

## Future Excavations

Between 2006 and 2008 it is planned to undertake detailed excavations within the eastern end of the abbey church to help in locating internal and adjacent features such as the alter, chapels, shrines and tombs. Excavations will also attempt to establish the position, character and extent of other buildings within the monastic complex, particularly south of the church.

## Birkbeck Training Excavations

Birkbeck's Faculty of Continuing Education undertakes annual Summer Training Excavations which provide teaching in archaeological excavation and recording.

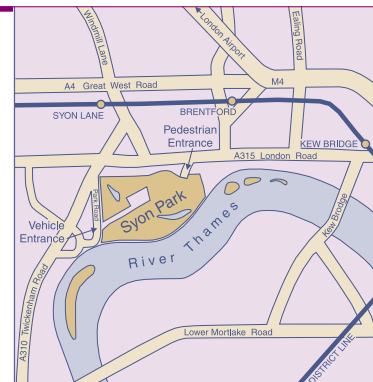


Students range from complete beginners, interested in learning what archaeological investigation entails, to experienced practitioners undertaking Degrees or Diplomas.

## Educational and Community Visits

Birkbeck College welcomes and encourages schools and other interested parties to visit the site during the summer excavations. Tours of the trenches are provided and opportunities to experience various aspects of archaeological activity are given.

**By Rail** From Waterloo to Kew Bridge then bus as below or North London Line to Gunnersbury then bus as below.  
**By Underground** District Line to Gunnersbury then bus as below  
**By Bus** 237 or 267 to Brentlea Gate Bus Stop. E2, E8 to Brentford, pedestrian entrance 50 yards.  
**Free car park** Vehicle entrance Park Road, Isleworth.



Drawings included are by, or based on the work of, Bob Cowie, Robin Densem, Richard Farrant, Jonathon Foyle, Scott McCracken, Mick Miles, Barney Sloane, and geomatics and drawing office staff from MoLAS. Photographs are by Robin Densem, Richard Farrant, Jill Hooper, Mick Miles, Tony Marshall and staff of the Birkbeck photo unit. Textual contributions were from Bob Cowie and Richard Farrant. The Mathias Gerung woodcut was used by kind permission of the British Museum, and the Moses Glover map by kind permission of the Duke of Northumberland. In the production of this leaflet we are grateful for financial assistance from the London Centre for Arts and Cultural Enterprise.

Harvey Sheldon  
2006



Front cover image: interpretative painting of the abbey church by Jonathon Foyle

## Structural Features within the Church

### The Pier Bases

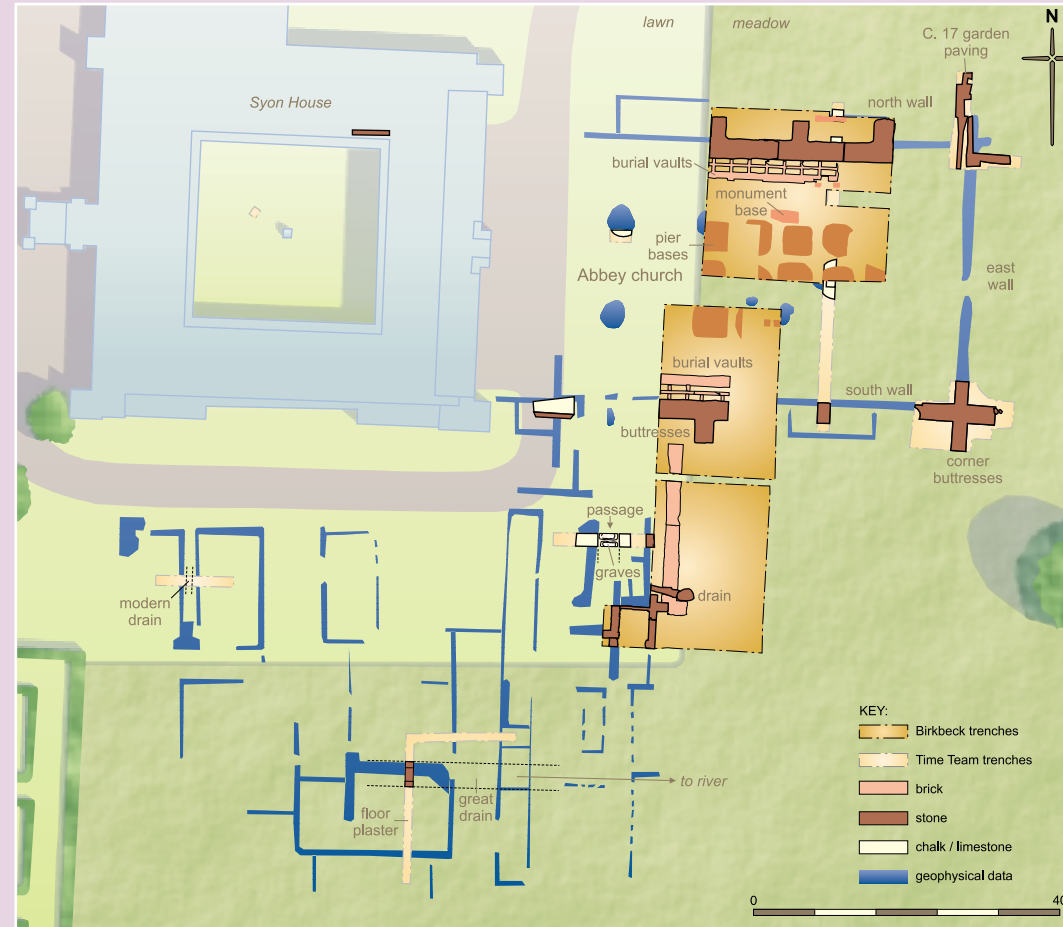
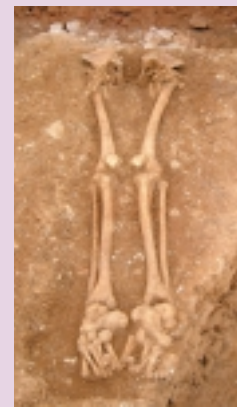
Three rows of massive, closely spaced, masonry pier bases have been found in the excavations. The northern and southern rows may have formed two east-west arcades dividing the church into three aisles. The purpose of the central row is unclear but it may have supported a gallery constructed towards the eastern end of the church.



'Monument' base and pier base with brick culvert from the formal garden

### The Grave in the Northern Aisle

The grave lying south of the 'monument' may have been associated with it. Only the lower half of the skeleton remained: the upper part had probably been destroyed in the removal of a pier base. Analysis suggests that the burial was of a robust male some 6 foot tall and about 45 years old, interred in a now-destroyed wooden coffin.



Geophysics, Time Team and Birkbeck excavations (2003-5)

### The Brick-built Burial Vaults

Two rows of brick vaults were constructed at the side of the northern and southern aisles. At least ten pairs in each aisle are likely, suggesting space for a minimum of forty inhumations. Most of the human remains had been removed, probably in landscaping for the gardens, but articulated bones had survived, particularly in the south aisle. Other finds in the graves included more than a dozen pins, two finger rings and a fragment of cloth, probably from a shroud.



Vaults and robbed-out northern church wall

## North and South of the Abbey Church

Geophysics, as well as the 'Time Team' and subsequent excavations suggest that major monastic buildings lie close to the south of the church. Brick walls on substantial stone foundations, some surviving to just beneath the modern ground surface, may be from the cloisters and adjacent buildings. Masonry drains, probably discharging east into the Thames, have also been located and two monastic burials, perhaps under the cloister floors, have also been found.

Though investigations north of the Church have so far been limited, wall foundations could belong to attached chapels and to the beginning of the northern monastic range.

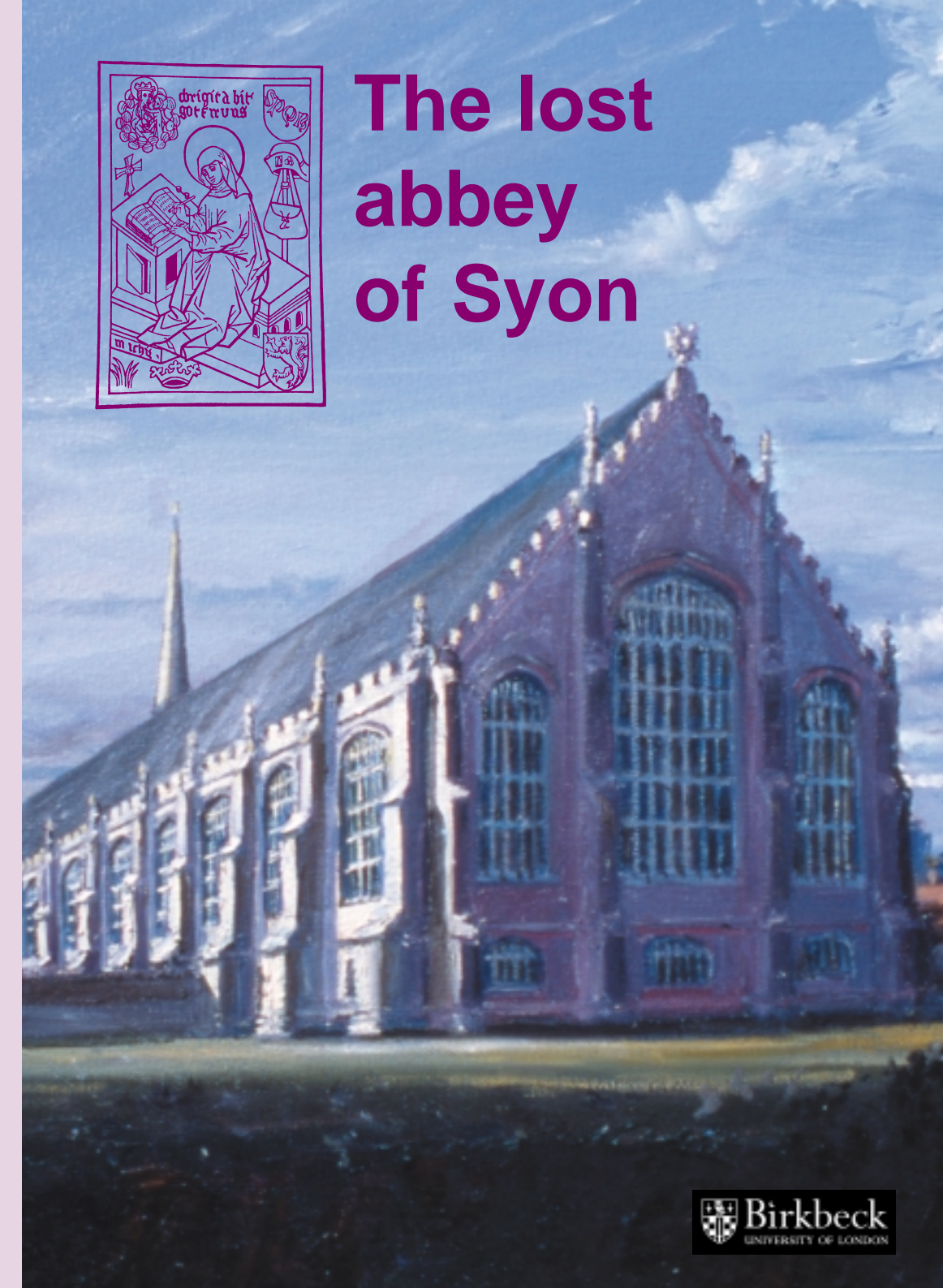


### Moses Glover's Map 1635

This landscape map depicts the quadrangular Syon House of the early 17th century, together with ranges of buildings to the west. An extensive orchard lies to the north and pasture land is shown close to the Thames, east of the house. The map also reveals walkways and beds, incorporated within the extensive formal gardens which border the house, particularly on its eastern side.



# The lost abbey of Syon



### The Importance of Syon Abbey

Syon Abbey was unique, as it was the only Bridgettine abbey in medieval England. It belonged to the order established by St Bridget at Vadestena in Sweden in 1346.

Royally endowed, with rich patrons and a church perhaps of a size similar to the abbey at Westminster, Syon was, at the time of its suppression by Henry VIII in 1539, the 10th richest religious house in England and the wealthiest Nunnery.

After its dissolution, most of the abbey buildings were demolished and subsequently their remains have lain buried on the Duke of Northumberland's Syon Park estate on the Middlesex side of the Thames, opposite what was to become the Royal Palace of Kew and its gardens.



Aerial picture of Syon House, looking east. The excavation is taking place on the lawns and meadows behind the house.

### The Bridgettine Order and the Founding of Syon Abbey

Syon Abbey was originally founded by Henry V on royal land near Twickenham in 1415, the year of Agincourt: it may reflect his father, Henry IV's ambition to establish a house belonging to this order. Bridgettine Abbey's, noted for their piety, were double-houses with separate conventual buildings for the nuns and monks.

The ground, close to the Thames may have been too marshy and within a few years the location was moved a short distance downstream to the land now occupied by Syon House and its estate.

The construction of the new Church was begun in 1426, early in the reign of Henry V's infant son, Henry VI and by 1431, the religious community had begun moving to the new site. New building construction, improvement and maintenance work continued sporadically almost up to the time of the abbey's suppression by Henry VIII, just over a century later.

### Dissolution of the Abbey

Henry VIII dissolved Syon Abbey in 1539 as part of his final suppression of the monasteries, though as early as 1535 a Syon monk, Richard Reynolds had been executed in London for his opposition to the Henrican religious reforms. The Bridgettines briefly returned to Syon under Mary Tudor but the Abbey was finally dissolved by her successor, Elizabeth, early in her reign.

### Syon House

After Henry VIII's death in 1547, the Syon Estate was granted to the Duke of Somerset, Lord Protector of his infant son Edward VI.

Somerset's Syon House might have been converted out of the monastic buildings. In 1553, after Somerset's fall, the Duke of Northumberland was granted the estate and by the end of the 16th century the main building had been erected as a three-storey quadrangular house around a central courtyard with four corner brick turrets. Re-building is recorded in the early 1600's and two centuries later, restoration included the re-cladding of the exterior in Bath Stone.

### The Discovery of the Lost Abbey

Research into surviving medieval and Tudor documents provides some information about the religious community and its royal connections, though little is known about the abbey church and the other monastic buildings.

In 2003, geophysical survey and excavation by 'Time Team' revealed some of the wall foundations of the church, immediately east of Syon House. In 2004, Birkbeck, University of London, was invited to undertake annual research and training excavations so that more could be learnt about the monastic complex.

### Birkbeck's Research Objectives

The main objectives, programmed for completion over a series of five summer training excavations, are to establish information about:

- The size and layout of the abbey church, which might extend under Syon House.
- The nature of the buildings in the monastic complex lying beyond the church to the north and south.
- The series of formal gardens laid out from the mid 16th century onwards in the grounds of Syon House.

### The Abbey Church

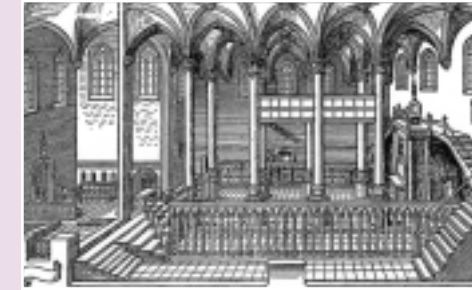
Excavations have succeeded in locating the north and south walls of the church. Each wall had external buttresses and was about 2 metres wide indicating that the church had an overall width of some 37 metres (121 feet).

The length of the church is unknown. The eastern wall has been found and if the western end coincides with the western wall of Syon House, as has been suggested, it would be about 145 metres (476 feet) long, much longer than in any other known Bridgettine Abbey.

Features discovered within the church, include brick-lined burial vaults inside the north and south walls, substantial pier bases supporting columns and what may be the stone foundation of a 'monument' with a body lying close by its southern side.



Excavation in progress on the northern wall of the church and the brick-lined burial vaults

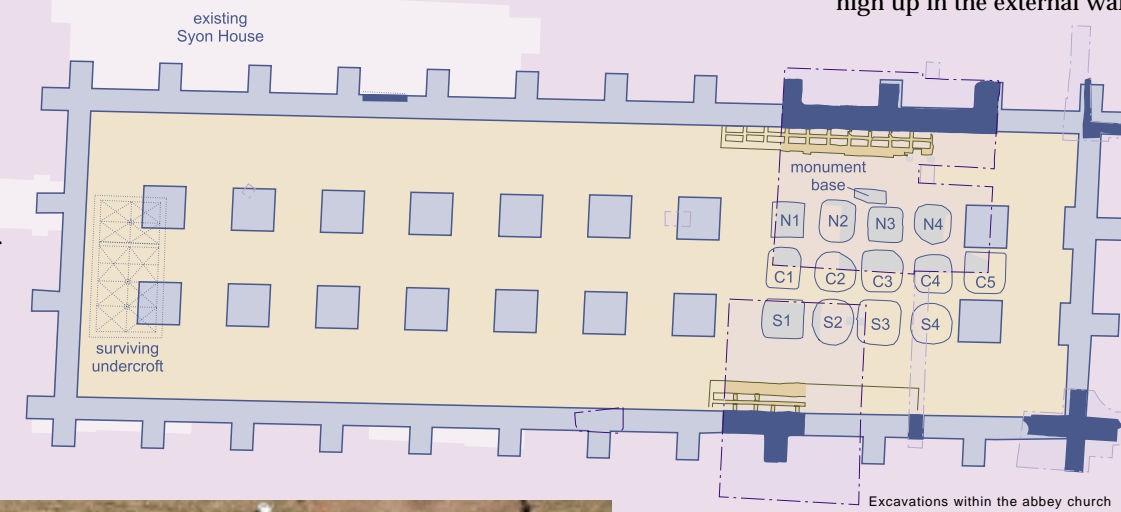


### Interior of a Bridgettine abbey

The Dutch woodcut dating from the beginning of the 16th century shows the interior of a Bridgettine abbey church. It illustrates an elaborate and complex interior, with high vaults supported by massive columns between which is constructed a gallery. Below is what might be a shrine or tomb. There is a raised pulpit reached by stairs, rood screen, tiled floor surfaces and relatively small windows placed high up in the external walls.



Excavation of a burial



### The Destruction of the Abbey Church

The church seems to have been carefully demolished with a view to re-using the materials. No floor surfaces or above-ground parts of the building have survived, at least in the area excavated.

The rubble suggests that much of the fabric of the church was quarried from the North Downs, though stone from Yorkshire and from Caen in Normandy was present. Some moulded stone fragments were probably from windows as were pieces of plain and decorated glass and lead fixings. Green and yellow glazed floor tiles, red roof tiles and iron nails have also been recovered.



'The destruction of a church' woodcut c 1547 (Mathias Gerung)



Fragments of window glass and lead



Roof tiles and nails from the demolition of the abbey



Floor tiles