

AN A-MAZ-ING STORY

THE LABYRINTH AT HILTON

Hundreds of Yards of Twisting Paths

By P.G.M. DICKINSON.

THOUGH Hunts, is so small, it contains within its bounds more unusual and unique survivals, in proportion to its size, than any other county in England. There is only one Little Gidding; Molesworth has its Pets' Cemetery, visited annually by people from all parts of the country; in Great Paxton is a splendidly unique church probably built by Saxon workmen under Norman influence; Monks Wood is the home of our rarest butterfly; the oldest church clock still going is at Great Gransden,—and lastly, Hilton has its Maze, the subject of this article.

The origin of the word "Maze" and its synonym "Labyrinth" is lost in obscurity, but everyone knows it means a complex network of paths. The verb "to amaze" and its earlier form "to maze" originally meant "to confuse" but it is now used to express surprise or wonder, and sometimes bewilderment.

There is practically no literature on the subject and references in "Encyclopedia Britannica" are very short and uninformative, saying scarcely anything about such turf-cut mazes as exist at Hilton and elsewhere.

Labyrinths may be divided into several classes. In early times they referred specially to complicated networks of underground passages, and to "architectural" labyrinths constructed to prevent unauthorised persons discovering royal tombs. Our study does not concern itself with these; neither does it deal with "topiary" mazes formed by clipped hedges, such as the maze at Hampton Court, laid out in 1690 for William III.

LAI D OUT IN 1660.

In the village green at Hilton, near the church, is cut a large circular turf maze, 53ft. in diameter sunk about 2ft. in the ground, the raised paths within being about 1ft. high, 1ft. wide and several hundred yards long. In the centre stands a stone pillar, one face of which is inscribed in Latin: — "Sic transit gloria mundi. Gulielmus Sparrow gen. natus Ano. 1641, aetatis sue 88 quando obit, hos gyros formavit anno 1660", which may be translated:—"Thus passeth the glory of this world. William Sparrow, gentleman, born 1641 and was aged 88 when he died, constructed this maze in the year 1660".



Plan of Hilton maze as originally laid out. Follow the "white" path.

Unfortunately the pathways have been recut on several occasions, apparently incorrectly. Originally, on entering at the beginning it was intended that one should continue without interruption along the whole length of the twisting paths until the central pillar, or "home" was reached. Now a large part of the track appears to have been by-passed, for "home" is attained without traversing the complete circuit.

Turf mazes, which do not appear to exist on the continent, are comparatively rare in England, but several exist in adjoining counties. There are, or were, examples at Alkborough, Lincs. (the replica of that at Hilton); Wing in Rutland; Boughton, Northants.; Dunstable, Beds.; Saffron Walden, Essex; and at Comberton (called "The Mazles"), not far from Cambridge.

Mazes date from ancient times and one of the most important is said to have been constructed by Daedalus at Cnossus in Crete, to serve as a prison for the Minotaur, a legendary monster. Later, Daedalus himself (from whom we derive our modern verb "to diddle" and no doubt the game "diddlems" as well), was imprisoned therein, but

he was enabled to "diddle" his captors by escaping with the aid of a pair of "artificial" wings—thus have the early Classic writers handed the fable down to us. He seems to be the undoubted originator of our modern Air Forces!

A RELIGIOUS ASPECT.

The early Church was a great adapter of heathen practices to ecclesiastical uses and in the middle ages mazes assumed a religious aspect. On the continent many "church" mazes set in tiles or stones in the floor may still be seen. They are of the greatest rarity in England but one exists in the pavement beneath the tower of Bourn Church, near Caxton. At that time the maze was supposed to represent the tangled web of sin in which mankind was caught, the paths led to Heaven—the centre,—which was only to be attained by following the tortuous ways of sorrow and repentance.

After the Crusades they assume an entirely new role. Pilgrimages to the Holy Land had become too difficult to undertake, and so, as a substitute, mazes were constructed as instruments for performing penance for non-fulfilment of vows of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and they then became known as "Jerusalem Ways".

They were also used as a general means of doing penance, the penitent having to follow out all the sinuous ways on his hands and knees, repeating various prayers at certain points. As some of these "paths" were very long, it must have entailed a lot of wearisome crawling before the end was reached.

Perhaps the origin of "Stations of the Cross" in Catholic and "High" churches may be traced back to this. Most of the English open-air mazes occur near churches, showing the former close connection between them.

"TROY TOWNS".

But there is nothing religious about the maze at Hilton; it was made at a time when all significance of that sort had died out. Its real use was as a sort of recreation for the young men and maidens of the village at festival times and in the evening when their work was done.

They were sometimes called "Troy Towns", the name being given them in Elizabethan times when a great revival in classical studies caused many mazes to be constructed. The capture of Troy and all the difficulties entailed in that military operation were supposed to be appropriately represented by these labyrinths. The occurrence of the place name "Troy Town" in various parts of England perpetuates the memory of a former maze which may still exist or, more likely, has been ploughed out.

Thus have mazes descended in the social ladder. Now, alas, their significance has gone and their twisting and turning paths are only occasionally traversed by the curious just to see how the thing was done in the days of long ago.