

Mazes and Labyrinths
George Byars - 12/2/2004

Gentlemen, while determining what style of paper to present to this esteemed group, I considered several literary avenues that have been previously traveled by Athenaeum presenters. I thought briefly about giving the ever-popular, thinly veiled book report. I contemplated cheating and choosing some little known subject tied to my vocation as a clinical social worker, but these career-based papers can prove to be painfully boring and sleep producing. One possibility was always the nostalgic trip down memory lane. These papers are fun to do, but I will not be doing one of those.

What you will be getting from me this evening is what I call the personal interest paper. I pursue a rather idiosyncratic hobby to which I give an inordinate amount of time and resources. Tonight I am going to talk to you about hedge mazes and their older cousin, the labyrinth.

At this point I think that it is important to take a few minutes to define and clarify the meaning and usage of a few key terms. In today's world, the words *maze* and *labyrinth* are used interchangeably and are commonly accepted as synonyms for one another, but in the world of gardening, these two terms have altogether separate and distinct meanings. Let's start with the word maze. A maze is defined as a confusing, intricate network of winding multicursal pathways. Multicursal pathways are pathways with one or more junctions, branches, or blind alleys. Mazes are pathway puzzles that force the visitor to make a number of difficult decisions in order to reach a pathway goal.

My interest in hedge mazes was piqued while visiting the gardens of Hampton Court Palace and Hever Castle. Hampton Court, you will remember, served as the home of Henry the Eighth and is reputed to have one of the oldest and most famous hedge mazes in the world. Hever Castle, the family home of Anne Boleyn, also sports a very handsome, but less ambitious maze. The Hever Castle maze was built by American millionaire, William Astor, after he purchased the estate in 1904.

During this English garden tour, I became interested in exploring how I could go about replicating, in some modest fashion, and in my own backyard, the mazes I had seen. I knew that this task would prove formidable because of two major problems. The first being my own limited knowledge of gardening and mazes, and the second problem would surely be the climatic differences between Western Kentucky and Great Britain. England is known for its temperate climate, its plentiful rainfall, fertile soils, and drought-less summers. Western Kentucky, on the other hand, presents hard red clay, drought plagued summers, periodic harsh winters and a relatively short growing season.

The plant materials used in England for lush, long-living hedges are numerous and varied: boxwood, hemlock, yew, cypress, American holly, and hornbeam. All of these do very well, and may live and thrive for hundreds of years. I knew that this would not be the case in Western Kentucky. I approached Fred Wiche with my problems, and asked him what plants would he recommend for planting in Zone 6 if he were going to plant a hedge maze. After carefully explaining that hedge mazes take many years to grow, Fred recommended an upright yew called *Taxus Media Hicksii* that grows to a height of eight feet and fills in to about six feet wide. I should explain that Fred

Wiche was a uniquely kind and generous man, so he refrained from saying what I am sure he was thinking, "What foolish fifty-year-old would set about planting such folly?"

A few months after returning home from the '97 garden trip, I began to plan for the construction of a hedge maze that would be a smaller and more simplified version of what I had experienced in Europe. After working with several simple designs, I decided upon a multicursal theta pattern that featured a number of blind alleys and junctions.

A theta maze pattern is one whose basic design pattern is made up of concentric circles. After deciding upon a basic pattern, I began staking out an area in my yard of approximately 4600 square feet. A primitive compass, made of bailing twine and duct tape was used to lay out five large concentric circles. The circles were later boxed in by a staked-out square that provided the outside border of the maze. This exacting and geometric layout was accomplished only after I received expert guidance from our late friend and neighbor Carmichael Fels. Once the border was laid out, I began the long, tedious task of measuring and staking the exact position for the future planting for all 260 yews.

Mature Hicksii yews retail for around \$100.00 each and the purchase of 260 of these could run into some real money. My solution to this expensive problem was to compromise and seek out very young shrubs over the next year which would be far less expensive. This decision to go with the less expensive, but smaller yews would mean that the plantings would have to survive an extended growth period of six to eight years that would allow them to grow into six-foot hedges.

After a year of working with the young yews, I began to understand why mazes are usually found on large estates and in government-funded gardens with dozens of expert horticulturists tending to their every need, as opposed to my under-funded, and certainly understaffed backyard. With all the planting, pruning, weeding, mulching, side-dressing, and the replacing of diseased plants, this turned out to be much more work than I had ever anticipated.

There have been some lighter moments however, when my hobby has provided entertainment as any good hobby should. As you can probably imagine, the sight of a grown man hunkered over in his back lawn hammering in wooden stake after wooden stake in a seemingly intricate but indiscernible pattern drew some interest from the neighbors. When I advanced to the compass constructed from twine and duct tape, the curiosity became overwhelming, and one lady in the subdivision, after circling around the oval street several times, finally called Sarah, chatted for a while and ventured, "I saw George working in the back." When Sarah volunteered nothing, she pushed bravely forward, "Are you'll building a garage?" To which Sarah replied, "Oh, no, we already have a garage." The lady's decorum overcame her curiosity and she backed off. Several days later, she plucked her courage, slowed her car, looked, parked, and advanced across the yard to demand, "George, what in the world are you doing?" I proceeded with hammer and stakes, never really looked up, but pretended to be working frantically, and breathlessly replied, " I must finish my pentagram; I really must finish! Do you know anyone who raises goats?" That

neighbor still looks at me curiously from time to time.

Having amused myself and worked so hard physically in the maze, I have become somewhat interested in the history of such creations. I am going to share with you my audience, a bit of what I have learned. Labyrinth's have been around for a long, long, time. The first historical record of a labyrinth was the Egyptian Labyrinth. Herodotus, a Greek traveler and writer, visited the Egyptian Labyrinth in the 5th Century B.C. The building housing the Labyrinth was located just above Lake Moeris and opposite the city of the Crocodiles. Herodotus was very impressed by this structure, stating, "I found it greater than words could tell, for although the Temple of Ephesus and that of Samas are celebrated works, yet all the works and buildings of the Greeks put together would certainly be inferior to this Labyrinth as regards labor and expense." Herodotus added that even the pyramids were surpassed by the Egyptian Labyrinth. In 1888 a group of archaeologists discovered the remains of this 4,000 year old structure and were able to measure its foundation. They found it had measured 1,000 feet long and 800 feet wide. The exact purpose of this structure is still a matter of speculation, but one thing is for sure – it is the oldest known structure to which the label labyrinth has been applied.

Certainly the most famous labyrinth of all time is that associated with the Greek myth of Thesusus and the Minotaur, which I alluded to earlier. According to the legend, King Aegeus was forced to pay tribute to King Minos of the Minoans. The Minoan kingdom was on the island we now call Crete. Every year the tribute required the sacrifice of seven young men and seven young maidens. Underground

and far below King Minos' palace at the city of Knossos lay a huge labyrinth. Inside the labyrinth Minos kept a creature called the Minotaur. The Minotaur was reputed to be a hideous animal that was half man and half bull. The fourteen young people from Greece would be put into the labyrinth where they would become hopelessly lost and eventually be eaten by the monster. King Aegeus' son Theseus volunteered to serve as one of the sacrificial victims so that he could attempt to kill the Minotaur. Theseus was successful. He slew the Minotaur and then used a trail of twine he had started laying down at the entrance of the labyrinth to find his way out. Archaeologists have found no evidence of a labyrinth structure at Knossos, but recently historians have suggested that the palace itself at Konossos was so complicated, with so many levels, stairs, and rooms that it may have been the genesis of the labyrinth story.

As the Roman Empire fell and the Middle Ages arose, labyrinths started to appear as a feature in churches and cathedrals as Christianity spread across Europe. These church labyrinths were not three-dimensional, but appeared as art, painted on walls or inlaid in the floor. The original purpose of these church labyrinths is a matter of conjecture. Some religious historians hold that they represent difficulties and intricacies that beset a Christian during his life. Another view is that these labyrinths are a symbol of the entangling nature of sin. Some of the larger floor versions of these labyrinths may have been used as the path for miniature pilgrimages. Priests sometimes would send parishioners on a distant pilgrimage as a penitence for sin. The labyrinth may have been substituted if the sin were particularly small, or the sinner was unable to undertake a distant journey because of ill health. The penitent would probably

have had to travel through the labyrinth on his knees while praying. The oldest known floor-inlaid church labyrinth is at the Basilica in Orleansville, Algeria, and dates back to the ~~12~~⁴th Century A. D. But it wasn't until the 12th Century that these pavement labyrinths became common place in the cathedrals of Italy and France. Today these labyrinths are still featured in many of the European cathedrals, but their modern day purpose is more for a soothing, tension-releasing meditation walk for the visitor, than for a somewhat painful path of atonement for the sinner.

Relatively speaking, hedge mazes have been around only briefly compared to their cousins, the labyrinths. It was during the late Medieval Period that labyrinths found their way into the gardens of the nobility, and for the first time there is evidence that the designs employed take the next major step in the story—the transformation from two-dimensional labyrinths into three-dimensional puzzle mazes from planted hedges. The first positive evidence of a hedge maze is the record of the destruction on an example in Paris France in 1431. In 1431 an anonymous English author penned, “The Assembly of Ladies,” a poem describing a low hedge maze and the efforts of a group of ladies to reach the center. Surely this was a puzzle maze with a choice of pathways, or there would have been no confusion about the correct path to take. It is not until the early 1500's, however, with the widespread advent of printing in Europe, that we see the first indications of the designs employed for these early garden mazes and labyrinths. The surprising feature of early depictions of hedge mazes is that many of them are in fact unicursal labyrinths. Most were only simple adaptations of the widespread Medieval labyrinth designs.

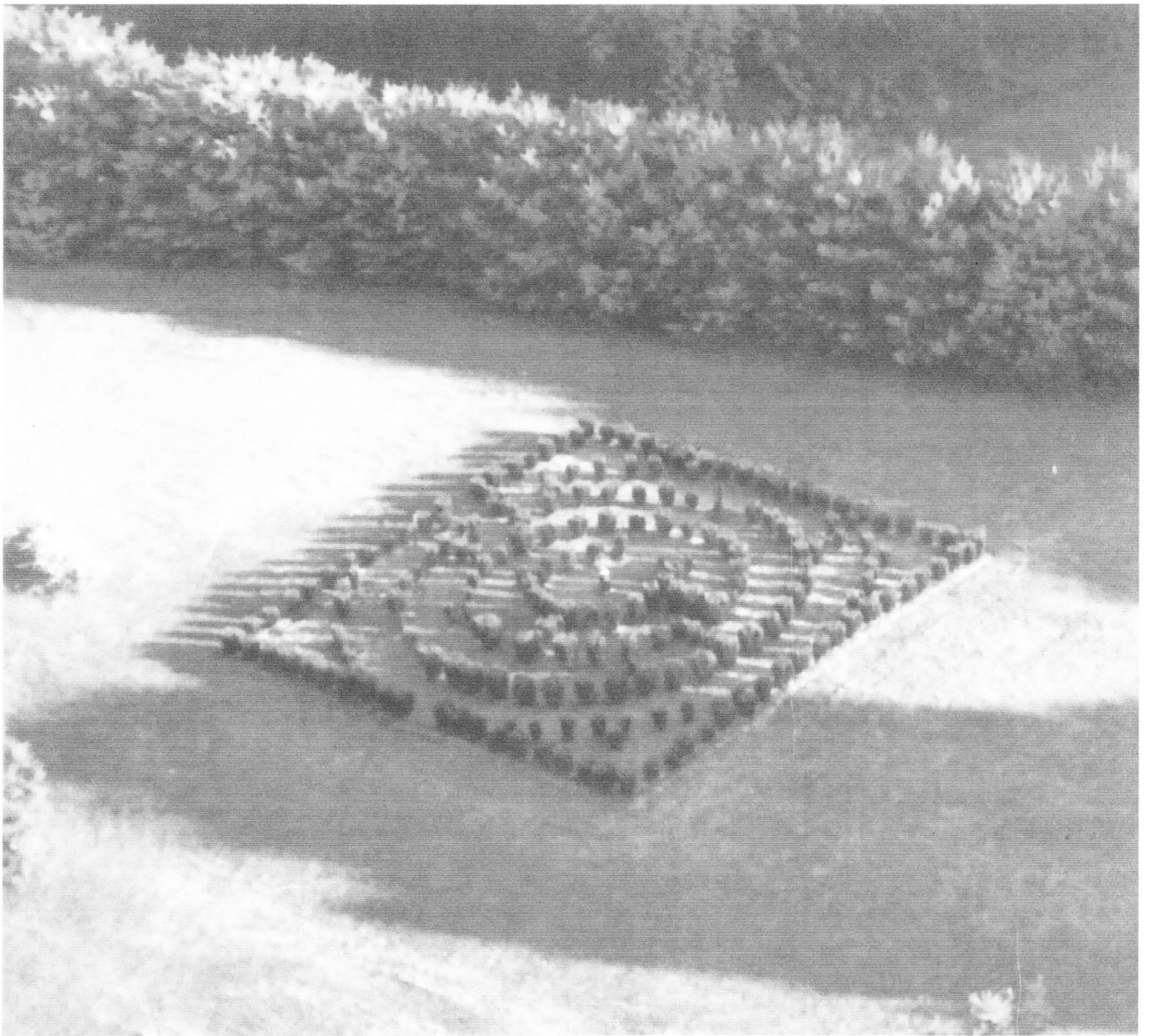
Garden labyrinths and mazes of the 1500's were usually developed as places of gentle entertainment, somewhere to stroll, dally, and engage in conversation. With the inclusion of shaded hedge bowers and other features such as garden benches, they were often the site for romantic trysts. The hedge mazes allowed young lovers to escape the requisite chaperon.

During the period from 1550 to 1650, a number of influential puzzle mazes were built from Italy across to Spain, up through France, Germany, and the low countries of Britain. Hedge mazes flourished and developed during the late 17th and 18th centuries. The famous hedge maze at Hampton Court Palace is probably the best known and oldest true survivor from the 1600's. The Hampton Court maze was planted during the reign of William and Mary, as part of a grand design known as the wilderness—a huge plot of geometrically laid out gardens. This maze, constructed in 1690, is of no great size, only occupying a quarter of an acre, but on the average, it requires 20 minutes to reach its center.

Most of the story of labyrinths and hedge mazes lies deep in the past, but is there any future for these garden dinosaurs? Well, twenty years ago there were only two dozen hedge mazes remaining in Europe and today there are over 100 mazes in Britain alone. Meditation walk labyrinths too have experienced a revival both in Europe and now in America. New Harmony, Indiana, a small community just west of Evansville, is the closest site to Hopkinsville that offers both a mediation labyrinth and a full-scale hedge maze. For those who are interested in such things, these structures are very much worth experiencing. The New Harmony hedge maze, planted in 1941, was adapted from

a drawing of the original maze created in the town in 1815, making it one of the first such mazes planted in America. Interestingly enough, this original New Harmony maze was not a maze at all, but a single-path labyrinth.

And for anyone interested in visiting my modest maze, it should be ready for touring in about two years, and I invite you all to come for an amazing mini-maze experience.



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