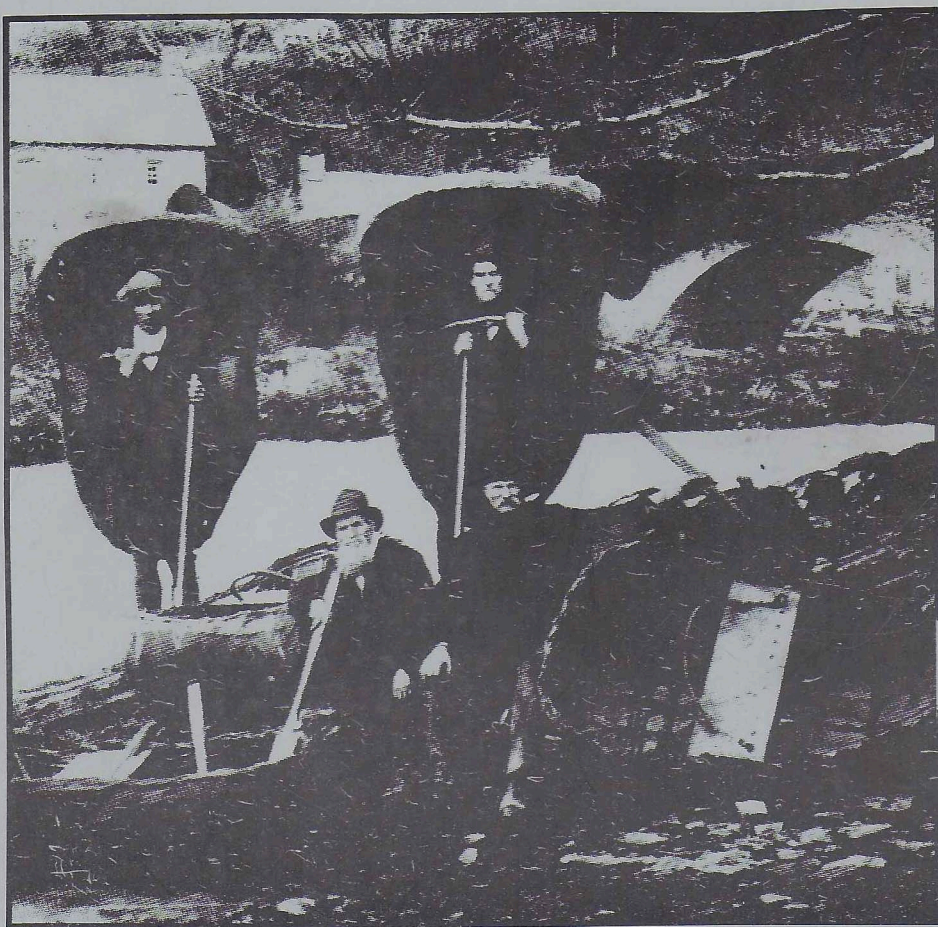




The **Coracle** *Society*



FOREWORD

When James Hornell wrote his classic treatise 'Water Transport' in 1946 he recorded that Coracles were then only to be found in use on the rivers TEIFI, TOWY, TAF, CLEDDAU, DEE and SEVERN and also within living memory on the USK, WYE, MONNOW and BOYNE. Sadly, today this tradition is only continued on the TEIFI, TOWY, TAF and SEVERN in Britain.

Moreover, on the 1st December 1987 the Times wrote that the TOWY Coracle net fishermen were ready to abandon their centuries old pursuit if proposals were passed which, in effect, would have doubled their net licence fees over the following two years. Happily, no doubt due in some measure to vocal and disparate public concern, this did not come about. It did, however, alert people to how close they had come to losing a precious and irreplaceable part of our national heritage because, of course, Coracles have an unbroken line of descent from pre Roman times to the present day. It was this principally which led to the formation of the Coracle Society in June of this year.

All is not gloom, however. Coracles are still being made and used for net fishing in West Wales and Eustace Rogers and John Davies continue their Families' Coracle making traditions at Ironbridge and Shrewsbury on the Severn. Coracles are now being made by an increasing number of people as a result of the pioneering courses run by the Bewdley Museum, and the Green Wood Trust at Ironbridge. They have also revived Coracle regattas in their areas. This year the Basket Makers' Association successfully made a replica of the basket-like Spey Curragh in conjunction with a member of the Coracle Society. This Coracle like craft was last used over 150 years ago.

What I have written fortifies the Society in its twin aims of both preserving our precious Coracle past and encouraging their increased use and future development.

Peter Badge.

On the River Teifi no new licences for the non-tidal section of the river have been issued since 1935 and as a consequence the use of coracles has declined year by year, so that today the most famous of all Teifiside coracle villages, Cenarth, has no coracle fishermen at all. A little over a hundred years ago a contemporary observer could write of Cenarth, "there is scarcely a cottage in the neighbourhood without a coracle hanging by the door"; by 1972 that tradition of two thousand years was dead.

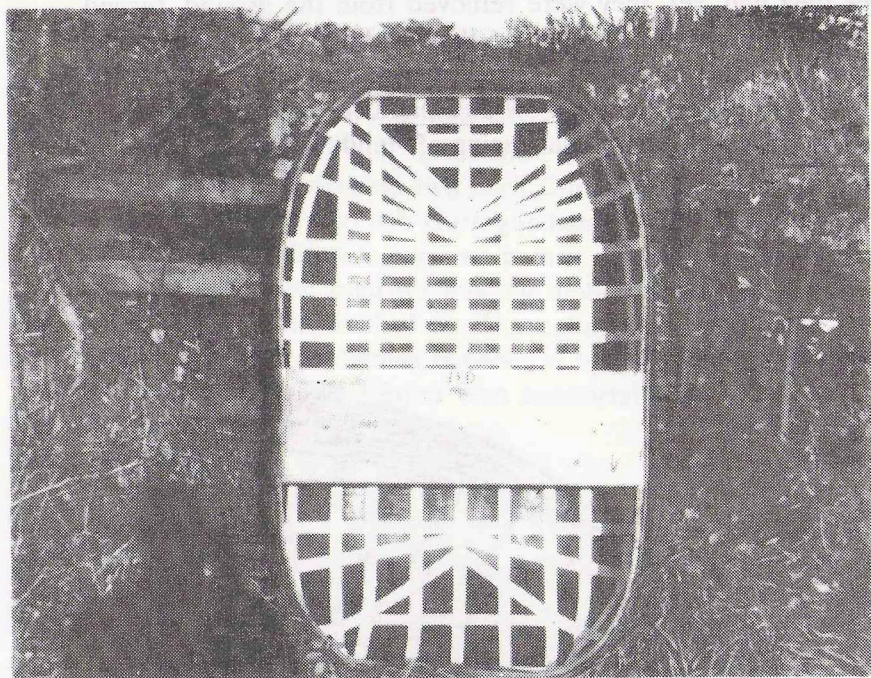
Geraint Jenkins

SOME UNUSUAL CORACLES

1. DWYRYD CORACLE

When John Davies, the Shrewsbury Coracle maker, showed me a Coracle he had been asked to renovate by its owner, the late Mrs Sheila Sandford of the Isle, Shrewsbury, I realised I was looking at a craft quite different from any of those described by James Hornell and our President, Dr. Geraint Jenkins, the two greatest authorities on Coracles. Sheila Sandford and her father, the late Duncan Robertson, a lifelong user of Llangollen Coracles, told me that it had been used for net fishing on the river Dwyryd near Maentwrog in North Wales. I was told by a former local resident that he remembers their use being talked about but never actually witnessed it.

I was recently told by a distinguished Basket maker that the well respected Basket making firm G.W. Scott & Sons of Charing Cross, London, founded in 1669, had, as their trade mark, a Coracle. I also read that the Sussex 'Trug', well known to basket makers, was based by its creator, Thomas Smith of Hurstmonceaux, Sussex, on a Coracle.

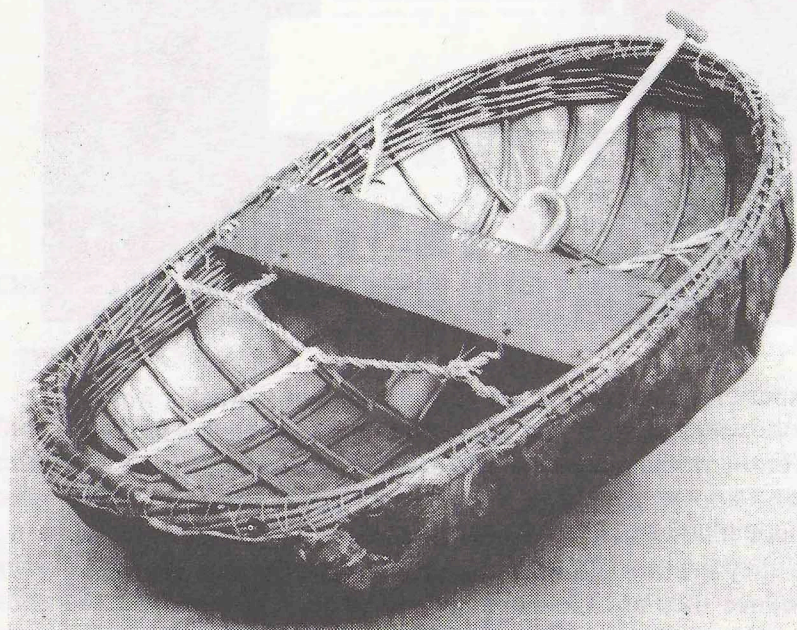


These experiences convinced me that the use of Coracles was much more widespread in the U.K. than even Hornell was able to discover. I would, therefore, be eternally grateful to hear from anyone who knows of unusual Coracles. In furtherance of this theme there follows details of 6 further coracles. (In their own countries they are not all termed Coracles for linguistic reasons but in essence they are the same species.)

2. BOYNE CURRAGH

The Brythonic Celts were not the only makers of Coracles. Until just after the last war Boyne Curraghs were being made and used for net fishing. They were made of hazel wands and withies and covered with animal hide. Their construction differed radically from British Coracles in that they were made 'upside down'; the wands were driven into the ground and a gunwale was then woven around the wands next to the ground. They were then bent over and lashed together to form the shape of the Curragh.

After they had 'set' they were removed from the ground, turned the right way up, and the rest of the building process completed. They were much larger than British Coracles. They carried two men; one who knelt in the bow and paddled using a 'scooping' stroke and the other who sat facing aft tending the net which was fixed to a point ashore.

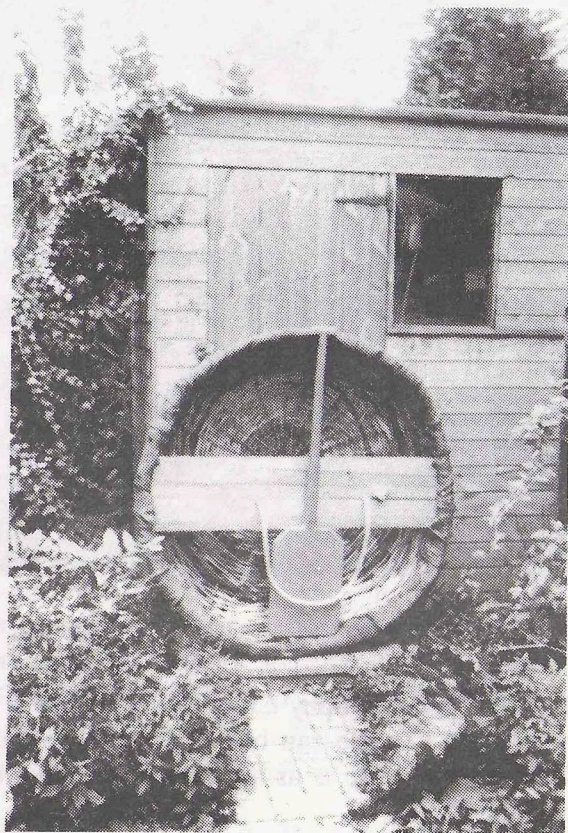


By kind permission of the Trustees of the Science Museum,
London

There are specimens of these Coracles in the National Museum
of Ireland in Dublin and the Museum at Drogheda in Ireland.

3. SPEY CURRAGH

There is only one Scottish Curragh left and it is to be found in the Museum at Elgin. From this members of the Basket makers Association and I constructed two such Curraghs. It was an interesting exercise as Scottish Curraghs haven't been used for over 150 years and the sole survivor is in a derelict state. In their heyday they were used for guiding timber down the Spey. As an indication of the skill of the Curraghmen an account is given of a race on the Thames between a Spey Curraghman and a Thames Waterman. The former won comfortably.



Like the Boyne Curragh they are covered with animal hide but there the resemblance ends. The Spey craft are essentially basket like in construction and their paddle is unusually broad. They are essentially one person craft and their overall shape approximates more to the Ironbridge Coracle than any other.

4. VIETNAMESE CORACLE

I am indebted to Jane Williams-Thomas for this print of a Vietnamese Coracle seen at UUNG TAN this year.



It will be seen that like the Spey Curragh it also has a basket like construction. Such a Coracle can be seen at the Exeter Maritime Museum. Their principal use is as a tender for fishing boats.

5. INDIAN CORACLE

Some three years ago my daughter saw two different types of Coracles within 70 miles of each other on the Cauvery river in South India.



They differed considerably in size. The larger, which could take several people, was poled along whereas the smaller had a single paddle not dissimilar to that used on the Spey. Both types of Indian Coracle were made of split bamboo. The block of wood shown in the photograph is used by the Coracleman to kneel upon when paddling the craft.

6. HIDATSA BULL BOAT

I apologise in advance to our American members if I inadvertently make any inaccurate statements but I hope what I write might produce much more accurate information from the USA.

The Bull Boat bears a very strong resemblance to the Coracle because of its construction, covering, method of propulsion and use. They were used by the Plains Indians for transportation purposes rather than fishing. Interestingly they were made and used by women.

The frame consisted of Willow rods lashed together with thongs and covered with Buffalo hide. The hide was put on with the animal's hair outboard whereas the Curraghs have their animal hide inboard. The Bull Boat varies greatly in size but was mainly circular in shape with a flat bottom. As with the Indian Coracles and the Boyne Curraghs the paddler knelt.



According to Hornell with the passing of the Buffalo herds, the Bull Boat is no longer made. Fortunately, however, there are a few survivors lovingly preserved in American Museums. The State Historical Society of North Dakota, by whose kind permission the photograph below appears, have a series of interesting photographs showing how these craft were made and used.

7. TIBETAN CORACLE

Although threatened by increased road building Coracles are still being made and used in Tibet. I commend a particularly interesting article in this November's edition of 'Classic Boat' showing their use on the river Tsangpo. They are used for transportation and are made of Juniper rods covered with Yak hide. It is not unknown for the Tibetan Coracle man to travel down river in his Coracle; having disembarked take his craft to pieces and continue his journey by donkey, then reassemble his Coracle and return to the water for the remainder of his journey. All the contemporary photographs show a quadrilateral shaped craft which is rowed with two sweeps. However, Hornell in 'Water Transport' shows circular Tibetan Coracles with a single paddle. I would very much like to know if these craft are still in use.

I hope the above to some small extent illustrates the infinite variety of the 'Coracle' and its users.

Peter Badge.

CORACLE BUILDING FOR BEGINNERS

When I signed on for the coracle building course I had an idyllic picture of myself seated at the feet of an ancient guru - "Bin building coracles seventy year, man an boy" - absorbing the dark mysteries of this historic craft before sallying into the woods to set steel to timber. Instead I got Gerwyn saying 'I've Blue Petered this a bit for you. It's all done with nails'. The mystique was pretty soon shattered. The first lesson was that there is no mystique, and that we were about to build boats that were knocked together by their users, not constructed by craftsmen.

As we made our introductions, it was apparent that the teaching profession was well represented, much to Gerwyn's disgust 'You can't tell them anything!' After some background chat on the nature of coracles and coraclers, we set to work. I took to it straight away. Give me a hammer and some four inch nails and that's the kind of carpentry I understand; cowshed rather than Chippendale. The work proceeded at a relaxed pace with plenty of opportunity for conversation. By the end of the day we had a seat and gunwales made and some laths nailed on ready for bending to shape.

Thursday saw the arrival of Walter and a consequent ten-fold increase in the laughter decibels. Not an easy man to overlook, Walter. We were also visited by the Star photographer. He ignored all us chaps busting a gut to look like capable craftsmen and concentrated on Paulette. Admittedly, after a brief course of instruction, she was wielding a pretty nifty hammer. Paulette and Gerwyn later appeared in the Star in glorious colour, artistically framed by the bones of a coracle.

The next stage was the bending of the laths. This involved vast amounts of boiling water to soften the ash (and a certain amount of colourful language in the early stages). A Catch 22 here - the laths were easiest to handle when they were too hot to handle. As we became more competent the sound of cracking wood became less frequent, even though some of us ended the day with blistered hands. By now the frame was complete and we could see what it was going to be.

For fixing the calico to the frame, Gerwyn produced a trigger tacker, but I put my faith in the traditional Bosch electronic stapler used by generations of artisans. Having stapled the material on, we then had to make the surplus into tucks and sew them down. Paulette confessed to being a seamstress and it showed.

Other efforts ranged from neat to Walter, who evidently learned his sewing from Dr Frankenstein. Anyway, it was all going to be covered over with bitumen to waterproof the skin. Bitumen is one of those substances like paraffin or fibreglass resin that it is impossible to keep in captivity. Black spots appeared all over the place. My trainers are more waterproof than before, but I can't wear them to garden parties any more.

Thursday had been chosen as the time for our maiden voyages in coracles. We assembled at the boat club where Gerwyn had conjured up a number of different craft for us to try. There was a certain tension in the air as people assessed their chances of staying dry. Harold immediately resolved the issue by falling in. Having experienced the worst, he then became completely fearless, whizzing about with shouts of delight. We were soon happily afloat and having a great time. Steve made the mistake of letting his wife have a go, thus landing himself with the job of building another coracle. Before darkness fell completely, most of us had got to grips with the tubs after a fashion, although the Lewis kids made us all look totally inept.

We began the final day of the course with Gerwyn's guided tour of Rose Cottage. Green Wood issues were convincingly explained. Several of us saw the light there and then and joined the Trust. Back at the station, bandsaw and lathe quickly produced paddles from planks, and then the week had gone. We parted hoping to meet again on the river. Steve set off to get to Norfolk in two hours with a coracle and a kayak on his roof-rack. Must have doubled his fuel consumption.

Terry Kenny.

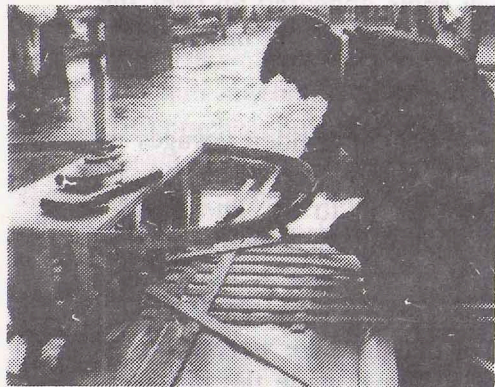
BEWDLEY MUSEUM

Load Street,
Bewdley,
Worcestershire.
DY12 2AE.



TELEPHONE
BEWDLEY
(0299)
403573.

EVENTS 1990



AUGUST 18/19 and 25/26

CORACLE MAKING COURSE.

Come and make a coracle or simply watch the course members applying traditional techniques to manufacture one of these fascinating craft that have such a long association with the River Severn.

DAILY DEMONSTRATIONS.

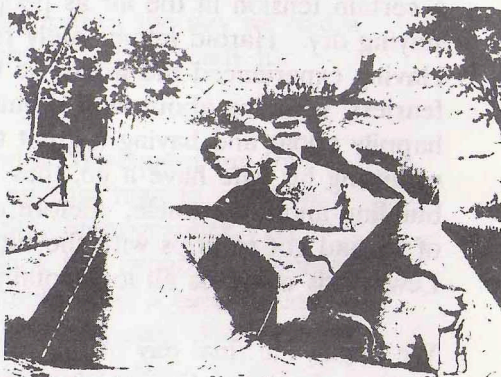
See rope being made on hand turned machinery and discover the secrets of the clay tobacco pipe moulder.

Walk through the traditional herb garden and see the waterwheel and hydraulic ram pump at work.

AUGUST 27 (BANK HOLIDAY)

CORACLE REGATTA.

This will be the Museum's fourth Coracle Regatta on the River Severn at Bewdley and it promises to be bigger and more fun than ever. The Regatta commences at 1pm just upstream of the town.



FIRST SUNDAY OF EACH MONTH.

The museum's unusual belt driven, Victorian reciprocating saw will be in action converting trees into planks. The saw is powered by an impressive Tangye 10 hp stationary oil engine.

President:

Dr J. Geraint Jenkins
Welsh Folk Museum
St. Fagans
Cardiff CF5 6BX
0222 569441

Chairman:

Mr. Peter Badge.
100 Thames Road
Chiswick
London W4 3RE
01 995 6776

Secretary:

Mr. John Williams-Davis
Welsh Folk Museum
St. Fagans
Cardiff CF5 6XB
0222 596441

Treasurer:

Ms Jane Thomas
Bewdley Museum
The Shambles
Load Street
Bewdley
Hereford & Worcester
DY12 2AE
0299 403573

Newsletter:

Gerwyn Lewis
Green Wood Trust
Coalbrookdale
Telford
0952 453080

HONORARY VICE-PRESIDENTS**TYWI**

Mr. Raymond Rees
22 Richmond Terrace
Carmarthen
Dyfed

TEIFI (Lechryd)

Mr. Bernard Thomas
Spring Banks
Llechryd
Cardigan
Dyfed

SEVERN (Shrewsbury)

Mr. John E. Davies
35 Old Heath
Heathgates
Shrewsbury
Shrops.

TEIFI (Cenarth)

Mr. Ronnie Thomas
c/o The Mill
Cenarth
Newcastle Emlyn
Dyfed

TAF

Mr. Edgworth Evans
The Trees
St. Clears
Dyfed

SEVERN

Mr. Eustace Rogers
Severnside
Ironbridge
Telford
Shropshire

CALENDAR OF EVENTS 1990

SECOND IRONBRIDGE CORACLE REGATTA & WOODLAND FESTIVAL

Organised by The GREEN WOOD TRUST

DALE END PARK, IRONBRIDGE, TELFORD, SHROPSHIRE

SATURDAY 5th MAY (BANK HOLIDAY WEEKEND) FROM MIDDAY onwards

We are repeating our successful event of last year while extending the event activity to include a Woodland Festival. Everybody is welcome. Come and try your hand at coracleding or, if you have a coracle, bring it along. Events include an obstacle race and a sprint. If you wish to take part please get in touch with us on 0952 3080

INAUGURAL EVENT OF THE CORACLE SOCIETY

at CENARTH, DYFED on the TEIFI

SUNDAY 28th MAY, from MIDDAY onwards.

The event will consist of demonstrations of coracle making and handling. This will include the well known craft such as the Teifi, Towi, Severn and Ironbridge, through to the exotic such as the Iraqi and Vietnamese.

Commentary will be supplied by Raymond Rees of Carmarthen.

This will be followed by a brief formal occasion at 4pm to establish the founding of the Coracle Society.

AGENDA

1. The Annual General Meeting.
2. Introductory talk by Geraint Jenkins (President of the Coracle Society and Director of the National Museum of Wales).

THE FOURTH BEWDLEY CORACLE REGATTA

AUGUST 27th (Bank Holiday)

This will be the Museum's fourth Coracle Regatta on the River Severn at Bewdley and it promises to be bigger and better than ever. The Regatta commences at 1pm just upstream of the town.

CORACLE MAKING AT THE GREEN WOOD TRUST

23rd – 27th JULY & 27th – 31st AUGUST

Here is an opportunity for you to build and learn to use a coracle. There is a brochure available of all our events. Get in touch with us on 0952 3080.