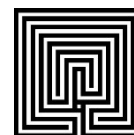


The Mizmaze at Leigh

Katherine Barker



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The Mizmaze at Leigh in Dorset, England (O.S. ref: ST 620082) belongs to a class of historic monument known as a turf maze.¹ Formerly well represented in England, only a few are now maintained in good order. By definition a turf maze is an ephemeral feature in the landscape and without regular attention is easily lost. This note aims to bring to wider notice three little known pictorial representations of the site at Leigh, the first depicted on the Issac Taylor *Map of Dorset* (1705), the second on Bayly's *Map of Dorset* (1773) and the third, the earliest and probably most important, to be found on an Elizabethan map of the manors of north Dorset dated to between 1569 and 1574. Assembling these has afforded an opportunity to consider what little is at present known of the history of the site.

In the first edition of Hutchin's *History of Dorset* (1774 ii, 468) a single sentence informs us that "about half a mile S[outh] of Leigh Mr Taylor's map places a Miz-maze..." In fact it appears on both the 1765 and 1795 editions of Issac Taylor's *Map of Dorset* and it is the second edition that is reproduced here (fig. 1). It may be noted that Taylor omits the hyphen from the spelling of Mizmaze.² On this scale there is insufficient space for much real-life detail and the drawing of the site is probably largely conventional. Nevertheless, the maze is clearly indicated by three concentric ovals with traces in the printing ink of a central linking cross. It is correctly sited on rising ground south of the village and within Lye Common, although the paths indicated cannot readily be traced today. A decade later there appeared J. Bayly's *Map of Dorset* (1773) which owes a great deal to Taylor. Here again the site is clearly depicted, but this time as a lightly dotted spiral and simply labelled 'Maze' (fig. 2).



Figure 1: The Leigh Mizmaze from Issac Taylor's *Map of Dorset*, 2nd edition, 1795 (much enlarged)

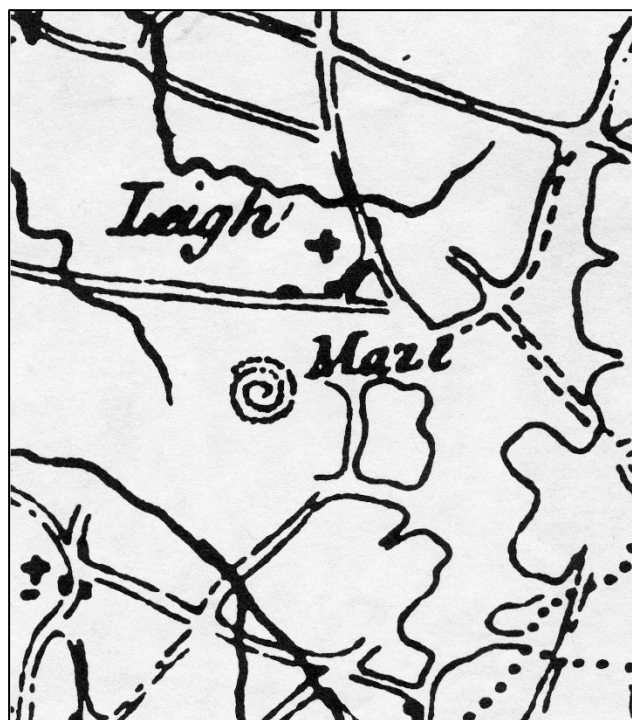


Figure 2: The Leigh Mizmaze from J. Bayley's *Map of Dorset*, 1773 (much enlarged)

In the second and third editions of the *History of Dorset* (1815 iv, 270-1 and 1870 iv, 451) the Mizmaze merits a whole paragraph (the additional wording from the third edition is given in brackets):

On an eminence in the common, about a quarter of a mile south from the village, is a maze of circular form, (about thirty paces in diameter), surrounded by a bank and ditch, and occupying an eighth part of an acre. The banks of earth of which it is composed are set almost close together, and are somewhat more than one foot in width and about half a foot in height. Heretofore it was the custom for the young men of the village to scour out the trenches and pare the banks once in six or seven years, and the day appropriated for the purpose was passed in rustic merriment and festivity. But of late years, either through want of encouragement from the principle inhabitants, or from a less reverence for a curious piece of antiquity, this salutary work has been neglected, and there is at present great danger that in the lapse of a few years, the traces of the several trenches or divisions will no longer be discernable, particularly in the centre, where the circles being shorter, and consequently more susceptible of injury, the banks have been trodden down by the numerous cattle that resort to the spot to enjoy the cool breeze in summer.

Both the second and third editions of the *History* bring us up to date on events after 1800:

In the year 1800 this common was inclosed and that part on which the mizmaze was formed consisting of a small field, being in the possession of an individual who has taken no care to preserve this work of antiquity, it is now almost obliterated.

The Mizmaze is not shown on the Leigh Inclosure Award of 1804. Comparison of the fields shown on the Inclosure map with both those on the Tithe map (1840) and on the Ordnance Survey first edition six-inch series map (1888) suggests the site lay in a newly created field called *Burls* and held by Elizabeth Cox and Robert Read from Earl Digby. It is this field which is listed in the Tithe award as *Mismaze Common* and which was then under 'furze' although no legal access had been granted in 1804. By 1840 it was in the possession of Matthew Cox, who was both owner and occupier – a smallholder whose only other property in Leigh consisted of a cottage and orchard on the western edge of the village. While not depicting the Mizmaze itself, the 1804 award mentions the name twice but, in unexpected places. Both are held by Thomas Hunt senior from Earl Digby, the first numbered 74 is a "certain customary tenement... called Mizmaze" which lies immediately south of the present Drummer's Castle Farm, just over half a mile SSE of the site itself. Then follows, out of sequence at number 95, a further reference to "a certain customary tenement... called also Mizmaze bounded on the north-east by old inclosures and on the south-east by Mizmaze Drove" (now known as Back Drove). This field lies some 200 metres east of the actual site of the Mizmaze and is listed as common pasture in 1840, by which time it was in the possession of one Simon Hunt.³

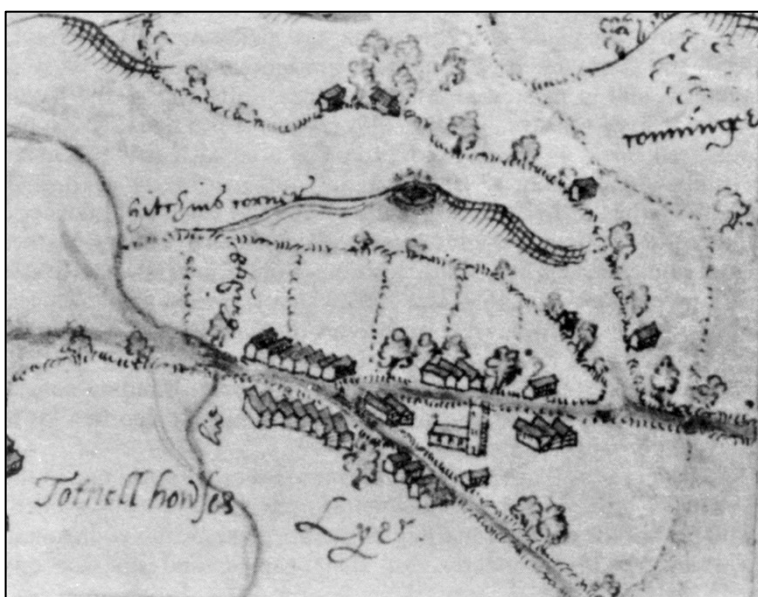
Nearly two centuries have elapsed since Inclosure but the site of the Mizmaze is not completely lost. The first edition of the OS six-inch series of 1888 shows the maze by means of a six-sided figure, one recently confirmed by aerial photography (fig. 3) which reveals a low and badly degraded earthwork of distinctly hexagonal plan. When Hutchins recorded it as circular he may have been referring to the maze itself and not to the bank around it. The enclosing bank is much eroded and stands little more than 60 cm (2 feet) high although its width suggests it once stood considerably higher. The length of each of its six sides is very approximately 14.5 metres. Measurements taken by the Dorset Sites and Monuments Record from the crests of the banks indicate a basic layout rather more oval than circular. A distance of 31.5 metres recorded from NNE to SSW and another of 26.5m from WNW to ESE, suggests something broadly consistent with the orientation and shape of Taylor's 1765 map symbol. Within the enclosure there is a very low central mound with a diameter of some 6.5 metres.

Figure 3: Aerial view of the Leigh Mizmaze taken in summer 1985, looking NE to Leigh Bridge and E over part of Hitchens (1840). The hexagonal enclosure can be seen and slight remains of a low central mound. The straight hedge east of the site dates from inclosure (1804); it adjoins the continuous hedgerow depicted c.1570 which then divided the village tofts from the common. Photo: Commander Bailey.



There remain the vestiges of an outer ditch from which the material for the bank was presumably dug out, and there are other ill-defined features associated with the perimeter, the nature of which it is not possible to determine. Just as Hutchins says, the maze stands on an ‘eminence’ and enjoys a commanding view of the surrounding countryside.

Hutchins deemed the Leigh maze to be “probably such a one as... in Pimpern” (1774 ii, 468), the use of which he later describes (1815 iii, 292-3).⁴ Both were turf mazes and their function – that of recreation – was the same. There perhaps the resemblance ends. The Pimperne maze was cut down onto chalk, whereas the Leigh maze was on heavy clay and their ground plans could scarcely be more different. Hutchins’ published plan of Pimperne shows what may be best described as a meandering labyrinth of basically triangular design which covered nearly an acre. Saward (1985, 9-11) suggests the Leigh Mizmaze belonged to the symmetrical ‘medieval-type’ and attempted a reconstruction based on the turf maze at Breamore, Hampshire. While certainly reminiscent of Taylor’s symbol it must be noted that at present no one knows the original figure of the Mizmaze, nor how it evolved over the years it was in use. Indeed from the information available it is difficult to know how best to think of the basic plan – whether hexagonal, circular or oval.

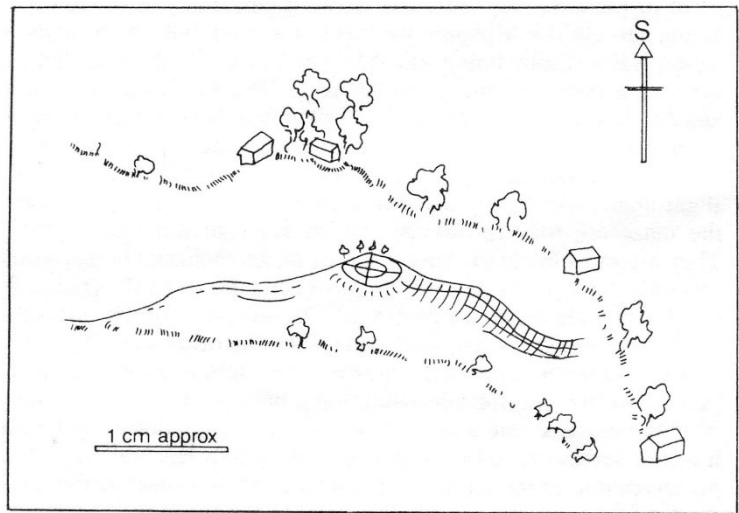


The earliest known representation of the Mizmaze is to be found on an Elizabethan map of the manors of north Dorset (BL Add MS 52522, Harvey 1965, 82-4) which dates from between 1569 and 1574.⁵ Finely drawn and coloured, the survey is uneven in its treatment of the area, but there can be no doubt that it is based on an actual survey. The Mizmaze itself is not named, but under magnification it is seen as a wholly unmistakable feature despite the fact that the drawing is barely 6 mm across (fig. 4). The site is shown in plan, and the hill in profile.

Figure 4: Leigh as depicted on BL Add Ms 52522, c.1570. The Mizmaze appears above the village. Reproduced by permission of the British Library

Figure 5: Detail of the Mizmaze as shown on the c.1570 map, redrawn for clarity

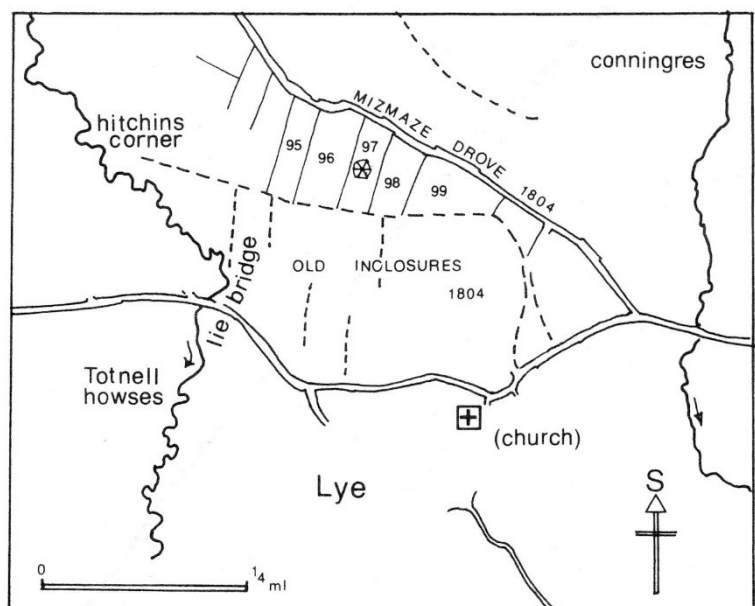
The cartographer has depicted the Mizmaze by means of two concentric ovals, the outer one incorporating the curve of the hill. The ovals are linked by a central cross set at a slight angle, which may be compared with Taylor's symbol (fig. 5). Above the maze are four tiny shapes which are something of a puzzle. They are most likely to represent bushes; an enclosing hedge would certainly have been needed as protection from cattle grazed by Leigh copyholders on the common.⁶ The steepness of the surrounding bank is shown by fine hachuring. Like the other drawings this is largely conventional in style, and yet the slight angle at which the maze is set on the hillside could have been taken from life; seen from the north as one approaches from the village this is very much how the earthwork appears. It seems likely that BL Add MS 52522 preserves one of the earliest representations of a rural turf maze in England.



The Elizabethan map may make some contribution to an understanding of the oft-repeated story in Leigh itself of the supposed connection between the Mizmaze and Witchcraft, which seems likely to have derived its inspiration from two notes published by William Barnes in the same volume of the 1879 *Proceedings*. The Mizmaze was the subject of the first note, and the second concerned a place called *Witches' Corner* on Leigh Common. Figure 4 shows the area around Leigh as drawn about 1570 which may be compared with the same area taken from the OS first edition six-inch series of 1888.

Running behind the village houses on the south (top) side is a row of narrow fields, or tofts, separated from the Common by a long and continuous hedgerow, most of which is still in existence. At the eastern (left) end of the hedge where it joins the stream is *Hitchens Corner*. It is a name which has persisted; in 1840 several closes in the area all carry the name *Hitchens*, and today is *Hedgings* or *Hedgins*. "Many years ago" wrote Barnes in 1879, "I was told by a man of this neighbourhood that corner of Leigh Common was called *Witches' Corner*." Barnes later came across some old depositions from Somerset magistrates of the years between 1650 and 1664, which recorded a witches' sisterhood that sometime met on Leigh Common. Barnes saw *Witches' Corner* as a folk memory of their meetings.

Figure 6: Features that can plausibly be identified on the OS 1st edition six-inch series map of 1888. Numbered fields are taken from the Inclosure map (1804), site of the Mizmaze occupies no.97. Houses shown along Mizmaze Drove in 1888 occupy similar positions to those shown c.1570, and several house platforms are still visible.



It is perhaps necessary to draw attention to some very similar sounding names, *Hitchins*, *Hitchens* and *Witches* and all seemingly at a corner. Were they all perhaps one and the same place? In his note on *Witches' Corner* Barnes makes no reference to the Mizmaze. Indeed, as he comments himself when quoting Coker,⁷ who tells of the annual repairing of the Mizmaze by the young men, it [the maze] was clearly “for their games, and not for any heathenish or other ceremony of their elders.” But the supposed link between Witchcraft and the Mizmaze is likely to remain prominent in popular consciousness for at least as long as the most attractive Leigh Women’s Institute banner continues to display a witch in full regalia on a broomstick taking a carefully considered view of a curious six-sided puzzle.⁸

Katherine Barker, Sherborne, Dorset, England; 1989

Notes:

1. RCHM Dorset vol.1 (West) 1952, 132.
2. ‘Mizmaze’ is described by Dr. Johnson (*Dictionary* 1775) as a cant word (i.e. dialect or slang) formed by re-duplication, normally confined to southern England. The RCHM gives the word as ‘Miz Maze.’
3. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Mizmaze names had been transferred in 1804 – if not actually misplaced. Each tenement is identified not only by a number on the map but by reference to its neighbours in the award. The entry for tenement No. 75 (adjacent to No. 74 ‘Mizmaze’) certainly contains an error. No. 75 is described as bounded to the east by *Mizmaze Drove* – when *Main Drove* must be meant and is clearly marked on the map as such.
4. The Pimperne maze was destroyed by the plough about 1730. Hutchins cites Aubrey, who “informs us, there were many [mazes] in England before the Civil wars; and that the young people used on festivals to dance, or, as the term was, to tread them...” Turf mazes were frequently to be found on commons or open spaces. A maze was often called *Troy Town*; there is a Troy Town Farm and Copse in Puddletown (Mills 1977 I, 322) and a close called Troy Town in Sherborne, now lost (survey of J. Ladd, 1735). It occupied an area south-west of the abbey church opposite what is now the Westbury Hall.
5. Formal mazes of various kinds were popular in Tudor England (see Harley, J.B., in (ed) Tyacke, S. *English Map-Making 1500-1650* (London 1983). More rustic seems to have been the maze mentioned by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* II i 99.
6. Sherborne Manor Survey 1615, DRO KG 1456.
7. Coker’s *Survey of Dorsetshire* was written by Thomas Gerard about 1625. This cannot, however, have been the source of Barnes’ information - the Survey makes no mention of Leigh.
8. Reproduced by Saward (1985, 8) and by Boswell, B. *Leigh – A Dorset Village* (Castle Cary, 1986), p. 6 & 150.

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