

Three Cowley Troytowns

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About three miles to the east of Oxford, England, lies Shotover Hill, formerly part of a large forest whose western edges stretched down towards the Cowley area where it met an area of common land known as Bullingdon Green. It was on the fringes of this common that until the middle of the 19th century could be seen two turf mazes cut in its turf. The origins of these are unknown now, but the last twenty years of their existence was recorded by a local historian who lived at Cowley in the mid-nineteenth century. His name was Herbert Hurst, born in 1833 in what was then the small village of Temple Cowley. He mentions the existence of two mazes in his book *Rambles and Rides around Oxfordshire* published in 1885, but most of the known facts about them come from a 1909 lantern slide lecture he gave to the Dorset Antiquarian Society.

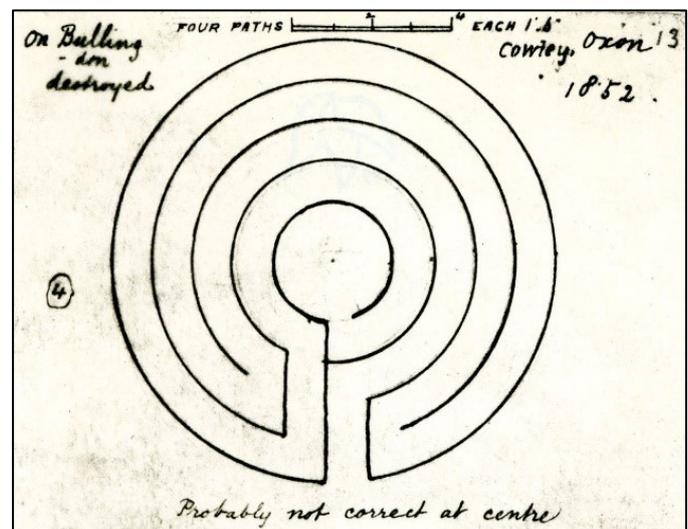
According to this, the older of the two mazes had been cut into the corner of Bullingdon Green nearest Temple Cowley on land which had once been occupied by the Knights Templar, who had a preceptory here from the year 1139. Though now known simply as "Temple Road," the site of the Templar's buildings was once known as "Cobblers' Knoll." This might have a bearing on the origins or purpose of the maze, as it is well known that in both this country and Europe there have been mazes which have had some connection with guilds of shoemakers, who looked after their upkeep and who performed ceremonies at them on certain times of the year. The *Windelbahn* of Stolp in Poland and the *Shepherds' Race* maze at Shrewsbury being two of the more well-known examples.

According to Hurst's drawing of the Cowley maze, it was quite small, having a diameter of 16.5 feet (5.03 m.), and had just four paths of 18 inches (45 cm.) width. It must be remembered though that he was recording this information fifty years after the mazes had been destroyed, so his memory and those of the elderly people who remembered them may not have been totally accurate. As a child in the 1830s, Hurst paid many visits to the Temple Cowley maze and its twin nearby in the company of his nursemaid, who he remembers recited a little rhyme as she carried young Herbert through them. It runs:

So my son you wish to marry,
'Twere better far for you to tarry,
Each one's load is enough to carry,
And it is doubled when you marry.

The local name of these mazes was *Tarrytown*, which may simply to be a corruption of *Troytown*.

Herbert Hurst's sketch of the Temple Cowley turf maze



1852 saw the destruction of the Temple Cowley *Tarrytown*, when the land it was on was enclosed and ploughed up. However, an exact copy of it had been made on another part of the common further east, toward Shotover at the top of "Hollow Way," near a lane leading to "Elder Stubbs." Tradition attributed the making of this copy to the local shepherds, who were careful to copy the dimensions of the original exactly. It was considered to be of great age, but again, we don't know when exactly it had been cut. However, it had been known for some time before its destruction that the Temple Cowley maze had been threatened by the advance of a rubble-filled pit, "Isaac's Pit," which was continually extended nearer and nearer to it. Could the shepherds have feared the loss of this venerable resident of the green and decided to make a faithful replica of it nearby, but well out of harm's way? This second maze lasted until the building of Cowley barracks, not long after the disappearance of the first one.

As well as these *Tarrytowns*, there could also be found a number of *Nine Men's Morris* games cut into the Green. The shepherds were also credited with the making of these and they were called *Shepherd's Chess*. That the cutting of these shapes on commons and greens was quite usual in the region is made clear by this description by the Rev. Thisleton:

In that part of Warwickshire where Shakespeare was educated, and the neighbouring parts of Northamptonshire, the shepherds and other boys dig up the turf with their knives to represent a sort of imperfect chess board. It consists of a square only a foot in diameter sometimes three or four yards...

The Cowley nine-men's-morris were usually never more than two feet square and as well as bearing the name *Shepherd's Chess*, were also known as *Mervals* and *Sticks and Stones*.

The third of this trio of turf labyrinths is another which had been made by a member of Hurst's family two years after the original was destroyed. It was made near "Rock Cottage," lower down in the village near that part of Temple Road which today joins Salegate Lane. This one did not enjoy too long a life, being thwarted by a group of elm trees whose falling leaves soon clogged up the paths. This, like the second one near the top of Hollow Way was an exact copy of the first, which had lain where today Crescent Road meets Junction Road, between Crescent Close and the corner of the Morris Motors sports ground.

One other resident of Bullingdon Green might be worth mentioning here as one of Hurst's informants, a Mr. Alden, is recorded as remembering what he thinks was another maze on the south slopes of Shotover Hill. No evidence exists for this supposition and nobody Hurst knew, who remembered the other mazes, or even Hurst himself, had any knowledge of this fourth one. May I suggest that what Mr. Alden is really referring to is the turf cut figure of a giant, which used to lay on the south western slopes of Shotover and which seems to have resembled the Cerne Abbas hill figure. Local tradition, recorded in the 1890s, had this giant throwing stones or arrows over to a rival giant living on the other side of Shotover Hill. He was called "Harry Bear" by the locals of Headington Quarry and lived at a spot on the edge of the green called "Harry Bear's Bottom." This would be on the south western slope of Shotover where the ground levelled out to meet Bullingdon Green near The Slade, which joined the Hollow Way at its lower end, not more than a quarter of a mile from the second maze. Writing in 1822, Thomas Gillett, refers to this giant in a poem, calling him "Bullingdon."

Whether or not Mr. Alden was referring to this figure, we can at least assume that Bullingdon Green had at one time a gigantic turf cut man, similar to such other figures as the Long Man of Wilmington and the Cerne Abbas Giant, as well as three troytowns and a couple of dozen nine-men's morrises which makes it a very interesting and important place, I feel, even though none of them remain and the area is now much more famous for "Morrises" of a very different kind.

Damon Williams, Oxford, October 1987.

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