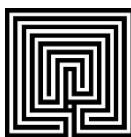


# The Turf Maze on Saffron Walden Common



Jeff Saward

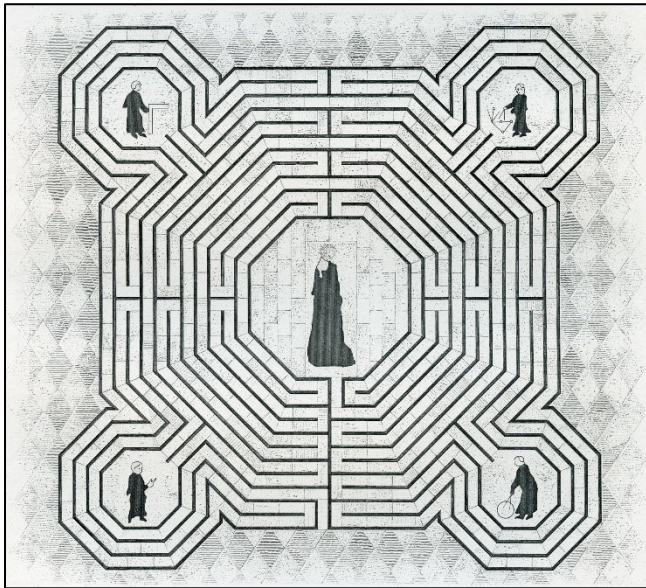
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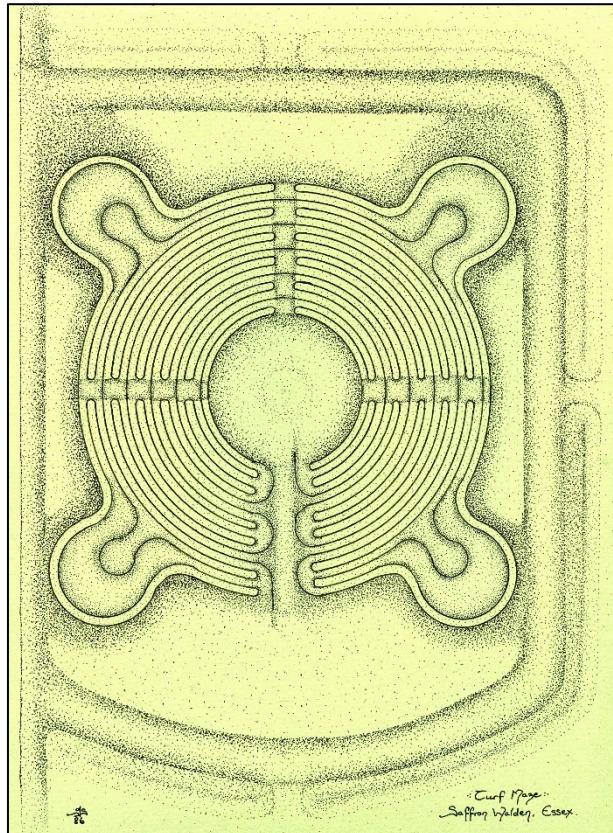
*The Saffron Walden turf maze. Photo: Jeff Saward*

The turf labyrinth at Saffron Walden, in the county of Essex in southeast England, is one of the best-known and well maintained historic turf labyrinths in Europe, and it is also the largest surviving example.<sup>1</sup> Known simply as the “Turf Maze,” it is situated at the east end of the Common, a large open area adjacent to the town centre, which has long been the location of fairs and festivals held in the town. The labyrinth itself is of an unusual 18 wall/17 circuit medieval design, 26.9 metres in diameter, but with four lobes at the ‘corners’ that increase its overall width to 40.2 metres from ‘corner to corner.’ The path of the labyrinth is formed from bricks sunk in the hollows between turf ridges, contrary to the normal arrangement where the ridge is the path to follow, but similar to the “Mizmaze” turf labyrinth on St. Catherine’s Hill, Winchester, which likewise has a trench (without the bricks), cut to expose the underlying chalk. The centre is marked by a mound 10.1 metres in diameter that stands some 0.45 metres above the level of the pathways. The corner lobes are similarly raised above the general level of the labyrinth, and the entire arrangement is further surrounded by an embankment and ditch arrangement, with overall dimensions of ca. 45.5 x 33.4 metres. The sculptural nature of the mounds, banks and ridges of the labyrinth are reminiscent of some ancient earthworks, and not surprisingly, perhaps, this has inspired some imaginative speculation surrounding the history and origin of this unique monument.

The design of the labyrinth at Saffron Walden is quite unique among the corpus of turf labyrinth designs recorded in the British Isles, or in the Germanic region, where turf labyrinths were also formerly widespread. With 17 concentric pathways surrounding the central goal it is easily the largest and most complex of the surviving examples and only two known former examples were larger – Pimperne in Dorset, England and Stolp in Poland. However, the design is by no means original. While many authors have likened the Saffron Walden design to the 13<sup>th</sup> century pavement labyrinth formerly situated in Rheims Cathedral, France, to which it bears a superficial similarity, the designs are in fact quite different, as study of the plans will reveal.



*Above: the pavement labyrinth formerly in Rheims Cathedral. Plan: Gailhabaud, 1858*

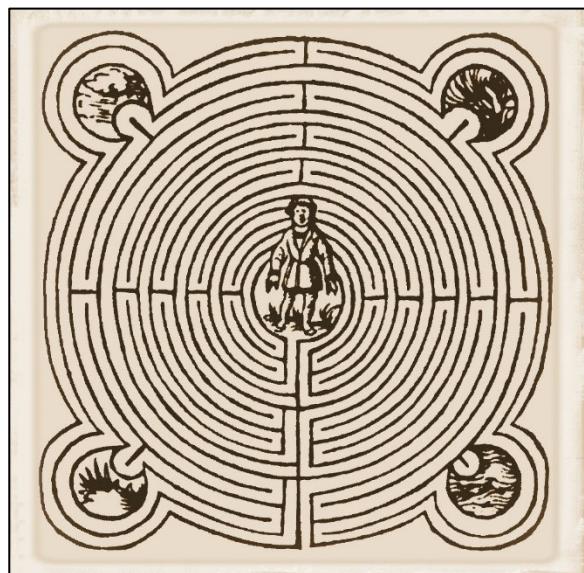


*Right: the turf maze on Saffron Walden Common. Plan: Jeff Saward, 1986*

Instead the origin of the design of the Saffron Walden labyrinth should probably be sought in an influential book of the period, Thomas Hill's *The Profitable Arte of Gardening*, the first gardening book in the English language, initially published in 1563.<sup>2</sup> The book contains illustrations of "two proper Mazes," one of which is almost exactly the same as the labyrinth on the Common, except that the design is a mirror image. This is the most likely source, a popular book which may well have been in the library of a wealthy trader or scholar in the town perhaps, although it should be noted that the design in Hill's book was by no means original; it had surely been copied in turn from Guillaume de la Perrière's book *Le Théâtre des bon engins, auquel sont contenuz cent Emblemes moraulx*, published in Paris in 1539.<sup>3</sup>



*Plan for a garden maze from Thomas Hill's The Profitable Arte of Gardening, 1586 edition*



*Labyrinth emblem from Guillaume de la Perrière's Emblemes Moraulx, 1539*

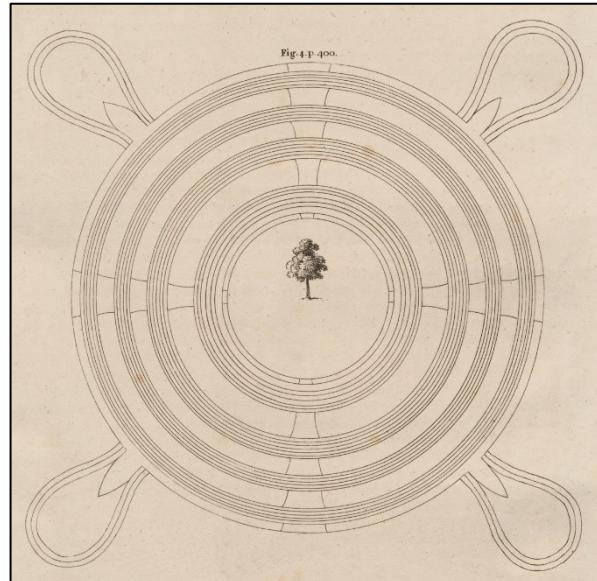
Whatever the source of its design, the first reference to the turf maze at Saffron Walden would appear to be the often-quoted entry from the 1699 accounts of the town council, recording that on 27<sup>th</sup> March of that year, 15 shillings was paid for "Cutting the maze at the end of the common."<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, another 15 shillings was paid in the same year for "setting 60 young trees, to fill up the walk at the end of the common" and further trees were planted in the following year. Clearly the "cutting" of the maze was part of a broader plan to enhance the eastern end of the Common, and the specific reference to the maze and trees located at "the end of the common" shows that this 1699 "maze" is on the same site where the monument survives to this day.

Many authors over the years have assumed that the 1699 payment was simply for maintenance and upkeep of an existing labyrinth, but 15 shillings was a considerable sum of money – agricultural labourers were typically paid around one shilling for a day's work at the time.<sup>5</sup> This generous payment would have been sufficient to employ three men for five days - undoubtedly enough time to mark out and dig the narrow trenches that formed the pathway of the labyrinth, cut through the turf to the underlying chalk, with the spoil providing the material for the central mound and the four mounds that form the 'bastions.' It should be borne in mind that the bank and ditch surrounding the labyrinth is a more recent addition, probably created ca. 1814 (see below), so would not have been part of the 1699 "cutting" works.

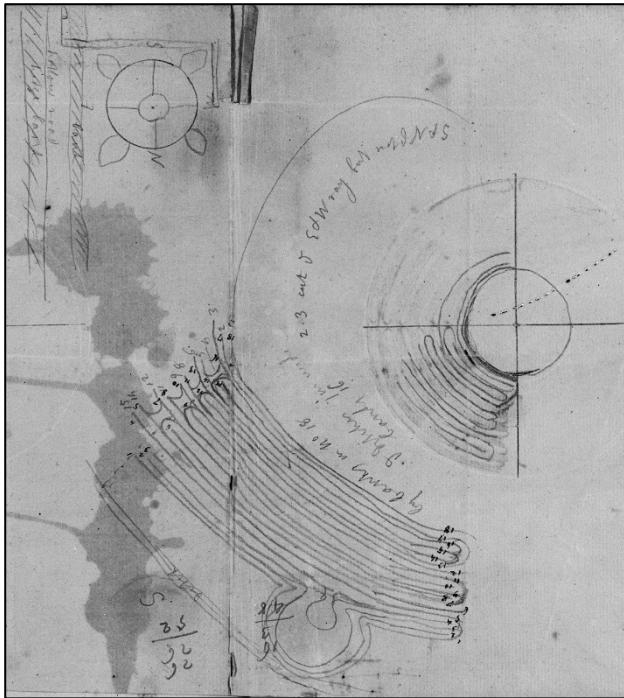
It is evident that the final decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were a period of considerable civic pride in Saffron Walden. The town council was presented with a large silver gilt mace by King James II in 1685, and the town charter of incorporation was renewed by King William III in 1694, in which year the first mayor of the town was appointed. The following year the corporation paid for maintaining the ditches around the Common, continuing a commitment to keep it in good order, so that fairs could continue to be held on the land and "that carts make no comyn way over the said comyn," as recorded in 1516.<sup>6</sup> While numerous authors have postulated over the years that the turf maze at Saffron Walden is somehow proof of the continuation of some antiquated practice, or even an old pagan ritual, the construction of the maze (and associated planting of trees) in 1699, might better be considered an act of civic improvement of the facilities available to its inhabitants, a venue for entertainment and exercise, in much the same way that councils today provide public parks and playgrounds.

Following the initial 1699 record of the turf maze, the first published mention of it would appear to be in the 1789 English edition of Camden's *Britannia*, edited and expanded by Richard Gough. A rather inaccurate diagram of the turf maze is given on plate XIV in volume II of this work.<sup>7</sup>

*Plan of the turf maze in the 1789 edition  
of Camden's Britannia*  
*Courtesy of Cambridge University Library*



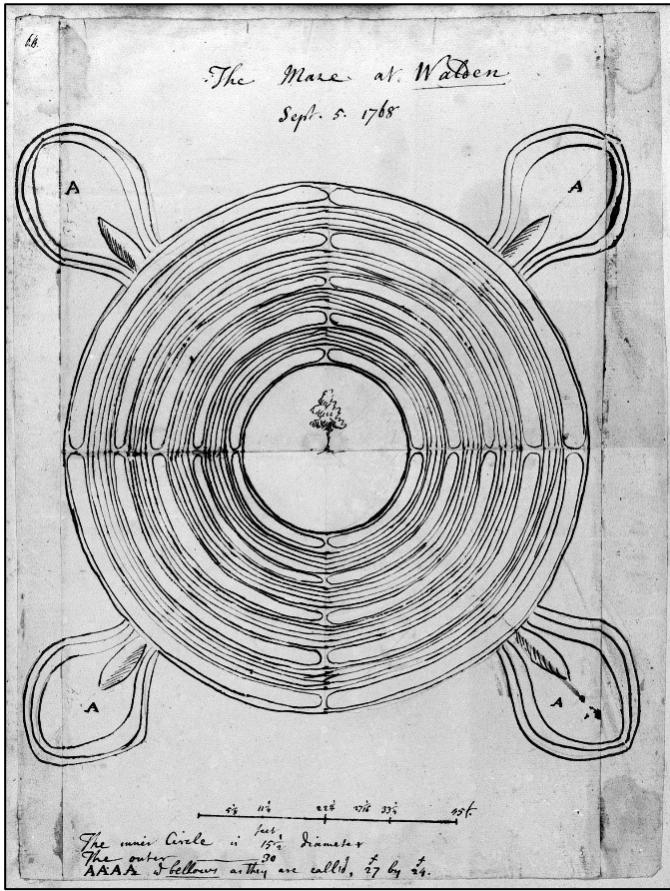
The source of this illustration can be traced to the earliest known drawings of the Saffron Walden labyrinth, contained within the extensive collection of books and manuscripts formerly belonging to the antiquarian Richard Gough (1735-1809), and now housed in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.<sup>8</sup> Two folio sheets, one (7R) containing a series of measurements, preliminary pencil sketches of sections of the labyrinth and a simple overall plan, drawn on a large sheet of paper, was undoubtedly drawn on location; the second sheet (6V), consists of three pasted down plans of the labyrinth, worked-up and inked-in to varying degrees, the largest dated September 5, 1768 (the date of the field visit?). The author of the sketches and plans is unrecorded, however the handwriting alongside the pencil sketches on sheet 7R is very similar to Gough's hand-written notes elsewhere in the collection (see below) and these, at any rate, would appear to be his work. The inked plans are surprisingly inaccurate and surely created at a slightly later time, possibly by one of Gough's assistants, struggling to interpret the earlier sketches and notes.<sup>9</sup> However, it is clear that the smaller of the inked plans on sheet 6V was the basis for the engraving in the 1789 edition of *Britannia*.



*Sketches of the turf maze in the Gough Maps Collection  
Courtesy of the Bodleian Library*

*Above: details of the turf maze on sheet 7R*

*Right: "The Maze at Walden - Sept. 5, 1768"  
the larger diagram on sheet 6V*



Several interesting features are recorded in these plans. A small sketch alongside the pencil notes and diagram of the path arrangements on sheet 7R gives an idea of overall layout of the site at this time – somewhat different from what we see today. No surrounding earthwork is shown, although the bank on its eastern side, between the maze and the road alongside, is essentially unchanged. Instead, a ditch is shown running out from the bank on the south side of the maze, and along one half of the western side. Also depicted on the inked plans is a small tree standing at the centre. No tree now graces the centre of the turf maze, but its absence is explained by later documents – it was destroyed in 1823. While the depiction of the tree on the plans is probably symbolic, rather than to scale, it would seem likely that Gough would have seen a mature tree in 1768, originally planted as part of the 1699 maze “cutting” and tree planting program, although it is recorded that further trees were planted on the common in 1727. The notes alongside the diagrams also record that the lobes at the corners of the labyrinth were called “bellows” at this time.

Also contained within the Gough Collection is another manuscript note concerning the turf maze, inserted in a book on the antiquities of Essex,<sup>10</sup> and clearly in Gough’s own handwriting:

*On the side of the hill at the back of the Rose & Crown inn is cut in the chalk a very regular & perfect Maze only green’d over. It consists of a number of concentric circles, the innermost 15 1/2 feet diameter, the outer 30 f[eet]: between these are cut several turnings & windings in which people sometimes run for their amusement; but I could not be shewn the beginning of ‘em. Four wings, or, as they are here call’d, Bellows from their resemblance thereto issue out of the outer circle: their largest diameter [space] feet, their shortest [space]. They say this Maze was cut by a shoemaker in memory of some old people lately dead (most probably only repair’d by him) & that it is an imitation of Troy walls.*

Directly below this is inserted a further (and obviously later) note:

*It had been so much neglected and destroyd when I was there 1798 and [indecipherable word] grown with grass but still distinguishable and only the stump of the tree in the centre remained.*

The first note, although undated, was presumably written some time after Gough had visited Saffron Walden in 1768 to make his pencil sketches of the turf maze, when he presumably also picked up the local folklore concerning its construction by a shoemaker. Clearly, he intended to go back to his notes to insert the missing dimensions of the "Bellows," although the overall dimensions have been inserted correctly from his 1768 field notes. The comment that it was overgrown and the central tree had been reduced to a stump when he visited again in 1798 shows that the turf maze was obviously in need of restoration work by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a hundred years on from its initial construction.

Clearly the turf maze was restored not long after, as the next document in the sequence shows. By far the most interesting of the surviving early manuscripts describing the turf maze, this is a small booklet preserved in the Saffron Walden Museum collection.<sup>11</sup> It consists of a hand drawn and water coloured plan of the turf maze with a tree at its centre, pasted on a card, to which is attached a folded sheet of paper, on the back of which is written a number of items copied from the town accounts from 1699, including the previously mentioned 15 shillings paid for cutting the maze. Pasted within the folded sheet of paper are a further 14 pages, apparently taken from a simple notebook, with a sketch of the maze dated August 30, 1816.

*Above: the hand-coloured plan attached to the cover of the 1816 booklet*

*Below: sketch plan of the turf maze, dated August 30, 1816*

*Illustrations courtesy of Saffron Walden Museum*

A number of the notebook's pages consist of measurements of various sections of the maze (which must clearly have been in good order at the time), columns of figures and a table of the various measures employed – yards, rods and furlongs. The third page is of particular interest, as it contains a simple annotated sketch of the layout of the maze. While the paths of the maze are not depicted, the four bastions are specifically named after the four nearest major towns in each direction, Chelmsford, (Bishops) Stortford, Cambridge and Newmarket<sup>12</sup> and the maze is clearly contained within an enclosing earthwork, identified as the "fortification," a feature not shown on the 1768 Gough plans. Accompanying the sketch are the following notes on the overall dimensions:

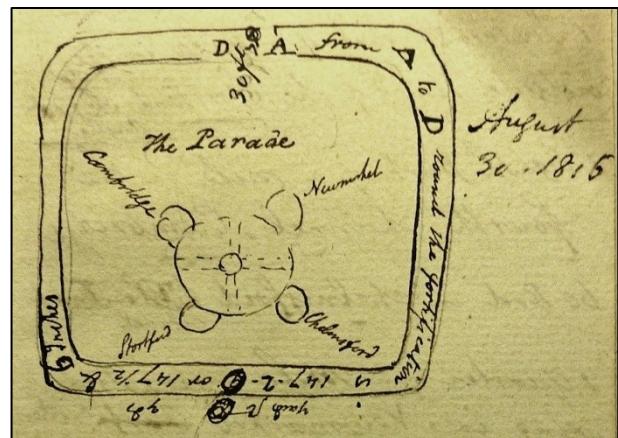
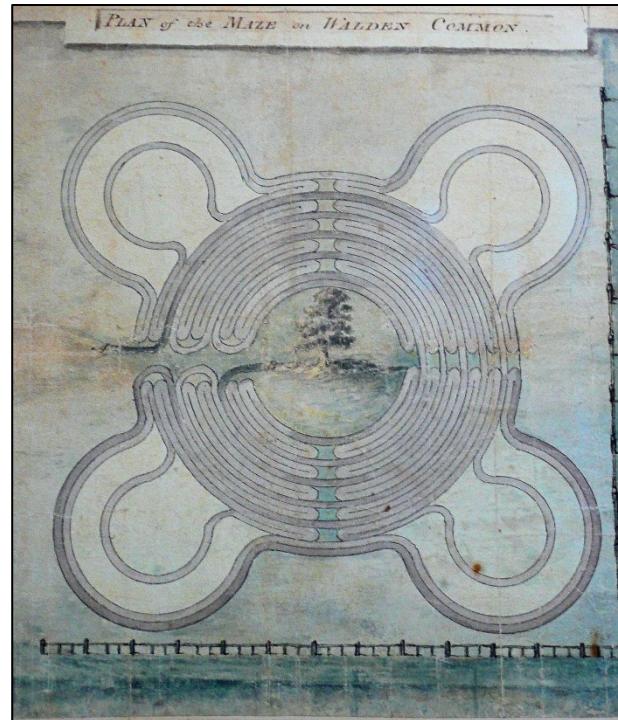
*from the End of the Maze to the Centre of the Bridge upon the fortification 30 feet*

*from A to D round the fortification is 147 yards 2 ft. or 147 1/2 yds. & 6 inches*

*The whole length of the runs in the maze is 207 rods & 1 quarter – equal to 5 furlongs 1/8 & 2/4 rods = to 1139 3/4 yards and half a quarter of a yard.*

*It will require a person to go the whole length of the maze & 4 times round the fortification and a further addition of 19 yards 1/4 and 7 inch & 1/2 to compleat a mile.*

This final comment confirms that the path of the maze is somewhat less than a mile in length, despite the popular tradition that the path is *almost* a mile long.



The fifth and sixth pages of the booklet provide further explanation of the named sections of the maze and its component earthworks, and an interesting explanation of its origin:

*The rais'd bank on the outside is called the Fortification*

*The Grass Bridge – to be call'd the Draw-Bridge*

*The space immediately descending from the Draw-Bridge is call'd the Parade*

*The centre Grass plot is called Waterloo*

*NB – It was judged proper to give these terms to the Maze out of respect to the Dutch Soldiers who originally cut it probably at the time they came into England under William, Prince of Orange, to assist the British Nation in defending their rights and privileges against a worthless despot and fanatic and so long as Dutchmen have gratitude they will remember the name of a British Soldier and a Wellington, Prince of Waterloo.*

The suggestion that the maze was constructed by Dutch soldiers (who would then presumably have been the recipients of the 15 shillings paid in March 1699) is an interesting possibility. William of Orange was invited by Parliament to become King William III of England in 1688, to suppress the Jacobite rebellion, but following the success of his campaigns in Scotland, Ireland and France, the majority of his loyal Dutch soldiers were stood down by Parliamentary decree, despite William's protest, at the end of 1698.<sup>13</sup> Certainly there would have been plenty of unemployed Dutch soldiers looking for work in the region the following spring. The eighth and ninth pages of the notebook record another fascinating aspect of the maze's history, this time linked to a military campaign from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that reached its conclusion the year before the notebook was written. A set of rules are given for running the path of the maze, the centre of which is specifically named as Waterloo, in clear recognition of the final defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo on June 18, 1815:

*Persons exercising in the Maze will observe the following regulations:*

*1<sup>st</sup> – To go over the Grass Bridge and continuing to pass through the opposite passage in the maze, when immediately on their right hand they will observe the opening into the Maze – and by continuing that track they will make their exit towards the North, facing the rank of trees.*

*Betting against Time*

*If the person while turning to enter a fresh track does not place the foot immediately opposite the end of the turn, he loses the Bet*

*If he at any time touches his foot against any one of the ends of the ridges he loses the Bet*

*If he falls he loses the Bet – If he steps out of his track, loses the Bet*

*No person whatever to be upon the Maze Ground, either in the parade or Waterloo, except the runner and the Umpire, whilst the Bet is deciding.*

*To prevent confusion, and in order that all the Spectators may have an equal share in observing the race, the Umpire will announce the begining of the race, when every person must immediately clear the ground and arrange themselves along the fortification.*

The running of the maze was clearly a long-established popular tradition in the town, as evidenced by the Gough manuscript from the previous century. Although no contemporary records exist of specific events held on the maze, the 1816 document shows that a more formal arrangement for timed walking and running of the maze was in place at this time, and while the nature of the bets are unspecified, local tradition suggests that wagers of various quantities of beer were a popular option!<sup>14</sup>

The plan of the maze attached to the front of the booklet is initially confusing. Unlike the sketch contained within the pages of the notebook, clearly dated 1816, the plan shows the configuration of the pathways in full (and correct) detail, but instead of an embankment surrounding the maze, a simple fence is depicted running along the south side and half way along the west side of the maze. This arrangement accords well, however, with the small layout sketch on the 1768 Gough plans, and would suggest that the plan attached to the front of the booklet is of somewhat earlier origin, when the maze was in good condition (possibly from the early or mid-1700s?) and that the various elements of the booklet were assembled at a later date.<sup>15</sup>

A brief description of the turf maze, probably written in 1818, clears up some of the confusion concerning the surrounding earthworks, when it records that:

*The maze or cursus on the common has been recently re-cut, and turfed with grass, under the immediate and indefatigable exertions of Mr. Robinson, the architect, and Mr. Leverett, a draper. The raised embankment which surrounds it is an excellent improvement.*<sup>16</sup>

This would certainly suggest that the embankment, clearly depicted in the 1816 sketch, was a fairly recent addition at that time - possibly added when the common was secured as a public open space for "the inhabitants for fairs, festivals, sports &c." in 1814? It was on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July in that year that a remarkable public festival was held in Saffron Walden to celebrate the end of hostilities in Europe (somewhat prematurely as it turned out), at which some 2400 inhabitants of the town were seated on the Common to feast and witness various sports and athletic events. While the turf maze is not mentioned specifically in the written and published accounts of the 1814 event,<sup>17</sup> mention of a mile-long walking race in a subsequent and very similar festival held on the Common in 1838 to celebrate the coronation of Queen Victoria,<sup>18</sup> may well have taken place on the maze, if the precise specification of the length of the paths and the additional laps of the embankment given in the 1816 booklet is any indication.

The description of the maze as a "cursus" is clearly in reference to the mention of turf mazes in the work of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century antiquarian William Stukeley, who postulated that turf labyrinths owed their origins to the Romans, who constructed them as *cursus*, or exercise grounds for soldiers.<sup>19</sup> While Stukeley did not mention the example at Saffron Walden, his theory, despite any supporting evidence, continued to be popular and regularly quoted by later writers.

Although depicted in several of the early plans, but recorded by Gough as little more than a stump in 1798, the fate of the tree that formerly occupied the central mound of the labyrinth is documented in several sources. All seem to agree that the Ash tree, by that time aged and decaying, was destroyed on the night of November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1823, as one later commentator states:

*...by the agency of fire caused through the zealous energy of the Saffron Walden boys being over anxious to display their adherence to the cause of Royalty upon that memorable occasion.*<sup>20</sup>

The need for maintenance of the turf maze is demonstrated by a number of further restorations, carried out at regular intervals, often with financial and practical assistance from prominent citizens of the town. In 1828, when the labyrinth was "obliterated with the exception of the centre mound, and slight indications of the outworks," restoration was again carried out by John Leverett and William Robinson (who lived opposite the maze on Chaters Hill), by means of a public subscription. A further restoration, for which a total of £9 was raised, is recorded in 1841, under the direction of a committee set up by William Leverett (the son of John) "to improve the state of the Common, for which the inhabitants have cheerfully contributed."<sup>21</sup>

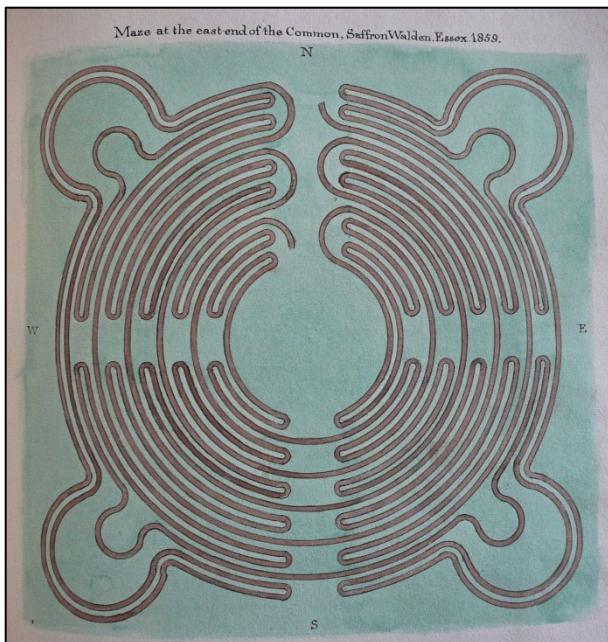
During the 1830s several prominent authors mention the turf maze at Saffron Walden, placing knowledge of its existence in general circulation. Braybrooke's *History of Audley End and Saffron Walden*, published 1835, quotes both Stukeley's theories on turf mazes in general (to which he gives little credence) and Gough's manuscript notes on the example at Saffron Walden in particular, mentioning its supposed creation by a shoemaker, but adds little new information.<sup>22</sup> Thomas Wright's *History of Essex*, published the following year in 1836, essentially paraphrases Braybrooke's text, but conflates the details, and suggests that Stukeley described the Saffron Walden turf maze in his earlier work, which he did not.<sup>23</sup> Writing in his influential paper *Notices of Ancient and Mediaeval Labyrinths* in 1858, the Rev. Edward Trollope also mentions the turf maze at Saffron Walden and reports a local tradition that the current maze was cut by a soldier in imitation of an earlier example.<sup>24</sup> The accompanying simple line illustration of the maze is the first essentially accurate published rendition of its design.

"Maze at Saffron Walden, Essex" Trollope, 1858



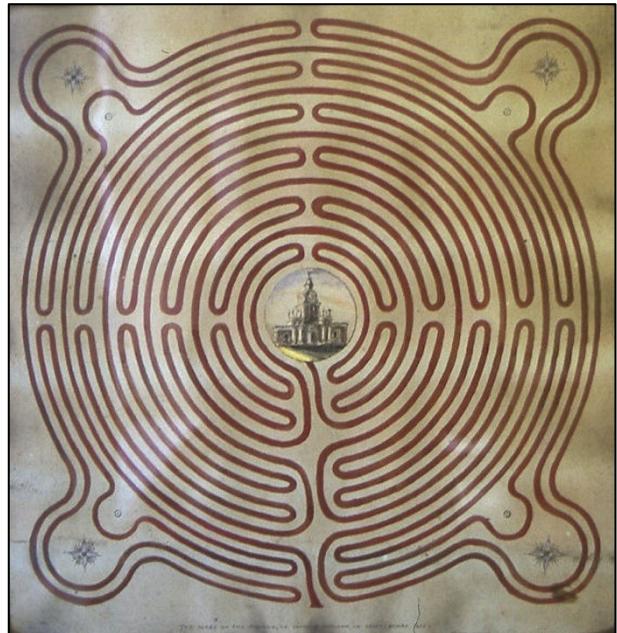
Another plan of the labyrinth, hand-coloured and dated 1853, is currently displayed in the Scrivener Room in Saffron Walden Town Hall. Produced by H. Turner in nearby Cambridge, the centre of the labyrinth is occupied by a depiction of the Corn Exchange building (built 1847/8, and now the town library) that also stands on the town's market square, painted on a circular label that has clearly been pasted in place at some slightly later date. The symbolism of depicting one of the finest buildings in the town at the centre of the labyrinth has parallels with numerous descriptions and depictions of the labyrinth, and suggests it may have been added by someone well-read in such matters.

*Right: The 1853 plan of the turf maze by H. Turner*



*sloping towards the south, where it is bounded by the slade (a local word signifying a rivulet or brook, dry (insert: which ceases to run) in summer), formerly called the king's ditch and was in ancient times the northern boundary of the Roman encampment. Along its north side runs the road to Ashdon; its western end adjoins the town and on the east it abuts a road to Thaxted. After being from time immemorial an adjunct to the town, it was, in 1814, when the act of inclosure came into operation, (a very good act in the main, but under it a great deal of rascallity was practised, very nearly being appropriated to the lord of the manor by his myrmidons but by the exertions of Mr. Atkinson Francis Gibson, brewer and afterwards banker, it was secured to the inhabitants for fairs, festivals, sports &c. The trees that now adorn its northern side and north western corner, were planted in 1727.*

*The old people used to say, that in former times, a larger maze existed further east, and this is a small copy, cut by a soldier, it has also been said by a shoemaker, he may have been both. It is probable that Stukeley's allusion as a "place for exercising soldiers" is to a larger one which might then exist. This is surrounded by a slight ditch and bank, inclosing an area of somewhat over 100 feet from east to west, and from north to south 138 feet, its dimensions being extended on the north by a projecting curve. The width of the maze is 91 feet and cornerwise across the outworks 138 feet. The middle portion is somewhat elevated and the interior parts of the four bastions, are also slightly raised; formerly a large ash-tree marked the centre, it was much decayed, and about 1823 on the celebration of gunpowder treason it was destroyed by the boys making a bon-fire round it.*



*Left: The 1859 plan of the turf maze  
Courtesy of Saffron Walden Library*

A fascinating document, dated 1859, inserted in a copy of Braybrooke's *History of Saffron Walden* preserved in the town library collection, contains both a hand-drawn and coloured plan of the turf maze and a summary of its history.<sup>25</sup> The text, written in minuscule hand-writing, contains a wealth of information, and is worthy of full reproduction:

*This maze, plan of the city of Troy, labyrinth or cursus as Stukeley more correctly calls it, the path running through without any break, occupies the centre of the east end of the Common, which is a piece of pasture ground of thirteen or more acres,*

*The narrow continuous path, through all of its convolutions is said to be nearly a mile in length, it is cut into the chalk, with a slight ridge of earth occupying about the same space as the path running beside it to separate it in its windings. By an item in a book belonging to the corporation, it was recut by that body in 1699, since which time it has from time to time been rescued from oblivion by the timely aid of private individuals. In 1828 it was obliterated with the exception of the centre mound, and slight indications of the outworks, when a subscription was raised by Mr. John Leverett a zealous inhabitant of the town, and it was recut by Mr. William Robinson an architect who lived on the other side of the road nearly opposite, and great care was taken of it for a time, but in 1841 it became obscure, when Mr. William Leverett, son of the above, had it restored at the cost of nine pounds, raised by the same means; under the superintendence of Mr. William Chater, a nurseryman, whose house and grounds face it. Being a part of a sheepwalk without fence, and children being allowed to play in it, and its bank and ditch presenting a tempting leap to any groom exercising horses, renovation is required four or five times during a century, and it is now in 1859 becoming very indistinct.*

The record of a further restoration, in 1859, must obviously have followed the writing of this final comment, indeed it might seem that the creation of the document may have spurred the subsequent refurbishment of the turf maze, which had obviously become the object of civic pride by this time. Likewise, on the occasion of the golden jubilee (50<sup>th</sup> anniversary) of Queen Victoria's reign, in 1887, the town council voted some of the money collected for the celebrations also be spent on restoring the turf maze, which had once again become "nearly obliterated, principally in consequence of its wearing away by children playing upon it."<sup>26</sup>

Shortly after this event, George Maynard, then curator of the Saffron Walden Museum, delivered a paper at the June 1889 meeting of the Essex Field Club on "The Ancient Labyrinth or Maze at Saffron Walden."<sup>27</sup> Quoting extensively from the 1859 document (at that time in the museum collection, but now in the town library archive), he subsequently issued his lecture in the form of a pamphlet, published in Saffron Walden in 1892, although interestingly, he seemed unaware of the details contained in the 1816 booklet, which was only donated to the Museum in 1899.

From its initial construction, until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the path of the turf maze was marked by deep trenches, dug down to reveal the white chalk that underlies the turf of the common. However, as we have seen from the frequent need for restoration, these trenches were evidently prone to accumulating silt, leaves and decaying vegetation. It was for this reason, that bricks were installed in the trenches in 1911 by the town council, in order to ease future maintenance of the turf maze, following a report on the condition of the maze and the raising of a further subscription for its restoration.<sup>28</sup> An early photograph of the turf maze, presumably from around 1925, shows the trenches once again in good condition.<sup>29</sup> The bricks evidently worked, as the next recorded need for repairs was in ca. 1950, when local historian H.C. Stacey records that the town council's head gardener, Albert Fitch, carried out the work.<sup>30</sup>

*The turf maze, ca. 1925  
Photo: Herbert Felton*



*Relying the bricks of the turf maze*

*Photo: Cambridge Evening News, 1979*

However, by the late 1970s the bricks themselves were showing signs of wear and in July 1978 a major restoration project was started at the instigation of George Scrivener, then the town mayor. In September 1979, the 6400 bricks that formed the pathway of the labyrinth were lifted, some 3000 damaged bricks were replaced and the entire total were re-set in cement, lengthwise and 'face up,' to give a path 11 cm, 4 ½ inches in width. Prior to this, the bricks were set 'edge up,' so the path was only 7.5 cm, 3 inches wide, and it is recorded that the change of orientation of the bricks was the subject of some dispute with the archaeological inspectors, who relented when it was pointed out that the bricks were not an original feature.<sup>31</sup> Finally completed the following spring, the maze was officially re-open on May 3, 1980, when a walking race, following the rules set out in the 1816 document, was again held on the maze and a winning time of 7 minutes and 30 seconds was set by Meredith Bowles.



More recently, the Saffron Walden Maze Festival, staged August 20-28, 2011, included a considerable number of diverse maze and labyrinth-related events in the town.<sup>32</sup> Naturally, the turf maze featured prominently in the proceedings, with another timed walking race of the maze staged (on August 21) in accordance with the 1816 rules. Over 100 contestants of all ages took part and the winner, Mike Sharp, set a time of 7 minutes and 28 seconds, just a fraction faster than the time set in 1980.

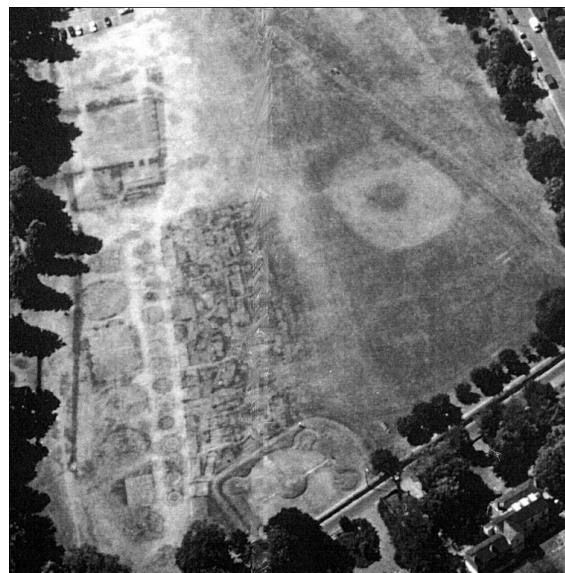
Today, the turf maze receives regular maintenance and is kept in excellent condition by the local authorities. As a scheduled ancient monument its future preservation is assured, indeed, along with the historic hedge maze in Bridge End Gardens on the other side of the town centre (originally planted ca. 1839, restored in the mid-1980s and likewise beautifully maintained) and two recent additions to the collection of mazes in the town, the *Mazes of Saffron Walden* have now become a popular and unique attraction for both local inhabitants and tourists visiting this charming town.

**A Second Turf Maze on the Common?**

The recognition of a curious roughly circular parchmark feature, some 40 metres or more in diameter, with a central circle and apparent lobes on several corners, on aerial photographs of Saffron Walden Common, taken during the dry summer of 1996, led to the suggestion that this may be the site of an earlier labyrinth on the common.<sup>33</sup> This suggestion, based largely on the similarity of the shape of the feature to the existing turf labyrinth, is of considerable interest in light of local folklore, recorded as early as 1859 (see above), that the current labyrinth is merely a copy of an earlier, larger example. However, its location to the north-west of the current turf maze would seem to be at odds with the tradition that the former example was situated to east, a site that has long been covered in housing. The 1996 photo also shows a number of other features, on the south side of the common, associated with the annual funfair that had been set up there in the week or so prior to the taking of the photo.

*Aerial photo of Saffron Walden Common, summer 1996,  
showing the mysterious parchmark, centre right*

*Photo: Essex County Council*



Shortly after the photo appeared in local newspapers in 2000, I visited the common to take a look at the location of the supposed “second maze” from ground level and noticed that a large circular patch of a clover-like plant, in the same general location, still stood out as a slightly different colour from the surrounding grass. However, no such feature has been seen in recent years (or on recent Google Earth images, for instance), so the question of whether the parchmark was a consequence of activity at the fun-fair, a simple difference of vegetation cover, or a genuine buried feature – a second maze or otherwise – remained unresolved. In November 2011, a geophysical survey of the site was carried out to investigate the nature of the supposed feature.<sup>34</sup> The results were somewhat inconclusive, but no sign of any buried feature corresponding to the position of the 1996 parchmark were found in either the resistivity or magnetometer survey carried out on the area in question. While it is possible that the subtle disturbance of the subsoil caused by the cutting, and subsequent abandonment, of a turf maze might leave little trace to be found by non-invasive archaeological techniques, the suspicion that the feature was little more than a fortuitously maze-like artefact of a funfair or some other event in the summer of 1996 would seem far more likely.<sup>35</sup>

Jeff Saward, Thundersley, England; December 2011 (updated August 2019)

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the various people who have provided me with valuable assistance in the course of preparing this study, in particular John Ready, Zofia Everitt and Martyn Everitt of Saffron Walden, the staff of the Library and Museum in the town, Penny Granger in Cambridge and the staff of Cambridge University Library, the British Library in London and the Bodleian Library in Oxford – without their help it would not have been possible to track down the many books and documents consulted and distil down all of the details to solve this labyrinthine puzzle.



***Lighting the paths of the maze at the closing ceremony of the 2011 Saffron Walden Maze Festival. Photo: Jeff Saward***

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## Notes & References:

1. The circular *Windelbahn* turf labyrinth at Stolp in Pomerania (modern Slupsk in Poland) was ca. 45 metres in diameter, but was destroyed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the triangular *Troy Town* at Pimperne in Dorset, England (probably around ca. 75 m. wide), destroyed 1730, were certainly larger. The surviving *Rad* labyrinth in the Eilenriede Forest, Hanover, Germany (32 m. in diameter) is arguably larger than Saffron Walden, but the latter covers more ground area, as a consequence of its projecting lobes.
2. First published in 1563 under the title *A most briefe and pleasaunte treatise, teaching how to dresse, sowe, and set a garden*, Thomas Hill's *The Profitable Arte of Gardening* was issued in three editions between 1568 and 1608. In 1577, his expanded work *The Gardener's Labyrinth* was published, but under the pseudonym of Didymus Mountaine, and contained the same plans for two mazes, remaining in print until the mid-1600s. See *The Gardener's Labyrinth – The First English Gardening Book*, edited by Richard Mabey, Oxford University Press, 1988.
3. See Kern, Hemann. *Through the Labyrinth* (2000) p.221 for details. The original woodcut of a labyrinth was presented as a moral emblem, a symbol of entanglement in idle pleasures and vices, explained in accompanying text. The four 'bastions' are decorated with symbols depicting the four elements (air and fire above, earth and water below), with a lost figure standing at the centre.
4. The original is preserved in *Borough of Saffron Walden General Account Book, 1587-1792*, preserved at Saffron Walden, but various transcriptions are published, including a thorough summary in Braybrooke's *History of Saffron Walden* (1835). Often said to be in the accounts of the Guild of the Holy Trinity, the Guild was actually dissolved in 1546, and replaced by the Corporation of Walden, technically known as the "Mayor and Aldermen of the town of Saffron Walden in the county of Essex" (see Player, John. *Sketches of Saffron Walden*, 1845, p.82). The charter of incorporation for the town was renewed by King William III in 1694, in which year the first mayor of the town was appointed, and it is clear from the financial accounts that civic pride and improvements to the town were an important consideration at this time.
5. Rogers, J.E.Thorold, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England*, 1939.
6. Player, John. *Sketches of Saffron Walden*, 1845, p.78.
7. Camden, William (ed. R.Gough), *Brittania*. 1783. Plate XIV in Vol.II, opposite p.400, contains engravings of the turf labyrinths at Saffron Walden and at Sneinton and Clifton in Nottinghamshire.
8. Gough Collection, Maps 8: fol. 6V & 7R. Bodleian Library, Oxford.
9. The Bodleian Library website notes: *Richard Gough (1735-1809), antiquary, was born in London, received a private education, and was admitted as a fellow-commoner of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in July 1752, but left in 1756 without taking a degree. From the age of eleven he was a prolific writer, but after his Cambridge days devoted himself almost exclusively to British topography and antiquities, making annual tours through different parts of Britain, often in company with John Nichols, his printer and publisher, and employing artists such as Jacob Schnebbelie and James Basire to illustrate his notes.*
10. Gough Collection, Essex 30: a copy of *The History and Antiquities of Essex* by N. Salmon, published 1753. The flyleaf is inscribed: May 28 1760, surely the date that Gough added the volume to his collection, and four manuscript pages are bound in between p.142 & 143. The note concerning the Saffron Walden turf maze is at the top of MS p.3.
11. Collection number 61'99 - presented to the museum by Ernest Hart (local printer, bookseller and later, councillor) in 1899, the booklet appears to be a compilation of several different documents, although it is unclear when, and by whom, they were assembled together.
12. This designation is explained in detail on page 10 of the booklet: *For the more ready understanding the separate parts of the maze, it was thought proper to give such names to each as might be familiar and easy to be retained in the memory. Therefore as the four passages at right angles divide it into 4 equal parts, such parts will take the names, viz. Chelmsford, Stortford, Cambridge, Newmarket according as they are situated pointing to those towns. The four projecting outworks will take the name of their castles, viz Chelmsford Castle, Stortford Castle, Cambridge Castle, Newmarket Castle and the small circle in each castle will be called the Citadel.*
13. Cassell's *History of England*, vol.III, p.507.
14. Various authors mention "wagers in gallons of beer" but no specific source for this supposed fact could be found by this author. W.H. Matthews appears to be the first to mention this on p.84 of his *Mazes & Labyrinths* (1922) and indirectly credits Guy Maynard (then curator of the Saffron Walden Museum) for information. Although Matthews suggests that this information comes from a manuscript book from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, this is surely an incorrect reference to the 1816 booklet, and the additional detail of the wagers may well have been supplied from local tradition imparted in his correspondence with Maynard.

15. The author of the booklet is unrecorded, but in a newspaper article by Sue Lake ("Riddles set by Walden's Maze" *Saffron Walden Weekly News*, 15 August, 1974), local historian Frank East commented that the handwriting in the notebook suggests it is the work of Joshua Clark, a prominent local antiquarian of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whether Clark assembled the various elements, or this was the work of Ernest Hart prior to depositing the document in the museum collection in 1899, is equally uncertain.
16. *Excursions in the County of Essex*, Vol. II, p.145 (1819). Edited by Thomas Kitson Cornwall, the two volumes of this work contain a report on various aspects of Saffron Walden, including quoted statistics from 1818, presumably when the contributing correspondents visited the town.
17. Robinson, William. *A Brief Account of The Festival at Saffron Walden, July 6<sup>th</sup> 1814*. The account by Robinson (who was responsible for at least two of the restorations of the maze) also contains a lengthy diatribe against the attempts by wealthy landowners of the time to appropriate common lands, thus "depriving the peasant and the middle class of their Play Ground", when in his opinion they should be preserved for the promotion of "athletic and manly exercises" – a barbed comment probably aimed at the Braybrookes of Audley End. It would seem likely that his documentation of the 1814 event, involvement in the addition of the embankment and restoration of the turf maze, and his views on sporting activities and enclosure were not unconnected. A more matter of fact account of the Festival is also recorded in the unpublished diary of John Player (*Walden Chronicles*), held in Saffron Walden Library.
18. *An Account of The Festival held on Saffron Walden Common, June the 28<sup>th</sup>, 1838 the Day of Coronation of Queen Victoria*, Saffron Walden Library.
19. Stukeley, William. *Itinerarium Curiosum* (1724). On pages 96-97, after describing the Julian's Bower at Alkborough, Stukeley presents his theories concerning the Roman origin of turf labyrinths, but does not mention the example at Saffron Walden.
20. Maynard. G.N. "The Ancient Labyrinth or Maze at Saffron Walden, with some notes on the Antiquity of Mazes in General" *Journal of the Essex Field Club*, Vol.III, 1889, p.245. This was on Guy Fawkes' or Bonfire Night, a long-standing tradition celebrated in England on the night of 5<sup>th</sup> November each year, when bonfires are lit and fireworks let off, to celebrate the abortive attempt to blow up the Houses of Parliament in Westminster in 1605.
21. Hand-written note in a copy of *The History of Audley End and Saffron Walden* (written by Richard Griffin (1783-1858), 3<sup>rd</sup> Lord Braybrooke and published 1835) held in Saffron Walden Library.
22. Braybrooke (3<sup>rd</sup> Lord). *The History of Audley End and Saffron Walden*, 1835, p.178.
23. Wright, Thomas. *History of Essex*, 1836, p.124.
24. Trollope, Rev. Edward. "Notices of Ancient and Mediaeval Labyrinths" *Archaeological Journal*, Vol. XV, 1858, p.226.
25. Hand-written manuscript inserted in a copy of Braybrooke's *The History of Audley End and Saffron Walden* (written by Richard Griffin (1783-1858), 3<sup>rd</sup> Lord Braybrooke and published 1835) held in Saffron Walden Library. The book supposedly came from the Braybrooke Library at Audley End, and the note may well have been written and inserted by Richard Neville (1820-1861), the 4<sup>th</sup> Lord Braybrooke, son of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl and a respected archaeologist.
26. Maynard. G.N. *Some Account of the Labyrinths or Mazes at Saffron Walden*. Saffron Walden, 1892.
27. Maynard. G.N. "The Ancient Labyrinth or Maze at Saffron Walden, with some notes on the Antiquity of Mazes in General" *Journal of the Essex Field Club*, Vol.III, 1889, p.244-7.
28. Scrivener. George. *Saffron Walden's Turf-Cut Maze*. Privately published manuscript, 1987, p.4.
29. The photograph appears on p.445 of *Wonderful Britain*, edited by J.A. Hammerton (published 1928) and is credited to (Herbert) Felton (1887-1968), a noted architectural photographer. The photo is undated, but probably from around 1924-1926, when he was photographing historic houses and monuments throughout England and Wales.
30. Scrivener. George. *Saffron Walden's Turf-Cut Maze*. Privately published manuscript, 1987, p.5.
31. Op cit., p.6.
32. Further maze festivals were held in 2013 and 2016. In connection with these events, a paved labyrinth was added to the floor of the bandstand in Jubilee Gardens on Hill St. in 2013 and a small maze was constructed adjacent to the Swan Meadow car park on Park Lane in 2016, to create four public mazes and labyrinths in the town and further small labyrinths can be found on the kneeling cushions in St. Mary's Church.
33. "The Amazing Case of the Misleading Parchmarks" *Essex Chronicle*. 17 Nov. 2000.
34. Carried out by members of the Archaeology Rheesearch Group ([www.rheesearch.org.uk](http://www.rheesearch.org.uk)) on November 11, 2011.
35. Local historian and archivist Martyn Everitt mentioned to me (personal comment, 10 December 2011) that he recalled a marquee set up alongside the path across the Common (an unusual location) for another event shortly before the 1996 funfair, which may well have occupied the location of the parchmark.