

The Syon Abbey Collection (1415-1990)

The Syon Abbey was founded in 1415 to accommodate men and women of the Bridgettine contemplative order. When the Abbey was dissolved in 1539, it was the wealthiest convent in England and had amassed a substantial library, though what happened to the books after the reformation remains unclear. Upon its dissolution, the abbey's inhabitants were forced to move to the Netherlands. They returned to England during the reign of the Catholic Mary, but upon the accession of Elizabeth they were once more uprooted, and began travelling across continental Europe. In 1594 the nuns settled in Lisbon and formed a diasporic English community, maintaining their language and traditions. In 1809, this community returned to England, settling first in Dorset and then in Devon, making it the only religious order to have survived the reformation intact.

In 1990 the Abbey's archives and collection of rare books, which still belong to the remaining members of the Bridgettine order, were deposited at the University of Exeter. The collection includes a range of hagiographical, devotional, polemical, and historical works, spanning in provenance from the sixteenth- to the twentieth-centuries. Unfortunately, the medieval manuscripts known to have been part of the original library at Syon have now been lost, but the collection remains a useful resource for studying the history of women's reading practices, post-Reformation Catholic print culture, and ecclesiastical history.

Archives and Rare Books Resources Held by the University of Exeter

EUL MS 95	Papers of Canon John Rory Fletcher relating to the history of Syon Abbey (35 volumes)
EUL MS 262	Liturgical and theological manuscripts dating from the 15 th to 17 th centuries
EUL MS 262 add. 1	Manuscripts dating from the 16 th to 20 th centuries including prayers, obituaries, extracts from hagiographies, and other religious and administrative documents
EUL MS 265	Papers of Marion Glasscoe and Claire Johnson relating to the process of cataloguing the Syon Abbey library
EUL MS 389	The Syon Abbey archive which includes 113 boxes of administrative records, financial papers, and assorted personal and ecclesiastical manuscripts dating from the 16 th to 20 th centuries
Books from the Syon Abbey library are listed in the University of Exeter main online catalogue	