



The Coracle Society



Vol III

February 1992

OFFICERS OF THE CORACLE SOCIETY

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Raymond Rees
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Honorary Auditor: Position vacant

Photograph on cover is of Sam Roberts
Dee (Llangollen) Coracle man

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

JUNE

11 - 13 Coracle building course at Greenwood Trust,
Coalbrook Dale, Telford

14 Ironbridge (Severn) Regatta

JULY

3 - 5 Coracle building course - Greenwood Trust

16 Display at Ty Mawr Country Park, Cae Gwilym Road,
(provisional - Cefn Mawr, Wrexham, Clwyd
date to be confirmed)

AUGUST

22 - 23	Coracle Building Course	-	Bewdley Museum
28 - 30	Coracle Building Course	-	Greenwood Trust
28 - 30	Coracle Building Course	-	Bewdley Museum
31	Bewdley Regatta	-	Bewdley
	Coracle Society AGM	-	Bewdley

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Perhaps not surprisingly, 1991 was a much quieter year than 1990 when the founding of the Society naturally attracted quite a lot of attention and general interest which has not been maintained at the same level.

It is inevitably difficult to run a Society covering the whole of the British Isles and with this in mind we have held our AGMs in different locations. We moved last year from West Wales (Cenarth) to Shropshire (Ironbridge) and this year will meet in Worcestershire (Bewdley).

We also decided that with such a diverse membership we should act primarily as a vehicle of communication both between our members and also as a contact point for those, who for one reason or another, have an interest in Coracles and allied craft, and particularly those who make and use them. Instead of attempting to organise events nationally, we decided to support local initiatives such as those run in Cenarth, Ironbridge and Bewdley.

The principal events of last year were :

1. In May the traditional Ironbridge Regatta, at which the Society displayed diverse coracles, took place. It was well organised by Gerwyn Lewis and Terru Kenny. It attracted large crowds on the river bank who witnessed not only a variety of races, both team and individual, but also an unintentional display of underwater coraceling by a local Mayor! Following a paddle from the Regatta site to the Ironbridge, the AGM took place in the premises of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum to whom we are most grateful. We were honoured that one of our Dutch friends (and members) came to the regatta and meeting from The Netherlands.
2. The formal opening of the Coracle Centre took place in June. It was carried out by Earl Lloyd George who made a short but witty speech to a large crowd of Cenarth residents and those who had contributed to the Centre in one way or another. He paid a very well deserved tribute to Martin and Melita Fowler for their remarkable achievement in setting up such an attractive venue for a vital piece of British heritage, virtually single-handed. Everyone was particularly pleased to see Peggy Davies present. She is the widow of the late Max Davies who had so much to do with the genesis of the Centre. On the same occasion, races and a display of Coracle acrobatics took place on the Teifi. Ashore, visitors to the Centre were able to see an Iraqi Kuffa and a Vietnamese coracle, which had been given to the Centre that day by Major David Goddard, of the Exeter Maritime Museum. It was a good opportunity to compare these unusual craft with the British, Irish, Indian and North American coracles already at the Centre.
3. Symonds Yat Weekend. This also took place in June. An account of it by Terry Kenny, who organised it, follows later.
4. On August Bank Holiday Monday, the annual Coracle Regatta took place at Bewdley. As always it was very well attended. An account of it is given later on in this newsletter, so I shall say no more than that it maintained its very high standard. Long may it continue to do so.

SYMONDS YAT WEEKEND by Terry Kenny

The gathering at Symonds Yat in June turned out to be more like a preliminary reconnaissance. But still, my neighbour and I with spouses and a friend, enjoyed a superb weekend. We went on some very pleasant paddles. Nigel and I spent some time on the rapids after the canoeists had gone and played until we were soaked and exhausted. Between times we polluted the atmosphere with a barbecue, watched the peregrines on the Rock and treated the campsite to a display of juggling. As we were about to leave for home, a group of people arrived with a Monnow truckle, so we had to stop and play with that and exchange stories.

So how about joining us next year?

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CORACLE MAKING AT BEWDLEY by Graham Fisher

An account of the Museum's now well known Coracle making Course and Annual Coracle Regatta.

Being a member of the Coracle Society from its outset but possessing, as yet, only a modest knowledge of the craft themselves, I felt the best way to improve matters by leaps and bounds would be to actually make one of the things. And so it was that, after paying my £85 and working my way through the waiting list, I found myself in company with a dozen or so other enthusiasts at the Bewdley Museum Coracle Building Course.

A bright Saturday morning in late August saw a dozen different folks from as many different backgrounds being welcomed to the course and facilities by curator Charles Fogg. After brief introductions and the obligatory cup of tea, we migrated to the rear yard, where straightaway we were introduced to the fundamentals of seat construction. All materials except certain basic tools and equipment were provided and over the next few days the finer points of the "Shrewsbury" and other styles were to become increasingly familiar to us under the expert tutelage of Charles and his colleagues, Mike Hanson and Dave Darby.

By the time the seat had been constructed and the gunwale strip applied we had already grasped a fundamental principle of coracle building, namely that no two are ever the same. From that point on every craft under construction, although following the basic Shrewsbury pattern, assumed the proportions and idiosyncrasies of its respective constructors.

As we grappled through the day, soaking, bending and, frequently, breaking lathes into shape, we were disturbed only by Charles or his colleagues taking time from their own projects (some weird and wonderful designs under wraps there lads!) to offer advice or take instruction a stage further. By the end of Saturday we had all completed a basic skeleton and the crafts were self-evidently taking shape. By the end of next day (Sunday) the entire framework was assembled and left to dry.

The following weekend saw us applying calico to the framework and stitching it to shape, followed by the application of waterproofing, bitumastic paint - a concession to modernism over traditional hot pitch but still horrendous stuff to work with. Assembling of a simple paddle completed the job and final touches included the fixing of a carrying rope across the seat (the rope being spun from fibres on the museum's own historic rope-making equipment) and the liberal splashing of a bit of paint around the gunwale rubbing strip and paddle. Seeing all those coracles ready to go on the Sunday of the second weekend, it was quite amazing to consider that just a few hours before we had all stood in complete ignorance of just where to begin. A marvellous sense of achievement - now to put them to the test.

The museum pond provided scope for a quick bit of tuition in the unsung art of coracle propulsion, but at twelve midday on the Bank Holiday Monday, a small flotilla from the museum joined the several dozen other enthusiasts from far and wide who had come together on a glorious English summer's day for the annual Bewdley coracle regatta. Course attendance leads to automatic entry into this event which is, quite rightly, rapidly achieving major importance in the town's social calendar. Never have I seen so many coracles gathered together and never have I seen so many unwitting victims upended into the River Severn as we struggled with the subtleties of manoeuvrability versus stability.

A full programme of events, including the world's first coracle water polo championships, was enjoyed by an alfresco crowd of several thousand bemused and appreciative onlookers. The climax, a race downstream to the bridge and yet more dippings, fair epitomised that uniquely homegrown spectacle of the great British eccentric out to enjoy himself. And the crowds loved it. Laugh? I nearly bought a round, as they say.

The Bewdley coracle making course is open to all interested parties, but places are limited. Don't be put off - if this course isn't massively oversubscribed next year, then there ain't no justice. My thanks to Charles Fogg and colleagues for an absolutely absorbing experience.

September 1991

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ARTICLES ON CORACLE MEN OLD AND NEW

John Davies and Terry Kenny

When we moved to Shropshire early in 1989 my involvement with coracles was a foregone conclusion. In fact my wife had given me an electric staple gun for Christmas saying "You'll need this to make coracles". This was the last stage of a process that began when my father took the family on a Broads sailing holiday when I was ten. Bitten by the bug, we scraped together enough money to buy a 50 year old gaff cutter. Soon after, Dad, who claimed to be the world's worst handyman, built a plywood sailing dinghy in the lounge of our first floor flat in North London - the glue marks were still on the fireplace when we moved - thus giving me my first independent command. Looking back on it, this dinghy was almost a coracle in shape and behaviour. Had I realised

that at the time, perhaps I wouldn't have wasted so many hours trying to sail the wretched thing.

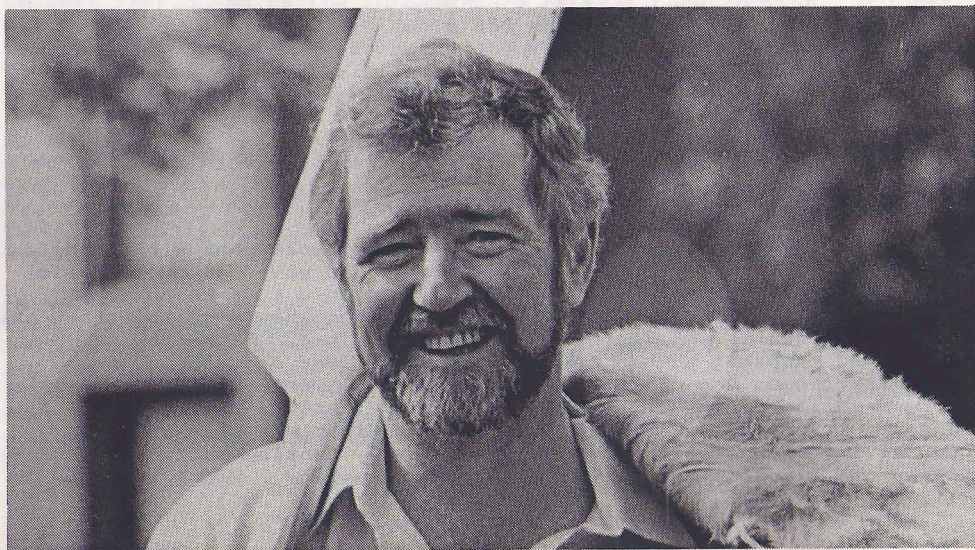
After a succession of small boats, I came to canoeing. I was immediately taken with a stroke called the sculling draw stroke, which is very similar to the coracle stroke. I was amazed that a boat could move sideways under control - something unique in paddled craft.

Although a confirmed canoeist, my interest in sailing remained alive. This drew me to the Wooden Boat Show at Greenwich, where Jack and John Davies were building coracles. (That's how Blossom knew about the stapler.) I was hooked by the functional simplicity of the coracle. From the photos on display, it looked a lot of fun too.

Soon after our arrival in Newport, I contacted the Greenwood Trust and booked a place on a coracle building course. Gerwyn showed us how to make a Shrewsbury, using the method that Fred Davies had shown the Trust. By the end of the week I was an addict.

After the Shrewsbury, I built an experimental Newport coracle. It looked good, but was impossibly unstable. A valuable lesson was learned - a coracle needs a flat floor. Next came an Ironbridge, which I find the most attractive shape of coracle. The finished item was serviceable, but the building process seemed too complicated for an amateur.

Then Peter Badge asked me to make a replica of a North American bull boat. I agreed, not really knowing what it entailed. It entailed having a smelly cowhide stretched out in the back garden and spending many hours scraping and dressing it. Fortunately the neighbours are tolerant people. To get the dimensions, I made a mock-up covered in polythene and was surprised at how well such a small boat performed. The final hide version, 42" in diameter, had a very solid, stable feel to it. Having the fur on the outside made the bull boat popular with visitors - a boat you could stroke. Howard - named after Howard Keel of "Bless Your Beautiful Hide" fame - is now in The Coracle Centre at Cenarth.



Reading Geraint Jenkins, I came across the sentence "The technique of constructions usually adopted by the coracle makers of Shrewsbury resembled those of Ironbridge. From this it seemed reasonable to assume that Ironbridge coracles could be made by the Davies method of starting the the seat and gunwales first. After a little experimenting found that this is the case. The method can be used for other types too. Whether it is an Ironbridge if it's not built in the way described by Hornell is a matter for debate. My view is that it is an evolving craft, and if we accept that the materials have changed, then we should accept that the building methods can change too.

Last year Newport Coracles came into being as a part-time business. This has taken me to a number of craft fairs, where the coracle always creates a tremendous amount of interest. People are attracted by the same thing that first attracted me - the simplicity of the craft. If I were able to let these folk paddle a coracle for themselves, I'm sure there would be a great number of converts.

This is a list of venues where Terry can be seen this year. (Editor)

27-31 May	Beaumaris Castle - (I'm running a course as part of the Festival)
5-7 June	Builth Wells - (running a course for Tim Wade)
19-21 June	Charlecote Park, Stratford on Avon
27/28 June	Pevensey Castle
18/19 July	Halton Park, Widnes
25/26 July	Hinchingsbrook Country Park, Huntingdon (probable)
1/2 August	Battle Abbey
8/9 August	Walmer Castle
15/16 August	Burton Park, Sussex
22/23 August	Old Tithe Hall, Bishop's Stortford
5/6 September	Bromley Norman Park
11-13 September	Hampton Court
26/27 September	Harewood House, Leeds

Terry Kenny

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THE CORACLING DAVIESES OF SHREWSBURY by Peter Badge



It has been my very great privilege to have met and paddled a coracle on their beloved Severnn with all members of the remarkable Davies family. These included John Senior, known as "Jack" (who sadly died last year), John, the present Shrewsbury coracle maker, his sons John and Mark and their sisters.

Many people have seen John making and demonstrating coracles up and down the country. He has undoubtedly made more coracles over the last ten years than any other coraclemaker. As a coracle-maker, he has two great virtues. He takes infinite pains to make sure the coracle "fits" its buyer, both

asto size and weight and that the latter understands how a coracle is to be used. He will never part with a coracle until he personally has shown the recipient how to use it. Moreover, if he says he will make a coracle by a given day, he will do so; a virtue not encountered universally in coracling circles. He is also a versatile craftsman, not confining himself to his own beloved Shrewsbury boat. Many differing examples of his varied skills are to be found in the Coracle Centre at Cenarth. Over the years, the Shrewsbury Coracle he makes has been modified. They are now larger and have more of a tumble home to their sides. Ironically, this is bringing them nearer to the design of the Shrewsbury Coracle displayed at the Welsh Folk Museum. This coracle



was made very many years ago, before both John and I were born when coracles could be bought in markets locally. This particular coracle was made on a mould by Mr. H. Hudson, a Shrewsbury boat builder. It is more like a lower Dee coracle than a conventional Shrewsbury coracle.

If one goes to the Isle at Bicton, it is possible to put a coracle in the Severn at one side of a field and travel for some six miles with the current and end up at the other side of the field. I have done this many times with the Davies family. It was on these fascinating journeys that I witnessed real skill in the handling of coracles. I also came to appreciate just how much they care about the Severn and adjoining land. The late Jack Davies would not allow Mark, his youngest grandson, to make the journey with a friend, when young, in case they succumbed to the natural tendency to "muck about". I clearly remember on one occasion John rescuing a sheep which had fallen from a steep bank on to a ledge and become entangled in brambles. Had he not done so, the sheep would undoubtedly have died.

I learnt so much about life on the Severn between the wars from the late "Jack" Davies as we drifted round the Severn. He described how they would make a coracle out of briars cut on the banks using a technique which was totally foreign to English and Welsh coraclemakers, but which would have been regarded as normal by the currach men of the Boyne or Owey Island. He also explained how, during the depression, they would walk from Frankwell (a district of Shrewsbury where the coraclemen used to live) a considerable distance up river where they would cut wood, float it down stream guiding it in their coracles, and then sell it in the Town as firewood. There was no D.S.S. in those days.

It is often thought that Eustace Rogers is the only English coracle maker. He has often been described as such, but he has never made such a claim. The Davieses have been making coracles at Shrewsbury for six generations at least, and it is profoundly to be hoped that they will do so for another six generations.

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DID CAESAR SEE CORACLES ?

by David Gent

If you are a follower of Sellars and Yateman (1066 and All That), then you will know that history began in 55BC when Julius Caesar landed in Britain. In that case I am able to tell you that the British coracle goes back to the beginning of History itself.

Julius Caesar recorded and published the events of some of his campaigns in Commentaries. In one of these he mentions seeing what could have been coracles in Britain, and is often quoted as the earliest reference to them in literature. This article aims to give the background to the reference, to show why I, for one, am convinced that it is the coracle referred to, and to note some points arising from it.

Caesar visited Britain in 55 and 54BC. Five years later (49BC), fighting in Spain in the opening stages of the Civil War between Caesar and Pompey, Caesar was trapped. The position was in the 30 miles or so

between the rivers Segre and Cinca in NE Spain, near the town of Lerida. Bridges had been built to ensure access to supplies and good communications, but a storm had swept them away. If Lucius Afranius, Pompey's field commander, could keep Caesar besieged by preventing him rebuilding the bridges he could force a surrender. The war would have been over almost before it had begun. Having control of the other bank, Afranius could place forces opposite any working party and, in Caesar's words "pour down showers of missiles"¹, while the "steepness of the bank and the swollen current"² added to the problems of Caesar's engineers.

It is in this situation that Caesar says:

"Caesar ordered his men to build boats of the type that his experience in Britain a few years before had taught him to make. The keels and ribs were made of light wood; the rest of the hull was made of woven withies covered with hides. When the boats were finished, he had them conveyed by night on wagons joined together, some twenty-two miles from the camp. He conveyed his men across the river in these boats and so captured unexpectedly a hill adjoining the bank and fortified it, before his opponents realised what he was doing. He then transferred a legion here and started the building of a bridge from both sides, finishing the work in two days. He was thus enabled to recover safely the supply convoys and the foraging parties and ease the difficulties of the corn supply".³ (my emphasis).

Caesar was able to carry on the war, defeat Pompey and become "Dictator in Perpetuo", and so was assassinated, having set his seal on history. To quote Raymond Rees "if Julius Caesar had not seen a boat resembling a coracle [in] this country history as we know it would have taken a different turn".⁴

You will see at once that the boats that Caesar built were not coracles. They were large, needing wagons to transport them, and had both keel and ribs - no coracle has those. However, they were covered in hides and early coracles were skin boats, and they had a framework of woven withies - definitely a coracle-like feature. There is no reason for us to suppose that what Caesar had built in Spain in 49BC was exactly what he had once seen in Britain. Another translation of this passage has Caesar say that the boats were "modelled on some I had once seen in Britain"⁵ (emphasis mine). He needed boats built quickly, with no facilities, from local materials, to take large numbers of fighting men across a river in haste. Would it be surprising if Caesar having remembered the British boat, gave his craftsmen what details he could remember of its unusual construction and then let them combine it with their own experience? Hornell, a marine historian who wrote the classic text on British Coracles, says that the boat Caesar had built, is clearly a hybrid craft "combining a light wicker-and-hide cover with the boat framing familiar to his army craftsmen".⁶ He was, after all, a General in a spot, not a heritage conservator preserving tradition.

There are three possibilities. Perhaps Caesar saw a type of craft, now lost, constructed in exactly the way described. I reject this. There is no reason for making the supposition and a solution that does not require the assumption of unknown facts is historically neater. However, archeology could prove me wrong by finding the remains of this type.

Alternatively, Caesar could be referring to a version of the Irish Curragh, skin boats which generally have both keel and ribs. I suggest that Caesar's reference to woven withies makes this unlikely. The modern curragh does not use woven withies in its construction and to suppose that the ancient did, falls into the category rejected above. Caesar's specific mention of them makes it seem fair to suppose that they were part of what he had seen in Britain. There was, after all, nothing unusual about keels and ribs. Another reason for rejecting the curragh as the boat is that as a potentially sea-going vessel, and there are ancient references to sea-going skin boats used in Britain, they are likely to have been known on the Gaulish coast. I also have a feeling that the curragh is too much like a "normal" boat to warrant an explanation in the Commentary. Hornell votes for the curragh. Perhaps I am prejudiced, but I do not.

The remaining possibility is that Caesar saw the ancestor of the modern coracle. The only known boat that has a construction of woven withies. The design is unusual and surprising to those unfamiliar with it, so that it would explain the specific reference Caesar makes to the source of his idea. It is even possible, and this is total guesswork - no evidence of any kind for it - that he looked closely at local craft when he was trying to cross the Thames, perhaps as ferries or as part of a floating bridge.

As the proud owner of a Thomas built Teifi Coracle, I picture Julius Caesar examining coracles almost exactly like my own. Obviously (!!) the Teifi retains all that is purest in coracle design.

In all, Caesar spent about 3 months in Britain in the years 55 and 54BC. In 55BC, the invasion lasted only a few weeks and never really left the beach-head. In 54BC, Caesar landed unopposed and marched inland, winning a battle on the Stour (near modern Canterbury). A delay was forced on him when a storm damaged his fleet, then he pressed on to and beyond the Thames, fording the river at Tilbury (it is thought). His final victory was somewhere north of the Thames. For two months or so, Caesar was in control of, and moving about, this area. It is likely, therefore, that it was in 54 and not 55BC that Caesar saw coracles in action, and we can date the first recorded reference to a coracle to the summer of that year.

The main rivers of the area under Caesar's control are the Stour, the Medway (with a good estuary) and the Thames, so that there must have been coracles on one or more of these rivers. Perhaps at the turn of the millenium, villagers were fishing the Thames from the coracle. So why did they die out in this SE corner of the country? Hornell suggests that Roman rule, which came full blast only a century later, brought Roman ways and more advanced boat building techniques. Somehow I doubt that the Germanic raiders who drove Rome out some 400 years later ever saw coracles on the Thames. Our western fringes were never so completely Romanised and perhaps this is why the coracle survived.

What may seem surprising is that these boats were in Britain and not in Gaul. Today we see coracles in the Celtic margins of the country; then the whole of Gaul was Celtic. Britain and Gaul traded goods, gossip and gospels. However, there were differences, for instance, British chariot warfare (without scythes on the wheels) was unique. There are no references to coracles in Western Europe (I disregard Lucan's poetic mention). It is possible that it was known in Gaul and that Roman rule ended it there too, but my argument about historical neatness applies

here too, though with less force. It seems that for some reason the Gauls did not use coracles.

References:

1. Mitchell J. (Trans.) Caesar: The Civil War. Penguin 1976; p.61.
2. Warrington J. (Trans.) Caesar's War Commentaries. Everymen 1955; p.209.
3. Mitchell, op cit; p.63.
4. Jenkins J.G. The Coracle. Golden Grove 1988; p.xii.
5. Warrington, op.cit, p.211.
6. Hornell, J. British Coracles and Irish Currachs. 1936; p.36.

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HOW TO BUILD AN IRONBRIDGE CORACLE

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Ironbridge coracle is made from narrow strips of 'laths' of ash, one quarter of an inch thick by one inch wide and eight feet long. The first part to be made is the gunwale using two laths, soaked in hot water, which are then bent into two rough semicircles and left to set, tying string across each end of the laths to keep them in shape. After two days these semicircles are spliced together, forming the gunwale. The latticed network is made using fifteen laths, six longitudinal and nine transverse, which are similarly soaked in hot water to make them pliable. These are nailed, in their middles, to a flat wooden board and interwoven to form the basic shape. The ends of the laths are then bent up, forming the sides of the coracle and the gunwale is attached inside the laths. The ends of each lath are tied across the top of the coracle. This framework is then left to set for several days. As the wood dries it retains its bent shape. Three more gunwale hoops are made in the same way as before, one of which is attached to the outside of the frame. The temporary inner gunwale is removed and any projecting ribs are then sawn off. The frame is now ready for covering in calico. Two widths of calico are used, each one metre wide and about two metres long, these are sewn together and then tacked onto the frame. The seam runs from stem to stern and the calico is put on as tightly as possible.

The bulkhead, to support the seat, is now inserted. This consists of three strips of wood and three vertical pads, inserted slightly forward

of midships. The coracle is now ready for water proofing. A mixture of one quart of tar and two pounds of pitch is boiled up and applied to the outside and inside of the coracle. Bitumastic paint is more commonly used today, as it is easier to apply. The last two gunwale hoops are put on, one inside the laths, the other on the outside. The seat, usually made of pitch pine, is the last thing to be fixed to the coracle. This is done using three angleties of iron on each side of the seat which are screwed through the top into the bulkhead. The seat has two slots into which the carrying thong, usually made from leather, is tied.

The oar used with the Ironbridge coracle is spade shaped, about four feet long, and is used by paddling over the prow of the boat in a figure of eight, drawing the coracle through the water. Each type of coracle had a particular shape of oar depending on the size of the coracle and the type of terrain it was used in.

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FROM THE RIVER BANK

1. When at the Northumberland Royal Show, Gerwyn Lewis was spoken to by a 70 year old American who had been brought up on an Indian Reservation in Montana and had been educated at the Reservation School.

He said that when he was young, he remembered seeing coracles in use on his Reservation. They were made of withy laths and had a paper cover which was impregnated with shellac. (He was adamant that they were coracles and not bull boats of which there is a very accurate replica made by Terry Kenny, in the Coracle Centre at Cenarth, Dyfed).

2. When Graham and Virginia Crerar were in India recently they saw literally hundreds of parisals (Tamil for coracles) on the River Cauvery. They hope to be organising coracle tours for Butterfields, the well known operators of tours to India. (The Crerars brought the Parisal, currently on display at the Coracle Centre, back to England from Southern India).

3. Mrs. M.L.L. Whitworth, aged 98 of Trevor, Llangollen, Clwyd, kindly donated a Llangollen Coracle to the Welsh Folk Museum. Despite being over 100 years old, it is in very good condition and an excellent example of a sadly defunct craft. It had been made for her father by one of the Robers family, well known fishermen and coracle handlers in the locality.

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ADVERTISEMENT

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