

The Romans adapted ancient labyrinth symbols and incorporated them into complex decorative patterns on mosaic floors. The standard Roman pattern was Christianised by the medieval Church. Medieval labyrinths, laid out on church floors and village greens, had eleven rings rather than seven, and a characteristic cruciform design (see Figure 2). According to Fisher and Kingham,<sup>2</sup> ‘It is probable that the Christian church, faced with a deeply rooted tradition of pagan turf mazes, simply replaced them with their own more acceptable form and allowed their use to continue with the blessing of the church.’ It is thought by some that labyrinths, traversed on the knees, were used for ritual penance or even as pious substitutes for pilgrimage to the Holy Land during the Crusades.



*Figure 2: A typical Christian labyrinth*

By the late sixteenth century in England, the religious significance of village-green labyrinths seems to have been forgotten, and they featured in popular festivities such as maypole dancing and ‘maze running’, in which young men would compete in a race to the centre, where a young maiden stood waiting to be claimed. Many turf labyrinths were lost during the enclosure of common land, and almost all of those that remained fell into disuse during the years of the Puritan Commonwealth (1649–1659),

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<sup>2</sup> Fisher, Adrian and Diana Kingham, *Mazes*, Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1991.