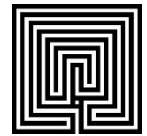


A Scottish Turf Labyrinth

Trevor J. Allcott



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An article entitled "Labyrinths of Northern Britain," published in *Northern Earth* magazine, issue 94, made mention of a turf labyrinth once existing "at Stewartfield, between Dunkeld and Pitlochry." I was unable to locate this on the 1:250,000 Ordnance Survey, and wondered if there could be any connection with Stuartfield in Aberdeenshire, where I had heard rumour of a now lost labyrinth.

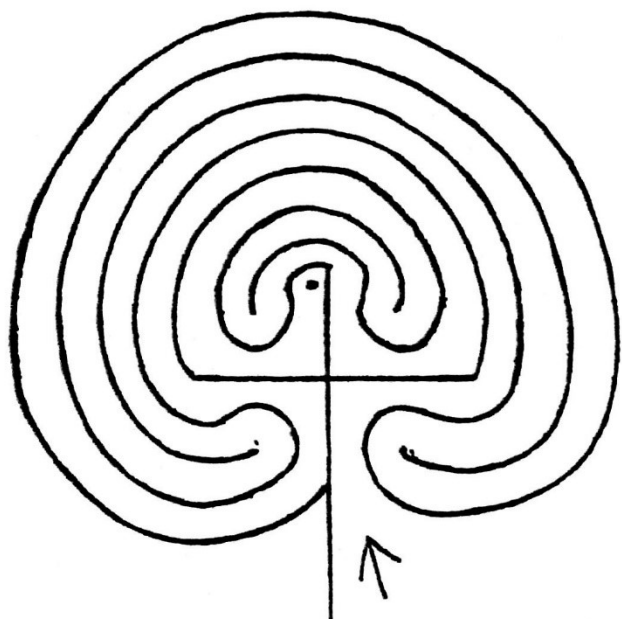
I sent a request for more information to the editor of *Northern Earth*, John Billingsley, who kindly forwarded it to the author of the article, Jeff Seward. Jeff contacted me, and it quickly became apparent that we were discussing two different locations, 'his' being a country house with Beatrix Potter connections some 150 miles southwest of 'mine.' He then asked me to seek further information on the Stuartfield site, as it would be only the second confirmed turf labyrinth site in Scotland, and perhaps the most northerly such location in Europe.

I contacted the Laird of Crichtie, Geordie Burnett-Stuart, the source of my original information, and the owner of the possible site of the labyrinth. He was extremely helpful, and invited me to visit Crichtie House to trawl through his archives, and also to examine a map of the estate drawn in 1775. The map was something of a disappointment. It is extremely well surveyed, delineating field boundaries with great accuracy. However, its purpose was to provide a basis for planning land improvement, a detailed report of the condition of the land, and its potential for improvement. Sadly, no antiquities were shown, although several remain in situ to this day.

Geordie also showed me a book, published quite recently by the local community as part of their Millennium celebrations (*Stuartfield – Our Place*, edited by Cecilia Penny) which stated that the maze had been cut by the tenant of the farm at Dens early in the 19th century and that the architect was unknown, and some mystery surrounded the subject. Further enquiries produced input from a lady who claimed that the design had been drawn by John Cumming, her great-grandfather, tenant of Kings Crown Farm close to Dens. To back up her story, she produced a framed picture depicting the design in ink with a caption "The Walls of Troy cut out of the Hill of Dens at Crichtie." The design was made on a piece of cardboard, with a brief, nearly illegible, account of its making.

The book goes on to say that the "Walls of Troy" lay in what was known as The Sheep Faul Park and the site was in the centre of the south fence of that park at the 'Watterins' (watering place) ... it marked the exact spot whence the supply of water came, from the spring of Troy to the dam and mill at Dens Farm. It is recorded that the Walls were finally destroyed in 1869 by Wullie Scott, grievie and ploughman at Dens Farm, during reclamation work with "sax ousen (oxen) an' a timmer plew (plough)." That evening, when Scott met a local man, he said:

*Weel man, I've demolished the Walls of Troy
and laid the ceety in ruins.*



The design of The Walls of Troy reproduced from Stuartfield – Our Place

I found this report puzzling, as I would have thought that the creation of a labyrinth from scratch to be an unlikely activity for a tenant farmer, although John Cumming does not seem to have been a typical one, particularly as it seems that the spring could be within the maze, and wondered (hoped!) that it might be that he had restored a dilapidated, but existing, feature. I therefore set off to Aberdeen Reference Library to examine their maps of the area to see if there was an earlier record of the site. Sadly, I found nothing on even the largest scale maps. I also wondered what would be the effect of a plough and six oxen on the spring when the site was destroyed. 19th century farmers had more respect for free sources of water for their sheep and cattle than to play those sorts of game with them!

A letter from Geordie to me casts doubt on both this location, and the date of destruction, believing it to be earlier. He thinks that the location was at the top of Dens Hill, and that the site was quite small – about 50 yards circumference (thus about 48 feet diameter). He has some records, apparently, amongst the current estate papers, but couldn't drop his hand on them. I then searched the publications of the Buchan Field Club (founded 1887), and those of their precursor The Spalding Club (founded 1839), again without success. However, a booklet entitled *A Souvenir of Stuartfield and Crichtie*, published in 1915, suggests that the Walls of Troy was to be found on Jock's Hill, but without any further detail.

So, I now have three possible sites, albeit within a mile of each other, but lacking positive documentation, as all the contemporary sources of information seem to be lost. To sum up, what we seem to have here is a 19th century folly which certainly existed, but the site of which remains uncertain. I hope that this is not the end of the story, and I shall continue my investigations.

Trevor J. Allcott, Fraserburgh, Scotland; August 2001
(updated June 2020)

Editor's note:

Quotations and illustration from *Stuartfield – Our Place* by kind permission of Cecilia Penny. The book also states that a note from 1916, written by the editress of *A Souvenir of Stuartfield and Crichtie* (1915) records that the paths of the Walls of Troy were about two feet wide and were edged with sod and stones and that the object was to find your way from the start of the path at "Crichtie" along the maze until you reached "Troy."

The only other documented turf labyrinth site so far discovered in Scotland is at the confusingly similar location of Stewartfield, between Dunkeld and Pitlochry in Perthshire. The only reference to this labyrinth would appear to be in the diaries of the writer Beatrix Potter (1866-1943), who as a child on family holidays between 1870 and 1881 stayed at Dalguise House. Beyond the house in the hills above Dalguise stood Stewartfield House (built 1821) and Potter commented (in later writing) on the wood beyond the house, which contained

strange bankments [with] mysterious zigzag ridges and ditches, miniature earthworks... these curious little banks and ditches remained a puzzle of childhood and a perplexing memory for many years. I now realize that it was in fact a great rarity and curiosity – an old maze.

See: p.35 in *The Tale of Beatrix Potter* by Margaret Lane. Frederick Warne, Harmondsworth, England, 1946, revised edition 1985. The remote location of this site, adjacent to a house built in the 1820s and decorated with stone carvings of mythological figures, would certainly suggest that this turf labyrinth shared a common antiquarian origin.

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As a collector of all things labyrinthine, one occasionally discovers an item that while quite clearly unique, is also very difficult to ascribe with any accuracy. Such was the case with a carved wooden plaque I recently acquired from an antiques dealer. Hand carved from two roughly joined pieces of mahogany off-cuts and coated with varnish, the plaque is 20.5 cm wide and 25.5 cm tall (approximately 8 x 10 inches).

Unsigned, or marked in any other way, it is very difficult to know how old or where this item may have been made, but there are some clues to be gleaned. The relatively crude carving and construction suggests that this is a piece of 'amateur' woodworking, rather than an item produced for sale, and the ornament that fills the upper triangular panel is of a style commonly known as a "Glasgow Rose." This design element is quite common on arts and crafts woodwork from the Glasgow area of Scotland, and further afield, from the 1890s onwards, when the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh inspired many amateurs to try their hand at woodworking, often at special schools and evening classes set up during the late 19th and early 20th centuries to train and educate working men and women in various handicrafts within the Arts & Crafts ethos.

The labyrinth design on the lower panel is of the familiar 'classical' form, but with a 'spot' at its centre and a small arrow indicating the entrance. This bears a close resemblance to the published plan of the turf labyrinth formerly at Stuartfield, near Aberdeen, in Scotland (see "A Scottish Turf Labyrinth," *Caerdroia* 32 (2001), p.39-40), which likewise has a similar central spot and arrow arrangement, although the labyrinth is reversed, with the entrance to the right. Possibly the creator of the plaque had seen this plan or had lived or worked in the Aberdeen area?

Although this item could conceivably date from anywhere between the 1890s to the early 1930s, the combination of style and the specific labyrinth design might suggest a date from somewhere around the middle of this range, and it was surely made in Scotland, perhaps in Glasgow, but maybe in Aberdeenshire?



*Hand-carved wooden plaque with labyrinth and "Glasgow Rose" design.
Labyrinthos Archive*

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