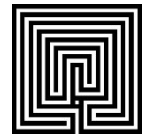


The Earthworks on St. Martha's Hill

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High on the list of turf labyrinth sites that receive more obeisance than scrutiny is St. Martha's Hill, an abrupt conical hill some three kilometres south of Guildford, Surrey.¹ Local histories and guidebooks will direct you to the building perched on its summit, St. Martha's Chapel, once a parish church despite its name.² What concerns us here lies downslope from the church and attracts less attention - several earth circles, overgrown and partially obliterated, reputed to be the vestiges of a turf labyrinth. A simple question: is this reputation deserved?

The first to propose a labyrinth on St. Martha's Hill seems to have been the antiquary Walter Johnson, no stranger to Surrey, in the early years of this century. "On St. Martha's Hill, near Guildford," he remarks in *Folk-Memory* (1908), "are some curious earth-rings, which may represent the remains of a maze. In olden times, the youths and maidens met there on Good Friday, and indulged in music and boisterous dancing."³ In *Byways in British Archaeology* (1912), Johnson returns to the issue: "there are some curious earth-rings situated to the south of the church, half-hidden by heather, and I have elsewhere suggested that these represent part of a maze, within which the [Good Friday] sports were once held."⁴ Not every speculation takes root. Johnson's did, largely because enrolled by W.H. Matthews in his hugely influential *Mazes and Labyrinths* (1922). Matthews proceeds cautiously: "It may be that the earth-rings of which traces are yet visible on St. Martha's Hill, on the other side of Guildford, constitute the remains of a [labyrinth]. It is said that the youths and maidens used to congregate here on Good Friday and indulge in boisterous celebrations, the origin of which is not known."⁵ And there the matter has all but rested. True, one or two writers have since converted the possible into the certain, even the extant ("There is a maze by St. Martha's near Guildford"), but on no authority save whim.⁶

Thus the 'career', if you will, of St. Martha's labyrinth. From some earthwork remnants, remnants to which attaches a tradition of festivities, Johnson infers the site of a turf labyrinth. As conjectures go, this is scarcely compelling stuff. Still, even the most perfunctory speculation may hit the mark, and we must now decide whether that has happened here.

Five earth circles are documented in the archaeological literature touching on St. Martha's Hill.⁷ Regrettably, Johnson's laconic description – "some curious earth-rings" – glosses over a fundamental and damning point: these circles are physically discrete, that is to say, five separate earthworks strung unevenly across the south-facing slope of the hill! Each consists of a single ring-shaped bank, as much as 30 to 32 meters in diameter, flanked by an external ditch; excavations at one site during 1953 measured the bank at perhaps 0.25 meters in height by 2 meters across, although long weathering has doubtless worked to reduce the first figure and exaggerate the latter.⁸ *Quid multa?* Even this briefest of accounts dooms Johnson's proposal. The dimensions cited collide with all that we know of turf labyrinths,⁹ and of course the very idea the "some" scattered rings "may represent the remains of a maze" (emphasis mine) amounts to an exercise in illogic. One is left wondering whatever possessed Johnson to conjure a labyrinth from such unpromising material... In fairness, however, it must be admitted that the circles on St. Martha's have yet to be fully explained. Archaeologists recognize them as a characteristic form of ancient earthwork, with congeners elsewhere in Surrey and beyond, but disagree on their precise antiquity and function.¹⁰

Although the topographic evidence speaks for itself, we would do well to check the Good Friday revels for signs of support, or indeed, for material that might prompt a contrary conclusion. Unfortunately, only a few details survive of an event that was moribund by the close of the nineteenth century: a lively procession of townsfolk made its way from Guildford to St. Martha's; as musicians played, many joined in the singing and dancing; sundry minor games were enjoyed, and stalls offered refreshments.¹¹ Not a word about labyrinths or any labyrinthine game, but silence forfeits much of its significance when information is so skeletal. Then let us try another tack. Johnson specifies the circles on St. Martha's as the site of these rustic diversions, Matthews and others echo him. Yet a brief eyewitness account carried by *The Times*, April 18, 1870, flatly contradicts this position:

A custom the origin of which is lost in the obscurity of time prevails in the neighbourhood of Guildford of making a pilgrimage to St. Martha's (or Martyr's) Hill on Good Friday. Thither, from all the country side, youths and maidens, old folks and children betake themselves, and gathered together on one of the most beautiful spots in Surrey, in full sight of the old Norman church which crowns the green summit of the hill, beguile the time with music and dancing. [The annual assembly and revel was held as usual on Friday last, when the concourse of persons was greater than has been known for some years past. The green sward at the foot of the hill was crowded with dancers, who, in pursuing their favourite amusement, seemed to attain the height of rustic enjoyment. Others who were too old, or whose inclinations did not prompt them to such active exercise, ascended the hill as far as the curious old church, which stands alone, far away from any human habitation, where they had the opportunity of enjoying a splendid panorama,... From every indication that presented itself] it was apparent that the pilgrimage to St. Martha's, whatever its origin, is one which commends itself to the taste of the present generation, and is not likely to die out with the lapse of years, but to increase in popular estimation as long as the green hill lasts to attract the worshipper of natural beauty, or to furnish the mere votaries of pleasure with the excuse and the opportunity for a pleasant holyday.¹²

The merrymakers of 1870, it turns out, converged on the greensward "at the foot of" St. Martha's, an area known by the name Ben Piece or Bent Piece. Only those not actively involved sought the quieter pleasures of the hill itself. Which makes some sense: the steep hillside – one of the circles clings to a slope of 1 in 3! – would seem far less hospitable to organized public revelry than the flat green below. To the degree that the situation in 1870 was typical, therefore, the earth circles and Good Friday celebrations have nothing to do with each other.¹³



Such evidence as can be culled from the Good Friday events serves only to underscore what the topographic record has already revealed - that the labyrinth identified on St. Martha's Hill is a figment of the imagination. The time has come to remove it from the roster of labyrinth sites.

Ivor Winton, Minneapolis, USA;
September 1990.

St. Martha's Chapel, c.1920.
Photo: Labyrinthos Archive

Notes:

1. This brief paper has as its immediate stimulus Jeff Saward's recent catalogue of turf labyrinths, a useful updating of his earlier work. What impresses at once is how large the corpus of labyrinth sites has become over the last few years. A mixed blessing, this. As Saward freely acknowledges, some proposed sites are quite speculative. I am concerned, therefore, lest efforts to expand the roster of turf labyrinths divert us from the no less important task of appraising what we think we already know. Only a self-critical field of study can hope to be taken seriously beyond its cénacle of enthusiasts. By way of example, this paper turns to a labyrinth that has been 'on the books' for the better part of a century without receiving adequate scrutiny.
2. Briefly on St. Martha's Chapel: Manning, 2:119-21; Brayley, 5:131-33; Williamson, 71- 72; Malden et al., 105-6; Nairn and Pevsner-, 155-56; Jennett, 130-32.
3. Johnson 1908, 336. In an earlier work, jointly authored, Johnson had tentatively joined the Good Friday revels to St. Martha's rings, but without identifying the latter as a labyrinth. See Johnson and Wright, 113-14. Did his subsequent researches for *Folk-Memory* (i.e., Johnson 1908) suggest the possibility of such an identification?
4. Johnson 1912, 195.
5. Matthews, 90.
6. E.g., Bayley, 585; Hawkes, Myres and Stevens, 269; Spence, 54. Better the guarded welcome of Saward 1982, 29 ("reputed site"), or 1987, 30 ("reputed site, but dubious").
7. On the circles: Brayley, 5:133; Lasham, 151; Malden et al., 104,105; Grinsell, 57; Surrey...,82,114; Wood, 21-29, and passim; Morris, 142; Nairn and Pevsner, 156. Wood's 1953 survey found only three of the circles in good condition; the remaining pair were "almost impossible to see" and "practically obliterated" respectively.
8. These and subsequent data on the circles are taken from Grinsell and Wood as cited in note 7.
9. A diameter of 30-32 meters would be exceptionally large for a turf labyrinth. Likewise, the original dimensions of the bank and ditch are brobdingnagian! Wood's excavations in 1953 revealed that the ditch began life some 0.45 meters deeper than at present, while the bank may have been twice its current height. The relative relief would thus have exceeded one meter. See Wood, 25, fig. 3.
10. See Lasham, 151 (for curiosity value); Grinsell, 28; Surrey., 82; Wood, 29-34 passim (by far the best discussion); Morris, 142; Nairn and Pevsner, 156. A Bronze Age or Iron Age dating is customary.
11. On the festivities: "Good Friday Pilgrimage," 7; Thiselton-Dyer, 156-57; Ditchfield, 74-75; Walsh, 484-85; Bume, 75; Dexter, 376; Wood, 14-16; etc. Beware all interpretations offered!
12. I reproduce this notice in full, save for a brief literary allusion of no present interest. An abridged version appeared many years ago in Thiselton-Dyer, 156-57, without due indication that all details specific to 1870 had been pruned. (I have set within brackets those lines omitted by Thiselton-Dyer.) This eviscerated version – unfortunately, more consulted than the original – allows quite a different impression of where the dancing was held. This surely led Johnson astray! For a more recent misconception, see note 13.
13. Wood, 15, sees matters differently. He claims to have evidence of festivities on the hillside near St. Martha's Chapel as well as on the greensward below. Indeed, the recorded disruption of a church meeting by Good Friday revellers in 1871 suggests to him that only after merrymaking had been banned from the vicinity of the church was Ben Piece put to such use. An interesting speculation, but it cannot stand as argued: we already know from the Times that the celebration of 1870 was held on the Ben Piece. (Wood overlooks this by depending on Thiselton-Dyer's abridged version of *The Times* notice. See note 12.) Unfortunately, I am not in a position to judge Wood's first claim above. One hopes he has firmer evidence for festivities beside the church than the 1871 incident, which may merely mean that unruly carousers made their way up the hill just as non-participants had done the year before. Yet even were games indeed once held beside the church that does not prove any connection to the earth circles - a point Wood himself (p. 16-17) is forced to concede.

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