



The Coracle Society

VOL 2

MAY 1991



OFFICERS OF THE CORACLE SOCIETY

PRESIDENT: J. Geraint Jenkins, D.Sc.Econ., F.S.A., F.M.A.

CHAIRMAN: Peter Badge.

VICE PRESIDENTS

John E. Davies (Severn Shrewsbury), Ronald Davies
(Teifi, Cenarth), Edgworth Evans (Taf), David Maybury
(Dee, Llangollen), Raymond Rees (Towy), Eustace Rogers (Severn,
Ironbridge), Bernard Thomas (Teifi, Llechryd).

HON SECRETARY John Williams Davies, Welsh Folk Museum,
St. Fagans, CARDIFF CF5 6XB.

HON TREASURER Jane Thomas, c/o Bewdley Museum, The Shambles,
Load Street, BEWDLEY, Worcs.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Peter Faulkner

Charles Fogg

Martin Fowler

Gerwyn Lewis

Raymond Rees

Jane Williams Thomas

Hon Auditor David Williams Thomas

INTRODUCTION BY THE PRESIDENT

Greetings at the end of our inaugural year as a Society. Without doubt the fledgling Coracle Society has been truly established and it will undoubtedly develop as an important and influential voice for those interested in the preservation and the development of the most ancient means of water transport. Our aim is to gain as many members as possible and our hard-working Secretary and Treasurer would be delighted to hear from anyone who wishes to join us.

It was particular pleasure for me as President to attend the inaugural meeting in the Teifside village of Cenarth: a village long famed as a centre of coracle fishing. Located at the junction of the three old counties of Cardigan, Pembroke and Carmarthen, Cenarth has always enjoyed a special place in the history of the coracle and we were all delighted to hear that in June of this year a new Coracle Centre will open near Cenarth's ancient mill. This new interpretative centre promises to be a most exciting and worthwhile development. Of course things have changed as the River Teifi and legal regulations have led to the demise of the coracle as a fishing craft on the non-tidal section of the river, but nevertheless here at Cenarth, visitors may still see the variety of coracles and see Ronnie Davies, one of our Vice Presidents, actually making coracles in his workshop. We wish Martin Fowler and his colleagues well in this new, and important project.

In 1991 our Annual meeting will be held in Ironbridge, long-famed not only as a centre of iron production and as the cradle of the Industrial Revolution, but also as a centre of coracle making and usage. In the 1950's as a very young and inexperienced member of staff of the Museum of English Rural Life at the University of Reading, I spent a few days in the company of the splendid Harry Rogers, whose family had been coracle fishermen on the Severn for generations. I am delighted that Harry's son Eustace still follows the family tradition and has provided such a valuable contribution to this Newsletter. It is said that the Rogers family have been coracle men on the Severn for over three hundred years and although salmon fishing from coracles has been illegal on the river since the 1920's the family tradition of coracle making and handling still continues in the remarkable family. We all look forward to meeting Eustace on the 4th May and with the National Coracle Regatta and our own Annual General Meeting in Ironbridge on that day, it promises to be a memorable occasion.

Finally may I appeal for new members for in order to be an effective and influential voice, it is essential that the society increases its members. I can assure you of exciting and worthwhile events and of visits to some of the most beautiful parts of the British Isles.

J. Geraint Jenkins
President

SPECIAL NOTICE

We shall be producing two newsletters a year from now on and would appreciate contributions from members, articles, photographs, letters everything would be welcome. Please send them to

PETER BADGE

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REVIEW OF CORACLE ACTIVITIES IN 1990.

By the Chairman

1. May Day. Ironbridge Regatta.

This event has now become established and attracts large crowds. It was well organised by Gerwyn Lewis and an overwhelming success (despite Gerwyn's having "baptised" the Mayor). The Society displayed three unusual Coracles and a number of photographs which attracted a good deal of attention.

2. Whit Sunday. Cenarth, Newcastle Emlyn, Dyfed.

This was a truly memorable day during which the Society held its AGM, the National Coracle Centre was inaugurated and a delightful display of Coracles of many different types ashore and afloat were watched by a considerable number of people in glorious sunshine with commentaries in English and Welsh. It is a truly unique occasion which allows one to see on the water at the same time Ronnie Davies, Edgworth Evans and Raymond Rees with Bernard Thomas on the bank casting a professional eye over the scene where these well known Coraclemen were mixing freely with young Coraclers from both England and Wales. Whilst this was going on it was possible to see a Vietnamese Coracle and an Iraqi Quffa ashore.

The inaugural AGM was well attended and chaired with great skill and charm by the President.

3. June. National Maritime Museum's Wooden Boat Show.

The Society was represented by its Vice President John Davies and his father who gave an expert display of Coracle building and handling.

4. June. Shrewsbury.

Here again John Davies and his family contributed greatly by demonstrating the Coracleman's unique skills to an appreciative audience at a Local Authority run event which it is to be hoped will often be repeated.

5. July. Llangollen, Clwyd.

The Society was anxious to try and revive an interest in Coracles in an area which had a proud Coracling tradition extending up until the 1950's. The Chairman gave an exhibition of Coracle handling on the Town stretch of the Dee which attracted a considerable amount of interest as did the display of Coracles and photographs in the nearby bandstand the highlight of which was three old Llangollen Coracles assembled by our Vice President, David Maybury without whom the event would not have been the success it undoubtedly was.

The Society is most grateful to the Town Council, the Pheasant hotel and ECTARC for the many kindnesses and assistance given. It was as a direct result of this pioneering event that the Society was invited to give a display at the World Fly Fishing Championships at Ty Mawr, Wrexham (about which more later).

6. August. The Game Fair, Margam Park, Port Talbot.

This saw an excellent and highly skilled display of Coracle making and handling by Raymond Rees. At the same time the Secretary and colleagues displayed some interesting old Teifi Coracle frames and photographs which attracted a lot of interest.

7. August Cilgerran Regatta.

The Society was not invited to this event but was very pleased to learn that it was attended by Coraclemen from both the Teifi and Towy and hope we may be present this year.

8. August Coraclemaking Weekends.

These now well settled events took place at Bewdley Museum, Wores and the Greenwood Trust at Ironbridge. They were as usual very fully attended including two gentlemen who had travelled from Holland to Bewdley to take part.

9. August Bank Holiday Monday.

Bewdley Coracle Regatta.

Due to an immense amount of preparation and hard work by Charles Fogg and other stalwarts this now nationally known event was once more a great success watched by hundreds and attracted considerable media attention. It always give those who have just made their first Coracle the chance to use it on the water in the company of seasoned Coracle enthusiasts.

10. September. World Fly Fishing Competitions, Ty Mawr.

We were privileged to be asked to give a display. Under very difficult circumstances we managed an exhibition of net fishing by Ronnie Davies and an interesting static display despite very high winds. Many thanks must be given to Ronnie, Terry Kenny for stepping into the breach at very short notice, David Maybury and above all Jane Williams Thomas who gave great support both spiritual and alcoholic throughout.

11. July to September.

We lent a Spey Curragh to form part of a basket making display at Dittling Museum in Sussex. As a result we were provided with a fascinating account of Coracle usage in India in the days of the Raj (see "From the River Bank" later on in this magazine).

TRADITIONAL CORACLEMAN EUSTACE ROGERS

Eustace Rogers is more than a coracle maker, he is part of the fabric of Ironbridge. His family have lived on the same site since before there was an iron bridge, and they were all bargemen and coracle men. Indeed, Eustace's grandfather, Tommy, took the last barge down the Severn, loaded with 40 tons of firebricks. When that barge came back up to Shrewsbury, Eustace's father, Harry was a lad on board.

His earliest recollection of coracles - "apart from pottering down here with me Dad and Uncle Jim in the same coracle as them to begin with" is going up river with them to lay eel lines. A long line would be laid across the river, passing back and forth about three times, with a number of short lines tied on, which were baited with "jack-sharps and bullnobs". These were left overnight to be lifted at first light. As the ends of the line were fixed to sinkers, not fastened to the bank, a drag made from a weighted piece of holly bush was used to find it. The eels were dropped into the back of the boat, which at that time was partitioned off by a solid board rather than the latticework that is usual on Ironbridge coracles today.

Many of the inhabitants of the Gorge would use their coracles for setting eel lines at weekends, having used them for transport during the week. Because men often lived on the opposite side of the river to their work in the brickyards "they'd got to walk up and pay a toll here (the Iron Bridge) or walk down to Coalport bridge and pay a toll. So me Dad said they'd be up here all the while and have a coracle for a few shilling". It made sense to use it to supplement the diet. The opening of the Free Bridge near Coalport china works in 1908 took away the need for a coracle to cross the river, although it continued to be used for other purposes.

While there was once a high concentration of coracles in the Ironbridge Gorge, not many were used for net fishing. Eustace remembers only three, and does not recall his father speaking of many more in this time. The technique was different from that used in Wales in that the coracle operated singly, not in pairs. The net was about four feet deep and had a large mesh outwalling back and front enclosing a finer mesh between them. The net was buoyed with corks and the horse-hair foot rope was weighted. The fisherman, having pegged one end to the bank "would paddle one-handed towards the middle, paying out the net, and then he'd come back to the side. When he'd finished, he was inside this water he'd got cordoned off. He'd got a beating pole with him, like a broomstick with a big leather disc on. He'd plunge that in the water and you'd see them corks going". The disturbed fish would swim through the first outwalling, driving the finer middle mesh through the wide mesh on the other side "like a rabbit in a purse net. Canna get out". Net fishing came to an end with the 1923 Act. Strangely enough, given their reputation for poaching, Eustace doesn't know of anybody breaking the law.

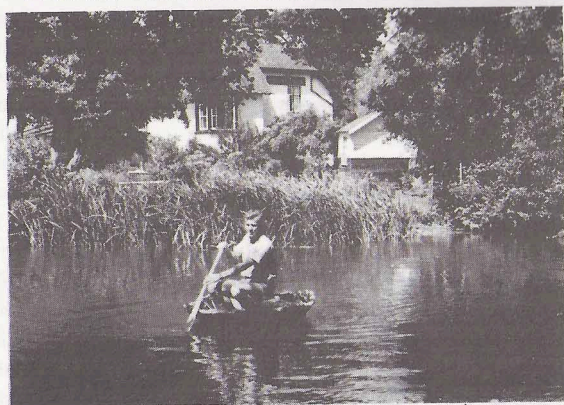
The coracles in use at that time were the same as those Eustace makes now. "The only thing is, there's no hard and fast rule how many splints you use. You'd see one nine by nine, one nine by eight or something. What I've done is use me own discretion about the quality of the timber. If it's been thinner, then I've put perhaps extra one or maybe two splints in". The cover was often two calico bedsheets, a double thickness being used to compensate for their poor quality. Frames have been painted as long as Eustace can remember, and always green. He pays much more attention to the final appearance than did the old coracle men - "As long as it would float, they didn't care what it looked like". All coracles were much of a size, except that Tommy Rogers, being nearly eighteen stone, had one bigger than average. It was not the practice, as in some places, to build smaller coracles for children. Eustace began in a full-sized boat and believes that a smaller one would be "dodgy".

Coracles were very valuable in the poaching carried by Ironbridge men. So notorious were they that this small place once merited twelve policemen and a resident inspector. The coracle was the get-away vehicle, enabling catches of rabbits to be ferried quietly downstream while the rest of the men walked home free of any incriminating evidence. When they were caught, they were often tried by the landowners whom they robbed, resulting in long sentences. But their activities evidently played an important part in the local economy. "I can bring you now people from up Madeley, when I meet them, they've said many times "We were raised on rabbits and fish from the poachers".

Were it not for the rabbit catching after the building of the Free Bridge and the end of fishing, perhaps the Ironbridge coracle would have disappeared from the Severn.



MODERN CORACLE MAN.
PETER G. FAULKNER of Leintwardine, North Hfds.,



Peter G. Faulkner has become a familiar figure on the Coracle scene of late in his hide covered Teme Coracle. He is known for the considerable distances he has travelled in his craft. To date he has navigated his beloved Teme from its source to its confluence; paddled from Llanidloes to Gloucester on the Severn and made an attempt last year on the Shannon but only managed 30 miles due to very unfriendly head winds. This year he intends to voyage down the Wye.

The Society is particularly interested in him because he has made a new type of Coracle for the river which he has known intimately since childhood. There is no tradition of Coracle usage on the Teme in living memory although Peter's Grandfather, 'Pop' Price used a Coracle, possibly built by Eustace Rogers' father on the Teme at Ludlow. Whilst the Society is determined to protect existing Coracles it also looks to interest in Coracles spreading beyond West Wales and the Severn. The Coracles Peter uses and makes for others are a very positive step in this direction.

Peter is the first to acknowledge that the Coracles he makes owe a very great deal to Eustace Rogers of Ironbridge who gave him such good advice and encouragement in his making of hide covered Coracles. They are the only two people making such craft that the Society knows of. His Coracles are similar to but not identical with Eustace Roger's, being slightly larger and more robust with subtle differences in paddle shape and mode of construction processes.

The Teme Coracle which takes about 45 hours to make is virtually dish shaped, consisting of hazel in the round, a withy gunwale and 'Floor' and covered with cow hide sewn on with an 18' plaited horsehair cord. The seat and paddle are made of Ash. All the materials involved are obtained in and around Leintwardine. Every aspect of the building process is carried out by Peter personally including tanning the hide and spinning the horsehair. Last year he planted his own withy bed. Peter's reasons for choosing to make hide covered Coracles rather than other types of Coracles such as, say, a Towy or Shrewsbury Coracle are many and diverse. They are not easy to articulate in a short article. The history of the craft, being the second oldest after the dug out canoe. The fact that nothing manufactured such as nails etc. appear in them and that no two such Coracles can never be the same.

Finally, an abiding wish to be different and contrary (a sentiment not unknown to others interested in Coracles). These are just some of the factors which lead to the creation of the Teme Coracle which has become an important part of Marcher life. It is profoundly to be hoped that others in parts of the country not traditionally associated with Coracles may be inspired by Peter Faulkner's example.

BREAKFAST WITH THE BARROWS - 1950 by David Livingstone

I had proposed to my fiancée Jane Barrow a couple of days before and had been accepted. But in those days it was customary to ask permission of the bride's too, and I did so over breakfast at Cophorne Mill, Fladbury, where we were all spending the weekend. Her mother was delighted and gave her immediate blessing. Her father said "Yes, of course: but before becoming a genuine member of the family we shall expect you to build a Coracle. Since I had been in love with Jane for two years and in love with anything that floated for even longer, I readily agreed to the terms. It seemed like a good deal and so it turned out to be.

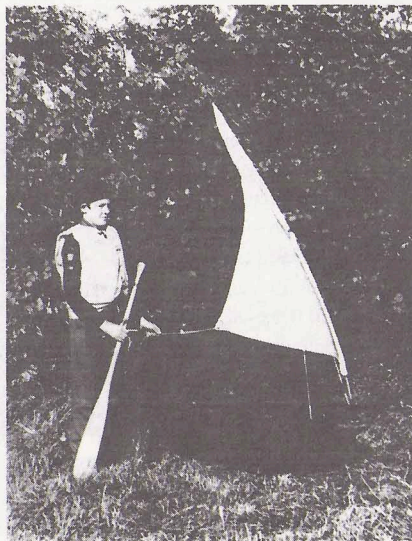
I don't know what started Richard Barrow on Coracle building, but the Mill has been in the Barrow family since 1894, so it may have been his father, Lewis, who was a bold and slightly eccentric engineer. The Mill fleet when I first knew it consisted of an enormous Coracle (more like a flat bottomed Curragh) length about 12' and a beam of 4'6". Another of Richard's inventions was a sailing Coracle, complete with dagger board and lugsail. It was never a great success partly because it is difficult to propel under the two ferry wires which separates the Mill from the up stream reach and partly because the winds on that part of the Avon are anyway fickle. There were two or three others of a more normal Ironbridge pattern, but the one I remember best was the "safe or visitors" coracle, a tiny round bottomed saucer in which it was almost impossible to stay upright. My brother in law, Ben Barman later built a similar Coracle in aluminium. The design was different but the end result was the same. Sadly both have subsequently been lost over the weir. We are fortunate not to have lost a paddler.

Since then I have built seven Coracles (two in fibre glass) all more or less to Harry Roger's Ironbridge design. Apart from his racy talk, it was a delight to watch him at work. However, methods and materials change and for anyone who may be interested in mine, I use 1/4 planed oak laths (straight grained of course: if the grain runs out it is a waste of time to use it) held together by copper rivets. I find this give the right degree of rigidity and 'give'. A really strong seat support, with a strong anchorage onto the gunwale is essential, especially in the Ironbridge pattern which has no bulkhead to take the paddler's weight. As a cover I use heavy duty canvas, which I used to daub with a mixture of bitumastic and creosote but no longer do as when left out in the sun it tends to crack. I now use a waterproofing solution which maintains its flexibility better. Even so the Coracles seem to need covering every 8 to 10 years.

Purists in Wales are very properly more interested in Coracles as working boats and may well think our activities on the Avon frivolous, as indeed they are, but what fun! In James Hornell's book 'British Coracles and Irish Curraghs' 1938 (p.270) he says 'Even today Coracles are in use on this river (the Avon) but it is a recent introduction and is not the continuation of a local tradition as far as I know'. How long does it take to become a local tradition? My eldest son in law, Terry Smyth, has recently completed his first Coracle, and although different from mine it is a good one; and it was never a condition of marriage.

On reading Hornell's superb and scholarly works I sometimes wish I could have put him in the 'safe or visitors' Coracle.

'THE CHANNEL CORACLE'



The 'Channel Coracle' reappeared in 1967 at the bay of Greve de Lecq an inlet among the steep cliffs on the north coast of Jersey. The geography is important in everything related to Coracles! I was Rector of the little Parish of St. Mary and had started a Scout Troop five years earlier. As another summer came on I was looking for some new activity to interest the boys, when, one evening, coming in from the garden I happened to see on T.V. a group of Welsh schoolgirls who had made a Coracle for research purposes. At once I decided to write to them but no reply came.

In retrospect this was the key to our success. We had no idea how to build a Coracle and so started from scratch - we also took the exciting hint that there might be something to be discovered. By the autumn our first coracle was built using willow from a nearby valley but being ignorant of technique the 'gunwale' was not woven but a single piece of willow secured by a series of square lashings! Subsequent Coracles also included much square and sheer lashing though later the 'gunwale' was attached by a more sophisticated method - slipping the sharpened ends of the 'ribs' into splits created by hammer and screwdriver. Apart from this our first effort had the general shape of a largish Coracle but was six feet in length.

One minute after the launch in a large pool on the beach a radical change was made. I could not control the wobble and so immediately the seat was cut out! Sitting on the floor was the norm from now on and it was soon found that this Coracle could comfortably accommodate two facing each other! It must be remembered that we were shortly to face Atlantic breakers and we did not wish to be hampered by tradition. In fact we began to think in terms of rediscovering the type of vessel that must have been used to colonise these islands some 8,000 B.C. when this and the raft were the only easy options. Incidentally, we soon ruled out the raft or dug out: we have 30 foot tides and the thought of dragging such weights hundreds of yards up or down to the sea does not bear consideration. Something light and manoeuvrable was essential.

The 'Channel Coracle' evolved through many experiments. Seeing how easily our first was blown about by the wind our next was made as small as possible, so as to sink into the waves, with a triangulated frame for strength. By now I had noticed that tarred fabric only gets torn where it touches the frame - so the frame was reduced to the minimum, which also helped eke out our

limited stock of natural branches. These were sometimes split but usually fitted as found on the tree! This also brought the shape nearer to a traditional boat: much later I discovered that the word BOAT probably meant a leather covered vessel. Boat in Breton is BALG OR BAK which is near to BAG - but I leave that to the experts. We even made one nearly fourteen feet long. Gradually, though, we settled for two basic types: the 6 - 8 foot two seater which was soon to be seen using various styles of sail; and the single seater, smaller than the traditional Coracle but sculled, while the larger ones used oars. A dozen or so were made in all using various woods.

Perhaps in future editions I may be permitted to record our 'voyages' and how we discovered the true Coracles 'rig' and 'sail', our early experience having convinced us that no-one would want to paddle far!

M. C. Millard



DEE CORACLES

By Peter Badge.

When Welsh Coracles are discussed today thoughts automatically turn to West Wales and yet it is on the great Northern river, the DYFYRDWY, or as it is known in English, the DEE where most Coracles were found. Indeed as long ago as 1810 Pennant in his "Tours in Wales" referred to their being much used for salmon fishing in the DEE. Until the 1920's Coracles were found in considerable numbers from BALA to OVERTON and BANGOR IS Y COED.

DEE Coracles divided into two very distinct types differing from each other in size, capacity, construction, use and history.

LOWER DEE CORACLES.



'By kind permission of the Clwyd Record Office'

These were principally used around Bangor and Overton, near Wrexham for commercial salmon net fishing much in the same way as they are on the rivers Teifi, Towy and Taf today. (One of these net fishermen, James Johnson, used to make baskets in the close season which grew into a thriving business). The net they used, however, was heavier but basically similar to the West Walian design. This type of fishing was not popular with sport fishermen. As a result, the local water authority started to restrict licenses from the mid 19th century onwards; no new licenses being granted. Consequently Coracle fishing on the Dee between Bangor and Chester ceased at the end of the Salmon fishing season in 1920, the last three licenses (6 Coracles) having been bought out for £1,000.00.

This type of Coracle would have been lost forever as there is scant information about it but for the actions of the late HARRY STANT who was so attached to his craft that built a shed for it in his garden at Bangor where it was seen in 1935 by JAMES HORNELL who recorded its dimensions and methods of construction as well as photographing it. It is today in the WELSH FOLK MUSEUM, St. Fagans, Cardiff.

It differs from all other Coracles in a number of ways:

1. It has a great number of laths.
2. These laths are much narrower and thinner than any others the writer has encountered.

3. There is a stout median strut which runs from seat to stern gunwale. (This feature is only found in Dee Coracles). It enables the Coracle to be stood on its "tail" for long periods without distorting the frame.
4. It has no less than 6 gunwale strips.
5. The great bulge of its tumble home sides.
6. Its elegant long paddle has a notched iron band at the top for carrying purposes.

For more information about this most attractive Coracle see:

1. British Coracles by James Hornell p. 287 et seq.
2. Nets and Coracles by J. Geraint Jenkins p.176 et seq.
3. The Coracle by the same author p.99.

UPPER DEE CORACLES.



'By kind permission of the Clwyd Record Office'

As recently as 1960 an article appeared in "Country Quest" stating that the only river on which Coracles could be seen in North Wales was the Dee. My researches suggest that Coracle usage on the upper Dee in any appreciable numbers ended somewhere between 1945 and the early 1950's. It has been suggested that changes in reel technology brought about the demise of the upper Dee Coracle but I suspect there were other reasons.

The upper Dee Coracle was used between Lake Bala and the mouth of the river Ceiriog. They were to be found in their greatest numbers in the Llangollen area. (I shall refer to them as Llangollen Coracles from here on).

Llangollen Coracles are interesting for a number of reasons, including their history, size, construction and the way in which and by whom they were used.

HISTORY

I have touched on this already and will come back to it later but what is clear beyond any doubt is that they are the last of the major Coracles to die and that is why the Society is so anxious to assist in their revival. To that end we gave displays at Llangollen and Ty Mawr last year and hope to do likewise at Ty Mawr this year.

SIZE

Although single seater Coracles were made the majority were two seaters. The reason for this is that while one person paddles the Coracle the other fished with rod and line. The late Jack Hughes-Parry described these Coracles as being almost square and measuring approximately 4' 9" in length by 4' 7" in width which corresponds with the dimensions given for such craft in our President's definitive work 'Nets and Coracles'.

They were some 20" deep which is exceptional for a British Coracle.

CONSTRUCTION.

Like their Lower Dee sisters they had considerably more laths than other Coracles. They also had the stout supporting median bar in their rear compartment.

The laths were of sawn ash.

The principal differences between the Llangollen and Lower Dee Coracles (besides size) are as follows:-

- a. Their laths are broader and planed.
- b. The Llangollen had a short diagonal lath at each corner.
- c. They had two rows of pillars supporting the seats.
- d. No carrying strap was present. The method of portage was to rest the seat across the shoulders and hold the gunwale in a 10" to 2" position.
- e. The paddle was short about 4' in length.
- f. The frame was covered with sail cloth or stout canvas which comes as no surprise when the Dee is seen in full spate.

Although pitch and tar was used to impregnate the covering latterly Bitumastic paint was used.

(The late A. S. Lloyd Jones built a Llangollen Coracle using rivetted aluminium strips in place of wooden laths. He is reputed to have travelled from Llangollen to the sea in it).

Fortunately, examples of these interesting old craft remain. The well known Robertson family of Llantysillio have at least two. There is another in a craft shop by Llangollen bridge. But, perhaps the best specimen, probably about 100 years old and in sound condition was very recently given to the Welsh Folk Museum by Mrs. M. L. Whitworth of Bryn Oerog, Trevor, Clwyd. It was originally made for her father, a noted local sportsman, by one of the well known Coracle making Roberts' family.

THE WAY IN WHICH AND BY WHOM THEY WERE USED

Perhaps the most intriguing thing about Llangollen Coracles is the way in which they were used. Writing in 1915 A. G. Bradley described how he secured the services of a local Coracle man, Evan Evans to fish the Dee in the Llangollen area. Evans, who was a licensed Coracle man, came up on the morning train to Carrog Station with his Coracle. He met his 'fare' at Llansaintffraid Bridge. They then travelled for 7 or 8 miles to Berwyn station. During this journey Evans handled the Coracle with his short paddle and Bradley fished using a short stiffish rod of 8 or 9 feet. I was told by the late Major Tom Hughes Parry that his father, Captain Jack Hughes Parry, and many other riparian owners used to fish from a Coracle in this way before and during the last war. I have also seen a photograph of the late Duncan Robertson of Llantysillio Hall, aged 16, sitting in a Llangollen Coracle with the Estate's Coracle man, whom he told me wore a bowler in winter and a straw hat in the summer, sitting beside him.

It has been my recent pleasure to correspond with a distinguished fishery expert, Neil W. Graesser, O.B.E., M.I.F.M., who now lives in Scotland but who used to live on Deeside. He has very kindly allowed me to reproduce parts of our correspondence on the subject of Llangollen Coracles. I can think of no better way of concluding this article than by sharing with you his very erudite account of Llangollen Coracle usage being someone with a unique practical experience.

Descriptions of Llangollen Coracles, their construction and usage are to be found in the following books:-

1. Nets & Coracles - J. Geraint Jenkins
2. The Coracle - by the same author
3. British Coracles - James Hornell
4. Fishing Fantasy - J. Hughes-Parry
5. Advanced Salmon Fishing, Fly Fishing for Salmon and Finer points of Salmon Fishing, all written by N. W. Graesser, O.B.E., M.I.F.M.
6. Clear Water by A. G. Bradley
7. Sounds of Running Water by David Maybury

Many thanks for your letter dated the 30th November, 1990, seeking more information re. Coracles and their use on the Welsh Dee.

Firstly, this river was ideally suited to Coracle fishing, for two main reasons.

1. The river was either heavily wooded with mature deciduous woods encroaching close to a bank or banks of many of the main pools, or the banks were tree lined with fine old hardwood trees. In either case, these trees often impeded casting clearance for the bank fishermen, but the problem could be easily overcome when these pools were fished from a Coracle, positioned a short distance out.
2. Many of these pools had an interesting flat rock formation which shelved and protruded a considerable distance out into the deep water of the pool from one or other bank. At low water these soft rock

outcrops were often high and dry, but at medium or high fishing water levels they were covered by one to three feet of water. The fish sometimes lay close to the edge of these, as the shelves were often undermined at their outward point. Although it was often possible to wade down these rock ledges, and fish the pool comfortably by doing so, this method was seldom successful. I believe because this caused too much vibration, and the fish were disturbed.

If, on the other hand, one positioned one's Coracle and floated over these rock outcrops, using a spiked staff to hold it in position to enable the angler to cast, it caused no disturbance and proved very successful. The handler could let the Coracle down two yards after the angler had covered his water from each position. If, when he reached the tail of the pool, he wished to fish it down again, he merely landed, lifted the Coracle onto his back, walked up to the head of the pool and relaunched. If, on the other hand, he wished to move on down here merely shipped his spiked staff on board, and by use of his paddle, moved out into the river and shot the rapids into the next pool downstream, without any problem.

We often used to walk up to the head of the beat, in the morning, with the Coracle on our back and spend the entire day fishing from the Coracle, slowly working downstream from pool to pool. The fish and tackle were carried in the Coracle and apart from coming ashore to land fish, lunch, or fish a pool down again, we were afloat the whole day.

In answer to your questions in order -

Question: "On what part of the Dee were your Coracles used?"

1. My father and his father before him, owned the Argoed Hall water from approximately 1860 to 1955. This beat was near Vroncysllte, midway between Llangollen and Chirk. Its upstream boundary was near the Old Mill at Plas yn Pentre farm and it extended downstream to the aquaduct carrying the canal across the valley. There were five main pools on the beat - the Mill, Pentre, Summer House, Run, and Major. The first two were mainly fished by Coracle only, whilst the other three could be fished either from the bank or by Coracle. There were also several other smaller pools worth a cast, such as the Willow, Gantry and Shelves.

Question: "Roughly over what period?"

2. For the entire period of our ownership up to 1947, when our last Coracle handler died. Even after that, we either worked them ourselves, or borrowed a handler from someone else.

Question: "Who made these Coracles?"

3. My father's last Coracle handler, Robert Jones, sometimes built his

own, or they were purchased. Unfortunately, I cannot remember the source.

Question: "Do you recall the names of others who used Coracles in the same locality?"

4. Nearly all the proprietors used them during that era, to name but a few, Sir Henry Robertson, Captain Hughes Parry, at the Fechan; Chirk Castle and many more between Corwen and Llangollen, and again from Chirk downstream to Overton. It would be fair to say that certainly between 1920 - 1940 few of the main beats on the river did not use Coracles. After the war, however, Coracle handlers became far scarcer and harder to find. I doubt whether at the present time there is a Coracle in use on the river.

At the point where we landed with the Coracle, there were wooden parallel rails some four to five feet off the ground, on which the Coracle was placed, upside down, at the end of the day's fishing. This enabled the Coracle handler to bend and raise himself up with the Coracle on his back and walk up to where he wished to launch it each day, a far easier method than having to lift it up on to his back which he would otherwise have had to do, if it had merely been left on the ground. Many of these stances are still in evidence, in several places I know on the river, even to this day.

FROM THE RIVER BANK

1. EXTRACT FROM MRS. BOURNE'S MOTHER'S BOOK ON HER LIFE AND THAT OF HER LATE HUSBAND AT THE BEGINNING OF THE CENTURY IN INDIA.

(Mrs. Bourne is closely connected with the Dittling Museum in Sussex).

"Podanur Madras Residency, S. India, 1906.

When the Bavari was not in flood and Jim could get away from his work, he went for some exciting fishing expeditions in a Coracle. These Coracles were made of strong plaited reeds and looked like completely round baskets, just big enough to hold two people. The men who owned them and guided them in the river seemed to have them completely under control, although they only had one paddle, hand made by themselves. The river runs fast at times and has big rocks and little rocks and rapids in it, but these experts gave a twist here and a twist there and sent the Coracles spinning round to miss all obstacles in the most amazing way.

I asked Jim how he could possibly fish swirling about like that and he said it was an art. He certainly proved it by catching the fish.

When the Coracle man got to a quiet place on the river, such as a deep pool, he manoeuvred his craft to a likely spot, where he thought the fish might be lying, so that Jim could fish that spot for a time before being dashed through the next rapid.

The Coracle men were expert fishermen themselves and spent their lives up and down the river, swirling - one can only call it that - downstream and then getting out at the place they wanted to and carrying their Coracles on their heads back to their village, or to an appointed place, on the river to start swirling down again. I still have a snapshot of Jim fishing from one of those impossible looking baskets. He certainly enjoyed it enormously.

To this day I can never make out how anybody could stand up in a Coracle, let alone fish when it slid over a rock, as it frequently did, in that rushing river...."

(There is a Coracle in the Coracle Centre at Cenarth which was made in S. India. Editor)

2. "I'd just closed the curtains on a frosty afternoon when there was a ring at the bell. Two large R.S.P.C.A. men stood at the door. "Are you the man who make Coracles?" I pleaded guilty. "Perhaps you can help us. We've got a swan frozen in the middle of a pond and we need a flat bottomed boat to slide across the ice to get to him. A chap at Market Drayton Marina said to try you". My fibreglass Shrewsburyish Coracle was in the back garden and a few minutes later it was in the back of their escort van speeding to the rescue. After a while they returned highly delighted with the result; the boat was perfect for the job and the swan was safe and sound. Unfortunately I couldn't persuade them to buy one!" Terry Kenny. (Terry is the author of the excellent article on Eustace Rogers and like Peter Faulkner one of the new generation of Coracle builders. Editor).

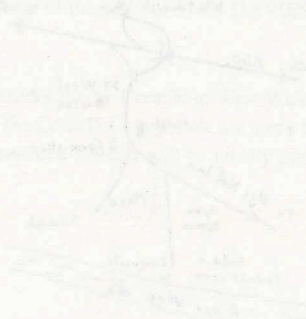
3. MRS. ROSEMARY PREECE of Malvern, Worcs, posed this rhetorical question following her successful participation in last year's BEWDLEY CORACLE MAKING COURSE. It was her first contact with Coracles and those who make and use them although she is a very experienced canoeist. ANY THOUGHTS?

"... I ask myself why the Coracle has disappeared from our rivers, while Kayak and Canoe increase in popularity. The reason must be that no convenient sport has been modelled around the craft. The existing water sports do not really lend themselves. One could I suppose have placid water salmon, though I am reliably informed that someone has taken a Coracle down the Serpent's tail! Sprint would prove interesting, marathon exhausting, polo would need reinforced boats. Something entirely new is needed. Perhaps a chukka of polo, or water born cricket, or tennis or golf? Has anyone any bright ideas? Surely we can revive this 2000 year old part of our heritage".

FOR SALE

SHREWSBURY CORACLE, "RACING VERSION": LONGER, NARROWER, SHALLOWER, BUT LESS STABLE! VERY WELL MADE; EXCELLENT CONDITION - ONLY 4 MONTHS OLD.

CONTACT MRS. B. WATSON (0562) 829843 Day Time or (0562) 851349. Evenings.



CALENDAR OF EVENTS

1991

May 4th Coracle Regatta and AGM

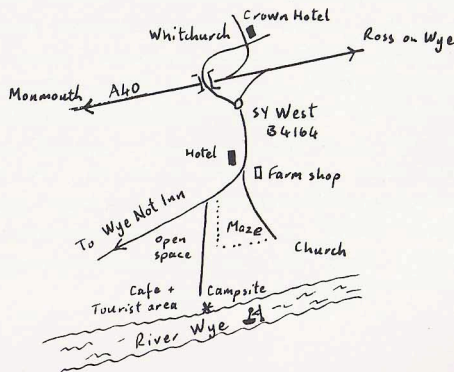
The Regatta this year will be held in conjunction with a 'Kids and Conservation' event. Coracling activities will begin at 12:00 with a Best Dressed Coracle competition, followed by a team obstacle race (mixed ability teams decided by the organisers). After a taster spot for the public there will be sprint races for the more serious types. The final competition will be a chance to show off by performing your favourite tricks and stunts - hot-dogging in Coracles. To round off the afternoon, a gentle cruise down river will bring you to this year's A.G.M. In the evening there will be a D.I.Y. barbecue at the Greenwood Trust's station site. For people wishing to stay over, there is camping space available or one of the famous wooden tents. Ring (0952) 433080 to book your space.

June: Wooden Boat Show National Maritime Museum.

June

8th & 9th Coracle weekend at Symonds Yat

There will be a weekend get-together over the 8th and 9th at the Symonds Yat Camping Park, Hereford. It's an ideal spot on the banks of the Wye, perfect for Coracling. Other attractions include Yat Rock and its peregrines, and excellent walks and climbs. The campsite has all the usual facilities and is near to shops and pubs. Fees range from £4.50 for a small tent to £5.50 for a frame tent or caravan. So Wye not join us? (Sorry!) Please book a.s.a.p. as the site gets very busy. The phone number is (0600) 890883. Tell them that you are one of us, otherwise they may put you with normal people.



23rd June **Grand opening of the National Coracle Centre at Cenarth,**
Newcastle Emlyn. Coracle displays and races 2 p.m. Formal
opening at 3.30 p.m. at the Centre. Come and see an
American Bull Boat, and Coracles from India and the British
Isles and Ireland. It is hoped that they will be joined by a
Coracle from Vietnam and a Quffa from Iraq.

July 5/6/7 **Coracle making course at the Greenwood Trust, Ironbridge.**

July

11th-14th **Tall Ships event at Milford Haven**

August **The Coracle making course at Greenwood Trust.**
26-30th

August
17/18th **Coracle making course at Bewdley Museum, Bewdley, Worcs**
&
24/25th

August
26th **Bewdley Coracle Regatta.**

November **End of season dinner.**
2nd

The End of Season dinner will be held on Saturday 2nd November at Castel Malgwyn
Hotel, Llechryd.

OBITUARY

The Society were sad to hear of the death of MAX DAVIES of Abercych just before Christmas
1990.

Maxie was a great ambassador for the Coracle in West Wales and was a vital link in the initial
stages of the creation of the Coracle Centre. We are sorry he won't see its opening in June. His
photographic skills and sense of humour will be greatly missed.

Martin Fowler.