

‘Crisis at Syon in the 1530s: The Ailing Finances of One of the “Greater” English Abbeys’

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Few writers have had a good word to say about Sir Richard Riche, Chancellor of the Court of Augmentations and one of Henry VIII’s principal lieutenants in the dissolution of the monasteries. Indeed, his enthusiastic participation in the speculative frenzy for ex-monastic lands during the 1530s and 1540s has earned him condemnation for unprincipled greed and avarice, but his darker reputation as a man totally lacking in scruples rests largely upon his role in the trial and execution of Sir Thomas More, where his insatiable desire for advancement in the king’s service allowed him to perjure himself to secure More’s conviction. In the words of one biographer, Richard Rich earned ‘a reputation for amorality and treachery with few parallels in English history’.¹ Even the early twentieth-century historian of Rich’s charitable foundations in Essex considered his philanthropic motives in the reign of Queen Mary to have been highly suspect: the establishment of his chantry and school at Felsted were perhaps ‘largely a piece of crafty policy to propitiate the new queen by an action specially acceptable to her private wishes, calculated to blot out the recollection of his actions against herself personally and against the old supporters of her wronged mother [Catherine of Aragon]’.² He was, then, a man peculiarly representative of the selfish venality at the heart of Tudor society, and we are perhaps justified in presuming that his actions in any given circumstance should be judged according to the proven deficiencies of his character. So when we discover that Sir Richard Rich purchased a large and important manor from one of the wealthiest monasteries in England just after the dissolution process began in 1536, and subsequently took the extraordinary step of securing an Act of parliament to ‘assure’ this purchase for himself and his heirs, we must surely conclude that such a transaction was fraudulent, or at least highly suspect. In today’s paper I would like to present three pieces of evidence which, taken together, not only suggest caution before jumping to such a foregone conclusion, but they also raise important questions about the accepted historiography of the dissolution of the monasteries and the economic health of the English church on the eve of the Reformation.

My first piece of evidence comes from a land transaction that probably occurred just before the unseemly scramble for ex-monastic lands that took place from the end of 1536: this was the sale of the lordship and manor of Felsted and Grautescourtes in Essex to Sir Richard Rich by the abbess and convent of Syon Abbey through private treaty in late 1536 or early 1537. This sale was later formalised in two transactions approved by royal letters patent on 25 May 1537 and 17 March 1538, although it was not until 17 January 1540 that Rich was finally allowed to purchase Felsted rectory and church.³ It is not known exactly when the initial purchase took place, nor the terms under which Rich acquired this valuable portion of Syon’s landed endowment, representing approximately 5% of the abbey’s total annual

income, but if Rich paid the going rate for this property, the purchase price was likely to have been £1,980, a very large sum of money in the 1530s.⁴

Felsted lordship was one of the original endowments that Henry V granted to Syon in 1415, and also one of the first properties over which the abbess finally gained control in the early 1420s.⁵ It formed part of the abbess's own landed income by the beginning of the sixteenth century and must have been one of the most prized possessions of the abbey.⁶ Exactly how Richard Rich was able to acquire this property is not known, but Thomas Cromwell certainly played an important part in the transaction. As chief steward of Syon, Cromwell no doubt had some influence over the abbey's administration, but his real influence over the Syon religious community was political, especially after the harrowing events of 1534-35 when one of the most renowned of the Syon monks, Richard Reynolds, was executed for treason with the three Carthusian priors at Tyburn. Rich wrote to Cromwell in March 1538, thanking him for 'your good expedition of my matter of Syon, for the which, on my faith, ye have and shall bind me; for this and many other pleasures and gratuities to me shown, I reckon myself most bounden to owe you my poor service, next to the king, during my life.'⁷ This letter was undoubtedly acknowledging Cromwell's assistance in securing the letters patent which enabled Syon to alienate this part of its endowment to a layman, an unusual and, one imagines, a rather difficult transaction to arrange at a time when the lesser monasteries were being suppressed.

Sir Richard Rich had been establishing a political base in Essex for several years before he made the purchase of Felsted. In 1529 he was returned as a member of parliament for the borough of Colchester, with Sir Thomas Audley as his patron; in 1532 he was appointed recorder of Colchester; and in 1536 he was selected as one of the knights for Essex in the parliament for that year.⁸ In 1536 he was also appointed as chancellor of the newly established Court of Augmentations, which would manage the lands of the 'lesser' monastic houses recently suppressed by Parliament. On 25 May 1536, Rich began acquiring ex-monastic lands in Essex with the purchase of the site and some of the lands of the Augustinian priory at Leighs, valued at £114 per annum. This was followed in June 1537 by a grant of the remaining lands of Leighs priory.⁹ It seems likely that Rich would have started looking for other properties in the vicinity of Leighs in mid-1536, or perhaps he was already aware of the Syon property at Felsted, which virtually adjoined the site of Leighs Priory. The lordship of Felsted was, then, an obvious choice for Rich to purchase after he had acquired Leighs. Rich continued to purchase lands in Essex over the next decade. By 1540 he had acquired ex-monastic lands in the county valued at around £420 per annum, and in the next six years before Henry VIII's death he added further lands valued at more than £400 per annum, furnishing him with a substantial patronage base in Essex. Some of these grants were free gifts from the king or exchanges, but altogether he paid the staggering sum of nearly £9,500 in ready cash for these properties. He also spent lavishly on remodelling the monastic buildings at Leighs Priory to turn them into his principal country residence, a sprawling and comfortable red-brick Tudor house.¹⁰ Some of the former Syon lands at Felsted were ultimately used to endow the Rich family chantry and grammar school.¹¹

The exceptional nature of Richard Rich's property transaction with the abbess and convent of Syon is highlighted by the fact that he felt it necessary to obtain a private Act of parliament in 1539 to ensure the validity of the Felsted manor purchase.¹² The Act fully lists the various components included in the original conveyance, consisting of the entire manor with its house and the advowson of the vicarage, forty messuages in nearby villages valued at £20 per annum, 1,260 acres of

land and meadow, 1,000 acres of pasture, 200 acres of wood and 40 acres of heath.¹³ Rich's desire to have his title to these extensive lands confirmed by parliament surely indicates the guilty conscience of a man who did not shy away from employing the most extraordinary measures to validate the means by which he had satisfied his greed for land. But this still leaves the question of why the Syon community submitted to the sale of one of its most important manors, a mainstay of the abbess's own landed income. Did Cromwell and Rich simply take advantage of the weakened leadership at Syon after the execution of Richard Reynolds, during a period when all the religious were placed under the close surveillance of the king's vice-regent in spirituals? This explanation does not unfortunately sit very well with what we know about the redoubtable abbess, Agnes Jordan, and the feisty members of her convent who refused to surrender their abbey right up until the last moment, and then contrived to continue their religious life until the reign of Edward VI in small pseudo-monastic households scattered across the Home Counties.¹⁴ Even at the suppression of the house in November 1539, the exasperated commissioners noted that ten of the nuns were proving to be 'obstinate', leading them to consider withholding the nuns' pensions.¹⁵ So, is it likely that these well educated and rather feisty nuns would have sold one of their prized possessions simply at the demand of Richard Rich or Thomas Cromwell? What did they owe Rich? Or did they perhaps need to sell Felsted for other reasons?

My second piece of evidence helps to answer these questions, but in a rather unexpected way. More than fifty years ago, Robert Dunning alerted us to the existence of a treasure-trove of Syon account rolls and administrative papers at the National Archives in London.¹⁶ He later used these materials to illustrate in fascinating detail the progress of building and repair work at Syon between 1461 and 1537.¹⁷ I began examining the Syon account rolls thirty years ago, but it was not until recently that I have been able to work in detail on the accounts of the various obedientaries, including the abbess, the treasurers, the cellaress, the chambress, and the sacristan. I was particularly struck by the annual accounts of the treasurers, the two nuns who received the bulk of the abbey's income and distributed it to the other obedientaries. The income of the treasurers fluctuated between £1,300 and £1,500 per annum between 1508 and 1536. For the first decade and a half of the sixteenth century, they usually managed to balance income and expenditure, even accumulating a small surplus of funds over several years. Beginning in 1515-16, however, expenditure began to outstrip income, forcing the abbess to redirect some of her own accumulated surplus to supplement the treasurers' income. These annual grants from the abbess ranged from £100 to as much as £400, and continued right up until the end of this series of account rolls [Table 1]. By 1520-21, expenditure was exceeding income by more than £400 per annum and large deficits began to be recorded [Table 2], especially in the abbess's account.

We know that all monastic houses went through good years and bad years depending on agricultural harvests, but at Syon the 1520s witnessed the beginning of more than a decade of large deficits in both the abbess's and treasurers' accounts. By 1529, the accumulated deficit had risen to more than £2,000, a sum that was well in excess of the monastery's annual income from all sources. We also note that in 1534-35 both the abbess's and treasurers' accounts were rebalanced and started anew, presumably following a large injection of funds from an external source. The date of this rebalancing of the Syon books does not quite match with the sale of Felsted manor, but we know from other sources that early sixteenth-century accounts were sometimes not presented for several years after the end of an accounting period. It

should also be noted that the account rolls for the years between 1530 and 1534 are curiously incomplete, indicating that something unusual was occurring at the time. I would therefore like to suggest that Sir Richard Rich was able to purchase Felsted manor from Syon Abbey because of a pressing financial need that the convent could not meet from other normal sources of income. These sources would have included entry fines for new leases, income that was not normally recorded in the annual accounts, but an examination of the Syon administrative records indicates that only four new leases were granted in the period between 1529 and 1536, although a further five leases were arranged in the final three years of the abbey's existence.¹⁸ It seems unlikely, therefore, that entry fines alone could have accounted for the sudden rebalancing of the accounts in 1533-34.

What this series of monastic accounts indicates is that, although Syon is rightly considered to have been one of the wealthiest abbeys in England on the eve of the dissolution, the condition of its finances in the 1520s and 1530s was far from satisfactory. What was the cause of this dramatic reversal in the abbey's fortunes? We know that Syon had to pay £333 at Cardinal Wolsey's legatine visitation in 1523,¹⁹ and after 1534 it was subject to the new statute of First Fruits and Tenths, so there were some new costs that the abbey had to make provision for in these two decades, but these impositions do not really provide us with a convincing explanation of the very sudden rise in expenditure from the mid-1510s. My third piece of evidence helps to explain how these new costs arose. It has been known for some time that the reign of Henry VIII marked the end of more than a century of 'surprising stability' in the cost of everyday foodstuffs and industrial goods, and the beginning of the second great period of inflation experienced by the English in pre-modern times.²⁰ These price rises were particularly noticeable in the 1520s and 1530s, although they did not reach a peak until the 1540s when debasement of the coinage led to rampant inflation [Table 3]. The decennial price indexes for the 1520s and 1530s indicate a 50% rise in prices of foodstuffs since 1500. Inflation was, then, a new economic force with which the whole of English society was coming to terms during these two decades. While individual families who were trapped by stable wage levels during these years perhaps dealt with the rapidly rising price of foodstuffs by tightening their belts as best they could, it was more difficult for a complex organisation such as the largest monastic community in the country to respond quickly to this challenge and reduce its expenditure, especially when increases in prices were initially thought to be cyclical and therefore might be resisted to some extent by deploying accumulated reserves of cash in the short term.

We are fortunate to have a nearly full run of accounts rolls for the first forty years of the sixteenth century rendered by Syon's cellaress, the obedientiary in charge of providing food and drink for the entire monastic community and its lay *familia* that consisted of several dozen dependents [Tables 4 & 5]. These figures indicate that the cost of provisioning the abbey was definitely the root cause of its financial difficulties. Provisioning costs rose exactly in line with price inflation in the 1520s and 1530s, peaking in 1527-29, but also reaching higher levels in 1520-21 and 1536-37. This sustained inflation made it necessary for the treasurers to find larger amounts of money each year to cover the usual costs of the cellaress, making it virtually impossible for Syon to balance its books by simply relying on traditional income streams, even with the assistance of annual cash injections from the abbess. Financial reserves were swallowed up within three years of the first great price rise of 1519-20, and yet prices continued to rise inexorably in the years that followed. It must be remembered that it was very difficult at this time for any landholder to increase rental

income because tenants were fiercely resistant to such increases. Rents therefore tended to remain stable even as prices soared. For example, the manor of Felsted was farmed to tenants for the same amount of £93 per annum from the beginning of the century until the preparation of the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* in 1535.²¹ New leases for other Syon properties in the first thirty years of the sixteenth century appear to have been made with the same provisions for rent charges as had applied in the last decades of the fifteenth century. Thus, during a period of extreme price inflation, landed income remained stagnant. In this situation, and faced with ballooning cumulative deficits in both her own and the treasurers' accounts, it is perhaps understandable that the abbess of Syon would consider taking the extraordinary step of selling one of her prize manors to ease what was considered to be a temporary phenomenon, usually referred to in Tudor times as a 'dearth of victuals'.²² Unfortunately, price inflation was not a temporary problem; by selling Felsted manor to Sir Richard Rich the abbess permanently reduced the income of the abbey from £1,945 per annum to £1,850 per annum, making it virtually impossible for Syon to weather the economic storm that was to worsen as the 1530s progressed. Even after the rebalancing of accounts in 1535, therefore, deficits were immediately recorded in the final two years for which accounts survive. This situation would have worsened in the 1540s, had Syon survived.

We must acknowledge the stark reality, therefore, that one of the wealthiest monasteries in England was faced with ultimate bankruptcy at the time of its suppression in 1539. To address the problem of ever-spiralling increases in food costs would have required both a reduction in the traditional dietary provisions of the monastery (already regarded as one of the most strictly observant in England) together with a significant change in the abbey's estate management practices, including a large increase in agricultural rents. This would have been a very difficult task to achieve in a conservative institution such as Syon Abbey, or indeed any of the other large monasteries in the country. It may well be that Syon was particularly hard hit because of its close proximity to London, where food prices may have been a little higher than elsewhere in the country, but if this was the case we should also expect some of the other 'greater' abbeys such as Westminster and St Alban's to have been similarly affected by inflationary pressures. If any of these greater monastic houses had survived into the 1540s, it is unlikely that they could have coped with mounting inflation. This is an economic dimension of the dissolution period that has perhaps been hidden from view by the more obvious political and religious storms that were raging at the time. It must also be acknowledged that there are very few extant household accounts which allow us to gain a full picture of the internal economies of even the largest abbeys. The historiography of the Tudor period tells us that the 'lesser' monastic houses were in a parlous state at the time of their dissolution in 1536; the financial evidence from Syon indicates that even the 'greater' monasteries were perhaps reaching their final days when Henry VIII pre-empted their ultimate financial collapse by appropriating their endowments for his own use.

¹ P. R. N. Carter in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 46, pp. 682-83.

² Andrew Clark (ed.), *The Foundation Deeds of Felsted School and Charities* (Felsted: Felsted School, 1916), p. xv.

³ These transactions are summarized in *Letters and Papers*, vol. 12(i), 1330(54), p. 606; vol. 13(i), 646(42), p. 245; and vol. 15, 144(16), p. 53.

⁴ The going rate for good agricultural land such as Felsted was twenty years' purchase, i.e. twenty times the annual value of the property.

⁵ *Victoria History of the Counties of England*, Middlesex, vol. 1 (1969), p. 184; Felsted was handed over to the abbess in 1424, at the same time as Isleworth manor, where the abbey would eventually settle and construct its permanent monastery. Felsted manor had been one of the overseas possessions of Caen Abbey in Normandy, and was surrendered to Henry V in the 1410s among the lands of the alien priories.

⁶ TNA, SC6/Hen8/2194; Felsted was second only to the lordship of Minchinhampton in Gloucestershire as a source of income for the abbess.

⁷ G. H. Cook (ed.), *Letters to Cromwell and Others on the Suppression of the Monasteries* (London: John Baker, 1965), p. 164, 29 March 1538; also calendared in *Letters and Papers*, vol. 13(i), 1538, 625.

⁸ *ODNB*, vol. 46, pp. 680-81.

⁹ *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, vol. 1, p. 449; this is the clear value of the Leighs Priory lands, their gross value would have been somewhat higher. The grant of Leighs Priory to Rich was made in two instalments, the first on 25 May 1536 for the site of the monastery and lands valued at £26.7s.6d. per annum (*Letters and Papers*, vol. 10, 1015(33), p. 420), and the second on 25 June 1537 for the reversions of all the remaining lands of the priory (*Letters and Papers*, vol. 12(ii), 191(40), p. 82).

¹⁰ Most of Rich's house was demolished in the eighteenth century and what remains of it is now used as an up-market wedding venue.

¹¹ See Michael Craze, *A History of Felsted School, 1564-1947* (Ipswich: Cowell, 1955), pp. 15-32.

¹² The parliament was held between 28 April and 28 June 1539, and included the Act for 'dissolution of all monasteries and abbeys', c.13; see *Letters and Papers*, vol. 14(i), 868, pp. 403-5. Rich's private Act was c.23, 'An Act Assuring Lands to Sir Richard Rich', Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PB/1/1539/31H8n23.

¹³ The only property reserved to the abbess and convent was a single messuage rented to Thomas Awert, including six acres of land with hedges and ditches adjoining Bedyngfeld. It is not clear why this property was excluded from the transaction.

¹⁴ See Peter Cunich, 'The Syon Household at Denham, 1539-50', in John Doran, Charlotte Methuen & Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Religion and the Household* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2014), pp. 174-87; and Peter Cunich, 'The Brothers of Syon', in E. A. Jones & Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and Its Books: Reading, Writing and Religion, c.1400-1700* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), pp. 69-74.

¹⁵ TNA, LR12/112, fol. 13r.

¹⁶ Robert Dunning, 'The Muniments of Syon Abbey: Their Administration and Migration in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, vol. 37 (1964), pp. 103-11.

¹⁷ Robert Dunning, 'The Building of Syon Abbey', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, vol. 25 (1981), pp. 16-26.

¹⁸ These leases were for the following properties: Breade (Sussex) on 12 Dec. 1529 for 21 years; Minchinhampton (Gloucs) on 12 Aug. 1531 for 60 years; St Michael's mount (Cornwall) on 4 Feb. 1534 for 30 years; Amounderness 1 (Lancs) on 12 Feb.

1536 for 34 years; Molashe rectory (Kent) on 14 May 1537 for 30 years; Amounderness 2 (Lancs) on 22 Aug. 1537 for 31 years; Lancaster Priory (Lancs) on 3 Feb. 1538 for 40 years; Martock (Somerset) on 1 May 1538 for 40 years; and Hinton (Cambs) on 12 Dec. 1538 for 99 years.

¹⁹ VCH, London, vol. 1, p. 185.

²⁰ N. J. Mayhew, 'Prices in England, 1170-1750', *Past and Present*, 219 (May 2013), p. 4; E. H. Phelps Brown & Sheila V. Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables Compared with Builders' Wage Rates', in Peter H. Ramsey (ed.), *The Price Revolution in Sixteenth-Century England* (London: Methuen, 1971) [originally published in *Economica*, vol. 23 (Nov. 1956), pp. 296-314], p. 29.

²¹ TNA, SC6/Hen7/146; *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, vol. 1, p. 426. In 1506-7 the manor of Felsted and Grauntescourtes was being farmed by John Danyell, with rental payments due at Easter (£33) and Michaelmas (£60).

²² R. B. Outhwaite, *Inflation in Tudor and Early Stuart England*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 18.