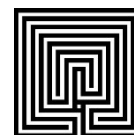


The Chaldon Labyrinths

Jeff Saward



Introduction

Beneath the village of Chaldon in the county of Surrey in the south of England, perched on the steep southern edge of the North Downs overlooking the M23/M25 junction, one of the busiest stretches of road in Britain, are an extensive series of late medieval underground stone quarries. Tens of thousands of vehicles thunder past every day, their drivers blissfully unaware that they are passing one of the most remarkable examples of industrial archaeology, and the most curious collection of labyrinths, all contained in the labyrinthine tunnels that form the Chaldon Quarries.



A view inside the Chaldon Bottom Mine with labyrinth and swastika graffiti

Some 10 miles (16 km) or more of tunnels and galleries have been excavated beneath Chaldon, from a number of separate entrances, or adits, mostly created from pits sunk into the ground above a seam of the good quality building stone that has been quarried here for the construction of churches and other buildings, both locally and further afield. Although the stone quarries have long since ceased production, until their re-discovery by local historians and caving enthusiasts in 1968, they had been almost totally sealed off since the early 18th century, preserving much of the mine system as it was left when quarrying ceased at the end of the 17th century. Along with the pit-props, the miner's latrines and the skeletons of bats and draught animals that died underground, the walls of the galleries also preserve numerous chalked tally marks, recording the blocks of stone removed from each gallery, as well as numerous items of chalked graffiti, some created by the miners, but much of it left by later visitors to this complex network of galleries deep underground.

The unusual shape of the Saxon parish boundary for Chaldon, as recorded in the Domesday Book and similar records from this period, certainly suggest that some form of stone quarrying was in operation

at Chaldon a thousand years ago, although just how extensive this would have been, and what form it may have taken, are unknown. It is possible that the stone used for the construction of the pre-conquest church at Westminster, London, came from the quarries here at Chaldon, for although the journey over such a distance, nearly 20 miles, may seem a long one, and across hilly terrain at that, the route taken would have been suitable for heavy loads of stone drawn on ox-carts, if only during the drier months. Certainly it is known that the quarries at "Chaldfon" were producing stone for the nave of Westminster Abbey in 1387 (Rackham 1909), and it is probably fair to assume that they were in use for this purpose until the completion of the Abbey in 1528. The high silica content of the stone from Chaldon makes it especially resistant to cracking when exposed to heat and fire. Hence it was known as Chaldon Firestone and was ideally suited for building works in the largely wooden, and therefore fire-prone, medieval city of London.

The mines were also in use after this, for in 1580 a certain Judge Southcott let a farm at Chaldon, but reserved the use of the stone quarry. The final records of usage come from the late 17th century, when John Aubrey, who toured Surrey extensively between 1673 and 1697, recorded in his *Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey* that there were two underground stone quarries at Chaldon... "from whose meanders the Country People pretend they draw Stone with their Oxen and Hurdles for above half a mile." From this statement it would appear that Aubrey may not have actually seen the mines in operation, and certainly this seems to confirm the current view that the quarrying of stone at Chaldon ceased near the end of the 17th century, although it continued to be extracted from other nearby quarries until the 19th century. In the early 18th century however, the Chaldon mine was apparently in use for other purposes, as is evident by the graffiti left by a number of visitors to the galleries, which forms the main point of interest for us here.

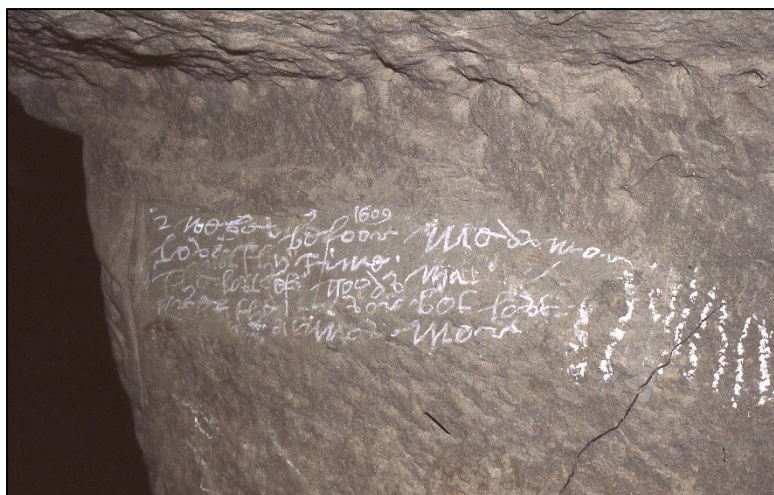
The Graffiti

As mentioned above, the walls of the underground galleries are extensively marked with chalked graffiti. Much of this is in the form of simple tally marks, obviously created by the miners to record the quantity of stone extracted from the numerous branching galleries that lead off from the main drives. The seam of Firestone that they were mining is a fairly constant five feet (1.5 metres) or so thick throughout the mine system and the air in the galleries is quite damp, but there is essentially no running water, so the moist conditions have preserved the chalked marks on the walls in a most fortuitous way. In places the sticky layer of grey clay that forms the floor likewise still preserves the hoof prints of oxen and ponies, and the runner marks of the sledges, on which the stone was dragged to the surface. The earliest dated graffiti, and one of the few items other than the tally-marks, which is obviously contemporary with the working period of the quarry is dated 1609, and says:

2 wekes befoor Medsmor
Lose not thy time
The loss of goods mai
Wrek the sor bot lost
- - times mor

which in modern English would read:

2 weeks before Midsummer,
Lose not thy time.
The loss of goods may
Wreck thee sore, but lost
- - times more.



The beginning of the last line is badly smudged, and unreadable, but such rhymes are common at this time and the missing words may well have read "time many" to judge by similar such couplets. Apart from this one example, the majority of the more complex graffiti would appear to date to the early 18th century, and the nature of these marks and the associated finds would suggest that the creators were here in the mine shafts for purposes other than quarrying.



Situated in the north-easternmost corner of the galley system, in a section known as the Chaldon Bottom Mine, is a long main drive that has cut through earlier workings that have been effectively sealed off. At the end of this drive is an area that appears to have been deliberately 'tidied-up,' with the walls carefully lined with dry-stone walling, created from the stone chips and waste that would otherwise litter the floor. Cracks and cavities in the rock have likewise been filled with this stone, and small stone seats, tables and niches have been built up in corners and let into the walls. Nearby, at a point that might be considered to be an 'entrance' to this area is a trough, crudely carved from a block of stone, and a heap of powdered orange-brown ochre, some smeared on an adjacent wall.

It is in this area that the majority of the graffiti is found, mostly chalked on the walls, but some of it executed in lamp soot on the roof of the galleries. There are a number of names and dates, some easier to read than others, but the following selection provides a dating context for the other, more enigmatic, symbols to be found nearby:

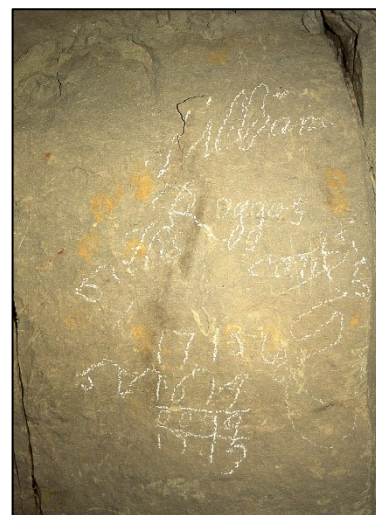
- William Rogers 1713
- James L(or P)eardi July 28 1722
- Robert Davis Sep 23 1723
- IMEM (or DMEM) Sep 28 1723
- John Maynard Sept 1723
- Daniel Lervis
- RS 1725
- Richard Smyth 1727
- TS 1757 (or 1737)
- WD 1769



Alongside a number of these names are additional dates executed in the form of a table or sum, by either addition or subtraction, i.e.:

William Roggers
1713
1694
0019
1713

It is probably fair to assume these represent combinations of the current year, birth dates and ages of some of the visitors whose names appear alongside, from which it would appear that majority of the graffiti was created in the first half of the 18th century, probably by young men in their late teens or early twenties.



In addition to the graffiti, there were finds of a large number of clay tobacco pipes and a broken drinking vessel, dated by an excise mark to the reign of Queen Anne, 1700-12, recovered when this section of the quarry was first explored in the early 1970s. There was also a quantity of decomposed organic material in this area, including items of leather and cloth, as well as remains interpreted as food, timber and faeces. While such finds occur throughout the quarry system - usually interpreted as the canteens and latrines of the miners - the finds from this small area of the mine far exceed those from other comparable areas of the quarry system, despite being situated in an otherwise remote corner.

While it remains possible that this was also a miner's canteen area, from the very final stages of mining activity (Hatton 1971), the wealth and nature of the finds and graffiti in this north-east corner of the quarry has led to a fascinating suggestion that the graffiti and the associated finds are nothing to do with the miners, but instead mark the location of a schoolboy's smoking and drinking den (Sowan 1980), secreted underground from prying eyes. It remains uncertain from where they might have gained entrance to the galleries - a number of collapsed entrance shafts are known - although currently the easiest access is down a dry well in a private garden, this would not have been available in the 18th century.

Maybe this secret 'den' was little more than a casual hide-away, or maybe something more akin to the meeting place of a 'secret society,' comparable, for instance, with the Hell-Fire Caves at West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. Assuming that the main period of clandestine activity at Chaldon was during the 1720s and 30s, it would predate the activities of the Hell-Fire Club by some two decades. However, this part of Surrey has a long tradition of subterranean excavations used for a variety of non-industrial uses, including the Barons' Cave beneath Reigate Castle, underground mock Roman bath houses, hypogeum and laboratories at Albury and Deepdene and an artificial cave at Coombe, built in the mid-17th century, in which the owner would meditate in darkness. Local inspiration for this use of the Chaldon Bottom Mine was therefore plentiful.

The Labyrinths & Other Symbols

Situated in the same small area of the quarry system, often just a few yards (metres) apart in the same gallery, and sometimes alongside the names and dates mentioned above, are a number of complex symbols, likewise chalked on the walls. It would appear that these inscriptions (names, dates and symbols) are all from the same time approximate period, and while it is impossible to link any particular name with specific symbols, the clustering of dates in the 1720s points to a period when the majority of the symbols were probably drawn.

Along with a few simple grids and squiggles, there are three specific designs, all of which occur on a number of occasions and on different rock faces, which are worthy of particular mention.

The first of these, a simple figure-of-eight pattern drawn by connecting the strokes of two back-to-back capital E's with looping lines is especially numerous on one wall. At least ten examples of this design, a number of which are incomplete or blundered, appear alongside initials and numbers in a confused jumble. It is impossible to say whether this collection was created at one point in time, or over a longer period. Similar geometric patterns to this are frequently found as late medieval graffiti, scratched on the walls and pillars of churches throughout southern England. One might imagine that its use here at Chaldon was as a simple test of drawing skill.



The Swastikas

The second symbol, the swastika or fylfot, occurs five times, but most of these are more carefully drawn. Two occur on their own, on otherwise blank sections of wall stone, but three appear directly beneath labyrinths and were obviously conceived as part of an overall design. Each of these pairs were presumably executed at the same time by the same person, judging by the similarity of the chalk stroke in each case.

The particular form of the swastika design found here at Chaldon has a long history, appearing in prehistoric rock art in both England and Italy and also as graffiti and as a decorative device in medieval churches, especially in southern England. In 2009 another example painted on a wall over a doorway in an old farmhouse (and dated to the late 17th century) was uncovered at nearby Caterham-on-the-Hill (Saward 2010).



The two swastika or fylfot designs drawn on their own in Chaldon Bottom Mine





Mediaeval swastika graffiti in Little Waltham Church, Essex, England



A graffiti figure (probably dating from the late 15th century) in All Saint's Church, Sutton, Bedfordshire, England – note the swastika on the man's tunic

Photos: Jeff Saward

This whirling swastika form is drawn by means of a particular process, created by first constructing nine points - or in the case here at Chaldon, nine small circles - in the form of a cross. A single line is then drawn that weaves in and out between these points to produce the distinctive design. All of the swastikas at Chaldon are correctly and accurately drawn, indeed in one or two cases, it is still possible to see where the line begins and ends, and thus where the artist started the process of connection. Clearly the creator(s) of these swastika were fully conversant with the process beforehand. This demonstration of drawing skill may somehow be of relevance to its placement in such an unusual location.

The Labyrinths

This medley of unusual geometric patterns is joined by five clear examples of the classical labyrinth design, all of the seven-path, eight-wall variety, and all clearly constructed from the universal seed pattern. Several of the examples have the initial central cross strongly and deliberately marked, the arcs and dots forming the rest of the seed clearly drawn, and the connecting circuits chalked in a lighter fashion with a more rapid, freehand, action, resulting in occasional breaks in the line where the chalk has skipped on the rough surface of the rock.

The labyrinths range in size between 12 and 25 inches (0.30 to 0.62 metres) in diameter, although four of the labyrinths are remarkably similar in both size and drawing style. These four are all left-handed, i.e. the first turn upon entering is to the left.

One of these is apparently unfinished, and appears to have a connection error in the lower right hand corner, although it may be that the crumbling rock surface was responsible for halting this labyrinth before it could be completed.





Another labyrinth, 12 inches (0.30 m) in diameter, more carefully drawn and well preserved, appears on an adjacent rock panel just a few feet away.

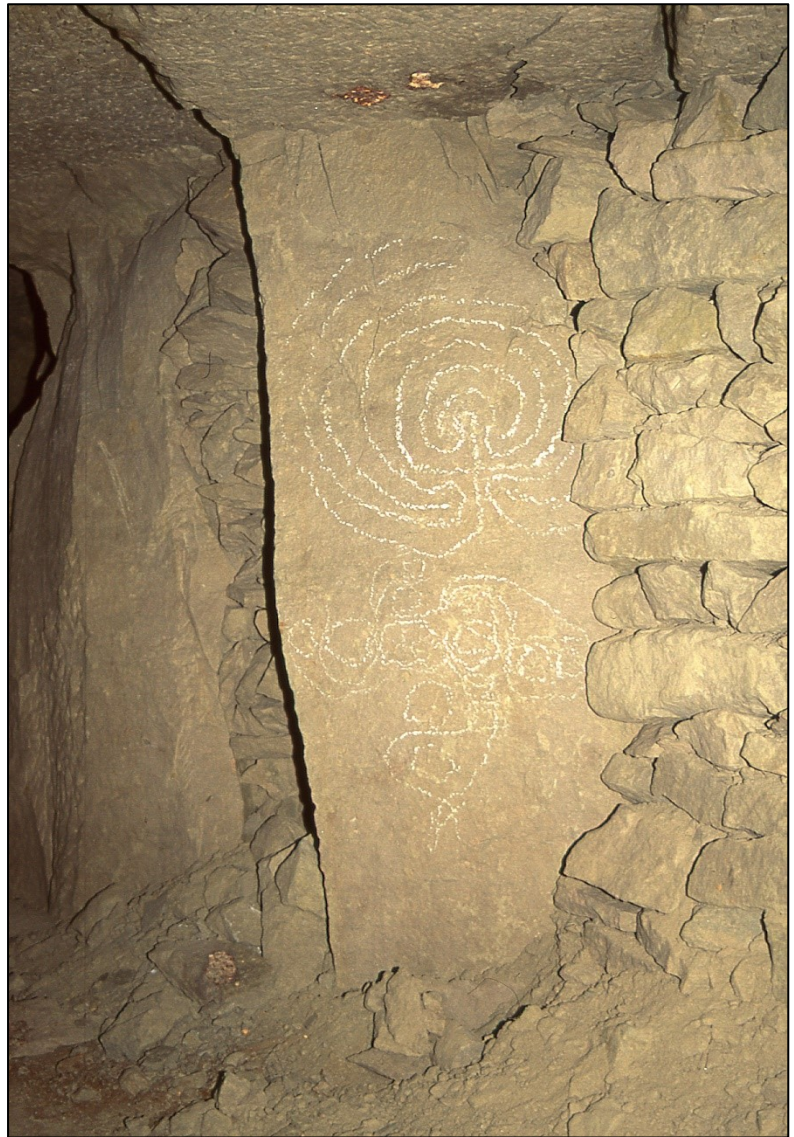


Another is only partially preserved, as the rock face on which it was drawn has subsequently collapsed, although it was clearly originally well-drawn and around 15 inches (0.38 m) in diameter. The preserved portion now rests at the base of the wall. This labyrinth is accompanied by a swastika drawn beneath it, likewise damaged by the rock collapse.

A similar pairing of labyrinth and swastika is found adorning the back face of a recess in the rock, with a seat or bench at its base that suggests a niche or altar. It is difficult to imagine that their placement in this location was anything other than deliberate. Both symbols are similar in their careful chalking style and size, ca. 13 inches (0.32 m) wide, and give the impression they were constructed at the same time, possibly by the same person.

The third pairing of labyrinth and swastika is somewhat different. Much larger, the labyrinth is 25 inches (0.62 m) wide, and only two-thirds completed, as the labyrinth obviously became too big during construction to fit the available space. However, the artist clearly understood the construction process and completed the labyrinth despite the missing portion. It is the only one of the five labyrinths that is right-handed.

The swastika beneath this labyrinth is similarly cramped and rather misshapen, suggesting that the labyrinth was drawn first. These two designs are drawn on a prominent slab that juts out into the gallery, a short distance from the pairing in the niche. Their appearance, as if defining an entrance, or marking a boundary, is quite striking.



Another, possible sixth example of the labyrinth is badly smudged, and if it is indeed a labyrinth, it is not only incomplete, but also contains a number of errors. It gives the impression that it may have been an attempt to replicate the labyrinth design by a later visitor, unfamiliar with the construction technique, as it is little more than a series of badly connected concentric circles.

The fact that it appears adjacent to the labyrinth/swastika pair in the 'niche' reinforces this impression. After this possible botched labyrinth had been smudged, maybe to erase the errors, the initials "RB" have been chalked over the design.

The Purpose and Meaning of the Chaldon Labyrinths?

The existence of these labyrinths, and the other complex geometric symbols, chalked on the walls here in the Chaldon quarries provides a unique insight into the use of the labyrinth symbol in 18th century England.

While it has been suggested that the labyrinths and swastikas are evidence of the initiatory rights of a magical cult amongst the former miners (Pennick 1990), if, as seems likely, these labyrinths and other symbols were created by a group of young men that used the quarry as a secret meeting place (sometime around the 1720s to judge by the majority of dated inscriptions), it might seem suggestive that these symbols had some 'occult' meaning at this time, if only in the imagination of the young men that were meeting in the quarry.

While this interpretation has obvious appeal, the placement of these symbols on the walls of the quarry, in the area that was presumably the meeting place, as well as in the corridors leading to it, might imply that it was nothing more than a 'signpost' to the secret hideaway, or a symbol chosen to designate the location, undoubtedly because of its labyrinthine nature. Alternatively, it might be suggested that the ability to correctly draw these geometric figures was somehow part of the 'membership' of the group, an initiatory test for new visitors to the hideaway. However, there is nothing to suggest that this was anything more than a piece of fun, with no 'occult' dimension, however seriously one might imagine the young men involved would have performed this process. The use of the labyrinth, and the other symbols preserved here at Chaldon, as a simple demonstration of drawing skill has many parallels in graffiti recorded from the walls of churches and other locations, from the medieval period onwards (and indeed in earlier times), both here in England and elsewhere in Europe.

Knowledge of the labyrinth symbol in the British Isles during the 18th century is surprisingly widespread, appearing in sources as diverse as early antiquarian studies and young girls embroidered samplers (Saward & Saward 2014). Clearly there were a number of turf labyrinths in England at this time, and a former "Troy Town" labyrinth at Hillbury, near Farnham, was situated some 30 miles to the west of Chaldon, with another reputed location at Westerham in Kent, just 10 miles in the opposite direction. There is evidence that turf labyrinths were especially popular in the second half of the 17th century - the example at Hilton, Cambridgeshire was cut in 1660, another at Saffron Walden, Essex, in 1699. Both of these are of the more complex medieval-type designs, as indeed are the majority of the English turf labyrinths, but a number of labyrinths of the classical-style are also known from this period. In the extreme southwest of England, the "Troy Town" formed from rocks on the island of St. Agnes in the Scillies is commonly dated to 1729 (the same decade as the presumed dating for the Chaldon labyrinths) and the two labyrinths carved on the rockface behind a ruined mill building in Rocky Valley, Cornwall, would also seem to date from the late 18th or early 19th century (Saward 2001). A recently recorded copper love token dated to 1791 (Saward 2006) and a cobblestone floor inlaid with a labyrinth pattern from Castletownroche, County Cork in Ireland, also from the 1790s, are all of the classical-type. This is, of course, the one form of the labyrinth that can most easily be committed to memory, without the need for a plan to replicate it accurately.



*Love token, dated 1791, engraved with a labyrinth
Labyrinthos Collection*

However, far more important than any speculative discussion of how and why the labyrinth, and the other symbols, found their way into a disused underground quarry, is that fact that they preserve the method of construction of those symbols. Most labyrinth inscriptions and carvings, embellished after the basic layout of the design has been completed, automatically erase the details of the construction technique. The Chaldon graffiti, on the other hand, is just that: designs hastily drawn on a wall with chalk, with no intention of permanence. The fortuitous preservation of this graffiti by the damp underground conditions preserves every stroke of the hand and slip of the chalk. It is clear that the labyrinths have been constructed from the universal seed-pattern and the swastikas have been drawn by the nine-dot method, in most cases quite perfectly, but the occasional errors in connection of the points and lines demonstrate that these ancient techniques for drawing these symbols were clearly alive and well in 18th century England.

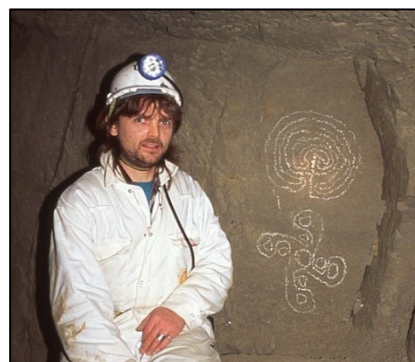
Indeed, in the case of the labyrinth, it is evident that alongside the books of the period that transmitted the more complex designs commonly used for the construction of turf labyrinths and garden mazes, the knowledge of how to draw a simple labyrinth from memory was also being passed down as a folk custom, and presumably across a broad spectrum of society for it to appear in such a diverse range of locations and mediums at that time.

Jeff Saward, Thundersley, England; 2006, revised 2016

PLEASE NOTE:

The Chaldon Quarries are not open to the public and are extremely dangerous to explore without expert guidance and appropriate safety equipment. Under no circumstances should you even consider attempting to visit or view these labyrinths.

All of the photographs of the Chaldon graffiti in this article were taken by myself in 1982 and 1994, on the two occasions I visited the Chaldon system at the kind invite of members of Unit Two and the Wealden Cave and Mine Society. My thanks go to them for providing the opportunity to visit and document these unique examples of the labyrinth symbol, in what has to be one of the most difficult to reach locations I have visited so far.



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The Wealden Cave & Mine Society website (www.wcms.org.uk) has illustrated online versions of several of the above articles from *Pelobates* and much more on the Chaldon Quarries in general.

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