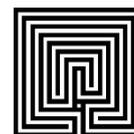


English Turf Labyrinths

Jeff Saward



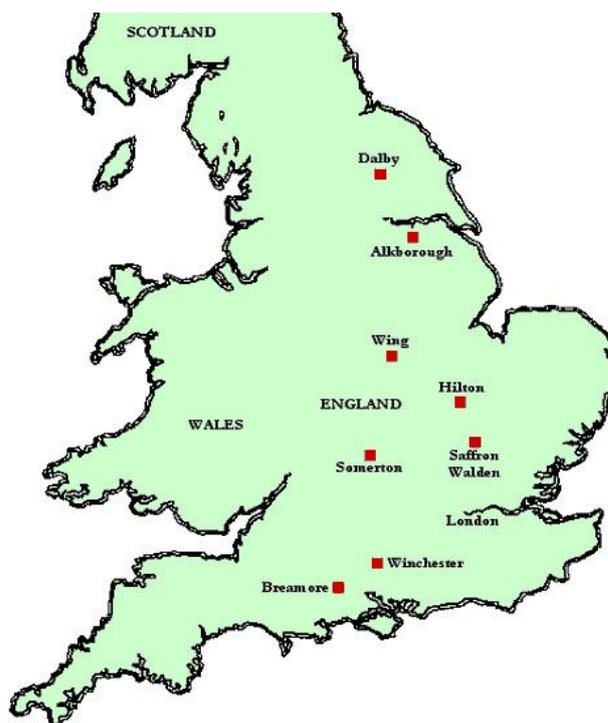
Turf labyrinths, or ‘turf mazes’ as they are popularly known in Britain, were once found throughout the British Isles (including a few examples in Wales, Scotland and Ireland), the old Germanic Empire (including modern Poland and the Czech Republic), Denmark (if the frequently encountered *Trojaborg* place-names are a reliable indicator) and southern Sweden. They are formed by cutting away the ground surface to leave turf ridges and shallow trenches, the convoluted pattern of which produces a single pathway, which leads to the centre of the design. Most were between 30 and 60 feet (9-18 metres) in diameter and usually circular, although square and other polygonal examples are known. The designs employed are a curious mixture of ancient classical types, found throughout the region, and the medieval types, found principally in England.

Folklore and the scant contemporary records that survive suggest that they were once a popular feature of village fairs and other festivities. Many are found on village greens or commons, often near churches, but sometimes they are sited on hilltops and at other remote locations. By nature of their living medium, they soon become overgrown and lost if regular repair and re-cutting is not carried out, and in many towns and villages this was performed at regular intervals, often in connection with fairs or religious festivals. 50 or so examples are documented, and several hundred sites have been postulated from place-name evidence, but only eleven historic examples survive – eight in England and three in Germany – although recent replicas of former examples, at nearby locations, have been created at Kaufbeuren in Germany (2002) and Comberton in England (2007) for example.

Inherently difficult to date, as most are poorly documented, there is little evidence for them existing prior to the late mediaeval period, the 13th/14th centuries onwards. Indeed, while a number of examples can be confidently dated to the 16th and 17th centuries, a few are as recent as the 19th century, created in response to antiquarian interest and the publication of several important studies of mazes and labyrinths at that time.

The eight surviving historic turf labyrinths in England are always a pleasure to visit, although some are more difficult to find than others. Few are signposted and several are situated in remote locations, away from main roads or on hilltops, approachable only by footpaths. And therein lies the joy of tracking them down. They are to be found from Hampshire in the south to Yorkshire in the north, and almost without exception, are beyond the reach of regular public transport and will require some planning to visit.

The following information will hopefully prove useful to determine which of these splendid preserved turf labyrinths to visit.



Historic turf labyrinths in England

Alkborough, Lincolnshire

The *Julian's Bower* at Alkborough is situated a short distance southwest of the village church, where several representations of the labyrinth are also to be found. Of the familiar eleven-circuit medieval design, it is set on high ground overlooking the confluence of the River Trent and the Humber. A local tradition asserts that it was cut as a penance by a knight involved in the murder of Thomas a Becket in 1170, however, the earliest record of this labyrinth is only from the



1690s. 44 feet (13.4 m) in diameter, it is deeply sunk into a hollow, the result of years of weed-pulling and removal of soil from the trenches gradually lowering the paths. A precise dating is impossible, especially as regular re-cutting is likely to have removed any evidence that might provide an answer. The labyrinth can be visited at all reasonable times, but please do not disturb adjacent residents.

Current condition: the Julian's Bower is always well maintained by local volunteers and has recently been re-turfed. The new plaque pointing out landmarks in the distance is worth studying on a clear day – the views from this labyrinth are quite wonderful.

Breamore, Hampshire

The splendid *Mizmaze* on Breamore Down is set on a remote hilltop surrounded by trees. The pattern of turf pathway and trenches, cut to reveal the underlying chalk, is of the eleven-circuit medieval design, 84 feet (25.3 m) in diameter, with a low central mound. The earliest record of it is an order for its restoration in 1783, but folklore has filled the gaps in historical knowledge. Local tradition records that it was cut either by shepherds to while away the



time or by monks from Breamore Priory (now destroyed) who would have traversed it on their knees to absolve their sins. More likely, perhaps, it owes its origin to a former owner of Breamore House, built in the 1580s, on whose property the site is located. Finding this labyrinth can be a challenge; it is marked on Ordnance Survey maps and can be reached by various footpaths, but the best approach is through the grounds of Breamore House (a leaflet with directions is available at the visitor shop, when open), a walk of over a mile from the House up through the woods and out across the fields to the hilltop on which the *Mizmaze* is situated, but so worth it, especially in the spring when the bluebells are in bloom.

Current condition: unfortunately the Mizmaze has tended to become rather overgrown in recent years, and is usually encountered in better condition if visited in spring or early summer. Maintaining this labyrinth is difficult, so please do all you can to encourage the Breamore Estate staff who care for this remarkable monument to keep up their good work.

Dalby, North Yorkshire

Only 26 feet wide (7.9 m), the charming *City of Troy* is located on a remote roadside verge high on the Howardian Hills between the villages of Brandsby and Dalby, and is notoriously difficult to find. Of classical design, the seven paths that encircle the central goal are banked towards the centre to allow easy running, although the total exercise takes less than a minute. Its current location dates to ca. 1900, when the original site (located ca.



100 yards further up the road) was destroyed by wagons, and its exact age remains a mystery. Despite suggestions of an ancient origin, the Dalby labyrinth may date to only ca. 1860, when it was supposedly cut by workmen repairing the adjacent road. Apparently the design was copied from a drawing in a newspaper, but another version of the story states that it was modelled on a carving on a local barn door. Either way, its atmospheric situation makes it an essential labyrinth to visit, an especial joy at midsummer, when the adjacent fields and hedgerows are ablaze with wildflowers.

Current condition: despite its remote location alongside Bonnygate Lane, 0.5 miles north of Skewsby, the City of Troy receives regular maintenance and is usually to be found in good condition, although it occasionally gets a little overgrown, especially in late summer. Please park sensibly on the side of the road adjacent to the site. The low wooden railing that protects the labyrinth has recently been replaced and a new sign board and seat have been installed.

Hilton, Cambridgeshire

Charmingly situated on the green in the centre of the village (park at the village hall and cross the road), this has to be one of the most quintessential of all the turf mazes in England. 55 feet (16.8 m) in diameter and sunk in a hollow – the result of many years of re-cutting – the labyrinth was cut in 1660 by William Sparrow, possibly to celebrate the restoration of the Monarchy, after the years of Puritan strictures against such activities.



The pillar, surmounted by a sundial, standing at the centre records its construction. The *Maze*, as it is known locally, is open at all times.

Current condition: this labyrinth is always kept in pristine condition by local volunteers, please help them keep it that way by pulling up any weeds and picking up any litter you see. Occasionally the labyrinth is roped off to avoid damage to the delicate turf – especially during wet weather – please respect this measure.

Saffron Walden, Essex

The largest surviving example in England, the *Maze* is located on the eastern side of the Town Common, a short walk from the town centre. 132 feet (40.2 m) from corner to corner, the 17 circuits that form the path of this labyrinth are inlaid with bricks. The path itself visits each of the four mounds surrounding the body of the labyrinth before reaching the central mound, formerly occupied by an Ash tree.



It seems certain that this labyrinth was constructed in 1699, but a local tradition records that this is only a copy of a former example nearby. The remarkable design was probably copied from Thomas Hill's book *The Proffitable Arte of Gardening*, first published in the 1560s. The labyrinth is open at all times. There is also a splendid early 19th century hedge maze in Bridge End Gardens, a short walk from the Common, a modern labyrinth in the Jubilee Gardens bandstand and a newly installed maze at Swan Meadows – visit the Tourist Information Office on Market Square for full details and maps.

Current condition: the Saffron Walden turf maze is always well maintained by the Town Council, however, it is prone to litter, so take a moment to pick up the sweetie wrappers and place them in the nearby waste bin before, or as you walk it!

Somerton, Oxfordshire

Situated in a private garden at Troy Farm, near Somerton, the *Troy-Town* is a fascinating example with a fifteen-circuit classical design, 60.5 x 51.5 feet (18.3 x 15.8 m), unique in the British Isles, but widespread in Scandinavia. Little is known of its history, but it possibly dates from the late 16th or early 17th century. Turf labyrinths were a popular decorative garden feature at this time and the location of this labyrinth suggest that it might originally have been created as part of a compartmented garden, typical of the late Tudor period.



Please note: the Somerton *Troy-Town* is on private property, however, polite requests to view the labyrinth are usually granted and a donation towards its upkeep is always welcomed.

Current condition: despite a complete restoration in 1999, the Somerton Troy-Town has proved difficult for the current owner to keep in good condition. Further work in 2007 has reduced the shading by surrounding hedges, but the problem of watering the labyrinth in high summer remains. Visitor donations towards its upkeep are essential for its long-term survival – please give generously!

Winchester, Hampshire

Situated on the crown of St. Catherine's Hill, on the south side of the city of Winchester, the *Mizmaze* has an unusual nine-circuit rectangular design, 90 x 86 feet (27.4 x 26.2 m) wide. The hilltop is encircled by the ditches and ramparts of an Iron Age hill fort and the summit is crowned by a clump of trees concealing the foundations of St Catherine's Chapel, which stood here from ca. 1080 until it was destroyed ca.



1539. Despite these impeccable credentials for a seemingly 'ancient' origin, it is likely that the *Mizmaze* dates to the latter half of the 17th century, when the hilltop was the traditional playground for pupils at the nearby Winchester colleges. While it might seem unlikely that college boys should be responsible for its creation, their privileged access to books containing designs for garden labyrinths would certainly have provided them with inspiration, and this example is not without parallels. Open at all times, the climb to the top of the hill can be strenuous, and the footpaths slippery when wet, but the views of Winchester from the summit are certainly worth it on a clear day.

Current condition: probably best visited during the early summer when the grass is shorter, in recent years the Mizmaze has been well maintained, but watch out for grazing sheep and electric fences!

Wing, Rutland

Known simply as *The Old Maze*, the turf labyrinth on the east side of the village green in Wing is of the eleven-circuit medieval type, 50 feet (15.2 m) in diameter, with the innermost circuits straightened out to flank the central goal. Nineteenth-century plans show a curious loop at the centre, presumably to return runners to the outside again, but the pathway has now been restored to a more familiar layout. There was formerly



a bank surrounding the maze, from which it is claimed spectators watched the sport of running the labyrinth, and nearby stands a large flat-topped mound (now surrounded by bushes). This is a post-medieval windmill mound, first mentioned in 1634, and it is not difficult to see a connection between the siting and origin of these earthworks. The labyrinth is regularly tended, open at all times and always a pleasure to visit.

Current condition: surrounded by a wooden fence for protection, in recent years the Wing maze has been very well maintained and a recently erected sign board now provides useful information for visitors.

Modern Turf Labyrinths

The current popularity of labyrinths has ensured that the designs and sinuous twists and turns of traditional turf mazes have provided inspiration for a number of modern replicas and interpretations. Situated in parks, gardens and playgrounds, as well as on hilltops and headlands, they are easily formed, often with little or no material costs, and have proven especially popular for community projects and in historic settings. Often created with little fanfare, sometimes no record of the builder is documented, as with examples from the past, and some will certainly survive the test of time to join the corpus of historic examples, becoming the 'ancient' turf mazes of the future, and undoubtedly a puzzle for future historians!

Situated on the brow of Solsbury Hill, overlooking Batheston, Somerset, this turf labyrinth was originally created by a group of itinerant road protestors during the early 1990s, but is still kept in good condition by the passage of feet of visitors and dog walkers.



The original *Mazles* was situated in the playground of the old village school at Comberton, Cambridgeshire, but was destroyed ca. 1929. This replica was created in 2007 in the grounds of the Meridian School, in the same village, with lottery heritage funding.

These, and many more, can be found on the Worldwide Labyrinth Locator website
www.labyrinthlocator.org

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