

It is easy to get bushed when you're threading a maze

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At Hampton Court, the sprawling palace Cardinal Wolsey built near London in 1514, a tourist from the United States recently discovered that strolling through a maze is an un-American activity. Americans like getting to the point, cutting corners, taking the straight-line approach. But the pathways of the maze in the garden at Hampton Court twist diabolically between six-foot hedges of privet and yew (p. 118)¹. Once inside, you can't see a way to escape. After spending an hour in there, the desperate American finally found a gardener's broom and held it over his head so friends on the outside could guide him to the exit. Ian Burgess, the maze's puckish ticket vendor, was unconcerned. "Usually we just send someone through at the end of each season to clear away the skeletons," he said.

Mention mazes and most Americans think of psychologists, mice and rats. But threading king-size mazes for amusement has been a British pastime since the Dark Ages, and today this curious sport is enjoying something of a renaissance at parks and estates all over the Sceptered Isle. Last year, more than a quarter-million visitors navigated the venerable Hampton Court maze. Longleat estate, near Bath, installed one of the world's largest mazes in 1978, and on a holiday more than 3,000 people are apt to wander its 1.5 acres of hedge-bordered paths linked by wooden bridges (p. 110). To show how bullish the population is on this form of recreation, the British Tourist Authority has tentatively designated 1991 the "year of the maze."

Britain has more mazes open to the public--nearly 60, at last count--than any other country except Japan. It is estimated that at least 100 commercial labyrinths have popped up at Japanese amusement complexes in recent years. On a typical weekend, upward of 5,000 enthusiasts a day may spend 500 yen apiece (half the price of a movie in Japan) for the fun of running through one of them. Japan's maze craze reflects a need that goes beyond the desire for mere diversion, according to one facility director. "Most of the time, people in our society are deprived of the chance to make their own decisions," she says. "In a maze, you can make your own decisions--and go for it."

Japanese mazes are made of wood, not hedges, and many of them are designed by Stuart Landsborough, an Englishman who moved to New Zealand 17 years ago and began putting his "puzzles" together shortly thereafter (see page 114). A similarly offbeat operation, Minotaur Designs, is responsible for most of the new-fangled mazes now being built in Britain and Europe (and one soon to be built in South Korea). The twisting paths of some Minotaur creations feature con-temporary symbols drawn from such disparate worlds as science and rock 'n' roll, but all of the firm's mazes are rooted in the past--in the mysterious "turf mazes" of the Middle Ages, in the decorative mazes of Renaissance gardens and in Victorian hedge mazes.

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Each Minotaur maze is a unique work of art and a challenging form of entertainment. "Mazes are play, but you can't toy with a maze as you can with a computer game because you're in it," says one of Minotaur's three partners, Adrian Fisher, a peppy 36-year-old graphics expert, inventor and business consultant. "A maze is a game of chess between the designer and the public."

Minotaur began when a maze-building lord noticed a newspaper article by Fisher and sent it to his friend, another maze zealot, Randoll Coate. After graduating from Oxford, Coate attended an art college in London, only to have his studies there interrupted by World War II. Following the war he accepted a post in the diplomatic corps, serving in Argentina and Italy. Now retired, he has become an artist after all. At college, Coate was fascinated with mazes. When Fisher met him, he was helping estate owners turn their ancestors' plans into reality. "If you're the owner of a stately home in Britain, you probably have on your wall an enlarged plan of your estate," he says. "If it's old enough, it will include a formal garden, a bowling green and a maze, which may have been designed but was never finished, or perhaps did get built but was then abandoned."

Coate and Fisher pooled their skills and launched Minotaur Designs in 1979. They met Graham Burgess, a slender, bearded landscaper, through mutual friends and he joined them in 1983. Minotaur's three associates operate independently, calling upon one another's special skills as needed. "Actually, we're so loose-knit we're less an organization than a disorganization," says Fisher.

For the nobility, an excellent investment

As Minotaur's businessman, it is Fisher who spreads the gospel, persuading landowners that a maze is the very thing they have been yearning to build. "Mazes are an excellent investment for any lord opening the family castle to the public because they attract people and quickly earn back their construction and design costs," he noted during a recent interview at his computer-jammed office in St. Albans. "Symbolism is not a luxury," he added, referring to any Minotaur maze's central feature, the images incorporated in the design of the paths. "It's essential to successful marketing and it costs no more to plant a maze in the shape of a unicorn or a dragon."

Like his associates, Fisher is a perfectionist. When he showed a visitor a maze in a park near London's Warren Street, a trash bin caught his eye. "Disgusting," he murmured, dragging the barrel off the bricks that formed the maze's paths. He regarded the maze critically. It was not built by Minotaur. "The designer based it loosely on the maze in Chartres Cathedral, but he didn't have enough room for the 11 rings at Chartres so he had to lop off two rings--absolutely barbaric!" Fisher stormed. "The balance is off!"

Minotaur's own mazes involve long discussions with the client (whom Fisher refers to as the "patron") about the site, the maze's size, whether to create it from hedges, brick or other materials, and the symbols to be introduced into the pathways. Coate, working in his London home, draws a picture of the maze, incorporating various images in its lines. The work is painstakingly detailed. It took the designer two years to plan a maze shaped like a human footprint for his brother-in-law's country home. The scheme features more than 100 images of local creatures, including a pig, a ginger cat, a hatching chick and a kingfisher.

Each Minotaur maze, like those of ancient Crete, is symmetrical--but not absolutely symmetrical. It's possible, in a traditional maze having one entrance, one exit and no detached walls, to get out by placing a hand against either wall and then following it all the way to the exit. That trick doesn't work in a Minotaur maze. "We devise pathways that take you in the most exhaustive way to the center and back," Coate says.

Coate's strength is working out the overall design of mazes and Fisher's is devising the intricate networks of pathways that constitute the puzzles, but each man is proficient at both. Graham Burgess transforms their schemes into reality. At his nursery office in the Hampshire village of Whitchurch, beside the ponds where he raises the water lilies for which he is renowned, Burgess uses a computer program devised by Fisher to produce an initial cost estimate. As he punches the keys on the console, a maze configuration appears on the screen. Underneath it are blanks where he can fill in the maze's specifics. He calls for a maze planted with yew hedges, three feet high at installation. He stipulates gravel paths six feet wide. He also punches in the width of the hedges, the distance between plantings (and hence the number of bushes), the cost per bush and other vital information. The computer whirrs momentarily, then presents the price estimate in pounds sterling--in this case, it is the equivalent of \$60,000. "We can fiddle with that and adjust the price by adjusting the specifications," says Burgess. "For instance, we could substitute a cheap alternative to the yew hedges, like beech."

Every one of Minotaur's mazes is unique. At Newquay Zoo, in Cornwall, Minotaur created a dragon-shaped maze. After entering through the dragon's tail, you wind through the creature's entrails, formed from hedge-lined paths, where you find ten sculpted beasts of 50 million years hence--zoologists' extrapolations of evolution's future. Then, if you can find the way, you exit through the mouth.

Nearby, at the East Wheal Rose Mine, the Lappa Valley Railway maze honors Richard Trevithick, who built the world's first railway locomotive there in 1804. The maze's brick-on-grass paths trace the shape of that original empire, complete with flywheel and cogs. Embodied in the paths' turns are the date 1804 in Roman numerals and E.W.R., for East Wheal Rose Mine.

At Beazer Gardens in Bath, the Georgian resort built on the site of an old Roman spa, Minotaur has created an elliptical maze with stone pathways (left). The "goal" at the center is a large mosaic of the famous Gorgon's head of Bath, made with 92,000 marble tesserae imported from the Vatican quarries in Italy. Modeled on a Roman carving, the Gorgon's head is encircled by mosaic images celebrating Bath's Celtic and Roman history, including dolphins, wild boars, Orpheus and Pegasus.

Braille pathways for the blind

Still in the design stage is an unusual maze Coate conceived to honor an acquaintance, the late Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges. It consists of two hourglasses--a full one symbolizing Borges' birth and an empty one representing the moment of his death. Borges, though blind, was fascinated with labyrinths, and Coate's plan calls for marking all of the maze's pathways in Braille. The author's literary executors have discussed the possibility of installing the maze in Argentina as a memorial.

Some Minotaur projects reflect a more traditional English style. For instance, after restoring 450-year-old Kentwell Hall at Long Melford in Suffolk, London attorney Patrick Phillips and his wife, Judith, asked Minotaur to design a maze for the vast courtyard (p. 109). "A brick maze was not typical of a Tudor house like this, but it certainly was possible," Judith Phillips recently told a Kentwell Hall visitor.

That afternoon, Kentwell was thronged with towns-people dressed as Elizabethans for the Phillipses' annual Tudor Reenactment. For three weeks, the manor would return to the 1500s, which involves everything from cooking on the Tudor hearths to using correct period location. Outside, Fisher explained the design of the red, brown, cream and orange brick maze which fills the courtyard between the mansion's wings and its surrounding moat. "It's shaped like a rose, symbol of the House of Tudor, with five thorns and five petals, for the five Tudor monarchs," he said. "That's a giant chessboard at the center, and I once played a game on it for a television show."

Three Elizabethan maids in floor-length gowns and floppy hats walked along the brick pathways, oblivious to the maze's 15 diamond designs. "The diamonds contain sketches of images associated with the Tudor period," Fisher explained, adding that construction of the maze had overlapped a reenactment. "The bricklayers had to wear Tudor costumes," he recalled.

'You have to remember: mazes in Japan are not like mazes in England'

A visit to Shiga Ritto, one of the newest and largest mazes in Japan, began with enthusiastic greetings. "Irasshaimase, irasshaimase," several young women chirped as we arrived at the gate. "Welcome, welcome." They waved us up the hill to the rustic brick courtyard with its trestle picnic tables and benches. Several log cabins--a snack shop, a gift shop, an office--and two totem poles completed the supposedly Canadian scene. Children were shouting and playing, parents were calling, hundreds of people were milling about, drinking, eating ice cream, wandering through the gift shop. The loudspeaker blared without letup: "Before you start, don't forget to go to the bathroom." "Please don't climb the walls." "Is there anybody who wants to be saved? Please wave one of the red flags and we will lead you out." Stuart Landsborough, my companion and ostensible guide, tried to talk over the noise. "You have to remember," he shouted, "mazes in Japan are not like mazes in England."

A blond, blue-eyed Englishman who lives and works in New Zealand, Landsborough is a major force behind Japan's current obsession with mazes. He's the designer of Shiga Ritto and 20 other complexes franchised by an Osaka-based company, Maze Products, which plans to have about 5 more open by next summer. "An English hedge maze is artistic and ornamental," Landsborough told me. "Here in Japan we're aiming at amusement. Our mazes are designed to accommodate masses of people--as many as a thousand enthusiasts at a time."

The construction of Japanese mazes is basically uniform: plank walls 6-1/2 feet high; corridors about 6 feet wide; macadam floors; perhaps 2,000 yards of pathways; and four checkpoints. The route of a maze can be altered by just shifting a wall or sliding a door. To keep things interesting, an owner usually changes the course once a week or so.

Typically it takes about 50 minutes to get through a maze like Shiga Ritto, which is located in Kurita, a town in Shiga Prefecture. Some customers wander around for hours, however, and Landsborough likes to tell a joke about the honeymoon couple who went into one of his labyrinths and came out with two children. "Some people say that the view from one of the bridges in a maze helps them figure the way out, but often bridges are designed to mislead," he said. I asked him if he remembers his own designs. "I can't even figure them out when I'm in them," he replied. He wasn't kidding.

We embarked shortly before noon on what I thought would be a brief stroll around the 1,400-yard course. I could see four towers topped by the letters M, A, Z and E. We were supposed to get our tickets stamped in a machine at each of those checkpoints. "The checkpoints create interest," Landsborough explained. "If you manage to get out of the maze but haven't gotten the stamps, you haven't solved the puzzle."

We headed for the M, walking fast. We kept finding ourselves staring at the M stamp machine, either from a bridge or from the wrong side of the exit turnstile. After 30 minutes we still couldn't get to M from the right side, although we had come close. "Just because we're near doesn't mean we're near," said Landsborough, which was not exactly what I wanted to hear.

It was hot. I was leading and Landsborough was directing me from behind, saying: "Let's try that way. No, maybe that way. Let's go up this bridge and look over and maybe we can get out bearings. That looks like the right path. Oops--dead end." I was becoming increasingly frustrated. I had another appointment in two hours.

A young woman approached carrying a red pennant with "Help" written on it. She was an official rescuer, leading an assortment of failures: one tired woman, two children who wanted to go to the bathroom and a couple who were arguing about whether to follow her even as they followed her. I considered joining them. Landsborough also seemed less than enthusiastic about continuing. But I looked at my empty card, at the M emblazoned against the blue sky, at the hundreds of determined people milling about. "Maybe we should try a little longer," I said. "I think it's this way," he said. Off we went and I knew I was hooked. I was not going to leave without the full complement of stamps, even if it took me all day.

Five minutes later we reached the turnstile that led to M and, as I slid my card into the machine, I let out a whoop. I actually felt a sense of achievement--or at least relief. Others were finding relief in other ways. A mother and two children giggled from the opposite side of the fence as they slipped their cards through, asking people to stamp them, please. Clearly Landsborough did not approve. "Those who cheat are only cheating themselves," he observed.

After M we were on a roll, finding Z and E within ten minutes. Then nothing. Once again I considered giving up, but, ratlike, we scurried on, trying not to repeat our mistakes. Finally we hit A. Another whoop. Now for the mad dash out. I still had time to make my appointment. However, getting to the exit was worse. Although we could see from a bridge that the route led along the outside of the maze, we couldn't get to it and kept going in circles, winding up in the interior or on another bridge--or worse, back at M. But all good things must come to an end and we finally found the outside path, along with a

hundred others, and joined the happy processing thronging to the finish line. Total elapsed time: 1 hour 20 minutes--with the expert. I phoned ahead to my next appointment, another maze, and canceled.

Jeremy Bridges-Bromley, age 8, wearing a jarringly un-Tudor blue running suit, enthusiastically hopped and skipped along the maze's pathways. The sun abruptly came out for one of its momentary British appearances and the drizzle-wet bricks of the maze shone, while a peacock on the moat's wall spread its iridescent tail and screamed. Jeremy stopped in mid-skip and exclaimed: "This maze is a-mazing!"

One amazing feature of Minotaur mazes is the plethora of images and symbols the designers pack into the pathways' curves, sometimes imposing one image atop another, and those two atop a third. At Leeds Castle, for instance, Minotaur designed a maze that mirrors the onetime royal residence itself, with castellated yew hedges forming the towers and bastions. The entrance is by bridge over a dry moat; to gain the exit, you go underground through a grotto encrusted with crystals, then deeper still to a hermit's niche and, finally, out through a secret passageway. The center is a turret, from which visitors can look out over symbols that are hidden in the convolutions of the hedges. One symbol is a queen's crown, since Leeds Castle descended through the female line. Another is a chalice, for the daily masses sung in the castle's chapel for Queen Eleanor after her death in 1290.

Why squeeze so much into a maze when 95 percent of the people will never see it? "You could ask the same thing about St. Paul's Cathedral," Fisher says. "It's full of architectural refinements that most people will never notice. What matters is the pursuit of excellence." Adds Randoll Coate: "Not being able to see symbols while you're walking the maze is a great advantage, because it maintains the esoteric, secretive quality that always has clung to labyrinths."

The mysterious origin of the maze

The most mysterious thing about mazes is their origin. All that has come down from antiquity is the myth from which Minotaur Designs took its name. The sea god Poseidon, so the ancient tale goes, punished King Minos of Crete for a transgression by inducing his queen to mate with a sacred bull. She gave birth to the Minotaur, half-human, half-beast. To pen the dangerous creature, Daedalus, who served the king as an architect and inventor, built the labyrinth: a complex of turning passages seeming to have no beginning or end. The word "labyrinth" may come from labrys, a Minoan double-headed ceremonial axe.

In 1822 B.C., the Egyptian pharaoh Amenemhet III began building a labyrinth with 3,000 rooms and a forest of pillars. It was to be his funerary temple. In Crete, no labyrinth ruins have ever turned up, although the Cretans did begin inscribing labyrinths on their coins around 400 B.C. "All of the ancient labyrinths were unicursal, meaning they had only one path that wound this way and that until it finally arrived at the center," says maze expert Jeff Saward. "You couldn't get lost in one of them." An industrial chemist with long blond hair, a beard and alert blue eyes, Saward heads the Caerdroia Project, an association of maze enthusiasts based at his home in Thundersley, Essex, which has the Cretan maze design painted on its red front door. Caerdroia is Welsh for City of Troy, a name for ancient mazes and an allusion to the almost impenetrable walls of the legendary city. Saward spends most of his spare time

tracking down mazes, organizing meetings and publishing a journal. But although he and other experts know how the oldest labyrinths were built, they can only speculate about their significance.

The Roman empire was peppered with mosaic versions of the labyrinth. In the Dark Ages, Scandinavians made mazes with stones outlining the paths. Similar turf mazes were dug into meadows throughout Europe. Using old records, the Caerdroia Project has identified the sites of 110 turf mazes in Britain. Eight are still in existence, including one hidden in a Hampshire woods near Breamore House, an Elizabethan manor (p. 119). Close to the manor is a Saxon church, built around A.D. 1000, that may be connected with the maze. John Stimson, Breamore's gardener, cites a local legend. "Centuries ago, there was a monastery here, and the monks built the maze as a penance--at least, that's what people say," he reports, shrugging.

A footpath from Breamore winds through 1,000 acres of huge sycamores and yews festooned with ivy. Stoats dart across the path into the bluebells under the trees. The path crosses fields where hedgerows march to the horizon, with cows and thatched-roof stone farmhouses in the distance. It climbs a hill, enters a copse and stops at the maze. The maze, which is round, covers an area about the size of a tennis court. Its path is a grassy spiral, bordered by ditches. In late summer, buttercups, thistles and dandelions grow in the ditches. At the center is a mound. On one recent day, some unknown visitor had laid upon the mound a spray of wildflowers.

Despite stories about religious connections, Jeff Seward theorizes that ancient mazes were actually used for ceremonial pagan dances. "If you run one on a clear, frosty morning, you speed up, slow for turns, speed up again," he says. "The first three turns take you almost to the center, then out, the loops getting bigger so you run faster, and then you're at the center and you stop. It's disorienting and maybe that helped set a meditative mood."

By medieval times, turf mazes were a fixture at fairs. Young men would run them, the winners receiving a keg of beer. Meanwhile, at Chartres and other great cathedrals of Europe, the builders sometimes created mazes in the floors, which, so the theory goes, pilgrims navigated on their knees. During the Renaissance, garden mazes came into vogue, decorative plantings marking the pathways where ladies and gentlemen might flirt. By Tudor times, such mazes had become standard on large British estates. Over the centuries the tradition waned, but in the Victorian era it reasserted itself in the form of puzzle mazes made of high hedges at parks and public gardens to amuse citizens on their holidays. After that, enthusiasm waned again, but mazes remained very much a part of the British scene.

In 1950, for instance, the Rev. Harry S. Cheales, parish rector in the Cotswold Hills village of Wyck Rissington, dreamed that a tall figure directed him to build a maze in the rectory garden. Cheales planted 5,000 willows representing the pilgrim's path through life. The path ended at a large redwood tree, which stood for paradise. Each year on the day of the church's patron saint, Cheales led his parishioners through the maze. In 1980, after the clergyman retired, the maze was bulldozed.

Mazes often vanish. Recently, driving in Henley-On-Thames, Adrian Fisher braked near an estate and dashed into the trees, where a bulldozer stood beside some uprooted hedges. "This was a maze in a

garden that was once part of Friar Park, where George Harrison, the Beatle, now lives," Fisher said, adding mournfully, "they've dug it up for a housing project."

Despite the occasional loss, Britain's mania for mazes is once again clearly on the rise, and in more ways than one. The maze at Leeds Castle, for example, features elevated pathways crossing over other pathways like a tangled freeway network. At Lord Peregrine Eliot's Cornwall estate, yet another dimension comes into play: time. The maze there has movable gates that are opened and closed at odd moments. "People go absolutely mad," says Randoll Coate.

Mathematicians have devised complicated formulas for outwitting the maze makers, but dogs seem equipped to solve such problems without the benefit of any assistance whatsoever. Not long ago the producers of a BBC-TV program staged an interspecies contest in the maze at Longleat, which encloses 1.5 miles of hedges, bridges and a tower. With a brown-and-white mongrel named Buffa on a leash, a correspondent plodded the trail for an hour and a half before reaching the central tower. Then the test began in earnest. The man tied a red balloon to himself so the cameras could follow his progress en route to the exit. He tied a white balloon to Buffa and unleashed her. While the red balloon bobbed aimlessly among the pathways, Buffa's white balloon shot arrowlike along the paths directly to the gate. Finding the way out took her only four minutes. Meanwhile, the puffing correspondent wandered about inside, hopelessly lost. Finally the camera crew sent Buffa back into the labyrinth wearing a coat that read "Rescue Dog." It took her only a few minutes to locate the poor fellow and lead him out.

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