to list a bulk amount spent. The abstracts of accounts do refer on occasion to ‘my lady’s book of account’, which would have included details of expenditure on ‘diverse necessities’.²⁶ Unfortunately, none of these books of account of the abbess has survived, and whether the abbess indeed had a separate kitchen remains a mystery.

Given the vagueness of the sources on this matter, it is difficult to say exactly how often the abbess may have dined on her own, or with other sisters, in her separate chamber. It is clear that she was expressly given permission in the *Additions* to do so. Even the configuration of her chambers is a mystery. There is no mention in any Syon Accounts of a separate building for the abbess’s residence. In fact, there is no mention of her chambers at all. The *Additions* indicate that she should choose two nuns of the abbey to attend upon her continually day and night, which suggests that they would have beds somewhere in her chambers.²⁷ If these precepts were followed, it is unlikely that the Syon abbess’s dwellings and appearance, and her retinue of servants, approached the grandeur of those in other monasteries.

This lack of a substantial separate household for the superior, as well as the lack of a wage system for the religious, the centralization of most abbey income, and a lack of separate households for either obedientaries or affinity groups within the monastery, indicates that Syon’s financial structure was more efficiently organized than that of comparable large monasteries. In only one sense was the abbey less efficient in expenditure needs due to its organization: it required separate buildings for the men

²⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1712.

²⁶ For example, in TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2186.

²⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 201.

and the women. In all other respects, the two sides of the household shared the same resources of income, food and clothing expenditure, and labour of precinct staff. The relative lack of redundancy and waste in establishments provided Syon with a financial structure primed to maximize the money available for the poor. It was primarily through their processes of accounting, auditing, and financial analysis that they took advantage of this structure.

Accounting, Auditing, and Financial Analysis

Accounting and auditing were central aspects of Syon's financial management system, built into its mission of world renewal, and therefore a central part of the processing of piety. According to the *Brigittine Rule*, the abbey should have an endowment sufficient enough to prevent it from needing to solicit donations, and to enable its religious to give away their surplus of money at the end of every accounting year.²⁸ The *Additions* for the Sisters states the guideline this way: 'If that after sufficient endowment and buldyng of the chirche and monastery, the necessary expenses of the yere presente and the yere nexte to come rekenedde, al that remayneth ouer, be deled euery yere to the pooere as the rewle wyll.'²⁹ This surplus included all things, both money and stock. The abbess was warned that if she failed to give away the surplus, it was to the peril of her soul.³⁰ The only exception was in cases when the projected income of the following year 'seme not to suffyse', in which case the needed surplus could be saved to make up the future deficit.³¹ In this sense, Birgitta was essentially requiring that the sisters make a budget for the following year, and stick to it, by giving the extra money away immediately.

In order to fulfil this aspect of the Brigittine mission, the Syon religious needed a clear, logical, and complete accounting and auditing system, without which budgeting would have been inaccurate. This, it seems, they had. According to the *Syon Additions*, all monastic officers of the abbey were to answer clearly and 'without any

²⁸ Johnston, 'VCH, House of Bridgettines', 182.

²⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 43.

³⁰ See Chapter 2.

³¹ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 75-76.

colour' for everything they received and spent.³² The large numbers of household accounts from Syon which survive in the National Archives, in nearly complete series, attest to the sisters' dedication to regular accounting practice. Mention is frequently made in these of 'my ladies little boke of account' or the like, indicating that the larger accounts were based on weekly journals of expenses and income – a common accounting practice at other large institutions of the period.³³ The Journal Book of the cellaress is the one surviving example of this account type at Syon.³⁴ These journal books, in turn, were compiled from bills, schedules, tallies, and receipts, which were saved for the later compilation of quarterly and annual accounts. Some of these have survived to this day, often appended to household accounts or account drafts that reference them, as was common elsewhere.³⁵ The quarterly and annual accounts may have each been compiled from a number of different Journal Books, representing the transactions of different types within an obedientiary's department, or those of sub-obedientiaries, as occurred at Westminster.³⁶ At Syon, some monastic officers – the chantress and librarian, for example – may have had accounts which they transferred to a central accounting officer (e.g. the sacristan). Lay staff may also have kept accounts of their own, which they transferred to the monastic official at the time of account, such as the baker to the cellaress, or the tailor to the chambress.

Compiling the account drafts and final versions was probably the job of the clerk of each office or of the household, as it was elsewhere, though it is clear from the wording above that the Journal Books were identified with the ladies – the female monastic officers – themselves.³⁷ This is not surprising, as it was very common for lords and monastic officials to be personally and intricately involved with their

³² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 70-71.

³³ For example, TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2185 and -2188. Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 17; John S. Lee, *Cambridge and its economic region, 1450-1560* (Studies in Regional and Local History; Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2005), 142-43; Oliva, *The convent and community*, 210.

³⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2283.

³⁵ See, e.g. TNA SC 6/HenVII/1728. Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, xli; Mertes, *English noble household*, 78; C.M. Woolgar (ed.), *Household accounts from medieval England, Part 1: Introduction, Glossary, Diet Accounts (i)* (Records of Social and Economic History, Oxford: Oxford University Press/British Academy, 1992), 8; P.D.A. Harvey, 'Manorial accounts', in R.H. Parker and B.S. Yamey (eds.), *Accounting history: some British contributions* (Oxford, 1994), 112.

³⁶ Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, lvii.

³⁷ Margaret Wade Labarge, *A baronial household of the thirteenth century* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), 59-60; Snape, *English monastic finances*, 132; Mertes, *English noble household*, 72.

financial documents.³⁸ At Westminster, accounts may even have been prepared initially in the office of the obedientiary, with only the writing out of the accounts delegated to paid scribes or clerks.³⁹ It is tempting to conjecture such hands-on account-making by the Syon nuns, but there is unfortunately no evidence one way or another. In any case, it is clear that final responsibility for the accounts rested with the female monastic officers.

Auditing was another important financial activity of the Syon women. According to the *Additions*, the abbess should receive both daily and weekly accounts, and should then receive a general account ‘before the feste of al halowen’ – an account of all the goods of the monastery, made by all officers accountable to her, both ‘outwarde and inwarde’. This accounting should take place in the presence of ‘some of the other or sadder sustres’, suggesting an auditing committee such as existed at other prominent monasteries.⁴⁰ The confessor general and brothers do not seem to have been present at the general audit. The passage goes on to say that the confessor general ‘understondyng by the abbes...that al the seyd accounte is trewly and ...made he schal make relation thereof to hys brethren....’⁴¹ This indicates that the abbess showed and explained the accounts to the confessor general after the audit, and that he then, when satisfied at their verity, showed them to the Syon brothers. This is a different process than the one followed at Vadstena, and the one Syon was directed by the Vadstena brothers to follow: the latter stated, in the *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, that the abbess was to give an account of spending to the elder sisters, the confessor general, and a few Brethren, all together at the grate.⁴²

The Syon accounts show evidence of several auditing techniques, including quarterly reviews, lines drawn down the middle of pages after having been checked, corrections in a different hand than the draft, sets of dots above numbers (used for addition to check sums), the word ‘quit’ appearing at the end of the account (indicating the approval of the auditor), the phrase *super comptum* (indicating that something had

³⁸ Woolgar (ed.), *Household accounts from medieval England, Part 1: Introduction, Glossary, Diet Accounts (i)*, 60.

³⁹ Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, xli.

⁴⁰ Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, xv, xliii, xlii; Smith, ‘The financial system of Rochester Cathedral Priory’, 591; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 206.

⁴¹ The original text is a fragment. Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 206.

⁴² Hogg, ‘Additions of Prior Peter’, 96; Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*.

been added at the audit), and the creation of both draft and fair copies of each account – the latter made after the final audit.⁴³ Nearly all of the surviving household accounts contain one or more of these signs, suggesting that the archive of Syon accounts that has come down to us was composed primarily of drafts, rather than fair copies.

While accounts could help to budget for the coming year by allowing a calculation of consumption averages, scholars agree that their primary purpose was to demonstrate how the accounting officers handled the trust placed in them by their superiors.⁴⁴ They were therefore important tools in decision-making about obedientiary appointments. Regular accounting was also widely seen as a sign of good management in general. A lack of regular accounts and audits was a major complaint in monastic visitation records, and monasteries saw repeated attempts to enforce financial regularity.⁴⁵ The state of accounting was also important to the visiting bishop, who would expect to see the most recent set of abbey accounts while examining the sisters and brothers about the management of the monastery.⁴⁶ The fact that Syon's accounting practices largely complied with ideals of a centralized treasury and regular accounts and audits likely contributed to its already good reputation in the lead-up to the Dissolution.

Crucial to the smooth working of the accounting system was the in-house archiving of financial and estate documents. After the final, fair copies of each account had been made post-audit, one was taken to the office of the treasurers, or to the muniments room, and another may have been taken by the accounting obedientiary back to her own office for future reference, as was customary elsewhere.⁴⁷ The *Additions* directed

⁴³ Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, xl, xliii; Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 12; E.M. Mayatt-Price, 'Cromwell household accounts', in A.C. Littleton and B.S. Yamey (eds.), *Studies in the history of accounting* (London, 1956), 109; Woolgar (ed.), *Household accounts from medieval England, Part 1: Introduction, Glossary, Diet Accounts (i)*, 33, 61; Harvey, 'Manorial accounts', 103.

⁴⁴ Harvey, 'Manorial accounts', 105; Christopher Noke, 'Accounting for bailiffship in thirteenth century England', *Accounting and business research*, 42 (1981), 137-51, 100, 04, 18; Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, xl; Bruce G. Carruthers and Wendy Nelson Espeland, 'Accounting for rationality: double-entry bookkeeping and the rhetoric of economic rationality', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 97/1 (1991), 31-69, 31, 61; E. Stone, 'Profit and loss accountancy at Norwich Cathedral Priory', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th Ser.*, 12 (1962), 25-48, 25; Lee, *Cambridge and its economic region, 1450-1560*, 142-43.

⁴⁵ Oliva, *The convent and community*, 99; Power, *Medieval English nunneries*, 97; Snape, *English monastic finances*, 133; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 1, 57-58, 61; Smith, 'The financial system of Rochester Cathedral Priory', 591.

⁴⁶ Mountain, 'Nunnery finances in the early fifteenth century', 263.

⁴⁷ Harvey, *Obedientiaries of Westminster*, xlii, li.

all monastic officers to ‘kepe wele ther scrowes and bylles indented, leste any thyng go out of mende.’⁴⁸ It was the job of the treasurers to keep the collection of primary accounts organized and accessible. This responsibility began with the proper receiving (in the presence of the abbess) of both monies and documents from lay staff in charge of collecting income from abbey-owned estates, and extended to the proper archiving of household accounts from monastic officers. According to the Syon *Additions for the Sisters*, the treasurer ‘and her felawe’ kept all of the muniments of the monastery, and all of the ‘temporal goods’ including gold, silver, and gifts. The abbey was to have a treasury house, containing a large chest with two keys, one kept by the treasurer, and one by her co- (or sub-) treasurer. ‘And as ofte as any proctor, or receyuer, or any fermer or other, brynge ome any golde or syluer, thes in the presence of the abbes schal receye it, by tayles or bylles endented with sufficient wrytynge, and put it vp in the syd cheste to be kepte’, and from this money, they should deliver ‘by bulles endented and sufficient wrytynge’ to all officers ‘inward and outwarde, as the office requyreth’ as assigned by the abbess.⁴⁹

One of the Syon muniments chests described here was apparently seen by Tanner in the eighteenth century and mentioned in his *Notitia Monastica* of 1744.⁵⁰ More recent research, however, has uncovered a remarkable system of notation on Syon estate documents that was almost certainly used for the organization of papers on shelves in a room. Dunning argues that the type of chest referred to here in the *Additions* and described by Tanner was a large one with only one compartment, which would have been cumbersome for the storage of hundreds of deeds and other documents.⁵¹ But he finds ample evidence of an organizational system based on press-marks.⁵² In this system, small symbols were inked onto deeds and other important documents related to Syon’s properties. They were categorized by geography, so as to allow for expansion as the abbey’s properties from the alien priories came into hand; A simple numbering or alphabetical system would not allow such expansion, or would make it

⁴⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 71.

⁴⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 186-87.

⁵⁰ Dunning, ‘Muniments of Syon’, 105; Tanner, *Notitia monastica: or, An account of all the abbies, priories, and houses of friers, heretofore in England and Wales; and also of all the colleges and hospitals founded before A.D. MDXL*, 324.

⁵¹ Dunning, ‘Muniments of Syon’, 105.

⁵² Dunning, ‘Muniments of Syon’, 105.

cumbersome.⁵³ The symbolic organization of the system, Dunning argues, suggests that they were physically organized in the treasurers's muniments room into small boxes or drawers, which would have been marked on the outside with the symbol given to the papers within it.⁵⁴

Dunning was able to trace sixteen of these press-marks. They were almost all geometrical in design, such as the dot in a circle for Minchinhampton documents, and many were based on the form of the cross, such as Yeovil, which was given a tau cross. The symbols for Isleworth and St Michael's Mount were quite different: for the former, a 'scaly water-monster for the Thameside property', and for the Mount, 'a sword for the Mount of the Archangel.'⁵⁵ There were also letter/number (e.g. L-1) press-marks for more general documents, such as papal bulls.⁵⁶ In addition, Syon kept a register of all its deeds.⁵⁷ The less important documents such as receipts, bonds, obligations, and the court rolls and ministers' accounts of the estates, do not have press marks.⁵⁸ All of this, Dunning says, shows that the Syon treasurers gave great care to the organization and protection of the abbey's business documents.⁵⁹ Given Syon's careful organization of its estate records, it is likely that it kept its household accounts equally accessible, better enabling a thorough understanding of consumption patterns at the abbey, and making possible the household budgeting that might lead to greater almsgiving in accordance with the *Rule*. Such budgeting would be enabled by the gathering together of expenditure and consumption averages for each obedientiary, and information on expected price and availability changes, as occurred in some other households of the period.⁶⁰ There are unfortunately no clear signs of such financial analysis in the surviving Syon household accounts. It is possible that Syon, like other comparable monasteries, drew up separate documents of average consumptions, for purposes of financial planning, but there is no direct evidence for

⁵³ Dunning, 'Muniments of Syon', 106.

⁵⁴ Dunning, 'Muniments of Syon', 106.

⁵⁵ Dunning, 'Muniments of Syon', 107.

⁵⁶ Dunning, 'Muniments of Syon', 107.

⁵⁷ Dunning, 'Muniments of Syon', 106.

⁵⁸ Dunning, 'Muniments of Syon', 108.

⁵⁹ Dunning, 'Muniments of Syon', 108.

⁶⁰ Woolgar (ed.), *Household accounts from medieval England, Part 1: Introduction, Glossary, Diet Accounts (i)*, 16, 28-29, 44, 45, 46; Mertes, *English noble household*, 94; Woolgar, *The great household*, 198; Christopher Dyer, *Standards of living in the later middle ages: social change in England, c. 1200-1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 94, 98.

it.⁶¹ The meticulous creation of household accounts, evidence for extensive auditing, and keeping of estate records, is however, enough evidence for serious financial conscientiousness on the part of the Syon monastic officers. The aim of this financial watchfulness was the maximization of surplus money which could be given to the poor. It was, therefore, an aim of careful management of income, expenditure and the balance between them, to which we now turn.

Syon Abbey Income

Syon was the richest nunnery in England at the time of the Dissolution, and the most financially secure women's house founded in England during the later middle ages. Using the lands and properties of French priory dependencies confiscated during the Hundred Years' War, Henry V endowed his new Brigittine foundation with enough land, spiritual properties, and liberties to ensure long-term prosperity and solvency. This high income put the house at the level of baronial households, and Syon expenditure levels reflected this.

Though many household accounts exist for Syon in the 1440s, and some in the 1490s, a complete picture of the total abbey income is available for only thirteen years between 1507 and 1538, for which both Abstracts of Abbess and Treasures Accounts, and Cellaress Foreign Accounts (both account types recording various income sources) survive. During these years, as Figure 2 demonstrates, total net income at Syon (i.e. the amount actually received in pounds, shillings and pence), ranged between £1,700 and just over £2,400 per year, with a mean of £1,989 over the available years. This is £258 more than the income figure provided in the 1535 *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, which reported Syon's net income at about £1,731 a year.⁶² The *Valor's* number subtracts, however, expenses for central administrative staff which at Syon are dealt with separately from the estates income, and which have been included in my own calculations of expenditure. These costs included the fees and expenses of the abbey's chief steward (Thomas Cromwell, himself), steward of the household, receiver-general, and auditor, which together added up to nearly £55. So to compare

⁶¹ Woolgar (ed.), *Household accounts from medieval England, Part 1: Introduction, Glossary, Diet Accounts (i)*, 45.

⁶² Caley and Hunter (eds.), *Valor*, 426.

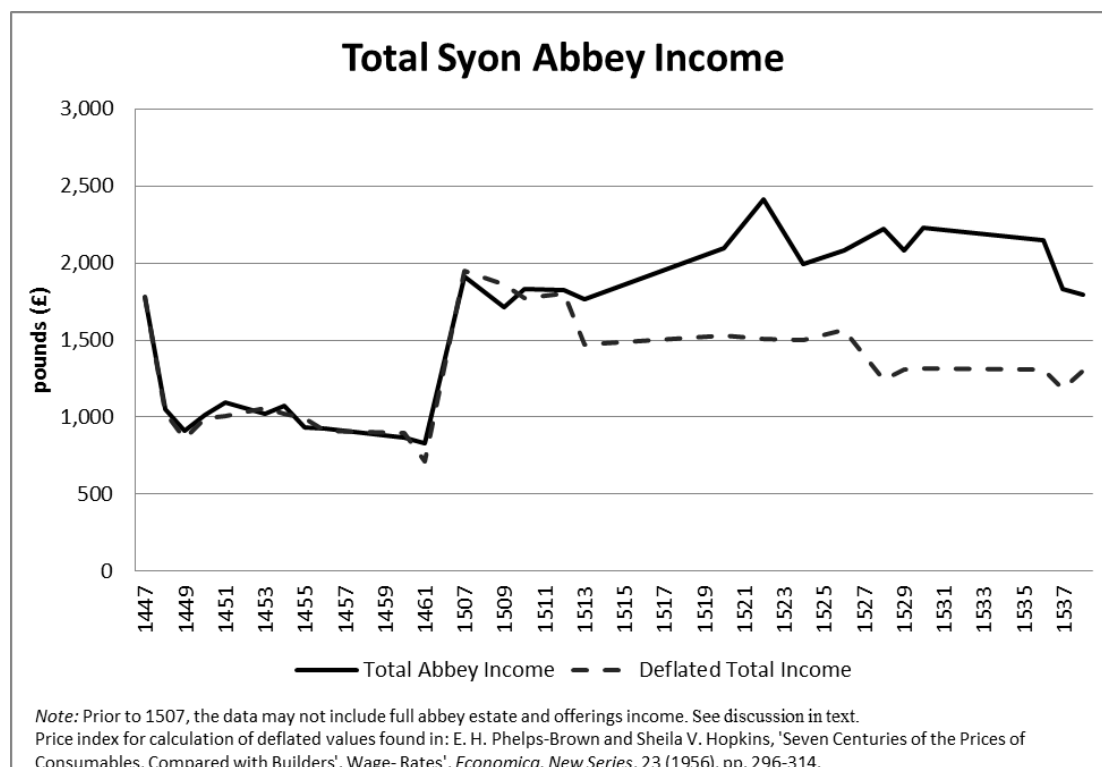
like with like accurately, this amount must be added back into the *Valor's* net income, resulting in a value of £1786. This is still substantially lower, at £203 less than Syon's average sixteenth-century income according to its own household accounts. This is significant, as the *Valor* has been said to have undervalued monastic income considerably, a problem investigated by a number of scholars.⁶³ There is, unfortunately, no complete set of accounts for Syon in the year of the *Valor*, and therefore no possibility of comparing actual total income with *Valor* projected income for 1534/35. In 1536, the closest year available, however, Syon had a total income of approximately £2,150 – or £364 more than the equivalent value calculated from the *Valor*. It is clear, therefore, that whether one takes the average yearly income for Syon in the early sixteenth century (£1,989), or the income in the closest year available, the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* in either case undervalued the annual income of Syon Abbey.

Syon's income also seems to have been relatively stable from the late fifteenth century to the Dissolution, though because of the incomplete sources before 1507, this comes as only a glimpse. The fifteenth-century data in Figure 1 includes only that income accounted in the Latin Accounts as a charge before being discharged by the necessary expenditures of all non-abbess officers (including the expenditures on construction and repairs by the master of new works). It therefore leaves out any income and expenditure of the abbess, separately, and any income received by the treasurers, but not used by her or other non-abbess officers for expenses. There are reasons to think that the abbey's income was significantly lower earlier in the fifteenth century, in any case. Syon had many of its properties taken away by Henry VI to finance his new foundation of King's College, Cambridge. The abbey nuns were involved in a lengthy dispute with the college, and only after the final accession of Edward IV did Syon regain its properties.⁶⁴ As will be shown below, both expenditure and consumption levels were significantly lower at the abbey in the 1440s and 1450s, which probably reflects a lower available income.

⁶³ Alexander Savine, *English monasteries on the eve of the Dissolution* (Oxford studies in social and legal history, vol 1; Oxford, 1909), 2, 74; Oliva, *The convent and community*, 94, 109 fn; Joyce Youings, 'Landlords in England: the Church', in Joan Thirsk (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales: vol iv, 1500-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 325; Tillotson, 'Marrick Priory', 8-9; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 245. See also Snape, *English monastic finances*.

⁶⁴ Makowski discusses this dispute in detail. Elizabeth Makowski, *English nuns and the law in the middle ages: cloistered nuns and their lawyers, 1293-1540* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012).

Figure 2



Syon's average income of about £2,000 in the sixteenth century was roughly comparable to that of equivalent-sized noble households, and was on par with the yearly income of other great monasteries, resting between Durham Cathedral Priory's £1,572 gross annual income (fifteenth in monastic wealth at the time of the *Valor*), and Westminster Abbey's £3,470 (first in wealth) – and close to Durham's income of £2,053 at the height of its wealth.⁶⁵ This places Syon's fortune far above that of the next-richest female monasteries at the Dissolution: Shaftesbury, which earned £1,166 in 1535, and Barking, which had an income of £862.⁶⁶ Most other nunneries had even less wealth: two thirds in the *Valor* had gross incomes of less than £100 a year, and a full third had less than £50 a year.⁶⁷ Some of this low income was related to the size of institution – at the Dissolution, only thirteen nunneries had over twenty resident

⁶⁵ For noble households, see Mertes, *English noble household*, Appendix B, 216-7. For monasteries, see Caley and Hunter (eds.), *Valor*., Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 250-3; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 4; William Page (ed.), *The Victoria History of London: Vol 1: Including London within the Bars, Westminster & Southwark* (Victoria County History, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1909).

⁶⁶ David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses: England and Wales* (London, 1971), 253-5.

⁶⁷ Tillotson, 'Marrick Priory', 2.

nuns.⁶⁸ Many convents seem to have been purposefully founded as small, poor institutions, with meagre endowments to match. These nunneries were designed both for deliberate isolation and the ideal of poverty, and for interaction with smaller local communities, not for high political contacts and constant intercessory activity requiring large numbers of religious.⁶⁹ Syon is clearly an exception to this pattern. St Birgitta, in fact, insisted on wealthy foundations for the monasteries of her Order, to lessen the struggle and ensure a stable livelihood, and promoted royal patronage of Brigittine foundations, and thus high political ties.⁷⁰ These were never intended to be poor, isolated, small nunneries. Syon, with its strong royal ties and vast holdings, was able to weather economic storms and routine costs with relative ease while laying out great sums on inspiring architectural projects and a large community of religious and their extensive supporting household.

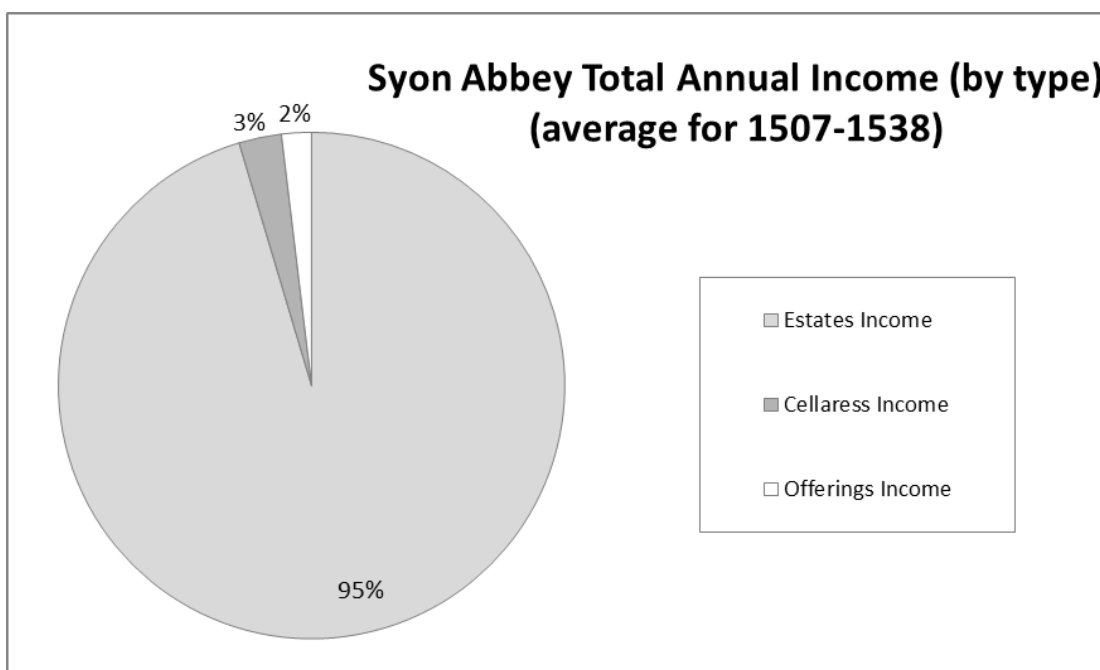
Syon received income from three main sources. As illustrated in Figure 3, the vast majority of abbey income, 95%, was in the form of rent or other proceeds from estates. The second highest source of income at Syon, by percentage, varied from year to year. Both income from offerings at Syon's church (and the dependent church at St Michael's Mount, Cornwall), and the cellaress's income from kitchen by-products and boarding of visitors in the monastic precinct generally amounted to 2-4% of overall annual takings. The treasurers were ultimately responsible for 80-85% of all Syon estate income. Total annual yield from their estates ranged from £1,270 to £1,912, and averaged £1,523 over the period. This amount was composed of income from twenty-nine manors, groupings of manors, farms, or pensions (See Figure 4). These categories of revenue are based on the groupings of receipts sources used by the treasurers and her clerks themselves in the creation of their annual account abstracts.

⁶⁸ Tillotson, 'Marrick Priory', 2.

⁶⁹ Oliva, *The convent and community*, 9, 22, 26; Gilchrist, *Contemplation and action: the other monasticism*, 107; Gilchrist, *Gender and material culture: the archaeology of religious women*, 191; Burton, *Monastic and religious orders*, 146.

⁷⁰ Beckett, 'St. Bridget, Henry V, and Syon Abbey'; Morris, *St Birgitta*; Warren, 'Kings, saints and nuns: gender, religion and authority in the reign of Henry V'.

Figure 3



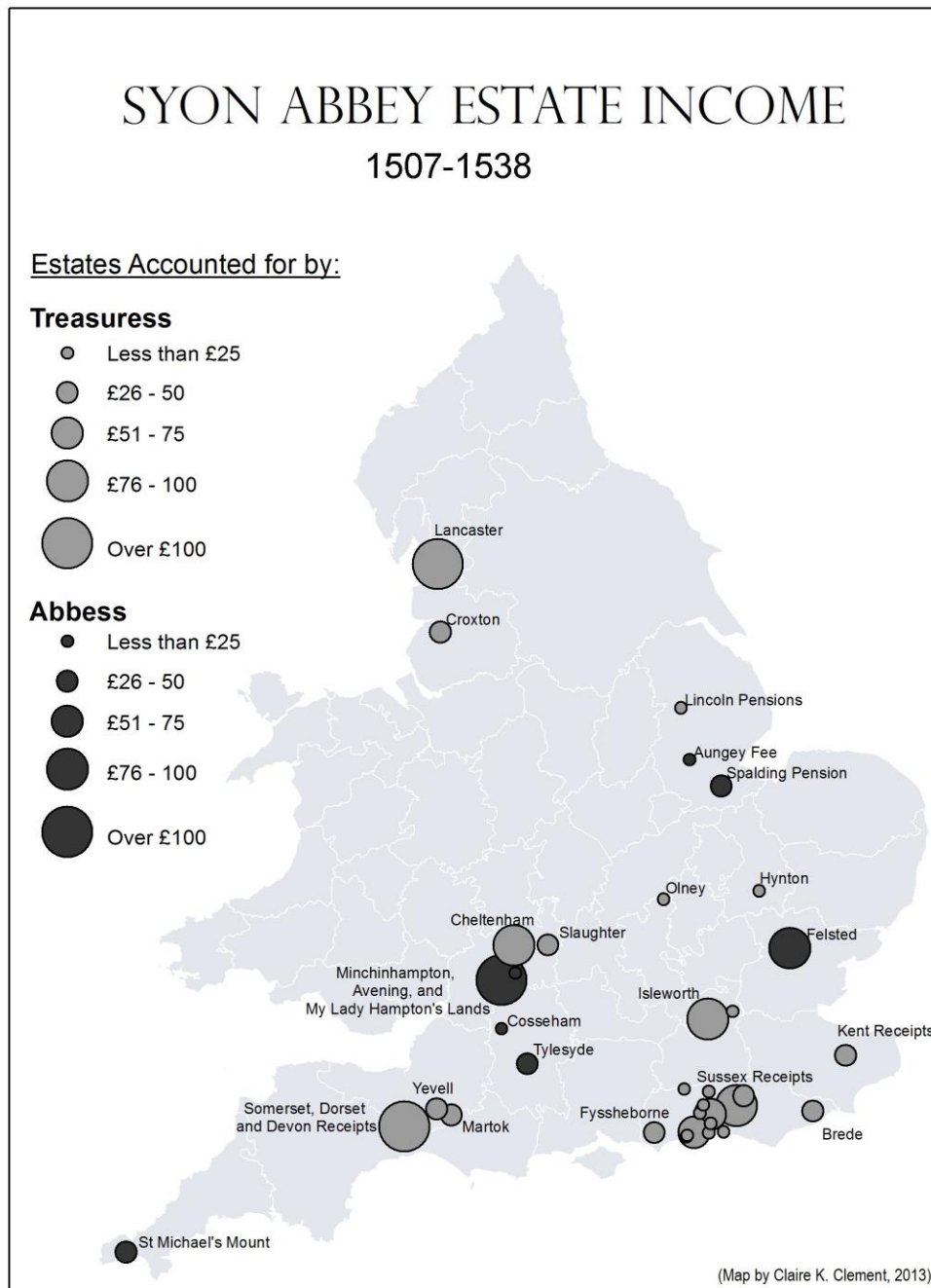
The abbess held roughly 20% of Syon estates (see Figure 4). This is lower than the 25% normally allotted to the head of a religious house, and much lower than the 32% of abbey estates held by the abbot of Westminster.⁷¹ It was not the only source of her income, however, as offerings from the churches at Syon and St Michael's Mount also comprised up to 15% of her income in normal years, an average total receipt of £46 per year, ranging from £35 to £65 in most years. Total offerings at Syon averaged £25 from 1507 to 1524, with only minor fluctuations, and dropped to an average of £15 yearly between 1528 and 1532. Offerings at St Michael's Mount were slightly lower, with an average of £23 per year until 1519, and an average of £17 annually thereafter. Annual incomes from each of Syon's pilgrimage centres were therefore higher than offerings at both Westminster Abbey (with an average of £5-£9 per year) and Norwich Cathedral (with an average of £9-£18 annually) in comparable years.⁷² Only Ely Cathedral (£34-£39 per year) and Canterbury Cathedral (with an average offerings income of £36 a year recorded in the *Valor*) had a consistently higher average from their single pilgrimage sites in the century leading up to the

⁷¹ Kerr, *Fontevraud in England*, 138.

⁷² Nilson, *Shrines*, 218-21, 30-31.

Dissolution.⁷³ The reasons for Syon's success in attracting pilgrims will be discussed in the Conclusion.

Figure 4



Source: *Syon Abbey Household Accounts: Abbess and Treasurers Extract Accounts*.

The cellars accounted for a very small proportion of Syon's income – about 3% of the abbey's overall annual income (see Figure 3) – and an average yearly income of

⁷³ Caley and Hunter (eds.), *Valor*, 426; Nilson, *Shrines*, 216-21.

£23 between 1447 and 1462, £34 between 1499 and 1511, and £64 between 1512 and the Dissolution of the abbey in 1539. This category of income included the sale of by-products from the abbey kitchen: candles made from tallow, leftover fats (*flotas*) and grease from cooking meat, and hides, skins, and wool left after the slaughter of livestock for food. The cellaress also received income from small sales of surplus grain, bran, honey, wood, thorns, wicker, and used pewter, and minor proceeds from the rent of pastureland. This category of Syon income also included the returns from the Isleworth Dairy, which was sometimes held in hand, and sometimes leased out. Syon's cellaress also would have received the in-kind income produced on the abbey's home farm, held in hand throughout the period. No accounts of this enterprise's yield have survived, but, at 320-340 acres in size, it is certain to have added significantly to the resources at the abbey's disposal.⁷⁴ Some indications of its impact are discussed in the following chapter.

A significant and growing proportion of the cellaress's income came from the boarding of visitors and postulants in the monastic precinct. First recorded in her 1515 accounts, and ending in 1534, this item was regularly between 30% to 40% of cellaress's separate income, and rose over time. Receipts were listed by boarder, with Syon postulants paying a small amount and staying for a shorter time – up to a year – before their profession, and richer lay boarders such as Lady Kingston and her retinue, remaining for several years.⁷⁵ It is likely that the number of boarders at Syon was even higher than that reflected in the cellaress income; other sources indicate that figures such as Lady Margaret Beaufort and Thomas More stayed at the abbey; any income collected to cover their expenses has, however, not been recorded in the Syon accounts.⁷⁶ It is possible that the cost of their visits was covered by the abbess, and were therefore recorded within her 'necessary expenses', as monastic superiors were traditionally responsible for hospitality involving prominent visitors.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ 'Heston and Isleworth: Manors', in Susan Reynolds (ed.), *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 3: Shepperton, Staines, Stanwell, Sunbury, Teddington, Heston and Isleworth, Twickenham, Cowley, Cranford, West Drayton, Greenford, Hanwell, Harefield and Harlington* (London: Victoria County History, 1962), 103-11.

⁷⁵ Erler, 'Special benefactors and friends'.

⁷⁶ Powell, 'Margaret Pole and Syon Abbey', 564-66; Tait, *A fair place*, 172; Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: women and learning c.1415-1600', 88.

⁷⁷ Julie Kerr, 'Cistercian hospitality in the later middle ages', in Janet Burton and Karen Stöber (eds.), *Monasteries and society in the British Isles in the later middle ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), 25-39.

In addition to the major income categories discussed above, Syon had sources of revenue which were sporadic, unusual, or not covered in the accounts or the *Valor*, but which were clearly a part of its foundation of wealth. In the beginning, a major source of extra income was the 1000 marks a year, or £666 13s 4d annually, guaranteed by Henry V in the foundation charter, to be decreased as Syon got possession of its estates and their income. The king specified that this money was to be the first payment made from the Exchequer every year, before any other needs were met.⁷⁸ There is a record of at least one of these payments, in May 1421, the year after the first profession of religious at Syon.⁷⁹ Whether the payments continued beyond this date is unknown. Another source of income was the four tuns of wine from Gascony also promised by the king to the house in its foundation charter; it is clear, however, that this was not always received by the abbey in the fifteenth century.⁸⁰ Other common receipts were gifts. Lords in the early sixteenth century commonly sent each other presents of prestigious items, such as wine, game, and freshwater fish, as signs of friendship, deference or patronage.⁸¹ That Syon received such gifts is demonstrated by near-yearly rewards, recorded in the cellaress's Household accounts, to 'gentlemen bringing venison', or to 'gentlemen's servants for bringing of venison', and, by the payment in one year, of a reward to the servant of 'lady G' for bringing wine.⁸² Large monetary bequests were also received on occasion by the abbey or its members, the implications of which are discussed below.

The last source of income is mentioned only once in the surviving accounts, in the single non-abstract treasurers account, which records foreign receipts from 'hyryng & rettyng out of grounde for Bothes by the year'.⁸³ This could reflect the money for 'bothes at pardon time', listed in the 1492 survey of Syon property, which Aungier took to mean fees for boats ferrying pilgrims across the Thames to Syon's wharf. Given the mention of grounds rented out, it is more likely to refer to the hiring out of booths or temporary shop stalls selling items to pilgrims at Syon during the major

⁷⁸ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 29-31.

⁷⁹ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 38-9.

⁸⁰ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 34. See also section on wine in Chapter 4.

⁸¹ Dyer, *Standards of living*, 67; C.M. Woolgar, 'Gifts of food in late medieval England', *Journal of Medieval History*, 37 (2011), 6-18.

⁸² TNA SC 6/HenVII/1869, SC 6/HenVIII/2250, -2253, for these wordings.

⁸³ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1790.

festival times. The abbey may also have received money from the sale of pilgrim badges, and beads. One significant source of income also missing from the surviving household accounts was from the sale of books which Syon had printed for widespread distribution. If there was a concerted marketing campaign, as seems to have been the case – at least late in the period – we would expect to see some sort of income from book sales.⁸⁴ None appears. It is possible that such proceeds would have been included with offerings, if the books were given in exchange for offerings in the church. Or any income received from books may have gone into a possible separate reserve of money kept by the Syon men.

‘Right Income Management’

An important aspect of the spiritual management of material things inherent in the Brigittine mission was 'right income management' – that is, an orientation towards property, gifts and bequests that was in alignment with the monastery's long-term goals and larger mission. Birgitta specifically required large initial endowments for her Order's monasteries so that the sisters would not be distracted from their contemplation by the need to do manual labour for food or to chase after new income or alms.⁸⁵ In keeping with this expectation, Brigittine houses were prohibited from acquiring land or donations after their initial endowments were secure.⁸⁶ There were some exceptions, however. New Brigittine brothers and sisters were expected to make offerings at their profession ceremonies, and family and friends of the new religious member could also make gifts to the monastery at this time. These funds were not, however, to remain in the hands of the monastery but be given to the poor.⁸⁷ Offerings made by pilgrims could also be accepted at the abbey church. These funds were to go towards the building of the monastery if construction was not yet complete. After construction was finished, all offerings should be given to the poor.⁸⁸

The only circumstance in which a Brigittine monastery was allowed to keep donations after its construction was complete, was if the house was going through severe

⁸⁴ See Conclusion chapter.

⁸⁵ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 141, 221-22.

⁸⁶ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 76.

⁸⁷ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 129; Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 31.

⁸⁸ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 171.

financial difficulties. If accepted, steps were taken to ensure that gifts were freely given. The abbey could only take donations after sending the giver away and asking her to come back only if she was firmly resolved to give to the monastery. The abbey was also expected to pray for her, and to ask her to give the money to poor churches in need, instead.⁸⁹ Only ‘unavoidable and intolerable necessity’ could justify the abbey’s use of these gifts for itself, instead of for the benefit of the poor.⁹⁰ Bequests might have been solicited, however, for books and other needed objects. The Syon brothers asked Vadstena a number of questions concerning what kinds of personal property were acceptable in the monastery. The answer was that all ‘precious things’ were unacceptable, but that an exception could be made for expensive books of psalms, prayers and other study or devotional material that were given to individual religious as gifts.⁹¹ Numerous donations of books to Syon have come to light, and may have been encouraged by the abbey, perhaps in lieu of the prohibited money or land.⁹² In addition to reaping the benefits of a growing library, Syon may have allowed such donations in order to strengthen, or at the least not reject, bonds with important political and social connections.⁹³

Syon and its religious did receive numerous bequests aside from books, both as a community, and as individuals. The majority of these were sums of money (in amounts ranging as high as £40 to £100), but some donations of goods in kind, such as precious metal objects, wax, wine are found in the sources.⁹⁴ Several of these donations appear as bequests to individual Syon religious. Keeping private reserves of money would have been strictly against the *Rule* and it is possible that this money made its way to the poor by way of abbey coffers and alms. In many nunneries,

⁸⁹ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 76.

⁹⁰ Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 31.

⁹¹ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 105, 63, 71.

⁹² Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood', 192-95.

⁹³ Mertes, *English noble household*, 93; David Postles, 'Small gifts, but big rewards: the symbolism of some gifts to the religious', *Journal of Medieval History*, 27 (2001), 23-42, 24.

⁹⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2193, -2194. For bequests to Syon, see: Tait, *A fair place*, 152, 64-65; Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: women and learning c.1415-1600', 96; Erler, 'Special benefactors and friends', 217-21; Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 55, 80-81, 531-33, 37; *Folios 84-100: 1430-32*, ed. R.R. Sharpe (Calendar of letter-books of the city of London: K: Henry VI London: Corporation of London, 1911) 116-34; *Wills: 2-10 Henry VII (1486-95)*, ed. R.R. Sharpe (Calendar of wills proved and enrolled in the Court of Husting, London: Part 2: 1358-1688, London: Corporation of London, 1890) 588-94; James Gairdner, 'William Gregory's will', in James Gairdner (ed.), *The historical collections of a citizen of London in the fifteenth century* (London: Camden Society, 1876), xlii-xlix, xlii-xlix; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 246; Jones and Underwood, *King's mother*, 240; Johnston, 'VCH, House of Bridgettines', 183; Gillespie, 'The book and the brotherhood', 192-95.

however, it was common for nuns to retain ownership of property, and for the abbess to keep their money for them in separate bags or chests, rather than putting it into the communal chest.⁹⁵ Such practices certainly existed at other Brigittine abbeys; one example is the separate income and property of Katrina Lemmel at Maria Mai convent in Germany.⁹⁶ It is possible that Syon Abbey religious also retained ownership of bequests given to them as individuals. If so, it would illustrate some limitation to the house's dedication to the Brigittine mission to the poor.

Only three bequests to Syon were of land: Avening, the estate called 'My Lady Hampton's Land', and the property known as 'Sutton lands'.⁹⁷ Both Avening and 'My Lady Hampton's Land', otherwise known as 'rents of lands and tenements lately of the Lady Alicia Hampton', came to be joined in the abbess's accounts with the large estate of Minchinhampton (which, like the new properties, was in Gloucestershire), beginning in 1524.⁹⁸ Both Avening and 'My Lady Hampton's Lands' seem to have been later bequests, as neither is mentioned in the original foundation charter, or any of the subsequent refoundation charters.⁹⁹ The terminology and remembrance of Lady Alicia Hampton's name through to the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535 also suggests a bequest, as does the fact that, as part of her estate, Syon was required to distribute alms in an almshouse in Gloucestershire and see to the delivery of cartloads of wood to its inhabitants.¹⁰⁰

The last property, sometimes described as 'Sutton lands in Braynfeed end', first appears in the Syon accounts in 1536, with a receipt of £2 13s 4d and is listed in 1537 as well with the same yield. In 1538, however, the receipt listed is 'null'.¹⁰¹ This land is certainly the result of a bequest from Sir Richard Sutton, former steward of Syon, who in his will (proved 1524) bequeathed estates in the town of Brentford to the monastery for the maintenance of a priest at Syon. This priest was meant to pray for Sir Richard's soul, to do divine service for the incumbent steward of the abbey, to

⁹⁵ McNamara, *Sisters in arms*, 274.

⁹⁶ Lemmel, Schleif, and Schier, *Katerina's windows*, 274.

⁹⁷ Caley and Hunter (eds.), *Valor*, 424-28.

⁹⁸ See the *Valor* for the latter phrase: Caley and Hunter (eds.), *Valor*, 424-28.

⁹⁹ See Aungier for printed originals and translations of the charters. Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*.

¹⁰⁰ Caley and Hunter (eds.), *Valor*, 424-28.

¹⁰¹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2202 to -2204.

attend upon that steward daily at dinner and supper in Syon's lay hall, and to teach all novices of the abbey in their 'year of proof' in the precinct. For these labours, the priest was to have all the profits of the said property.¹⁰² Such a man may have existed at Syon, but there is no clear reference to a man of the cloth at the abbey who was not a member of the Order and an inhabitant of the enclosure. The eventual inclusion of these lands in the income of the abbess is potentially due to the creeping Dissolution. Profession of new novices in numbers large enough to warrant a devoted priest-teacher may have ended by 1536.¹⁰³ In addition, the new steward of Syon, Thomas Cromwell, in this post by the time of the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* survey, was not resident in the abbey precinct, and therefore would not have required a personal priest on the premises. The lands of Sir Richard Sutton, then, were no longer needed for his original intent, and were free to support the office of the abbess. The null receipt from Sutton lands in 1538 may indicate a sale of this property only a few years after its acquisition by Syon.

With these three exceptions, Syon acquired no new lands other than those promised to it by Henry V in the abbey's initial foundation charter. Far from managing its image by projecting a 'reputation for austerity' in an attempt to garner donations of land from people who needed to be convinced of Syon's moral worthiness, as Krug asserts, the overall impression from the sources, and from an analysis of the abbey's financial state, is that Syon was rarely, if ever, seeking out bequests of land.¹⁰⁴ While it is true, as she says, that Syon desired to 'be present in the minds of lay believers', it is not for the reasons she believes.¹⁰⁵ Syon's primary objective in being well-known was to spread Brigittine spirituality. One of its central methods of doing so was through careful management of its expenditure, to which we now turn.

¹⁰² Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 531.

¹⁰³ See Conclusion chapter for a discussion of new professions in the lead-up to the Dissolution.

¹⁰⁴ Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 200.

¹⁰⁵ Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 200.

Expenditure in Overview

Unlike Syon's income, which was recorded by only three accounting officers of the Tudor period (abbess, treasurers, and cellarer), and only in part in the Latin accounts of the fifteenth century, the abbey's expenditure involved all of the Syon household accounts. For this reason, to investigate the Tudor period, the Abstracts of Abbess and Treasurers Accounts, Cellarer Household, Cellarer Foreign, Chamberlain, and Sacristan Accounts, must all be available for a given year, in order to calculate the total expenditure of the abbey from the 1480s onward. This convergence occurs for only seven years of the sixteenth century. The Latin Accounts of 1447 to 1461 also have problems related to expenditure. Despite the fact that they include simple statements of the amount spent by the sacristan, chamberlain and treasurers, and include a detailed list of payments by the cellarer, they are not complete in that no expenses of the abbess are included, aside from the money spent on building and repairs. Because of this, a complete longitudinal analysis of expenditure at Syon is not possible. The seven years of full expenditure in the sixteenth century are therefore not fully comparable with the eleven years of the fifteenth. Something very close to a full picture can, however, be composed by separating the abbess's non-building/repairs expenditure in the Tudor accounts from the rest of the expenditure, thereby creating a category inclusive of the same expenditure items as the Latin Accounts. The results are shown in Figure 5.

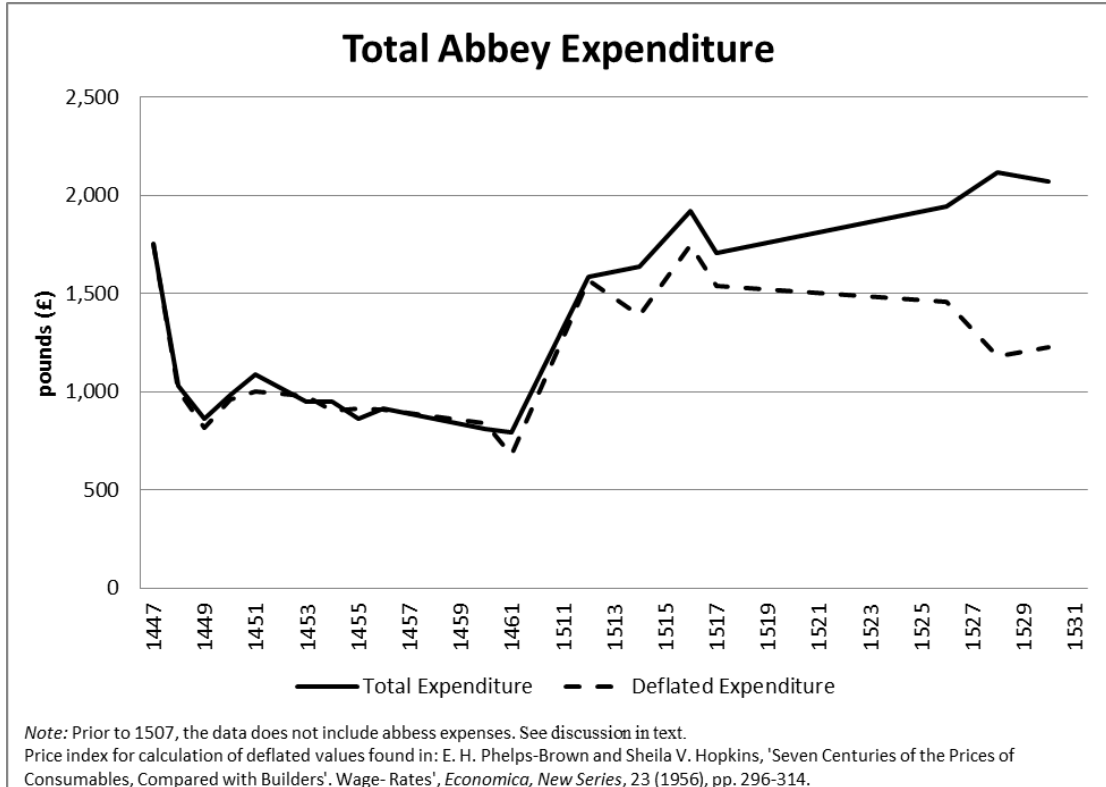
Syon's overall expenditure (minus abbess necessary payments) ranged from a high of £1,931 in 1528, to a low of £791 in 1461. The average in the available fifteenth-century years was £999, versus £1,726 in the available sixteenth-century years, without abbess necessary payments, and £1,854 with these expenses. This increase in expenditure holds true even when it is adjusted for price inflation, as also shown in Figure 5. This is well above the average yearly expenditure of lay households numbering over fifty, studied by Mertes.¹⁰⁶ It is also to be expected, given that Syon's religious members alone numbered eighty-five, and that its servants, staff, and boarding guests likely brought the number into the hundreds.¹⁰⁷ Durham, however, despite its residential population of only 36 monks, with an average annual

¹⁰⁶ Mertes, *English noble household*, Appendix B, 216-7. See also, Dyer, *Standards of living*, 70.

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter 2.

expenditure of £1,877, exceeded Syon's spending (in years which include abbes necessary expenses), though only by £23.¹⁰⁸

Figure 5



Food was by far the biggest expense of the abbey in all years. As Figure 6 illustrates, it comprised between 50% and 70% of Syon's total expenditure (minus abbes expenses in early years), rising as high as 76% when building and repairs expenditure was at its lowest, and as low as 28% when construction costs were at their highest. These numbers are generally comparable to the 50% to 60% of total expenditure spent on food in average lay households over 50 people, as described by Mertes.¹⁰⁹ Likewise, the nobleman Thomas de Berkeley's household spent only 57% on food.¹¹⁰ Durham spent a usually much smaller proportion on food (only 47% of total expenditure) than Syon.¹¹¹ This is not surprising, however, given that only 36 monks were actually resident at Durham at any one time, many living temporarily instead at

¹⁰⁸ Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 15, 24-7; Hatcher, Piper, and Stone, 'Monastic mortality'.

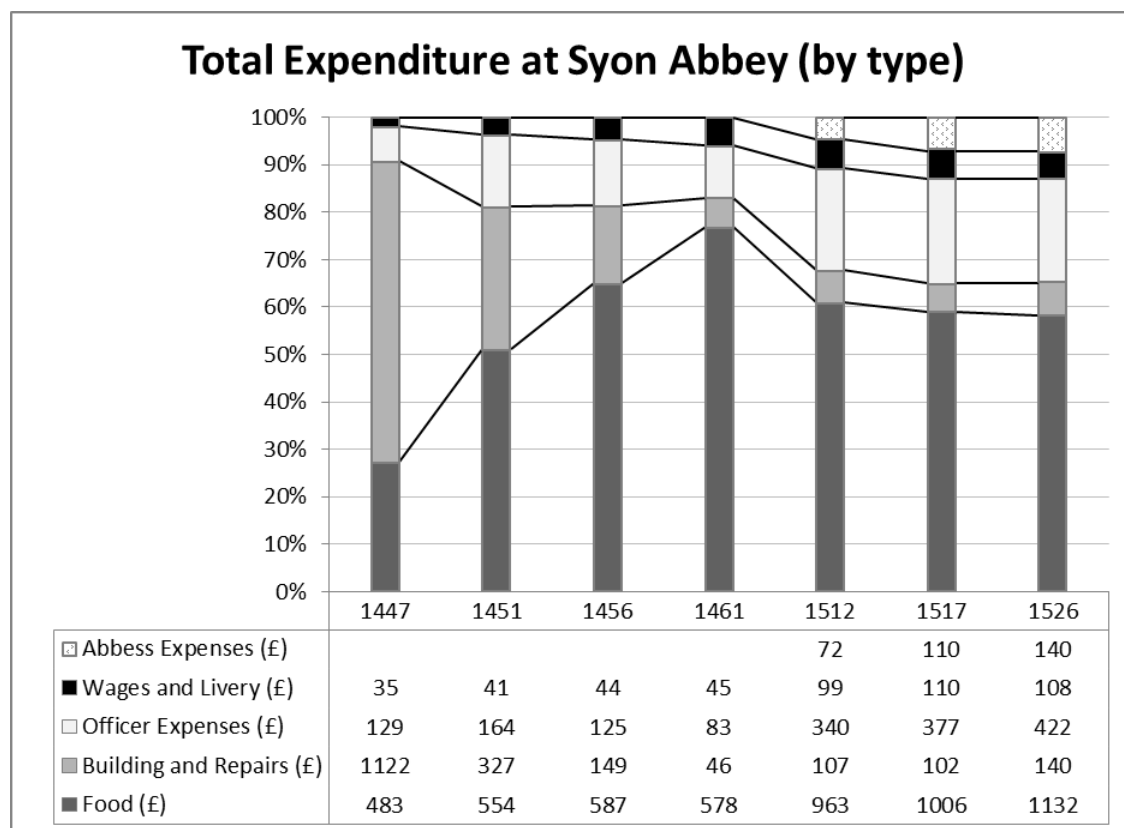
¹⁰⁹ Mertes, *English noble household*, Appendix B, 216-7.

¹¹⁰ Dyer, *Standards of living*, 70.

¹¹¹ Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 24-27.

the priory's college in Oxford or in one of the monastery's cells.¹¹² It is possible that Durham also received more income in-kind than either Syon or lay households, and thus required less by purchase. Given the greater number of people in Syon's household, as compared with these average large lay households and Durham, the abbey's sometimes larger expenditure on food is not surprising.

Figure 6



The next highest percentage of spending at Syon was on building and repair work, which ranged from a high of 63% of abbey expenditure (minus abbess expenses), to a steady low of 7% of the total (with abbess expenses) in the sixteenth century, after a majority of Syon's monastic and precinct buildings had been constructed. This later equilibrium was lower than the 12%, on average, spent at Durham on construction costs each year, and lower as well than the nearly 11% spent annually in large lay households.¹¹³ This may be due to the lower repair costs of Syon's new buildings, as

¹¹² Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 14-15.

¹¹³ For Durham, see Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 24-27. For large lay households, see Mertes, *English noble household*, Appendix B, 216-7. I have combined the building material with craftsmen's wages to get a rough estimate of building costs as a whole at these households.

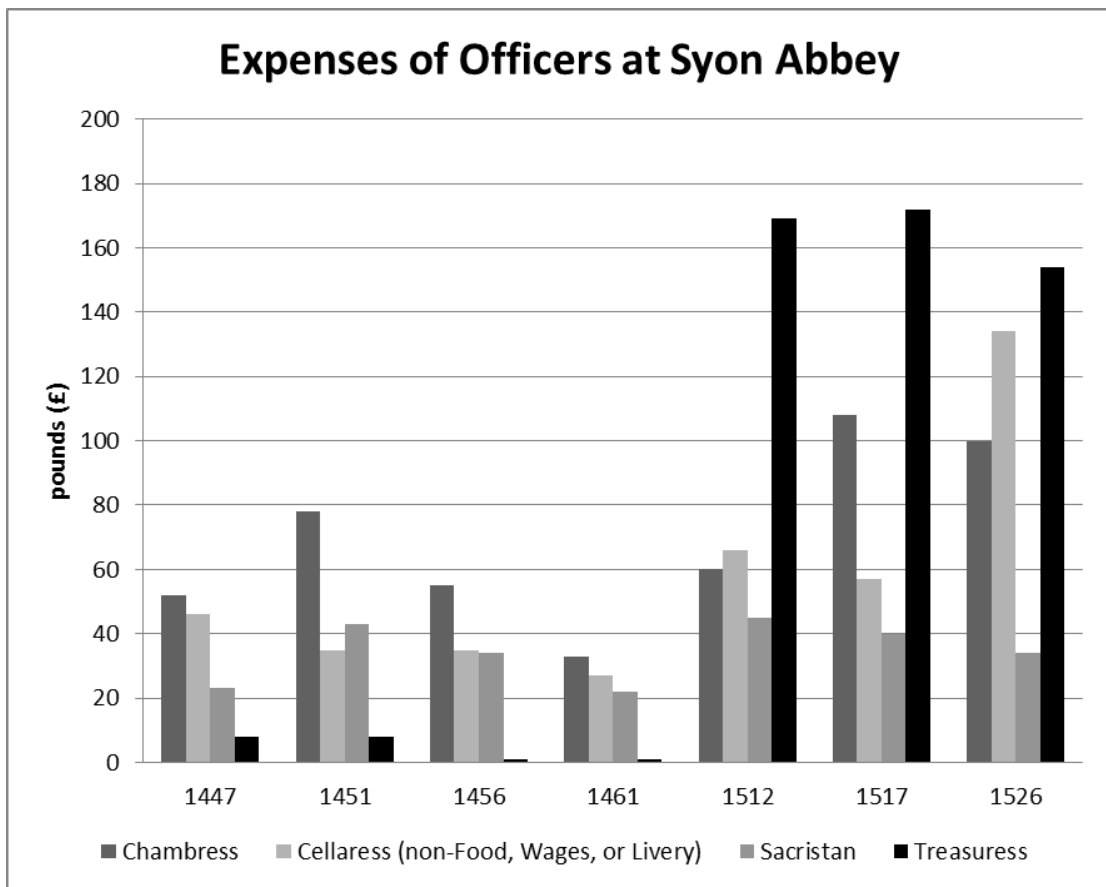
opposed to the maintenance required for centuries-old monastic and aristocratic structures.

Expenditure on ‘wages and livery’ ranged from 2% to 7% of abbey expenditure. This category does not include wages and fees of some craftsmen employed directly by the chambress and the sacristan, or casual labourers employed on occasion by the cellaress. It does, however, encompass the majority of permanent servants who were members of the Syon household. These percentages are well below the proportions spent by large lay households for servants’ wages (at 20% of household expenditure), and on pensions or stipends at Durham (at 15% of its total expenditure).¹¹⁴ This is even without including cloth for livery at those locations, which is impossible to separate from the general ‘cloth and clothing’ categories the authors of these studies have chosen to use.

The final groups of expenditure include the abbess’s expenses aside from building and repairs – available only for the sixteenth century – and other expenses of officers, including general and necessary expenditure items of the treasurers, chambress, and sacristan, and all of the non-food, non-wage and livery expenses of the cellaress. As shown in Figure 6, the abbess expenses rose from 4% to 8% of total abbey expenditure in available years. The expenses of other officers rose from a low of 8% to a high of 22%, remaining steady in percent of overall expenditure in the three available years of the sixteenth century accounts. Figure 7 illustrates the composition of this category, and demonstrates that the expenses of the treasurers far exceeded that of the other officers in the later years, indicating that it was an increase in treasurer expenditure that was likely to blame for the increased spending on officer expenses in general. The possible meanings of this will be discussed below.

¹¹⁴ Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 24-27; Mertes, *English noble household*, Appendix B, 216-7.

Figure 7

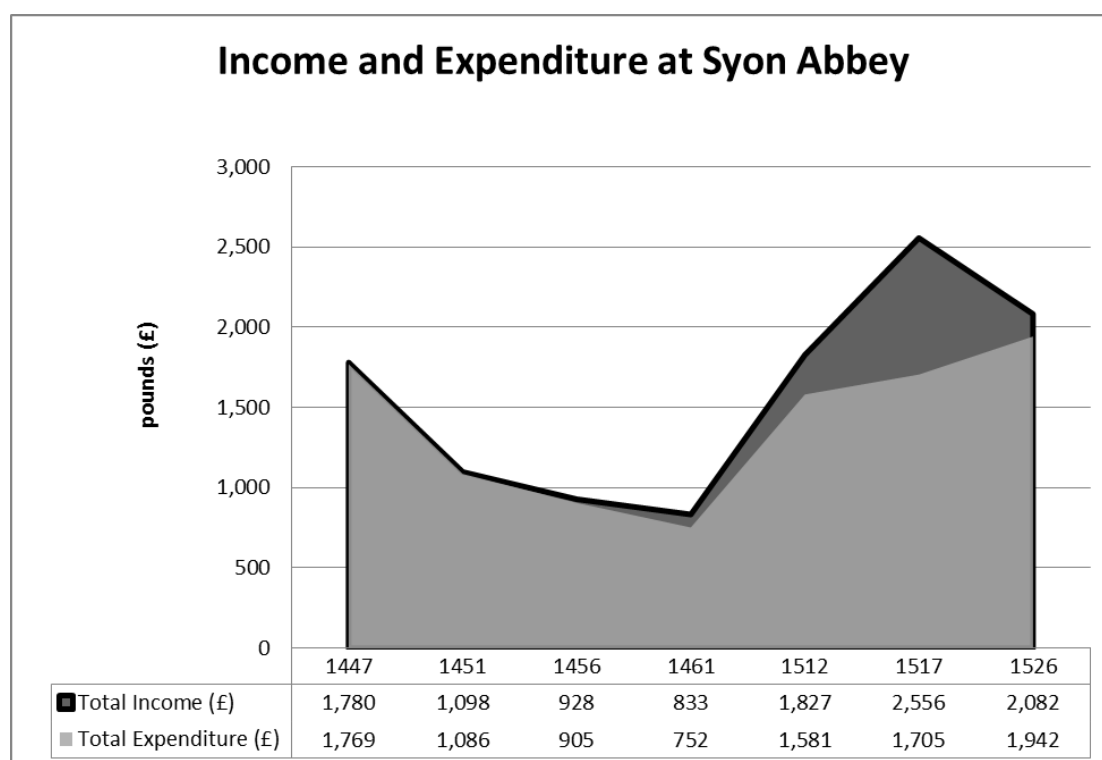


This is Syon’s expenditure in broad overview. The findings indicate that the abbey was quite normal in its expenditure ranges for its size, fending off any potential criticism of general excess. The Syon Accounts divulge many more details about the abbey’s spending, which often provide evocative insights into daily life at the monastery. The following chapters discuss these details of expenditure and consumption thoroughly, and highlight the way Syon’s lived materiality, expressed in the specific spending choices it made, compared to the ideals and purposes of its Brigittine mission. The next section, however, looks at the issue from a broader perspective, assessing both the balance of expenditure to income, and the effect this balance may have had on Syon’s ability to fulfil a crucial aspect of its mission: delivering its surplus funds to the poor each year in the way of alms.

Alms

While Brigittine abbeys theoretically aimed to give their excess money away as alms at the end of every accounting year, it is not certain that Syon did so. As Figure 8 illustrates, the abbey did certainly have, in many years, a gap between the amount it received in income, and the amount it spent on all household consumption and necessary expenses. The year 1517, in particular, shows a surplus of over £850. The fifteenth century years illustrated here, however, show income and expenditure that are closely matched. This may have been due to a true lack of funds, especially as costs for construction of the monastic buildings and precinct were still quite high. On the other hand, this is possibly due to the nature of the accounts. While the expenditure in these years does not include the abbess's necessary expenses, the full abbey income is also not indicated. As discussed above, the income recorded in these accounts may merely have been composed of transfers to cover expenses – a charge to the discharge of the expenditure.

Figure 8



In any case, in some years of the sixteenth century, at least, there was clearly a surplus of money available to the abbey, above its needs. We should therefore expect to see,

for these years, some evidence of major, annual almsgiving. There is, however, no evidence of this. One possible explanation involves the youth of the abbey. After the majority of Syon's estates came into hand during the reign of Edward IV, the abbey certainly had the endowment needed, but construction of the abbey church did not finish until after its consecration in 1488, and construction of abbey and precinct buildings seems to have continued up to the Dissolution.¹¹⁵ It is possible, therefore, that Syon's religious never believed themselves to be financially secure enough to give large sums away. This attitude may have been reinforced by the Vadstena brethren, who, in response to a query by Syon's men, stated, 'we believe that the monasteries are not bound to take care of every kind of distribution of superfluous things before the endowment and construction.'¹¹⁶ In this context, they were speaking of smaller alms items, but the sentiment may have been extended to larger obligations. Syon does not seem to have had an almshouse or almoner, as was common at other monasteries. The 1535 Valor shows little in the way of alms coming from Syon, but the survey is known to have underestimated alms in general, partially by not recording alms that were not regular and strictly obligatory amounts or percentages.¹¹⁷ So Syon's year-end almsgiving may simply have not made it into the surviving sources. On the other hand, given the ongoing construction, the opportunity to fulfil this major almsgiving aspect of the Brigittine mission may have never arisen; those years with a clear surplus may have been years in which the abbey was foreseeing a large future expenditure and was saving and budgeting accordingly.

Evidence of smaller amounts of alms do appear in the Syon accounts. The chambress spent 4s 6d in one year on 'almes', and in other years spent money on 'burying of poormen' – ten burials in one year, including money spent on 'burying of a poor child', and burials of up to five people a year in four other accounts.¹¹⁸ The cellaress accounts also record expenditures related to alms. In one year she gave 12d 'to a pilgrim to St Jacob pilgrimage', and distributed money at other times to paupers, at

¹¹⁵ See Chapter 5.

¹¹⁶ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 169.

¹¹⁷ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 264-65; Caley and Hunter (eds.), *Valor*; Savine, *English monasteries*, 230; Caroline Barron and Matthew Davies (eds.), *The religious houses of London and Middlesex* (Centre for Metropolitan History and Victoria County History, Institute of Historical Research, 2007), 17; Neil S. Rushton, 'Monastic charitable provision in Tudor England: quantifying and qualifying poor relief in the early sixteenth century', *Continuity and Change*, 16/1 (2001), 9-44, 16, 18.

¹¹⁸ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1723, SC 6/HenVIII/2291, to -2295.

the direction of the abbess.¹¹⁹ In one year, the cellaress listed an expense of 10s for ‘keeping people when sick’.¹²⁰ She may also have been involved in the more regular management of almsgiving, for she paid someone a reward of 12d in one year for ‘helping the baker at the dole’.¹²¹ The *Syon Additions* required that ‘releues be delte to the poer peple by outwarde seruantes, after the tenour of the rewle’.¹²² This included the distribution of broken meats – the leftovers from the nuns’ and brethren’s tables, to be distributed daily at the gates of the abbey, as discussed in the following chapter.

Perhaps the most promising reference to alms in the Syon accounts appears in the single surviving fragment of what was probably a full treasurers account, which lists that officer’s expenditure of £9 6s 6d on alms given to ‘pore and nedy folk’.¹²³ It is quite possible that the treasurers’, and perhaps the abbess’s ‘necessary expenses’ each year included alms, and that the amount given by the abbey to the poor year by year is unknown only because that category of expenditure was left un-itemized on the Abstracts of Abbess and Treasures Accounts, and because the more detailed Journal Books and accounts on which they were based have not survived. In fact, an increase of alms recorded in this way could be one of the reasons for the significant growth in necessary expenses of the treasurers throughout the period of the Syon accounts, as shown in Figure 7 above. If so, the sisters of Syon Abbey may well have increased almsgiving in general, and kept to the spirit, if not the letter, of the almsgiving provision in the *Brigittine Rule*.

¹¹⁹ TNA SC 6/1106/23.

¹²⁰ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2252.

¹²¹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2249.

¹²² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 174. For the use of ‘dole’ in the middle ages in reference to charity, see “dole, n.1.” Oxford English Dictionary: OED Online’.

¹²³ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1790.

Conclusion

Syon Abbey had the financial organization, structure, accounting and auditing processes, document archiving, income, reasonable expenditure percentages, and sometime-annual surpluses to enable large scale almsgiving in many years. Yet this, it seems not to have done – or at least none appears in any overt way in any of the Syon source material. While the increase in treasurers expenses may hint at a type of almsgiving, it is possible that the abbey did not yet see itself as stable enough, whether financially or politically, to risk the extra expenditure. They may also have decided to prioritize other expenses, such as the publication of books, or the purchase of church decoration that might attract pilgrims – expenses which were still in keeping with the greater Syon mission of evangelizing the laity and thereby renewing the world. On the other hand, Syon's sisters may have chosen to prioritize other, less virtuous expenditures, such as more decadent food, more sumptuous clothing, or more elegant architecture and decorations for the cloister. It is to a close examination of these items of consumption that we now turn – first to the food habits of the abbey residents, and then to their clothing, shelter, and décor.

Chapter 4

Orderly Delights: Food Consumption at Syon

Of all the monastic concerns about lived bodily spirituality, food consumption carried perhaps the widest variety of symbolic meanings in medieval monasticism. While food carries moral connotations in most cultures, it had a particularly explicit relationship with spirituality in the middle ages, especially among monastics and those who adopted quasi-monastic lifestyles. For the Brigittines, it had additional significance, being as it was a prominent part of the daily material life that held so much spiritual meaning in the Order. The current chapter explores these meanings of food at Syon Abbey, investigates the types of food eaten by abbey residents, calculates the volume of those foods consumed, explores how consumption patterns changed through time, and assesses how well the culinary experience of Syon residents reflected Brigittine ideals, and therefore how well it contributed to the overall mission of the abbey to renew the wider world.

The Brigittine Meaning of Food

Food was steeped in meaning in medieval monasticism, much of it negative. Many monastic thinkers believed that the pleasure possible in tasting food could ‘provoke the flesh’ and lead to illicit sexual pleasure and ‘excessive carnality’.¹ Eating rich and expensive dishes, too much food, or prohibited items like meat in Lent, was also believed to be as much a symptom of greed as grasping at wealth.² Food was therefore a means through which sin could be enacted. But it could also be a conduit for holiness. The sacrament of the Eucharist gave food a symbolic meaning as the most

¹ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 151; Woolgar, *Senses*, 111-12.

² Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 41-42.

direct way of encountering God.³ But the holy possibilities of food existed more in its avoidance. It was seen by some as the highest form of abstinence, especially for women, as it was more accessible, more essential, and often more pleasurable than other aspects of physicality – therefore more challenging to avoid than other aspects of physicality.⁴ Abstinence from food also helped divert one’s attention from the physical, and identify with the salvation-bringing suffering of Christ; it had the practical side-effect of making food available for greater almsgiving.⁵ The more food left on the plate or in the cupboard, the more leftovers or provisions were available for distribution to the poor.

In the high middle ages, the traditional monastic fast was becoming diluted by an increasing number of feast days, a proliferating variety of loopholes around the prohibitions against red meat, and a vast expansion in the number, variety, and decadence of non-red-meat dishes served at each meal. This growing problem spurred a number of monastic reform movements in the high middle ages calling for a return to more ascetic practices.⁶ Birgitta’s *Rule* can in part be seen as a continuation of this tradition. Like most monastic reformers, Birgitta was concerned with the excessive consumption of food, and she accused the religious of her era with abandoning their commitment to fasting.⁷ ‘Just like a vessel open at both ends is never filled, even if the whole sea were poured into it, so, Birgitta says, the clerics are never satiated.’⁸ Not only did they eat too much, ‘beyond measure’, but they also ate ‘too exquisitely’, with decadent foods and numerous and varied courses, and drank to the point of drunkenness.⁹ Gluttony more generally, and especially the consumption of spices, Birgitta believed, incites lust, and immoderation in eating makes the flesh ‘become insolent towards the soul’, making the soul itself slothful in its service toward God.¹⁰ Excessive and ‘delicate’ foods could also have negative practical effects, leading to bodily illness, loss of time, and a resulting inability to serve God and neighbour.¹¹ The discipline of the body was also, Birgitta thought, essential to the soul’s understanding

³ Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 2.

⁴ Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 2-3, 30, 191-93.

⁵ Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 5, 33, 114, 218.

⁶ Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 41-42.

⁷ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 52.

⁸ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 51-52.

⁹ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 51, 227.

¹⁰ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 227, 30.

¹¹ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 230.

of spirituality.¹² While excessive and decadent consumption could instigate the prioritizing of lower inclinations such as sloth, gluttony, and ‘disordered delights’, abstinence helped to re-order the priorities of the soul.¹³ Those who could abstain would earn ‘a grete martyrdom withoute swerde.’¹⁴

While Birgitta stressed the importance of abstinence and fasting and criticised those who were lax in their food habits, she also believed that extreme strictness in living could lead to a loss of humility, charity and discretion – values which she saw as higher priorities than restraint in food.¹⁵ To her, the excessive abstinence practised by some, such as those holy women whose food practices have been discussed in detail by Bynum, was a symptom of competition with others for higher spirituality, reward, or honour, and was therefore ultimately a symptom of pride.¹⁶ In fact, Birgitta argued that humility and its corollary, obedience, are so much more important than abstinence, that one could eat extravagant amounts of food without sin, if one did so in obedience to her monastic superior.¹⁷ In this situation, extravagant eating was therefore a sign of holiness, not of spiritual degradation. The intention behind the act was more important to Birgitta than the act itself.¹⁸ To prevent the tendency of some religious women to fast too much, Birgitta even required each sister in her Order to eat the same amount of food.¹⁹ These values were reflected in the *Syon Additions for the Sisters*. According to this source, if a sister wanted to add an additional abstinence, she had to have it approved by the abbess, lest God mistake the extra fasting for ‘a veyne glory’.²⁰ Meanwhile, all sisters were required to eat extra food if the abbess sent it to them.²¹ In this way, therefore, the Brigittines of Syon saw obedience as expressly superior to ascetic food practices.

¹² Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 225.

¹³ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 225.

¹⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 168.

¹⁵ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 40-43, 231.

¹⁶ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 231-2; Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 239-40.

¹⁷ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 197.

¹⁸ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 231-2.

¹⁹ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 230.

²⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 168.

²¹ Ellis, ‘*Viderunt eam filie Syon*’, 114.

It was believed by thinkers such as St Birgitta that all good and god-created things fell from holiness when used for disordered purposes. Food, a good thing when used well, could also be associated with moral danger, sin, and skewed priorities. In a sense, the medieval household's relationship with food was a special epicentre of the struggle for the right spiritual use of materiality. As with materiality in general, the judgement of right or wrong came down to the motive, and by extension, the extent of use. The key, for Birgitta, was to find a holy balance in food consumption. Eating should be carefully controlled and monitored, but not highly restrictive. Partly this was Birgitta's nod to the practicalities of her own late medieval world, a 'lukewarm age' in which strict diets were impossible to uphold, and in which such diets weakened the spirit and decreased the fervour with which men served God and neighbour.²² The body is part of God's good creation, she said, and should therefore not be destroyed and weakened through lack of nourishment.²³ It should instead, she said, be treated like 'an ass', like a 'sike beste', which needs to eat sufficient amounts in order to maintain the sound bodily condition which would enable it to be useful and to fulfil its purpose in the world.²⁴ To deprive the body of food was to weaken its ability to help others.²⁵ Birgitta also believed that food is a part of God's good creation, and that acceptance of his gifts of material abundance is pleasing to him, as long the use is moderate and rational, prioritizing the higher good of humility over the lower good of abstinence (the pride of ascetic attainment), avoiding gluttony, and pursuing food for necessity, not 'delight'.²⁶

While the religious of Syon Abbey were spiritually rewarded for abstinence, even in moderation, they faced strong pressures in the other direction from the wider society of late medieval England. In the secular culture of this time, excess and decadence in food was often seen in a positive light. They could be marks of the wealth, magnificence, and largess that were required to demonstrate good lordship and high social standing.²⁷ Great quantities of food, extravagantly prepared, like other kinds of conspicuous display, including décor, architecture, and clothing, sent a message of

²² Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 224, 31.

²³ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 224, 27.

²⁴ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 224-5; Hogg, 'Rewyll', 117.

²⁵ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 244.

²⁶ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 186, 224, 27.

²⁷ Kate Mertes, 'Aristocracy', in Rosemary Horrox (ed.), *Fifteenth century attitudes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42-60, 50-51; Woolgar, *The great household*, 111, 65, 201.

power and prestige.²⁸ Projecting this appearance was vital for the continued security of the abbey in a hierarchical culture. Given the positive qualities of fine food consumption as a demonstration of social standing, and its negative potential as excessive and ‘disordered delight’, monasteries such as Syon were to an extent in a double bind. On one hand, they had to project a holy approach to materiality characterized by some degree of abstinence. On the other hand, they had to be seen to consume, display, and give, in order to demonstrate good lordship – which was expected of them as great landlords. If they decreased the display too much, their political and social legitimacy, and even security, could be threatened. They needed the patronage networks that could be built through good lordship and display. This all created a strong incentive for the consumption of large quantities of fine foods at Syon, and set up a potential conflict with the abbey’s Brigittine values of ascetic moderation. Examining what Syon actually consumed, and where this consumption sat on the spectrum of asceticism to display, is the purpose of the present chapter.

Sources for the Study of Syon’s Food

The investigation of Syon’s food consumption requires the identification of specific information and source types, and the application of complex methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis. Until recently, medieval food consumption has been relatively understudied by historians, who have focused largely on the production side of sustenance.²⁹ Important exceptions to this include the historians Christopher Dyer with his studies of standards of living, and Barbara Harvey with her study of the diet of the monks of Westminster Abbey.³⁰ Recently, the field has expanded, and new research has been published which sets the quantitative examination of food consumption, especially that of institutional households, be they collegiate, lay, or monastic, within an archaeological, cultural, and institutional context.³¹

²⁸ Woolgar, 'Conspicuous consumption', 7.

²⁹ Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', 1-3.

³⁰ Harvey, *Living and dying*; Dyer, 'English diet in the later middle ages'; Christopher Dyer, 'The consumer and the market in the later middle ages', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Ser, 42/3 (1989).

³¹ Woolgar, Serjeantson, and Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition*; Woolgar, 'Gifts of food'; Slavin, *Bread and ale*; Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*; John S. Lee, 'Feeding the colleges: Cambridge's food and fuel supplies, 1450-1460', *The Economic History Review*, new series, 56/May (2003), 243-64.

Some studies have focused exclusively on money spent on various food items, but this has inherent problems.³² Expenditure is not a reliable indicator of consumption, as different goods had different cost-to-volume ratios. Low-cost items such as fruit or dairy could have a large impact on the diet. And prices could sometimes change significantly.³³ For this reason, the present study focuses primarily on volumes and edible weights of food purchased or consumed. I further convert food items to standard volume and weight measurements for easier calculation and comparison. The findings are presented in the individual food sections, below. The comparability of food types has been further increased by converting the edible weight or volume of each to calories (kcal) allowing for a more accurate assessment of the relative importance of different food types to the diet of the abbey through time. These findings are presented at the end of the present chapter.

Such analyses require excellent, detailed sources for the abbey's food consumption – many of which fortunately survive for Syon Abbey. The annual Syon cellaress accounts are extraordinary for their level of detail on food and the length of the series available, comparable to the Durham Priory accounts covering roughly the same period.³⁴ Five types of annual Syon cellaress accounts are preserved at the National Archives. The Cellaress Household Accounts survive with some gaps from 1482 to 1539, and record the bulk of food purchases at the abbey, in addition to some non-food expenses. From 1512 forward, they also record the amount of wheat, malt, cattle, and sheep consumed in the abbey and household each year. The Cellaress Foreign Accounts, surviving with gaps from 1500 to 1539, are generally concerned with non-food income and expenses, but they also include expenditure on fish and spices. These items are also recorded in some Cellaress Household Accounts. Determining overall purchases of these foods requires both types of accounts to be available for a given year. The Cellaress Extract Accounts are drafts of the Cellaress Household Accounts, and sometimes include additional information. I have used them, when available, to supplement Cellaress Household Accounts missing from that series. The cellaress's Latin Accounts, finally, surviving from 1442 to 1461 with some gaps, combine most aspects of the Cellaress Household and Cellaress Foreign Accounts,

³² E.g. Dyer, *Standards of living*; Dyer, 'English diet in the later middle ages'.

³³ Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 72; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 35.

³⁴ Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 34-5.

and include a much greater amount of detail regarding consumption of various animals and dairy goods.

These annual accounts of the cellaress are supplemented by the Journal Book, a diet account covering the period 26 September to 20 November, 1535.³⁵ It records the purchase of 'Diette' items – fresh food which included fresh fish, eggs, poultry and other birds, calves, and some vegetables and condiments, by Syon's cellaress at the time, Agnes Merret, for each day of the eight-week period. The account also has a number of regular items recorded on a weekly basis. One such heading includes livestock and provisions bought in bulk, such as oxen, coal, straw, tools, sheep, cheese, malt, and wheat. Lists of expenses, rewards, and payments to various staff members, merchants, and service providers were usually grouped together after this, which was followed by a short sum for the week of all expenses to include in the quarterly or annual Cellaress Household accounts: Diet, Provisions, and Foreigns. After these sums was a record of the ale and beer brewed during the week, the amount of malt and wheat used to make each, and the amounts of drink distributed to each section of the household. Finally, the weekly entry ends with the amounts and kinds of bread baked that week, and the volume of wheat used for that purpose.

Despite this wealth of food information provided by the Syon cellaress accounts, they have some limitations, which make calculation of per capita food intake impossible. They do not, for example, give the kind of detailed data about individual meals and portion sizes seen in the kitchener's accounts of Westminster Abbey, which enabled Harvey to do a comprehensive analysis of daily per capita calorie intake there.³⁶ There are ways of partially estimating the household size of Syon, however. The *Brigittine Rule* dictates that whenever a sister died, the food she would have received, if alive, was to be given to the poor.³⁷ This was traditional practice in Benedictine monasteries as well. But while the latter gave out the portion for only thirty days for a monk or one year for an abbot, the Brigittines gave the sister's portion as alms for as long as her place in the monastery lay vacant.³⁸ This stipulation means that, assuming it was adhered to, a calculation of per capita consumption by the monastery would not be

³⁵ TNA SC6/HenVIII/2283.

³⁶ Harvey, *Living and dying*.

³⁷ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 75.

³⁸ Woolgar, 'Gifts of food', 17; Hogg, 'Rewyll', 75.

affected by the death of a religious.³⁹ Given a full list of household staff to whom rations of food were distributed on a daily basis each year, and the number of casual labourers fed each season, an average of per capita calorie intake could be calculated based on the consumption and purchase information that is available in the Syon cellaress accounts. Unfortunately, such a list has not been found, and, as discussed in Chapter 2, only a fraction of abbey staff members are known by title.

Calculations of actual consumption by the Syon household would also be affected by the amount of food that was given away by the abbey in the form of gifts and alms. Food gifts were an important part of medieval culture. They were a way of demonstrating ‘good lordship’, thereby creating political and social capital, and gifts to servants were a customary and expected part of the compensation from employers.⁴⁰ The abbess of Syon, Agnes Jordan, gave Mary Tudor a present in December, 1537, and the abbey sent her puddings the next month, in January 1538.⁴¹ Only scattered evidence remains of food gifts given to others by the Syon sisters and brethren, but it must have been substantial. Almsgiving was central to the purpose of Brigittine houses, and the distribution of broken meats to the poor was expected after each meal.⁴² Lacking records of an almoner (which position appears not to have existed at Syon) or of a staff member charged with the distribution of leftover food, it is not possible to determine the proportion of Syon food that was actually consumed by household residents.

Gifts received by the abbey would also skew the calculations of household consumption. A regular item of expenditure in every cellaress account was ‘rewards’, sometimes with reason for the reward given, sometimes without. For those whose purpose is identifiable, a large number were given to those bringing food. In many cases, these were rewards to servants bringing gifts of venison or other luxury items from gentry and noble connections, such as the ‘reward to my lady Gilfords servant for bringing a hogshead of red wine’ in 1499, and ‘rewards to gentlemens servants for bringing venison’ in many years.⁴³ Venison, along with wild birds, capons, high-

³⁹ See Chapter 2.

⁴⁰ Woolgar, ‘Gifts of food’, 7, 8, 12.

⁴¹ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 537.

⁴² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 174.

⁴³ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1869, SC 6/HenVIII/2252.

quality fish and freshwater fish, were high-status gifts in late medieval England, and any of these items may have been given to the women and men of Syon as a mark of respect.⁴⁴

In other cases, the reward was for 'diverse persons' 'other presents' as well as venison.⁴⁵ Many of these 'other presents' may have been small gifts of fruit from local peasant women, who were often given rewards 'for their trouble' for bringing similar gifts to other monasteries.⁴⁶ Syon's cellaress already had a good deal of interaction with local women, who often sold eggs, chickens, and capons to the abbey.⁴⁷ Woolgar argues that such small gifts of food were one of the primary ways in which the less well-off and wealthy alike practised almsgiving to religious houses.⁴⁸ Small gifts of food were especially a mark of friendships and associations between women.⁴⁹ Certain gifts were more akin to customary payments than voluntary donations. For example, peasants were commonly expected to give hens to their lords at Easter and Christmas.⁵⁰ Voluntary gifts of food might be also be given more frequently on the major feasts of the monastery.⁵¹ It is therefore probable that Syon received extra food income around the time of the *ad Vincula* pardon, and the feasts of St Birgitta and her daughter (and abbess of Vadstena), St Catherine of Sweden. All of these gifts may have had a significant impact on the supply of food available to the abbey, and potentially to its actual levels of consumption.

Additional food was also certainly obtained from the abbey home farm and in-kind income from its estates. While portions of the home farm seem to have been leased out, there is evidence all through the account series of expenditure on agricultural supplies and labour, payments which only make sense if the abbey was cultivating its own grain and maintaining some of its own livestock. Because the cellaress recorded the most important food items: wheat, malt, cattle, and sheep, by number 'spent' by

⁴⁴ Woolgar, 'Gifts of food', 11.

⁴⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2260.

⁴⁶ Woolgar, 'Gifts of food', 6.

⁴⁷ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2283. This daily account of fresh food purchases covering several weeks from 26 September to 20 November, 1535, shows the abbey purchasing items from women several times a week. The purchasing patterns and contacts of Syon deserve a thorough study, for which there is ample source material. Space limitations prevent the exploration of these issues in the present project.

⁴⁸ Woolgar, 'Gifts of food', 13-14.

⁴⁹ Woolgar, 'Gifts of food', 9.

⁵⁰ Woolgar, 'Gifts of food', 8-9.

⁵¹ Woolgar, 'Gifts of food', 10.

the household, the existence of the home farm poses no danger to estimates of their consumption. Other food items likely grown and raised on the home farm, however, will have escaped recording in the cellaress accounts. This includes foods grown in the monastic gardens and orchards, gleaned from hedges and woods, hunted from the park, caught from warrens, fished from the fishponds, and raised in home farm chicken coops. The abbey's Isleworth Dairy property also seems to have contributed in-kind income to the abbey household at times when it was in-hand.⁵² Syon also received some in-kind income from its other estates, particularly when high-status fish were caught. Examples of this were found by Morris in the estate records of Sidmouth, from which a number of porpoises caught were transferred to the abbey.⁵³ Only a thorough analysis of all of Syon's thousand-plus estate accounts, outside the scope of the present study, could indicate the relative importance of this type of in-kind income to Syon's household food consumption.⁵⁴

The real volume of Syon's household consumption is also affected by some uncertainty regarding the Syon accounts and accounting responsibilities themselves. Studies of other monasteries' food consumption have been limited by a lack of breadth in account series. Harvey, for example, has no information on food eaten in the abbots' or priors' households, or in any other separate household (of which there were many) in the monastery. Her study includes only food eaten in the refectory and misericord, and therefore any of the food known to have been eaten in the prior's or abbot's household, or in any other of the numerous other separate households in the monastery, is hidden from analysis.⁵⁵ In this, the Syon accounts have an advantage, since the vast majority of the food expenditure in the abbey seems to have been recorded in the cellaress accounts. There are some exceptions, however. The abbess could have food prepared for her separate eating, and, despite the *Rule's* directions to the contrary, she may have purchased food additional to or different from that bought and recorded by the cellaress, which she may have recorded in her 'diverse necessities' entries, the detailed contents of which are unknown. The men's side of Syon Abbey may also have had access to money, but if so, only minimal amounts, as I discuss in Chapter 3. Finally, the treasurers do seem to have purchased some food

⁵² Isleworth Dairy Accounts. See bibliography.

⁵³ Morris, 'Estates of Syon', 184-5.

⁵⁴ See below and Morris, 'Estates of Syon'.

⁵⁵ Harvey, *Living and dying*, 37.

and drink items. The list of expenses in the only surviving full (non-abstract) account for that officer included payments for spices, sugar and wine.⁵⁶ If her yearly ‘necessary expenses’ category regularly included purchase of food, the lack of details in the surviving abstracts likely obscure a great deal of food, over time.

There is, therefore, uncertainty both in the amount of food available to the Syon household overall, and the amount of that food actually eaten by the religious, their staff, and by each individual person within those groups. Despite these limitations, there is a great deal that can be discovered about Syon’s food consumption from an analysis of the abbey accounts, and it is even possible to come to some rough estimations of per capita consumption and household size. Before examining the consumption of each food type in turn, it will first be helpful to summarize the general expectations of Syon cuisine and mealtime ritual, as described in the *Additions for the Sisters*, to which we now turn.

Syon Food and Meal Regulations

Given the moral and symbolic importance attached to food in Brigittine thought, it is not surprising that every aspect of sustenance was regulated by the *Syon Additions*, including the eating arrangements of the nuns, and their conduct during meals. On these subjects, the *Additions* are relatively detailed, declaring, among other things, that nuts should be opened with knives, and knives and spoons should be wiped with napkins, while fingers should not be wiped on tablecloths, and cups and spoons should be washed and kept in ‘ther coffynes’ under the table.⁵⁷ The sequence of events and placement of people involved in cleaning up after meals was carefully orchestrated. First, the servitors collected broken meats from the nuns, in order of youngest to oldest, for distribution to the poor. They then collected, in order, the remains of the drinks, the other dishes, the bread and crumbs, and lastly the salt.⁵⁸ Many other aspects of mealtimes were also closely regulated, including the rules followed by the abbess when sending extra food to a sister, and of the sister when accepting it, the manner with which nuns should ask for additional food or drink, and

⁵⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1790.

⁵⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 169-70.

⁵⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 173.

the meal rituals of the servers themselves.⁵⁹ The rules for the lay brothers were comparable, with the notable exception that all broken meats from the men were to be brought to the sisters for distribution to the poor rather than being distributed by the men directly.⁶⁰ The lay brothers, priests and deacons seem to have eaten in the same room at the same time, aside from the servitors and readers, who, like their counterparts on the nuns' side, ate after all others had left.⁶¹

In addition to these practical rules were more explicitly spiritual rituals associated with mealtimes: readings during the meal, and a series of prayers which accompanied and interrupted the meal.⁶² Ellis argues that the mealtime was meant, through these detailed rules and rituals, to express and nurture social and spiritual decorum and obedience, and cultivate a spiritual understanding of their mealtimes.⁶³ This is supported by several passages in the *Additions*, for instance one stating that, '...none schal stretche her handes to receyue any bodyly fode, tyl the soule be refresched with spiritual fode.'⁶⁴ Food consumption at Syon was therefore deeply infused with spiritual meaning.

The *Additions for the Sisters* also describe in detail the type of meals and dishes to be prepared for the monastic inhabitants of the monastery. As discussed above, Brigittine guidelines for food consumption are relatively moderate compared with traditional fasting customs, but more in keeping with the actual practice of late medieval monasticism.⁶⁵ One of the more relaxed attitudes of the *Brigittine Rule* is that toward meat consumption. In Benedictine monasticism, meat was officially only allowed for the sick, though numerous loopholes were used to get around this restriction, and monasteries of the later middle ages can be seen eating quite high volumes of it.⁶⁶ According to the *Brigittine Rule*, in Ordinary Time, the sisters were allowed meat at the midday meal (which was interestingly called 'mete') four times a week – on Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. The evening meal ('soper') on these

⁵⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 170-1, 74.

⁶⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 113-18.

⁶¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 113-19.

⁶² Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 113.

⁶³ Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 113-14.

⁶⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 166.

⁶⁵ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 228.

⁶⁶ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 229; Harvey, *Living and dying*.

days, however, should include both fish and dairy, but no flesh meat. On Wednesdays, they were to have no flesh at all. Instead they ate fish the whole day. In keeping with Brigittine lenience regarding food, on fish days, ‘white meats’, that is dairy items, should be served in addition to the fish itself.⁶⁷ On Fridays throughout the year, they fasted with Lenten meats (dried fruits and nuts), and on Saturdays, they fasted with fish and white meats (dairy).⁶⁸

The *Additions* indicate that three kinds of courses were served at the midday meal: pottage, prebend, and pittance.⁶⁹ The cellaress was instructed to ensure that two types of pottage were prepared every day for both the sisters and brothers, so they each might choose the one they liked best.⁷⁰ One should be flesh or fish, depending on the day of the week and the monastic fasting calendar.⁷¹ The other should be composed of ‘wortes or herbes, or of any other þing that groweth of the 3erth holsom to the body, as whete, ryse, otemele, peson, and suche other.’⁷² The prebend included a portion of meat, as well as a pound of bread ‘well weyed’, and a pottle of ale.⁷³ The meat provided should be of two kinds, in either flesh or fish as the day required: one kind fresh and the other ‘powdred, boyled, or rosted, or other wyse dyght’.⁷⁴ The exact composition of meat types and preparation methods was up to the discretion of the cellaress, as circumstances required, and ‘as the market and purse wyll stretche.’⁷⁵ PITTANCES were foods and drinks that were originally extra to the normal meal. They were adopted in monasteries, initially used on special occasions only, as a way of serving foods more commonly found in lay households than monastic. In this way, monasteries might introduce more variety into their diet, and sample the developing cuisine of the larger culture.⁷⁶ At Syon, the pittance was a standard course of the midday meal, typically containing meat additional to that of the prebend meat

⁶⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 189.

⁶⁸ Hogg, ‘Rewyll’, 65-66. ‘Friday’ here is termed ‘sext feria’. For this usage, see R.E. Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin word-list from British and Irish sources* (London: British Academy and Oxford University Press, 1965), 437.

⁶⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 171.

⁷⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 171, 88.

⁷¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 188.

⁷² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 188-89.

⁷³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 189.

⁷⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 189.

⁷⁵ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 189.

⁷⁶ Woolgar, ‘Food and the middle ages’, 18.

course.⁷⁷ According to the *Additions*, a simple prebend should be ‘restored’ by the cellaress with a more substantial pittance to follow, but if the prebend was ‘goode and sufficiente to go rownde aboute, than no fors what the pytaunce be.’⁷⁸ The evening meal was a simpler affair at Syon, consisting of only ‘som lytel sowpyng’, alongside fish or dairy, or any other thing allowed by the *Rule* which was ‘lyght of dygestyon’.⁷⁹

The abbey had a number of food regimes corresponding to weekly and annual fasting cycles. The Brigittine brothers and sisters were to have a number of bread and water days (often simply called ‘water days’ in the *Syon Additions*), during which no ale or beer was consumed, aside from a ration after evensong.⁸⁰ On these days, the sisters were allowed buns or new bread, ‘water growel’, ‘albreys’ (perhaps the soft Saint Albray cheese), and at least two types of fruit, such as apples, pears, nuts, plums, cherries, beans, peas, or the like, which should be ‘rosted or sothen, or other wyse dyght to the bodyly helth’.⁸¹ The water on these days should be ‘sothen with brown brede in maner of a tysan, or with barly brede, for coldenes and feblenes of nature, more thys dayes, than in dayes passed regnyng.’⁸² On non-water days, the sisters drank ale at mealtimes and on one or two additional daily occasions: just before evensong every non-water day, and after evensong on fasting days.⁸³ The brothers received both ale and an extra helping of bread three to four times a day except on water days, in addition to the ale consumed with meals: before evensong, before collation, after the Lady Mass, and, on fasting days only, after the sisters’ evensong as well.⁸⁴ There were also blocks of the year set aside for certain types of fasting: the Lenten fare heavy on dried fruit and nuts during Lent and Advent, the fish and dairy in the three shorter periods of Ascension to Pentecost, Holy Cross to Michaelmas, and

⁷⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 171-73.

⁷⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 189.

⁷⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 189.

⁸⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 174.

⁸¹ C. Sinclair, *Dictionary of Food: International Food and Cooking Terms from A to Z* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009); Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 190.

⁸² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 190. This interesting note on the temperature suggests an acknowledged and noticeable change in the climate of the period of the late 15th century, which may be an unusual textual reference to what is now known as the Little Ice Age. See Brian Fagan, *The Little Ice Age: how climate made history, 1300-1850* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

⁸³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 174.

⁸⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 118.

All Saints to Advent, and finally the additional bread and water days on the vigils of the feasts of Mary, the Apostles, and other important medieval Catholic feast days.⁸⁵

While all the water days, fish days, and various fasting regimes limited the diet of the Syon religious, it was not, by any means, bland. The cellaress was directed in the *Additions* to ensure that all food was ‘holsom and well sesonned, tender and goode...honestly serued forth, al hote, or other wyse as the mete requyreth’.⁸⁶ While the *Rule* discouraged the use of exotic spices in food, Birgitta indicated elsewhere that they were permitted on special occasions, especially for the sake of recreation on high feast days. As discussed below, the Syon Accounts record the purchase of substantial supplies of spices at the abbey, indicating that the abbey residents had a highly spiced diet.⁸⁷ This may have been no different for the abbess and confessor general than for the religious as a whole. While in many monasteries and nunneries, abbots and abbesses maintained separate, more high-status diets than the rest of their sisters and brethren, this practice was outlawed by the *Syon Additions*, which warn that neither superior should have special foods: ‘nor do more delicate metes and drynkes to be made for þem, than the conuente hathe, but yf any special sekenes, or feblenes, or any oþer resonable cause requyre it. For the hygher they stonde aboue other in prelacy, the more þei be bownde to obserue the preceptes of the rewle’.⁸⁸ The abbess was allowed to eat and drink in her own chamber as often as she liked, when she was not able to come to the frater, but this indicated neither a separate household, nor a qualitatively different diet.⁸⁹

Some variations in diet were allowed for Syon religious whose health required it. Sisters who were elderly, sick, or in need of extra food ‘for any feyntnes or feblenes, or for any other resonable cause’, could have bread and drink in the frater on fasting days, but not on water days.⁹⁰ With permission from the abbess, a sister was allowed to have *potum caritatis* on water days: ‘that is to say, a lytel draught of ale yf nede be and not elles’. This was also allowed with permission before collation.⁹¹ On non-

⁸⁵ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 228; Hogg, ‘Rewyll’, 65-66.

⁸⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 189.

⁸⁷ Ellis, ‘*Viderunt eam filie Syon*’, 17.

⁸⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 199.

⁸⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 201. See Chapter 3.

⁹⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 157.

⁹¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 175.

fasting days, they could have one or two eggs, or other things allowed. With special permission of the abbess, they could have pottage or flesh meat, but only in the infirmary or parlour.⁹² There was also a potential for slightly different food for the Syon men and women, due to biological differences. Because humoral medical theory held that women were 'moist' and so needed drier foods for a balanced health, female diners often requested food with ingredients or preparation methods that would balance their constitutions. Because baking was thought to help dry out foods, and spices to help 'cook' foods, it is possible that the Syon women may have eaten more spices and baked food than the men. The latter, meanwhile, may have had more boiled food, to balance out their masculine 'dry' natures.⁹³ This difference in the gendered quality of food in meaning and medicinal effect may have been one reason why the *Additions* allow for a kitchen for the Syon men at the same time as they explicitly state that the men are to receive all of their food from the sisters. It is likely that different sex and humour-appropriate dressings of food were added before serving to each community.

Bread

Bread was one of the staples of the medieval diet, for people of every status. The majority of later-medieval English monasteries and great households consumed wheat bread almost exclusively, and Syon followed suit.⁹⁴ The abbey does not seem to have used other grains in its bread-making, neither the barley used at Thetford, nor the maslin used for some breads at Norwich.⁹⁵ In four years, Syon did purchase rye, a grain normally used to produce dark and inferior breads, and to fill out bread in lean times. Most of these were not years with particularly high wheat prices, however, and the Syon accounts give no indication of the grain's use.⁹⁶ While some of it may have made its way into bread, as may whatever rye was grown on the home farm, the

⁹² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 157.

⁹³ Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', 15.

⁹⁴ Slavin, *Bread and ale*, 147-48; Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 81.

⁹⁵ D.J. Stone, 'The consumption of field crops in late medieval England', in C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition* (Medieval History and Archaeology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 11-26, 25; Slavin, *Bread and ale*, 147.

⁹⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1714, SC 6/HenVIII/2261, -2252, -2283; Stone, 'Consumption of field crops', 13; 'rye, n.1'. 'Oxford English Dictionary: OED Online'. For wheat prices, see W.G. Hoskins, 'Harvest fluctuations and English economic history', *The Agricultural History Review*, 12/1 (1964), 28-46.

cellaress's record in the Journal Book of 1535 of bread made and flour used makes clear that wheat was the only grain baked into the abbey's bread at that date, at least.

Syon's annual cellaress accounts provide an excellent series of data regarding the amount of wheat purchased and consumed by the abbey each year in a total of 37 years. The abbey spent an average of £40 on this grain annually between 1449 and 1461, and about £114 a year between 1482 and 1539. The volume consumed ranged from 149 quarters and one bushel, in 1442, to 390 quarters in 1520. As with other food at Syon, the amount of wheat consumed by the abbey was much less in the fifteenth century than in the sixteenth.⁹⁷ While it is helpful to understand the general volume of wheat spent by the abbey, more meaningful for the question of Syon's adherence to its values is the volume or weight of bread consumed by the abbey's residents. The Syon accounts reveal five different uses for wheat in the abbey household: wheat 'Baken this yere' in light wheat bread for the abbess and convent, and in regular wheat bread for the abbess, convent, and household – both internal and external; wheat allocated to the miller for lunch (found only in the Latin accounts); wheat made into flour for use in the kitchen; and wheat used to make beer (found only in the 1535 Journal Book).

Flour would have been used in the kitchen for a variety of creations. It could thicken sauces, although breadcrumbs were often used for this purpose as well, and sauces were often left relatively thin and acidic.⁹⁸ Flour was more commonly used to make pastries –savoury pies, sweet tarts or cheese tarts, which were all quite usual elements of the diet of large late medieval and sixteenth-century households.⁹⁹ It is possible that the abbey cooks also made biscuits. Syon recorded purchase of 'biskits' in three surviving Cellaress Foreign Accounts, in years when specialty foods and spices were often purchased and itemized, but abbey cooks may have baked them as well.¹⁰⁰ Another use of flour, perhaps recorded under the heading 'Flowre to the kyche', was to make buns, or manchets: small, flat, round rolls made of fine wheat flour.¹⁰¹ In

⁹⁷ See Appendix B.

⁹⁸ Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 73; Freedman, *Out of the East*, 22.

⁹⁹ Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 56, 58; Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', 11.

¹⁰⁰ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2243, -2246, -2247.

¹⁰¹ 'Manchets' in 'Oxford English Dictionary: OED Online'.

1520, the abbey purchased 224 manchets at a total of 6s 4d.¹⁰² It is clear, however, that the abbey baked its own rolls at times. In several years of the early sixteenth century, the cellaress received extra money from the treasurers to make these items.¹⁰³ At Westminster, buns were provided to the religious on anniversaries, and the same may have been true at Syon.¹⁰⁴ According to the *Additions for the Sisters*, buns were also to be made and served on water days throughout the year.¹⁰⁵ There is no record of the baking of such batches in the 1535 Journal Book, which accounts weekly for other bread baked during that month.¹⁰⁶ It is highly likely that the abbey bought these fine white bread rolls instead. From 1521 onward, a regular annual purchase was 'white bread', bought in amounts ranging from four dozen to over eighteen dozen, at a cost ranging from 4s to 18s 3d. It is likely that the standard 'white bread' purchased was, in fact, manchets or similar rolls. Thirsk notes the increasing popularity of manchet, especially in higher-status households.¹⁰⁷ This can be compared with gentry households, in which manchet was a treat for the ill or those with a delicate disposition, not a regular purchase.¹⁰⁸ If manchet was an item consumed annually by Syon's household, it is an indication that the abbey saw itself as belonging to a higher level of household. The long-term consumption of white bread in general also suggests this. In this, then, Syon's food life was characterized more by social status or culinary taste, than by spiritual asceticism. But it was not alone in this. Slavin argues that such white bread was consumed regularly by monastic communities in late medieval England.¹⁰⁹

The annual Syon cellaress accounts generally do not record the amount of bread that was made out of the wheat that was 'Baken this yere', and how many people that volume was meant to feed. Happily, the Journal Book's record of bread baked and flour used enables a calculation of bread weight and volume made by the abbey per quarter of wheat. The calculations, details of which are discussed in Appendix B, result in 102 'caste' of white bread and 64 loaves of brown bread per quarter of

¹⁰² TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2270.

¹⁰³ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1730, SC 6/HenVIII/2208, -2209, -2213, -2214, -2218.

¹⁰⁴ Harvey, *Living and dying*, 59.

¹⁰⁵ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 189.

¹⁰⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2283.

¹⁰⁷ Joan Thirsk, *Food in early modern England: phases, fads, fashions 1500-1760* (Hambledon: Continuum, 2006), 45, 232.

¹⁰⁸ Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 72.

¹⁰⁹ Slavin, *Bread and ale*, 147-49.

wheat, for a total of 166 units of bread per quarter, and a weight of 1.12 lbs per loaf of brown bread, and 2 lbs per ‘caste’ of white bread baked at Syon Abbey. These findings can be compared with the 106 ‘conventual loaves’ of bread baked per quarter of fine flour/wheat at Westminster Abbey, and the roughly 126 white loaves made at Norwich per quarter in the pre-Black Death period.¹¹⁰ And they are far lower than the 230-300 loaves made from each quarter in late medieval aristocratic households (with a corresponding weight per loaf of .88-1.15 lbs per loaf). Apparently, while the abbey baked bread of smaller weights than other monasteries, it did not follow the lay food trend of serving very small loaves.¹¹¹ The percentage of white bread versus brown bread is also lower at Syon than in some lay households, such as that of Alice de Bryene, where 89 % of bread baked was white (compared with 74 % at Syon).¹¹² Either the religious of Syon ate more brown bread than would be expected of their status, or the abbey had a higher ratio of low to high-status people. That the former case is true is suggested by the description of the hand sign for bread given in a list of sign language vocabulary for use in times of silence, which was appended to the *Additions for the Lay Brothers*. The description indicates that the religious had a choice in bread types, saying that to specify a desire for bread, a brother should, ‘Make with thy two thombes, and two forefyngers a rounde compass. And if thou wole haue white make the sign therof of white. And if brwn toche thy cowl sleue.’ (To make the sign of white, the sister or brother should ‘Drawe thy two right fyngers by thy cheke downwarde.’)¹¹³

According to the *Additions*, the daily prebend, or regular ration, for each Syon religious was a pound of bread a day.¹¹⁴ In addition, the evening meal on water days included buns or newly baked bread, and the drinking water was to be served with bread mixed-in.¹¹⁵ At Vadstena, bread was eaten at the ‘mixed meal’ (*mixtum*), a breakfast which was taken after Mass. It included ‘a fourth’ of bread (i.e. a quarter of a loaf), in addition to beer, fish, cheese and butter.¹¹⁶ This meal was only eaten by those who needed extra food for health reasons. Given the additional bread or buns on

¹¹⁰ Harvey, *Living and dying*, 59; Slavin, *Bread and ale*, 149.

¹¹¹ Stone, ‘Consumption of field crops’, 16.

¹¹² Stone, ‘Consumption of field crops’, 14.

¹¹³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 135, 44.

¹¹⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 189.

¹¹⁵ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 190.

¹¹⁶ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 189-91.

water days, and the bread soaked in water at the 'conventual drinkings', the average daily intake of bread by Syon religious may have been considerably higher than a single pound a day of the prebend. Given the findings of other scholars, this would not be surprising. Dyer calculated the standard bread consumption as 2-3 lbs of wheat bread per person per day, based on contracts for monastic corrodies and provisioning of castles.¹¹⁷ In his study of consumption in aristocratic households, Woolgar recently calculated a ration of between .4 lb and .93 lb of bread per person, per meal, and two to three times that per day, resulting in a consumption between .8 lb and 2.79 lbs of bread per day.¹¹⁸ Unfortunately, because of the lack of clear information about Syon's household size, it is impossible to tell from my data what the actual daily per capita bread consumption was in practice.

Together with the wheat consumption figures in the annual cellaress accounts, the above findings from the Journal Book allow an estimation of the edible weight of bread baked in each year. The results of these calculations are given in Appendix B, and are illustrated in Figure 9 . It is clear from this graph that the consumption of bread at Syon increased dramatically between the 1440s and the sixteenth century. There could be several reasons for this, including an increase in bread consumption per person, the distribution of more bread as alms, or a growth in household size. The latter scenario could have been caused by an increase in staff, a growth in the number of religious at the abbey (which would contradict the assessments of other scholars, as above), or an increase in the number of temporary boarders or visitors fed at the abbey. Given the limitations of the Syon accounts, only the last possibility is open to analysis. As shown in Figure 10, there is a positive correlation between the amount of boarding income the cellaress received in a year, and the amount of bread consumed by the abbey that year. This suggests that much of the extra bread consumption was due to an increase in the number of paying visitors. This might be magnified by an increase in non-paying visitors, such as the many prominent scholars and nobles who are known to have stayed at Syon, but from whom no boarding fees were received by the cellaress.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Dyer, 'English diet in the later middle ages', 192-3.

¹¹⁸ Woolgar, 'Conspicuous consumption', 11-15.

¹¹⁹ See Chapter 3.

Figure 9

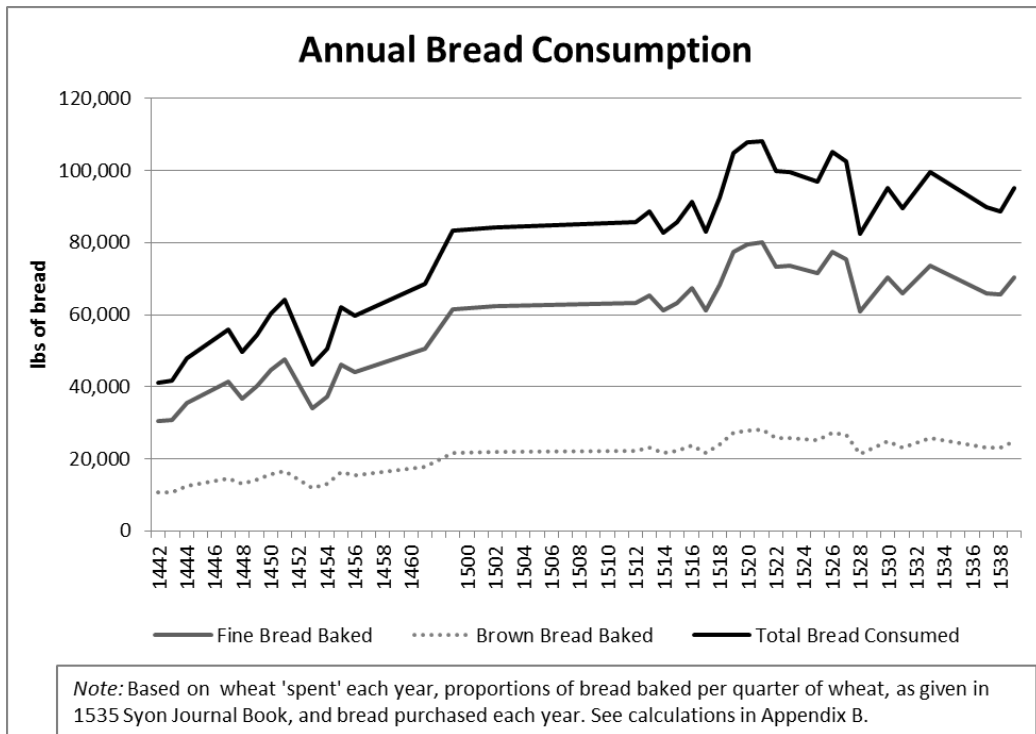
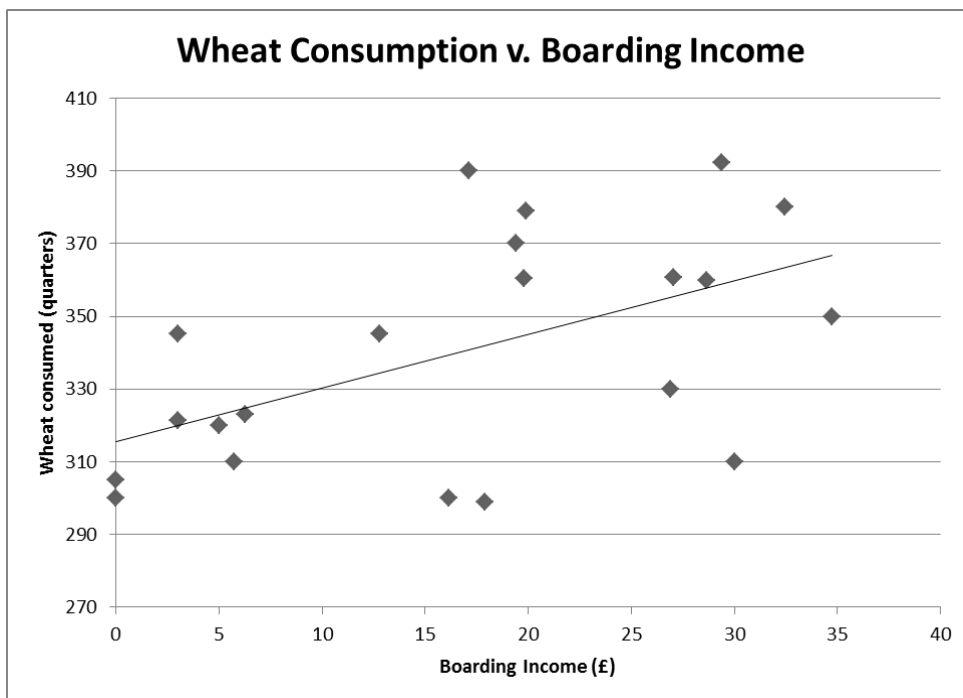


Figure 10



Pottage

Bread was not the only source of grains in the Syon diet. The cellaress was instructed to ensure that two types of pottage were prepared every day for both the sisters and brothers, so each individual could choose the one she or he liked best.¹²⁰ One pottage should be flesh or fish, depending on the day of the week and the monastic fasting calendar. The other should be made of vegetables and grains such as roots, herbs, wheat, rice, oatmeal, or peas.¹²¹ While some have argued that pottage was not eaten much in aristocratic households similar in status to Syon, the abbey does seem to have consumed it.¹²² This may be one area in which the food consumption of the monastery differed dramatically from that of its lay counterparts. In fact, according to some, pottage was usually given as food to the poor, or to household servants.¹²³ For the Syon religious to eat it regularly, then, would have been a mark of affinity with the poor, and therefore a strong spiritual statement in alignment with Brigittine consumption values.

A number of grains, other than wheat, were purchased by Syon, some of which may have been used for pottage. The abbey purchased barley in almost every year of the surviving account series, but its only use indicated in the Syon accounts was for animal fodder. The seeming lack of barley for human consumption at Syon is in keeping with late medieval large households' commonly low opinion of barley for either bread or pottage.¹²⁴ Oats had more varied uses at Syon, mostly as animal feed for horses, poultry, and pigs.¹²⁵ In some cases, however, this grain was used for human consumption. In 1533, the year in which Syon began brewing some of its own beer, oats were unusually recorded in the 'spent' provisions section, as having been 'Brewed this yere in the seid household for Bere'.¹²⁶ They also appear in the 1535 Journal Book as an ingredient for beer, with between four and six bushels used for this purpose each week.¹²⁷ In some cases, the grain was made into oat flour for use in

¹²⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 171,88.

¹²¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 188.

¹²² Dyer, *Standards of living*, 58; Stone, 'Consumption of field crops', 11.

¹²³ Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 139; Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 9; Stone, 'Consumption of field crops', 11.

¹²⁴ Stone, 'Consumption of field crops', 13; Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 40.

¹²⁵ As specified in the Cellaress Latin Accounts.

¹²⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2259. See below.

¹²⁷ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2283.

the household.¹²⁸ Purchase of oat flour or oatmeal was also recorded in all but one year of the surviving Latin and Cellaress Household Accounts, indicating that these were considered important ingredients in cooking. Both could be used to add bulk and carbohydrates to meat puddings, and oatmeal was a main ingredient in pottage.¹²⁹

Legumes were also customarily used in medieval pottage. Beans are recorded in the majority of Syon's sixteenth-century Cellaress Household accounts, but no indication is given of their usage. They were often added, elsewhere, as an ingredient in pottage, and may have served the same purpose at Syon.¹³⁰ Peas were more certainly used for this dish at the abbey. Syon purchased various sorts in most years for which accounts survive. Information on their usages is given in the Latin accounts. Every mention of grey peas discusses them in connection with either seed or animal feed; more specifically, in some years they were sent 'to the dovecote' or purchased 'for the dovehouse'.¹³¹ While in most years, a portion of green peas, as well, were used for seed and animal fodder, they were also transferred 'to the cook for pottage' in numerous years, in quantities ranging from 3 bushels to one and a half quarters per year. One entry specifies that they were 'for pottage for the convent and servants of the lady's household in advent and lent' and other times.¹³² Pottage is not mentioned in the Syon accounts after 1461. This could reflect a change in tastes and food-status, but may simply be an omission by the less detailed later accounts. Given the continued purchase of green peas recorded in the sixteenth-century accounts, it is likely that this item remained a part of the abbey's diet in pottage, as a side dish, or perhaps baked into bread for the poor.¹³³

¹²⁸ TNA SC 6/1106/21, -22, -23, -24, -25.

¹²⁹ Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 60; Stone, 'Consumption of field crops', 13.

¹³⁰ Stone, 'Consumption of field crops', 13.

¹³¹ E.g. TNA SC 6/1106/15, SC 6/HenVIII/2268.

¹³² TNA SC 6/1106/19: 'Et lib' cocis pro potag' conventus & fam~~lor~~um hospic' d~~ne~~ in adventu' & xl^{vo}'

¹³³ Slavin, *Bread and ale*, 154; Stone, 'Consumption of field crops', 13.

Ale and Beer

Like all households of sixteenth-century England, Syon Abbey consumed a great deal of ale and beer. Though they were sold retail, great households required large enough quantities to make brewing operations of their own more economical.¹³⁴ This was especially the case, as ale, the more common drink of the two, deteriorated quickly, having a shelf life of only a few days to a week.¹³⁵ It also required days between brewing and initial consumption; the Syon cellaress was admonished in the *Additions for the Sisters* to never serve new ale, ‘nor palled or ouer sowre’.¹³⁶ With its preservative additive of hops, beer kept much longer – up to a year – even improving with age, and was cheaper per gallon to make. It required more fuel, labour and storage, but used half the malt required for ale.¹³⁷ Beer had been introduced to England from the Low Countries at the end of the fourteenth century, and was initially slow to take off, but by the second quarter of the sixteenth century, was nearly as common a household beverage as ale, especially in the southern counties and among the London elites.¹³⁸

The annual Syon cellaress accounts do not record the amounts of ale and beer consumed each year, but they do indicate the amount of malt ‘spent in the household’ annually. The 1535 Journal Book, in addition, gives us both the amount of ale and beer brewed, and the malt used to make each batch. These sources together make it possible to estimate the volume of drink consumed by the abbey each year (see Appendix C). Syon spent an average of £152 on malt annually, with expenditure ranging between £70 and £254 per year. The amount of malt consumed ranged between 297 and 692 quarters a year – an average of 473 quarters annually. To this can be added the volumes of ale and beer purchased ready-made, which could

¹³⁴ Mertes, *English noble household*, 98; Dyer, *Standards of living*, 58.

¹³⁵ Woolgar, *The great household*, 127.

¹³⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 189.

¹³⁷ Dyer, *Standards of living*, 58; Woolgar, *The great household*, 127; Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 78; Judith Bennett, *Ale, beer and brewsters in England: women's work in a changing world, 1300-1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 85-86; Steve Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds: structures of life in sixteenth-century London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 143. For the history of medieval brewing, see also Richard W. Unger, *Beer in the middle ages and the Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

¹³⁸ Dyer, *Making a living*, 323; Bennett, *Ale, beer and brewsters in England: women's work in a changing world, 1300-1600*, 9-10; Mertes, *English noble household*, 110.

amount to a total cost of over £50 and a total consumption of nearly 7,500 gallons a year.¹³⁹

According to the 1535 Journal Book, the Syon brewers used the regular amount of 6 quarters of malt per week to brew an average of 15 barrels, 9 stanne, and one firkin of ale per week, a total of 648 gallons in all, and a yield of 108 gallons of ale per quarter of malt.¹⁴⁰ Of this ale, 45.7%, or 296 gallons, was ‘small ale’, 42% (272 gallons) was ‘good ale’, and 12.3% (80 gallons) was ‘middle ale’. In the same average week in the Journal Book, the abbey also used 3 quarters of malt, 2 bushels of wheat, and 6 bushels of oats to make 5 hogsheads, 6 barrels, and 4 kilderkins (for a total of 558 gallons) of ‘single beer’, a commonly available brew, weaker than the ‘double beer’ recipe used elsewhere.¹⁴¹ In addition, Syon purchased an average of 3 kilderkins (54 gallons) of beer in each week of the Journal Book. Altogether, this resulted in a total of 1,260 gallons of drink consumed by the abbey community in an average week in 1535, or 180 gallons a day.

While given the difficulties of estimating household size, it is impossible to know what proportion of food was going to the Syon religious versus their staff, the account of ale production in the Journal Book gives a regular account of allocation of each type of ale. So, we can see that the Syon sisters received the largest portion of both good ale and small ale (a total of 464 gallons per week, or 66 gallons per day), and the brethren of Syon received the next highest amount of the same ales (a total of 80 gallons per week, or just over 11 gallons per day). Amounts of good ale were also sent to the ‘womenhouse’ and to the brewhouse (8 gallons per week). A firkin (8 gallons) of small ale was sent to the Dairy each week, while middle ale was reserved solely for ‘the womenhouse’ (together with good ale, a total of 24 gallons of ale per week) and for ‘the Buttery’ (64 gallons per week). These allocations are clues to the abbey’s household size, but issues further to those already discussed stand in the way of any

¹³⁹ See Appendix C.

¹⁴⁰ What exactly a ‘stanne’ is in this context is a difficult question. As discussed in Appendix C, I have assumed a conversion of one stanne to 16 gallons.

¹⁴¹ Unger, *Beer in the middle ages and the Renaissance*, 188. Note: that calculations of beer gallons here differ from that of ale – the two measurements were different prior to 1688, with a barrel of beer equalling 36 gallons. See Colin R. Chapman, *How heavy, how much and how long?: weights, money and other measures used by our ancestors* (Dursley, Glos. : Lochin Publishing, 1995), 40. See Appendix C for measurement conversions used.

certainty in calculations. That is, it is not known what proportion of staff would have received an ale allowance, given the plurality of payment agreements among employees of large households, and given that it was quite common, in this period, for lay staff to ‘sub-contract’ work to assistants, with whom they would share their regular food and drink allowance.¹⁴² In addition, some sections of the household – the brethren, for instance – may have relied more heavily on the beer that the abbey purchased or brewed. Syon’s ale allocation can therefore give only hints as to household size, not reliable estimates.

Beer seems to have been a relatively new item of production in the abbey at the time the Journal Book was written, having first appeared in the Syon accounts in 1533, when implements clearly designated as purchased for beer-brewing were bought by the cellaress.¹⁴³ Signs of the activity at Syon continue in the 1535 Journal Book, which records the brewing of beer at the abbey every week, and in 1537, the cellaress gave a reward to one ‘Nicholas Berebruer’.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps the same man appears the next year: Nicholas Butteler received a reward in 1538, the same year that ropes and slings were purchased for brewing beer and ale. These were also the only years in which the abbey purchased hops, and they did so in great quantity – for example the 2,003 quarters and 21 lbs purchased in 1538.¹⁴⁵ Previous to 1533, no specifically beer-making implements, ingredients, or staff were recorded in the surviving cellaress accounts. However, the abbey had been purchasing great quantities of the drink, some perhaps from known fifteenth and sixteenth century breweries in Brentford and Isleworth, or perhaps most from ‘the Bereman of Charyng Crosse’ who appears in the 1535 Journal Book (see Figure 11 and Appendix C).¹⁴⁶ From 1496 until the disappearance of abbey beer purchases from surviving abbey accounts after the 1535 Journal Book, Syon bought an average of 7,268 gallons of beer total, 81% of which

¹⁴² See above and Woolgar, *The great household*.

¹⁴³ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2259.

¹⁴⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2283, -2260.

¹⁴⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2261.

¹⁴⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2283., ‘Heston and Isleworth: economic and social history’, in Susan Reynolds (ed.), *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 3: Shepperton, Staines, Stanwell, Sunbury, Teddington, Heston and Isleworth, Twickenham, Cowley, Cranford, West Drayton, Greenford, Hanwell, Harefield and Harlington* (London: Victoria County History, 1962); ‘Heston and Isleworth’, in Susan Reynolds (ed.), *A History of the County of Middlesex (Victoria County History): Volume 3: Shepperton, Staines, Stanwell, Sunbury, Teddington, Heston and Isleworth, Twickenham, Cowley, Cranford, West Drayton, Greenford, Hanwell, Harefield and Harlington* (London: Victoria County History, 1962).

(5,921 gallons on average) was single beer, and 15% (1,069 gallons on average) was double beer. The rest of the beer bought by Syon was ‘threehalfpenny beer’, purchases of which were uneven but ranged from 36 to 468 gallons. In many years it was not purchased at all, but in the year 1502, on the contrary, the abbey bought 4,464 gallons of this type, at a total cost of £15 10s 5d, which is an amount more usually associated with the abbey’s purchases of single beer. (See Appendix C) This was perhaps a labelling mistake of the clerk, as the single beer purchased that year was bought in a volume more normally associated with three halfpenny beer.

Figure 11



It is possible that the abbey’s new investment in beer production around 1533 was a response to rising costs, or a desire to reduce reliance on external sources and ensure supply. A look at the prices paid by the abbey for beer suggests that the former was a major factor (see Figure 12). The year 1533 saw a significant rise in the price of beer, from an average of between 11d. and 12d. a kilderkin to a spike of over 15d. per kilderkin. Such prices had been exceeded in two years of the fifteenth century Syon Accounts, but at that time, there was little recourse; beer was still, at this point, only

Given that the abbey did not seem to brew its own beer before 1533, the vast majority of the abbey's malt use up to that year, if not all, probably went to making ale, and the calculations of Syon's ale consumption here are based on that assumption. The amounts of different kinds of ale brewed by the abbey may also have changed substantially over the period. I therefore calculate gallons of ale in general, rather than calculating each individual type. The figures given in the Journal Book, as discussed above, amount to an average of 108 gallons of ale brewed per quarter of malt. This is double the 45 to 75 gallons per quarter that was the medieval average calculated by other scholars.¹⁴⁸ If there is indeed a trend toward stronger drink in the later medieval period, as suggested by Stone, Syon Abbey seems to have been a significant exception, drinking unusually weak ale.¹⁴⁹ However, those averages are not strictly comparable with my calculations, given that the former rely on the amount of 'best ale' that could be brewed from each quarter of malt. A higher yield can be expected if lesser brews are included. If so, the alcoholic strength of much of Syon's ale may not have been so different from the norm.

Combining the figure of 108 gallons of ale per quarter of malt calculated above, and the volume of malt consumed by the abbey each year, as recorded in the annual cellaress accounts, results in an astonishing amount of ale drunk by the abbey community each year. An average of 38,475 gallons of ale was brewed each year at Syon between 1442 and 1461, and 57,089 gallons were brewed annually, on average, from 1461 to 1539. (See Appendix C). As shown in Figure 11, the amount of beer purchased at Syon was negligible in comparison. Ale purchases were also minimal. In most available years, none was bought at all, and in those years when the abbey did buy ale ready-made, it did so in amounts normally ranging from 16 to 184 gallons in a year.¹⁵⁰ Around the same time as the abbey started brewing beer, it also stopped buying ready-made ale.

While beer consumption was low compared with ale, the use of beer was increasing to the detriment of the traditional drink. This indicates that the abbey had a growing taste for beer in keeping with the fashion of the times. My figures in fact underestimate the

¹⁴⁸ Stone, 'Consumption of field crops', 16.

¹⁴⁹ Stone, 'Consumption of field crops', 16.

¹⁵⁰ With the exception of one outlier of 320 gallons in 1454. See Appendix C.

amount of beer consumed in the last years of the abbey accounts, as they do not include the amounts brewed in addition to ale after beer production began in 1533. The overall malt drink consumption at Syon in the run-up to the Dissolution may have been quite a bit higher than that illustrated here.

Wine

When he founded Syon Abbey, Henry V promised the community ‘four tuns of wine of Gascony, to be received yearly from the wines of us and our heirs in the port of our City of London by the hands of our chief butler, or his deputy there for the time being, at the feast of St. Martin, in winter.’¹⁵¹ The abbey’s foundation charter, containing this pledge, was reconfirmed by Henry VI, and again by Edward IV. It seems that the Wars of the Roses interrupted this supply, however, because Edward IV’s 1463 reconfirmation of the charter granted the payment of wine in arrears from the beginning of his reign.¹⁵² It is clear that the abbey did in fact receive this allocation in many years, since several cellaress accounts from 1496-1512 record the expense of rewards ‘to the king’s underbutler for prisewine’.¹⁵³ From 1514 to 1519, rewards to the king’s butler, himself, are recorded.¹⁵⁴ The majority of single payments to both men, sometimes including rewards to winedrawers and other servants, were between 20s and 30s. Usually two payments were recorded annually, even in those years when the rewards went to the same man, suggesting that the abbey picked up its allotted wine twice a year. Given that the quality of wine decreased after six or seven months in unsterile conditions, retrieving supplies twice a year would have been logical.¹⁵⁵ There are no records of such rewards, or other indications that wine was in fact received by the abbey from the royal servants, before 1496 and after 1519. The cellaress accounts do, however, often record amounts given for rewards generally, which may include rewards given to the king’s butler or under-butler.

¹⁵¹ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 34.

¹⁵² Johnston, 'VCH, House of Bridgettines'.

¹⁵³ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1867, -1869, SC 6/HenVIII/2248.

¹⁵⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2249, to -2253.

¹⁵⁵ Miranda Threlfall-Holmes, 'Durham Cathedral Priory's consumption of imported goods: wine and spices, 1464-1520', in Michael Hicks (ed.), *Revolution and consumption in late medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), 141-58, 149.

Several of these years in which these rewards were given were also years in which the abbey recorded its own purchase of wine. The various cellaress accounts record purchases of wine in eleven years, in amounts varying from 8 gallons, to 4 tuns or more and costing between 4s and £8 18s 9d (see Table 2). When noted, the type of wine purchased was specified as either red wine or claret, with one exception. The 1523 Cellaress Household Extract Account records purchase only of ‘singing wine’, that is, wine for the celebration of Mass. Materials required for liturgical celebrations were normally recorded in the Sacristan Accounts, so it is interesting that this appears here. It is possible that it was thought logical to purchase wine for liturgical use along with all the other bulk food and drink provisions bought by the cellaress. In fact, it is probable that some of the other wine purchased by the cellaress was destined for the church rather than the table.

Table 2

Cellaress Wine Purchases

	Wine (general) vol	Wine (general) cost	Red Wine vol	Red Wine cost	Claret vol	Claret cost	Other wine
1454	1 pipe	63s. 9d.					
1460	1.5 casks	£8 18s 9d.					
1513	8 gallons; 4 tons	4s; £4: total: £4 4s.					
1514			21 gallons	18s. 3d.			
1516	8 gallons	6s 8d.					
1517	20 gallons	13s. 4d.					
1519			1 hogshead	25s.	1 hogshead	25s.	
1520				13s 4d.			
1521			2 hogsheads	48s 4d.	1 hogshead	23s 4d.	
1522			1 hogshead, 1 rundlet, 60 gallons	105s 2d.	2 hogsheads	51s.	
1523							Singing wine: 118 gallons: £6 19s 7d.

Source: TNA: SC6/1106-21, 24, SC6/HenVIII/1153, 2249, 2252, 2266, 2267, 2270, 2271, 2272, 2273

In many years, the accounts recorded neither purchase of wine, nor rewards to the king’s servants for help in obtaining prisewine. Wine was, however, purchased by the Syon treasurers at least on one occasion, and they may have done so regularly. The one surviving non-abstract Treasurers Account records the purchase of £14 1s 2d

worth of sugar, ginger, spices, and wine ‘for diverse times and for the Oes’.¹⁵⁶ This term refers to the rosary prayer ‘The Fifteen Oes’.¹⁵⁷ In this context, it could mean either that the treasuresses bought the beaded rosaries specially designed for the prayer, or that they were using the shorthand term for the prayer to refer to the Syon festival associated with that rosary, for which spices, wine, etc. were bought.¹⁵⁸ It is possible that this was a regular annual cost, and therefore that wine was purchased by the treasuresses on a yearly basis, hidden to us within the broad category of ‘necessary expenses’ in their account abstracts. Wine was also often given as a gift in the later middle ages, as a show of honour and high-status.¹⁵⁹ Sometimes wine for communion, specifically, was given as a high-status gift.¹⁶⁰ The Syon accounts may have an example of such a gift. In 1499, a servant of ‘Ladye G’ was given 2s 6d for bringing wine.¹⁶¹ In nearly every year of the sixteenth century accounts, rewards were given to other servants bringing unspecified gifts, some of which were likely presents of wine. Syon’s access to this drink was therefore likely to have been higher than that recorded in the surviving sources.

The result of this patchwork of glimpses of wine buying and procuring at Syon, is that it is impossible to tell from the surviving sources how much wine was consumed by the abbey. It is probable that in most years, especially in the sixteenth century, the abbey received wine from the king, as stipulated in its charter (this might, however, have been affected by the growing anti-monasticism of Henry VIII in the 1530s). The various purchases of wine recorded in the cellaress accounts may have been meant to supplement the regular supply of 4 tuns. Certainly the maximum of two or three hogsheads of wine purchased by the abbey in the 1500s would not have replaced the king’s gift in volume.

It is possible that the late-fifteenth century slump in English wine consumption more generally also affected Syon. When the English lost Gascony in 1453, imports of

¹⁵⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1790.

¹⁵⁷ C. Annette Grise, ‘Holy women in print: Continental female mystics and the English mystical tradition’, in E.A. Jones (ed.), *The medieval mystical tradition in England: Exeter symposium VII : papers read at Charney Manor, July 2004* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 83-96, 84.

¹⁵⁸ See Conclusion chapter.

¹⁵⁹ Woolgar, ‘Gifts of food’, 7.

¹⁶⁰ Woolgar, ‘Gifts of food’, 14.

¹⁶¹ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1869.

‘wine of Gascony’ and Bordeaux, declined, resulting in a significant drop in wine consumption in England.¹⁶² Threlfall-Holmes found that Durham Cathedral Priory’s consumption of wine was cut in half between 1464 and 1520.¹⁶³ If Syon’s supply of wine was, in fact, ensured by Edward IV after 1463, it may have enjoyed a much higher consumption in these years than was available to other major monasteries. Wine prices decreased in the early sixteenth century, resulting in an increased consumption at Durham.¹⁶⁴ It is in this period that we also see increased, though still relatively minimal, wine purchases at Syon, suggesting that the abbey’s demand for purchased wine was somewhat elastic. This means either that the abbey was indeed having its basic wine needs met by the king or gifts of wine from friends and associates, or that the abbey made do without. Given Syon’s likely immense need for communion wine for its many Masses, it is probable that the abbey continued to receive shipments of prisewine throughout the period, or that its wine was provided by either the abbess or treasuresses, recorded only in the ‘diverse necessities’ category of their abstract accounts. (Wine does not appear in any of the surviving Sacristan Accounts.)

Wine was a symbol of social status, a daily expectation for the aristocracy, and a luxury for the gentry.¹⁶⁵ Some monasteries drank volumes of wine consistent with an aristocratic lifestyle; Durham for instance consumed nearly 8 tuns of wine a year, not counting communion wine (which was an additional pipe), and wine for guests (an additional tun each year).¹⁶⁶ Without knowing the consistency with which Syon received its prisewine from the king, and without detailed accounts of the ‘diverse necessities’ of the abbess and treasuresses or of gifts received by the abbey, it is impossible to determine to what degree Syon Abbey either matched Durham and the social status of its wine consumption, or kept to a reduced intake more in keeping with a monastic identification with the poor and with Brigittine moderation in material life.

¹⁶² Threlfall-Holmes, 'Wine and spices', 148; Dyer, 'English diet in the later middle ages', 196-7; John Hatcher, 'The great slump of the mid-fifteenth century', in Richard Britnell (ed.), *Progress and problems in medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 237-72, 266.

¹⁶³ Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 70.

¹⁶⁴ Threlfall-Holmes, 'Wine and spices', 145.

¹⁶⁵ Woolgar, *The great household*, 126.

¹⁶⁶ Threlfall-Holmes, 'Wine and spices', 146.

Meat

The consumption of meat had a special place in the history of medieval monasticism – playing a key role in criticism of monastic excess and calls for reform. While early medieval monasteries often lived near-vegetarian lifestyles, those of the later middle ages found many loopholes allowing them to eat meat-heavy diets. Partly this change reflects trends in the wider society. Many scholars have found a marked rise in great household meat consumption over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹⁶⁷ By the end of the period, monasteries and aristocratic households alike were eating ‘an extraordinary excess’ of meat – over a few pounds per day per person – while their consumption of fish fell.¹⁶⁸ As discussed in the next section, Syon Abbey’s fish consumption did not follow the general trend, but as Figure 13 illustrates, consumption of flesh meat did increase considerably over the period. The abbey spent an average of £76 per year on livestock for meat between 1449 and 1482, and an average of £138 between 1490 and 1538. While inflation was part of the reason for this rise, the volume of meat consumed also increased, with an average abbey household intake of about 29,000 lbs of meat per year up to 1461, and about 38,500 lbs annually from 1502 forward.

The volume (lbs edible weight) of meat in this graph is calculated based on the numbers of livestock (cattle, sheep, and swine) recorded as ‘spent’ or purchased each year in the Syon household.¹⁶⁹ The abbey also seems to have spent a great deal of money on food animals which were recorded in the Journal Book and would therefore have been included in the annual lump-sum Diette entry in the cellaress accounts. These included calves, piglets, chickens, pigeons, other small birds, and rabbits. (See Table 3.) Such young animals and lighter meats were increasingly eaten in aristocratic households, and were particularly preferred by women, making Syon’s large

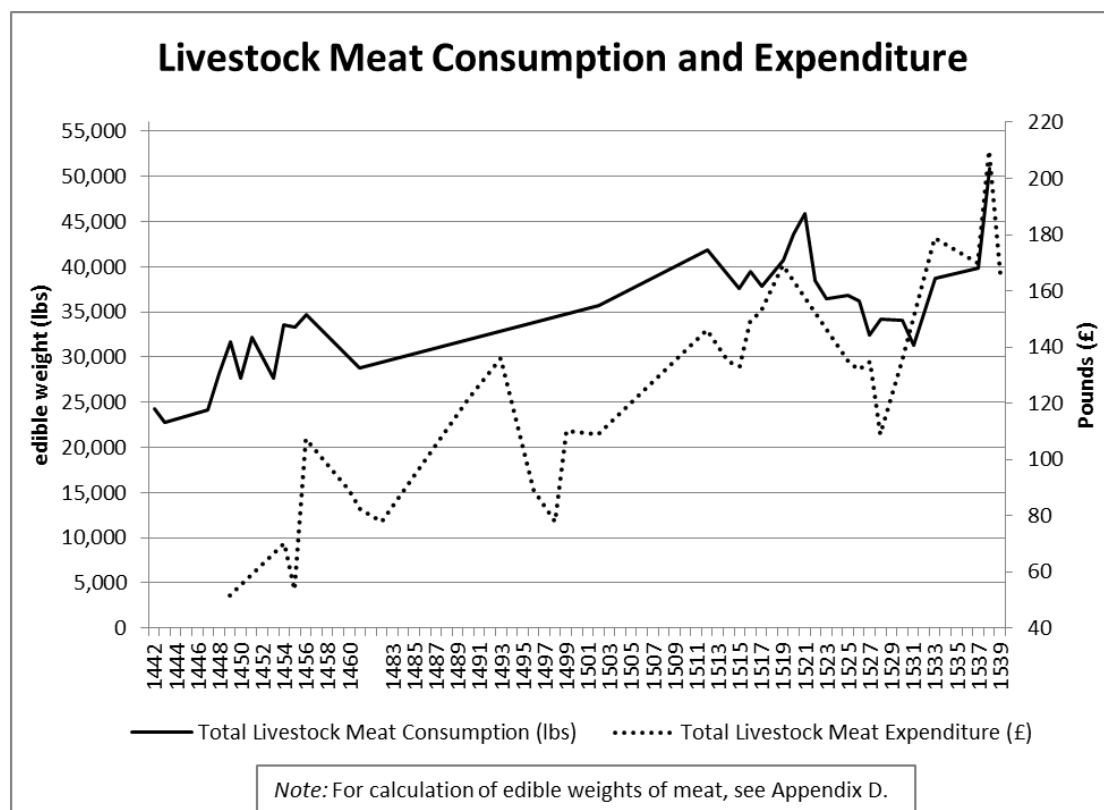
¹⁶⁷ Dyer, *Standards of living*, 58; Hatcher, ‘The great slump’, 252-3; Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 47.

¹⁶⁸ C.M. Woolgar, ‘Meat and dairy products in late medieval England’, in C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition* (Medieval History and Archaeology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 88-101, 91; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 52; Dyer, ‘English diet in the later middle ages’, 193; Slavin, *Bread and ale*, 171-72.

¹⁶⁹ Supplemented by Cellaress Extract Accounts where necessary. See Appendix D for details on edible weight calculations. ‘spent’ (in the case of cattle and sheep, and swine in the early years) or purchased (swine in the sixteenth century).

consumption of these items unsurprising.¹⁷⁰ When a yearly total is calculated from average weekly consumption of these items in that source, it indicates that the actual edible weight of meat eaten at the abbey each year was likely considerably higher than that shown in the graph above – even as high as an additional 16,546 lbs edible weight, making the total meat consumed potentially as high as 68,000 lbs in a year.

Figure 13



The total is likely to have been even higher still, considering the numerous gifts of venison to the abbey, and the many animals which may have been procured from the monastery's home farm and properties directly, such as lambs, geese, swans, pheasants, and other game. The Latin accounts record the 'spent' amount of these animals, with some recorded regularly, and others more sporadically (see Table 4), but later accounts focused only on the numbers of cattle, sheep, and pigs slain for food. It is likely that it was a change in accounting practice, rather than a change in eating habits that dropped these desirable animals from the abbey's food record.

¹⁷⁰ N.J. Sykes, 'From *cu* and *sceap* to *beffe* and *motton*', in C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition* (Medieval History and Archaeology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 56-71, 68; Woolgar, 'Meat and dairy', 92, 94.

Table 3

Meat Consumption Estimates from the Syon Journal Book 'Diette' Expenses				
	Animals Purchased per Average Week	Estimated Annual Purchases (animals)	Estimated Edible Weight Annually (lbs)	Estimated Annual Cost
Calves	4	182	6,847	£80
Capons	10	527	842	£30
Chickens	9	449	431	£4
Pullets (small hens)	9	481	1,231	£7
Conies	30	1,560	3,869	£28
Pigs (young pigs)	4	215	2,703	£4
Pigeons	38	1,950	624	£8
Eggs	1,446	75,166	N/A	£96

Source: Cellaress Journal Book: TNA: SC6/HenVIII/2283

Table 4

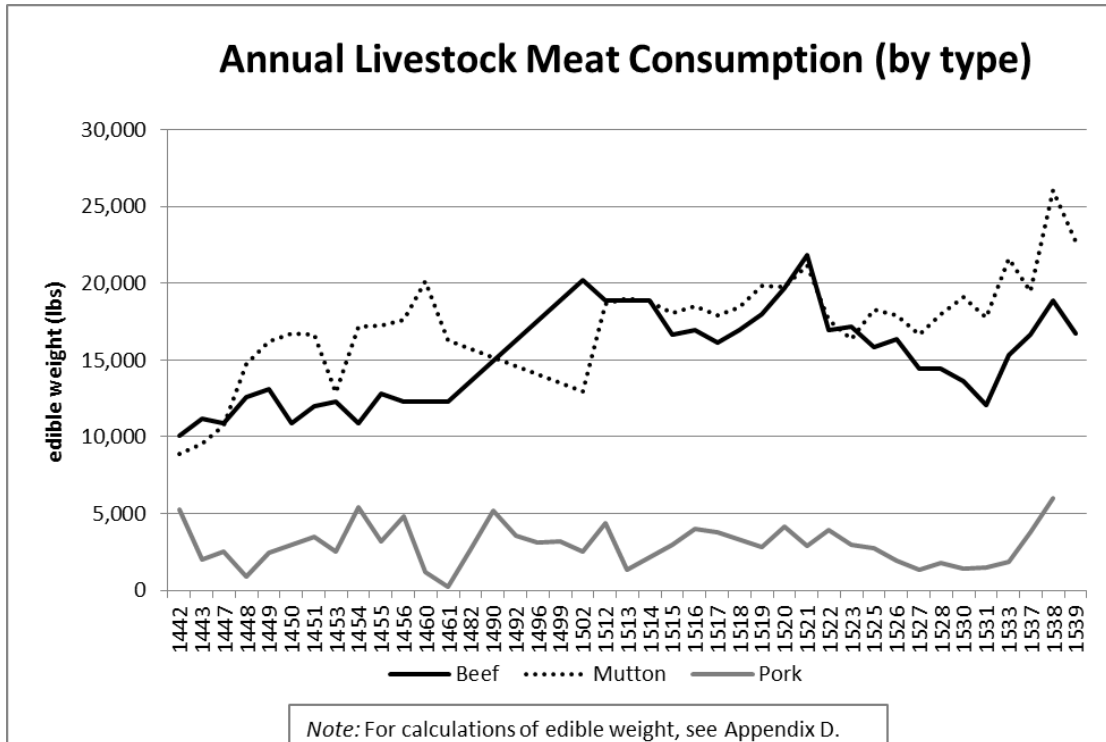
Additional Meat Consumption from the Latin Accounts						
Year	Calves	Lambs	Geese	Capons	Hens and Chickens	Swans
1442	11	19				
1443	44	12				
1444	44	35				
1447	42	20				
1448	37	72	23	11	40	
1449	50	79	12	26	80	
1450	19	23	8	40	40	5
1451	38	24	13	20	37	5
1453	47	26	16	35	29	4
1454	41	15	16	20	40	11
1455	37	18	20	24	42	9
1456	44		14	24	75	16
1460	47		7		16	
1461	37					
Average animals per year	38.43	31.18	14.33	25.00	44.33	8.33
Edible Weight (Annual Average)	1445.68	279.70	63.07	40.00	42.56	

Note: Edible weights are calculated following the conventions given in Appendix D.

As the foregoing tables illustrate, Syon had access to a wide variety of flesh meat. The most prominent in the diet were the three livestock categories: mutton, beef, and pork. Of these, mutton claimed the top spot in consumption in most years (but second-place in expenditure), with demand for this item rising over the period – a trend in keeping

with other monasteries and great households whose mutton consumption was both substantial and growing.¹⁷¹ (See Figure 14)

Figure 14



It is clear from Table 4 that lamb was also eaten by the abbey, at least in the fifteenth century. In that period, the household averaged a consumption of 31 lambs per year, or 280 lbs edible weight. Lamb was a high-status food, eaten primarily at feasts by aristocrats, high-level churchmen, and wealthy monastic communities.¹⁷² This springtime food, commonly eaten at Easter, does not appear in the extant Journal Book (Table 3), which covers eight weeks in the autumn, but was still commonly eaten in the sixteenth century, and would likely have been recorded in non-surviving excerpts or Diette journal books written in other seasons.¹⁷³ It is probable, therefore, that the amount spent on Diette each year included numerous lambs. Syon sold lambskins in most years for which accounts are available, through to the Dissolution

¹⁷¹ Harvey, *Living and dying*, 52; Woolgar, 'Meat and dairy', 93-94; Woolgar, *The great household*, 133; Christopher Dyer, 'Seasonal patterns in food consumption in the later middle ages', in C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition* (Medieval History and Archaeology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 201-14, 203; Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 47.

¹⁷² Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', 11; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 52; Sykes, 'Cu and scep', 68; Woolgar, 'Meat and dairy', 92, 94.

¹⁷³ Dyer, 'Seasonal patterns', 203; Sykes, 'Cu and scep', 65.

of the abbey – another indication that lambs were consumed regularly in the household.¹⁷⁴

Beef was on average the second-most important meat at Syon, but the highest cost. This meat may have been of even higher importance to the abbey's consumption – surpassing mutton, if the calculations for veal calves in Table 3 are included. Even with the possibility that the 6,847 lbs per year of edible weight of veal is an overestimate, the number would still be likely to push beef consumption above that of mutton. Given their seasonality and size, consumption of lambs is unlikely to have counteracted consumption of calves, which were commonly available, especially to those establishments, like Syon, which possessed a large-scale dairy operation or the funds to purchase them on a scale and frequency like that seen in the Journal Book.¹⁷⁵ If Syon's beef intake did exceed its mutton consumption, it would be in keeping with the general trend in sixteenth century great households, in which it became the primary meat.¹⁷⁶

The estimate of 182 calves per year in the sixteenth century is a substantial increase over the amount of veal consumed in the fifteenth century (Table 4). It is possibly an overestimate, but may simply reflect the increasing consumption of nearly all foods that Syon seems to have experienced over the period. Veal consumption also increased in English great households in general, as a consequence of the growth in dairying operations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and may for this reason have been an even more prominent meat in monasteries, with their longstanding demand for dairy products.¹⁷⁷

Scholars have had conflicting assessments of the importance of pork in the sixteenth century diet, and particularly its associations with wealth and poverty. Some have found a decline in pork consumption generally, and by the elite in particular, but at

¹⁷⁴ See Latin Accounts and Cellaress Foreign Accounts.

¹⁷⁵ In the Journal Book (TNA SC 6/ HenVIII/2283), we see the abbey buying veal, instead of transferring it from the Isleworth Dairy. This suggests that the existence of the Dairy made acquiring it easier, but did not drive demand. This is reflected in other sixteenth-century households, too, where demand exceeded personal supply. See: Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 96-98; Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 46.

¹⁷⁶ Woolgar, 'Meat and dairy', 92. See also Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 237.

¹⁷⁷ Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 96-98; Sykes, 'Cu and sceap', 57-5; Woolgar, 'Meat and dairy', 97-99.

the same time, a continued purchase of it by their households for feeding lower-status servants.¹⁷⁸ Recent assessments have recognized the continued importance of pork, and the rising significance of the meat of young pigs, in particular, in the diet of elite households, especially in monasteries and in households headed by aristocratic women.¹⁷⁹ Households with their own dairies also consumed more pork, since pig-rearing was, like veal, another by-product of dairy farming.¹⁸⁰

Syon's smallest livestock yield recorded in the annual record of 'spent' animals or livestock purchases, was meat from pigs and boar, and these animals took up a much smaller amount of abbey expenditure than did cattle and sheep.¹⁸¹ Pork consumption at Syon was much lower than that of beef or mutton. It was nearly always less than 5,000 lbs of edible meat per year, and saw no trend of rising consumption. However, this number does not include the considerable supply of pork from young pigs purchased as needed through the year, and recorded in the Syon Journal Book. As Table 3 illustrates, during the period covered by this document, an average of 4.13 piglets were purchased each week for the immediate consumption of the household, which amounted to up to an additional 2,702 lbs edible weight of pigs a year. The numbers of stock swine purchases in the sixteenth-century accounts also do not include the large number of pigs which seem to have been transferred to the household without cost from the Isleworth Dairy; 32 hogs and 75 pigs were transferred in 1521, 30 hogs and 130 pigs in 1523, and smaller amounts of hogs, pigs, and boar in several other years.¹⁸² There are indications that such transfers may have occurred in other years without having been recorded in the annual accounts.

As a result of these complications, it is possible an upward trend in the consumption of pork was being disguised by either the unclear and changing financial

¹⁷⁸ Woolgar, *The great household*, 133; Dyer, 'English diet in the later middle ages', 206; Woolgar, 'Meat and dairy', 92; U. Albarella, 'Pig husbandry and pork consumption in medieval England', in C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition* (Medieval History and Archaeology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72-87, 80; Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 103.

¹⁷⁹ Albarella, 'Pig husbandry', 80-83; Woolgar, 'Meat and dairy', 92; Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 241-2.

¹⁸⁰ Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 102-3. Pigs ate the refuse of butter and cheese making.

¹⁸¹ Only the Latin accounts record the amount of swine spent. For all years beginning in 1482, therefore, the amount of swine spent is taken from the number purchased, which, in years of overlap, is usually identical to the number 'spent'.

¹⁸² Transfers are found in the Cellaress Foreign Accounts: TNA SC 6/HenVII/1730, -1870, SC 6/HenVIII/2223, to -2226.

arrangements between the Isleworth Dairy and the household of Syon, or by inclusion of piglet consumption in the annual Diette figures. This growth in consumption, if true, would accord with the increased intake of nearly all other food items at the abbey, and would suggest that pork was not, perhaps, declining as a proportion of overall abbey meat consumption, but may even have increased as a percentage of meat intake in the Syon household. Given Syon's possession of a dairy, its status as a monastery, and the preponderance of elite women in its household, who may have preferred lighter meats, a higher-than-average pork intake for a great household of the sixteenth century would not be surprising.

Poultry and Wild Birds

Birds were an increasingly popular consumption item among later medieval elites.¹⁸³ Even poultry such as chicken, a standard fare now, was a high-status food, and some types, such as capons (castrated cocks) were especially prized for feasts.¹⁸⁴ Capons, chickens, and pullets (small hens) were regular items of consumption at Syon. In the period of the Latin Accounts, the actual household consumption of these birds was recorded annually between 1448 and 1456. As shown in Table 4, Syon ate an average of 25 capons per year during this period, and 44 hens and chickens, for a total edible weight of over 82 lbs per year. Poultry rarely appears in the sixteenth-century accounts, but there is ample evidence of them in the 1535 Journal Book, which records regular purchases of capons, chickens and pullets – at an average of 28 birds per week, and an estimated combined edible weight of up to 2,504 lbs annually (see Table 3). This is likely to be an overestimate, given that poultry would not have been eaten at the abbey during Lent and the other Brigittine fasting seasons. However, it still demonstrates a very significant increase in poultry consumption over the period.

Geese were an important part of the diet recorded in the fifteenth-century accounts, though at 63 lbs per year, they made up less of the edible weight of meat consumed than did capons and chickens together. (See Table 4.) Evidence of geese and ducks in

¹⁸³ D.J. Stone, 'The consumption and supply of birds in late medieval England', in C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition* (Medieval History and Archaeology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 148-61, 156; Woolgar, *The great household*, 133; Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 47.

¹⁸⁴ Dyer, 'Seasonal patterns', 206; Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 253.

the sixteenth-century accounts is sparse, however, appearing only twice. Geese and ducks were purchased by the cellaress in 1490 for a total of 10s (with no number of birds given).¹⁸⁵ On 4 November 1535, Syon received a mallard from the Isleworth Dairy, and on 12 October, purchased twelve geese.¹⁸⁶ These are the only signs of geese and duck consumption at the abbey after 1460. But the amounts consumed in an entire year at Syon in the fifteenth-century Latin Accounts are not too much greater than the number purchased for consumption on that one instance on 12 October in the Journal Book. It is likely that this was not the only purchase or consumption of geese that year, and that this bird was consumed more frequently in sixteenth century Syon than the available sources let on. Much is hidden by the lack of other Journal Books and the non-itemization of the Diette expenses. Consumption of geese and ducks alike may have been a significant part of the Syon household diet.

Pigeons were a common food for late medieval aristocrats, with many great households consuming an average of over 100 per month.¹⁸⁷ They were a regular purchase recorded in Syon's Journal Book, with an average household consumption of over 37 birds per non-fasting week – and a total of 300 pigeons in one month.¹⁸⁸ In addition to this, Syon seems to have raised its own birds, as the cellaress purchased grey peas for a dove-cote.¹⁸⁹ It is clear, then, that the residents of Syon Abbey shared the aristocratic love of pigeons and even surpassed the average level of elite consumption.

Syon also consumed a wide variety of wild or game birds. A description of Syon's monastic precinct and its yields in 1474 lists its right to 'river birds and winged animals, water-fowls of every kind and sort, as well wild and warren fowls as tame, especially swans and bees.'¹⁹⁰ Only two pheasants appear in the Syon record, in a single year (1448/49), but more may have been consumed in the sixteenth century when records of 'spent' game were left out of the accounts. Many swans were eaten at

¹⁸⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1712.

¹⁸⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2283.

¹⁸⁷ Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 110; D. Serjeantson, 'Birds: food and a mark of status', in C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition* (Medieval History and Archaeology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 131-47, 141; Stone, 'Birds', 155.

¹⁸⁸ Journal Book (TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2283): first four weeks: 26 September – 23 October. No pigeons were consumed in the rest of the period of the account, which was largely a time of fasting.

¹⁸⁹ Annually through the Cellaress Latin Accounts.

¹⁹⁰ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 137.

Syon between 1453 and 1456, at an average of 8 per year (see Table 4). These birds are only mentioned once more in the Syon accounts: in her 1490 Household Account, the cellaress recorded a cost of 5s for ‘upping of swans’ – the process of marking cygnets and fattening some for consumption.¹⁹¹ Such a prominent right of the abbey was unlikely to have been unused in subsequent years. Swans were a high-status food, popular at aristocratic meals and Christmas feasts.¹⁹² The lack of mention in later years likely stems from a change in record-keeping and accounting practices, though the abbey may have leased out its swanneries in the sixteenth century, as was increasingly common, buying swans instead as needed, and recording them in the Diette accounts.¹⁹³

Other birds were also consumed by the abbey’s residents. The Journal Book records the purchase of a number of wild birds on 1 November 1535, when four dozen larks and two woodcocks were bought.¹⁹⁴ These animals were prized by the elite, who ate a great variety of wild birds and displayed them proudly at feasts.¹⁹⁵ The first of November was indeed a feast day at Syon – All Saints Day – and the daily account records some other fresh meats to be included in the banquet: the other items purchased that day include one calf, one dozen conies, four pigs, and twenty-five capons. The volume and types of food purchased gives some indication of what special foods and variety of dishes the Syon religious could look forward to on feast days. Comparing this with the average purchase per *week* of ten capons, we can see that this feast day included not just special types of meat, but more in volume of certain meats as well, namely and especially, poultry. On this feast day, Syon also slew four sheep for the kitchen. This not an unusual amount, and is in fact several sheep fewer than the number slain on some non-feast days. This suggests that the wild birds and capons were the featured speciality. That is, when Syon feasted, they looked not to increased volumes of mutton, but to birds, for their special dishes.

¹⁹¹ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1712; Hunt Janin, 'Appendix II: Medieval and later laws concerning swans', in Hunt Janin (ed.), *Medieval justice: cases and laws in France, England, and Germany, 500-1500* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), p 190, 190.

¹⁹² Janin, 'Appendix II: Medieval and later laws concerning swans', 190.

¹⁹³ Stone, 'Birds', 159.

¹⁹⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2283.

¹⁹⁵ Woolgar, 'Gifts of food', 11; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 52; Serjeantson, 'Birds', 142, 46; Dyer, 'Seasonal patterns', 206.

Rabbit

Conies were also a regular consumption item at the abbey. As shown in Table 3, the abbey ate an average of 30 per week in the period of the 1535 Journal Book. In addition to this, Syon clearly raised its own rabbits, as it had numerous recurring expenses related to ‘the warren’ or ‘the coney hay’.¹⁹⁶ Syon also sold rabbit skins nearly every year – another indication that the meat was consumed in the abbey.¹⁹⁷ Occasionally, the accounts note the colour, recording that both black and grey cony skins were sold.¹⁹⁸ Sale of these skins was a regular source of income for the cellaress until it largely disappears from her accounts after 1524.¹⁹⁹ In 1530, the cellaress received money ‘of my lady Marlow for rent of the Warren’.²⁰⁰ But this is the only mention of this income. Cony skins were again sold in 1533, but then they disappear entirely from the surviving Syon accounts.²⁰¹ After this year, the warren was probably leased out again.

Rabbit warrens such as those at Syon were commonly owned by large households in the sixteenth century and rabbit meat was routinely eaten.²⁰² Ferrets were used to root out the conies, and there is evidence for this practice at Syon, where the cellaress purchased a ferret in 1515.²⁰³ Rappaport finds an increase in rabbit consumption between 1490 and 1530.²⁰⁴ Syon’s fifteenth-century Latin Accounts unfortunately do not mention rabbits or warrens, making it impossible to test whether such an increase in rabbit consumption occurred at the abbey.

Venison

Syon had the right to free warren of deer in all of its properties, and probably ate venison sourced from the roe deer in its own park, which surrounded the

¹⁹⁶ E.g. TNA SC 6/HenVII/1869, SC 6/HenVIII/2248, -2250, -2252, -2262.

¹⁹⁷ See all of Cellaress Latin Accounts and Cellaress Foreign Accounts.

¹⁹⁸ E.g. TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2224.

¹⁹⁹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2228.

²⁰⁰ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2237.

²⁰¹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2239.

²⁰² Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 243.

²⁰³ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2250; Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 109.

²⁰⁴ Rappaport, *Worlds within worlds: structures of life in sixteenth-century London*, 139-40.

monastery.²⁰⁵ In addition to this, the abbey likely received large amounts of deer meat as presents. Gifts of venison held great symbolic meaning in late medieval society. As game, it was an important facet of the aristocratic lifestyle. As a high-status gift, it denoted largess and magnificence, and served as a binding agent in local society, and a reinforcing symbol of social hierarchy.²⁰⁶ While the Syon accounts do not record any purchases of venison, or the number of deer consumed each year, it is clear that the abbey had plentiful access to this meat in the form of gifts received. Signs of such gifts exist in every Cellaress Household account, which each record rewards given to ‘bringers of venison’, sometimes specified as servants of gentlemen. While sometimes these rewards are recorded in a groups with those of other servants, in many cases, the venison-bringers are separated. In those years, the rewards they received ranged from a low of 17s 8d (in 1482), to a high of 75s 8d (in 1517), with an overall average of 35s per year.²⁰⁷ Interestingly, the gifts did not end as the Dissolution approached. If venison was a gift signalling esteem, respect, and a desire for patronage, Syon Abbey seems to have lost little cachet within its social network in its last years, despite its vehement resistance to the religious reforms and marital actions of Henry VIII. It is possible that there was some inflation in the ‘cost’ of rewards, given the general inflation of the time, which would suggest perhaps fewer venison gifts in the abbey’s later years. The 33s 6d spent by Syon on rewards ‘for carrying venison’ in 1538-1539, however, recorded in the abbey’s last account, is still a very high amount, compared with the rewards given to individuals the same year.²⁰⁸ This suggests a significant number of ‘bringers’ of venison gifts to Syon’s monastic community, even in the last year of its life in Isleworth. This is an indication of the social support Syon maintained until the end, the potential impact of the abbey’s spiritual outreach, and the probable social impact of its suppression.

²⁰⁵ 'Sport, ancient and modern: Introduction', in William Page (ed.), *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 2: General; Ashford, East Bedfont with Hatton, Feltham, Hampton with Hampton Wick, Hanworth, Laleham, Littleton* (London: Victoria County History, 1911), 253-58; Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 62.

²⁰⁶ J. Birrell, 'Procuring, preparing, and serving venison in late medieval England', in C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition* (Medieval History and Archaeology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 176-88, 177; Woolgar, *The great household*, 115.

²⁰⁷ TNA SC 6/1261/4, SC 6/HenVIII/2252.

²⁰⁸ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2262.

Did Syon's religious community eat this meat? St Birgitta had indicated that any gifts received by her monasteries should be given immediately to the poor, rather than being enjoyed by the Brigittine sisters and brethren.²⁰⁹ There is no evidence of what Syon did with these gifts of venison, whether they ate the meat themselves, gave it to the poor, or distributed it to their servants and staff. The monks of Westminster ate it – sometimes as an ingredient in special pittances.²¹⁰ It is possible that the religious of Syon may have done the same.

Fish

Fish was a major part of the medieval diet, and due to its special relationship with Christian fasting, it symbolized a proper spiritual approach to food that meat, especially, challenged. Medieval people also believed that consumption of fish had particular medical benefits. Women, for instance, being hot and dry (according to the humoral theory of medicine), should eat cool, wet, fish to balance their bodily health.²¹¹ There were still spiritual risks related to fish, however. Consuming large volumes could be seen as gluttony, and flavouring it with great quantities and varieties of spices would send the same signals of waste, excess, and disordered pleasure that the item symbolized in general. A greater moral evil, perhaps, to medieval minds, was a decline in fish consumption relative to meat – one of the monastic abuses of the period most criticized by reformers.²¹² Scholars have found a decline by up to two thirds in both expenditure on preserved fish, and in fish consumption, from the early fifteenth century to the early sixteenth century.²¹³

Preserved Fish

The Syon accounts, however, do not show a decline in fish consumption: quite the contrary. Consumption of preserved fish (dried, salted, or brined) rose over the

²⁰⁹ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 219.

²¹⁰ Harvey, *Living and dying*, 52.

²¹¹ D. Serjeantson and C.M. Woolgar, 'Fish consumption in medieval England', in C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition* (Medieval History and Archaeology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 102-30, 102-30, 29; Freedman, *Out of the East*, 52-54.

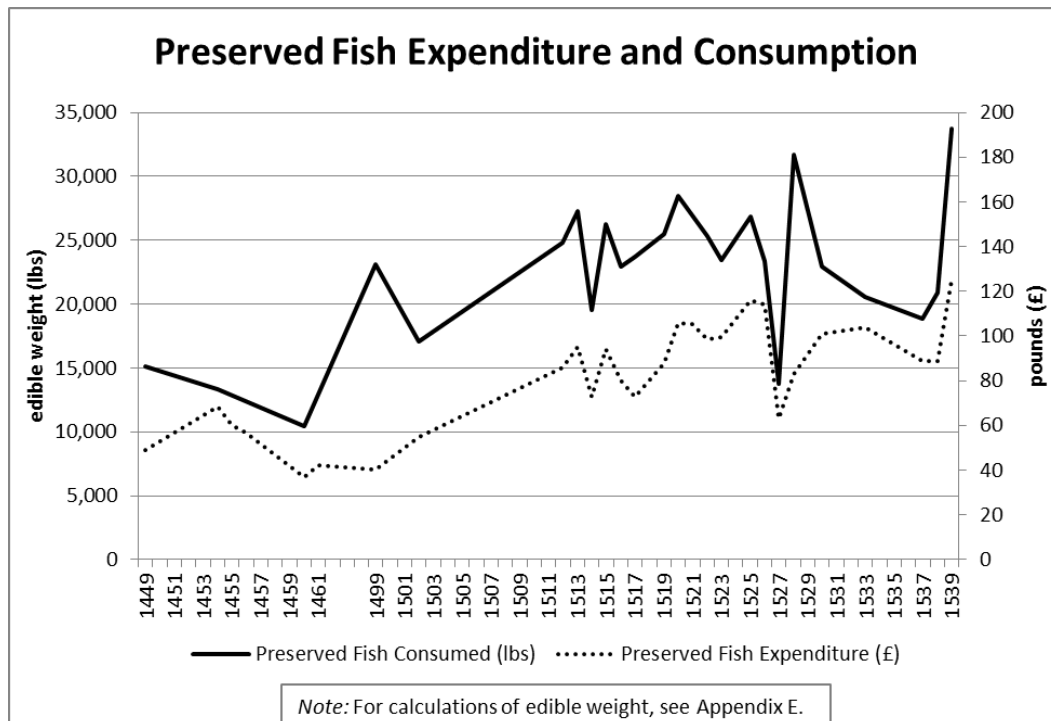
²¹² C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval monasticism: forms of religious life in Western Europe in the middle ages* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 115, 19, 48, 202, 84-86.

²¹³ Woolgar, *The great household*, 132; Serjeantson and Woolgar, 'Fish consumption', 104, 27, 30.

identical period. The abbey spent between £40 and £70 a year in the fifteenth century accounts period, rising to a range of £60 to £125 in those years of the sixteenth century for which complete information is available (see Figure 15).²¹⁴ This rise in expenditure was reflected in a rise in volume as well, as shown in Figure 15. This graph shows that Syon's overall consumption of preserved fish ranged from a low of just over 10,000 lbs edible weight in the fifteenth century, to a high of nearly 34,000 lbs edible weight in 1539.²¹⁵

Syon purchased a great variety of preserved fish, and the proportion changed through time. As shown in Figure 16, the two primary preserved fish types consumed in the Syon household throughout the period were herring – either white (salted) or red (smoked), and whitefish, a category of cod and cod-like fishes which included stockfish, a variety of cod types, greenfish, ling, haburden, and other fish which were simply salted, dried, or were salted and pickled in brine. These were the main types of preserved fish kept in stock by most medieval great households.²¹⁶

Figure 15

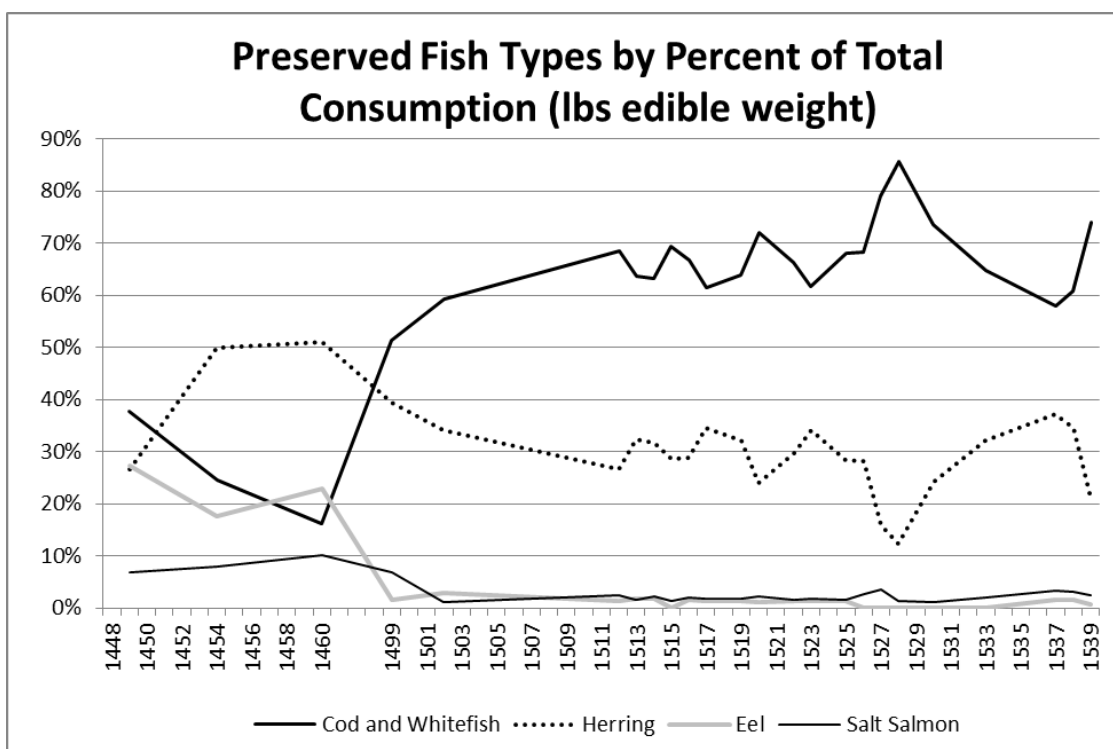


²¹⁴ In the sixteenth century Syon accounts, fish purchases appear in both the Cellaress Household Accounts and Cellaress Foreign Accounts. Only those years for which both account types are extant can be used to calculate fish consumption.

²¹⁵ See Appendix E for notes on calculations of edible weight and use of measurements.

²¹⁶ Dyer, *Standards of living*, 61; Woolgar, *The great household*, 118.

Figure 16



Scholars have found a general decline in the consumption of herring by great households over the course of the fifteenth century, and a corresponding increase in the consumption of cod.²¹⁷ This is only partially true for the household of Syon Abbey, which did see a significant rise in cod consumption, but saw a decline in herring consumption only as a proportion of preserved fish consumed; there was, as illustrated in Figure 17, no downward trend in the volume of herring consumed. The rise in cod as a percentage of all preserved fish eaten is therefore due to an addition of cod, and not to a subtraction of herring. In early years, eel and salmon were also important at Syon. Between the period of the Latin accounts and the sixteenth-century accounts, however, there was a marked change in the preferred preserved fish consumed at the abbey, with eel drastically reduced, and salt salmon also diminished both in bulk and as a proportion of overall consumption. This reduction is clearly demonstrated in Figures 16 and 18.

²¹⁷ Woolgar, *The great household*, 132; Serjeantson and Woolgar, 'Fish consumption', 126.

Figure 17

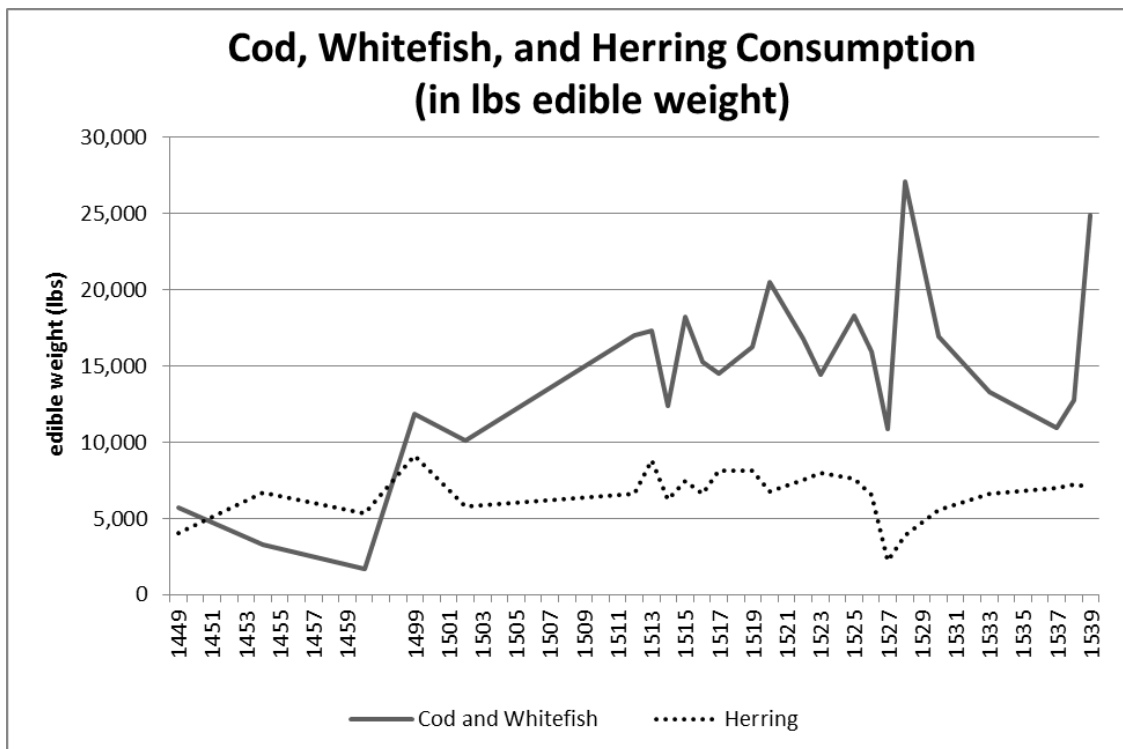
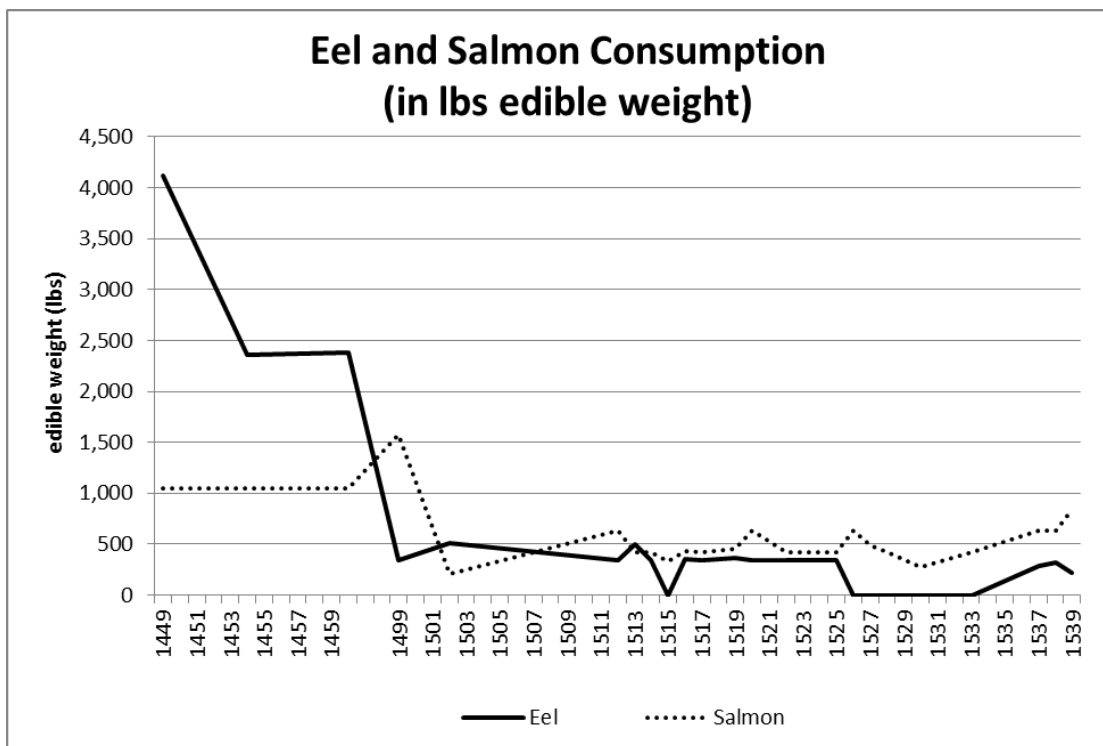


Figure 18



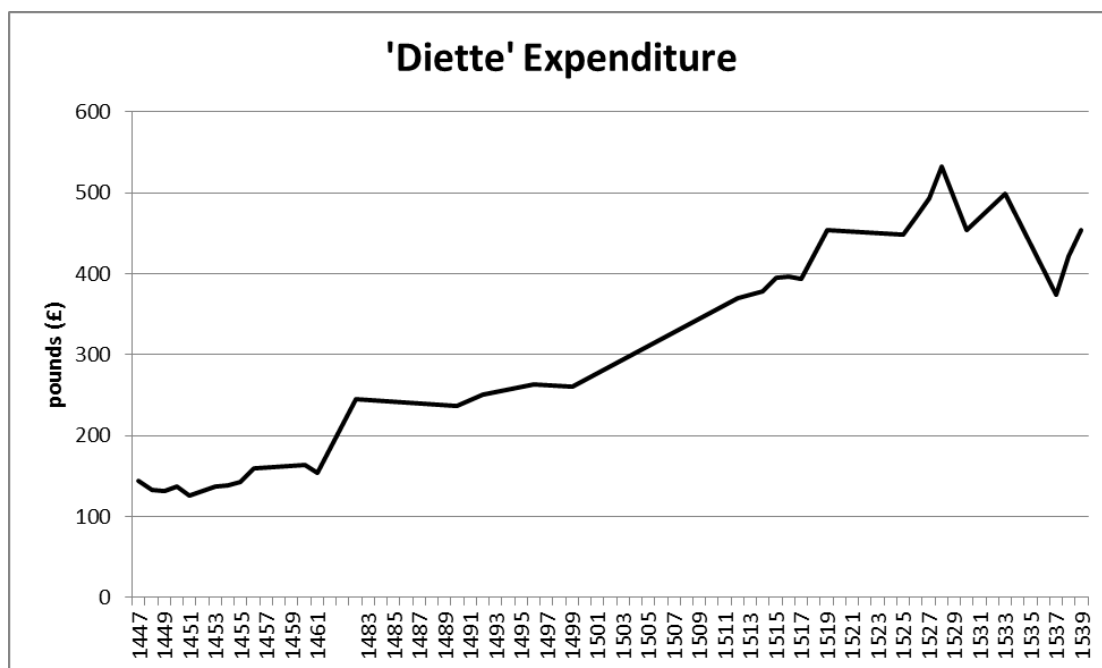
Fresh Fish

Syon's consumption of fresh fish is more elusive than its intake of preserved fish. While the annual accounts of the cellaress recorded amounts spent on the latter, and volumes purchased, they only rarely mention the former. It might seem from the annual accounts alone that the abbey had little access to fresh seafood. This is belied by the single excerpt of a diet account available for Syon – the Journal Book of 1535. It is clear from its entries that it was in this type of account that fresh foods, including fresh fish, were itemized, to later be added together and entered as the single sum of 'Diette' expenditure listed in the annual accounts. The majority of items listed in this excerpt (though not the majority of either lbs edible weight or calories, as discussed at the end of this chapter) are purchases of seafood – in great variety and quantity, as illustrated in Table 5. The abbey's annual expenditure on 'Diette' might therefore be taken as a partial proxy for the movement of its fresh fish demand. As shown in Figure 19, the cellaress's annual expenditure on this item increased considerably over the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century accounts. This may therefore indicate an increase in the amount of fresh fish consumed. This is significant, as fresh fish, especially from freshwater sources, was considered the highest status fish. Preserved marine fish such as herring, on the other hand, were the bottom of the piscine food-status hierarchy.²¹⁸ If Syon ate increasing amounts of fresh fish, it would signal a greater willingness of the abbey to embrace the culinary trappings of its upper-class status. Furthermore, freshwater fish, also, was both expensive and a high-status consumption item.²¹⁹ The fact that Syon ate the quantities it did from freshwater sources makes a statement about its social status, and its willingness to play the role of the elite in its consumption habits.

²¹⁸ Woolgar, 'Gifts of food', 11-12; Woolgar, *The great household*, 121; Serjeantson and Woolgar, 'Fish consumption', 118.

²¹⁹ Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', 7.

Figure 19



The Journal Book of 1535 lists near-daily purchases of fish through an eight-week period, which are summarized in Table 5. The types of fish bought were extremely varied, with more variety in some weeks than others. The order of prominence of fish also varied considerably, with plaice, whiting, sole, and haddock being most important, and with dace contributing a high proportion of fresh supply in most weeks. While fish such as plaice and whiting seem to have been commonly available in great households, a number of fish types found in the Journal Book have been identified as having higher status.²²⁰ Turbot was a marine fish and a high-status fish, prized by the elite.²²¹ Harvey finds that at Westminster, pike and salmon were eaten as treats on feast days.²²² Syon does not seem to have held these fish up as particularly special, eating them in most weeks of the account period.

²²⁰ Woolgar, 'Conspicuous consumption', 13; Woolgar, *The great household*, 119.

²²¹ Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', 7.

²²² Harvey, *Living and dying*, 49. See also Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 3.

Table 5

Fresh Fish and Seafood Purchases in the Cellaress Journal Book

Week 1	26 Sept - 2 Oct	Total edible weight: 455.06	Week 5	24 Oct - 30 Oct	Total edible weight: 257.46
Major fish and seafood this week: % of total edible weight	plaice flounder rochet stockfish Pike	21.98% 18.13% 15.05% 14.02% 10.00%	Major fish and seafood this week: % of total edible weight	dace and flounder whiting, haddock, sole pike stockfish	36.55% 36.55% 13.30% 11.78%
other fish and seafood this week	barbyll, chaynes, chevyns, gosent, shrimp, brett, sole, oysters, fresh herrings, pilchard, perch, salt salmon, dace		other fish and seafood this week	gojons, oysters, herring	
Week 2	3 Oct - 9 Oct	Total edible weight: 469.46	Week 6	31 Oct - 6 Nov	Total edible weight: 697.86
Major fish and seafood this week: % of total edible weight	flounder dace stockfish torbutte	32.70% 28.65% 16.06% 12.78%	Major fish and seafood this week: % of total edible weight	dace herring haddock whiting	33.24% 23.27% 15.13% 14.19%
other fish and seafood this week	shrimp, brett, pike, tench, herring		other fish and seafood this week	perch, shaft eels, salt salmon, oysters, shrimp, flounder, rochets, gojons, carp, pike and pickerel	
Week 3	10 Oct - 16 Oct	Total edible weight: 542.44	Week 7	7 Nov - 13 Nov	Total edible weight: 1018.3
Major fish and seafood this week: % of total edible weight	plaice, whiting, sole pike stockfish brett	40.56% 20.92% 16.04% 11.06%	Major fish and seafood this week: % of total edible weight	dace whiting haddock and rochet thornebacks	28.38% 23.42% 20.78% 12.18%
other fish and seafood this week	shrimp, herring, pike, tench, flounder		other fish and seafood this week	oysters, salt salmon, shaft eels, flounder, shrimp, gojons, gornards, pickerel	
Week 4	17 Oct - 23 Oct	Total edible weight: 421.56	Week 8	14 Nov - 20 Nov	Total edible weight: 1002.2
Major fish and seafood this week: % of total edible weight	dace herring flounder haddock and whiting	40.45% 17.53% 13.05% 11.86%	Major fish and seafood this week: % of total edible weight	dace whiting rochet	23.00% 18.66% 15.96%
other fish and seafood this week	tench, oysters, pike, stockfish		other fish and seafood this week	oysters, gojons, shaft eels, brett, tench, minnows, brett, gornards, shrimp, salt salmon, flounder, herring, haddock, thornebacks, pickerel	
Average weekly lbs edible weight of fish					
608.04					

Note: To calculate edible weight of fresh fish where price but no volume/number is given, I use the estimates of Dawson (*Plenti and Grase*, p.121) for the 1520s - 2d per lb of edible matter. Due to inflation, his estimates are more accurate for the Journal Book of 1535 than are Dyer's (in 'The consumption of fresh-water fish in medieval England', p. 31 - also used by Harvey, *Living and Dying*, pp. 226-27), of 1/2 d. per lb of total weight.

Syon Abbey's residents also consumed shrimp and oysters on a regular basis during the period of this account. According to Woolgar, oysters were eaten all year round, but crustaceans were rarely consumed.²²³ Dawson also finds that the latter were rarely eaten in sixteenth-century households.²²⁴ That Syon's residents ate shrimp, is therefore unusual. The abbey also consumed, or at least was given, another type of crustacean. In 1421, the abbess received twelve crabs from the abbey's estate of

²²³ Woolgar, *The great household*, 119.

²²⁴ Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 130-2.

Sidmouth in Cornwall.²²⁵ Syon also had access to porpoise, a very high-status food. Like crabs, Syon sometimes received this food from its estates in Cornwall, such as the porpoise sent to the abbess from Sidmouth in 1421.²²⁶ All of these items suggest that Syon's intake of fresh fish and seafood was at an unusually elite level.

It is apparent from the foregoing that Syon ate a large amount of fish – both preserved and fresh – each year. The abbey likely purchased even higher volumes and more variety of fish during Lent and other abstinence periods than in the short period of the Journal Book which includes several meat days and one major feast (1 November – All Saints Day), in addition to three weeks of Advent. Syon likely also had additional fish supplies from its own fishponds, and may have acquired fish from the Thames. In several years, the accounts record purchase of fishing lines and nets for fishing, sometimes specifying a 'net to take fish from cisterns'.²²⁷ In one year, the abbey paid 3d to someone 'taking fish out of cisterns'.²²⁸ Syon also seems to have had a 'fresh fish house'.²²⁹ A 1474 description of the monastic precinct and its yields includes 'piscaries, fishings, and fish of ponds, fens, lakes, marshes, pits, ditches, rivulets, watercourses'.²³⁰ In some great households of the later sixteenth century, the following fish were raised in fishponds: pike, roach, tench, pickerel, trout, bream, chub, grayling, barbells, eels, carp.²³¹ It is conceivable that Syon's fishponds had similar stock, and thus that its consumption of these fish was higher than that reflected in the accounts. But whatever was taken from the ponds, was surely a supplement to the preserved fish purchased in bulk, and the fresh fish purchased daily.²³² Syon certainly had a much higher consumption of fish on a regular basis than the accounts alone can indicate. My assessment of total fish and seafood (in edible weight) consumed by the abbey in an average year is therefore very likely a significant underestimate.

²²⁵ Morris, 'Estates of Syon', 184.

²²⁶ Morris, 'Estates of Syon', 184.

²²⁷ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1712, SC 6/HenVIII/2255, -2257, -2259.

²²⁸ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2254.

²²⁹ TNA LR 2/112.

²³⁰ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 137.

²³¹ Serjeantson and Woolgar, 'Fish consumption', 125; Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 133-35.

²³² Serjeantson and Woolgar, 'Fish consumption', 102, 25.

Spices and Dried Fruit

Syon purchased large amounts of spices each year, a group of items which included a variety of substances which we would today put in that category – such as pepper and cinnamon – along with some – such as sugar, almonds, raisons, figs, mica and rice – which we would not. What they seem to have had in common was the exotic and distant nature of their sources, and the necessity of buying them from merchants in large cities such as London. Like food and the rest of materiality, spices, especially those of exotic provenance, were associated with qualities of morality and immorality in the medieval mind. On the positive side, their smell had associations with sanctity.²³³ Their exotic odour was associated with the saints, the garden of Eden was thought the origin of the most precious spices, and heaven itself was believed to be awash in their smells.²³⁴ For medieval people, the spiritual world was close-by, and scents came directly from that world, or symbolized its power and presence nearby.²³⁵ This is as true for bad smells, which were often seen to suggest the presence of evil and to carry disease.²³⁶ Scenting the air, through incense, sachets, laundry treatments, and potpourri-like bowls of spices, therefore made both sacred spaces and household living areas healthier for the human body and spirit alike.²³⁷

Spices also were believed to increase human health when ingested as medicine, and this had a special connection to food. While spices were sometimes formed into separate pills, they more often functioned as part of a ‘wellness’-promoting diet.²³⁸ Medieval medical theory held that foods had the ability to balance qualities of the body, and lead to physical health. All of a person’s diet could be, and often was, managed to provide the right quantities of hot, cold, wet, and dry substances to balance the natural tendencies of an individual’s body, or to correct for illness or circumstance.²³⁹

Contrary to the common myth that medieval spices were used for preservation of meat, or to cover up the taste of bad flesh, historians have found that they were

²³³ Woolgar, *Senses*, 125-6; Freedman, *Out of the East*, 5, 80-1.

²³⁴ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 5, 90; Woolgar, *Senses*, 118.

²³⁵ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 88.

²³⁶ Woolgar, *Senses*, 124; Freedman, *Out of the East*, 81-2.

²³⁷ Woolgar, *The great household*, 129, 66-7; Freedman, *Out of the East*, 81-2.

²³⁸ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 56-57, 74-75.

²³⁹ Woolgar, *Senses*, 110; Freedman, *Out of the East*, 110.

actually quite ineffective at food preservation, compared with standard medieval preservation techniques such as salting, smoking and drying. Furthermore, spices were so expensive that those who could afford them could also easily afford fresh meat.²⁴⁰ Spices were instead most frequently used as ingredients in cooking food, for either flavour or colour, the latter often considered as vital as the former, due to its ability to convey light, and therefore spiritual meaning. Bright colours were preferred, and these were made possible by spices like sanders (a tasteless relative to sandalwood – used for red), tounesol (for blue), and saffron (for yellow).²⁴¹ For flavour, medieval cuisine preferred highly spiced sauces: thin and acidic, or sweet and sour, which were more akin to the foods of India, North Africa, and the Middle East today than to modern European cuisine.²⁴² These sauces relied on acidic bases of wine, vinegar or verjuice (made from crab apples), not the richer sauces with bases of oil or fat used in later European cooking, and they usually included sugar or honey to create the popular sweet and sour taste.²⁴³ The volume of spices used in these sauces and in other food preparations was quite astonishing. For a single feast, a cook might require a full pound and a half of spices.²⁴⁴ In addition, they were omnipresent in the cuisine of the upper classes. Freedman finds that 75% of recipes in late medieval cookbooks contained exotic spices. The percentage was even higher for recipes in England, 90% of which had spices.²⁴⁵

In addition to providing food with the intense flavours which were preferred by the medieval elite, and the bright colours which they believed exuded spiritual light, spices also conveyed a quality fundamental to the political and social well-being of the upper classes: prestige. Serving highly spiced dishes was a true obligation for anyone wishing to maintain their position, security, and power in medieval Europe, since going without, or failing to serve them to guests, would be seen as an abdication of status and the privileges that came with it.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁰ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 3-4, 26-7, 218, 21.

²⁴¹ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 37-8; Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 170-1; Woolgar, 'Conspicuous consumption', 23.

²⁴² Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', 8; Freedman, *Out of the East*, 25, 216.

²⁴³ Woolgar, *Senses*, 107-8; Freedman, *Out of the East*, 22, 219.

²⁴⁴ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 48.

²⁴⁵ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 20.

²⁴⁶ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 6.

Whether as practical necessity, sensory enjoyment, social requirement, or spiritual good, spices therefore had an important positive role in the life of a medieval household. To many medieval thinkers, however, spices also had a dark side. The social standing that was reinforced by their use was often associated with pride and greed, and moralists singled out spices as both symptoms and instigators of these sins.²⁴⁷ They were seen as wasteful, a ‘ludicrous self-indulgence’ requiring labour and costs to obtain and prepare, that were far out of proportion to their spiritual and social usefulness. The money spent on acquiring them would be better given to the poor.²⁴⁸ Overuse of spices was also seen to exacerbate the disordered use of material goods in general. In bringing extra pleasure to food, they spurred gluttony and created an association with other physical pleasures such as sexuality, and the immorality that often came with them.²⁴⁹ Like lust, the use of spices was also seen as an expression of the human weakness for instant gratification and transitory pleasures, over the proper uses of materiality and the correct orientation of mankind toward the eternal realm of the spirit.²⁵⁰ St Birgitta herself told the members of her future monastic Order that spices incite lust, and should only rarely be consumed by the healthy.²⁵¹

Syon was therefore in a tight position. On one hand, in order to maintain the status that would ensure the monastery the social connections and political network necessary for long-term security in late medieval England, abbey religious needed to display the lifestyle and habits of consumption that would mark the institution as a member of the elite, a powerful patron, and a worthy friend to those in prominent positions.²⁵² On the other hand, investing too much in display of prestige symbols would mark them as not monastic enough, too worldly, and therefore put them in a precarious position in the growing anti-monastic climate of late medieval and early Tudor England. Syon needed spices, that was clear: for medicine, for incense, for household uses, and for maintaining necessary social status through dishes served to visitors. How much spice they used for their own culinary pleasure within the cloister, was, however, an area of choice and more potentially a statement of their adherence to Brigittine ideals of right-ordered materiality. Given the injunction against spices by

²⁴⁷ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 17, 158.

²⁴⁸ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 17, 146-7, 58-59.

²⁴⁹ Woolgar, *Senses*, 126; Freedman, *Out of the East*, 147-51.

²⁵⁰ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 146, 48, 58.

²⁵¹ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 230.

²⁵² For a similar argument, see Heale, *Monasticism in late medieval England, c.1300-1535*, 37.

the founder of the Brigittine Order, and one of the models for the holy life led by the sisters, an examination of Syon's spice consumption is important for determining the degree to which the abbey lived up to its Order's ideals. As the following discussion shows, the volume of spices consumed in the household is striking, in comparison with this ideal.

While it is impossible to tell how much of the spice purchases recorded in the cellaress accounts went toward household scenting, the majority were likely allocated toward food. Incense for the church was recorded in the Sacristan Accounts, and is discussed in Chapter 5. Some spices destined for infirmary medicines may have originated with the cellaress, but the only surviving fragment of a treasuress account indicates the purchase of spices along with medicines, and that officer may have supplied the majority of infirmary needs. The volume of spices purchased for that use is unfortunately unknown. How much spice the treasuresses bought for use in food is also unknown. That such purchases were an accepted responsibility of the treasuresses is noted in the *Additions*, which indicate that 'thes schal prouyde and pay for medycyns, spices, powders, and suche other, after þe disposition of the abbes.'²⁵³

The spice purchases of the cellaress are known, however, and show an increase in the amount of money spent.²⁵⁴ The amount ranged from a low of just over £4 in 1454, to a high of £48 in 1538, with a generally steady rise between these dates, averaging nearly £14 a year between 1449-1461, £18 during 1499-1520, and £33 a year between 1521 and 1538. Durham Priory spent £23 per year on average on spices and dried fruit in the same period, while Westminster Abbey spent approximately £14.²⁵⁵ The Earl of Northumberland spent £26 on spices.²⁵⁶ Syon's spice expenditure in its latest years was therefore in the highest category. Syon likely fed a larger number of people than these other households. Durham had a population of 60 to 80 monks at any time during the period, resulting in a per capita spice cost of between 5s 10d and 7s 8d, but given that the number of monks actually resident at the priory was significantly lower,

²⁵³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 187.

²⁵⁴ While the Cellaress Latin Accounts from the 1440s-1460s seem to include all that officer's purchases, the cellaress's expenditure records after c.1461 are separated into Household Accounts and Foreign Accounts, both of which series contain information about spice purchases. My analysis here therefore includes only years for which all known cellaress accounts are extant.

²⁵⁵ Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 63-4, 222; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 37.

²⁵⁶ Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 64.

at an average of 36 at a time, the spice consumption was actually closer to 12s 9d per monk.²⁵⁷ Westminster's population of religious averaged only 48, resulting in a per capita spice cost of 5s 11d per monk.²⁵⁸ This is likely a significant underestimate, however, as Harvey's figures do not taking into account food prepared and consumed in all chambers of the monastery. With 85 religious members, Syon's per capita spice purchases in its later years averaged 7s 10d per person. In its earlier years, it averaged 3s 4d per person. These estimates do not take into account the large numbers of staff resident at each monastic house, who would have consumed some unknown portion of the spices. They can serve only as points of comparison with Syon based on known facts. It is still striking that Syon's purchases in the later period were comparable with that of an aristocratic household, but it is clear from this analysis that even its highest level of expenditure was significantly lower than that of Durham Priory, and was probably comparable to that of Westminster Abbey, when spices in other dining areas of that monastery are taken into consideration.²⁵⁹

Given the vagaries of prices, it is important to ask whether this high expenditure was actually reflected in a higher volume. While most of the Cellaress Accounts record only a bulk amount of spices bought, or list spices and dried fruits without itemizing the amounts paid for each, several of the fifteenth century accounts, and a number of accounts in the last decade of the monastery's medieval existence provide enough information for a closer analysis.²⁶⁰ Table 6 illustrates the findings.

The largest portion of Syon's spice purchases, by weight, was a variety of dried fruit and nuts, which totalled an average of 2,550 lbs per year in the 1530s, up from an average total of 1,552 lbs per year in the 1400s. This increase is in keeping with the trend in English cuisine from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, which saw a general rise in the use of dried fruit.²⁶¹ This was especially true of currants and raisins into the late 1500s and early 1600s, and Syon's purchase accounts reflect this, as

²⁵⁷ Hatcher, Piper, and Stone, 'Monastic mortality'; Hatcher, 'Mortality in the fifteenth century'; Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 15.

²⁵⁸ Hatcher, 'Mortality in the fifteenth century', 2; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 115-16.

²⁵⁹ Hatcher, Piper, and Stone, 'Monastic mortality', 668; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 115-16; Hatcher, 'Mortality in the fifteenth century', 2.

²⁶⁰ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2239, -2241, -2243, -2244, -2246, -2247, as well as the entire series of Latin Accounts.

²⁶¹ Threlfall-Holmes, 'Wine and spices', 151.

well.²⁶² While figs were perhaps more favoured in early years when currants were rarely bought, by the 1530s, the abbey's average purchase of raisins was three times the volume of fig purchases (and was the largest weight of spice purchases), while currants grew significantly in importance. Prunes and dates were also regular purchases.

Table 6

Itemized Spice Purchases of the Cellaress (lbs)																		
	1449	1454	1455	1456	1460	1461	1499	1502	1512	1515	1516	1533	1534	1535	1536	1537	1538	1539
Raisins					484.0							1,350.0	1,468.0	1,122.0	954.0	1,089.0	1,031.0	899.0
Figs					672.0							520.0	564.0	340.0	580.0	102.0	320.0	320.0
Raisins and Figs	360.0	240.0				360.0												
Almonds	128.0	188.0	224.0	336.0	448.5	717.0	392.0					672.0	1,176.0	896.0	560.0	560.0	560.0	504.0
Prunes												108.0	210.0	140.0	420.0	90.0	358.0	198.0
Currants	20.0											102.0		72.0	24.0	42.0	96.0	112.0
Dates	2.0	30.0			78.0	4.0						66.0	27.0	18.0	6.0		46.0	24.0
Sugar	26.7	6.0			36.1	11.3						421.0	426.0	343.5	443.8	749.8	666.8	390.3
Rice	40.0		12.0		54.0	18.0						56.0		28.0		84.0	57.0	62.0
Pepper	48.0				64.0							36.0	48.0	24.0	48.0	6.0	72.0	
Saffron	7.0	11.0			8.0	9.0	5.0	8.2	4.0	6.0		3.6	3.1	2.0	0.7	2.0	2.0	2.5
Mace	4.0				4.0	1.0						1.0		8.0	3.0	4.0	8.0	
Cloves	3.0	7.0			4.0	4.0						1.0	1.0	1.0	2.0	1.0	2.0	2.5
Cinnamon	3.0				2.0	1.8							1.3		1.5	1.0	9.0	2.8
Saunders	1.0	2.0										3.0		6.0	2.0		2.0	1.0
Ginger		6.0				3.0							7.0		2.0	1.0	7.5	3.5
Cumin											4.0			1.0				1.0
Grains of Paradise												18.0	39.0	24.0	24.0		6.0	13.0
Nutmeg												12.0		18.0	12.0	18.0	24.0	
Licorice												2.0	3.0				1.0	0.5
Annisseed												2.0	3.0				1.0	0.5

Source: Cellaress Latin Accounts, and those years after 1461 for which both Cellaress Household Accounts and Cellaress Foreign Accounts are available.

Note: Raisons usually recorded as 'Great Raisons' except in these years: 1460, 1492, 1535. The saunders, licorice, and anis seed bought in 1538 and 1539 is recorded as 'saunders powder', 'licorice powder', and 'annis powder', respectively.

Almonds were another major purchase of the cellaress. They were a common ingredient in Lenten food – used in a variety of preparations as vegan substitutions for milk, eggs, and meats – and were used in desserts throughout the year.²⁶³ Orchards in early modern England commonly contained nut trees such as walnuts, hazelnuts, and chestnuts, alongside fruit trees, and Syon's well-known orchard probably provided some such items, which do not appear in the cellaress accounts.²⁶⁴ Almonds, however, were not typically grown in England, so they were purchased in great bulk by the abbey, averaging nearly 348 lbs per year in the fifteenth century, and doubling to an average purchase of 704 lbs per year in the 1530s.

²⁶² Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 9-10.

²⁶³ Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 165, Labarge, *A baronial household*, 98.

²⁶⁴ Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 302. See below for information on Syon's orchards.

After dried fruit and almonds, the next largest item of spice purchase at Syon was sugar, and the trajectory of the abbey's consumption demonstrates the extraordinary growth in the use of this spice in England between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the earlier period, sugar purchases by the abbey (not an annually itemized occurrence), averaged only 20 lbs per year. In the 1530s, however, Syon bought nearly 492 lbs per year, never skipping a year. This is a 2360% increase. It shows the dramatic difference the Portuguese explorations and cultivation of sugar had on the price and availability of this substance, and the great unmet demand that existed and gave a strong and unfortunate impetus to the slave trade.²⁶⁵

Sweet flavours were used in most medieval main dishes, to draw out other flavours, and sugar was used for this purpose in England from the thirteenth century.²⁶⁶ It was also regarded as a healthy and wholesome food, and an important ingredient in medicines.²⁶⁷ Still expensive in the early fifteenth century, it was used in small quantities in a great variety of dishes.²⁶⁸ By the sixteenth century, however, sweetness became a culinary end in itself, and sweet desserts were increasingly allocated to separate courses at the end of meals.²⁶⁹ This trend may have been particularly prominent in the households of women, which seem to have consumed more sugar than households dominated by men.²⁷⁰ If so, Syon's residents may have eaten more than the average amount. The 1530s average of 492 lbs per year works out to 5.79 lbs per religious resident. This can be compared with the purchase of sugar in other households of the period, such as Durham, where consumption in the 1530s was around 100 lbs per year (and 2.78 lbs per resident monk), this seems to be the case.²⁷¹ As with other spices, on at least one occasion, sugar was purchased by the Syon treasurers 'for diverse times and for the Oes'.²⁷² If such expenditure was repeated by these officers in other years, as is likely, the volume of Syon's sugar consumption was even higher.

²⁶⁵ Threlfall-Holmes, 'Wine and spices', 152. See also Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Sweetness and power: the place of sugar in modern history* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

²⁶⁶ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 27.

²⁶⁷ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 56; Woolgar, *Senses*, 106-7.

²⁶⁸ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 219.

²⁶⁹ Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 162-3; Woolgar, *The great household*, 129; Freedman, *Out of the East*, 13.

²⁷⁰ Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 325.

²⁷¹ Threlfall-Holmes, 'Wine and spices', 154. For Durham population, see Hatcher, Piper, and Stone, 'Monastic mortality', and Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 15.

²⁷² TNA SC 6/HenVII/1790.

Syon continued to consume honey in addition to sugar throughout the period. The cellaress recorded the abbey's consumption of this substance in two years of the fifteenth century, in which it spent 8 gallons (in 1448) and 21 gallons (in 1449).²⁷³ In later years, purchases of honey were usually between 30 and 40 gallons per year, with little variation. The abbey also had access to honey from its own home farm. A description of the monastic precinct written in 1474 listed bees (along with swans and other fowl) as 'winged animals' whose yield the abbey could consume.²⁷⁴ That Syon produced its own honey is confirmed by the Cellaress Household (Extract) Accounts, which record purchases of beehives in 1522 and 1531.²⁷⁵ Other items for sweet courses were also purchased by Syon, and included ready-made sweets such as biscuits and comfits (sweetmeats of fruit coated in sugar).²⁷⁶ Rice was commonly used in desserts with almonds or almond milk, and later, in rice puddings and tarts; it was purchased in great abundance, exceeding pepper in average volumes in the 1530s.²⁷⁷

Compared with that of sugar and dried fruits, the volume of exotic spices purchased at Syon was small; by modern European standards, however, the average totals were enormous. The abbey consumed an average of 80.5 lbs of exotic spices per year between 1449 and 1461, and 99.4 lbs per year in the 1530s. Even if the abbey household was as large as 200 people, the latter average would have meant a minimum consumption of a half a pound of exotic spices per person, per year. In 1513, the Portuguese returned from their first trip to the Spice Islands, laden with cheaper spices, effecting a price change from then on.²⁷⁸ This may have affected Syon's consumption. A greater variety of spices were purchased in the latter period, with nutmeg and grains of paradise being the most substantial of the new additions. The former was, however, a major ingredient in recipes through the middle ages, so the absence of it in the early accounts may indicate that the abbey had some other source of spices not recorded there.²⁷⁹ The spice called 'grains of Paradise' (or simply

²⁷³ TNA SC 6/1106-16, -17.

²⁷⁴ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 137.

²⁷⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2272, -2277.

²⁷⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2241; Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 325. See above.

²⁷⁷ Labarge, *A baronial household*, 98; Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 171.

²⁷⁸ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 1, 203.

²⁷⁹ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 22.

‘grains’) in the late middle ages has been identified as malagueta pepper, a sharp and peppery plant from West Africa, unrelated to the pepper plant from India.²⁸⁰

According to Freedman, this spice was extremely popular in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, but began to decrease in popularity, even disappearing from use in Europe by the end of the sixteenth century.²⁸¹ However, this spice appears in great quantity in the Syon accounts of the 1530s, after not appearing at all in the Latin Accounts. It is possible that like nutmeg, Syon did consume it and recorded its purchase elsewhere in earlier years. It is clear, in any case, that its popularity was not waning by the 1530s.

The largest exotic spice purchase, by bulk, was pepper, averaging about 39 lbs per year in the 1530s. Other items were purchased in much smaller volumes: cinnamon, cloves, mace, ginger, and cumin (all used in a variety of savoury dishes), and anise seed and liquorice (both used in comfits and for flavouring biscuits).²⁸² Spices used primarily for colouring food were also purchased in the 1530s - turnsole for blue food colouring, sanders for red – suggesting that Syon may have had increased interest in food display in this period.²⁸³

Another prominent food colouring was saffron, used to create a bright yellow hue. This spice was as valued for its flavour as its colour, with over half of all medieval English and French recipes requiring it as an ingredient.²⁸⁴ It may also have been used as a stimulant, anti-depressant, and even hallucinogen. Volker Schier argues that nunneries, in particular, used it for these psychotropic effects, though his analysis is in many ways problematic.²⁸⁵ In any case, the Syon cellaress purchased enormous quantities of saffron each year – an average of nearly 9 lbs annually between 1449 and 1515 (see Table 6). This declined substantially to an average of only 2.3 lbs per

²⁸⁰ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 12.

²⁸¹ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 12.

²⁸² Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 169.

²⁸³ Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 168. See Cellaress Foreign Accounts and Cellaress Household Accounts.

²⁸⁴ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 37; John H. Munro, 'The consumption of spices and their costs in late-medieval and early-modern Europe: luxuries or necessities?', (2013).

²⁸⁵ Volker Schier, 'Probing the mystery of the use of saffron in medieval nunneries', *Senses & Society*, 5/1 (2010), 57-72, 58, 63. For example, he argues that saffron had special meaning to nuns and supports this with examples of their bulk consumption, but he does not examine consumption by monks or put the consumption volumes of nuns in the wider context of lay household saffron use. Furthermore, when calculating the consumption of saffron by nuns, he uses figures for household saffron use while not considering the probable contribution to consumption made by lay staff and visitors at convents.

year in the 1530s. This downward trend does not necessarily indicate a decline in consumption, however. It may instead be explained by the abbey's cultivation of this spice in its own saffron garden. Hints of such cultivation first appear in the accounts in 1490, and are recorded annually in the accounts from 1514 to 1519. In each of these years, the cellaress records the expense of labour for 'delving for safurne', 'paryng of saffron garden' or helping in the same garden.²⁸⁶ Evidence of cultivation disappears after this point. Unfortunately, it is impossible to tell whether this was simply a change in accounting convention or labour arrangements, or whether the garden plot was given over to other crops.

The fact that purchases of saffron were substantially lower in the 1530s than the 1400s makes the lack of clarity especially frustrating. Was the decline in saffron purchases and the ending of records of saffron cultivation at the abbey reflective of a diminished demand – due perhaps to changes in either culinary taste or abbey policy regarding this extravagant spice? Or, were they due rather to a stable or higher demand on the part of abbey residents, who simply began relying more on their own garden to make up the bulk of their supply? There is some reason to think that the lack of labour costs could actually reflect increased labour being dedicated to the task: these expenses are for rewards and fees of casual labourers, not regular wages. No list of regular staff at Syon has survived, and had the abbey hired a permanent assistant to the gardener, we likely would have no record of it. The gardener himself, for example, appears repeatedly in the Syon accounts in the guise of supervisor for whom assistants are hired on a casual basis. There is nowhere, however, a record of the income or employment circumstances of the gardener himself.

Other Foods

The Syon accounts provide information about a number of other food types which in themselves are less relevant to questions of moral mission, but which impact the issue through their contribution to overall consumption volumes. These include dairy, condiments, fruits, and vegetables. Dairy (which to the medieval mind included eggs) was an important part of the monastic diet, and of increasing importance in great

²⁸⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1712, SC 6/HenVIII/2249, to -2253.

secular households of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Monasteries used cheese and eggs in great volumes to supplement a diet of reduced meat intake, while both lay and religious households used increasing amounts of butter in cooking, in baking pastries, and in sealing pies for more lasting preservation. Milk and cream were also used to make pastries, pottage, and desserts. It has been suggested that households dominated by women consumed higher quantities of dairy products, in keeping with their general demand for lighter protein sources. While cheese in general was associated with the poor in earlier years, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, certain high-quality cheeses, especially imports from France such as Brie, were prized by gentry and aristocratic households.²⁸⁷

Milk and cream were together an item of low expenditure at Syon, ranging from 14d to £9 per year. Consumption averaged 552 gallons per year, in years when spent amounts were recorded.²⁸⁸ Syon's expenditure on butter ranged from £5 10s to £8 in the years through 1502, rising to an average of £20 a year after 1512. The abbey's use of butter rose dramatically between 1502, before which its average use was 740 gallons a year, and 1512, after which its average purchase was 3,523 gallons per year, and consumption was likely higher.²⁸⁹ This vividly demonstrates the marked increase in use of butter at Syon Abbey over the period, in keeping with wider culinary trends.

Eggs were used in a variety of ways in medieval cuisine. They could be served hard boiled, fried, or in omelettes, used as an accompaniment to fish, or used as separate monastic pittances, and were a common ingredient in pastries and pottages.²⁹⁰ Syon's

²⁸⁷ Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 4, 5, 22, 144, 270-76; Woolgar, 'Meat and dairy', 94-6, 99-100; Dyer, 'English diet in the later middle ages', 195, 207-8; Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 53; Woolgar, *The great household*, 128; Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 82, 98-9; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 61; Dyer, *Standards of living*, 63; Woolgar, 'Gifts of food', 12.

²⁸⁸ The amount of milk and cream 'spent' by the abbey each year through 1460 is recorded in the Latin accounts. In these years, the household consumed an average of 552 gallons a year. Later accounts do not record consumption, but do indicate volumes purchased. It is clear that in the majority of these years, the abbey had some in-kind source of milk, from either the home farm or the Isleworth Dairy. Amounts purchased in this period ranged from 5 gallons in 1527 to 640 gallons in 1538, with an average purchase of 268 gallons a year, but an average consumption likely in keeping with the earlier period.

²⁸⁹ Given that I was not able to convert the 'dishes' of butter to gallons and that there are indications that some butter purchases were lumped in with the 'diet' expenditure, and given that the abbey may have received butter as in-kind income from the Isleworth Dairy at times, the actual amounts consumed after 1460 may be quite a bit higher.

²⁹⁰ Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 25-6; Barbara Harvey, 'Monastic pittances in the middle ages', in C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and*

Latin Accounts record the abbey's consumption until 1460: an average of 937 eggs per year. After this point, they were included, un-itemized, under the 'Diette' heading in the accounts. Table 3 indicates the average number of eggs used at the abbey per week (recorded in the 1535 Journal Book), and includes an estimate of annual consumption based on this number. The figures show that Syon's *weekly* use of eggs in 1535 (over 1,445 eggs per week on average) far surpassed its *annual* use in the early- to mid-fifteenth century. It also greatly exceeded the consumption at both Durham (808 a week) and St Swithun's (750 a week) in the fifteenth century.²⁹¹ Syon had over twice as many resident religious members as Durham, however, and likely a larger number of resident staff as well, meaning that Syon's per capita consumption of eggs may not have been out of proportion.²⁹² The change over time is striking, however. It is unfortunately not possible to tell from the sources whether the increase is due to an across-the-board rise in consumption, or whether the abbey household was consuming one type of egg-heavy dish to an increasing degree.

Syon's expenditure on cheese was quite high, averaging £4 a year between 1482 and 1502, and rising to an average of £17 between 1536 and 1539. The Syon accounts usually do not itemize cheese types, but in two years, the volume of Essex cheese – a hard, dry, inexpensive variety – was recorded separately, and can be converted to standard weight in pounds. In 1512, the abbey purchased 1,570 lbs of Essex cheese, and in 1533, it bought 2,370 lbs.²⁹³ In the latter year, Suffolk cheese (similar in kind and quality to Essex) was also purchased, as was cheese from the Isleworth Dairy, and a variety of other cheeses not specified. While it is not possible to calculate the volume of cheese in most years, given the lack of standard measurements or specificity of cheese type, it is likely that Syon's intake of this food was quite large. At monasteries, cheese was commonly consumed as an extra dish, or pittance, with dinner.²⁹⁴ It was used as an ingredient in pottage and certain desserts, such as the

nutrition (Medieval History and Archaeology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 215-27, 215-18, 23; Dyer, *Standards of living*, 63.

²⁹¹ Winifred A. Harwood, 'The impact of St Swithun's Priory on the city of Winchester in the later middle ages', in Michael Hicks (ed.), *Revolution and consumption in late medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001), 159-75, 168; Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 52-3.

²⁹² See Chapter 2. Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 15; Hatcher, Piper, and Stone, 'Monastic mortality'.

²⁹³ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2248, -2259. I use the figure for Essex cheese given by Chapman, *How heavy*, where 1 wey = 336 lbs. On Essex cheese, see: Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 278-80.

²⁹⁴ Harvey, *Living and dying*, 62; Harvey, 'Monastic pittances', 223.

cheese flans eaten by the Westminster monks in summer.²⁹⁵ Plates of cheese were also put out at the close of meals, as an aid to digestion.²⁹⁶ Woolgar argues that it was favoured by women in particular, which suggests that as a household primarily composed of monastic women, Syon would have had a particularly high level of cheese consumption.²⁹⁷

Syon also purchased a variety of condiments and ingredients for cooking, including oil, salt, vinegar, and verjuice. The latter was a bitter liquid, similar to vinegar, which was used for cooking and preservation, and was an essential ingredient in the sweet and sour sauces prized in medieval cuisine. It could be made from either grapes or crab apples; that Syon used the latter is apparent from the cellaress's many payments to workers for 'gathering of crabbys' and 'stamping of crabbys'. It is likely that the abbey had crab apple trees on its home farm, though it did purchase some 'crabbes' in most years, and 3 hogsheads of verjuice was bought separately in one year.²⁹⁸ The abbey also purchased vinegar once every few years, and its average purchase volume increased substantially over the period, from purchases of 36 gallons at a time, to 98 gallons at a time. Syon spent an average of £2 10s on oil each year. It averaged a consumption of 31.5 gallons annually in the fifteenth century accounts, and 52 gallons a year in the sixteenth century. Until 1482, it bought solely olive oil, but from 1490 onward, only rapeseed oil was specified.²⁹⁹

Fruit was regarded highly by the elite, and was central to certain dishes, particularly those served at Christmastime.³⁰⁰ The majority was probably eaten cooked: medieval medical theory saw raw fruit, with the exception of cherries and berries, as dangerous

²⁹⁵ Woolgar, 'Meat and dairy', 98; Dyer, 'Seasonal patterns', 208.

²⁹⁶ Woolgar, 'Meat and dairy', 100.

²⁹⁷ Woolgar, 'Meat and dairy', 99; Woolgar, *The great household*, 128; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 61.

²⁹⁸ Verjuice bought: TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2258. For info on verjuice, see: C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron, 'Conclusion', in C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition* (Medieval History and Archaeology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 267-80, 274; Christopher Dyer, 'Gardens and garden produce in the later middle ages', in C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (eds.), *Food in medieval England: diet and nutrition* (Medieval History and Archaeology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 27-40, 28; Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 154; Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 321; Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', 9.

²⁹⁹ C.f. Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 322; who argues that only olive oil was used in England until the late seventeenth century, and that rapeseed oil only came into use in 1660.

³⁰⁰ Dyer, 'Gardens', 35.

and impossible to digest healthily.³⁰¹ The *Syon Additions* echo this cultural belief by requiring fruit to be cooked before serving.³⁰² It is likely that the women and men of Syon ate a great deal of this food. The *Brigittine Rule* allowed the religious of the Order to eat ‘vegetables’, including fruit, on the ‘water days’ – fasting days on which the women and men could otherwise eat only bread and drink only water. According to the *Syon Additions*, on these days, the religious were allowed ‘two manners of fruits – apples, pears, nuts, plums, cherries, beans, peas, etc.’³⁰³

Water fasting days with fruit and bread were a unique requirement of Brigittine monasticism, and this probably led to much higher levels of fruit intake at Syon than at other English religious houses. Unfortunately, in many cases, the volume of fruit purchased by Syon was either not documented, or was recorded in non-standardized units, such as panniers. Some fruit purchases were logged in barrels, however, and some in individual pieces of fruit. Wardens and other types of pears were purchased in the greatest bulk, at an average of 17 bushels of wardens, and 2,250 pears annually circa 1515-1525, but amounts purchased seem to have declined somewhat in the 1530s. Apples were also purchased with great regularity, but in much less quantity than varieties of pear, at an average of about 12 bushels a year in the same period. Syon purchased strawberries in most years of the sixteenth century and bought cherries in four years, from 1525 through 1538. Other fruit purchased by the abbey on occasion included plums, and quince, and in one year (1538), oranges appeared for the first and only time in the Syon records.³⁰⁴ Fruit purchases were recorded fairly consistently in the sixteenth century accounts, but appear only twice (apples in 1449 and warden pears in 1461) in the Latin accounts.³⁰⁵ Given that Syon’s orchards had likely not grown up enough by the 1440s to produce much fruit, it is probable that the abbey ate less of it at this time, or acquired it as in-kind income from another source.

By the time of the Dissolution, Syon’s fruit trees were so well known and coveted by other aristocrats, that Henry VIII transferred them from the former abbey to his new

³⁰¹ Freedman, *Out of the East*, 41.

³⁰² The fruit should be ‘rosted or sothen, or other wyse dyght to the bodyly helth.’ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 190.

³⁰³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 190.

³⁰⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2261.

³⁰⁵ TNA SC 6/1106-17, -25.

palace of Nonsuch after the Dissolution.³⁰⁶ Orchards of aristocratic households commonly had nearly 130 trees in one place, and Syon may have had near that number.³⁰⁷ If so, the fruit available for consumption at the abbey in the sixteenth century would have been much more numerous than purchases shown in the accounts would indicate. The amount was likely expanded by gifts received. Fruit was a common gift to great households.³⁰⁸ In most years, the Cellaress Household Accounts record payments of rewards to servants for bringing gifts. It is probable that some of these were gifts of fruit.³⁰⁹

In contrast to the evidence for regular fruit consumption at Syon, Harvey finds that at Westminster, this food was seen as a treat which was eaten only several times a year by the abbot, and likely less often by others.³¹⁰ Dyer finds that monasteries and other great households did not eat fruit on a daily basis, but rather ate it in great quantity on particular occasions.³¹¹ Syon had many water days, however, on which fruit could be served, suggesting that though it was unusual in consuming a greater quantity of fruit than other monasteries and great households, it did so for reasons in accordance with the *Rule*.

There is less evidence for the consumption at Syon of what we would now consider vegetables. These items were usually used as ingredients in other dishes, especially pottage, though they were sometimes made into a separate dish, as was common at Westminster.³¹² The abbey accounts do record purchases of lettuce seeds, radishes, beans, and peas for pottage.³¹³ Onions were purchased in most years, in amounts ranging from 10 bunches to 6 bushels, while garlic purchases appear in only four years, one bunch each time.³¹⁴ On the other hand, these purchases may have been supplemental to the stock yielded by the convent gardens; onion seed was also purchased on occasion, and garlic was commonly found in medieval English

³⁰⁶ Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 295.

³⁰⁷ Dyer, 'Gardens', 28.

³⁰⁸ Woolgar, 'Gifts of food', 12.

³⁰⁹ Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', 11.

³¹⁰ Harvey, *Living and dying*, 60-61.

³¹¹ Dyer, 'Gardens', 35.

³¹² Dyer, 'Gardens', 35; Harvey, 'Monastic pittances', 215, 17.

³¹³ TNA SC 6/1106/17, SC 6/HenVIII/2256, -2262, -2209, -2210.

³¹⁴ For garlic: TNA SC6/HenVII/1869, SC 6/HenVIII/2252, -2253, -2271.

gardens.³¹⁵ Other items commonly grown in English kitchen gardens of the period included cabbage, leeks, parsley, sage, and other herbs, and Syon, like Lambeth Palace, may have enjoyed such items as spinach, cucumber, and cress from its gardens.³¹⁶

Syon's Changing Food Tastes

Changing food tastes during this period have been a subject of some study, and data available in the Syon accounts can add to the discussion.³¹⁷ Using the edible weights and volumes for each food type as calculated in the Appendices and discussed above, it is possible to convert the annual abbey consumption of the foods into their calorie equivalents (as determined by modern dieticians), and to compare the importance of each food to the overall calorie intake of the household each year. The results of the calorie calculations are shown in Appendix F. Figures 20 and 21 illustrate the findings of this analysis, and indicate that the most important items in the abbey diet in all years were bread (at 30-38% of the calorie intake on average), ale and beer (at 20-30% of overall calories), and meat from stock (at 15-25%). Preserved fish (hovering around 5% of total calorie intake) and butter (at 0-5%) contributed much less to the overall diet. The importance of bread and ale at Syon were in keeping with their proportion of overall calorie intake at Westminster Abbey, whose diet was 35% bread and 25% ale and wine.³¹⁸

The abbeys differed considerably in meat and fish consumption, however. At Westminster, meat and fish comprised 23% of total calories, which is only slightly less than the combined proportion of these items in the Syon diet.³¹⁹ However, this amount does not include the very large quantities of fresh fish and young meats likely included under Syon's 'Diette' expenditure every year, as discussed above. As a result, the true proportion of Syon's household diet that was contributed by meat and fish is likely to be up to 15% higher: a total of 27-45% of the abbey's calorie intake,

³¹⁵ Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 206; Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', 14.

³¹⁶ Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages', 10; Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*, 7.

³¹⁷ See Woolgar, 'Food and the middle ages'; Dawson, *Plenti and grase*; Mertes, *English noble household*; Thirsk, *Food in early modern England*; Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*.

³¹⁸ Harvey, *Living and dying*, 57.

³¹⁹ Harvey, *Living and dying*, 56.

which is substantially larger than the estimated importance to the diet at Westminster Abbey.

Figure 20

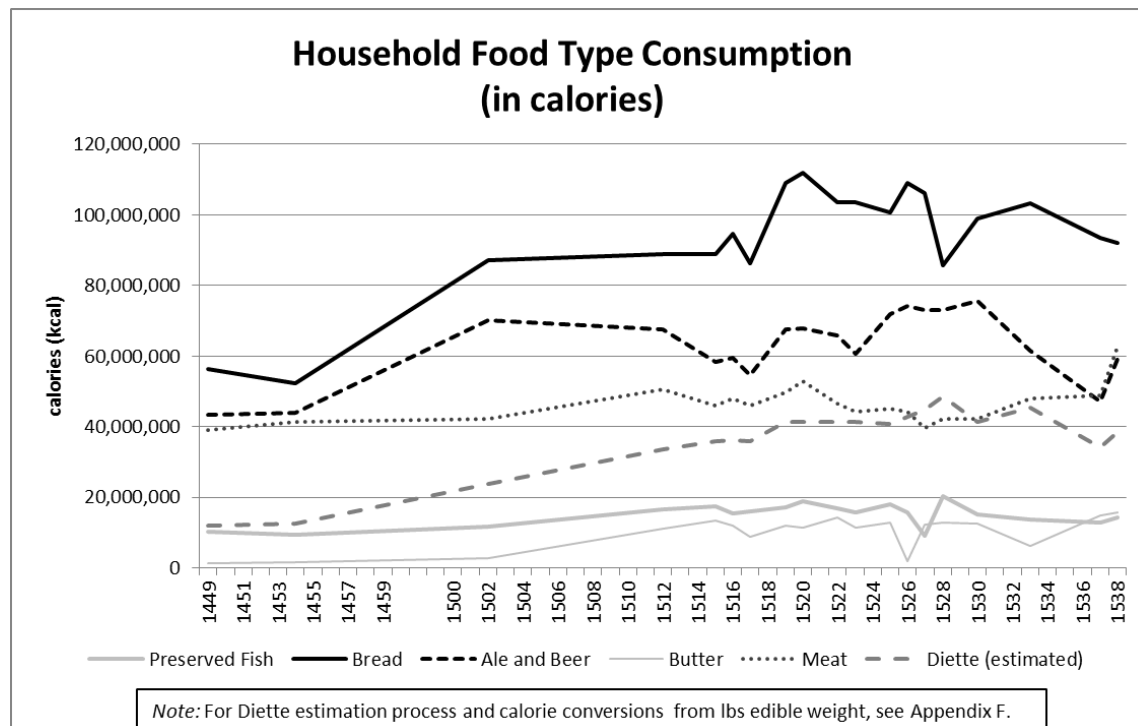
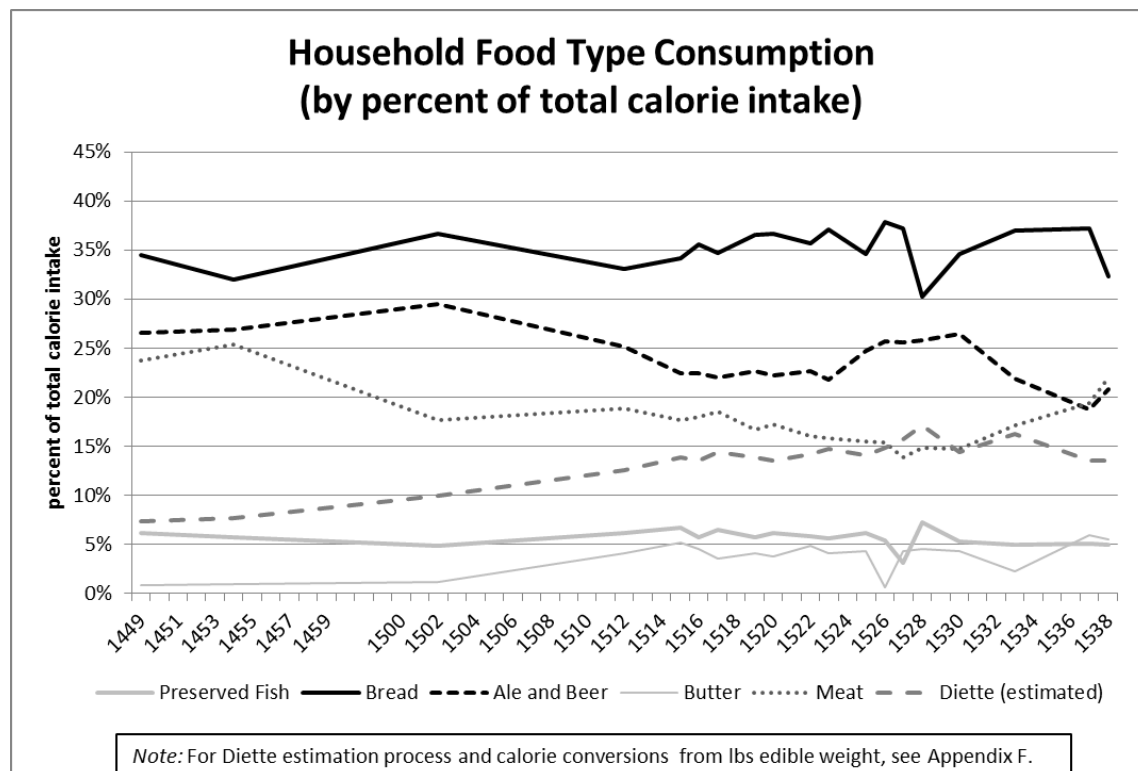


Figure 21



The figures illustrate some interesting trends in Syon's consumption. Ale and beer declined in importance to the household diet from the fifteenth to sixteenth century. The pronounced drop in importance of these items in the last few years of the abbey's pre-Dissolution existence is likely due to an underestimation of calories from beer, as my calculations do not include the additional yield from beer brewed at the abbey in those years. In earlier years, however, the drop in importance to the diet is, as indicated by Figure 20, due to increased consumption of bread and 'Diette' items, rather than decreased demand for ale and beer. Meat from stock also declined in importance to the Syon diet, dropping as much as 10%, while calories from preserved fish remained relatively steady as a proportion of consumption. Again, the drop in relative importance of meat to the diet does not reflect a decline in absolute demand, but to increased demand, especially for 'Diette' items. Consumption of the category 'Diette' certainly increased in relative importance (and absolute amounts) through most of the period, and aside from butter, was the only food type to do so. This has implications for the importance of both fish and meat.

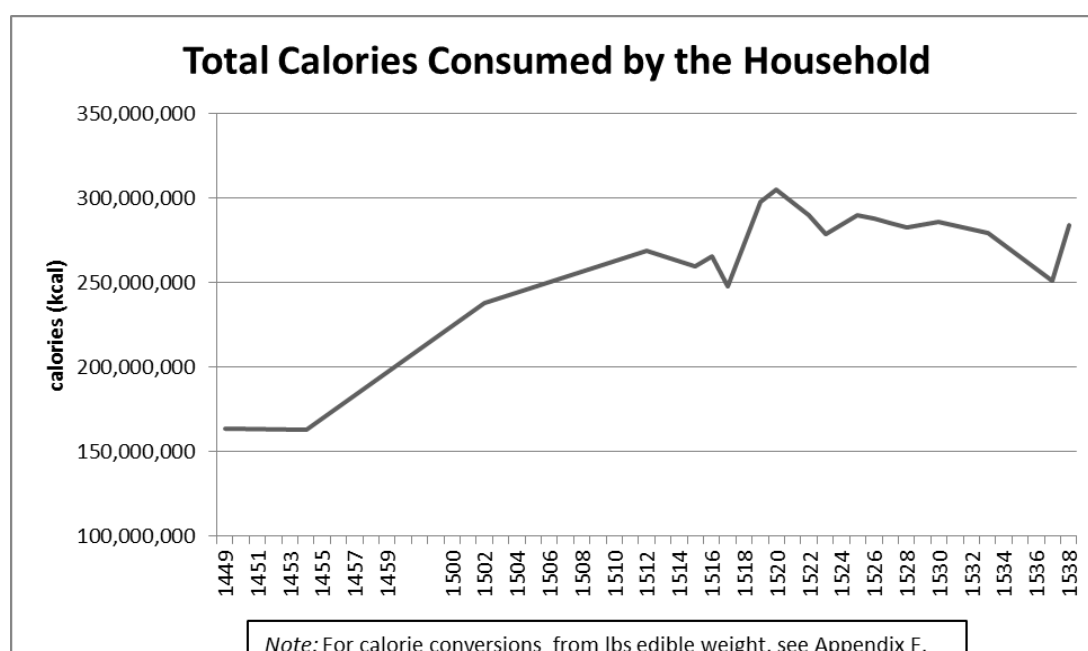
Many studies have shown a decline in fish consumption relative to meat over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in both in monasteries and large households in general.³²⁰ This pattern is not, on first sight, reflected in the Syon consumption figures, with stock meat consumption down in importance and preserved fish holding steady. It is possible that such a transition did take place within the category of fresh fish and young meats recorded under the 'Diette' heading of the Cellaress Household Accounts. When the calories of meat and fish recorded in the 1535 Journal Book are calculated and extrapolated to a full year, this category is found to be composed of 36% fresh fish calories, and 64% meat calories. Because the Journal Book is only a small slice of a year, and does not include the major fasting times of Lent and Advent, it is very likely that these figures overestimate the importance of meat calories in the 'Diette' category, and underestimate the importance of fish. The proportions of meat to fish within this category also potentially underwent significant change through the period. The Syon data is therefore inconclusive when it comes to the overall importance of meat versus fish, and the extent to which their prominence in the

³²⁰ Slavín, *Bread and ale*, 171-2; Dawson, *Plenti and grase*, 124-5; Woolgar, 'Conspicuous consumption', 8; Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 47-48.

abbey's diet may have changed. It is clear, however, that as a combined category, meat and fish (including the young meats and fresh fish of the 'Diette'), rose considerably as a part of the diet of the Syon household.

As Figure 22 illustrates, the overall calorie consumption of the Syon household was very high. Some foods have been left out of these calculations, due to greater uncertainty surrounding volumes consumed. Oil has not been included, given that much of it was used for cooking processes rather than direct consumption. Without recipes, it is impossible to tell how much of the oil was retained in the food consumed by the household residents. Butter poses a similar problem, but given that its main use in medieval cooking was as an integral ingredient in pastries, it is likely that a high percentage of that used by the household was actually consumed as food by its residents. Cheese, however, likely a major source of energy for the Syon residents, is not included at all, as its purchase was recorded in numbers of 'cheeses' of varying and non-standardized sizes, the calories of which are impossible to calculate from the given source data. It is probable, therefore, that the overall annual calorie consumption of the Syon household was quite a bit higher than the amounts calculated here. There is no question, however, that the overall calorie consumption of the Syon household changed – rising considerably through time. As Figure 22 illustrates, total calories nearly doubled from the 1450s to the 1520s.

Figure 22



This doubling of calorie intake unavoidably brings up the question of why the abbey's volume of food consumption changed so radically. What was the reason for the increased intake of food? Was it a larger number of boarding visitors, as discussed above? Was it an increase in food-alms given to the poor? Did the number of household members (staff or religious) increase? Or did each of the abbey residents simply eat more food? Two pieces of evidence hint that this latter option may have been a factor. First is a letter from Pope Calixtus III to the Bishop of London and the confessor general of Syon in 1457, releasing a brother from the abbey to transfer to a 'milder' religious order, due to the fact that he was 'weak and delicate, [and] has, when subjected to the said strictness [of the order], fallen often and gravely ill, so that he has no hope of remaining in the said monastery and strictness with bodily health and quiet of his mind'.³²¹ This indicates that the lifestyle of Syon in the mid-fifteenth century was by no means luxurious. The *Syon Additions* were written after this point, and reflect a much more moderate attitude toward food consumption than the *Additions of Prior Peter*, which, as noted above, seems to have served as a guideline for Syon until its own *Additions* were drafted.³²² It is possible that the alterations seen in Syon's food volume data between the early and late fifteenth century reflect a conscious change in policy and culture surrounding consumption – perhaps spurred by incidents like that of the papal letter – which was then articulated in the *Syon Additions*, put into action by the cellarer, and is reflected in the expansion of food consumption seen in the present analysis.

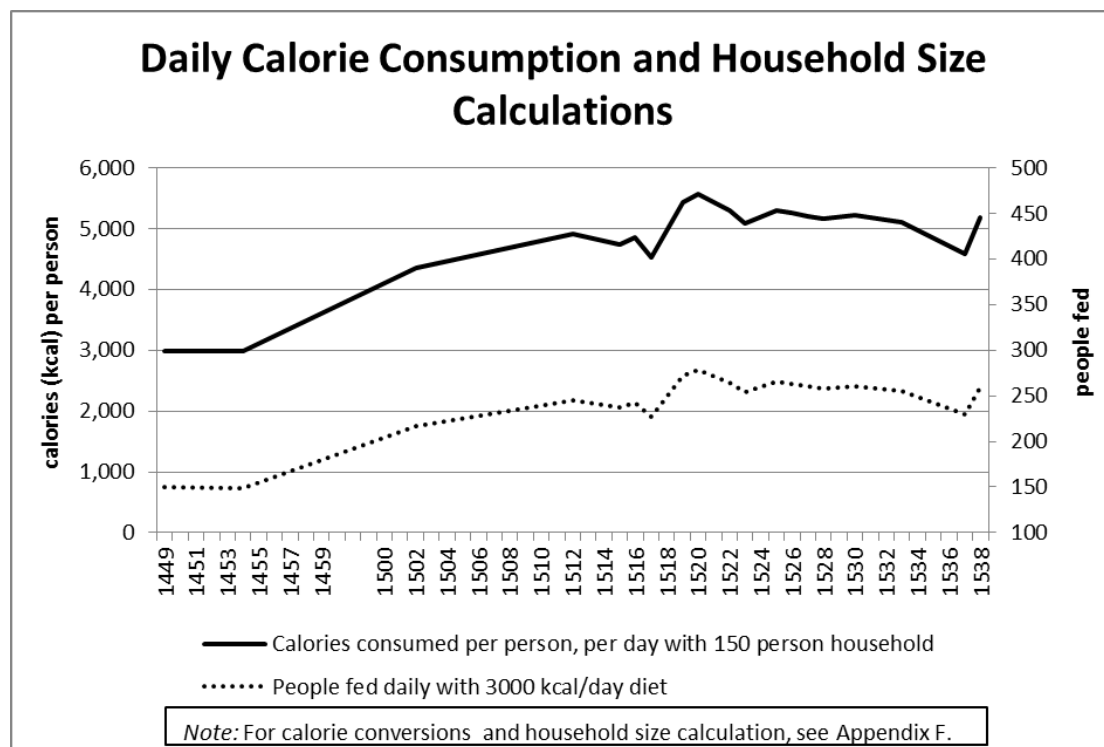
While, as shown in Figure 10, an increase in boarders does seem to have been a part of the picture, especially in the 1520s, the correlation is not exact, and it does not explain the very significant rise in overall calorie consumption between the 1450s and the first decade of the 1500s. The surviving sources are unfortunately silent on volumes of food alms distributed by the abbey. It is possible, however, to come to some very rough estimates of either calories per person (based on a conservative estimate of a steady 150-person household), or number of people fed daily per year (based on an estimate of a steady 3,000 calories consumed per day, per person,

³²¹ 'Vatican Regesta 460: 1457', *Calendar of Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland, Volume 11: 1455-1464, pp.140-152* <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=103677&strquery=syon>>, accessed 20 September 2013.

³²² Tait, *A fair place*, 328.

throughout the period – a number based on other studies of medieval diets).³²³ The results are illustrated in Figure 23.

Figure 23



The figure shows that the number of people fed in the Syon household daily may have risen from a minimum of about 150 in the 1450s, to an average of about 250 in the sixteenth century accounts, and a high approaching 300 people in the 1520s. On the other hand, using the most conservative figure for household size – 150, the number of calories consumed per person per day may have risen from a minimum of 3,000 in the 1450s, to an average of about 5,000 in the sixteenth century, and a high of over 5,500 calories per day in the 1520s. Neither of these scenarios is likely to be entirely true on its own. Instead, a combination of a rise in the size of household and a rise in the amount of calories consumed per person may have been closer to fact.

³²³ Other studies of monastic and aristocratic diets, such as those by Harvey, Slavin, and Dyer, have estimated a daily intake of between 3,700 and 4,000 calories per individual. All of these were, however, studies of male-dominated households not known for moderation in foods. A female-dominated household with a reputation for austerity requires a considerably lower number for the present purposes of household-size estimation. Harvey, *Living and dying*, 67-70; Slavin, *Bread and ale*, 172; Dyer, 'English diet in the later middle ages'.

Conclusion

The eating habits of the Syon Abbey household were surprisingly aristocratic, although the religious of the household certainly had numerous opportunities for the exercise of asceticism during their Lenten, Advent, and other fasts, and their numerous ‘water days’ through the year. The one mark of asceticism which seems to have remained within the abbey’s food regime, however, was its consumption of pottage. All other food-types were either elite to begin with, or tended in that direction, to varying degrees, in the sixteenth century. Syon consumed white bread and manchet, used large quantities of spices, dried fruits, and fresh fruits, ate lamb, rabbit, and venison, and consumed beef in great quantities – all in keeping with eating habits of the elite. The abbey trended toward more elite consumption types through time, with an increased intake of fresh fish and young or light meats, an enormous growth in the use of sugar, an increased variety of spices in the last years of the abbey, and, quite tellingly, a new and frequent purchase of spices solely used for colouring food – indicating an increased concern with the display and magnificence of meals on the table.

The volume of food consumed also rose extraordinarily throughout the period of the Syon Accounts. However, because of a lack of sources detailing the number of staff, household size, or portion size, conclusions about the impact of this volume on the abbey’s adherence to Brigittine morality are elusive. Some attempt has been made to estimate household size from per capita daily calorie estimates, and daily calorie intake from number of people fed per day – but these are necessarily very rough assessments which must be used in tandem, and together with knowledge of boarders housed and potential food alms distributed, to gather a rounded picture of the volume of food eaten by any single Syon religious.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the types of food consumed, and the way in which they changed over time, can reveal a great deal about the way in which the abbey dealt with this fundamental aspect of materiality. Despite the warnings of Saint Birgitta and other medieval moralists that consumption of decadent foods led to sin, the religious of Syon Abbey seem to have opted, at least in the later years of their Isleworth life, to indulge their cravings for more high-status foods. It is possible, of

course, that some of the more elite food types were destined for boarders and higher-level staff, but the sheer volume of these goods makes that unlikely as a complete explanation. The Syon religious may have justified their increasingly elite food types by an appeal to the believed goodness of food as part of God's good creation (as per Birgitta), or through a perceived need to display their social status for purposes of social and political networking, and thus increased evangelical reach. On the other hand, they may have neglected to justify it at all, indulging themselves in the material pleasures afforded by fine cuisine. Whether such tendencies of elite-level indulgence are found in the clothing, art, and architecture of the abbey and its residents is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 5

The Fabric of Monastic Life: Textiles and Architecture

While food was perhaps the most prominent part of the monastic material experience, the lives of the Syon religious were enveloped in the physicality of architecture and clothing, and their relationship to these fabrics could say a great deal about their spirituality. Clothing and physical environment could both be used as means to express and transmit the Brigittine message, or could, conversely, be seen as temptations to grandeur. Many a medieval monastic reformer spoke of the evils of sumptuous dress and rich architectural details, connected as they were, in the medieval mind, to the sins of lust, pride, and sensual pleasure.¹

Clothing and Bedding

Clothing was, in a very real sense, both a symbol of, and the construction of, identity in medieval culture, in which the clothing worn by an individual was assumed to reliably identify him or her, in the way that a government-issued identification card or passport might today. There was a presumed 'link between appearance and personhood'. Dress not only reflected identity, it created identity, to the extent that people dressing above or out of station led to 'doubts about the relationship between the material and the immaterial more generally'.² Clothing served a crucial purpose in the late middle ages; in addition to identity itself, it was also a key to a person's connections, affiliations, and their place in the world.³ This was as true for religious in habits as for servants in livery. The specific clothing of the Syon sisters and brothers identified them as specifically to their affinity to God and Saint Birgitta as the livery of Syon servants signalled an affinity to, and social identification with, the abbey. The

¹ Catherine Richardson, 'Introduction', in Catherine Richardson (ed.), *Clothing culture, 1350-1650* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 2.

² Martha Howell, *Commerce before capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 214, 43-45.

³ Joanna Crawford, 'Clothing distribution and social relations c. 1350-1500', in Catherine Richardson (ed.), *Clothing culture, 1350-1650* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 153-64, 164.

weight put on this function of clothing in the Order is made clear by the *Brigittine Rule*.

Syon Abbey's nuns, priests, deacons and lay brothers all had distinct and heavily symbolic uniforms that set each group apart from the others. These outfits were dictated in detail in the *Rule*, and the residents of Syon probably followed them closely.⁴ The nuns were to wear a kirtle of grey burel (a coarse, English woollen fabric usually used by the poorer classes) over a smock of white burel.⁵ A cowl with sleeves reaching to mid-finger was worn over this, and the long sleeves were designed to button up when needed for work. A mantle made of the same grey burel was to be worn in the summer, and an identical one with added woollfelling in the winter. They were each to be a hand's width from the ground, and were to clasp at the chest with three buttons. An additional outer garment made entirely of woollfelling and worn under the mantle, called a pilch, was also allowed in the cold season. The sisters' hose were to extend to the knees, and they each had two sets of footwear – ankle shoes in the summer, and in the winter, boots lined with burel cloth. On their heads, they wore a wimple (presumably white), surrounded by a black linen veil fastened with three pins. Atop the veil was placed a white crown, cruciform with a surrounding circle, with red dots at each intersection, symbolizing the five wounds of Christ.⁶

The habits of the sisters held further symbolism, as expressed in the part of the profession ceremony in which a new nun was clothed in her habit. Each stage of the enrobing process, and each aspect of appearance associated with it, symbolized a corresponding virtue. The nun's tunic symbolized penance and contrition, her shoes the correct path to salvation and 'penance for sin committed and a will to sin no more'. Her cowl symbolized 'hope in the justice and mercy of God', her mantle, faith, her wimple, 'Christ's protective shadowing of the soul', and her veil, wisdom. The wooden button clasping the mantle symbolized 'the mind of Christ fixed on the wood of the Cross'. The distinctive Brigittine crown, in this robing ceremony, symbolized the sign of Christ, the 'constancy of will, and the heavenly reward', and the pin fixing

⁴ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 62-73.

⁵ 'Burel' in Louis Harmuth, *Dictionary of textiles* (New York: Fairchild Publishing, 1915).

⁶ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 66.

the crown to the hair symbolized ‘the piercing love of Christ’.⁷ Here can be seen one more example of the Brigittine attempt to reflect spiritual qualities in the physical world.⁸

The priests, deacons, and lay brethren also wore symbolic habits. They shared a similar garment style, with slight modifications for each group. The foundation was an undershirt of white burel, and a tunic, cowl, and mantel of grey burel. They could also wear a pilch of lamb or sheep fell under the mantle when needed.⁹ As a mark of their position, the thirteen priests wore on the left side of their mantle a cross made of red cloth, with a dot of white at the intersection, symbolizing the Eucharistic wafer. The four deacons had the same basic uniform, but the patch on their mantles was in the form of four red tongues of flame radiating from a white circle, symbolizing the wisdom of the four doctors of the Church, who had been uniquely inspired by the Holy Spirit. The eight lay brothers also wore the same habit, with the exception of the insignia on their mantles, which on them took the form of a white cross with five small red dots, symbolizing innocence and the five wounds of Christ. The men all had tonsures, with the lay brothers having most of their hair shaven off, and the priests and deacons having circles of only an inch in breadth. All of the Syon men also received hoses, ankle shoes for summer wear, and boots lined with burel cloth for the winter.¹⁰

According to the *Additions*, everyone who entered the monastery of Syon, ‘be they ryche, be they pore’, was required to get their regular habit from the convent, at the cost of the monastery.¹¹ There were no money allowances to individuals for clothing, and none of the religious were allowed to have clothing that deviated from that of their group. Every year, each religious was to receive a new set of clothing, and their old set was to be given to the poor.¹² Unfortunately, it is impossible to tell from the surviving sources whether this transfer of clothing alms occurred, although it is highly

⁷ Ellis, ‘*Viderunt eam filie Syon*’, 14.

⁸ Ellis, ‘*Viderunt eam filie Syon*’, 15; Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism*, 244.

⁹ Hogg, ‘*Rewyll*’, 71-2.

¹⁰ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 120.

¹¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 83.

¹² Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 220.

likely, given the volume of wool cloth purchased by the chambress every year (see below). In addition, whenever a sister died, her clothes were to be given to the poor.¹³

Wearing the full habit was necessary, and the *Additions* indicate penalties for disobeying these and other rules related to clothing.¹⁴ The women were only allowed to be bareheaded or without their veil and crown while in their cells and the washing house.¹⁵ The lay brothers could only have their heads uncovered when acting as servitors at meals, or when inside their own cells.¹⁶ The *Additions* also cautioned the nuns and brethren to take care with their clothing, and instituted penalties for tearing, burning or breaking their items, for not washing their clothes, or for not taking them to be washed by others.¹⁷

The *Additions for the Sisters* also describe in detail the types of clothing, bedding and other textile goods the chambress was supposed to provide for the sisters and brothers, and what kinds of cloth should be purchased for those purposes. She should provide canvas for bedding, friezes (coats made of a coarse woollen cloth – especially of Irish manufacture), blankets, sheets, bolsters, pillows, coverlets, cushions, stamine cloth, coats, cowls, mantles, wimples, veils, crowns, pins, caps, night kerchiefs, pilches, mantle furs, cuffs, gloves, hoses, shoes, boots, soles, socks, ‘mugdors’ (muckenders – handkerchiefs), girdles, purses, and knives.¹⁸ The Chambress Accounts indicate that she did buy many such items, or inputs for their manufacture. In addition to purchasing, she was also charged with ‘schapyng, sewyng, makyng, repayryng, and keypyng them from wormes, schakyng them by þe helpe of certayne sustres depute to her, that they be not deuoured and consumed of moughtes’.¹⁹

The surviving Syon sources unfortunately provide little information on the Chambress purchases of the fifteenth century. While total expenditure of this officer is given in each Latin Account, none of her purchases were itemized. Instead, repeated references were given to a ‘paper’ containing the pertinent information. Without surviving copies

¹³ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 169.

¹⁴ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 19-20, 120; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 3.

¹⁵ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 179.

¹⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 19.

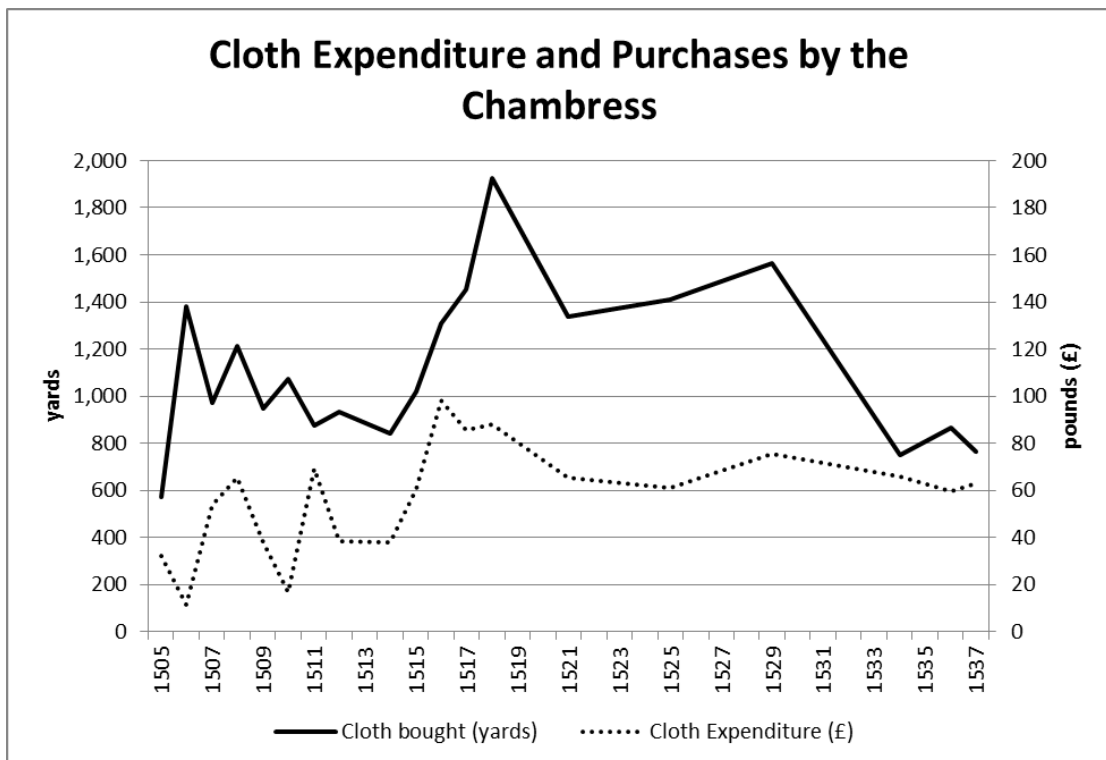
¹⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 19-20; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 3.

¹⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 187-88.

¹⁹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 187.

of these supplementary papers, a systematic analysis of clothing purchases in Syon's early years is not possible. The story is quite different for many years of the sixteenth century, however, for which full Chambress Accounts survive. An analysis of these sources reveals that, as expected, cloth was the main expenditure item of the chambress in most years, costing between £10 and £70 per year until 1515, then between £60 and £100 from 1515 to 1539, and constituting between 58% and 70% of her total costs, on average. In most years, the amount spent by the chambress alone was far above the average £71 spent annually at Durham Priory on *all* textiles.²⁰ Given Syon's larger numbers of resident religious, in need of both bedding and clothing, the number is not altogether surprising. It reflects the purchase of large volumes of cloth: an average of 1,116 yards annually, ranging from a low of 600 yards, to a high of nearly 2,000 yards per year (see Figure 24).

Figure 24



The largest sum spent on cloth by the chambress each year was on russet, which amounted to an average of £31, or 264 yards, annually (see Table 7). This was a

²⁰ Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 121.

coarse homespun, usually of grey or reddish-brown colour and used by the poor or for working clothes, and was likely used in place of the grey burel mentioned in the *Rule* – which appears nowhere in the sixteenth-century Chambress Accounts, and which had disappeared as a type of cloth in the late middle ages.²¹ The *Rule* also specified the use of burel for bedsheets, and russet may have been used for this as well.²²

Table 7

Major Cloth and Textile Purchases of the Chambress (yards)

	Russet	Stamin	Canvas	Linen	White Cloth	Frieze	Northern Whites & Kerseys	Blanket	Total major cloth purchases
1505	180	72	95	90	48	60	24	2	571
1506	242	432	0	336	183	90	36	64	1,383
1507	482	384	0	36	69	0	0	0	970
1508	449	312	131	125	127	30	0	38	1,211
1509	206	360	289	0	64	30	0	0	948
1510	307	264	130	235	24	90	0	25	1,075
1511	555	168	13	81	36	0	0	23	875
1512	137	384	0	222	76	90	0	23	932
1514	166	312	168	66	72	60	0	0	844
1515	216	360	96	48	120	106	0	72	1,018
1516	576	384	0	203	144	0	0	0	1,307
1517	249	384	228	265	98	175	54	2	1,455
1518	492	84	953	213	122	44	18	0	1,924
1521	201	360	120	275	118	210	54	0	1,339
1525	241	288	250	429	24	90	87	0	1,409
1529	280	192	836	32	126	30	71	0	1,566
1534	409	48	62	0	125	90	18	0	752
1536	185	180	55	83	197	56	109	0	864
1537	168	264	3	n/a*	54	243	36	0	767
Average yards per year	302	275	180	152	96	79	27	13	1,116
Average % of total purchases	27.06%	24.67%	16.16%	13.63%	8.60%	7.04%	2.39%	1.17%	

* Linen is purchased this year, but the amount is not recorded

Note: A piece is 24 yards, aside from the piece of frieze, which is 35 yards, buckram which is 15 yards, and fustian, which is 13 ells or 16.25 yards. I use the English ell for all cloth recorded in that measurement, and have considered a roll to be 30 yards in length. My calculations are necessarily very rough estimates, given the variety and uncertainty of lengths and breadths. References: *OED*, 'bolt', Zupko, *Dictionary of Weights and Measures*, p. 291, 352, 119, 441, Hanham, *The Cely's and their world*, p. 214., Blair and Ramsay, *English Medieval Industries*, p. 341., Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade*, p. 22, Childs, 'English Export Trade', p. 125.

Stamin, a coarse worsted cloth often used for clothing or wall hangings, was the second-largest (by bulk) fabric purchased by Syon, averaging 286 yards per year. Canvas also comprised a large proportion of cloth bought by the abbey, but with less regularity, averaging 174 yards annually, but ranging from 12.50 to 836 yards in a

²¹ Harmuth, *Dictionary of textiles*; 'russet', *Oxford English Dictionary: OED Online*'; 'russet' Robert E. Lewis (ed.), *Middle English dictionary. Q-R*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1984); John Blair and Nigel Ramsay (eds.), *English medieval industries: craftsmen, techniques, products* (London: The Hambleton Press, 1991), 340-41.

²² Hogg, 'Rewyll', 62.

year, and not being purchased at all in several years. Simple linen (as opposed to the finer linens discussed below) was also purchased in large amounts each year. An average of 134 yards of Holland Cloth was purchased each year. This fabric was a type of linen, plain and unbleached (though very fine in earlier years) and may have been used for wimples, veils, and mattress covers.²³ Next in bulk in the Chambress Accounts was ‘White Cloth’, of which an average of 80 yards was purchased annually. Though the name is very generic, one year’s account indicates it was a woollen cloth.²⁴ This fabric was likely used in place of the white burel in men’s undershirts and women’s smocks.

A variety of other fabrics were used more sparingly or sporadically. ‘Red Cloth’ was purchased twice, likely for the details on the nuns’ crowns and the men’s mantles.²⁵ Brussels cloth was purchased almost yearly, and may, if red, have been used for these details as well. Also bought on occasions of varying frequency and in diverse amounts were ‘Northern White’ (of unknown make), Frieze, Fustian (a heavy worsted velveteen-like fabric), buckram (a fine linen – sometimes purchased green), tresse cloth (a braided cloth or lace), and kersey (a heavy, pliable woollen fabric often used for coats).²⁶ It is not possible to tell from the sources whether these cloths were used in the construction of clothing for religious, or whether they were used primarily in bedding and household decorations. The chambress also purchased skins, namely, lamb-, calf- and sheepskins, leather ‘backs’, and on rare occasions, oxhides. In the later years, she also sometimes purchased white leather. Aside from the very rare occurrence of small amounts of silk in the Chambress Accounts, especially luxurious fabrics and expensive types of fur do not seem to have been common in the clothing and bedding of the Syon religious, unlike that of members of the aristocracy, who wore silks in much greater quantity.²⁷ This lack of sumptuous fabrics in the Chambress Accounts is in accordance with the *Additions for the Sisters*, which says that fabric for clothing and bedding should be plain, not ‘ouer curyous’, ‘without

²³ Harmuth, *Dictionary of textiles*. Harmuth says it’s plain and unbleached, used as curtains or furniture cover. Herbert Norris considers it a superior kind of fine linen. Herbert Norris, *Tudor costume and fashion* (London: Courier Dover, 1997), 130-1. See also Woolgar, *The great household*, 149.

²⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2289.

²⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1723, SC 6/HenVIII/2291.

²⁶ Harmuth, *Dictionary of textiles*.

²⁷ Dyer, *Standards of living*, 79.

weuyng of any straunge colours of sylk, golde or syluer'.²⁸ This finding challenges the assertions of Eileen Power, whose generalized claim that most English nuns wore bright clothing of silks and furs is clearly not true of Syon.²⁹

Some fabrics purchased by the chambress were obviously intended for household use. The *Syon Additions* were more lenient about bedding than was the original *Brigittine Rule*, which was based on Birgitta's own lifestyle. The former allow sisters to have straw mattresses, two bed clothes (blankets) of coarse material, and a cushion and pillow covered with linen.³⁰ The chambress purchased an average of 26 yards of 'Blanket' each year. This cloth was a loose woollen fabric often used by peasants for clothing, but may have been used for bedding at Syon.³¹ Canvas was also purchased regularly, at an average of 110 yards per year. The *Additions* indicate that this fabric was intended principally for bedding.³² The *Brigittine Rule* describes the construction of bedding with straw, sheets of burel, and a feather bed with a quilt, all over a cushion covered in linen.³³ The chambress could very well have substituted canvas for this linen. Coverlets were also purchased by the chambress in many years, with increasing regularity and number (up to 8 in a year) until 1525, then only one purchase again in 1537.³⁴ In 1515, she purchased 'a coverlet of fustian with teke and bolsters'.³⁵ This seems to have been a special item, as it is the only coverlet with any description recorded.

These coverlets were some of the several items purchased ready-made by the cellaress. Although most of the Syon Religious' clothing and bedding was made by the abbey tailor, wardrober, and other textile workers, whose wages are found in the Chambress Accounts, some minor items seem to have been purchased ready-to-wear. Girdles, purses, and knives for personal use (these last a part of the *Rule*-dictated habit) were all purchased fairly regularly.³⁶ Gloves were also bought occasionally by

²⁸ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 188.

²⁹ Power, *Medieval English nunneries*, 211.

³⁰ Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon', 8-9.

³¹ Valerie Cumming, C. W. Cunnington, and P. E. Cunnington (eds.), *The dictionary of fashion history* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 130-31.

³² Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 187.

³³ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 62.

³⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2290, -2291.

³⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2287.

³⁶ Hogg, 'Rewyll', 62-72.

the chambress, and in most years by the sacristan, who purchased them for the use of Syon lay brothers in their bell-ringing duties. In 1529, two dozen black veils were purchased, as were one dozen white veils.³⁷ In most years, however, veils seem to have been made in-house, and were dyed and mended by hired workers.

One clothing item bought on a near-annual basis was caps. Purchases of caps of both russet and white colour occur almost every year of the chambress accounts, an average of 24 annually, with the number ranging from a low of 12 to a high of 37. The majority bought were ‘russet caps’ or ‘Russet Bonetts’, purchased in quantities of over 30 per year. In several years, the chambress purchased ‘syngle cappes’ and ‘doble cappes’, in addition to both russet and white caps. In two years, the chambress also to have had caps knitted for the abbey, rather than purchasing ready-made sewn versions. The 1518 account records expenditure on fees for spinning of wool, knitting of caps, and ‘thicking and shearing’ of caps.³⁸ In 1529, the chambress also paid for spinning of wool and knitting of caps.³⁹ The difference in usage of all of these various types of caps is unknown.

Another item of attire which the abbey bought ready-made annually was spectacles, sometimes purchased with cases. In 1505, they paid 6d for six pairs.⁴⁰ In 1534, 17s 17d was spent on 99 pairs of spectacles, and two years later 19d was spent on 14 pairs.⁴¹ In other years, the number of pairs purchased was not recorded, though money spent on them was – at 8d to 5s 4d per year. Numerous years also record the expense of having spectacles mended.⁴² These numbers of spectacles, especially that in 1534, were clearly far above the amount required for the brothers alone, and support widespread conclusions in the literature that the Syon nuns were active readers as well.⁴³

³⁷ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2292.

³⁸ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2289.

³⁹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2292.

⁴⁰ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1731.

⁴¹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2293, -2294.

⁴² Nearly annually in the Chambress Accounts: TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2284, -2285, -2288 to -2293, -2295, -2318.

⁴³ See Chapter 2.

Clothing served a variety of purposes at Syon, aside from the basic functions of warmth and modesty. It was spiritual metaphor, both in the very specific symbolism of the habits and in the general connotations of asceticism. The coarse wool burel used for Brigittine habits was in keeping with ascetic ideals.⁴⁴ This was perhaps too challenging for some in the early days of Syon, who asked Vadstena if they might wear finer white woollen cloth for undergarments and shirts, instead of burel. Vadstena replied only, 'excessive finery or extravagance should be avoided.'⁴⁵ One gets the impression that the Syon brothers were chafing, metaphorically as well as literally, against the coarse woollen cloth they were expected to wear. The evidence of the Chambress Accounts, however, indicates that the clothing of the Syon religious was not in any way excessive. Even in their fabric substitutions, the abbey chose materials that were generally coarse and associated not with elite status, but with humility of station and lifestyle. In this aspect of its mundane life, therefore, Syon Abbey was living well in accordance with the *Rule*. Through the roughness and simplicity of their clothing and bedding, they were also given the opportunity to develop further their spirituality regarding materiality, and therefore to contribute to the Brigittine mission – to contribute, that is, to the material production of piety for the eventual benefit of the wider world.

Architecture, Art, and Décor

As with other forms of consumption, expenditure on monastic architecture could be seen in the middle ages either as glorifying God, or as a 'disinvestment' from the other responsibilities and roles of the religious.⁴⁶ For Brigittine monasteries, central among the latter would have been their role as almsgivers. Consequently, Birgitta stressed the need for simplicity in the architecture of her Order, in contrast to practices prevailing in other parts of the Church.⁴⁷ In describing what her new monasteries should be like, Birgitta emphasized the importance of architecture in communicating a 'humility of deeds'.

⁴⁴ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 206-7.

⁴⁵ Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses*, 143.

⁴⁶ David Postles, 'Heads of religious houses as administrators', in W.M. Ormrod (ed.), *England in the thirteenth century: proceedings from the Harlaxton Symposium* (Stamford: Watkins, 1991), 37-50, 37.

⁴⁷ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 43-4.

‘...the buildings of the abbey should express complete humility. The windows should be simple and lucid, and the roof should be of moderate height. The whole buildings should be “redolent of humility”. No refined sculptures should be found on the church doors, pillars, or at windows, everything should be “free of ornament and robust”. The window-glass should not have any other colours than white and yellow. The church should be built in stone, cut from the rock or found in the earth, and not of bricks. On the church walls, no paintings should be allowed except of Christ’s passion and the lives of his saints.’⁴⁸

According to the *Brigittine Rule*, the abbess should not allow for the construction of more buildings than was required for those dwelling in the monastery, and should not ‘make proud houses’. If she did, the *Rule* states, ‘it will be counted against her as a grievous sin’, akin to violently stealing goods and clothing from the poor.⁴⁹ There were other influences in society, however, which made decoration of sacred spaces essential to the monastery’s viability. Magnificence in architecture was necessary, both politically and socially, because it attracted connections and respect, and with them, security.⁵⁰ As Postles notes, in an era when large-scale acquisition of land was no longer an available means to glorify the status of the monastery, and therefore its patron saint and God, expenditure on building could be seen as an alternative.⁵¹ It is possible, in addition, that added glory inhered in any benefactions given to the monastery for the purpose of construction and beautification.⁵² The great expense that was building and repairs at Syon therefore most likely had a high level of support from both Syon’s religious, and the abbey’s supporters.

This expense truly was enormous, particularly in Syon’s early years, such as 1447, when it totalled almost £1,120 and comprised almost 63% of overall abbey expenditure. It remained between 5% to 10% of overall abbey expenditure for the majority of the remaining years – a percentage which was lower than the 12% of total expenditure, on average, spent at Durham on building each year, and lower as well

⁴⁸ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 213.

⁴⁹ Hogg, ‘Rewyll’, 76.

⁵⁰ Mertes, *English noble household*, 102-3; Woolgar, *The great household*, 68; Woolgar, *Senses*, 155; Adrian R. Bell and Richard S. Dale, ‘The medieval pilgrimage business’, *Enterprise & Society*, 12/3 (2011), 601-27, 612; Heale, *Monasticism in late medieval England, c.1300-1535*, 18-20, 37.

⁵¹ Postles, ‘Heads of religious houses as administrators’, 47-8. See also Mavis Mate, ‘Property investment by Canterbury Cathedral Priory, 1250-1400’, *Journal of British studies*, 23/2 (1984), 1-21.

⁵² Postles, ‘Heads of religious houses as administrators’, 42.

than the nearly 11% spent annually in average large lay households.⁵³ Aside from its initial construction, then, the cost of Syon's building and repairs works was in keeping with, and even less than, that of comparable institutions.⁵⁴

The construction of Syon's Isleworth monastery site began in 1426, but was not ready for residence until 1431, when the community moved in.⁵⁵ In 1443, as an aid and alms to the abbey, Syon was given protection from Crown purveyors for ten years, and was allowed to move its goods through several locations without toll. The next year, two of the abbey's masons were given permission to use ships to transport Syon's building materials with similar freedom from tolls and purveyance.⁵⁶ Major construction projects, including on the cloisters, dormitories, chapterhouse, precinct workshops, and other buildings continued through the 1430s, 1440s and late 1460s, and the church was not consecrated until 1488.⁵⁷ Even then the building work continued, with several additions built in the 1490s, including the manufacture of a grate between the sisters' and the brothers' side of the convent, made possible by ten tons of iron gifted by the king.⁵⁸ Between 1507 and 1512, work was done on the 'new building' and the 'new hall', both made mostly of local brick, like most post-1479 construction at the abbey. The monastic buildings were also made with local bricks.⁵⁹ In 1502, a brickmaker from nearby Brentford was contracted to supply 400,000 bricks to the abbey.⁶⁰ The abbey also had its own brickhouse, which it leased out in the fifteenth century to a tenant in return for 12,000 bricks a year, used in the abbey construction.⁶¹ It is unclear what exactly these buildings were, though they are likely to have included the 'womenhouse', which is first found in the abbey household accounts shortly afterward. The 'new hall' was likely a hall for the external household of

⁵³ For Durham, see Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and markets*, 24-7. For large lay households, see Mertes, *English noble household*, Appendix B, 216-7. I combined the building material with craftsmen's wages to get a rough estimate of building costs as a whole at these households.

⁵⁴ See Chapter 3 above for more comparisons of building costs at different monasteries.

⁵⁵ Johnston, 'VCH, House of Bridgettines', 182; Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 17-19. The monastery had also invested previously in construction at its Twickenham site, for which it was given gifts of oak and other timber from the Crown. See Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 16.

⁵⁶ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 17.

⁵⁷ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 18.

⁵⁸ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 18-19.

⁵⁹ Farrant, 'The Birgittine abbey of Syon: the archaeological evidence', 35.

⁶⁰ Diane K Bolton, Patricia E C Croot, and M a Hicks, 'Ealing and Brentford: economic history', in T F T Baker and C R Elrington (eds.), *A History of the County of Middlesex, Vol. 7: Acton, Chiswick, Ealing and Brentford, West Twyford, Willesden* (London: Victoria County History, 1982), 131-44.

⁶¹ 'Heston and Isleworth: economic and social history'.

Syon's precinct, headed by the chief steward. From 1512 onward, expenditure stayed at a low, relatively even level until the end of the series in 1536, averaging £91 a year.

The Abbey Church

The church of Syon Abbey was probably 'among the flowers of the perpendicular style', built as it was during the late-medieval boom in English architecture.⁶² Though there are no remains left standing above ground (the monastery and precincts having been knocked down and replaced by the Duke of Northumberland's Syon Park), excavations by a BBC Time Team/Birkbeck collaboration in 2004 yielded evidence that Syon's church was the widest in medieval England, and potentially comparable in size to present-day Westminster Abbey, though recent estimates have been more cautious.⁶³ The cost was equally large. Between 1461 and 1479 alone, Syon spent £5,629 on its construction.⁶⁴

This enormous expenditure was reflected in its style: it was built largely out of stone from Caen, and was probably quite ornately carved.⁶⁵ A piece of a finely sculpted stone pillar, said by some to be from the Syon church, existed until recently in the modern Syon Abbey, in Kent, and is considered a relic of St Richard Reynolds, a Syon priest whose martyred body, the story goes, was displayed on it. If this block is actually from the medieval Syon's church, it would suggest a highly decorative interior and exterior design.⁶⁶ Other findings support this conclusion. The Birkbeck archaeological excavations revealed traces of yellow-green floor tiles and fragments of stained glass.⁶⁷ The contents of two 'casements' of six and a half foot in length full of coloured glass with images were probably used as church windows, as were, perhaps, images (of what material is not known) of St Birgitta and St Catherine.⁶⁸ A Syon altar table resplendent with gold, silver and gems has been described, and the

⁶² Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 16.

⁶³ Foyle, 'Syon Park', 553. See Farrant, 'The Birgittine abbey of Syon: the archaeological evidence', 35.

⁶⁴ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 17.

⁶⁵ Farrant, 'The Birgittine abbey of Syon: the archaeological evidence', 35; Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 22.

⁶⁶ Fletcher, *Syon Abbey*. Tait claims that the block was from the abbey's gatehouse: Tait, *A fair place*, 179-80.

⁶⁷ Foyle, 'Syon Park', 553.

⁶⁸ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 23.

Abbey is known to have possessed extravagant liturgical books.⁶⁹ The abbey also had a pix of gold, garnished with pearls and ‘course stones’, gilt plate, and ‘white plate’ at the time of its dissolution.⁷⁰ While most monasteries had organs in the fifteenth century, Birgittine guidelines forbade them.⁷¹ The abbey may well have not had one, but if so, it is then a curious fact that one of the earliest surviving pieces of English organ music is associated with Syon.⁷² If the abbey did have an organ, it would have added to the ornate décor inside the church.

My own study of the Syon Sacristan Accounts has uncovered even more evidence of the magnificence of the abbey church’s interior decorations. Primary among the items of art bought, made and repaired for the abbey were embroideries. For example, in 1509, the sacristan paid 4s for mending of a ‘Lady of Pity’ embroidery work.⁷³ The next year, she spent 6s 8d on an embroidered crucifix with Mary and John.⁷⁴ In 1511, she paid 7s for another embroidered crucifix, and in 1512, the sacristan paid 10s for an embroidered cross, 40s for five embroidered crucifixes with Mary and John, and 16s 8d for two more similar crucifixes.⁷⁵ In 1515, an ‘embroidered Trinity’ was purchased for 13s 4d, as was an embroidery of ‘The Salvation of Our Lady’. A rood of the same make was also purchased that year for 10s.⁷⁶ In 1524, the sacristan bought an embroidered ‘image of Lady’ – probably the Virgin Mary, for 13s 4d.⁷⁷ In another year, she paid 62s for the embroidery of two ‘Orsays’ for a vestment.⁷⁸ In 1531, crosses, probably of a precious metal, given their overall cost of £4 15s 8d, were purchased to add to a ‘vestment of embroidery work’.⁷⁹ In many years, the abbey also bought ‘embroidered flowers’. The bulk purchases of these items ranged from 3s 4d for ten of these flowers in 1513 (at a rate of 4d each), to 120 for 35s in 1511 (at a rate

⁶⁹ Caroline Mary Barron and Mary Erler, ‘The making of Syon Abbey’s altar table of Our Lady c.1490-96’, in John Mitchell and Matthew Moran (eds.), *England and the Continent in the middle ages : studies in memory of Andrew Martindale : proceedings of the 1996 Harlaxton Symposium* (Harlaxton Medieval Studies, 8; Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 2000), 318-35; Spear, *Leadership in medieval English nunneries*, 92.

⁷⁰ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 535.

⁷¹ Tait, *A fair place*, 218.

⁷² Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 20.

⁷³ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1738.

⁷⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2296.

⁷⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2296, -2297.

⁷⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2300.

⁷⁷ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2307.

⁷⁸ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2319.

⁷⁹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2312.

of 3d halfpenny each).⁸⁰ In the seven years for which the number of flowers embroidered is given in the accounts, the average purchased per year was 53. Though it is tempting to assume that these were decorations, the great number purchased annually may suggest some other use. They may have been used as appliqués to decorate furnishings or vestments, as was common later in Elizabethan embroidery.⁸¹ It is also possible that they were used as tokens or gifts for friends of the abbey. The embroideries made of the ‘three flowers of great beauty’ – a bunch of three lilies symbolizing the ‘three adornments of [Mary’s] soul’ in the Brigittine Lessons as read at Syon would have made a meaningful gift.⁸²

Interestingly, there is no mention in the accounts of these embroidered flowers after 1521, and spending on embroidery in general seems to drop off considerably around this time. This decline was preceded, however, by the direct employment of an embroiderer, who received £3 13s 1d in wages, spread over seven instalments, during 1520. He or she also travelled to London that year, and received 2s 8d in expenses for the journey.⁸³ This is the only mention of such an employee in the accounts. It is unknown if this was a regular member of staff who was normally compensated through other arrangements invisible to the accounts, or if the year 1520 occasioned extraordinary needs for embroidery at the abbey. One clue may be the purchase in 1530 of three dozen ‘broches for embroidering’, which suggests the presence of a needlework artisan, or alternatively, implies the possibility that the Syon nuns themselves were involved in embroidery, as were their sisters in the mother abbey Vadstena.⁸⁴ Overall, the sacristan spent anywhere from 3s to over £4 a year on embroidery items and work, with an average expenditure of £1 10s per year.

Candlesticks were also a common and sometimes major expense of the sacristan. The accounts indicate no significant variety in the kinds purchased, except to distinguish between ‘Belle’ candlesticks, ‘Grate’ candlesticks, ‘laten candlesticks’ (latten being a brass-like metal), ‘standing candlesticks for altars’, and ‘candlesticks for the choir’. A single pair of ‘great candlesticks’, bought in 1511, cost the abbey 46s 2d, but thirteen

⁸⁰ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2298, -2296.

⁸¹ Margaret Jourdain, *The history of English secular embroidery* (New York: Dutton and Company, 1912), 33.

⁸² Blunt, *Myroure*, 223.

⁸³ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2305.

⁸⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2317. See Chapter 2.

‘Belle’ candlesticks were purchased for 10s 3d, and the three pairs of standing candlesticks for altars were bought the same year for 6s 9d.⁸⁵ The abbey also purchased two prickets (spikes to hold candles) for the side altars in 1527.⁸⁶

Crucifixes of undefined material were another common Syon expense rarely described in any detail. Anywhere from one to ten could be purchased in a year, for a price of up to 48s 8d.⁸⁷ Many of these may have been embroidered, like those already mentioned. One was papered in 1511 at a cost of 8d.⁸⁸ Three were ‘set’ in 1514, for a charge of 12d.⁸⁹ What they were set into or on, or how, would depend on what they were made of, and so remains a mystery, though the common sixteenth-century usage of a ‘setting’ as indicating a means to describe precious and semi-precious stones set into metal base, suggests that they may have been made in this way.⁹⁰ There is one clear example of such craftsmanship in the Syon accounts; in 1519, the sacristan paid 21s for ‘veying and setting of stones in silver and gilt.’⁹¹ She purchased several other ‘settings’, but the low cost of these and the setting of the three crucifixes mentioned above argues against precious stones and metal. For example, in 1515, the sacristan paid 36s 8d for 84 ‘settings of Johanis’ (or approximately 5d each), and 12s 16d for 40 ‘settings of flowers’ (at 4d each).⁹² ‘Setting’ in this context may have meant a form of mounting for embroidery. This is suggested by the setting of the 40 flowers, which echoes the many embroidered flowers purchased yearly, and if so, the ‘Johanis’ would have been an embroidery as well.⁹³

A number of other varieties of art were owned or purchased by the abbey. In 1516, ‘a stained cloth of St Kateren & St Swithun’ was purchased.⁹⁴ The next year, the sacristan bought a painting of St Nicholas and St Martin, and a ‘St Kateryn Cloth’ (perhaps the same one) was mended.⁹⁵ In 1511, the crown of ‘an image of Our Lady’

⁸⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2296.

⁸⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2310.

⁸⁷ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2298.

⁸⁸ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2296.

⁸⁹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2299.

⁹⁰ ‘setting’ Oxford English Dictionary: OED Online’.

⁹¹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2304.

⁹² TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2300.

⁹³ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2296.

⁹⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2301.

⁹⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2302.

– probably a statue – was mended for 6d.⁹⁶ Two unspecified images were painted in 1513 for 28s, and ‘Our Lady’ – again likely a statue – was painted in 1514, along with other things for a total of 21s 8d.⁹⁷ A ‘paper with devices and flowers painted and gilded on it’ was made in 1523, perhaps for the visit of Cardinal Wolsey in that year.⁹⁸ A cross for the trindle – a coiled wax candle – was painted five years later, as was a table in the nuns’ choir.⁹⁹ The church had a Lady Altar (also described as the Lady Tabernacle), which was made in the late fifteenth century, and according to the Sacristan Accounts was cleaned on several occasions.¹⁰⁰ Another Lady Tabernacle was made and painted for 6s 8d in 1530.¹⁰¹ A total of fourteen holy water stocks were bought in 1510 and 1511, and a ‘St Briggitte Shippe’ was made for the abbey in 1534, at a cost of 4s.¹⁰² This may have been a visual reference the story from one of St Birgitta’s *Revelations*, in which a man on a narrow bridge over a great abyss is offered life if only he would jump onto the adjacent ship of life, representing the discipline and community of the Church.¹⁰³ The image of the ship also symbolized in her visions the life of a man, brought to fulfilment when steered to safe harbour in Christ.¹⁰⁴

The Sacristan Accounts also record purchase of a number of sumptuous fabrics and pre-sewn textiles. In 1528 for instance, a banner was painted for the abbey for 12d, and in 1521, four cushions were purchased for use in the church.¹⁰⁵ Buttons ‘of siluer and gilt for the canopy’ were bought in 1517, and a Lent veil was purchased in 1520 for 20s.¹⁰⁶ In addition to these items, the sacristan also purchased luxurious fabrics, many undoubtedly for use in vestments, but some perhaps for curtains and other soft furnishings in the church. These fabrics included damask gold, ribbon, silk, cloth of gold, gold of Venice, blue and crimson velvet, satin of Bruges, Cologne silk, and

⁹⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2296.

⁹⁷ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2298.

⁹⁸ Erler, ‘Syon Abbey’s care for its books’, 306.

⁹⁹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2304.

¹⁰⁰ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2300, -2305, -2306, -2307, -2308, -2312, -2317. Barron and Erler, ‘The making of Syon Abbey’s altar table of Our Lady c.1490-96’.

¹⁰¹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2317.

¹⁰² TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2296, -2315.

¹⁰³ Stephen Borgehammar, Denis Searby, and Bridget Morris (eds.), *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden: Volume II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 208.

¹⁰⁴ Julia Bolton Holloway (ed.), *Saint Bride and her book: Birgitta of Sweden’s Revelations* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 44-5.

¹⁰⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2319, -2306.

¹⁰⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2302, -2305.

Paris silk, and leather. For example, in 1508, the sacristan bought 52 yards of blue damask for a total of over £12, and this cloth was purchased in other colours as well throughout the years of her accounts, including a type made with gold.¹⁰⁷ The very fine patterned Brussels silk cloth, so expensive it was normally used only for gifts in most large medieval households, was also purchased by the sacristan.¹⁰⁸ In fact, this extravagance was a nearly annual expense, undoubtedly for vestments or church decorations, sometimes at a cost of up to £10 per year. The sacristan also purchased cloth of gold, for example in 1514, at a cost of over £13.¹⁰⁹ She bought Satin of Bruges in 1519 and 1521, silk on a number of occasions, and bought the sumptuous gold-patterned blue silk of Cologne once, in 1528.¹¹⁰ The Syon Cope, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum, is one of the most famous vestments from the medieval period in England, and appears to have been owned by the abbey when it left England for the second time, after the disbanding of their reconstituted monastery (re-founded by Mary I), early in the reign of Elizabeth I. It is not known whether Syon possessed the cope in its pre-1539 existence at Isleworth. The vestment itself has been dated to between 1300 and 1320. It is greatly significant, as the only known example of the *opus anglicanum* style of medieval embroidery to use a background of coloured silk stitches.¹¹¹ If Syon did own this, it gives some indication of the level of splendour the abbey church and liturgical celebrations may have had.

The sacristan also purchased a number of items used in the celebration of Mass and other ceremonies. Cruets – vessels for holy water or communion wine – were bought, gilded and mended on several occasions, as were chalices and paxes – tablets depicting an image of the crucifixion kissed by the priest in celebration of the Mass.¹¹² One of the latter was gilded and set with enamelled flowers.¹¹³ Three paxes were purchased in 1521.¹¹⁴ The abbey likely had a number of reliquaries, as well.¹¹⁵ Altar cloths were also made on occasion, usually alongside vestments, and flowers

¹⁰⁷ TNA SC 6/HenVII/1738, SC 6/HenVIII/2296, Gold: SC 6/HenVIII/2297.

¹⁰⁸ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2296.

¹⁰⁹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2299.

¹¹⁰ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2219, -2304, -2306.

¹¹¹ A.H. Christie, 'Notes on the Syon Cope', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 61/357 (1932), 252-59., Victoria and Albert Museum, 'The Syon cope', <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93171/the-syon-cope-cope-unknown/>>, accessed 1 December 2014

¹¹² TNA SC 6/HenVII/1738, SC 6/HenVIII/2296, -2297, -2306, -2307.

¹¹³ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2307.

¹¹⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2306.

¹¹⁵ Ellis, '*Viderunt eam filie Syon*', 32.

such as lavender and roses were bought as well.¹¹⁶ The sacristan also purchased large amounts of incense, this despite the negative attitude of the *Syon Additions* towards the substance, which stated that the sisters, at least, should use none: ‘in stede of encense, they vse deuoute prayer.’¹¹⁷

From the evidence given, an image of the splendour of Syon’s abbey church develops. In addition to the above items – images, fabrics, and fine goods – the building may have had painted masonry, perhaps in the patterned decoration that was fashionable at the time, and a number of statues.¹¹⁸ Contrary to Birgitta’s instructions the Syon church certainly did have stained glass windows and other detailed decoration, and may have had carved pillars – all conflicting with her call for buildings ‘free of ornament’. The church’s size alone – one of the biggest monastic churches in medieval England – may particularly have challenged her call for buildings ‘redolent of humility’. These aspects of design, and the many items of church decoration found in the Sacristan Accounts, are revealing of Syon’s perhaps selective adherence to Birgitta’s guidance on humility in architecture.

The Monastic Buildings

Far less evidence is available regarding the architecture and décor of the monastic buildings. Even the basic layout is still nebulous. We cannot yet know with certainty where the male and female monastic buildings were in relation to the church. Nunneries usually positioned their cloister north of the convent church, while male monasteries had the cloister to the south.¹¹⁹ At Vadstena, the brothers’ enclosure was located on the south side of the church, suggesting that this monastery, and likely Syon, as well, which was physically modelled after it, may have followed the convention.¹²⁰ Archaeologists have suggested a different configuration for Syon,

¹¹⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2301, -2311.

¹¹⁷ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 27.

¹¹⁸ Woolgar, *The great household*, 74.

¹¹⁹ Gilchrist, *Gender and material culture: the archaeology of religious women*, 133-34.

¹²⁰ Elisabet Regner, ‘Monastic vision and archaeology: Vadstena Abbey revisited’, in Claes Gejrot, Sara Risberg, and Mia Akestam (eds.), *Saint Birgitta, Syon and Vadstena: papers from a symposium in Stockholm, 4-6 October 2007*. (Stockholm: Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, 2010), 110-28, 112-13.

however, based on female skeletons found where the men's cloister would be expected.¹²¹

The *Syon Additions* do give some details about the types of chambers found in each side of the monastery. Certain rooms or areas were duplicated on each side. There was, therefore, a cloister for the nuns, and a separate cloister for the priests, deacons and lay brothers. Each side had its own frater, infirmary, garden, chafing house, and washing house with yard.¹²² Both the brothers' and the sisters' *Additions* to the *Rule* refer repeatedly to the 'prison' to be used for punishment of serious faults, though whether a separate chamber was designated as such, or was set aside only when necessary, is not apparent from the sources.¹²³ The women had their own chapterhouse, visited by the Bishop of London and the confessor general during the Dissolution, in their attempts to convince the nuns to support the king.¹²⁴ The men had two chapters, one for the priests and deacons, and another for the lay brothers, but these seem to have been held in the same chapterhouse at different times.¹²⁵ Each side of course had also the necessary lavatories, which in the *Additions for the Sisters* were called 'the howse of secrete nede', and in the *Additions for the Lay Brothers*, the 'howse of esement'.¹²⁶ These were probably, like those of other major monasteries of the time, advanced in comparison with toilets in lay houses, with flowing water and well-engineered drainage.¹²⁷

As the abbess had sole control of the convent's temporal needs, and she delegated the responsibility for them to female obedientiaries, the majority of convent offices likely existed on the sisters' side. If we can assume an average of one room per main officer (the chantress was likely to need less space, and the chambress more, for example), then there were at least ten required office or work spaces, the largest and most important probably being the spaces of the cellaress, chambress, sacristan,

¹²¹ Farrant, 'The Birgittine abbey of Syon: the archaeological evidence'; Foyle, 'Syon Park'.

¹²² Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 21.

¹²³ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 22-27; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 35-37.

¹²⁴ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 88.

¹²⁵ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 12, 18.

¹²⁶ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Sisters*, 72; Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 19.

¹²⁷ Woolgar, *The great household*, 170; Kerr, *Fontevraud in England*, 105; Barron, 'Introduction', 20; Harvey, *Living and dying*, 78.

treasuresses, keeper of the buttery, and keeper of the garden.¹²⁸ The brothers did have some officers, but of those revealed by the sources, the male sacrist is the only one who is likely to have had a separate office space. The most prominent separate office spaces were those of the abbess and the confessor general. Due to their busy and fluctuating duties, they were each allowed a separate chamber in which to eat, drink and sleep. The confessor general had his own substantial locutory, a luxury the abbess probably had as well, to facilitate her meetings with prominent seculars.¹²⁹ For the abbess at least, the locutory would have been split by a grate, through which the interlocutors could speak, but which would maintain the abbess' strict enclosure. There is evidence of one such instance of the abbess speaking to a secular at a 'grate', conversing with Thomas Cromwell himself.¹³⁰

The sources mention several other chambers and building features which seem to have existed only on the men's side of the convent, including a shaving house, a vestry, a belfry, and an infirmary chapel.¹³¹ The women's side, on the other hand, possibly had a common workshop area, as existed at Vadstena, though the lesser emphasis on female manual labour at Syon makes this uncertain.¹³² Each side also seems to have had a separate garden.¹³³ It was suggested in the *Additions of Prior Peter* for Vadstena, that a Brigittine monastery might build a structure for singing lessons, or a separate dwelling near the infirmary for a sister who was insane or a leper.¹³⁴ No evidence for such building types at Syon has come to light.

The construction of these buildings was expensive. Between 1461 and 1479, £1,352 was spent on construction of the cloister and dorter of the nuns alone. The abbey also spent £170 on the chapterhouse, and £14 on a smithy.¹³⁵ Although some structures in the precinct and monastery were perhaps made with wattle and daub, most were probably made from brick, with some at least receiving windows of glass from

¹²⁸ I am excluding the infirmaress and librarian from this count, since they may have had no separate offices apart from the rooms themselves.

¹²⁹ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 19. See Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 88.

¹³⁰ Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 88.

¹³¹ Hogg (ed.), *Additions for the Brethren*, 39, 45.

¹³² Olsen, 'Work and work ethics'.

¹³³ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 219. See also Chapter 4.

¹³⁴ Hogg, 'Additions of Prior Peter', 111.

¹³⁵ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 17.

Normandy.¹³⁶ Roofs were often of lead from the Peak District, and were decorated in places with weathercocks.¹³⁷ Some buildings had plaster work such as the exterior pargeting, which must have made for lovely architecture, and most had chimneys.¹³⁸ A clock with a painted dial, a bell, and brass pulleys, was also installed at the abbey, probably in the precinct, though it may have been for inside use, and Syon had a belfry on the brothers' side, for which new bells were purchased in 1494.¹³⁹ Many walls of Syon's buildings were whitewashed, such as the cloister wall on the ladies' side, and the abbey contained many vaulted spaces, similar perhaps in function and form to those in the famous Hampton Court kitchens.¹⁴⁰

Unlike evidence of art for the church in the Sacristan Accounts, there is little indication of interior decoration or furnishings in the domestic spaces of the monastery buildings. In 1529, the confessor general had made for him 'a wheel' and a table, and in the same year, dressers for the kitchen, and a chair, stools, and an aumbry were made for the abbess, though this last, being a cabinet for the storage of chalices and other vessels for the Eucharist was likely not for her own chambers.¹⁴¹ Though little is said about furniture inside the monastery, it is likely to have been of the large, bulky, and permanent kind increasingly fashionable in the later middle ages.¹⁴² The Chambress Accounts unfortunately give little insight into décor on the sisters' side, as the majority of her purchases related to clothing manufacture. We can glean from her accounts, though, glimpses of candlesticks to light the rooms and hallways of the nuns' enclosure, and snuffers to put the lights out. Two accounts also list expenses for the purchase of curtain rings, though with no indication of the cloth or design of the curtains themselves.¹⁴³ Bedding is also alluded to in expenses of 'dryvyng of feathers', presumably for mattresses and pillows, and in one year, a man was paid 14d for this work plus mending of cushions and bolsters.¹⁴⁴ There is also a

¹³⁶ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 22.

¹³⁷ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 20, 22.

¹³⁸ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 19-20.

¹³⁹ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 20-23; Woolgar, *The great household*, 83.

¹⁴⁰ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 20; Woolgar, *The great household*, 75.

¹⁴¹ Dunning, 'Building of Syon', 21.

¹⁴² Woolgar, *The great household*, 77.

¹⁴³ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2291, -2318.

¹⁴⁴ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2291, -2292.

near-annual charge for help ‘scouring the Master’s Blankets’, and in 1517, 12d was spent purchasing ‘a case for a pair of tables’.¹⁴⁵

The corridors of Roman convents in the seventeenth century were decorated with religious images to facilitate spiritual focus.¹⁴⁶ It is possible that some of the images purchased by the Syon sacristan were meant for the cloister rather than the church, and were seen as part of her responsibilities since they involved religious imagery. While Syon’s cloisters may have had such decorations, their décor is unlikely to have compared with that of secular households of the time (and even some major monasteries), which vied for magnificence in material luxury.¹⁴⁷

Conclusion

The two types of Syon’s fabric discussed in this chapter exhibit strikingly different tendencies in terms of ascetic impulses and adherence to the guidelines of Saint Birgitta and her *Brigittine Rule*. In the clothing of the religious, all evidence points to the abbey sticking to the letter of the *Rule*. The evidence for the architecture and décor of the monastic buildings is more elusive, but what does exist points to humility in decoration. In the architecture and décor of the abbey church, on the other hand, splendid display and grandeur abounded, contrary to the directions of the founding saint. While this may indeed have been an exhibition of that pride that Birgitta warned against, it may have had a moral justification; Syon may have concluded that within the English cultural context, it was most important to glorify God through art and architecture, and to attract greater numbers of pilgrims – who often came as much for the museum-like sightseeing as for the religious experience – in order to expand the audience for the abbey’s work of spiritual evangelism.¹⁴⁸ It is to this spiritual outreach that we now turn.

¹⁴⁵ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2318.

¹⁴⁶ Dunn, ‘Convent architecture and nuns’, 155.

¹⁴⁷ Woolgar, *The great household*, 61; Given-Wilson, *The English nobility*, 96; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 2, 360.

¹⁴⁸ For this view of medieval pilgrimage as tourism, see Bernard of Clairvaux, as quoted in Bell and Dale, ‘The medieval pilgrimage business’, 612.

Conclusion:

Sharing The Fruits of Contemplation

Materiality was at the heart of the Brigittine spiritual mission and its expression at Syon Abbey. Saint Birgitta's metaphor of the new vineyard established a model of monastic life which explicitly tied spiritual renewal to images of economic production. The Brigittine Order, established principally for enclosed contemplative women, was to reach beyond the cloister to evangelize the laity and distribute the 'grapes of good devotion' to the world. These fruits of contemplation were to be nurtured by the enclosed contemplative women, whose daily individual and collective interactions with material challenges would test, express, and inspire their spiritual growth, which could be processed further by the Brigittine brethren in their spiritual outreach work, and by the mostly female-run bureaucratic structures which enabled both that outreach and daily material life. The material methods of attaining the Brigittine spiritual goals included, on the one hand, seeing all of materiality, including mundane materiality, as a spiritual possibility, and on the other, organizing labour and material resources to maximize spiritual results. They produced piety in their daily life, through their spiritual, intellectual, and administrative work, and through their consumption choices and decisions about collective property and finance. That is, they had the potential to produce piety this way. But how well did they do? Did they, in the end, use their material life to express and inspire piety? Or did they, instead, use it primarily for worldly pleasures?

The present dissertation has asked these questions, and the findings are mixed. In many senses, Syon's material life was true to Brigittine ideals. Women held final temporal power in the abbey, despite the brethren's involvement in some construction-related administration which likely was justified on the basis of their role

as conservators of the Order. The sisters managed a wide range of administrative duties without major problems and submitted regular accounts, which were consistently audited and kept well-organized. Selection of officers was done largely on the basis of administrative experience and with an eye to maintaining effective working teams. The financial reporting structure was centralized and efficient, with no distribution of monastic 'wages' to individual religious, and no separate and redundant households based on office, kinship, or affinity. The abbey was very wealthy, in keeping with Brigittine guidelines, and maintained a connection with the royal family. For the most part, it did not acquire new estates above the initial foundation grant, and the only land sold was minor and released in the lead-up to the Dissolution. In its expenditure composition, the abbey was normal for households of its size, and it kept to the *Rule* in important aspects of its consumption, namely, in its fasting practices, its consumption of pottage (indicating a more ascetic approach to food), and the types of cloth from which religious habits and bedding were made.

In other senses, Syon may have redefined the virtue of labour or consumption types, perhaps justifying them with reference to the greater good, or with reinterpretations of the *Rule* and its guidelines. The status of manual labour versus administrative work is one such situation. There is little evidence that the Syon women engaged in manual labour. The percentage of sisters involved in bureaucracy was so great that additional tasks may have been seen to threaten time available for the more important duties of spiritual and intellectual labour. Administrative work may have been, in some ways, redefined as manual labour, and was certainly itself seen as 'good besynes' in the Brigittine context – work imbued with as much spiritual meaning as all other aspects of material life. A similar re-framing may have taken place with regards to the architecture of the abbey church, which otherwise stands out as directly contrary to the humility in design that Birgitta called for. The apparently richly decorated Syon Abbey church was perhaps justified, in the minds of the religious, by its role in furthering greater aims: it projected power, and thus increased the security of social status needed in an era of creeping reformation; it glorified God through its beauty; and most importantly, it helped draw pilgrims, who would then personally benefit from the piety produced and processed at Syon. The splendour of the abbey church may thus have been directly connected, in the minds of the religious, to the primary

aim of their Order: the renewal through the world through the evangelization of the laity.

In some areas of material life, however, the religious of Syon seem to have lived at an elite level, contrary to reasonable interpretation of the *Rule*, without any apparent spiritual justification other than perhaps a general need for elite consumption as a sign appealing to friends of high status. This is particularly true of the many elite types of food eaten. Here, it seems, the abbey bent most to the demands of social conventions and elite culinary fashions, with increasing amounts of high-status meats and fish, numerous and voluminous spices, increasing use of food colouring spices in particular, and enormous and growing quantities of sugar.

In some cases, the extent to which Syon lived by Brigittine ideals is simply unknown, due to a lack of source material. The size of the household, and thus the number and kinds of staff helpers available to the religious cannot be conclusively determined, and so a significant factor impacting the work of the religious is also left unknown. Due to the lack of bishops' visitation records, potential personality conflicts or issues regarding conduct of obedientiary duties remain unseen. Barring the discovery of new records, any money held by the Syon confessor general or men's community remains elusive. No inventories of gifts to the abbey remain, leaving only conjecture as to whether these presents were kept by the religious or were distributed to the poor, as directed by the *Rule*. Certain food items were recorded with insufficient detail to determine the volumes consumed at the household in most years, including items which likely had a high impact on the calorie intake of the religious, such as wine, venison, and cheese, and items which reflected their elite status, such as shellfish, lamb, and exotic spices. The degree to which the monastic buildings (as opposed to the church) were themselves ornately carved, decorated, glazed, or furnished, is also unknown; the lack of mention of these things may indicate that the abbey cloisters were in fact 'redolent of humility', or it may be due to a gap in the sources.

Finally, and most strikingly, the sources do not provide enough detail to determine if Syon Abbey fulfilled one of its most central tasks, as defined by the *Brigittine Rule*: at the end of each fiscal year, to budget and save only the necessities for the following year, and distribute the remainder of money to the poor on the feast of All Saints.

While a surplus of money can be calculated in some years of the sixteenth century, after the great expenditure on abbey construction was largely concluded, no evidence of major, annual almsgiving has appeared. Record of such almsgiving may have been recorded in accounts which have not survived, or responsibility for major alms distribution may have been in the hands of the treasurer (who certainly spent much on alms in the one year for which a detailed account exists) or the abbess, evidence of it lost, perhaps, with the itemized information of their ‘necessary expenses’ which was originally recorded in journal books. The abbey may also, instead, have decided to prioritize other expenses, such as the publication of books, or the purchase of church decoration that might attract pilgrims – expenses which were still in keeping with the greater Syon mission of evangelizing the laity. Alternatively, the abbey may have never had the opportunity to fulfil this responsibility, having seen, perhaps, projected expenses which are hidden to us now.

Late medieval and Tudor society increasingly suspected that monasteries were using their vast wealth for selfish purposes, or without any clear moral direction.¹ This does not seem to have been true of Syon Abbey. For those aspects of Syon life for which sufficient evidence survives, the abbey appears to have largely lived in accordance with the *Brigittine Rule* and the ideals of Saint Birgitta, though sometimes more in spirit than to the letter. The major exception to this is the household food consumption, many aspects of which were not in keeping with Brigittine values of moderation in food and a lack of expensive and wasteful spices. But given the positive qualities of fine food consumption as a demonstration of social standing on the one hand, and its negative connotations of excessive and ‘disordered delight’, on the other, monasteries, including Syon, were to an extent in a double bind. They had to project a holy approach to materiality characterized by some degree of restraint and abstinence, but must also be seen to consume, display, and give, in order to demonstrate good lordship – expected of them as great landlords. If they decreased the display too much, their political and social legitimacy and even security could be threatened. They needed the patronage networks that could be built through good lordship, hospitality and display.

¹ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 255, 458-9; Heale, ‘Training in superstition?’, Heale, *Monasticism in late medieval England, c.1300-1535*, 67-70.

This perhaps became a tighter bind in the later middle ages and into the sixteenth century as display increased in noble households, compared with the earlier, more Spartan life of the elite. Perhaps this also affected society's attitude toward monasticism, causing a contradiction in people's views and expectations of the religious, requiring them to be ascetic, but to do so while maintaining the luxury expected of their class. The food habits of Syon demonstrate both of these qualities, the fasting and the feast-foods, the pottage on the one hand, and the elite meats and fish on the other. Even luxurious foods could, conceivably, be justified in the context of the Syon spiritual mission – for the projection of an image of elite status was essential to the maintenance of the abbey's property, its spiritual influence among the elite, and the political connections necessary to the security of its ongoing evangelical duties. This outreach to the world formed the aim and mission of Syon Abbey.

Sharing the Fruits of Contemplation

The primary aim of Brigittine monasticism, and therefore of Syon Abbey, was to cultivate the 'grapes of good devotion' through spiritual work, intellectual work, and daily material life, and to share these grapes – the fruits of contemplation, in Dominican terminology – with the world. As the present work has shown, Syon in large part followed the guidelines of Brigittine values, and could therefore be said to have produced piety worthy of being distributed. This, the abbey did in numerous ways. What impact did it have? What was its success at evangelizing the laity and thereby fulfilling its central mission? We have already seen the widespread social connections of Syon Abbey and its individual religious. Through advice, friendship, and gentle admonishment in letters and conversations at the enclosure grate, the Syon women and men could share the fruits of their contemplation with their numerous social contacts, boarders, and staff. A passage in the *Additions* suggests that the sisters' mature response to frivolous speech by secular visitors and staff could have a gentle teaching component; this was both an evangelical opportunity and duty for those religious who held administrative office. The sisters were to serve as a good example to outsiders through their speech and behaviour in these encounters, and were to admonish them gently when necessary.² Sisters could also act as spiritual

² Ellis, '*Viderunt eam filie Syon*', 95, 101.

advisors, to a minor extent, through their written correspondence with family and friends of the abbey. There are a few traces of such letters written by Syon women – most accompanied by presents of Brigittine-style prayer beads, books, printed woodcuts of St Birgitta, or gifts of food at holidays.³

That there was ample opportunity for the sisters and brothers to exercise these skills in person, is clear from the Syon Cellaress Accounts' records of income from boarding of laypersons in the monastic precinct. Lay people were often drawn into close living associations with the Syon in order to take advantage of the opportunity for both spiritual counsel from the priests and preachers, and association with the godly worldview of the nuns, which proximity to the abbey offered.⁴ Boarding of gentry and aristocratic spiritual seekers rose from 1515 onwards, probably due in part to the increasing prominence of Syon Abbey's male preachers around this time, among whom several were authors of spiritual tracts, and in part to its growing association with other prominent thinkers, such as Thomas More.⁵

The sisters could also be a powerful means of spreading piety by way of example more generally. Birgitta emphasized personal reform as a way to world reform, and believed that Christ tested good people 'so their stability in the face of hardship can become apparent to the outside world and inspire others'.⁶ In her opinion, good example was actually a more effective method of attracting people to religion than speech alone.⁷ The ability of enclosed women in general to affect the wider world through example was an accepted understanding of their vocations in the later middle ages.⁸ This understanding was also promoted by some at Syon, such as priest Richard Whitford, who argued that the sisters should be examples to the laity of good works and manner of life.⁹ Meanwhile, their own spiritual battle within the enclosure, he believed, was an 'example and light vnto all parsones'.¹⁰

³ For example, see R.N. Swanson, *Indulgences*, 273; Driver, 'Bridgettine woodcuts'.

⁴ Erler, 'Special benefactors and friends'; Erler, *Women, reading and piety*; Bainbridge, 'Women and the transmission of religious culture'; Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: women and learning c.1415-1600', 88; Tait, *A fair place*, 172, 399.

⁵ Gillespie, 'Syon and the new learning'.

⁶ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 100, 243.

⁷ Fogelqvist, *Apostasy and reform*, 154-55.

⁸ Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption*, 54, 63, 69, 70, 73; Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast*, 74-75.

⁹ da Costa, *Reforming printing*, 15.

¹⁰ da Costa, *Reforming printing*, 15.

The publishing efforts of the Syon brethren were another, more explicit, means of evangelizing the laity, and thereby fulfilling the Brigittine mission. Recent works by da Costa and others have unveiled the great extent to which the writing emanating from the abbey was directed towards purposes of lay spiritual renewal and acquired both a large audience and a widespread influence on the English book market.¹¹ The Syon writers had a significant influence on the intellectual history of late medieval and early Tudor England, acting as transmitters of new forms of piety, and of Italian humanism, to the laity, and responding in the process to a growing hunger for spiritual understanding.¹² Conscious steps were taken by Syon Abbey to expand the readership of its books by making them more accessible and affordable.¹³ This is further evidence that the religious of Syon saw a symbiosis between the financial state of the abbey, and its ability to fulfil the Brigittine spiritual mission. That is, there was a direct connection between frugality – not only of expenditure, but of income as well, in this instance – and the ability to help others and renew the world.

Pilgrimage

One of the more evocative aspects of the Syon program of spiritual outreach, which can only be briefly touched on here, is its status as a major pilgrimage location. By all indications, Syon's evangelical outreach was a tremendous success. It not only influenced lay piety all over England through its program of writing and publication, it also attracted large numbers of pilgrims whose hope for an indulgence at Syon led them to an experience of intense spiritual exposure. It is possible to come to an estimate of the number of people who visited and experienced the abbey in this

¹¹ da Costa, *Reforming printing*, 44-45; Susan Powell, 'Syon Abbey as a centre for text production', in Claes Gejrot, Sara Risberg, and Mia Akestam (eds.), *Saint Birgitta, Syon and Vadstena: papers from a symposium in Stockholm, 4-6 October 2007* (Stockholm: Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, 2010), 50-70, 53-54; Hutchison, 'Richard Whitford's *The Pype, or Tonne, of the Lyfe of Perfection*: pastoral care, or political manifesto?', 91; de Hamel, *Syon Abbey: the library*, 101; Keiser, 'The mystics and the early English printers', 12, 22-24; Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 202; Driver, 'Bridgettine woodcuts', 237-9, 50-2, 88; Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, 295, 339; Ellis, 'Further thoughts on the spirituality of Syon Abbey', 220; Hutchison, 'Dissolution no decline', 245.

¹² Bainbridge, 'The Bridgettines and major trends in religious devotion', 225; Bainbridge, 'Women and the transmission of religious culture', 59; Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*, 62; Fuller, *The Brotherhood of the Common Life and its influence*; Taylor, 'Into his secret chambre: reading and privacy in late medieval England'.

¹³ da Costa, *Reforming printing*, 26, 42, 44-45; Powell, 'Syon Abbey as a centre for text production', 53-54, 63, 91; Hutchison, 'Richard Whitford's *The Pype, or Tonne, of the Lyfe of Perfection*: pastoral care, or political manifesto?', 91; Hutchison, 'What the nuns read', 217; Ellis, 'Further thoughts on the spirituality of Syon Abbey', 238; Krug, 'Reading at Syon Abbey', 202.

manner in an average year. It was a standard practice in the period for any pilgrim, regardless of status or wealth, to give one coin, usually a penny, to the shrine being visited, particularly if an indulgence was being received.¹⁴ This amount seems to have been steady, regardless of changes in prices or wages – the offering of a single coin was a symbolic gesture of faith.¹⁵ Though some gave more than a penny, evidence shows that this was normally balanced out by those giving less – a halfpenny or farthing, even those offering no coins at all, but rather a candle or a piece of wax form.¹⁶ The income from offerings at the Syon church is therefore a good general indication of the popularity of its indulgences and pilgrimage.¹⁷

By looking at the total offerings recorded annually in the Abstracts of Abbess Accounts, and multiplying each pound by 240 pence – one penny per pilgrim, it is possible to provide a reasonable estimate of the number of pilgrims visiting the abbey each year. The £25 annual average for Syon church offerings (discussed in Chapter 3, above) works out to an average of 6,000 pilgrims per year at the abbey. The Syon church's largest offerings income, in 1513, was £34 6d, suggesting that approximately 8,166 pilgrims visited the abbey that year.¹⁸ Such calculations may be complicated by a number of factors. For example, visits from royalty, cardinals, and other extremely wealthy persons would occasion great gifts although these were often non-monetary in form.¹⁹ However, large bulk offerings of money could significantly inflate the estimate of the number of pilgrims visiting that year, and in addition, it had become acceptable in some circumstances to grant indulgences to those who had sent money to the shrine but had not come themselves, or who had even sent someone on their behalf.²⁰ The church might therefore receive more pennies than pilgrims. On the other hand, the numbers of pilgrims might have been somewhat higher than this estimate as offerings at other major churches were sometimes used for church or sacristy needs before being accounted for.²¹ There is no evidence for such an arrangement at Syon, but if one did exist, it would lead to an underestimation of

¹⁴ Nilson, *Shrines*, 114.

¹⁵ Nilson, *Shrines*, 174.

¹⁶ Nilson, *Shrines*, 114, 74; Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 181.

¹⁷ Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 45.

¹⁸ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2186.

¹⁹ Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 111.

²⁰ Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 94.

²¹ Nilson, *Shrines*, 145.

pilgrim visitors. Pilgrims also did not come in a steady flow throughout the year. In most places, they congregated on major feast days.²² At Syon Abbey, the majority of the average 6,000 pilgrims annually likely arrived on the twelve days of the year when the pardon of Syon made plenary remission available. If they arrived exclusively on these days, there would have been an average of 500 pilgrims at the abbey during each of the eight days of Lammastide, and on each of the other four major pardon days of the year.²³

By all measures, Syon's shrines and associated pilgrimage were a great success until shut down by Henry VIII and his commissioners. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Syon offerings income exceeded that of shrines at comparable abbeys. This indicates that the flow of pilgrims to Syon was higher as well. The reason for the success of Syon's two pilgrimage destinations can be attributed to three factors. First, the Lady Chapel at the Mount, and the close connections of St Birgitta's hagiography with the Virgin, tapped into growing Marian devotion in late medieval and early Tudor England.²⁴ Second, there was a common trajectory of the volume of offerings in medieval England, with new shrines receiving many more pilgrims and donations than established ones.²⁵ Syon, as a new pilgrimage site, may therefore have had an advantage of novelty. Third, Syon's proximity to both London and Windsor likely helped maintain high levels of pilgrimage and thus offerings.²⁶ These factors seem to have mitigated the effects at Syon of a country-wide loss of interest in pilgrimages to major shrines from the end of the fifteenth century onward, in favour of small, local shrines.²⁷ Syon's pilgrimages seemed to have been popular right up to 1536, when the abbey brethren were specifically banned from preaching to the public and hearing the confessions of the laity (both activities which had been major parts of the special

²² Spencer, *Pilgrim souvenirs and secular badges: medieval finds from excavations in London* 13, 117.

²³ For a description of the Syon Pardon, see: Aungier, *History and antiquities of Syon*, 421-22; 'Rich Indulgences: The Syon Pardon', in George G. Coulton (ed.), *Life in the middle ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 310-14.

²⁴ Nilson, *Shrines*, 193; F. R. Johnston, 'The English cult of St Bridget of Sweden', *Analecta Bollandiana*, 103 (1985), 75-93; Hutchison, 'Reflections'.

²⁵ Nilson, *Shrines*, 182, 90; Swanson, *Indulgences*, 427.

²⁶ Spencer, *Pilgrim souvenirs and secular badges: medieval finds from excavations in London* 179; Spencer, 'Pilgrim souvenirs and secular badges', 46.

²⁷ Nilson, *Shrines*, 182.

indulgence offered at Syon), and when prohibitions on all pilgrimage and shrines to saints had taken effect throughout England.²⁸

The Syon pilgrimage, like the abbey's publishing campaign, its extensive social contacts, its liturgy, and the power of its example, were all means of spreading the Brigittine message and renewing the world through the pious lives of the Syon nuns and the men who assisted them. It was through these actions that the religious of Syon shared the fruits of contemplation cultivated so carefully in the material lives of their cloistered vineyard. These were the goals towards which the sisters and brothers were ultimately directed as they pursued the production and processing of piety as individuals and as a community, through the medium of mundane materiality.

* * * *

The present work has focused on the material life of the Syon religious themselves, and aspects of the monastic precinct that directly impacted their daily lives. Much more can also be said about the precinct itself, and about the people who worked and traded there. While total numbers are unavailable, the accounts do provide a great deal of information about the abbey's staff, its use of professional services (e.g. payments to 'Lord Connrell, attorney and for phisik and surgery'), the gender, nationality, and residence of its trade partners (e.g. rewards to 'the Flemings on the Sea', and payments 'to Bertlotts wyf for eggs' and to 'the Bereman of Charyng Crosse'), and its purchasing patterns, staff, and processes (e.g. with a reward given 'to men going with the boat to London, Skayles being sick').²⁹ Using other source materials, much more could also be said about the logistics of the Syon pilgrimage and the provision of pilgrim badges and tokens, the gender struggles in the early Brigittine order and Syon's role in their resolution, and the histories of the Syon Abbey estates.

²⁸ Hutchison, 'Dissolution no decline', 252; Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 255; Powell, 'Preaching at Syon'.

²⁹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2183, -2257, -2260, -2262, -2283.

The history of Syon during and after the Dissolution of the Monasteries could fill a volume on its own.³⁰ The onset of this upheaval can be seen in the Syon Accounts, in which the laity can be seen responding to new strictures against pilgrimage, and to the creeping danger of association with what would become a main monastic opponent of the king. The latter is illustrated by the decline in boarding income, beginning in 1526, as fewer lay visitors came to stay. Prominent lay people and patronage-seeking gentry most likely found it less advisable to maintain strong associations with an institution so wholeheartedly opposed to the King's plans as was Syon.³¹ The very connections which had previously drawn boarders into Syon, such as its close relationships with Bishop John Fisher, with Thomas More, and with visionaries such as Elizabeth Barton, now served perhaps to hold them at bay as these people and Syon itself became more vocally and directly opposed to the King.³² A drop in the number of postulants also contributed to the decline of boarding income. While professions of some new Syon religious continued into the mid-1530s, they were fewer in number, and abbey population declined.³³ Syon lost a full one-third of its religious men between 1535 and 1537, one of whom was the abbey priest (now Saint) Richard Reynolds, executed in 1535 for his support of Elizabeth Barton, the 'Holy Maid of Kent' who had challenged Henry VIII's divorce from Katherine of Aragon.³⁴ Syon's complement of nuns also shrank in its last days at Isleworth, likely from a lack of new recruits. At the suppression of the abbey by Henry VIII's commissioners in 1539,

³⁰ Many have worked on this. For example: Virginia Bainbridge, 'Propaganda and the supernatural: the Bridgettine nuns of Syon Abbey in exile, c.1539-1630', in Fiona Reid and Katherine Holden (eds.), *Women on the move: refugees, migration and exile* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 25-41; Ellis, 'Viderunt eam filie Syon'; Fletcher, *Syon Abbey*; Hutchison, 'Dissolution no decline'; Ann E. Hutchison, 'Transplanting the vineyard: Syon Abbey 1539-1861', in Wilhelm Liebhart (ed.), *Der Birgittenorden in der frühen Neuzeit Beiträge der internationalen Tagung vom 27. Februar bis 2. März 1997 in Altmünster* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1998), 79-107; Bishop William, *History of the English Bridgettine nuns: their expulsion and exile, their wanderings, and their return to their native country* (Plymouth, 1886); Claire Walker, 'Continuity and isolation: the Bridgettines of Syon in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and its books: reading, writing and religion, c1400-1700* (Studies in Modern British Religious History; Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 155-76; Caroline Bowden, 'Books and reading at Syon Abbey, Lisbon, in the seventeenth century', in E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and its books: reading, writing and religion, c1400-1700* (Studies in Modern British Religious History; Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 177-202; Bernard, *The King's Reformation*; Duffy, *The stripping of the altars*; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3.

³¹ Bernard, *The King's Reformation*; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3.

³² Barton is most famous for her defiant and outspoken opposition to the King's divorce. Bernard, *The King's Reformation*; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3; Gillespie, 'Syon and the new learning'.

³³ Fletcher, *Syon Abbey*, 30; Tait, *A fair place*, 160, 87-88.

³⁴ Cunich, 'The brothers of Syon', 67. For Richard Reynolds and a detailed discussion of Syon's role in the resistance to the King's claim of supremacy, see Bernard, *The King's Reformation*, 90-105, 37-70. See also Fletcher, *Syon Abbey*, 32-33; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 216.

Syon had 51 nuns, 4 lay sisters, and a total of 12 priests and deacons (no lay brothers are mentioned in the pension list from which these numbers are known).³⁵

The growing political opposition to monasticism and traditional Catholicism also affected the pilgrimage to Syon and the abbey's offerings income, which dwindled as the Dissolution approached. The Abstracts of Abbess Accounts from 1535 and 1536 show a maximum of £4 yield per year from all offerings, and in 1537 and 1538, the totals are null.³⁶ Scholars have discussed the observable decline of pilgrimage and offerings in late medieval England, attributing it to increased competition for offerings money, particularly by smaller, more local shrines, and to the rise of Reformation thought.³⁷ This criticism of orthodox religious practice particularly attacked the lavish shrines, images, statues, icons, regal vestments, and the sometimes superstitious practices of pilgrims who were attracted by these miracle-centres.³⁸ Critics believed that instead of offering more money to wealthy churches and shrines for the purchase of gold ornaments and sumptuous fabrics, the faithful should spend that money on the poor.³⁹ The public discovery that some relics and icons were frauds also swayed some against their veneration.⁴⁰ The behaviour of pilgrims while journeying was also an issue, with many concerned about the excessive freedom and lack of responsibility of those on the road.⁴¹

The offerings received at Syon declined late enough and suddenly enough, however, that these general reasons could not have been solely responsible for the significant drop in receipts there. Instead, some severe restrictions against the Syon brothers specifically, and against pilgrimage and shrines in general, were probably to blame. Serious attacks on the institution of pilgrimage were begun in 1534 by Hugh Latimer, Bishop of Worcester, and continued through the 1530s.⁴² This led to a statute in 1536 which outlawed pilgrimage in England altogether.⁴³ The year before this, however, as

³⁵ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 260.

³⁶ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2201 to -2204.

³⁷ Nilson, *Shrines*, 171, 78-80; Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 249; Heale, 'Training in superstition?'

³⁸ Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 139.

³⁹ Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 252.

⁴⁰ Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 252.

⁴¹ Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 232, 55-6.

⁴² Nilson, *Shrines*, 191; Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 255.

⁴³ Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 255.

a reaction to their strong and outspoken views against the King's divorce, the Syon priests, specifically, were banned from preaching to the public, or hearing confessions outside the monastery.⁴⁴ This would have directly affected pilgrim numbers at Syon, for the available indulgences, and thus one of the main incentives for pilgrimage, were directly tied to hearing of the preaching and giving confession. Until 1538, however, sympathetic priests were still encouraging people to go on pilgrimage, so the trickle of offerings seen at Syon in 1535 and 1536 is not a surprise.⁴⁵

Rises in pilgrim numbers were also regularly seen in medieval England after the martyrdom of an associated future saint.⁴⁶ Syon's own saint, Richard Reynolds (canonized in 1970), was drawn and quartered on 4 May 1535 at Tyburn along with three Carthusian priors, all found guilty of refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy which declared the King the head of the English Church.⁴⁷ It is possible that those pilgrims who made offerings at Syon in this and the following year were responding in part to his martyrdom. In 1537, Syon's new confessor general, John Copynger, more amenable in many ways to royal demands than his predecessors, applied to Cromwell for permission for the priests of Syon to resume preaching.⁴⁸ It is unclear if the request was granted, but in any case, no income from offerings was recorded by the abbess in 1537 and 1538.⁴⁹

In 1539, the religious of Syon were expelled from their Isleworth home, forced to wander abroad for over 300 years, until their exile from England ended in the nineteenth century. The community of Syon Abbey finally came to an end in 2011, as its numbers dwindled and the remaining sisters separated. It leaves, however, an incredible legacy of learning, devotional impact, and a fascinating institutional experiment in the possibilities for a deep spiritual meaning to mundane material life – one that could take the grapes of good devotion, cultivated in the heart of each religious in his or her enclosed, contemplative, daily material life, and share them with the wider, waiting, world outside the cloistered vineyard.

⁴⁴ Hutchison, 'Dissolution no decline', 252; Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 220.

⁴⁵ Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 260.

⁴⁶ Webb, *Pilgrimage in medieval England*, 167.

⁴⁷ Johnston, 'VCH, House of Bridgettines'.

⁴⁸ Knowles, *Religious orders*, vol 3, 220.

⁴⁹ TNA SC 6/HenVIII/2203, -2204.

Appendices

Appendix A: Syon Monastic Officers

Table A: Monastic officers in surviving Syon household accounts

Year	Treasurers	Abbess	Cellaress	Sacristan	Chambress
1442	Agnes Worshall	Maud Muston			
1443	Agnes Payneswyke and Isabell Lamborne	Maud Muston	Anne Clerk		
1444	Agnes Payneswyke and Isabell Lambrie	Maud Muston	Anne Clerc		
1447	Anne Clerke	Maud Muston	Anne Clerk and Julian Gaylerde	Margerie Phelippe	Leticia Crewse
1448	Agnes Payneswyke and Isabell Lamborne	Margaret Ashby	Julian Gaylarde	Margerie Phelippe	Leticia Crewse
1449	Isabell Lamborne and Leticia Crewse	Margaret Ashby	Johane Gayler	Alianore Malett	Elizabeth Muston
1450	Isabell Lamborne and Leticia Crewse	Margaret Ashby	Margerie Phillip, Juliane Gaylerd	Alianore Malett	Elizabeth Muston
1451	Isabell Lamborne and Leticia Crewse	Margaret Ashby	Julian Gaylerd	Alianore Malett	Elizabeth Muston
1453	Isabell Lamborne and Elizabeth Herthill	Margaret Ashby	Juliane Gailer	Margerie Phelippe	Elizabeth Muston
1454	Isabell Lamborne and Elizabeth Herthill	Margaret Ashby	Juliane Gailer	Margerie Phelippe	Elizabeth Muston
1455	Isabell Lamborne and Elizabeth Herthill	Margaret Ashby	Juliane Gailer	Margerie Phelippe	Elizabeth Muston
1456	Isabell Lamborne and Elizabeth Herthill	Margaret Ashby	Juliane Gailer	Margerie Phelippe	Elizabeth Muston
1460	Isabell Lamborne and Elizabeth Herthill	Elizabeth Muston	Juliane Gailer	Margerie Phelippe	Katarina Boulde
1461	Isabell Lamborne and Elizabeth Herthill	Elizabeth Muston	Juliane Gailer	Margerie Phelippe	Katarina Boulde
1482	Isabell Lamborne and Elizabeth Herthill	Elizabeth Muston	Isabell Langthorne		
1490	Alinore Scrope and Elizabeth Wodeford	Elizabeth Muston	Kateryne Wey		
1493	Alinore Scrope and Elizabeth Wodeford	Elizabeth Muston	Margaret Gryspyon		
1496	Alinore Scrope and Elizabeth Wodeford	Elizabeth Muston	Katerine Wey		
1497	Alinore Scrope and Elizabeth Wodeford	Elizabeth Muston, then Elizabeth Gybbes	Katerine Wey		
1498		Elizabeth Gybbes	Katerine Wey		
1499	Alinore Scrope and Constance Browne	Elizabeth Gybbes	Katerene Wey		
1500		Elizabeth Gybbes	Kateryn Wey		
1501		Elizabeth Gybbes			Kateryn Parteland
1502	Alinore Scrope and Constance Browne	Elizabeth Gybbes	Kateryn Wey		
1503		Elizabeth Gybbes	Alice Couwey		
1505	Constance Browne & Margaret Vaux	Elizabeth Gybbes	Alice Couwey		Kateryn Parteland
1506	Constance Browne & Margaret Vaux	Elizabeth Gybbes	Alice Couwey		Kateryn Parteland
1507	Constance Browne & Margaret Vaux	Elizabeth Gybbes	Alice Couwey		Kateryn Parteland
1508	Constance Brown and Margery Vaux	Elizabeth Gybbes		Agnes Helperby	Kateryn Parteland
1509	Constance Browne and Margaret Vaux	Elizabeth Gybbes	Elizabeth Straunge		
1510	Margaret Vaux and Anette Covyle	Elizabeth Gybbes	Elizabeth Straunge	Mary Drury	Kateryn Parteland

Year	Treasurers	Abbess	Cellaress	Sacristan	Chambress
1512	Margaret Vaux and Alice Covyls	Elizabeth Gybbes	Eliaore Hall	Mary Drury	Kateryn Parteland
1513	Margaret Vaux and Anette Covyle	Elizabeth Gybbes	Eliaore Hall	Mary Drury	
1514	Constance Browne and Margaret Vaux and Agnes Colv*	Elizabeth Gybbes	Eliaore Hall	Mary Drury	Johanne Ros
1515	Constance Browne and Anne Colvell	Elizabeth Gybbes	Eliaore Hall	Mary Drury	Johanne Roose
1516	Constance Browne and Anne (or Agnes) Colvell	Elizabeth Gybbes	Eliaore Hall	Mary Drury	Jane Strangeways
1517	Constance Browne and Agnes Jordan	Elizabeth Gybbes	Eliaore Hall	Mary Drury	
1518	Constance Browne and Agnes Jordan	Elizabeth Gybbes, then Constance Browne		Mary Drury	Margaret Shuldham
1519	Jane Strangeways and Elizabeth Ogle	Constance Browne	Elinore Hall	Mary Drury	
1520	Johanna Straunge and Elizabeth Ogle	Constance Browne and Agenete Jordan		Mary Drury	
1521	Johanna Straungeways and Elizabeth Ogle	Agnes Jordan		Mary Drury	Elizabeth Strickland
1522	Anne Colvell and Brigitte Fitzherbert	Agnes Jordan			
1524	Elizabeth Strickland and Agnetis Smyth	Agnes Jordan	Johanna Buckley	Elizabeth Monteyn	
1525	Agnes Smyth and Brigitte Belgrave	Agnes Jordan	Anne Wye and Margaret Dely	Margaret Shuldham	Bridget Fitzherbert
1526	Agnes Smyth and Brigitte Belgrave	Agnes Jordan	Anne Wey and Margaret Dely	Margaret Shuldham	
1527	Agnes Smyth and Brigitte Belgrave	Agnes Jordan	Anne Wye and Margaret Dely	Margaret Shuldham	
1528	Agnes Smyth and Brigitte Belgrave	Agnes Jordan	Anne Wey and Margaret Dely		
1529	Margaret Shuldham and Edithe Morepath	Agnes Jordan		unreadable	Kateryn Somerfeld
1530	Margaret Shuldham and Edithe Morepath	Agnes Jordan	Anne Wey (and someone else - can't read)		
1531	Margaret Shuldham and Margaret Daly	Agnes Jordan		Elizabeth Strickland	
1532	Margaret Shuldham and Edith Morepath	Agnes Jordan	Anne Wey only	Elizabeth Strickland	
1533	Margaret Shuldham and Anne Wey	Agnes Jordan	Edith Morepath and someone else (can't see)	Elizabeth Strickland	
1534	Margaret Shuldham and Rose Pagett	Agnes Jordan	Agnes Merett	Elizabeth Strickland	Clemens Tressham
1535	Margaret Daly and Pervelle Damporte	Agnes Jordan			
1536	Margaret Daly and Purvell Damport	Agnes Jordan	Agnes Merett	Bridget Fitzherbert	Clemens Tressham
1537	Margaret Daly and Purvell Damport	Agnes Jordan	Agnes Merett		Bridget Belgrave
1538	Margaret Daly and Pervell Damport	Agnes Jordan	Agnes Merett		
1539	Margaret Daly and Purvell Damport	Agnes Jordan	Agnes Merrett		

Appendix B: Bread and Grains Calculations

Table B: Bread Baked and Purchased

	Wheat Spent (quarters, bushels)	Fine Bread Baked (casts)	Brown Bread Baked (loaves)	Bread Bought (loaves)	Fine Bread (lbs)	Brown Bread (lbs)	Total Bread Baked (lbs)	Bread Bought (lbs)	Total Bread Consumed (lbs)
1442	149 q, 1b	15,211	9,544		30,422	10,689	41,111		41,111
1443	150 q, 6b	15,377	9,648		30,753	10,806	41,559		41,559
1444	173 q, 2b	17,672	11,088		35,343	12,419	47,762		47,762
1447	202 q, 2b	20,630	12,944		41,259	14,497	55,756		55,756
1448	180 q, 1b	18,373	11,528		36,746	12,911	49,657		49,657
1449	197 q, 3b	20,132	12,632		40,265	14,148	54,412		54,412
1450	218 q, 7b	22,325	14,008		44,651	15,689	60,339		60,339
1451	233 q	23,766	14,912		47,532	16,701	64,233		64,233
1453	167 q, 1b	17,047	10,696		34,094	11,980	46,073		46,073
1454	183 q	18,666	11,712		37,332	13,117	50,449		50,449
1455	225 q, 5b	23,014	14,440		46,028	16,173	62,200		62,200
1456	216 q, 5b	22,096	13,864		44,192	15,528	59,719		59,719
1461	248 q, 2b	25,322	15,888		50,643	17,795	68,438		68,438
1499	302 q	30,804	19,328	75	61,608	21,647	83,255	150	83,405
1502	305 q	31,110	19,520		62,220	21,862	84,082		84,082
1512	310 q	31,620	19,840	166	63,240	22,221	85,461	332	85,793
1513	320 q	32,640	20,480	213	65,280	22,938	88,218	426	88,644
1514	300 q	30,600	19,200	75	61,200	21,504	82,704	150	82,854
1515	310 q	31,620	19,840	48	63,240	22,221	85,461	96	85,557
1516	330 q	33,660	21,120	144	67,320	23,654	90,974	288	91,262
1517	300 q	30,600	19,200	180	61,200	21,504	82,704	360	83,064
1518	335 q	34,170	21,440		68,340	24,013	92,353		92,353
1519	379 q	38,658	24,256	261	77,316	27,167	104,483	522	105,005
1520	390 q	39,780	24,960	187	79,560	27,955	107,515	374	107,889
1521	392 q, 2b	40,010	25,104	3	80,019	28,116	108,135	6	108,141
1522	360 q	36,720	23,040	276	73,440	25,805	99,245	552	99,797
1523	360 q, 5b	36,784	23,080	139	73,568	25,850	99,417	278	99,695
1525	350 q	35,700	22,400	219	71,400	25,088	96,488	438	96,926
1526	380 q	38,760	24,320	213	77,520	27,238	104,758	426	105,184
1527	370 q	37,740	23,680	207	75,480	26,522	102,002	414	102,416
1528	299 q	30,498	19,136	60	60,996	21,432	82,428	120	82,548
1530	345 q, 2b	35,216	22,096	48	70,431	24,748	95,179	96	95,275
1531	323 q, 1b	32,959	20,680	207	65,918	23,162	89,079	414	89,493
1533	360 q, 3b	36,758	23,064	153	73,517	25,832	99,348	306	99,654
1537	323 q	32,946	20,672	463	65,892	23,153	89,045	926	89,971
1538	321 q, 3b	32,780	20,568		65,561	23,036	88,597		88,597
1539	345 q, 2b	35,216	22,096		70,431	24,748	95,179		95,179

Notes to Table B: Bread Baked and Purchased

Note 1: The Journal Book's account of bread baked each week included the amount of wheat meal used in total, and the amount of 'Fyne flower' and 'Browne flower' used for baking white bread and brown bread, respectively. Brown bread was recorded in loafs baked, while for white bread, it was the number of 'caste' of white bread baked. In an average week, beginning Sunday, 7 November, 554 caste of white bread was baked, and 354 loaves of brown bread was baked, out of a total of five quarters, four bushels of meal. These appear to have been the most usual batches for each type of bread, and so are used as the basis of calculations for the weight and caloric value of Syon bread, and for the amount of bread which a quarter of wheat could yield.

Note 2: Each quarter of wheat generally yielded one quarter of fine flour (and therefore of meal), in addition to some bran (Harvey, *Living and Dying*, p. 59). While Syon clearly used brown flour as well as fine flour, no accurate gauge of the relationship between a quarter of wheat and the volume of brown flour in the Middle Ages has been found. For this reason, I estimate one quarter of flour or meal as deriving from one quarter of wheat spent.

Note 3: The Journal Book does not give the amount of wheat itself made into bread each week, but rather the amount of meal total, and then the amount of white and brown flour which resulted from the bolting (sifting) process. In the average week in the Journal Book, 5 quarters and 4 bushels of meal was used to make 14 baskets of fine flour and 5 baskets of brown flour. Unfortunately, 'baskets' of flour do not seem to have been a standard measurement. The amount of meal (and thereby wheat, with the equivalency supported by Harvey, as above) that went into making the flour can, however, be deduced by the proportions which resulted. The two types of flour result in 19 baskets total, which can be divided into the total of 44 bushels of meal (or wheat), resulting in an equivalency of 2.3 bushels of wheat per basket of flour. The weekly use of fine flour at Syon is therefore equivalent to 32.2 bushels of wheat, while the weekly use of brown flour at Syon is equivalent to 11.5 bushels of wheat. This in turn translates to a value of .74 quarters of wheat used for baking white bread with white flour, and .26 quarters of wheat used for baking brown bread, per every quarter of wheat spent on baking. The resulting proportion of 1:1.74 and 1:1.26 can also be used for determining the number of loaves and 'caste' resulting from each quarter of wheat at Syon. This is particularly important, as there is no other indication of the size or weight of a loaf at the abbey. The 32.2 bushels (equivalent to 4,025 quarters) of wheat made into fine flour and used to bake white bread each week, resulted in 554 'caste' of white bread. Dividing the number of 'caste' by the quarters of wheat used to create them will give a number of 'caste' of white bread created per quarter of wheat, a result of 137.63. Using the same method, the 11.5 bushels of brown flour (equivalent to 1,437.5 quarters of wheat), resulted in 354 loaves of brown bread per week. Dividing by the quarters of wheat used to make them, this results in 246.3 loaves of brown bread per quarter of wheat. The analysis is still incomplete, however, as the goal is to determine how much of both kinds of bread would result from a single quarter of wheat, so the overall bread consumption of the abbey can be calculated from the simple sum of 'wheat spent' as recorded in the annual cellars accounts. To do this, it is necessary to apply the same proportions determined above for the amount of wheat which went into each type of flour. Out of each quarter of wheat came .74 quarters to white bread, and .26 quarters to brown. If 137.63 'caste' of white bread can be made from a full quarter of wheat, 102 'caste' can be made from .74 quarters. Likewise, if 246.3 loaves of brown bread can be made from a full quarter of wheat, then 64 loaves can be made from .26 quarters. This results in 102 'caste' of white bread, and 64 loaves of brown bread, per quarter of wheat, for a total of 166 units of bread per quarter.

Note 4: It is also possible, additionally, to estimate the weight of the bread loaves and 'caste' baked at Syon. A quarter of fine flour was equal to roughly 276 lbs of bread (Harvey, *Living and Dying*, p. 59). Harvey allows for a loss of up to 25% of the weight through the process of baking, but Stone argues convincingly that this loss of moisture in cooking is cancelled out by the addition of water added to the flour to make dough (Harvey, *Living and Dying*, p. 59, and Stone, 'Consumption of Field Crops', p. 16). I will therefore use the equivalency of one quarter of wheat (which, as noted above, is itself equivalent to one quarter of flour), to 276 lbs of bread. A limitation of this method is that it uses an estimate based on fine flour only. The weight (and subsequently, calories) of Syon's brown bread will therefore be too low. Unfortunately, I found no estimate in the literature to determine the pounds of brown bread yielded by a quarter of brown flour. That estimates can vary widely is clear, however. Past estimates have ranged from 480 to 510 lbs per quarter of wheat. (Dawson, *Plenti and Grase*, p. 71.) Using the same proportions of white to brown as above, the .74 quarter per quarter of wheat/flour devoted in the Journal Book to white bread, can therefore be calculated as a weight of 204.24 lbs, or, with 102 'caste' per quarter, a weight of 2 lbs per 'caste' of white bread. Interestingly, this is the same estimate Harvey gives for the 'conventional loaf' of white bread served regularly at Westminster Abbey (Harvey, *Living and Dying*, p. 59). Because she allows for a reduction in weight due to baking, our calculations are not comparable, however. Without that reduction, she calculates the conventional loaf as being 2.6 lbs. For brown bread, the .26 per quarter of wheat used for brown bread at Syon would yield 71.76 lbs of brown bread. With 64 loaves made, this works out to a total weight of 1.12 lbs per loaf of brown bread.

Note 5: The price of bread bought works out, with rare exception, to exactly 1d per 'caste', throughout the period. This makes it possible to calculate the volume of bread purchased when only the total cost is recorded. Because the bread purchased and identified was in nearly all cases, white bread or bread bought in 'caste', I have assumed that all others not identified are, in fact, white bread in the same general form and weight as Syon 'caste', and have therefore calculated the weight of purchased bread at 2 lb per 'caste'. It was usual, however, for the size and weight of a loaf to change with wheat prices, shrinking when prices were high and expanding when low (Stone, 'Consumption of Field Crops', p. 14). This creates obvious problems for the calculation of volume consumed based on the price of a 'loaf', if that unit was variable.

Note 6: The bread calculations do not take into account the amount of flour sent each year 'to the kechyn', and included in the 'wheat-spent' amounts. My calculations therefore somewhat overestimate the amount of bread consumed by the abbey each year. This flour was used for food, however. It made its way into pastries, buns, sauces, and perhaps biscuits, as discussed above. These items are very difficult to analyze separately, given the absence of kitcheners accounts, so the inclusion of the flour in the bread calculations here ensures that the calories are counted in the abbey's overall consumption.

Appendix C: Ale and Beer Calculations

Table C: Annual Ale and Beer Consumption at Syon Abbey (gallons)

Year	Malt 'spent' (quarters)	Ale Brewed from Malt	Ale Purchased	Beer Purchased			Total Ale and Beer	
				Beer	Single	Double		Three-halfpenny
1442	423.25	45,711					45,711	
1443	297.00	32,076					32,076	
1444	314.00	33,912					33,912	
1448	336.00	36,288					36,288	
1449	384.00	41,472	144	1,296			42,912	
1450	381.00	41,148					41,148	
1451	383.50	41,418					41,418	
1453	357.63	38,624	16	1,296			39,936	
1454	383.50	41,418	320	1,539			43,277	
1455	345.63	37,328	160	3,015			40,503	
1456	339.75	36,693	171		2,574	126	39,564	
1460	360.00	38,880	32		1,368	414	40,694	
1461	326.00	35,208	64		2,106	180	37,558	
1482	480.53	51,897	16				51,913	
1490	435.00	46,980	16	72			47,068	
1492	524.00	56,592	0		90		56,682	
1499	692.00	74,736	16		810	198	369	76,129
1502	591.00	63,828	40		333	18	4,464	68,683
1512	532.00	57,456	48		7,722	0	0	65,226
1513	542.00	58,536	0		7,785	36	468	66,825
1514	497.00	53,676	0		7,704	180	72	61,632
1515	507.00	54,756	0		2,232	324	0	57,312
1516	534.00	57,672	144		963	108	108	58,995
1517	493.00	53,244	128		738	36	0	54,146
1518	543.00	58,644						58,644
1519	590.63	63,788	184		2,268	324	0	66,564
1520	596.00	64,368	184		1,827	450	36	66,865
1521	553.00	59,724	64		4,239	243	0	64,270
1522	546.00	58,968	40		4,824	288	0	64,120
1523	558.00	60,264	112		8,478	135	0	68,989
1525	468.00	50,544	0		14,148	2,259	0	66,951
1526	478.00	51,624	112		14,652	2,610	0	68,998
1527	488.00	52,704	0		13,032	2,664	0	68,400
1528	549.00	59,292	0		7,344	3,168	0	69,804
1530	549.00	59,292	0		9,396	3,258	0	71,946
1531	541.00	58,428	0		9,000	2,898	0	70,326
1533	499.00	53,892	0		2,664	3,060	0	59,616
1537	436.00	47,088	0		0	0	0	47,088
1538	546.00	58,968	0		0	0	0	58,968
1539	504.00	54,432	0		0	0	0	54,432

Note 1: The cellaress Journal book provides a great deal of information about brewing at Syon, but does not specify the proportion of grains used in the production of its ale. It does indicate how much malt was used to produce how much ale. It can be calculated that in an average week, one quarter of malt produced 105 gallons of ale. The brewers used the regular amount of six quarters of malt per week to brew an average of 15 barrels, 9 'stanne', one firkin of ale per week. Each barrel of ale equalled 32 gallons, and each firkin of ale was 8 gallons. The 'stanne' of ale, however, is an unknown measurement.

Note 2: What exactly a 'stanne' is in this context is a difficult question. It probably means 'stone', but there is no mention in the literature of stones being used as a volume measurement for ale. It is possible that the term here refers to a stone container used for doling out ale to various household departments. It may have been a vessel weighing one stone – fourteen pounds – when full of ale. It could also have referred to the volume measurement for butter – in which one stone equalled 16 pounds of butter or cheese. Tallow was also measured in stones, with eight pounds to a stone. In any case, it is clear that a 'stanne' in the Syon brewer's context, is somewhere between a firkin (8 gallons, pre-1688) and a barrel (32 gallons), perhaps roughly equivalent with a kilderkins (16 gallons) (Chapman, *How Heavy*, p. 40). Acknowledging that there is room for error in the guesswork, I will for the present purposes, in the absence of any certainty about the ale 'stanne's' true volume, estimate it at around one kilderkin (16 gallons).

Note 3: Using this estimate of the 'stanne's' volume (16 gallons), it is possible to convert the average weekly ale production at Syon to modern measurements. In the week beginning 26 September, 1535, an average week in the Journal, the abbey brewed 632 gallons, or 2,873 litres of ale. Of this, 256 gallons was 'Goode Ale', the strongest grade, 80 gallons was 'Middle Ale', and 296 gallons was 'Smale Ale', the weakest.

Note 4: Purchased beer was measured in hogsheads (54 gallons), barrels (36 gallons), and kilderkins (18 gallons)

Appendix D: Livestock Meat Calculations

Livestock Meat Consumption: Carcasses 'Spent' and Purchased, with Edible Weights

Year	Beef		Mutton		Boars Spent	Boar bought	Pigs spent	Hogs bought	Pigs bought	Total Swine	Pork	Total Livestock Edible Weight (lbs) (complete years only)
	Oxen Spent	Edible Weight (lbs)	Sheep Spent	Edible Weight (lbs)							Edible Weight (lbs)	
1442	37	10,101	253	8,880	4		80			84	5,292	24,273
1447	40	10,920	305	10,706	6		34			40	2,520	24,146
1443	41	11,193	273	9,582	0		32			32	2,016	22,791
1448	46	12,558	419	14,707	5		9			14	882	28,147
1449	48	13,104	461	16,181	5		34			39	2,457	31,742
1450	40	10,920	476	16,708								
1451	44	12,012	475	16,673	7		48			55	3,465	32,150
1453	45	12,285	367	12,882	6		34			40	2,520	27,687
1454	40	10,920	490	17,199	7		79			86	5,418	33,537
1455	47	12,831	491	17,234	7		44			51	3,213	33,278
1456	45	12,285	502	17,620	5		71			76	4,788	34,693
1460			573	20,112	7		12			19	1,197	
1461	45	12,285	463	16,251		3		1		4	252	28,788
1482								8		34	42	2,646
1490						3				79	82	5,166
1492						2				55	57	3,591
1496						3				47	50	3,150
1499						3		23		25	51	3,213
1502	74	20,202	370	12,987		1		39		40	2,520	35,709
1512	69	18,837	532	18,673		5		65		70	4,410	41,920
1513		0	541	18,989		4		17		21	1,323	
1514	69	18,837	536	18,814								
1515	61	16,653	514	18,041		4		43		47	2,961	37,655
1516	62	16,926	528	18,533		5		58		63	3,969	39,428
1517	59	16,107	510	17,901		3		57		60	3,780	37,788
1518	62	16,926	524	18,392								
1519	66	18,018	566	19,867		4		41		45	2,835	40,720
1520	72	19,656	563	19,761		5		61		66	4,158	43,575
1521	80	21,840	602	21,130		4		42		46	2,898	45,868
1522	62	16,926	501	17,585		6		56		62	3,906	38,417
1523	63	17,199	466	16,357		4		43		47	2,961	36,517
1525	58	15,834	520	18,252		3		41		44	2,772	36,858
1526	60	16,380	511	17,936		3		28		31	1,953	36,269
1527	53	14,469	474	16,637		3		18		21	1,323	32,429
1528	53	14,469	512	17,971		3		25		28	1,764	34,204
1530	50	13,650	544	19,094				22		22	1,386	34,130
1531	44	12,012	506	17,761				24		24	1,512	31,285
1533	56	15,288	615	21,587				27		29	1,827	38,702
1537	61	16,653	554	19,445		2		58		60	3,780	39,878
1538	69	18,837	743	26,079		2		93		95	5,985	50,901
1539	61	16,653	648	22,745								

Note: Only cattle and sheep recorded as 'spent in the household', in the Cellaress's Household, Extract, and Latin accounts have been included. This does not include lambs and calves, as noted in Chapter 4, but does sometimes include juvenile animals. The table also includes all ages of swine recorded as 'spent' in the Latin accounts, and as purchased in the later accounts. Due to the inconsistency with which young animal types are recorded, I have calculated their edible weight as if all were adults. For this reason, the figures given may slightly overestimate the amount of livestock meat consumed. In estimating edible weight (i.e. the weight of edible flesh and innards, as opposed to bones, skin, etc.), I follow Dawson (*Plenti and Grase*, p. 85-86), who uses estimates of weight per carcass, and edible weight percentage per carcass, more applicable to the sixteenth century than the earlier medieval estimates used by Harvey in her study of Westminster (*Living and Dying*, pp 228-30). The above figures therefore assume 350 lb per cattle carcass (with 273 lbs edible weight each), 30-45 lb per sheep (35.1 lbs edible weight), and 90 lb per hog (63 lbs edible weight).

Appendix E: Fish Consumption Calculations

Table E: Fish Consumption (by lbs edible weight)

	Total Cod and Whitefish	Total Herring	Eels	Salt Salmon	Sturgeon	Total Fish
1449	5,709	4,032	4,113	1,046	209	15,110
1454	3,287	6,664	2,363	1,046	0	13,360
1460	1,683	5,320	2,383	1,046	0	10,433
1499	11,890	9,128	338	1,570	209	23,134
1502	10,144	5,824	506	209	419	17,102
1512	17,022	6,625	338	628	209	24,821
1513	17,340	8,792	503	419	209	27,263
1514	12,372	6,216	338	419	209	19,553
1515	18,205	7,482	0	331	209	26,227
1516	15,306	6,636	348	436	209	22,936
1517	14,544	8,176	338	419	209	23,685
1519	16,275	8,176	365	453	209	25,479
1520	20,478	6,803	338	628	209	28,456
1522	16,788	7,538	338	419	209	25,291
1523	14,460	8,008	338	419	209	23,433
1525	18,286	7,616	338	419	209	26,868
1526	15,929	6,552	0	628	209	23,318
1527	10,889	2,184	0	484	209	13,767
1528	27,112	3,920	0	419	209	31,660
1530	16,913	5,566	0	270	209	22,959
1533	13,280	6,608	0	419	209	20,515
1537	10,935	7,000	284	628	0	18,846
1538	12,744	7,224	325	628	0	20,920
1539	24,942	7,112	216	837	628	33,735

Note 1: Use of the long hundred: The Syon accounts use a 'C' for fish that equalled a 'long hundred' of 120 individual fish. I am assuming a quateron of 30 fish, 'D' of 600 fish, and 'M' of 1200 fish. For detailed information on long hundreds, see: David Yaxley, *A researcher's glossary of words found in historical documents of East Anglia*, Larks Press, 2003, p. 29., Gemmill and Mayew, *Changing values in medieval Scotland: a study of prices, money and weights*, Cambridge, 2006, p. 394., W.H. Stevenson, 'The long hundred and its use in England' *The Archaeological Review*, vol 4 (1899-90), p. 322., Keith Thomas, 'Numeracy in early modern England: the Prothero lecture' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Ser., vol 37 (1987), p. 123., Julian Goodare, 'The long hundred in medieval and early modern Scotland' *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquities Scotland*, vol 123 (1993), pp. 395-418.

Note 2: Measurements used: Barrels of white herring held 1000 fish; Barrels of eels, I have calculated at 625 eels per barrel (assuming the same volume barrel for eels and herrings, per Zupko, below, and a weight of .5 lb per herring, and .8 lb per eel.) Barrels of sturgeon, I calculate the same lbs edible weight per barrel as salmon: 209.28 lbs. Barrels of salmon and all other fish: 48 fish per barrel (a standard barrel size). Red herring: 600 per cade. Other measurements: a couple (a pair), a piece (32 lbs), dorssers and panyers (unspecified amounts), bushels (8 gallons dry), weys (32 bushels), pipes or butts of salmon (a butt of salmon was twice as much as a barrel of salmon, so 96 fish), firkins of eels (a quarter of a barrel of eels – roughly 156 eels), ronde of sturgeon (equivalent to a kilderkin, or half of a barrel. With the estimates of barrels of sturgeon above, this would be roughly 105 lbs of edible sturgeon per ronde.), pecks of sturgeon (with a peck being equal to 2 gallons, There were 42 gallons per barrel of salmon, so 21 pecks to the barrel. So, with the barrel of sturgeon being 209.28 lbs edible, as calculated above, this would mean approximately 10 lbs of edible sturgeon per peck). These measurements and calculations of barrels and other volumes were taken from, and based on information in the following sources: Chapman, *How Heavy*; Dawson, *Plenti and Grase* (for white herring barrel and red herring cades); James E. Thorold-Rogers, *A history of agriculture and prices in England from the year after the Oxford Parliament (1259) to the commencement of the Continental War (1793)*, Vol. IV, 1401-1582., 1882. (for salmon barrel); Ronald Edward Zupko, *A dictionary of weights and measures for the British Isles: the middle ages to the twentieth century*, American Philosophical Society, 1985. (for eel barrel and other fish barrels using the salmon barrel size).

Note 3: For edible weight of fish, Harvey's figures have been the standard, but recently Dawson has argued convincingly for some adjustments. Oddly, neither author gives an edible weight for salmon, so I estimate this separately. According to a USGS report, commercially caught salmon average 4.5 kg, but adult land-locked salmon average 1-2 kg (*Species Profiles: Life Histories and Environmental Requirements of Coastal Fishes and Invertebrates (North Atlantic) Atlantic Salmon*. http://www.nwrc.usgs.gov/wdb/pub/species_profiles/82_11-022.pdf. Accessed August 12, 2012.) The first equals 10 lbs, but 1.5 kg equals 3.3 lbs. 2 kg equals 4.4 lbs. I assume the larger volume of the smaller size, because in the Middle Ages, salmon were often caught in estuaries (Serjeantson and Woolgar, 'Fish Consumption', p. 123). I use a value midway between 2 kg and 4.5 kg: 3.25 kg, which equals 7 lbs. I use Harvey's estimates for cod weight (6.6 lbs) and edible proportion of cod (4.36 lbs). Aside from salmon, I use Dawson's estimates of edible weight for varieties of cod and ling, his different estimates for haburden and stockfish (*Plenti and Grase*, 119-20). I have used Harvey's estimates for everything else (*Living and Dying*, 226-27).

Appendix F: Food Types Calorie Calculations

Calories (kcal) consumed by Syon Abbey household, with estimations of people fed daily (household size)

	Preserved Fish	Bread	Ale and Beer	Butter	Milk	Meat	'Diette' (estimated)	Total Calories (complete years)	Calories per day	People Fed with 3000 kcal/day diet	kcal/day per capita in 150- person household
1442		42,640,384	45,848,675			28,979,455					
1443		43,105,031	32,172,608			27,337,401					
1444		49,538,618	34,014,138								
1447		57,830,797				29,172,617	13,132,398				
1448		51,504,436	36,397,294	1,313,949	1,987,392	34,528,292	12,051,378				
1449	10,088,327	56,436,853	43,448,402	1,405,148	1,242,120	38,942,877	12,014,070	163,577,797	448,158	149	2,988
1450		62,584,503	41,271,932	1,688,880	1,832,127		12,499,983				
1451		66,623,365	41,542,745	1,256,527	0	39,621,527	11,479,019				
1453		47,787,253	40,426,745	847,818	1,869,391	33,610,165	12,536,381				
1454	9,343,377	52,326,506	43,932,973	1,513,236	2,046,393	41,433,906	12,647,395	163,243,785	447,243	149	2,982
1455		64,514,579	41,522,213	2,634,653	2,055,709	40,970,977	13,056,873				
1456		61,941,144	40,494,931	2,560,342	947,117	42,733,611	14,490,954				
1460	7,326,021		41,329,469	1,167,016	1,732,757		14,866,763				
1461		70,983,908	38,335,577	2,107,722	21,737	35,640,384	13,970,462				
1482			52,074,254	3,012,962	121,107		22,340,182				
1490			47,234,644	3,404,782	77,633		21,531,237				
1492			56,878,165	4,809,930	428,531		22,848,845				
1496				3,931,713	434,742		23,999,021				
1499	15,864,946	86,513,748	76,752,157	5,566,548	170,792		23,752,425				
1502	11,551,463	87,210,843	70,262,605	2,756,252	217,371	42,129,779		237,880,739	651,728	217	4,345
1512	16,512,690	88,996,247	67,619,404	11,149,310	0	50,678,797	33,675,430	268,631,878	735,978	245	4,907
1513	18,321,346	91,956,334	69,369,966	11,538,428	0						
1514	13,141,252	85,941,873	64,067,171	14,835,122	0		34,447,977				
1515	17,489,906	88,743,387	58,207,320	13,402,952	0	45,835,051	35,973,963	259,652,579	711,377	237	4,743
1516	15,318,715	94,667,848	59,546,760	11,970,781	0	47,957,624	36,097,717	265,559,445	727,560	243	4,850
1517	15,996,984	86,166,876	54,564,119	8,890,264	577,586	46,005,064	35,824,732	248,025,624	679,522	227	4,530
1518		95,788,959	58,820,627	9,781,993	0						
1519	17,123,007	108,929,487	67,548,888	12,078,870	1,006,117	49,645,031	41,237,114	297,568,514	815,256	272	5,435
1520	18,813,768	111,916,223	67,772,410	11,457,362	1,263,857	52,752,511		305,213,245	836,201	279	5,575
1521		112,165,292	65,748,945	15,483,652	1,679,967	55,498,615					
1522	16,915,975	103,528,823	65,769,838	14,267,658	1,467,254	46,581,586		289,768,250	793,886	265	5,293
1523	15,816,220	103,413,960	60,763,089	11,457,362	1,804,179	44,094,976		278,586,900	763,252	254	5,088
1525	17,914,424	100,547,307	71,791,695	12,673,356	1,443,965	45,041,313	40,766,670	290,178,730	795,010	265	5,300
1526	15,562,209	109,112,566	74,118,278	1,932,079	0	44,243,604	42,663,006	287,631,741	788,032	263	5,254
1527	8,972,893	106,240,337	73,044,026	12,254,513	15,527	39,711,962	44,862,355	285,101,612	781,100	260	5,207
1528	20,415,284	85,623,793	72,986,488	12,889,532	0	42,053,305	48,467,577	282,435,979	773,797	258	5,159
1530	15,177,129	98,822,673	75,740,586	12,457,179	0	42,297,869	41,280,792	285,776,228	782,949	261	5,220
1531		92,837,031	73,901,949	11,487,762	0	38,904,703					
1533	13,798,887	103,372,476	61,414,005	6,215,078	1,425,333	47,965,302	45,361,008	279,552,088	765,896	255	5,106
1537	12,805,328	93,349,866	47,229,822	14,970,232	0	48,707,141	34,042,139	251,104,529	687,958	229	4,586
1538	14,135,078	91,893,065	59,145,603	15,834,939	1,987,392	62,675,853	38,418,999	284,090,928	778,331	259	5,189
1539	22,209,716	98,719,815	54,595,941	14,754,056	0		41,332,659				

Note 1: Calories are calculated using 'McCance and Widdowson's The Composition of Foods', Sixth summary edition. Food Standards Agency (2002). Cambridge: Royal Society of Chemistry. The values used in the present study are (in calories per 100 grams edible weight): Ale and beer: 28 kcal, white bread: 236 kcal, brown bread: 207 kcal, cod: 138 kcal, herring: 168 kcal, eel: 137 kcal, salmon: 154 kcal, sturgeon: 154 kcal, butter: 744 kcal, milk: 66 kcal, beef: 233 kcal, mutton: 303 kcal, pork: 253 kcal, chicken: 218 kcal, rabbit: 114 kcal, pigeon: 187 kcal, eggs: 147 kcal.

Note 2: Calories per day calculated as total yearly calories divided by 365 days. People fed with 3000 kcal/day diet calculated as calories per day divided by 3000 kcal. Calories (kcal) per day, per person in 150-person household calculated as calories per day divided by 150 people. The estimated minimum of 150 household size is derived at by rounding the smallest number of people fed found using the previous calculation.

Note 3: Estimating Diette calories: The information available in the Journal Book allows for calculation of calories from fresh fish and seafood, eggs, and young meats, consumed by the abbey during the eight week period of that account. By calculating the calories consumed in an average week, and multiplying the resulting number by 52 weeks in a year, it is possible to estimate the total household consumption of these goods for the year (it comes out to 39,701,606 calories in the year). These items are indicated as being included in the category of 'Diette', and we can therefore infer that these kinds of items are recorded, un-itemized, under the 'Diette' expenditure heading of the Cellars Household Accounts each year. If the expenditure on 'Diette' for the year 1535 is available, it should therefore be possible to determine the average number of calories bought and consumed by the abbey household per pound (£) of money spent in this category. Unfortunately, the 'Diette' expenditure is not available for 1535, but it is available for the years 1533 and 1537. By averaging the money spent on 'Diette' in these two years, a reasonable estimate for 1535 might be arrived at (it works out to an expenditure of £436.31). It is then possible to calculate the average number of calories of edible weight of food, purchased per pound sterling. Dividing the estimated calories for the year 1535, by the estimated 'Diette' expenditure in 1535, leaves a total of 90,995 calories of 'Diette' foods per pound (£). This process can then be used to estimate the calories derived from these foods in other years in which total expenditure amount for 'Diette' items is available. The resulting figures are necessarily very rough estimates, as they do not take into account changing prices of individual food items.

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