

# TROY TOWNS AND TURF LABYRINTHS: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

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A traveller on the road between Ardley and Somerton in north Oxfordshire might idly wonder why a prominent house half-way along the route is named Troy Farm – without ever suspecting that opposite the house, on private land hidden behind trees, lies the only 15-ring classical turf labyrinth extant in Britain. The accidental discovery of this fact has led me on a long and meandering journey of research which is still far from complete. I hope that this account of the journey so far will prompt others to contact me with their own ideas and comments.

First, a definition: although the two terms ‘maze’ and ‘labyrinth’ are often used interchangeably, this article is concerned with unicursal (single-path) labyrinths, rather than multicursal mazes. The former consist of a spiral path, leading from the entrance to the centre and out again without any junctions; the latter offer a choice of paths, incorporating blind alleys and trick corners. Puzzle mazes, as a form of fashionable garden ornament, spread to England in the sixteenth century from Italy, where they were created as amusements for rich landowners. Labyrinths have altogether more ancient origins.

## **A brief history**

Classical seven-ring labyrinths (Figure 1) date back at least 4000 years. As symbols carved in rock, or patterns marked out on the ground in stones or turf, their remains have been traced in places as diverse as pre-conquest Arizona, India, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, and northern Europe. Of the 500+ stone-lined labyrinths that survive in Scandinavia, Fisher and Gerster<sup>1</sup> assume that at least twenty could date from the Bronze Age, although most are post-medieval. The earliest dateable example in Scandinavia was created c.815 in Uppland, Sweden.

It is generally estimated that England once had more than 100 turf labyrinths. Of these, only seven survive to this day (see Appendix I for details), although records exist for at least another 29 (Appendix II).

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<sup>1</sup> Fisher, Adrian and Georg Gerster, *The Art of the Maze*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990.