

YORKSHIRE CURIOSITIES

Amazing Mazes



ALL mazes whether lined with hedges or simply cut into turf are curiosities. The turf maze on a verge outside Dalby, 10 miles west of Malton, is a rarity because there are now less than ten turf mazes left in Britain and this is Yorkshire's only example.

Called "The City of Troy", it measures 26 by 22 feet and as such is the smallest maze in Britain. Also known as the Brandsby maze it was in need of re-cutting in the late 19th century after horses had used the verge to avoid ruts in the road. This was made possible by reference to a carving of the maze on a barn door at nearby Skewsby, now lost.

The Dalby maze is of the ancient Classical design and more specifically of the 7-ring Cretan type, as depicted on ancient Cretan coins. This echoes the Greek legend of Theseus and the Minotaur in the labyrinth in King Minos's palace at Knossos. The Trojan connection may reflect the fact that Minos sent a contingent of warriors to the Trojan War.

Alternatively the name may simply be a Classical conceit of the type popular in Elizabethan times. Carvings of similar mazes have been found all over the world as far away as Scandinavia

and Arizona!

A second, later type was the 11-ringed medieval Christian maze as seen on the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France. Such a maze, called "Julian's Bower", is cut in turf at Alkborough near Scunthorpe.

The original purpose of mazes is obscure. That they may have been used in fertility rites is suggested by some being called "Maiden's Bowers". Another theory is that they were a means of casting out the Devil. If the maze was followed from the centre the Devil could be left behind because he could only travel in straight lines. Local tradition at Dalby warns of bad luck if the maze is walked more than nine times. Christian mazes were trod as penitential ways.

Turf mazes were no doubt once a common feature on village greens and were used at May Day ceremonies. Unfortunately they disappear if neglected as was the case at Ripon and Asenby.

This article has been adapted from the recently published book "North and East Yorkshire Curiosities" by Duncan and Trevor Smith (The Dovecote Press).