Two Labyrinths on English Needlework Samplers

Kimberly & Jeff Saward

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In times past, the women and girls who stitched intricate and delicate samplers would not have considered themselves artists, and accordingly they left little, if anything, of a biographical insight into their personalities and lives. Generally, we have only a name, a date, and the legacy of the designs they chose. These designs, with their specific motifs, verses, arrangement, and colour, serve to provide insight into the life and times of their nearly-anonymous makers.

> Stories, poems, songs – even the scantiest of jottings of families and loved ones – contributed to the composite life story of the Anonymous Women who ornamented every phase of her experience from girlhood through old age with handiwork of startling power and invention.[1]

The earliest surviving English samplers date from the late 16th century, and by the mid-18th century girls, often as young as five years of age, would stitch simple samplers. Working designs of increasing complexity as they became older and more experienced, their needlework skills would accompany them throughout life. Instruction often took place in schools and female academies where "elegant accomplishment" sometimes took precedence over scholarship.[2] They sourced their designs from collections that were regularly published and stored in the libraries of schools and teachers where they would be available to the students who passed through on their way to adulthood.

A recent addition to the Labyrinthos collection of labyrinthine artefacts is a late 18th century embroidered sampler, approximately 50 cm (18 inches) square, created by Ann Lewis "at Mrs Lees Dewsbury yorkshire in the year of our Lord 1798 Aged 12 Years" Rather faded, but otherwise in good condition for a piece of fabric over 200 years old, the sampler is decorated with two large birds (probably meant to be parrots), a number of heraldic devices, biblical figures in the form of Noah and his Ark, and Adam and Eve standing either side of the Tree of Knowledge, complete with serpent wrapped around its trunk. To the right of the tree is a rectangular labyrinth 8 x 5 cm, probably originally embroidered in blue silk. Winding its way between the various designs and devices (technically known as spot motifs) embroidered on the fabric are the lines of a poem *Whenever I take my Walks Abroad* written by Isaac Watts (1674-1748), a prodigious hymn-writer and theologian and author of various volumes of hymns, including *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, published in 1715, in which the poem on the sampler first appears.

The labyrinth on Ann Lewis' 1798 sampler.
Photo: Labyrinthos Collection

Ann Lewis' 1798 sampler. Photo: Labyrinthos Collection

While searching for further information on the author of the sampler and who her teacher may have been, we were rather surprised to find an almost identical sampler preserved in the important collection of samplers in the Kirklees Museums Collection, held at the Tolson Memorial Museum in Huddersfield, Yorkshire (accession no: KLMUS 2011.18).[3] This example, embroidered by Mary Blackburn (aged 11) in 1785, was once again created at Mrs. Lees in Dewsbury and has very similar design elements including birds, biblical figures and an almost identical, slightly rectangular, labyrinth stitched in black, floating directly above Noah in his Ark. This time the text woven around the motifs is from a verse entitled "O that the Lord Would Guide my Ways," and once again the author is Isaac Watts – clearly his uplifting moral rhymes were popular on the bookshelf where these two girls were taught their needlework skills.

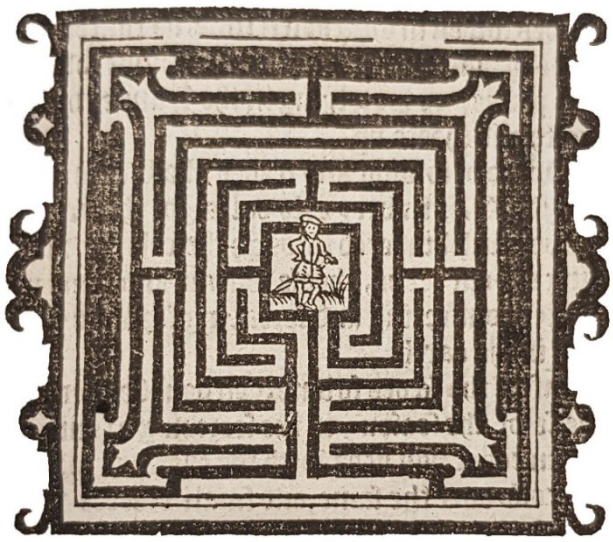
Mary Blackburn's 1785 sampler. Photo: Jeff Saward, courtesy of Kirklees Museums

The fact that two samplers survive with remarkably similar designs, from 13 years apart, and both created at Mrs Lees in Dewsbury, would suggest that Mrs Lees (or Lee, there is no apostrophe to indicate either way on the samplers) was a teacher, either at a 'Dame school' (a private elementary school, often located in the home of the teacher) or at one of the charitable schools in the town.

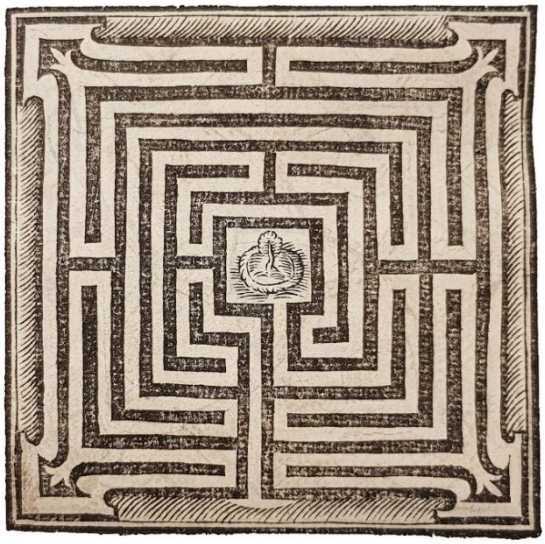
Dewsbury, as a wealthy milling and mining town, had a proud tradition of providing education for its children from the early 18th century onwards, long before the introduction of compulsory education – although we have been unable to trace her in the early trade directories, first published in the early 19th century. Wherever her classes were held, Mrs. Lees was surely providing her girls with patterns for them to copy motifs for their embroidery projects. Such patterns were available in pattern books, and also in publications of the time, especially the fashion monthly *Lady's Magazine*, published from 1770 to 1837. Clearly one of the books or magazines in her library may have contained the labyrinth design that appears on both of the surviving samplers.

The labyrinth on Mary Blackburn's 1785 sampler. Photo: Jeff Saward, courtesy of Kirklees Museums

The design of the labyrinths is at first sight rather unusual – rectangular, with protrusions at the four corners – but the pattern of the pathways is, in fact, a familiar seven-circuit medieval design, first found in Serlio's influential book *Libri cinque d'architettura*,[4] a design used in circular form for the pavement labyrinths at San Vitale, Ravenna and the Castel Sant' Angelo in Italy. In the British Isles it appears as the design of a turf labyrinth at Clifton, Nottingham, this time rendered in square form, and also as the likely design of an overgrown labyrinth earthwork recently identified at Llwydiarth Hall, in Powys, Wales.[5] This square design, with the same protrusions at the corners that appear on the samplers, first appears in Thomas Hill's famous English-language gardening book *The Profitable Art of Gardening* (also the probable source of the design of the Saffron Walden turf labyrinth), first published in 1568 and widely reprinted thereafter. It also appears in *A Country Housewifes Garden* by William Lawson, first published in 1618 and likewise reprinted a number of times throughout the 17th century.[6]



The square labyrinth from The Profitable Art of Gardening by Thomas Hill, 1586 edition



A Maze, from A Country Housewifes Garden by William Lawson, 1618

Photos: Jeff Saward, courtesy of the British Library.

A copy of Hill or Lawson's engraving, or a later version of the same design, was surely in one of the pattern books or magazines on Mrs. Lees' bookshelf in Dewsbury in the late 1700s. Whatever the exact source, it further proves how widespread the labyrinth symbol had become in 18th century England, at all levels of society – even schoolgirls would have known the designs!

Kimberly & Jeff Saward, Thundersley, England; April 2014
(Revised and updated, May 2020 & January 2025)

Notes:

Our thanks go to Katina Bill at the Tolson Memorial Museum in Huddersfield, and to Kathy Andrews for research assistance and providing permission to use images, etc.

1. Bank, Mirra. *Anonymous was a Woman*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1979; p.9
2. *ibid.*, p.10
3. http://www.kirkleesimages.org.uk/Samplers.php
4 Kern, Hermann. *Through the Labyrinth*. Prestel, 2000, p. 248 (no.470)
5. Saward, Jeff. "The Llwydiarth Hall Labyrinth," *Caerdroia* 49 (2020), p.4-5.
6. Francis, Jill. *Gardens and Gardening in Early Modern England and Wales*. Yale University Press, 2018.

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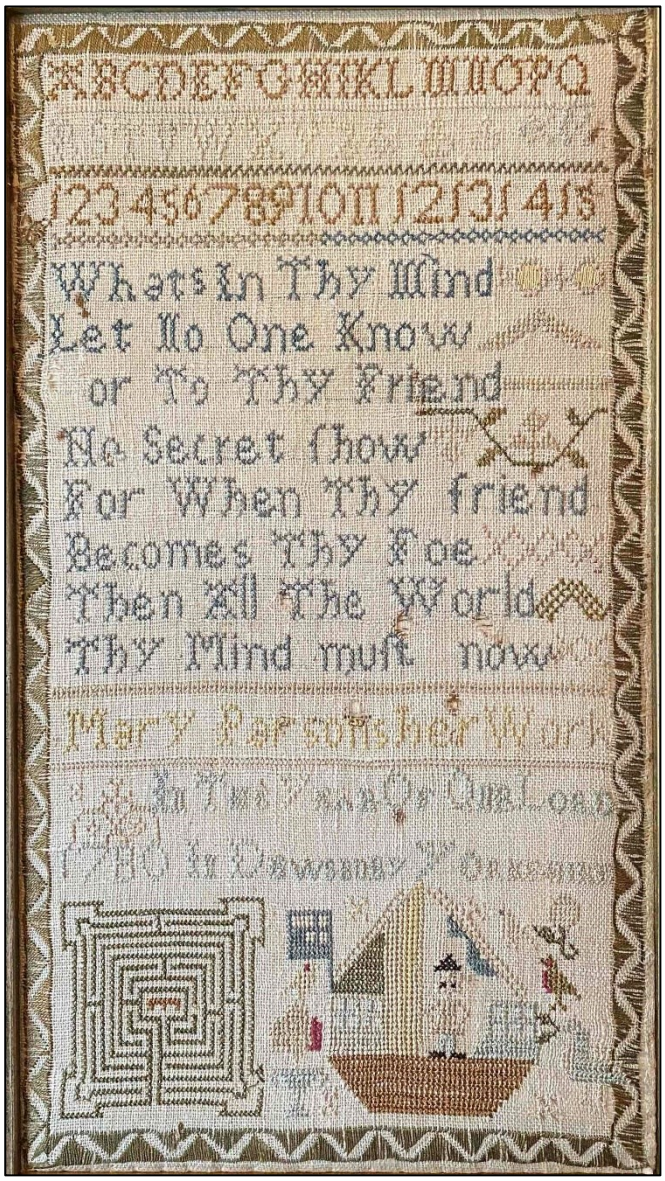
A Third Example Discovered – Updated 2020

A third sampler decorated with the same labyrinth design, and again produced in Dewsbury, has recently been brought to our attention. Purchased in 2017 and now in a private collection in Iowa, USA, this small sampler was created by Mary Parsons "In The Year Of Our Lord 1780 in Dewsbury Yorkshire" and along with the usual alphabet and numbers (one to fifteen) is decorated with a popular verse:

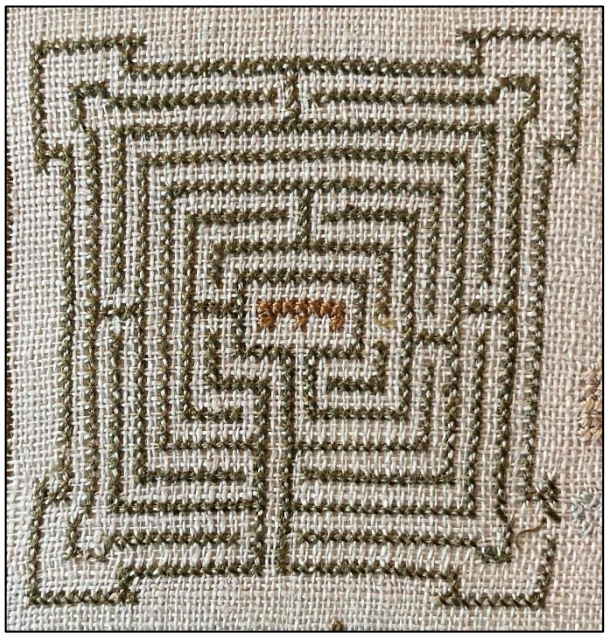
> Whats in thy mind let no one know
> Or to thy friend no secret show
> For when thy friend becomes thy foe
> Then all the world thy mind must (k)now

The lower panel of the sample is filled by a square labyrinth and a depiction of Noah standing on the deck of his ark, complete with dove and olive branch. Both the ark and the labyrinth are identical in form to those on the two previously documented samplers, and interestingly the labyrinth contains the same distinctive quirk – a slight offset of the pairs of turns on the right-hand side, not present on any of the engravings in the gardening books. This surely suggests that Mary Parsons was using the same stitching pattern as Mary Blackburn in 1785 and Ann Lewis in 1798, and that maybe she was also a pupil of Mrs Lees?

With three samplers decorated with identical labyrinths now on record, stitched over a period of nearly 20 years, it seems likely that more might yet be recorded, although to the best of our knowledge, none have ever been documented from anywhere other than Dewsbury. Might this suggest that this specific design was a speciality kept in Mrs Lees' library for her girls, rather than a template in a more widely available work?



Mary Parson's 1780 sampler and close up of the labyrinth. Photos courtesy of Kathy Andrews



Reproduced from Caerdroia 50, p.72.

A Further Labyrinth on an English Sampler – Updated January 2025

Following the note in *Caerdroia* 50 (p. 72) of another embroidered sampler dated 1780 from Dewsbury, Yorkshire, England decorated with a labyrinth, Lynne Anderson in Eugene, Oregon, USA contacted us with news that she has a further example in her collection. Stitched by Martha Sharp, a young girl of unrecorded age, and unfortunately with no location specified, the sampler is decorated with the usual alphabet and numbers, spot motifs of trees, flowers, birds and animals and a typical moral verse:

> Love the Lord and he will be
> a tender father unto the[e]
> let virtue always be thy Guide
> And he will keep the[e] out of pride

In the centre of the sampler is a rectangular labyrinth, of essentially the same design as the other three examples previously recorded, but this one contains a small error – a pair of turns on the upper margin are missing, resulting in a closed loop that is never traversed, although the labyrinth can still be traced successfully none the less.

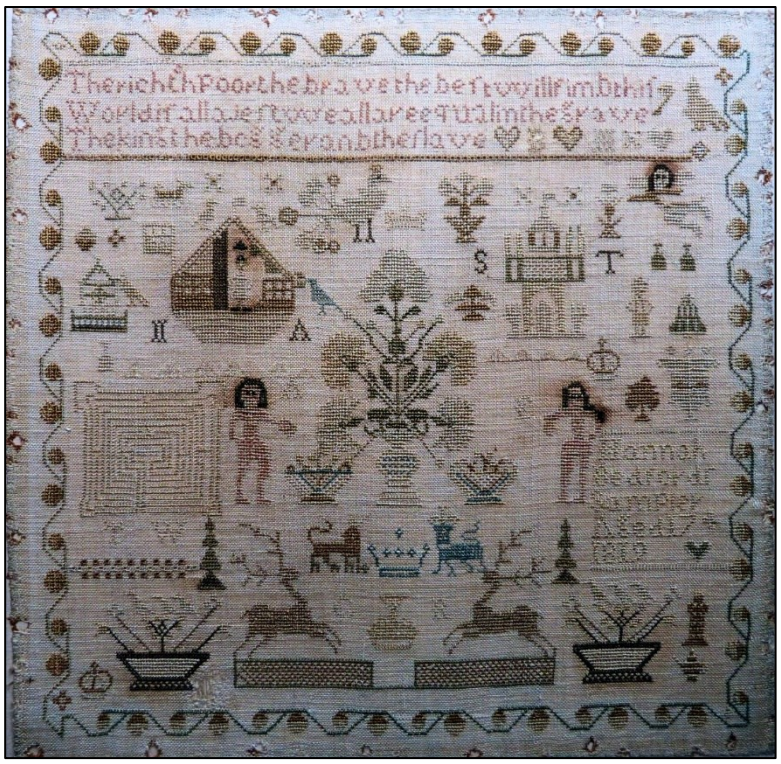
The sampler is dated 1741, and consequently predates the previous earliest example by Mary Parsons of Dewsbury, Yorkshire by 39 years. With two other remarkably similar examples by Mary Blackburn (1785) and Ann Lewis (1798) also originating in Dewsbury, it is tempting to wonder if Martha Sharp also hailed from the same town or was maybe copying the design (albeit with an error) from the same currently unidentified source?

Marta Sharp's 1741 sampler and close up of the labyrinth. Photos courtesy of Lynne Anderson

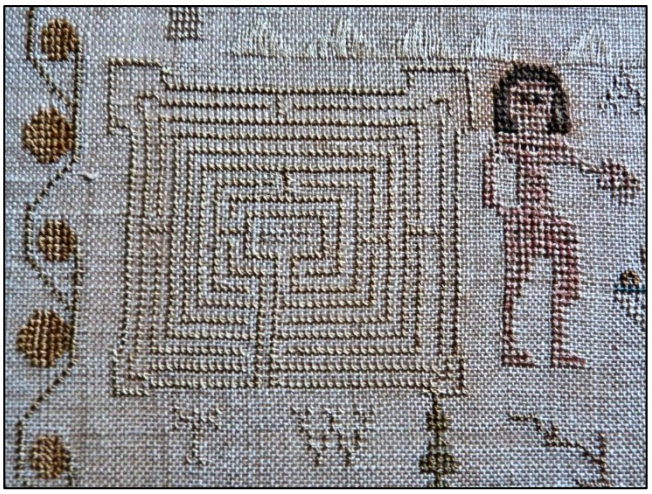
Reproduced from Caerdroia 51, p.58.

An Early 19th Century Labyrinth Sampler – Updated January 2025

Another stitched sampler including a labyrinth design has been recorded, to join the four examples previously noted in the pages of *Caerdroia* (C'43, p.4-6; C'50, p.72 & C'51, p.58). The newly reported sampler is 18 inches (46 cm) square and was created by Hannah Bedford, aged 17, in 1819, later than the other similar examples, but no clues are provided to where Hannah was living when she created her handiwork. In common with the other examples, the rectangular labyrinth design, with simple bastions at the four corners, is probably derived from an engraving that first appears in Thomas Hill's *The Profitable Art of Gardening*, first published in 1579, and the accompanying depictions of Noah's Ark, Adam and Eve, and Solomon's Temple are common motifs on samplers of the period.



Curiously, the labyrinth this time has eight, instead of seven, circuits, resulting in the outer circuits becoming isolated and redundant. As noted before, three of the four samplers previously known were from Dewsbury in Yorkshire, England, and the close similarity of the respective labyrinth designs on each of the samplers might suggest a similar geographical origin for this latest example, although a currently undiscovered printed source for the precise stitching pattern is also a possible explanation.



Hannah Bedford's 1819 sampler and the labyrinth design in detail. Photos courtesy of Linda Hadden

Reproduced from Caerdroia 53, p.56.