

England's last medieval monastery. Syon Abbey, 1415–2015. By E. A. Jones. Pp. xii + 151 incl. 39 ills. Leominster: Gracewing, 2015. £9.99 (paper). 978 085244 872 4
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As E. A. Jones notes in the introduction to his concise, easily accessible history of Syon Abbey, 2015 marked the sixcentenary of the only English monastery able to trace an unbroken line from the Middle Ages to the modern period. Founded by Henry V, who even laid the foundation stone himself, in February 1415, this Bridgettine community soon ranked amongst the wealthiest religious houses in England, by the sixteenth century boasting one of the largest and most up-to-date libraries in the country. Typical of Bridgettine houses, it was a split community, the numerically greater female side living separately from the smaller male contingent that acted as spiritual guides and chaplains. As such, women played a markedly significant role in the running of Syon Abbey, a female filling the role of treasurer and overseeing all the abbey's income and expenditure, whilst the abbess had overall control, like a 'chief executive of a major institution' in the words of Jones. Such was the abbey's reputation for learning and being at the cutting edge of humanist teachings that by the Reformation period, Thomas More and John Fisher were frequent visitors. Yet the community proved resistant to the Reformation, one of the brothers, Richard Reynolds, being executed for his refusal to accept the Oath of Supremacy and Anne Boleyn receiving a cool reception when she visited the abbey. Eventually shut down by Thomas Cromwell's legal chicanery, Syon Abbey entered its exile period, albeit with a brief respite at the invitation of Cardinal Pole during Mary's reign. After a peripatetic existence, Syon Abbey eventually found a new home in Lisbon. Here, despite the last brother dying in 1695 and the buildings being devastated by the 1755 earthquake, the community remained until 1861, when anti-religious fervour swept Portugal and the community again became refugees, but this time to their once inhospitable homeland. At the encouragement of Bishop William Vaughan, who was busy establishing contemplative orders in Plymouth Diocese, Syon Abbey settled in the south-west. Initially thriving, the house received its last solemn profession in 1962, underlining that it was more than just the effects of Vatican II that led to the decline of religious life in England. *England's last medieval monastery* is a light, highly readable canter through the abbey's history, picking out the major stories of its six hundred years. There are a couple of sticky moments when detailing the early modern period of the community – for example, despite what is stated, Edmund Campion was not the first martyr of the 'English mission'; that was Cuthbert Mayne, four years earlier, in 1577. Nevertheless, this is an enjoyable, useful introduction for anyone wishing to learn more about Syon Abbey and launch into further research on this unique religious community.

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