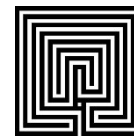


Maureen's Mump – an Ancient Turf Labyrinth in Cornwall?



Jeff Saward

Originally published in Caerdroia 26 (1994), p.61-62

The publication of a paper entitled “English Turf Mazes, Troy, and the Labyrinth” in *Folklore* 102, in 1991, contributed by W.M.S. Russell and Claire Russell of Reading University, England, became the focus of a vigorous exchange of correspondence between labyrinth enthusiasts recently. The authors had drawn most of their information from W.H. Matthews’ *Mazes and Labyrinths* (1922), thereby perpetuating a number of errors and omissions, and completely ignoring much of the advance in knowledge now available to researchers as a result of the renewed interest in this field during the last twenty years or so. As a consequence, the paper continued with the notion that turf labyrinths were somehow a very English affair with no reference to sites now known elsewhere in the British Isles, no reference to the turf labyrinths of southern Scandinavia and only passing mention of the German turf labyrinths, although the surviving example at Steigra is referred to as a stone labyrinth!

The most surprising conclusion of this paper was that ten original turf labyrinths survive in England: Alkborough, Breamore, Dalby, Hilton, Saffron Walden, Somerton, Winchester and Wing (all present and correct); Comberton (surviving in Matthews’ day but destroyed ca. 1928) and at Crackington Haven in Cornwall. This last site came as a complete surprise, indeed something of a shock to many informed readers of the catalogue appended to the paper. Could it be that a genuine turf labyrinth had survived unrecorded in Cornwall all this time? William Stukeley mentioned turf labyrinths as existing in Cornwall in the early 1700s, although he fails to give locations. Given the proximity of Crackington Haven to Tintagel with the nearby Rocky Valley labyrinth carvings and Boscastle with the labyrinth carved slab at the Witches House Museum, it might seem a suitable area to find such a monument. But somehow, the notion of an unrecorded turf labyrinth in a popular tourist area didn’t quite tally. Your editor suspected a modern replica perhaps, cut for amusement after visiting one of the historic examples - from the description given, possibly the Breamore Miz-Maze - but chose to reserve judgement until sources could be checked and essential fieldwork carried out.

For information on Crackington Haven Russell and Russell reference *The Countryman* (Summer edition, 1989, p. 179), a charming quarterly journal of country matters. The editor of *The Countryman* kindly provided *Caerdroia* with a photocopy of the note which originally appeared on the letters page, which details an 83-foot diameter (25.3 metre) turf labyrinth, known as “Maureen’s Mump,” but was unable to find an address for Mr. Melwyn Harcombe, the contributor of the note.

Our Cornish correspondent Paul Devereux, while on business in north Cornwall during the winter months of 1992 attempted to visit the site, but found Roundhayes Farm, an old farmhouse and extensive outbuildings now converted into holiday apartments, shut up for the winter. However, a local man at a nearby farm, resident in the parish for 40 years had no knowledge of Maureen’s Mump, or of a turf labyrinth on the property, despite a keen interest in local history. A recent visit by your editor to Cornwall (April 1993) finally provided the chance to visit Crackington Haven and clear up the confusion. Following the instructions in Mr. Harcombe’s note, we turned up on a Friday afternoon to speak to the owners and hopefully obtain access to Maureen’s Mump, whatever it might turn out to be.

From conversation with the current owners of Roundhayes Farm it can now be categorically stated that the Maureen's Mump turf labyrinth at Crackington Haven does not exist, as originally stated in *The Countryman* and *Folklore*, indeed if it ever did it would only have been visible on April 1st of each year, All Fool's Day, for the entire thing was nothing more than an April Fool's joke! This was one of a series of such stories placed in magazines and newspapers over a period of many years by a group of businessmen working for a large, well-known company based in Leatherhead, Surrey.

The most notorious of these spoofs, which concerned a war-time airstrip with a runway so short that the gates of a nearby railway crossing had to be opened every time an aircraft wished to take-off or land, thus delaying the train service. This generated correspondence in the local press for over six months – people who could remember it well, others sure that the author was confused about events, etc. – even though the entire story was fiction. And likewise, the turf labyrinth at Roundhayes Farm, complete fiction. But why call it Maureen's Mump? Maureen is the wife of the owner of Roundhayes (and is thus described as 83 feet in diameter!), and who is the mysterious Melwyn Harcombe? A fellow employee of the Leatherhead pranksters, and none too popular by all accounts, whose name was regularly used as a pseudonym for the true authors of this series of spoofs, all of which contain just enough information to sound plausible and certainly in this case convincing enough to appear unchecked in *The Countryman* and *Folklore*.

The Crackington Haven turf labyrinth can safely be struck from the records!

Jeff Seward, Thundersley, England. December 1994
(Revised, May 2023)

Note:

An edited version of this article was subsequently published in *Folklore* 105 (1994), p.109, to correct the record following letters concerning the 1991 article published on pages 114-115 of *Folklore* 103 (1992).

References:

Russell, W.M.S. and Claire. "English Turf Mazes, Troy, and the Labyrinth." *Folklore* 102 (1991), p.77-88, 1991.
"One Countryman to another." *The Countryman* (Summer 1989), p.179 – quoting a letter to the editor from Melwyn Harcombe of Bramhall, Cheshire.

The text in this reprint is © Labyrinthos/Jeff Seward 2023 as appropriate. Personal copies are permitted, but permission must be sought for any commercial reproduction: www.labyrinthos.net