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The **Coracle** *Society*



Vol IV

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OFFICERS OF THE CORACLE SOCIETY

- President:** J. Geraint Jenkins
c/o. Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagan's, Cardiff
- Chairman:** Peter Badge
100 Thames Road, Chiswick, London W4 3RE
- Vice Presidents:** John E. Davies (Severn - Shrewsbury)
Ronald Davies (Teifi - Cenarth)
Edgware Evans (Taf)
David Maybury (Dee - Llangollen)
Raymond Rees (Towy)
Eustace Rogers (Severn - Ironbridge)
Bernard Thomas (Teifi - Llechryd)
- Honorary Secretary:** John Williams-Davies
Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagan's, Cardiff
- Honorary Treasurer:** Jane Thomas
c/o. Bewdley Museum, The Shambles, Load Street,
Bewdley, Near Kidderminster, Worcs.
- Committee Members:** Peter Faulkner
Charles Fogg
Martin Fowler
David Gent
Gerwyn Lewis
Raymond Rees
Jane Williams-Thomas

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

1982/3 has been a mixed year.

The level of license fees on the Towy continues to cause deep concern to the Net Fishermen. The Society, through our honorary Secretary, has made representations in support of the Towy men and will continue to do so when and wherever appropriate.

Two museums whose curators are distinguished members of the Society sadly have considerable problems. The Exeter Maritime Museum, which houses a good collection of coracles and allied crafts from all over the world and which has given invaluable support to Martin Fowler at Cenarth were at one time threatened with closure.

The plight of the magnificent little museum at Bewdley to which so many coracle enthusiasts owe so much for its pioneering coracle making courses and which has organised the biggest Coracle Regatta in the U.K. will be greatly reduced, due to the financial difficulties of its local authority owing to its having been charge capped. The Director of Leisure Services, to whom I expressed the Society's profound anxiety has assured me they will do all they can to keep it open and ultimately rebuild. Any help that can be given by individual members would be very much appreciated by Charles Fogg, the Museum's first class curator, about whom an article appears elsewhere in this Newsletter. At the moment of writing it is understood the Museum has cancelled the very well subscribed Coracle Making Course and Regatta.

All the news, I am happy to say, isn't bad.

Over the year, Terry Kenny, the Newport coracle maker has appeared at a number of diverse locations and introduced a large number of people to the delights of coracles. As has Pete Faulkner who worked tirelessly in our interests when he exhibited his skills at the Boat Show at Earls Court in January.

The Society ran a very successful symposium at the Welsh Folk Museum excellently run by our honorary Secretary. Our President and Chairman gave addresses on Welsh and non-British coracles respectively, accompanied by slides. Later, Raymond Rees, one of our Vice-Presidents, and the noted Towy netsman gave a fascinating display of coracle net making. The event was well attended and will be repeated. It was nice to see so many new faces.

The A.G.M. was held at Bewdley this year and was well attended. Many interesting ideas were discussed and we are very pleased to hear that David Gent has joined the committee. Sadly, due to a rapid increase in the level of the River Severn, the Regatta which should have preceded the A.G.M. had to be cancelled at short notice.

Coracles continue to flourish in the Ironbridge area thanks to the excellent support they get from the Greenwood Trust and particularly Gerwyn Lewis and his family (the Von Trapps of the coracling world) and, of course, Terry Kenny.

I am very happy to report that the Coracle Centre at Cenarth goes from strength to strength thanks to the magnificent efforts of Martin Fowler, its Founder and Director and the unsparing support of his family. An article about the Centre by Martin can be read elsewhere, as can an account of how its latest acquisition, a Donegal Paddling Currach was obtained.



pools and trawls of the Cenarth coraclemen.

His services to the community are legion. He has saved the lives of at least two youngsters who had got into difficulties in the treacherous waters of the Teifi, actions which have won him the Royal Humane Society's Certificate for life-saving. Many local farmers also owe Ronnie tremendous debts for saving livestock endangered by the river and his various encounters with marauding seals have entered local folklore! Like all coraclemen, Ronnie Davies is a colourful character, a man about whom legends are created. Despite this, however, he is by nature a shy and reserved individual, a man who is happiest away from the public eye, be it in his workshop or on his beloved Teifi. He is above all, a worthy heir to all those generations of Cenarth coraclemen who have gone before him.

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CHARLES FOGG - BEWDLEY CORACLE MAKER

by Peter Badge

There are two types of coracle makers. Those who are maintaining a family tradition, often centuries old, such as Eustace Rogers of Ironbridge or Raymond Rees of Carmarthen. The second variety is people who have recently joined the coracle world and learnt its skills well into their adult lives. A select few have become recognised coracle makers. Charlie Fogg is one such person. His standard of craftsmanship is high, as anyone who has seen the collection of coracles at Bewdley Museum would testify. Indeed, not long ago he made a coracle for a well known pop star.

Charles, who is the curator of Bewdley Museum, began his career at Art School, went on to teach at Shrewsbury and then joined the staff at Avoncraft Museum. His artistic beginnings probably account for one of the best Old Testament beards one could see. His interest in and enthusiasm for traditional crafts is universally apparent in the magnificent museum which he has done so much to create and which is now in grave danger. It would be an obscenity if this jewel in the museum world were to be lost through closure.

In 1987, a tradition of coracle manufacture and usage was restored to the Severn at Bewdley. In that year its museum, led of course by Charles, held its first Coracle making Course and Regatta. That both were such an overwhelming success was due to Charles' gentle charisma, boundless patience and infectious enthusiasm for coracles. His course attracted people from all walks of life, ages and manual dexterity. He could well have filled his places many times over. So well did they become known that they attracted enthusiasts from the Netherlands.

Additionally, the Bewdley Regatta has become one of the liveliest and best attended of any in England and Wales.

In its heyday, the River Severn had more coracles in use on its waters than any other river in the British Isles. Thanks to Gerwyn Lewis and Terry Kenny of the Greenwood Trust at Ironbridge and Charles Fogg, that position remains so today.

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THE NATIONAL CORACLE SOCIETY AT CENARTH

A report by its Founder and Director, Martin Fowler

Having completed two full seasons at the Coracle Centre, I must say the interest shown by the patrons is most reassuring.

Our A.G.M. will be held this year at Welshpool. Do please make an effort to attend.

I would like to end by thanking particularly our honorary Secretary and Committee members for their constant support. I cannot stress too strongly how desperately we need practical help. An immense amount of work falls on very few shoulders. If you can help please don't hesitate about coming forward. We need you urgently.

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FORTHCOMING EVENTS

List previously circulated

Additional events at which Peter Faulkner will be present and demonstrating coracle making and usage

29 - 30 May	Prestigne Craft Fair (local) - static display
	also
29 - 31 May	Craft Fair, Ludlow Castle
3 - 6 June	Wooden Boat Show, Greenwich (will miss Ironbridge Regatta)
23 - 25 July	National Trust Craft Fair, Petworth, Sussex
1st August	The Cornwall Countryman's Fair, Launceston, Cornwall
11 - 12 September	Hull Shanty Festival
January 1994	Boat Show, Earls Court

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RONNIE DAVIES, CENARTH

by John Williams-Davies

To most people in Wales, coracles are inexorably linked with Cenarth, that most picturesque of villages on the banks of the River Teifi in Dyfed. Many visitors will have ventured on their first (and in most cases, only) trip in a coracle at Cenarth and many more will have purchased one of the dozens of postcards of coraclemen captured in unlikely poses in front of Cenarth Bridge. Cenarth can also boast Martin Fowler's splendid Coracle Centre and arguably the highest sale of miniature coracles in the civilised world. It is ironic, therefore, that despite all this obvious commercial exploitation of the craft, Cenarth is no longer a working fishing village.

In the early 1930s, twenty-four coracle fishing licenses were issued for Cenarth, but legislation introduced in 1934 prohibited the issuing of new licenses to fishermen in the non-tidal section of the Teifi (defined as above Llechryd Bridge). As a consequence of this Act, as those individuals who held licenses in 1935 died out, so too did the right to fish at Cenarth, until finally with the death of Will y Gof (William Jones, the blacksmith) in 1970, coracle fishing in the village came to an end. Fortunately, however, the village which gave the coracle world some of its most notable characters, such as Fred Llewellyn, 'the coracle king' and John

Christmas Thomas arguably the most famous of all coracle-makers, still retains a vigorous link with the past in the form of the Society's Honorary Vice-President, Ronnie Davies.



Ronnie was born into the same family as Wil y Gof, a family whose roots go back deep in the history of the village. Like generations of his family before him, he continues the proud traditions of coracle-making and fishing. In Ronnie's case, however, his fishing has perforce to be carried out at Cilgerran several miles downstream of his native village. His coracle-making skills, however, can still be seen at Cenarth Cenarth where thousands of visitors annually watch his work.

As a coracle-maker, Ronnie is very highly regarded, indeed according to the local experts his coracles are certainly the equal of, if not superior to those made by J.C. Thomas - perhaps the highest accolade that could be paid to a Teifi coracle-maker. Although it could be said that in one way Ronnie is the heir to J.C. Thomas, this would be misleading, in that Ronnie is, if anything, a self-taught coracle-maker. It is true that he did learn some of his craft from J.C. Thomas, but he did so indirectly by watching him at work and was never actually taught by him. Despite the many hours that Ronnie spent in J.C.'s workshop, the latter never helped him in any way, never offered him any advice, nor

ever passed on any tips of the trade. Ronnie was only able to perfect his skills by trial and error and this he did to great effect eventually surpassing the master himself. The great hallmark of his skill as a coracle-maker is the tremendous attention he pays to detail and the quality of finish which he gives his work.

Several of Ronnie Davies' coracles have by now found their way into museum collections throughout the world in countries as distant as Holland, the United States and Australia, but ironically, not in his native land. At one time, Ronnie was the resident demonstrating coracle-maker at Martin Fowler's Cenarth Coracle Centre, but sadly this association has now ceased. Although steeped in the traditions of the Teifi, Ronnie does not disdain innovation and in the past few years he has experimented with the construction of a variety of replica coracles from other rivers.

As a fisherman, Ronnie Davies could also be considered something of a traditionalist, being one of the few remaining individuals who can still produce a genuine Teifi coracle net using the traditional materials - hemp for the net, twisted horsehair for the head- and foot-ropes and cowhorn rings. Needless to say, he is a highly skilled fisherman, well-versed in all the ploys and intricacies of using the traditional two-man net. His knowledge of the Teifi is also unparalleled and he is now probably the only person remaining who knows the traditional fishing

THE DONEGAL PADDLING CURRAGH

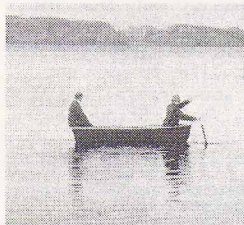
by Peter Badge

What we would call coracles in England and Wales are called curraghs in Ireland and Scotland. Examples are the Boyne and Spey curraghs. This is because of the division of the Celtic language with Goidelic (spoken in Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man) and Brythonic (spoken in Wales, Cornwall and Brittany).

A curragh to most people denotes a larger, conventionally boat-shaped craft, rowed by as many as three people. There is, however, a link between coracle-type curraghs and the larger variety. It is the Donegal Paddling Curragh. It is only to be found in the beautiful but wild Rosses area of Donegal.

In November 1991, my wife and I went with a Northern Ireland friend as a guide, to Bunbeg where we were given the greatest possible help by everyone at Udara na Gaeltachta, Bunbeg, and particularly by Tom Flaherty who put us in touch with Andy McGonagle of Kincasslagh who had moved from nearby Owey Island where he had been the postmaster, with others of the older generation there. He showed us his currach. At first, although he was far too polite to say so, I detected some perplexity as to why an eccentric Britisher should arrive in November and take such an interest in his boat, about which his fellow countrymen were not particularly concerned. To cut a long story short, after I had sent him one of our newsletters and a model of a Teifi coracle, he agreed to make a curragh for display at the Coracle Centre at Cenorath. One year later with the same friend, I arrived again at Kincasslagh to collect the superbly made curragh. Many locals, the local radio and press turned out. With Andy, I attempted to paddle my new acquisition in Bunbeg harbour. The presence of a strong tide and the boat being much longer proportionately than a coracle made it much more difficult to handle than I had imagined. In Andy's expert hands it had looked so simple.

With great reluctance we left these most friendly of folk and set off on our journey to Cenorath which would be accomplished in various stages, via Nottingham and London.



Not only is the currach in Cenorath, but Andy very generously photographed the construction so that it is possible to see how it was made.

I now add some details about Donegal Paddling Currachs.

These currachs are found only and very rarely in the wild Rosses district of the west coast of Donegal.

Like coracles, they are mainly paddled (or 'pulled' as the locals express it) with a single paddle over the bow in a scooping motion on either side. They are two-person crafts. The second person sits on the stern, steering and helping the currach (as the locals call it) along. His role is very secondary. Relatively recently (about forty years ago) two thole pins have been fitted for the traditional currach oars to be used, though the paddle remains the main method of propulsion.

Unlike coracles, these are seagoing craft. In expert hands a force eight gale can be handled. They would venture about three miles to sea. Sadly, only about four such currachs are in use in the Rosses area. Andrew McGonagle has been using currachs for about forty five years and his family at least ninety years before that. The greatest number he can remember in use is about twenty-four. Their uses are and were for fishing, ferrying from Owey to the mainland, tending lobster pots, cutting seaweed and leisure purposes. They could carry a full grown cow whose legs had been tethered and who was on its back. Carefully looked after when in regular use they would last for about ten to fifteen years, being re-covered every three to four years.

The gunwale is made of fir and the laths are made of planed oak. The cover consists of two thicknesses of calico or canvas with brown paper between; the whole being covered with coal tar.

Andrew McGonagle said that this is the first Donegal Curragh which has left the Rosses district so far as he is aware.

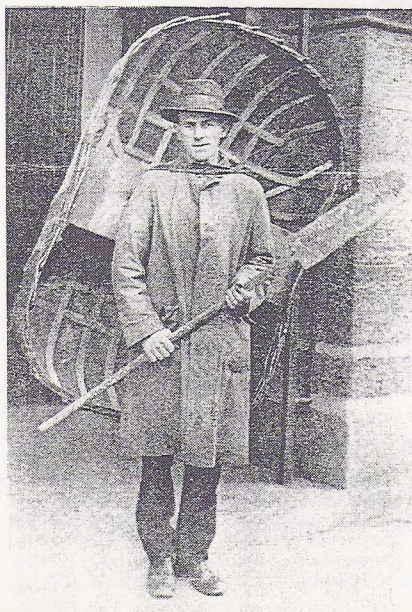
The curragh is carried on the shoulder rather in the same way that the upper (Llangollen) Dee coracle was carried.

Andy was told that smaller currachs were made and used by women. (The Indians' [of North America] bull boat was also made and used by women). Perhaps there were coracle-like currachs in Donegal as well as in use on the Boyne at Oldbridge. Who knows.

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THE RETURN OF THE WYE CORACLE

by Tim Oakes



Coracles and 'truckles' were once a familiar sight on the waters of the Wye, the Monnow and the Usk, but changes in the fishing rights in the early part of this century brought their useful life to an end. Locally, there were several men from the Lydbrook and Kerne Bridge areas who built and used coracles on this stretch of the Wye, the best known being William Dew of Kerne. He used his coracle between 1880 and 1910, and twenty years later his family donated his superb craft to the Hereford Museum. This is the very Wye coracle that appears in 'Nets and Coracles' and, intrigued by the idea of trying to recreate this piece of history, I started work just over a year ago to build a replica.

Living just a few hundred yards from the Wye in the Forest of Dean, there was no shortage of local wood for the project ... but getting it cut to the right dimensions proved very difficult. Eventually a local joiner agreed to cut a set of lathes and I

The risks involved in trying to create a new business in these uncertain times must border on madness, but the seeds sown by Peter Badge and the late Max Davies provided enough encouragement to go through with the project.

When Max Davies, a local coracle enthusiast and photographer approached me inquiring as to my interest in providing a home for a small collection of coracles, it seemed a good idea at the time. I had, in the 17th century flour mill (which I had been renovating over the last few years) a perfect venue for what was then half a dozen coracles.

It was soon evident that as Peter's search for bigger and better craft intensified, that a new home for the collection would be needed and Plan B was put into operation. In the grounds of the mill, what was once a shed for boiling potatoes and a pair of pigsties was to become the National Coracle Centre.

Many of the original members will recall the inaugural meeting of the Coracle Society held in the foundations of the Centre here in 1990, Geraint Jenkins, our President and Peter Badge trying hard to make themselves heard over the roar of the nearby river.

I opened for Easter 1991 with the paint still wet on the walls and builders' debris scattered in untidy mounds around the site. Apart from the odd inquisitive local whom I dare not charge, there was very little sign of the paying public, and I began to wonder quite what I had let myself in for.

The official opening in June was for me a nerve-wracking affair. Under leaden skies and in blustery conditions, I started the pre-opening coracle race. The P.A. system I had arranged didn't turn up, so the whole ceremony was conducted at the top of my voice. The race, on very high water, had a half mile sprint with the competitors returning to the start overland carrying their coracles on their backs. The winner was awarded the Max Davies Cup in memory of Max who had died the Christmas before.

The grand opening was conducted by Earl Lloyd George (grandson of David Lloyd George).

The highlight of the day for me was the arrival of David Goddard, the curator of Exeter Maritime Museum. He turned up with a coracle from Vietnam which he had rescued from a police compound in Hong Kong and had been used to get a family of Vietnamese across the South China Sea. The other surprise was an Iraqi guffa which is made with pomegranate wood, date palms and bitumen and took four of us to lift and therefore had to stay outside where it can be seen guarding the entrance to the Centre. People approaching mistake it for a tractor tyre and I hear variations on Saddam Hussein jokes, "Is it an Iraqi gunboat?"

The majority of visitors know very little about coracles and most assume they are only found in Wales and are greatly surprised when they see the range of countries in which they are still used. Looking back through, I came across such comments as:-

"I thought it was alright but enjoyable"

"I thought I knew everything about coracles until I came here"

"Most interesting and toddler friendly"

"We have a sailing boat called 'Coracle'" (written by a Dutch couple who just liked the word)

"Twenty seven ladies left very happy"!! (a W.I. group who were only here for an hour)

"Thank you for showing me your coracles and cnocers" (Welsh for priest used by fishermen)

"Very interesting and boaty"

"It's nice to see how they did it in the old days"

A man from Chester told me he had been asked to build a Giant for a carnival, and he based the structure on a coracle frame. He wrote "Great technology for building giants"

"I wish I had a coracle"

"I've never spent so long looking round a museum before"

A boy from Eastbourne wrote "I've been dead keen on coracles so this is great"

A man from Soweto wrote "Coracle very interesting"

A man from Vietnam was very pleased on seeing the Vietnamese coracle and said his family had always used them for fishing there.

Some of the places the people have arrived from include Alaska, Venezuela, Israel, Japan, Nicaragua, Brazil, Thailand and the Phillipines. Of the people in this country, many from the Midlands recognise Eustace Rogers from Ironbridge and others know of the Shrewsbury coracle retrieving footballs from the river behind the football ground.

Over the past two years some visitors have sent pictures or articles they have found. A man from London made a point of returning months after his first visit with a photograph of himself and a friend in an Indian parusal on the Tungabhadra River in 1958. A man from Derbyshire sent a postcard of guffas in Iraq which he had kept since 1952 when he served there in the army.

An article arrived from Newport in Gwent, first published in the 'Star of Gwent' newspaper on 3rd February 1896 and was as follows:-

"In June, J. Emberey of 88 Henry Street, Newport, decided to travel to Weston-super-Mare in his coracle, the size of which was 5'11" x 3'3", being 12" deep and weighed a total of 29lbs. He set off from Alexandra Dock at 9.15 a.m. and entering the Channel he faced a head wind and rough sea. On three occasions his craft was clearly swamped. About four miles beyond Bell Buoy he was passed by the 'Waverley' and on reaching Weston, the Captain reported having seen him. He finally arrived at 1.30 p.m., the hazardous journey having taking four and a quarter hours."

The most recent snippet of information was from a one time Cilgerran coracle fisherman who remembers his father telling him about a coracle man who lived in that village around 1912 and worked in Cardigan as a bootmaker. He went to work by coracle, some four miles by river and he carried the coracle home each night.

Finally, a press article in the 'Western Mail' stated that the largest salmon caught in Wales weighed 68lb.8oz. It was netted by two coracle fishermen on the Usk at Llantrisant in June 1782. It was not eaten, but put on show until putrid. A life-size portrait of the salmon was recently unearthed and sold at auction.

May I take this opportunity to thank all contributors to the Coracle Centre in whatever capacity and ask anyone who has items of interest to forward a copy to me where they will be displayed together with any personal requirements. Likewise, if anyone requires any information, I will do my best to oblige.

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collected the rest of the materials - discovering that large sheets of calico are very hard to find and very expensive. Bitumen compound of the right consistency was eventually tracked down to a company in Cardiff, who market under the 'Dyke' trade name.

Last summer I built two primitive coracles out of hazel rods. 'Geraldus' and 'Geraldus Minimus' (or Gerry and Gerry-Baby to their friends) took to the water in July, scattering canoes as they went. The larger of the two was an experiment in basic coracle building, and to 'try the water' on my local stretch of the Wye. At six feet by four, it is light and tough and can carry an enormous amount of cargo. The second and much smaller version, was made to estimate the smallest possible size and the fastest manufacture. It took about four hours to make and is very fast and manoeuvrable. These were groundwork coracles, but they stirred up enough local interest and soon I was getting vague memories from local people of the Wye coracles in action. My replica model took shape in March, riding a learning curve that was pretty near vertical! A saving grace was having a garden that could take a ten foot soaking trench and owning a Rayburn cooker and a ten pint kettle. The Wye coracle is larger than most and the long 'tail' takes some bending. After covering and painting with bitumen, I launched 'Mr. Dew' in April. It is very stable and can move quite fast (after a slow start). The tail doesn't allow the coracle to twist in the water and it holds a straight course very well indeed.

The next coracle I will launch is a replica of the models offered for hire to fishermen on Ross-on-Wye at the turn of the century. This is simply enormous, since it was designed to take a Victorian angler and all his kit (which was considerable) and, hopefully I suppose, his catch as well. Not designed for long distance carrying - the hirer paid an extra fee to be picked up by cart at Monmouth for the journey back to Ross - this model does look like a floating bathtub but hopefully should be even more stable than 'Mr. Dew'.

If anyone has any photographs of the Wye, Usk or Monnow coracles, I'd be very interested to copy them. I am trying to collect as many images as I can. Finally, if you plan to voyage down the Wye this year, Lydbrook is two and a half miles downstream from Kerne Bridge

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FROM THE RIVER BANK

Did you know?

- that 300 years ago Luke Hughes of Wilton on the Wye paddled his Wye 'truckle' to Lundy Island according to 'The Wye Valley' by Richard Sale; that Bernard Thomas of Llechryd, Dyfed, crossed the English Channel in a Teifi coracle not long ago.

- that coracles are now to be found in Otane in the Hawke's Bay area of New Zealand according to the 'Hawke's Bay Tribune' of 15th August 1992. They are built Paul Brimecombe. He hopes they will be used by fishermen and duck shooters.

Dee Coracles

Tony Morris of Wrexham is making contact with some of the relatives of the last lower Dee net fisherman whose lovely coracles haven't been used since the 1930s but can be seen at the Welsh Folk Museum and the Cenarth Coracle Centre. Look out for the number and thinness of the laths and the unusual paddle. Tony has sent an extract from the Dean of Chester's book 'The River Dee'. At the time he was writing coracles cost £2. The Dean refers to coracle races on the Dee at Chester and net fishing at Overton using the same techniques which are only to be found on the Teifi, Towy and Taf today.

Shrewsbury

Trevor Vale of Bridgnorth refers to a book he obtained from the local library called 'Memories of Shrewsbury' from which he sent photocopies showing two businesses in the town over 60 years ago; one which specialised in nets had a picture of a rod and line fisherman with his rod in a Shrewsbury coracle as its 'logo'. The other is of H. Shaw, a fishing tackle shop, with a coracle standing outside it. How lucky people were to have lived in those days!

In Memoriam

Sadly, John Cottrell, who played such a vital part in providing the hazel for an assisting in the construction of the Boyne Curragh currently in the Coracle Centre at Cenarth, died on the 8th April 1993. John was one of that rare breed, a genuine woodsman. His knowledge of his beloved Oxfordshire woods was phenomenal. As well as his skills, he had a delightful sense of humour and was one of the kindest men you could encounter. We will not see his like again.

Boyne style curraghs in the U.S.A.

Stanley Joseph of Harborside, Maine 04642, U.S.A. used his basket making skills to build his curragh to enable him to reach his sail boat. Its frame is on the cover of his fascinating book 'Maine Farm - a year of country life'. His account of how he made it makes good reading and is strongly recommended as an example of the way in which the coracle tradition is adapting to 20th century life. We are very pleased to welcome him as one of our American members.

