

Running a Maize Maze

Hadleigh Castle Country Park covers nearly 500 acres of woodland, downland and grazing marsh overlooking the Thames Estuary, near Southend on Sea. The park is managed by Essex County Council and has three full time staff. Like most country parks, we are under pressure to generate income and one way that we have been doing this is by running a large living history event, "Step Back in Time", which has involved groups such as Medieval Siege Society and Sealed Knot. We have only been able to run this event with the help of the neighbouring landowner, the Salvation Army, as we do not have sufficient level land for an arena and additional car parking. Last year, the 2 acre field that was used for the car park had to be cropped and we had to cancel this event as there were no alternative sites for parking. It was at this time that the idea of running a maize maze in this field was proposed.

Planning the Product

The first step was to convince our managers and the farm's manager and land agent that running a maze was a viable project. Everyone saw that there was little risk, as the set up costs were modest and there was a good opportunity to generate income. We contacted our local Council planning department and were informed that we could run a maze for up to 28 days under our permitted development rights. As luck would have it, one of the local bird-watchers, whom we had known for many years, is an international expert on mazes and he readily agreed to design a maze for us.

We were now ready to move forward with the following objectives:

- Generate income
- Work in partnership with Salvation Army Farms on a commercial project
- Raise the profile of the Park in the local area
- Provide a memorable experience for visitors
- With the combination of maze, country park, castle and farm tea room and rare breeds centre, encourage visitors to spend the whole day in the area.

Maze Making

We encountered our first real problem several weeks after planting seed when only around three-quarters of the seed germinated, leaving far too many holes to make a workable maze. This caused a lot of uncertainty for a couple of weeks and we considered cancelling the project. The rest of the seed did eventually germinate, though growth was very slow. Only a month before we were due to open, most plants were struggling to reach a foot in height. This led us to delay and scale down our promotion for the project and we created the design within the crop at a late stage.

The design for our maze was based on the castle from which the Park takes its name, as we wanted a fairly basic geometric pattern and certainly wanted to avoid curved lines. The area of the maze was measured and marked out on the ground and we had already determined the best planting pattern regarding both distances between and within each row. The maze layout was created by pulling up some maize plants to form the paths. The maize plants proved much easier to pull than ragwort! The hard part was removing the uprooted plants from the maze to the main access point.

Lose yourself in it

The maze was open for 28 days in August 2005, with a flat rate admission of £2.50. The main users were families with young children and most took between half an hour and an hour to go round. We ran various event days, which included puppets, pirates, Alice in Mazeland and finished off with 'Scary Night' in the maze.

After what we thought had been a successful and uneventful first week, word reached us of two incidents that had happened at night. The first was of a group of youths being abusive and letting fireworks off at 1am, which led to the police helicopter being called; the second was a large group of youths having a corn-cob fight amongst local residents' cars. After these incidents, we hired a security guard to protect the maze.

Was it worth it?

Overall, the maze was a great success with over 6,000 visitors. It generated a lot of interest from the local press and received a lot of positive feedback from visitors. From our point of view, it was a lot of hard work, but great fun too; so, 'yes', we will be doing it all again in 2006.

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