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ABSTRACT

The story of the Bridgettines of Syon Abbey has been remembered as one of triumph over adversity. They were one of two religious orders that were not dispersed after the Reformation, and the only one of the two to have survived thus retaining an unbroken line of succession from the original community founded in south-west London in 1415. After much ‘wanderings’ on the Continent and a short return to England in 1557 during the reign of Mary I, the community settled in Lisbon in 1599. Their permanent return to England in 1861 was celebrated in the Catholic press. This paper is about a lesser-known facet of their history, and examines Syon’s first return in 1809, when, threatened by the approach of Napoleon’s revolutionary forces, ten members of the Syon community in Lisbon returned to England. The paper begins by outlining the story of the 1809 departure from Lisbon. It then moves to what we know of the events that unfolded in England, identifying the individual Bridgettines, the places they resided, and their benefactors. It examines in depth the individual stories of two sisters who are dispersed, examining the fidelity to their identities as Bridgettines. Then, it considers the memory of the 1809 return interrogating how the history of the first return has been remembered and documented arguing the preoccupations of the twentieth century have shaped how the story of Syon’s first return has been told.

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