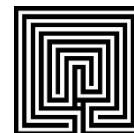


Historic English Church Labyrinths

Jeff Saward



The historic labyrinths situated in English cathedrals, churches and chapels mostly date from the late 19th century, a period when renewed interest in labyrinths combined with a wave of church building and restoration during the Victorian era. Only two examples, the splendid gilded roof-boss in St. Mary Redcliffe Church and the tiny labyrinth on the Hereford Mappa Mundi are from the medieval period, when many labyrinths were created in the churches and cathedrals of France and Italy.

Situated largely in the south and east of England, these labyrinths are always a pleasure to visit, located as they are in everything from simple chapels and churches to grand cathedrals. Their construction and design range from the relatively simple to some of the most fascinating examples from their period. The majority are relatively easy to find, although obviously some are subject to limited opening hours and a few might require the finding of a key or caretaker to gain admission. And therein lies the joy of tracking them down. While several are in large towns and cities, a number are beyond the reach of regular public transport and will require some planning to visit.

In addition to these historic examples, within the last few decades a number of modern labyrinths have been constructed (both indoor and outside) at churches and cathedrals throughout England as part of the modern spiritually-inspired revival of interest, most notably at St. John's, Batheaston (1985); Norwich Cathedral (2000); St. John's, Glastonbury (2007); St. Michael and All Angels, Abingdon (2008); Boxgrove Priory (2009); St. Mary's, Barnard Castle (2010) and Wakefield Cathedral (2013). These, and many more, can be found on the Worldwide Labyrinth Locator website – www.labyrinthlocator.org

For the benefit of visitors, the following information will hopefully prove useful to determine the whereabouts of these preserved ecclesiastic labyrinths and how to gain access to see them.



Historic church labyrinths in England

Alkborough Church, North Lincolnshire

Situated 300 metres northeast of the “Julian's Bower” turf labyrinth, the church of St. John the Baptist in the village of Alkborough also contains several labyrinths well worth visiting. Set into the floor of the porch is a plan of the nearby turf labyrinth formed of concrete, 6 feet (1.95 metres) in diameter, created in 1887 by James Goulton-Constable, the local squire and keen local historian, to preserve the plan should the turf labyrinth ever become overgrown. Inside the church, a smaller version of the same design appears above the altar in a stained glass window, likewise donated by Goulton-Constable. Look out also for the labyrinth embroidered kneeling cushions in the church. The nearby village cemetery also has a memorial cross inset with a small labyrinth, marking the grave of Mr. Goulton-Constable, who died in 1922.



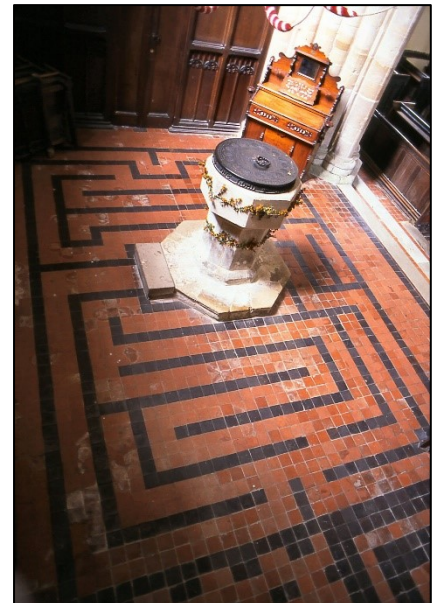
The porch and stained glass window Alkborough Church



Visiting details: while the small labyrinth in the porch is always visible, modern times dictate that the church is normally kept locked. However, details of the key holders are posted in the porch and if they are home they are always willing to show visitors round. Donations towards the upkeep of the church are always welcome.

Bourn Church, Cambridgeshire

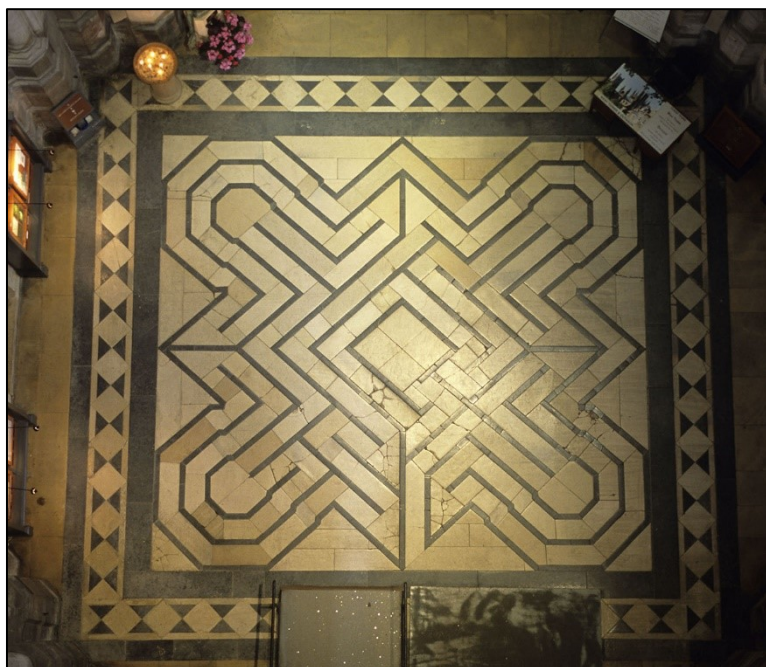
Set into the floor of the parish church of St. Helena & St. Mary in the small village of Bourn, this unusual example is formed of simple red and black floor tiles. Constructed in 1875, shortly after the labyrinth was laid in nearby Ely Cathedral, and likewise situated beneath the west tower, the design is not as one might expect, a copy of the Ely labyrinth, but a squared-up version of the Hampton Court hedge maze design. The font which now stands at the centre of the design obscures the path that circles the goal, and was obviously placed here as an afterthought. While not the most exciting example, this curious little pavement maze is none the less an interesting historic record of the enthusiasm for labyrinths and mazes during the late 19th century. A similar pavement maze, laid ca. 1870, still survives in the church of St. Martinus in Oud-Zevenaar in the Netherlands.



Visiting details: as with many small parish churches, opening times are dependent on volunteer arrangements. On several visits during the summer months in recent years I have always found this church open, but this is no guarantee. Sundays are always the most likely day to find the church unlocked, but nearby key holders can usually be found.

Ely Cathedral, Cambridgeshire

Situated beneath the west tower, just inside the main entrance doorway, this was for many years the only pavement labyrinth to be found inside an English cathedral, although it is now joined by the recently installed (2013) example in Wakefield Cathedral in West Yorkshire. Created in 1870 by Sir George Gilbert Scott during his restoration of the cathedral, the labyrinth of black and white marble is a little over 21 x 19 feet (6.45 x 5.84 m) across and fits neatly within a decorative frame filling the floor beneath the tower. The unusual design was clearly inspired by the former



labyrinth in Reims Cathedral and it is known that Scott visited Amiens Cathedral for inspiration prior to his work at Ely, although the labyrinth at Amiens would not have been visible at that time. It is possible to walk this labyrinth, but the constant traffic of visitors crossing the labyrinth as they enter the cathedral will call for a certain amount of patience or good timing!

Visiting details: Ely Cathedral is open to the public 7.00 am to 6.30 pm every day during the summer, 7.00 am to 6.30 pm (5.30 pm on Sunday) in winter, although admission to parts of the cathedral are restricted during services. An admission charge is payable, except Sundays, and guided tours of the cathedral are also available – the lantern and rooftop tour is highly recommended – visit www.elycathedral.org for details

Hadlow Down Church, East Sussex

Set in the graveyard behind the church of St. Mark the Evangelist in Hadlow Down, this curious labyrinth-decorated memorial stone in the form of a large cross, lying prone in a small enclosure, commemorates Lt. Colonel Francis Wheler Hood, the 4th Viscount Hood (1838-1907) and his wife Edith Ward who died in 1911 – the date of the memorial cross. The labyrinth design employed is an unusual five path medieval design with no obvious source, neither is it clear why the labyrinth was chosen for their memorial. The labyrinth is surrounded by a quotation from Revelation 21:4 *And God shall wipe away all tears...* with angels on the arms and shaft of the cross.



Visiting details: while the church is usually open daily, 9:30 am to dusk, the Hood memorial stone is in the churchyard directly adjacent to the NE corner of the church within a low box hedge enclosure, so can be seen at any time. The church is situated alongside the busy A272 road with no parking, but a small car park behind the church usually has a few spaces available for visitors and parking is also possible in adjacent School Lane.

Hereford Cathedral, Herefordshire

Without doubt, one of the smallest of the historic labyrinths on general public view in England, the tiny 11-circuit medieval labyrinth labelled *Laborintus id est domus dedali* (Labyrinth, the house of Daedalus) that occupies the island of Crete on the Mappa Mundi in Hereford Cathedral is only a few inches across. Created on a sheet of vellum by Richard de Bello ca. 1280-1300 CE, probably in Lincoln and then taken to Hereford Cathedral in 1305, it has been kept ever since. 64 x 52 inches (1.58 x 1.33 m) across, this map of the then known world is centred on Jerusalem and depicts a plan that seems strange to modern eyes. The major cities and rivers of Europe are faithfully depicted, but strange beasts and monsters inhabit the far reaches of Africa and Asia. This masterpiece of mediaeval geography shows clearly the enduring knowledge of the labyrinth myth throughout the mediaeval world; indeed a number of similar labyrinths are found in historical and geographical texts, often in connection with discussion of Daedalus' fabled labyrinth on Crete.



Visiting details: the Mappa Mundi is housed within Hereford Cathedral's 15th century south west cloister and the New Library Building. An admission fee applies. Visitors can also see the world's largest surviving chained library containing over 1,500 rare books dating from the 8th to the 19th centuries. While the cathedral is open throughout the year, the Mappa Mundi and Chained Library Exhibition has variable opening hours, usually Monday to Saturday 10 am to 4.30 pm., but not Sundays, Good Friday, Christmas & Boxing Day and New Year's Day. The exhibition is usually closed for some or all of January for essential cleaning and conservation work. You are advised to check opening times before you visit – www.herefordcathedral.org

Itchen Stoke Church, Hampshire

Built in 1866-67 by the architect Henry Conybeare for his brother the Revd. Charles Conybeare, Rector of the village, the church of St. Mary in the small village of Itchen Stoke was clearly inspired by the then recently restored Sainte Chapelle in Paris. This striking example of Victorian Gothic Revival architecture is lit inside by richly coloured stained glass and has a unique labyrinth filling the floor of its apse, 16.7 feet (5.1 m) in diameter, but partly obscured by a wooden altar. Formed from brown and green tiles, the labyrinth is a replica of the labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral, although some of the details are somewhat simplified. Although too small to walk, and clearly created for decorative purposes, this little labyrinth created from over 1600 tiles is none the less one of the gems of the 19th century labyrinth revival.



Visiting details: Itchen Stoke Church is now in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust and is no longer used for regular services. The church is usually kept open during daylight hours. Maintenance and cleaning of the building relies on local volunteers, so donations are always welcome to help with the upkeep. The churchyard is deliberately maintained as a wild flower meadow and is quite beautiful in late spring and high summer.

St. Mary Redcliffe Church, Bristol

A number of small decorative labyrinths occur in mediaeval churches, cathedrals and abbeys across Western Europe, including one notable example in England: a beautiful gilded roof-boss in the form of a mediaeval labyrinth, 8 inches (20 cm) in diameter, in St. Mary Redcliffe Church in the city of Bristol. Dating from the 1390s, it is one of nearly 1200 bosses depicting that decorate the roof of this fine Gothic church, and is located on the ceiling of the fourth bay of the north aisle.



Visiting details: St. Mary Redcliffe Church is open weekdays, 8.30 am to 5.00 pm and 8.00 am to 8.00 pm on Sundays, bank holidays 9.00 am to 4.00 pm, although access is restricted during services and the church is occasionally closed for special events. Situated in the heart of Bristol, overlooking the harbour area and Temple Meads, the church is on a busy main road and parking nearby is often difficult, although it is possible to park in surrounding streets on Sundays. A pair of binoculars is useful to study the roof bosses.

Watts Chapel, Compton, Surrey

The labyrinths to be found adorning the Watts Chapel are without doubt some of the most beautiful from the 19th century labyrinth revival. Built by Mary Watts, the wife of George Frederick Watts, the well-known artist and sculptor, between 1895 and 1898, with the help of local artisans, the chapel is situated on the edge of the small village of Compton, near Guildford in Surrey, where the Watts' lived and worked. For many years considered little more than an indulgent folly, it is now rightly recognized as one of the finest buildings of the Arts and Crafts movement. The exterior is sumptuously decorated with flamboyant terracotta panels, a mix of Celtic and Art Nouveau design elements. The interior is a riot of foliage, angels and cherubs, created in painted and gilded gesso. In the midst of all this are five separate labyrinths: four as shields held by a series of hand-carved terracotta angels, inscribed The Way, The Truth and The Life surrounding the outer walls and another of richly gilded gesso on the triptych altarpiece. The designs of these labyrinths are based on the labyrinth in the San Vitale basilica in Ravenna – those on the exterior are identical, the labyrinth on the altar has four additional circuit added.



Visiting details: the Watts Chapel is open daily 9.00 am to 5.00 pm weekdays, 10.00 am to 5.00 pm weekends. Limited parking is available beside the road in front of the chapel. Visitors to the chapel should also take the time to visit the nearby Watts Gallery (open Tuesday to Sunday 11.00 am to 5.00 pm, closed Mondays, except bank holidays – admission fees are charged) where many pieces of the Watts' work are on display. The Visitor Centre is open daily (10.30am to 5.15pm) where guide books to the chapel may be purchased. The adjacent Tea Shop is likewise open daily and serves excellent lunches and the best cakes for miles around!

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A Selection of Modern Church Labyrinths in England – Photos: Jeff Saward



Boxgrove Priory, Sussex, 2009

St. Mary's, Barnard Castle, Co. Durham, 2010



Wakefield Cathedral, West Yorkshire, 2013

St. John's Church, Glastonbury, Somerset, 2007

