

Is it a Maze or a Labyrinth?

Richard Stone and Trevor James – The Maze is a cultural phenomenon enjoyed across civilisations over several millennia, and it has played a role in various forms of spirituality.

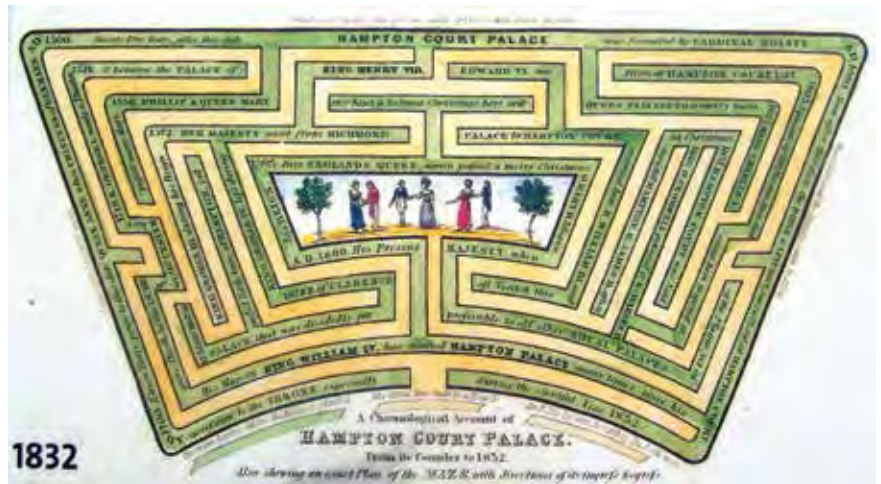
Connoisseurs of Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) will remember, and relish, the delights of his comedic account of his travellers being lost in the Hampton Court Maze and the difficulties that ensued in trying to rescue them.

Hampton Court Maze is a small component of the 60 acres of Wilderness Gardens laid out for William III in the 1690s. Itself covering about one-third of an acre, with about half a mile of footpaths, it is technically a multi-cursal *hedge maze*. Designed by George London and Henry Wise, it offers a challenge, or puzzle, to visitors because it offers them a baffling range of potential wrong turnings and alternative routes to the centre, thus demonstrating that it fully warrants its multi-cursal status. Tradition offers the possibility that it actually replaced an older version laid down for Cardinal Wolsey or Henry VIII. Its significance lies in the fact that it has been providing healthful entertainment for over 300 years from its late Stuart design; but this form of entertainment could have been located here for virtually 500 years. With social and recreational traditions that endure for such lengths of time, there are usually a number of factors which combine to secure its longevity as part of popular culture.

Alongside the existence of hedge mazes, of which Hampton Court is probably the most famous, there is another parallel English phenomenon known as the 'turf maze'. The body of evidence associated with these turf mazes will help to inform the wider picture and further interpret what it is that has been inherited.

Popular labelling has blurred the difference between a maze and what we understand to be a labyrinth, indeed the confusion probably makes it imperative that we consider both recreational forms as one large phenomenon! Basically there are two parallel forms: the multi-cursal, as at Hampton Court, and the turf maze which is generally unicursal. Somehow the labelling of the two forms has lost its accuracy.

To explain. Ancient Crete's Labyrinth of classical mythology, designed according to legend by Daedalus to



contain the Minotaur within a complex network of branches and blind alleys, is what modern theorists would now define as a maze because it followed a multi-cursal path. Ironically, by contrast what we label the turf maze, however convoluted, follows a single path. This is how one would ordinarily define a labyrinth.

In reality we only know what form the Cretan Labyrinth took because of the telling and retelling of the legend. By contrast Herodotus (484-424 BC) in his *Histories*, reported visiting a labyrinth in Ancient Egypt which he judged to be more impressive than the pyramids but he did not describe precisely what he saw.

The fact that these two forms existed in parallel with each other can be traced back to the time of Pliny the Elder (died AD 49) who, in his *Natural History*, described observing classical labyrinths, which he qualified by commenting that they should not be compared with mazes formed in the fields for the entertainment of children.

In England over 30 reliably-documented mazes have been recorded but have been lost due to ploughing or neglect. For example a maze known as 'Robin Hood's Race' at Sneinton in Nottinghamshire was ploughed out in 1797. The neighbourhood name of Maze Hill at Greenwich is another haunting clue.

There are however eight surviving turf mazes for us to observe and enjoy. Documentary evidence confirms that

they are several centuries old but precise dating has been difficult because they have had continually to be recut. These surviving historic turf mazes are to be found at:

- Julian's Bower, Alkborough, Lincolnshire
- City of Troy, Dalby-cum-Skewsby, North Yorkshire
- Mizmaze, St Catherine's Hill, Winchester, Hampshire
- Mizmaze, Breamore, Hampshire
- Hilton Maze, Hilton, Cambridgeshire
- Saffron Walden, Essex
- The Old Maze, Wing, Rutland
- Troy, Somerton, Oxfordshire

The possibility that the origins of turf mazes may lie significantly in the past, that is from the time of Herodotus, is suggested by the persistent association with classical names – the turf maze at Somerton in Oxfordshire is known as 'Troy', another at Dalton-cum-Skewsby in North Yorkshire is 'City of Troy'. The now vanished mazes at Dorchester, Bere Regis and Edenbridge were all labelled 'Troy Town'. The precise link with the eastern Mediterranean is not known but it is very consistent, thereby implying a link via the Roman settlement of England with cultural practices much further afield.

Evidence of how they were used in a recreational sense can be provided by antiquarian John Aubrey [1626-1697] in his *Monumenta Britannica*. Describing

a turf maze at Pimperne, near Blandford in Dorset, known as 'Troy Town', he says it was 'much used by the young people on holidays and by schoolboys'. Aubrey also mentioned a maze on Dover's Hill, Chipping Campden, where Captain Robert Dover initiated his 'Olympick Games' with royal approval in 1612. The existence of this maze is confirmed in a compilation of poems and drawings, 'The Annals of Dover' (*Annalia Dubrensis*), which celebrated the games, gathered together by Dr Robert Burns in 1636. This contains several references to a maze, although none say whether the maze was used as part of the games, or indeed how.

John Aubrey also identified a maze at Tothill Fields in Westminster which he described as being 'much frequented in summertime on fair afternoons', more than a hint that it was a scene of entertainment and diversion. The Tothill maze is referenced earlier in a play of 1614 by John Cooke – *Greene's Tu Quoque* or *The City Gallant* – and in the churchwarden's accounts for St Margaret's, Westminster in 1672 there is reference to payment to 'Mr Brewer for making a maze in Tuttlefields – £2'. Presumably this payment was for maintaining rather than cutting, given the evidence from the earlier literary source. Mazes in that proximity are also mentioned in the diaries of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, suggesting that they were tea garden attractions.

An unusual square turf maze on the summit of St Catherine's Hill, Winchester, known as 'Mizmaze' is set within the ramparts of an Iron Age hillfort. This implies some continuity from an earlier period. Certainly it was part of the traditions of Winchester College where 'treading the maze' at St Catherine's Hill was one of the pursuits of their pupils in the eighteenth century.

An inscribed stone at the centre of a turf maze on the village green at Hilton in Cambridgeshire commemorates its creation by William Sparrow in 1660. With communal revelry being discouraged while Puritans were in the ascendant during the Interregnum, this could easily mark the reinstatement of an earlier maze. Certainly Robert Dover's Olympick Games at Chipping Campden were halted in 1643 and then reinstated after the Restoration, so the Hilton example would match this pattern.

The location of the turf maze at Hilton and also one at Saffron Walden in Essex – the largest surviving turf maze at 43 metres diameter and recorded as being recut in 1699 – on their respective village greens, in other words common land, suggests a communal purpose.

White's *Directory for Leicestershire and Rutland* in 1846 notes an 'ancient' maze at Wing, known as the 'Old Maze', in which 'the rustics run at the parish feast', confirming this communal usage. Such recreational activities within the community historically were a mechanism for social cohesion.

A turf maze at Julian's Bower at Alkborough in Lincolnshire was recorded as being connected with May Day celebrations in the nineteenth century. This location is particularly significant because the site overlooks the confluence of the Rivers Trent, Ouse and Humber. Its name is also derived from a Trojan allusion: according to Homer, Ascanius Julius was the son of the Trojan hero, Aeneas, and some legends maintain that the walls surrounding Troy were complex, thereby associating him with complex patterns. Given the tidal vulnerability of the riverside areas below this location, this may well have been a place of spiritual significance. Community events were often drawn to such locations.

The maze, whether multicursal or unicursal, has undoubted longevity in being utilised by people for well over 2,000 years but this last English example provides the context for a much wider interpretation. The medieval church adopted the maze as an allegory of the search for truth or to represent a symbolic pilgrimage. The best-known example in a Christian building is on the floor of Chartres Cathedral, which was built in c. 1235. It is designed in 11 concentric circles in symmetrical quadrants. Penitent pilgrims, many of them English pilgrims on their way to the Shrine of St James at Santiago de Compostela, would follow the maze on their knees. Pilgrims still follow this ancient discipline in their meditations within the cathedral. As the turf mazes

at locations such as Alkborough, Wing and Hilton mirror the Chartres pattern, it is quite reasonable to assert that part of the impetus behind the existence of the 40 or more English mazes that we can identify may well have been inspired by Christian reflective practice.

Popular culture is what people generally experience and enjoy. Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [Act 2, Scene 2] reveals his awareness of the maze in the culture of everyday Tudor life when he has Titania bemoan 'the quaint mazes in the wanton green for lack of tread'. It was something that this most observant of men had noticed.

Popular culture is what people experience and enjoy but there will be deeper reasons why such phenomena as labyrinths or mazes occurred originally. The strong presence of the use of this form of expression within the spirituality of pilgrimage may be a strong indicator that this was a spiritual expression initially and that it became a vehicle for social and community pleasure, much as May Day began with spiritual overtones and became an opportunity for community exuberance over the centuries.

The creation of mazes is not an activity only fossilised in the past. Amongst various contemporary examples, a turf maze has been cut within the cloisters of Norwich Cathedral; and hedge mazes are being developed at Mary Arden's House at Stratford-upon-Avon and at Trentham Gardens in Staffordshire.

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