The Itchen Stoke Labyrinth

Jeff Saward

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The delightful little church of St. Mary's in the Hampshire village of Itchen Stoke, between Winchester and Alresford in southern England, is now redundant and maintained by the Churches Conservation Trust. A grade II listed building, it contains one of the more interesting labyrinths constructed during the latter half of the 19th century, at the height of the Gothic Revival period.

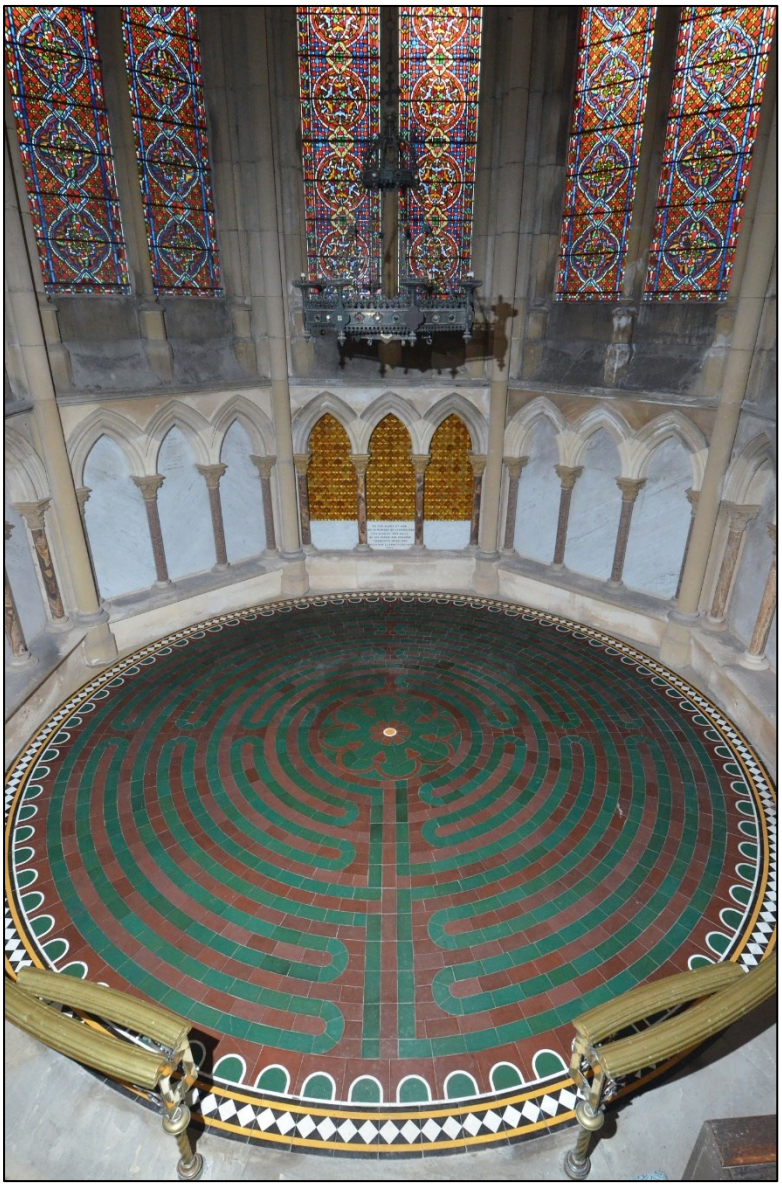
The current church stands on the site of an earlier building that was built in 1830-31 to replace a dilapidated medieval church nearby. When Charles Ranken Conybeare became the vicar of the parish in 1857 he complained that the church was cold and damp, and obtained consent for the demolition of the building and the construction of another new church. Built in 1866-67, the church was designed by his brother, the architect Henry Conybeare, designer of the church of St. John the Baptist and various other municipal works in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, before he returned to work in London in the late 1850s.

St. Mary's, Itchen Stoke. Photo: Jeff Saward

Conybeare's design for St. Mary's at Itchen Stoke was clearly inspired by the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, itself restored back to its former medieval glory in 1855, following the serious damage it sustained during the French Revolution. It has also been suggested that the chapel at Exeter College, Oxford, built 1856-59 to a design by George Gilbert Scott (who would subsequently install the paved labyrinth in Ely Cathedral) was also influential, and C.R. Conybeare was the vicar at nearby Pyrton until he came to Itchen Stoke. An article describing the new church at Itchen Stoke, published in *The Building News* in January 1868 shortly after the church was completed and consecrated, mentions various European cathedrals as the inspiration for particular details within its walls. The interior is notable for its long, tall nave and rose window above the west entrance, and of particular interest to us here, for its chancel with elegant windows and circular floor at the east end. Covered with glazed tiles, the floor is laid in the form of a labyrinth, although it is usually difficult to appreciate the full design, due to the wooden altar that usually stands at its centre. The text in *The Building News* describes the pavement as "a modified reproduction, in glazed green and chocolate tiles, of one of the concentric labyrinths (called Heavenly Jerusalems) that so frequently occur in the pavement of early French cathedrals."

Recent restoration work at the church (2013) necessitated the temporary removal of the altar, thus allowing a rare opportunity to photograph the labyrinth in its entirety and to study the details usually hidden from view. A little over 16½ feet, 5.1 metres, in diameter, in total around 1610 tiles (made by Maw & Co.) were utilised in the construction of the labyrinth, and while a few now have cracks and other superficial damage, the tiling has survived 150 years in surprisingly good condition, undoubtedly because it receives very little foot traffic. Close examination reveals that while some of the tiles employed in its construction were surely designed specifically for this project, especially those used in the central roundel and the outer halo, the intricate design has been executed with a surprisingly limited number of basic pieces – most of the tiles are simple 6 x 3 inch units, in either brown or green – but the careful layout and attention to detail prove this to be the work of a skilled tiler.

The tiled labyrinth. Photo: Jeff Saward



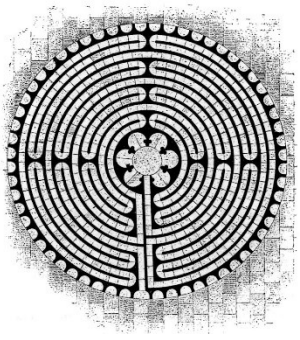
The design of the Itchen Stoke labyrinth, while by no means a slavish copy, is based directly on the famous labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral, complete with a rosette at its centre and an outer perimeter that imitates the escalloped border of 'cusps' or 'cogs' around the original labyrinth at Chartres. There are 79 of these cogs surrounding the labyrinth at Itchen Stoke – an unusual number that was probably the result of the requirement for creating a tile of convenient size, which could then be laid evenly around the perimeter without the need for cutting. Likewise the unusual treatment of the central rosette, with eight, rather than six-fold division, also allowed the otherwise complex central panel of 25 tiles to be created with just four different tile designs, two of which are merely the mirror image of each other.

The precise source of the designs employed for these 19th century 'replicas' of the medieval cathedral labyrinths, at Itchen Stoke and elsewhere, can sometimes be determined by reference to the various published plans of labyrinths available at the time. For example, several of the 19th century paved copies of the St. Omer labyrinth contain specific errors that can be traced back to an incorrect engraving published in several popular books. In the case of the Chartres labyrinth, all of the plans published during the 19th century are notoriously unreliable concerning correct details of the outer perimeter and the central rosette. Wallet's diagram (first published in 1834) depicts 57 cogs around the outer perimeter, De Caumont (1850) gives 59 and Gailhabaud (1858) ups the count to 60. Winkles (1837) and Amé (1859) both provide 102 on their illustrations and are the only ones to come anywhere near close to the 113 that decorate the original at Chartres.

Various published renditions of the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth design

Wallet (1834)

De Caumont (1850)



Gailhabaud (1858)

Amé (1859)

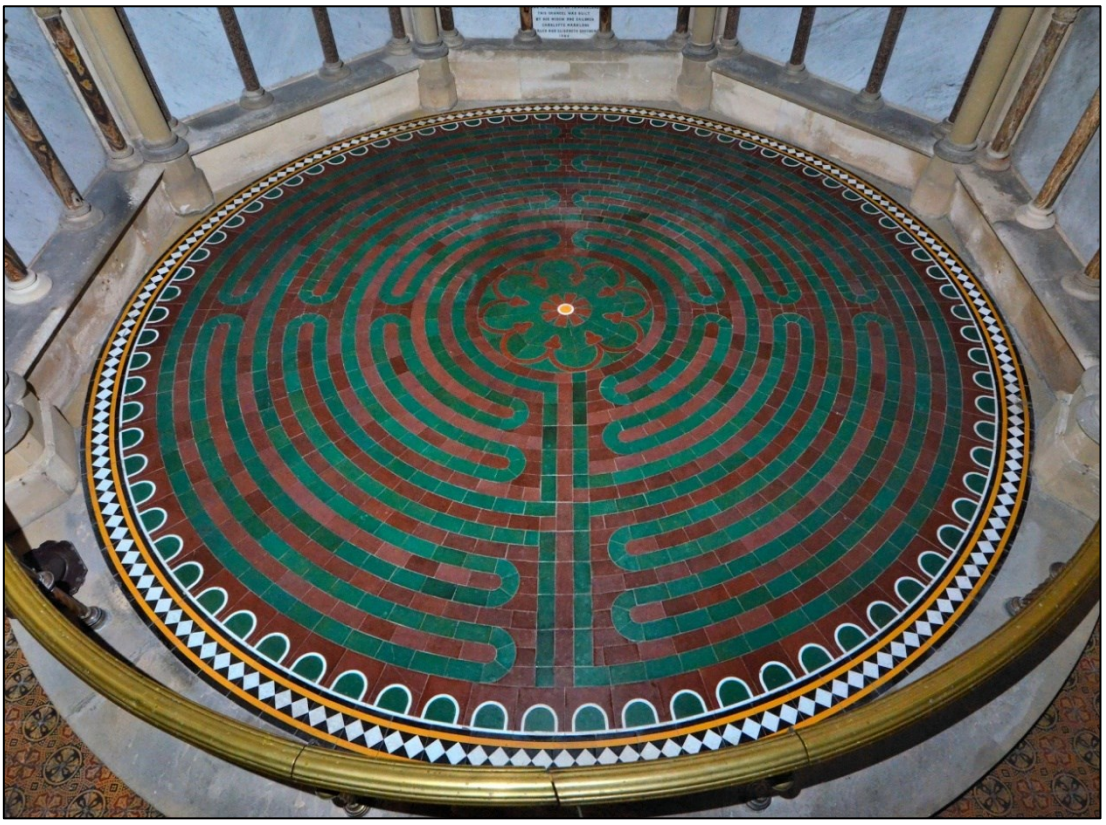
It was Wallet's diagram that was subsequently reproduced in Trollope's influential *Notices of Ancient and Medieval Labyrinths* paper (published in various journals from 1858 onwards) that brought many of these labyrinths to the attention of an English readership. This may well have been the source of the labyrinth of very similar design (also with 57 cogs) inlaid in marquetry on the wooden cabinet created by John Pollard Seddon and shown at the London International Exhibition in 1862.

Inlaid labyrinth (one of two) on a wooden cabinet created by J.P. Seddon, c.1860-61, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Photo: Jeff Saward, courtesy of the V&A

However, no such direct model would seem to exist for the unique 79-cog tiled labyrinth at Itchen Stoke; its precise form was surely the work of its architect, George Conybeare, who created his own "modified reproduction" of the Chartres design. With its striking geometric design and colourful tiles, set in front of the stained glass that fills the chancel with both light and colour, the little labyrinth at St. Mary's is without doubt one of the finest jewels to be found amongst the Gothic Revival labyrinths of late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Jeff Saward, Thundersley, England; March 2016
Updated May 2026



The Itchen Stoke labyrinth. Photo: Jeff Saward 2013

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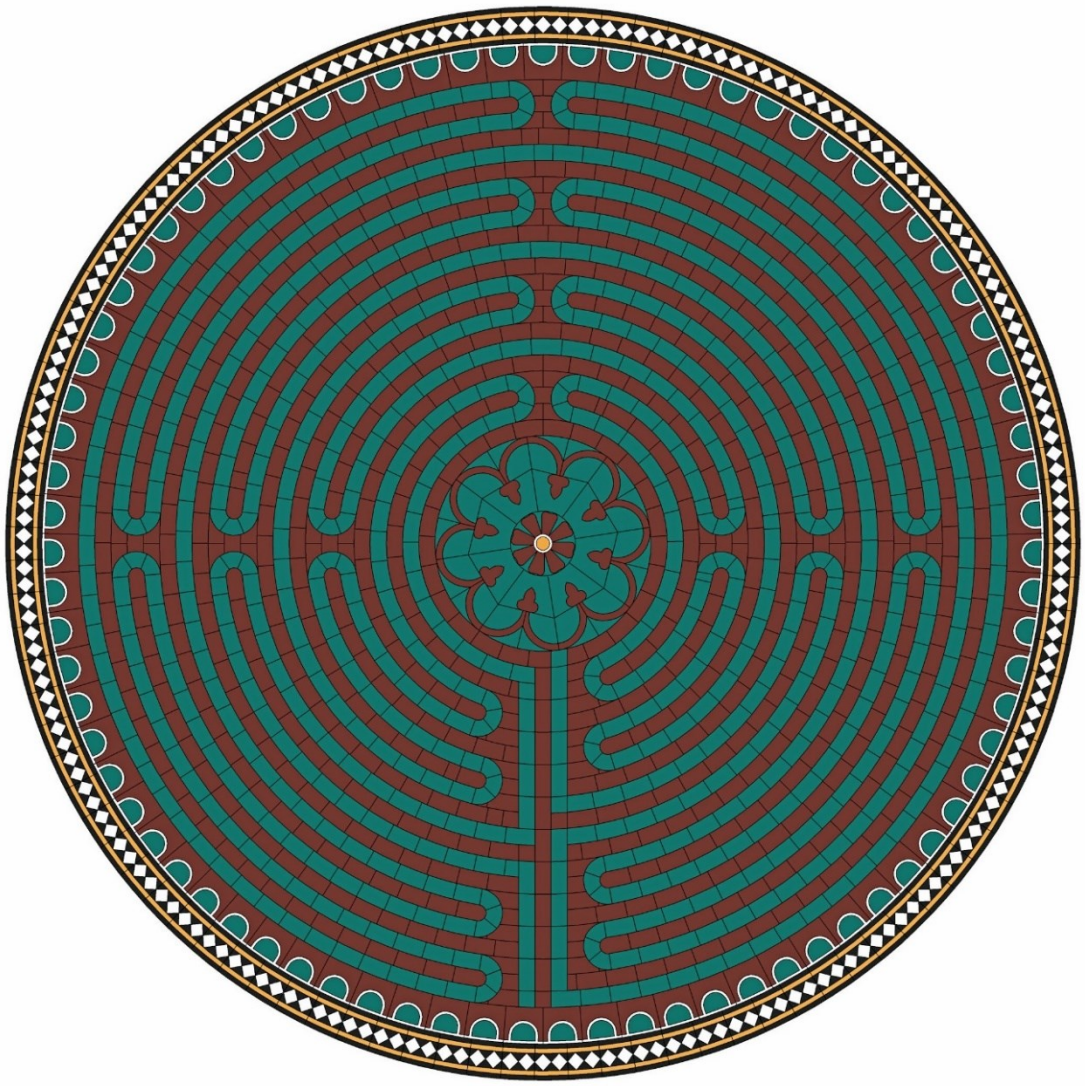
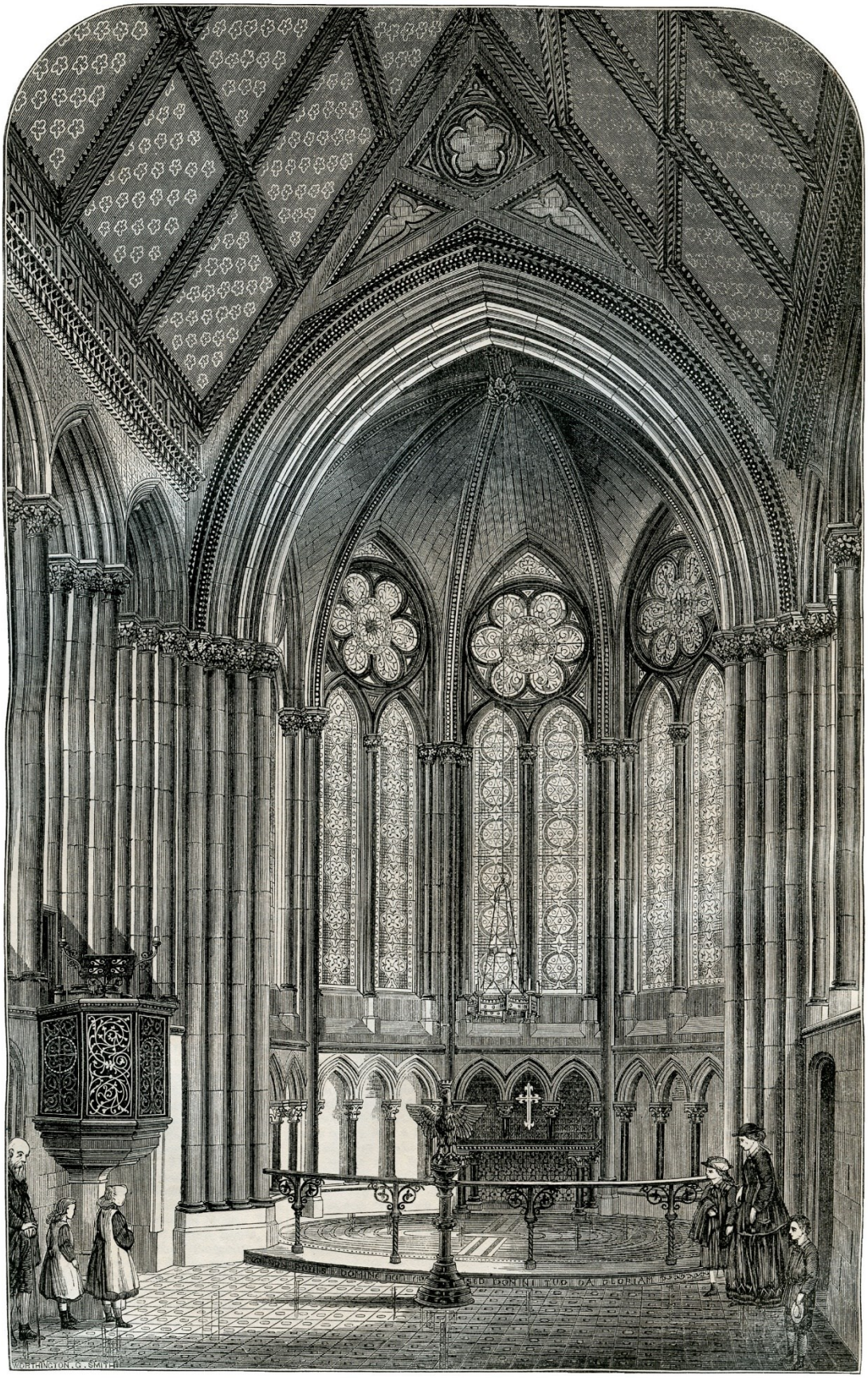


Plan of the Itchen Stoke labyrinth. Artwork: Jeff Saward



The chancel and labyrinth, St. Mary's, Itchen Stoke. Illustration from* The Builder*, 1868. Labyrinthos Archive

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