

when such folk customs were forbidden. Obviously, unless a turf labyrinth is regularly maintained, it will soon be obliterated ('the quaint mazes in the wanton green for lack of tread are undistinguishable' – Titania, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 2, Scene 1). But the customs and beliefs associated with those that remain are remarkably persistent: W.H. Matthews³ recorded that villagers living near the Fairies' Hill labyrinth in Asenby, Yorkshire, told him in 1908 that they used to tread the labyrinth on summer evenings and kneel at the centre 'to hear the fairies singing'.

Troy Farm, Somerton, Oxfordshire

As mentioned, one of the seven extant turf labyrinths in England is in Oxfordshire, on land belonging to Troy Farm in the village of Somerton (Anglo-Saxon 'Sumortun' = a farm used in summer). According to the *Victoria County History* (vol. 6), 'Troy Farm dates from the sixteenth century, probably built on the site of the manor house known as "Somertons", which belonged to the fifteenth century Aston family'.

The Somerton labyrinth (Figure 3), still in excellent condition, measures 60 ft x 50 ft. According to Harrington,⁴ its full length is approximately a quarter of a mile, and its turf path is one foot wide. It is the only 15-ring classical turf labyrinth known in Britain. Sherwood and Pevsner⁵ date its origins to the sixteenth century, but there are reasons to believe that it is much older than that, even if one does not accept the theory of Mr and Mrs R. Hall, the owners of Troy Farm in the 1970s, advanced in a pamphlet quoted by Harrington:

The weight of opinion inclines to the view that such a maze is a legacy of Roman occupation and was cut by Roman colonists to play The Troy Game, 'Iulus'. The Roman Road, Portway, passes nearby.

This supposition echoes a confident statement by E. Carleton Williams, in *Companion into Oxfordshire*, cited uncritically by Gelling,⁶ to the effect that the Somerton labyrinth was 'cut by Roman colonists to play the Troy

³ Matthews, W. H., *Mazes and Labyrinths: A General Account of their History and Development* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1922; reprinted by Dover Publications in 1970).

⁴ Harrington, Frank, article about the 900th anniversary of St James' church, Somerton, in *The Advertiser*, 25 July 1974 (filed in ORCC 100)*.

⁵ Sherwood, J. and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of Oxfordshire*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974.

⁶ Gelling, Margaret, *The Place Names of Oxfordshire*, Oxford: OUP, 1953.