

St. Fin Barre's Cathedral Labyrinth

Martin Dier April 2015

St. F



Cover page: Top Left, Floor plan of Labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral

Top Right: St. Fin Barre's Cathedral by William Burges

Bottom: Thésée et le Minotaure by Maître des Cassoni Campana, circa 1500

Introduction

What is the St. Fin Barre's Labyrinth and what has it to do with the Cathedral?

The St. Fin Barre's Cathedral labyrinth may be described as a winding, unicursal path, without branches, that leads to a centre. It is based on the more complex Chartres Cathedral labyrinth and it is intended for use in walking meditation, contemplation and prayer as well as

tourism.



Above: St. Fin Barre's Cathedral Labyrinth April 2015

Labyrinths have been known to occur in a wide range of cultures from the Neolithic Bolshoi Zayatsky labyrinth complex of Russia to the woven labyrinths of the Native American's. From the Mesolithic age right the way through to modern times (Westbury 2001).



Above: one of many Neolithic labyrinths from northern Russia

Origin

The word labyrinth derives from the double headed Minoan style axe, or Labrys, and is referenced in the tale of Theseus and the minotaur. Its distinctive shape can be seen in the St. Fin Barre's Labyrinth.



Above left: A replica of a Minoan labyris, a ceremonial double headed axe.

Above right: One of the turnings in the St. Fin Barre Labyrinth showing the labyris shape.

Labyrinths and Mazes

There is a strong association in the public mind with labyrinths and the story of Theseus slaying the Minotaur in the Cretan labyrinth. This was a maze like building constructed by Daedalus on the command of king Minos of Crete. This is far removed from the unicursal path labyrinths in modern day parlance (Wikipedia, 2014), yet Cassoni Campana, Figure 1, on the cover, combines elements of both so a distinction should be made between mazes and Labyrinths.

Mazes have raised walls or tunnels that present the walker with choices which lead to the goal or conversely loops and dead ends. It is generally impossible to see the goal when on the path. They are generally used for entertainment.

However, the **labyrinth** path, although circuitous, contains no branches and hence no choices ie. is unicursal and leads you to a goal which is visible at every stage of the journey. They are used as a spiritual tool to aid with contemplation, meditation and spirituality.

Typically, although there are variations, labyrinths tend to be flat on the ground with no or low dividing walls, so that the centre or goal can be seen from the outset. The medieval labyrinths are usually found as pathways or paintings associated with Christian sites while the modern day labyrinths are used as non denominational contemplative tools. (Kern 2010)

As one walks the path one is directed at first towards the goal and then away from it, each loop bringing you on a circuitous route to the centre. Thus, the labyrinth can be used as an esoteric tool that entertains anxiety, relief, drama and accomplishment, symbolic of life's journey on many levels.

Labyrinths are left brain puzzles where one is forced to walk slowly. This slowing down in itself is the first part of meditation. They come in various designs but central to all is the geometry of the cross which may help explain their popularity with Christians. They have been seen vicariously as the finger print of God, as traps for evil spirits, as symbols of luck and healing, they were used in obscure religious practices, and today they remain an enigmatic and mysterious spiritual tool that are better experienced rather than explained. (Camp 2013)

Symbolism

Labyrinths being geometric and largely symmetrical leave a lasting impression on the walker. It is easy to get into the mind frame of curiosity and want to know what it all means. This lends labyrinths an air of mystery in which symbolism can tell an allegorical tale.

The symbolism of the goal

The labyrinth is seen as a path in life where the labyrinth goal is seen as a goal in life. When we are newborns the goal is directly in front of us, we can be powerful world leaders, artists of renown, physicians or physicists. But then life has a habit of sweeping us away from our goals and we spend the rest of our lives trying to get back on target.

The goal can be a more short term goal such as; deciding on a colour scheme for a room, figuring out what decision to make, how best we could work etc etc. When we start reflecting on the issue we find that suddenly we see our goal as never before, from near and far, from left and right and up and down until we finally reach it. In this sense, labyrinths offer us differing perspectives on our goal.

And when we do reach our goal, what we thought was our finish is simply half way through the path. The gift of the goal now needs to be brought out into the wider world. Do we take short cuts and jump the walls or do we carefully consider the outcome?

The goal is also the centre point or still point where we may rest, observe and analyse the path we have just taken. It is here we may assimilate our journey and integrate its realisations into our life.

The symbolism of the path

The Labyrinth is aligned on the Golden Angel of the Resurrection who stands on the sanctuary roof on the Cathedral. The angel is always present even if we are unaware of her. She reminds us that we can be guided by the higher powers in life and that the heavens tend to have a better perspective on our life's journey than we do.

The Labyrs patterns naturally fall into a north, south and westerly direction with the mouth being aligned east on the Angel. This allows the labyrinth to be divided into four segments in

a cruciform pattern which can be seen as the centrality of the Christian spirit and is also a nod to the seasons of the year or indeed seasons of life.

The labyrinth is a highly ordered pathway that can also look bewildering. The spiritual view may be that our path in life is equally complex but has a purpose and a deeper meaning behind it. All we have to do is trust and put one foot in front of the other and we will eventually get there.

When walking the labyrinth we meet people on the path as we do in life. Some people will be blocking us, so do we pass them out or silently wish they were not in our way? Do we step aside or over take? All people, although they may seem to be going the wrong way, are ironically, all headed in the same direction. Similarly, everyone in life is on their own journey and what seems right for one is not right for everyone.

Each of the bends help show us a different perspective on the goal. Some bends are at 180° and some are more sweeping and gentle. However doing a U-turn and apparently going in reverse is in reality propelling yourself forward. This reminds us that change can be abrupt or gradual and that we may lose our sense of direction from time to time, but if we trust, we will arrive.

People walk the labyrinth whilst; considering a problem, praying, meditating, saying a mantra, using prayer beads, tuning into the energy or without any prescriptive methodology. Each walker is unique and each walk different.

St. Fin Barre's Cathedral labyrinth long term project.

The labyrinth project, when finished, will consist of the labyrinth set tidily within the Cathedral grounds. It will include; building of low walls (Circa 50cm) around the trees on site to aid with landscaping and seating, screened compost bays to manage the grass clippings and leaf litter generated by the Cathedral every year, steps and a ramp to facilitate access.

The Labyrinth is part of a long term two phase development which will be completed by the addition of a Bible Garden when funding allows. The Bible garden will complete the landscaping by setting the labyrinth within borders made of shrubs and trees mentioned in the Bible.



Left: 5 circuit labyrinth in the grounds of St. Fin Barre's Cathedral, Cork, as a novel way of reclaiming derelict ground, stopping antisocial behaviour, a spiritual and cultural tool and

developing the area for the community and to act as a tourist attraction

Dimensions of St. Fin Barre's Cathedral Labyrinth



Above: Angel of the northern transept, St. Fin Barre's Cathedral, holding a measuring rod a cubit long measuring out the dimensions of the new Jerusalem. The measuring rod is the unit of measure of the Cathedral and its labyrinth

The Cubit There is a secret unit of measure used in the fabric of the building of St. Fin Barre's Cathedral. It is not the metric or imperial system, but the cubit. The cubit was the measure of length from the tip of the index finger to the elbow and was used extensively by

the Hebrews in the measure of Noah's Ark, King Solomon's temple, the Ark of the Covenant and in the measurement of the new Jerusalem.

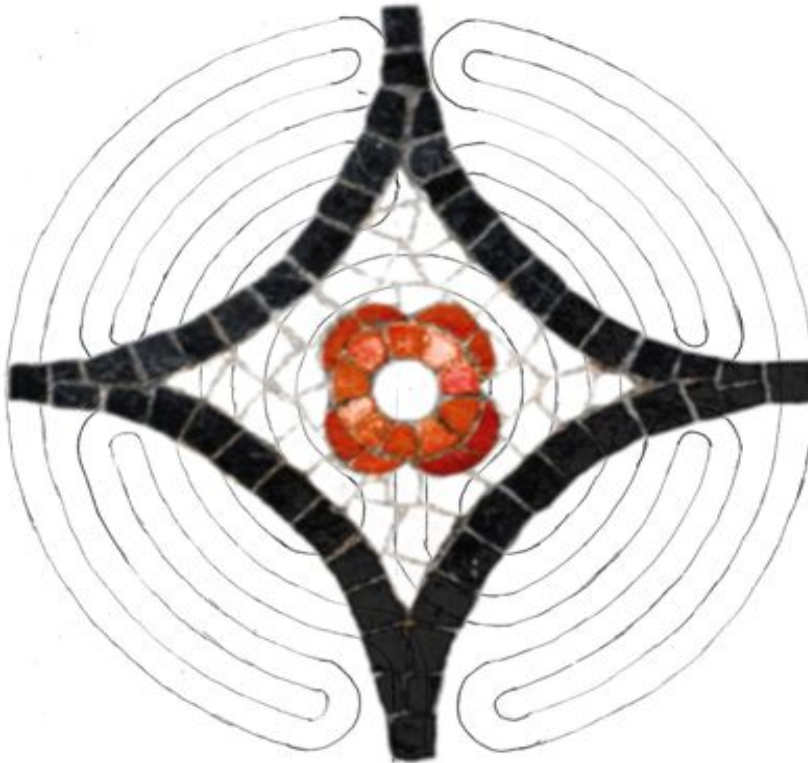
One of the most important but overlooked statues in the Cathedral is the Angel of the north transept. He holds a measuring rod a cubit long (20 inches). The Cathedral uses this measurement and multiples of the same unit to build things such as towers, transepts and even the placement of marble borders within the structure. The cubit was thus chosen as the unit of measure for the labyrinth and as such is in harmonious proportion to the design that Burges had originally intended.

Measurements: The labyrinth Path is approximately 116.8m/383.20 feet/229.92 cubits to the centre making it 1.6 times the height of the Cathedral spire. The width of the path is one cubit while the radius of the goal is 2 cubits. From edge to edge the Labyrinth measures 24 cubits wide. The Pathway is nestled into 4 quadrants and five circuits. There are 14 turnings within the Labyrinth, 12 of those are 180° and 4 of those may be described as being part of the Labyrs shape.

The Golden Section: The Labyrinth also contains a key concept in aesthetics, that of the golden section. The golden section is a proportion that when used in the design of a structure makes it look inherently pleasing. It is a specific ratio that is found in everything from the helix of the DNA molecule to the spiral arms of galaxies and every else in-between. It is found; in the classical architecture of the Greeks, the temples of the Egyptians, in musical harmonies, the cairns and art of the Irish Neolithic through to the medieval art of the masters and also in the human body.

In St Fin Barre's Cathedral labyrinth every point of the circumference of the goal falls on the golden section of any diameter drawn through the outermost circle. Mathematically speaking the goal is the solution to the labyrinth.

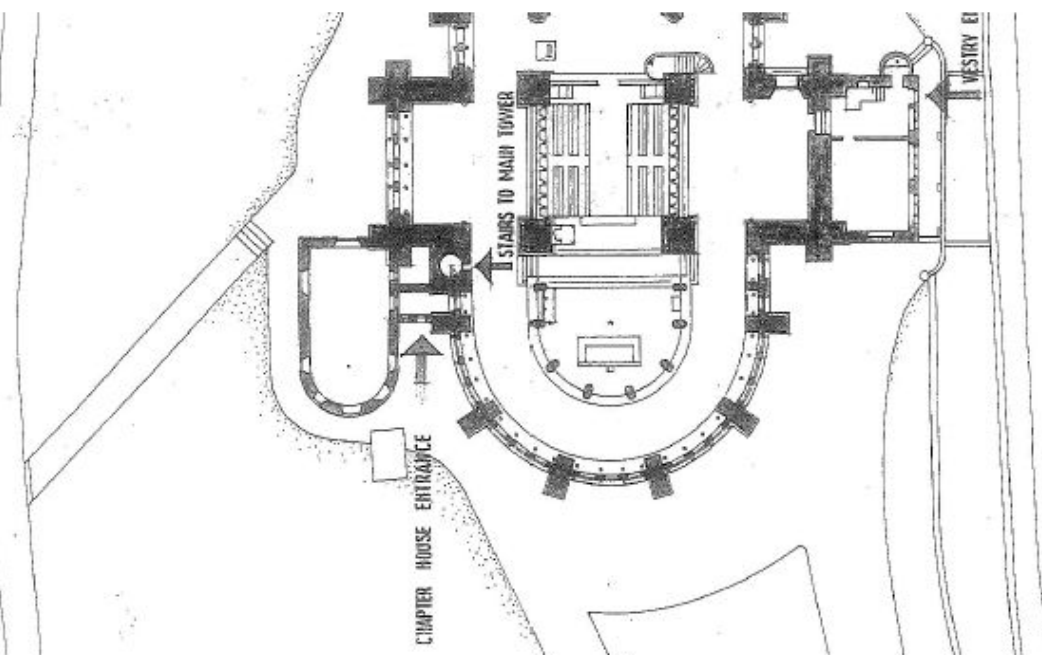
When the cathedral logo, a cruciform pattern of mosaic near the high Alter, is stretched over the labyrinth the cruciform pattern of the tiles fits snugly into the labyris patterns of the



labyrinth. Also at this scale the floral centre of the tile pattern fits snugly into the goal of the labyrinth.

left: Cathedral logo superimposed upon the labyrinth. Note how the rose center fits snugly into the labyrinth centre and the cruciform pattern is held by the labyris pattern.

Below: a scaled sketch plan of the shape and size of the labyrinth (bottom centre of page) in relation to the Cathedral (top centre of page) Scale 1:500.



Medieval pilgrimage



Above : Chartres Cathedral Labyrinth pictured with pilgrims barefoot and on their knees, M. Dier, June 2011.

The most famous labyrinth is the 13th century Chartres Cathedral Labyrinth in France. It was built in the Nave of the Cathedral from both dark and light coloured stones with pathways only a few inches wide. It is an intricate design with 11 circuits. St. Fin Barre's Cathedral Labyrinth is based on this design but with just 5 circuits and wider walls.

Labyrinths were popular religious tools associated with pilgrimage in the Middle Ages and were known as "Roads to Jerusalem" (Camp 2013). When pilgrimage to the Holy Land was deemed too dangerous people could go on a mini pilgrimage to a labyrinth to gain a plenary indulgence.

During the medieval period St Fin Barre's Cathedral site was a popular pilgrimage destination. One of the earliest documented references to pilgrimage is the eleventh/twelfth century satirical wonder tale '*Aislinge Meic Conglinne*', the vision of Mac Conglinne, where it mentions '...the men of Munster in their bands going to Cork for the festival of St. Barre

and St. Nesson, in order to fast' (Meyer 1892, 114) (St Nesson was a disciple of St Fin Barre and succeeded him as Bishop in 630AD).

It is thus appropriate that one of the main iconographic sequences in St. Fin Barre's Cathedral is about the New Jerusalem and also that the Cathedral site is associated with medieval pilgrimage.

This long history of pilgrimage together with the Irish phenomenon of labyrinths serves to establish credulity for the modern labyrinth and it is hoped it will serve as a cultural tool to demonstrate the concepts surrounding Medieval pilgrimage in Ireland.

Irish Labyrinths



Labyrinths are also known from the Irish tradition and as a nation we are the proud owners of the sixth century Hollywood stone, marking the ancient St Kevin's Pilgrimage route to Glendalough. It is the oldest classically styled, 7 circuit, carved labyrinth in Britain or Ireland (Orpen 1911). We also have the medieval Rathmore Labyrinth stone, Athboy, one of only such 11 medieval stones in Europe

(Leask 1933).

Above: The 6th C Hollywood Stone, Wicklow (Christy 2010)

Below: Rathmore medieval labyrinth with raised path and sunken walls. Entrance is at the top



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Architectural Importance of the site

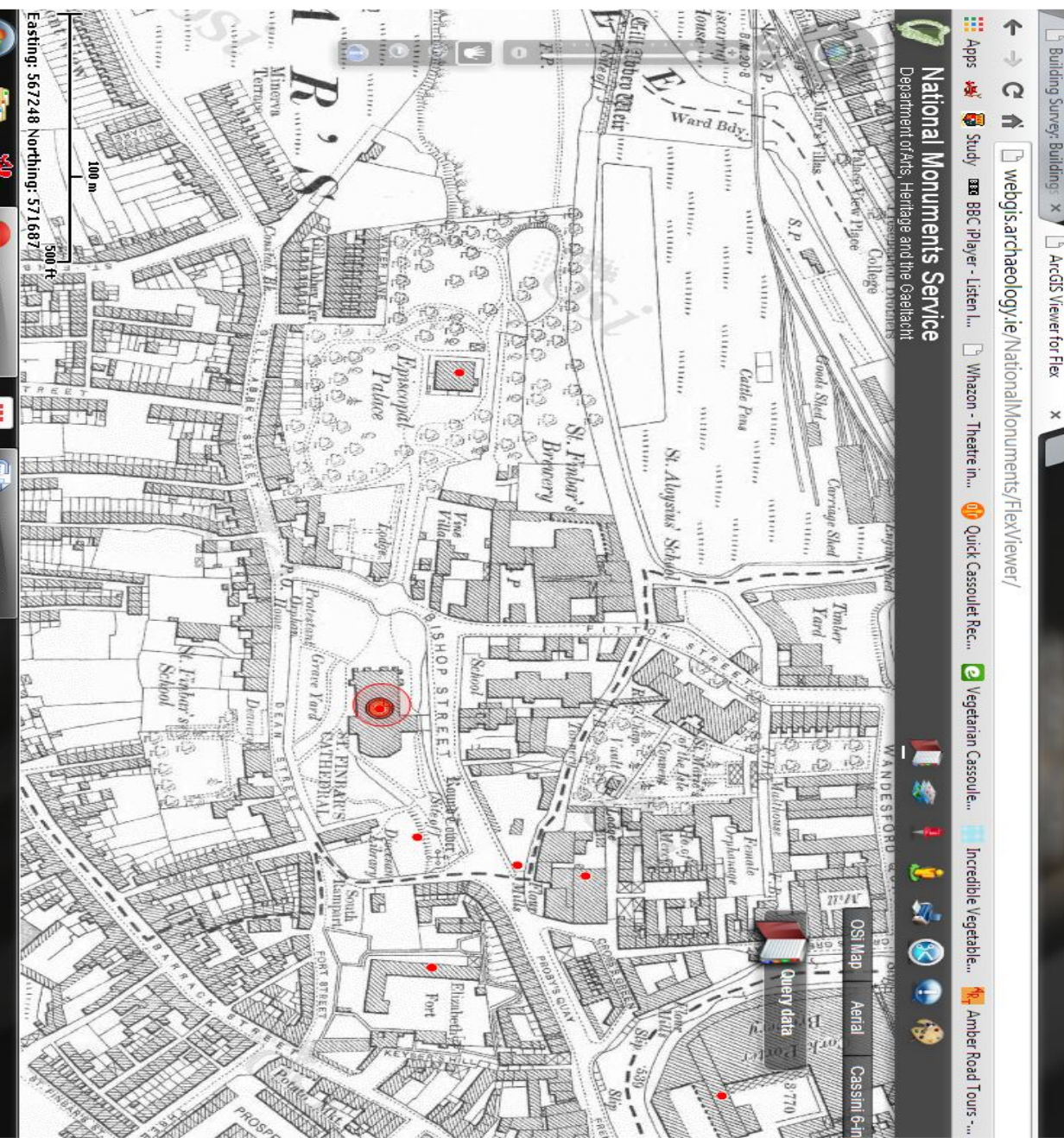
The Labyrinth is sensitively constructed in the grounds of St. Fin Barre's Cathedral, Cork and fits in with the upstanding Neo-gothic architecture of the Cathedral itself and the garden space in which it is placed. The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage describes the cathedral thus:

One of Cork's most distinctive landmarks, St. Finbar's Cathedral is situated in one of the oldest areas of the city, and forms a group with several other ancillary buildings. The Cathedral is one of the architect Burges's most complete achievements, as he also designed many of the interior features, thereby creating a comprehensive style. This Cathedral is highly significant in its contribution to the body of nineteenth century architecture in Ireland, for its high quality design and the use of local limestone, and for providing a key public space in this part of the city. (NIAH 2014)

Because this was William Burges's flagship work and it was the commission that launched his career, the site has international significance. The importance is further accentuated when we learn from Matthews (1922) that Burges won the commission for Lille but it was never granted. This commission included a labyrinth. Much of what was intended for Lille became rebranded for Cork and one wonders if he ever intended the labyrinth as part of the Cork design.

Importance of the Archaeological and Cultural Heritage of the site

The site is also important from a cultural, heritage and archaeological point of view and the Records of Monuments and Places (RMP), indicates that the labyrinth site falls into a zone of notification being close to CO074-038003, a round tower site and CO074-038002- the Cathedral itself. Because the works on the site had the potential to disturb archaeological heritage it required the relevant authorities being notified who were all satisfied that the labyrinth could proceed as planned. Fortunately an archaeological dig had taken place almost ten years ago to access the suitability of the site for a visitors centre which was never built. The soil at this location is termed, made ground and consists of a deep layer of modern soil covering any archaeology. As the earth disturbance was no more than a few inches there was no threat to disturbing the archaeology which remains as is for posterity.



Above: Screen grab showing the RMP 25” map centring on St Fin Barre’s Cathedral. The immediate points of interest include the Cathedral building and a round tower site near the labyrinth. (Archaeology.ie, 2014)

Background history to St Fin Barre’s Cathedral

After leaving the source of the river Lee, *Gougan Barra*, St Fin Barre arrived at the great marsh of Munster, *an corkaigh*, in 606AD. Where he landed his boat he was granted a field and a cow by a pagan land owner. The field developed into the early Christian enclosure, whose outline is still visible today in the property boundaries. There he built his first church and school. The Church has evolved into the present day Anglican Cathedral and the school evolved into the modern day UCC. From the site of the present day cathedral the city of Cork grew and developed moving onto the marsh islands of the Lee. All the early churches were likely to have been simple wooden structures of which nothing remains, but traces still remain of the Medieval stone buildings. The site has always been a popular location as Fin Barre reputedly said that anyone that was buried with him would make it into heaven. This made St Fin Barre’s Cathedral grounds a very popular place for burial. Cawfield remarked that the modern cathedral cut through 3 layers of burials “about 30 feet” in depth. “Here were evidences of the remains of three distinct places of sepulture” (Cawfield 1871, pp xi). He described the lowest layer of burials as likely being contemporary with St Fin Barre.

It is documented that a monastic enclosure and a round tower once stood on the site but all upstanding traces seem to have vanished around the 1800's.

Construction of the Labyrinth:

The idea for the labyrinth was first mooted in February 2014 and plans were quickly under way to choose a design to suit the space. Initial ideas were for a classical 7 circuit labyrinth which incorporated the magnolia tree in its centre. This was dropped in favour of a simplified Chartres style concentric labyrinth that would fit compactly into the space. Expert advice on the design stage was sought from specialists in Cork and as far away as the UK.

After the site was cleared of rubbish, de-stoned and levelled the design was spray painted onto the ground before Easter 2014 and was given a vote of popular approval by the Dean and Select Vestry.

Left: The freshly spray painted labyrinth aligned on the Golden Angel.



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Below: Construction advice was supplied by a range of experts from Cork and labour was



supplied by the Local Community Employment Scheme and Tús.

The walls were created by bending pressure treated timber into the shape spray painted on the ground. The timber was pegged into place and given a coating of creosote. The inner circles naturally had a tighter curve so niches had to be cut into the wood to allow for extra flexure, while the tight 180° corners needed sheet galvanise to take the tight curve.



Above: Walls of the labyrinth being constructed and pinned down

What would become the path was excavated out and filled with 2” hardcore. The excavation from the path went into building the walls. A weed barrier was laid down over the hardcore and a final dressing of chippings was added.

A hard wearing lawn seed was sprinkled on top of the walls and by September 2014 supported a fresh green growth.

Direct and indirect impacts

It is expected that the Labyrinth project will generally have a beneficial effect on the local area.

On a heritage level attracting extra visitors will benefit the cathedral financially allowing it to continue its ongoing maintenance. Extra numbers to the area will also make the area safer to be in as it pushes anti-social behaviour to less frequented areas. It will provide a restful green space where locals and tourists can rest, unwind and relax.

More tourists with more spending money have the potential to stimulate local shops and services which would be good for employment. The Labyrinth is plainly visible from Elizabeth fort which is a near by tourist attraction. It has been a source of interest for culturally curious visitors and by those with a keen photographic eye. It is hoped that it will generate a sense of pride in the community and people would be supportive of concert events in the Cathedral.

The completion of the Bible garden will see an increase in the species diversity creating a richer diverse environment which will offer new habitat to be colonised by various plants, insects and animals.

This project reclaimed waste ground that was used for dumping and anti-social behaviour. In place of the dereliction it now creates an aesthetically pleasing garden space that will act as a

curiosity garden feature to attract tourists. This will allow the Cathedral to be included on a list of Garden Trails across the County.

On a spiritual level it will act as a tool to allow for meditation and contemplation. It can also act as an area that the Cathedral clergy can use in a liturgical way.

It is planned as a community resource that is free for use to the surrounding city. It is envisaged that people will use the space for “time out”. It can also be used as an educational tool to aid in describing the changing nature of religious practices throughout Europe and Ireland during the medieval period.

On the negative side there may be more people causing erosion and wear to the Cathedral lawns. To counteract this the lawn seed selected was a hard wearing seed variety and pathways will be inserted if necessary to deal with foot fall in any funnel areas, spaces where people are forced to walk between obstacles causing increased wear on that patch of lawn.

Increased numbers will undoubtedly cause more pressure on the sewage system in the Cathedral and will add to the push factors already present to build two new toilets in the building.

Conclusions

On the whole the labyrinth project is a positive step forward. There are many advantages to building the Labyrinth, socially, culturally, spiritually and commercially. It has the potential to increase amenity value and draw in more tourists who spend money. It can be used by the community and the clergy for both sacred and secular applications. It has the potential to neutralise the anti-social behaviour taking place on the site which was derelict and overgrown. When the project is completed with the addition of the Bible Garden, the rich

species diversity will support an abundant flora and fauna and allow the Cathedral to be included in garden trails in the county. The value of the labyrinth will benefit not only the local community acting as a free recreational space in an otherwise urban environment but indeed the Cathedral itself.

Labyrinths have a strong Irish connection with pilgrimage and St. Fin Barre's Cathedral used to be a popular place of pilgrimage at least since the 1100s. The labyrinth will act an outward symbol recognising the historical importance of the early Christian and Medieval roots of the site. The size and scale with which labyrinth was constructed are the same proportional measurements of the Neo-gothic structure beside which it sits so there is a sense of harmony and unity between the old and modern.

As a spiritual tool the labyrinth speaks across boundaries of religion, social class and education. Each person can come to it and have a valid experience according to their beliefs and level of understanding. Whether people gain insight due to God, Allah, The Divine or their own higher selves is immaterial. The fact is that the labyrinth has the potential to help people shift their perspectives and to “think outside the box”.

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