

The labyrinth at Piddington, Oxfordshire

As it happens, there is a small field called ‘The Bowery’ half a mile south-east of Piddington (itself south-east of Bicester), a village where the existence of a long-lost labyrinth has been recorded. Tempting though it is to assume that this field was the site of the labyrinth, there is an even stronger contender on the summit of Muswell Hill, which rises to nearly 400 feet, one mile south of Piddington. According to the Boarstall Cartulary, in the early twelfth century a certain Ralph founded a hermitage in the manor of Piddington at a place called Musewell. (I am indebted to Ian Costar of Ludgershall for this information.) Did the hermit create a labyrinth inside the ramparts of the earthwork that is still visible today on the summit of Muswell Hill? The flat space inside the ramparts, some 250 ft square, bears the traditional name ‘The Wilderness’.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a particular usage of the word ‘wilderness’ once denoted ‘a piece of ground laid out in an ornamental or fantastic style, often in the form of a maze or labyrinth’. The first recorded usage of ‘wilderness’ in this sense is relatively late – 1644, in connection with a horticultural type of maze – but, to quote W. H. Matthews,¹⁹ writing of the Piddington turf labyrinth, ‘it is not improbable that it was used in connection with mazes in general’. One might even surmise that an owner of Muswell Hill Manor in the seventeenth or eighteenth century appropriated and prettified a much more ancient structure. But how ancient? Is it possible that the medieval name ‘Musewell’ was a corruption of an earlier form, namely ‘Mazewell’, referring back perhaps to a pagan site? Unfortunately the OED does not record any use of the word ‘maze’ before 1385, so presumably the derivation proposed by Gelling and Cole²⁰ is correct: ‘a mossy or boggy spring’. How easy it is to get carried away when studying mazes and labyrinths!

Postscript: ‘Jericho’ labyrinths

Some labyrinths in northern Europe bore (or still bear) the names of famous cities, such as Jericho, Babylon, and Nineveh. Fisher and Loxton²¹ conjecture a resemblance between the rings of a labyrinth and

¹⁹ As footnote 3, page 73.

²⁰ Gelling, Margaret and Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names*, Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 2000.

²¹ Fisher, Adrian and Howard Loxton, *Secrets of the Maze*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1997.