



The Coracle Society



Vol V

February 1994

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President: J. Geraint Jenkins

Chairman: Peter Badge
100 Thames Road, Chiswick, London W4 3RE

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Ronald Davies (Teifi - Cenarth)
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Eustace Rogers (Severn - Ironbridge)
Bernard Thomas (Teifi - Llechryd)

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Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagan's, Cardiff

Honorary Treasurer: Jane Thomas
2 Stapeley Cottages, Monkhopton, Bridgenorth,
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Committee Members: Peter Faulkner
Charles Fogg
Martin Fowler
Gerwyn Lewis
Raymond Rees
Jane Williams-Thomas

Honorary Auditor: Position vacant

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

My report will be very brief.

The Society is maintaining its three main aims, namely to safeguard the coraceling tradition; to revive interest in coracles in areas where once they were and now no longer are and to extend interest in coracles generally. It was in furtherance of our last two aims that we held our AGM in Welshpool. The turnout was surprisingly good and the setting (the Welshpool Museum) delightful. Its curator, Eve Bredsdorf, (whom I introduced to coraceling some years ago) was most generous.

We had coracles from the Dwyrdd, Bangor-on-Dee, Conwy, Boyne and Teifi on display in the water. We were privileged to be joined by our President and Bernard Thomas, the very well known Teifi maker and user of coracles. As the coracles attracted so much interest from passers-by, it was a shame that prior notice of our arrival hadn't been given. We desperately need a Press Officer. Any volunteers, please?

May I end by thanking all who have supplied so much interesting information for this newsletter. Please keep it coming in.



Bernard Thomas Peter Faulkner Charles Fogg Peter Badge Martin Fowler
(standing)

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BERNARD THOMAS

by Martin Fowler, The National Coracle Centre

Bernard Thomas is the best known coracle fisherman on the River Teifi, and the last of the old school of coracle makers.

He was born in Llanelli, but has lived most of his life in Llechryd. The countryside is his life, and he knows the river better than anyone. His father was a coracle fisherman before him, and the knowledge and skills of the river were learnt at an early age.

During the war he was still to be on water as he was drafted into the merchant navy, and because of his countryside shooting skill, was used as a gunner. His stories of the war years include the drama of being torpedoed and set adrift in an open boat for many days and just avoiding death. Having lived through such an experience, I find it remarkable that in later years he should consider crossing the Channel in a coracle.

He undertook this task in 1974, setting out from St. Margaret's Bay in Kent on July 18th and planted a Welsh flag on the beach at Cape Blanc Nez, France, thirteen hours later. This proves not only the durability of the man, but of the construction of his Teifi coracle.

During the 1960s and '70s he was the mainstay of all the races and regattas on the Teifi, and organised the race each Boxing Day from Cenarth to Cardigan for many years. His speciality at the Cilgerran Races, apart from winning many of the races was the handicap and timing competitions. The event required him to go through a routine, handling up to four coracles at once, tipping from one to the other and balancing in them. Such was his confidence that the whole performance was done wearing his best suit and he would complete the exhibition always in pristine condition.

In times of flood, Bernard is kept very busy and has rescued many a cow and sheep marooned or drowning on the banks of the Teifi. He has also rescued people, including a lady from the upstairs window of her house. When he relates this story, and you visualise a rather large woman disappearing rear first through a rather small window and into the front of Bernard's coracle amidst a great deal of hot air and rural language, the mind boggles.

His knowledge of the Teifi includes the river bed, as he is an accomplished diver, and often spends time during the winter clearing the debris from the bottom. A lifeguard at the swimming pool is also on his list of achievements.

The winter months are spent gathering willow and hazel which he prepares ready for the coming season's coracle building. He makes about fifteen coracles each year and there is always a market for them. Any visitor to Llechryd will see two or three coracles in different stages of construction or repair perched beside the main road.

You can't help spotting his cottage, pots of pitch, piles of shavings, bundles of hazel and nets draped around the small garden. Inside, further chaos, knives, paddles, more nets and plenty of memorabilia. There is evidence of the makings of home made wine. (Don't be lured into the clutches of the elderflower wine). Bernard Thomas and home brew are a lethal combination.

Now aged 70, he has taken up a new hobby. He has just passed his test to

fly microlight aircraft. He tells me that when he has sold all this year's coracles, he is going to buy a secondhand microlight and park it next to the coracle stands in front of his cottage.

He is worried about the future of coracle fishing on the Teifi, and he campaigned for many years to keep licenses going from Cenarth down to the estuary when the tidal limit laws were being enforced and has been an ambassador for the river ever since. With the great drop in fish numbers in recent years, and the price of licenses, it is becoming harder and harder for those less dedicated than himself to continue. He still fishes every night of the season no matter what, but when he is no longer able to, he fears the tradition may die out with him on this river.

He has been a great help to me at the Coracle Centre, teaching me parts of coracle science I didn't know, but if you ask him which of all the coracles he has seen at the Centre he regards as the best, he always returns to the Teifi coracle (the fact that he made the one on show only strengthens his case).

Finally, a poaching tale he related to me. It involves a Teifi coracle man from many years ago who was discovered in suspicious circumstances drifting downstream. The bailiffs lining the river bank shone torches on him as he paddled past. Quick thinking, he started to sing "Way Down Upon the Swanee River" and asked could they concentrate the lights on to the water so he could see to fish better. He then began paddling in earnest with the bailiffs trying to keep up along the river bank. He gained a bit of distance, secreted his catch and coracle, and disappeared across the fields towards home. The Evening Service at the Chapel was in full swing and he crept into the back row of the congregation. During the next hymn, he sang at the top of his voice, and not being recognised as a regular member, he stood out somewhat that night.

When he was called to Court he turned up with the whole congregation who swore he was in Chapel on the night of the alleged poaching incident, and was found "Not Guilty".

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OLIVIA ELTON BARRETT, New Coracle Maker
in conversation with Peter Badge



1. Photograph - Olivia Elton Barrett

2. How long have you been making baskets?

Since the early 1960s.

3. What started you making baskets?

I saw some pieces of Rushwork on display, and fell in love with the material, because of its beauty of colour and texture. I made rush baskets and re-seated cane and rush chairs for some years before beginning to work with willow.

4. Where were you taught?

I learnt to make rush baskets at classes run by the Womens' Institute, having first seen a demonstration of rushwork at a monthly meeting. I took the W.I. Proficiency Test in about 1967 and began to teach rushwork, first to other W.I. members and then at Local Education Authority evening classes. I joined the Basketmakers' Association when it was formed in the 1970s, and in 1976 had a fascinating commission to make rush carpets for Mount Vernon, U.S.A., the home of George Washington.

I learned willow and hedgerow basketmaking through courses run by the Basketmakers' Association, from books and from watching and talking to other basketmakers. There is always something more to learn!

5. & 6. When did you become first Secretary and then Chairman of the Basketmakers' Association?

I became Secretary in 1980 and then Chairman in 1985, a post I was privileged to hold for seven years. It was a wonderful opportunity to work for a rapidly growing organisation and to help to raise the standing of British basketmaking generally. We have members all over the world as well as in Britain, with a wonderful exchange of information and friendship.

7. Details of Currachs/Coracles made alone or with others.

Peter Badge first introduced me to coracles when he asked the Basketmakers' Association for help in making a Spey Curragh similar to the 150-year old relic in the Elgin Museum. Using the information available we worked out how the basket frame should be made, and over a busy weekend in my garden, Peter and I and a party of Association members made two frames, using split brown willow, as close as possible in dimensions and appearance to the original. They were made exactly like a basket, starting in the centre and working out to the gunwale, in solid weave with no open spaces. The gunwale was a circle of two heavy willow rods bound together and stitched on to the frame with twine. The covering was cow hide in a partially cured state, stitched on over frame and gunwale with horsehair twine, and allowed to shrink tightly around the frame as it dried.

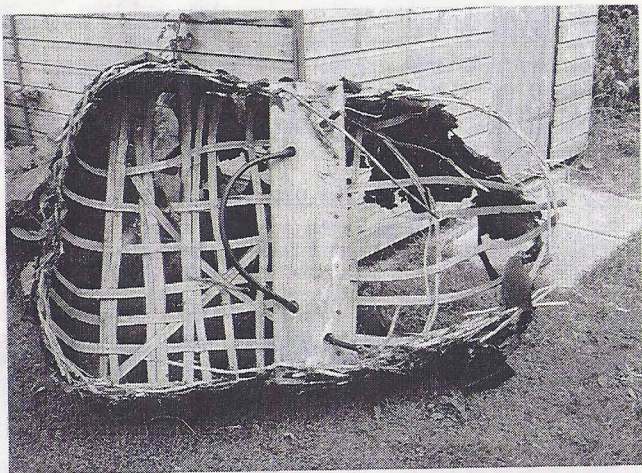
The launch, on a sunny backwater of the Thames, was an exciting event for me. I had never been in a coracle and was really rather scared of small boats, but from the first I felt happy and at home in the curragh, which is rather like going to sea in a saucer. It handles very easily, feels comfortably stable and skims over the water at quite a speed.

With great generosity, Peter has allowed me to retain one of the two currachs and I have since had tremendous fun with it on all sorts of water, from school swimming pools to large lakes, but have not yet had the chance to go on a

river expedition. It makes friends wherever it goes and most people learn to handle it very quickly.

By now, of course, I was completely hooked, and couldn't wait to try the Boyne Curragh, made by driving rods into the ground, weaving a gunwale around them, then bending the rods over and tying them into a grid to form the frame. I had no source of the traditional hazel, so used heavy willow for my first model which was about $\frac{3}{4}$ size. I had no source of the traditional cow hide either, so used calico waterproofed with bitumastic paint. This worked well, but the brand I used dried shiny, so this one is like going to sea in a black plastic dustbin bag. It performs well, but with only one person in a vessel designed for two, has a tendency to dip down when paddled over the bows.

Again thanks to Peter, I then became the proud owner of a derelict Teifi model, made by Bernard Thomas, and the retired "dinghy" to a yacht at Burnham. It had been quietly rotting on a shed roof, with only its beautiful slender paddle in mint condition. Restoration was a matter of stripping off the old calico, unpicking the rotten weaving and replacing some of the willow laths. I used my own hand-stripped willow to re-weave the top edge, and found it very difficult to ease the poor contorted skeleton back into the right shape. It looks a little lop-sided still. New calico, several coats of bitumastic, and then the re-launch! It was extraordinarily exciting and rewarding, and what a lovely coracle the Teifi is.



8. Details of a course on Coracle making at Hay Bridge Nature Reserve.

This summer I received an invitation to teach the making of the Boyne Curragh on a weekend course in the Lake District, an exciting but slightly terrifying prospect, as I am still such a beginner, with enthusiasm but little experience. However, it was too attractive an offer to turn down, and members of this Society are more than kind in giving information and advice.

9. Why did you choose a Boyne Curragh for your course?

The course organiser was very anxious to have a coracle which could be made from local materials, and entirely by the students, with as little as possible pre-cutting or preparing of materials. The Boyne seemed to fill the bill, and I felt confident that the work could be completed in the three days of the course

I knew that there would be few tools or workbenches available, and all processes needed to be simple. The materials could be kept down to a total of £20 per head, including the paddle, and this was also a stipulation.

I worked out a 4' x 5' version designed for one person only, and to fit in the back of a car. I made my prototype in my own home-grown willow, but for the course we used hazel cut on site. This was rather heavier than we needed, which made it very hard work, but produced incredibly strong frames. I found a source of inexpensive calico, a huge ball of binder twine for tying the frames (just a modern version of using the materials available), and designed a very simple paddle with a shaped external ply blade slotted into a broom-stick handle. Because the frame could not be weighted down to set the shape, we slotted the seat in between the first and second rows of weaving, and tied the grid down to the seat at the correct depth. We also tied the sides in over the seat to prevent them from "gaping". These ties could be cut away after a week or so.

If all this sounds very anachronistic, remember we had 2½ days to do the lot, including allowing the bitumastic (matt black this time) to dry properly.

Seven students, including a twelve year old, took happily to the water after lunch on the third day, and went home as hooked as I am myself.

10. What was the challenge to you in making the Spey Curragh?

Something new, something different. I'd always been interested in the idea of coracles and wanted to try one. It was so fascinating to look at photographs of the one in the Museum, and then to read the description of it and try to fit the two together to give a complete picture. It is always interesting to try and work out the "recipe" for a basket from a photo or drawing, and we had to do a lot of working out and guessing. The size and weight of the willow was a challenge too, a physical one!

11. Where do you use your curraghs?

So far -

- Local canals and rivers
- School swimming pool
- Yacht club practice lake
- Leisure Centre lake in a converted gravel pit - we nearly lost a friend on this one when she could only paddle herself AWAY from the shore.
- The Mere at Thorpeness - paradise for children and grown-ups
- Farm reservoirs and ponds

They all four go on or in the car (not all at once), and I love to take them anywhere where there is a chance to get them in the water.

12. What is the level of local interest?

They attract attention wherever they go, and have performed at events like the opening of part of the Community Forest at Thurrock. My local basketmaking

students are interested in the construction, and a number have been involved in various stages of making.

13. Is coracle making very easy for the experienced basketmaker?

Knowledge of the construction techniques involved, and experience of working with basketmaking materials, certainly makes it easier. However, I don't think I would have got very far without the knowledge and experience of a coracle maker to guide me.

14. What improvements would you make to traditional coracle making techniques from a Basketmaker's perspective?

When making the Spey curragh, we used a certain amount of whole (round) willow when tying in the slath at the centre, whereas the original was all in split willow. This made the job easier as the split willow was particularly "un-kind", that is, stiff, brittle and unwilling to make the tight weave required. This would prevent it from mellowing well.

A band of whole willow woven in half way up the sides also added stability to the structure.

In the small Boyne curragh made with willow, it was easy to tuck the tips of the grid rods down into the weave instead of cutting them off short. This added strength and made it practicable to use the smaller material.

For short courses, the method we used of slotting the seat into the weaving and tying the grid down to it worked very well. My prototype has kept its shape well.

15. What is the level of interest amongst Basketmakers?

Great interest was generated initially by Peter Badge's talk at our AGM several years ago, and quite a few people have been on courses to make their own since then. There have been several courses making the Spey curragh taught by a member in the Gloucestershire area. There is certainly considerable awareness among the membership, and our meeting at St. Fagan's two years ago gave many members a chance to try them out.

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HARRY ROGERS REMEMBERED

by Nick Freeman

As a woodland crafts instructor, demonstrating at various venues in the south of England, I often get into conversation with those members of the public commonly referred to as "old boys". At a large Agricultural Show this summer, I was busily setting up a variety of traditional tools and finished products. This included my Mark I Greenwood Trust coracle. As a consequence I got into a fascinating conversation with a man who had lived for many years at Iron-bridge and could remember the renowned Harry Rogers - coracle maker.

I was "all ears" and did what I always do - when I got home I wrote down everything I had been told in a notebook kept for the purpose.

Here is the gist of what I learnt:

Harry Rogers poached for rabbits in his coracle and was often challenged by the local police. He overcame the problem by getting the permission of a

local farmer to clear his land of rabbits. Thereafter, all the rabbits he was queried about always came from this particular site.

The man telling me the story thought for a bit and added "It's a shame the police pestered Harry. He was a kind man and took hot soup, in his coracle, to the people stranded in their houses during the floods".

Again, speaking of the poaching, he said "Harry would have so many rabbits in his coracle that the gunwale was barely out of the water". Finally he related that he could remember Harry Rogers "catching" and tethering flood driftwater which he towed and tied to the bank. This became his winter firewood.

It was these small but lively details, from a first hand witness, that put blood and flesh on someone that I had only heard of through photographs and distant hearsay.

The moral is : flaunt your coracle and live in hope that someone at some show will come forward and reminisce.

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**HOW TO MAKE A BOYNE CURRACH - a transcript of a 1930
recording of a conversation with MICHAEL O'BRIEN, one of
the great currach men.**

Kindly provided by Gerwyn Lewis of the Greenwood Trust

(Peter Faulkner, the Teme coracle maker is now making an
excellent Boyne coracle. - Ed.)

Ediphone Record, taken 16.6.30 with Mr. O'Brien by
Mr. John Delargy, M.A., 7 St. Devin's Gardens, Dublin

I'm Michael O'Brien of Oldridge and I'm goin' to give a description of coracle makin'.

I commence to cut the hazel rods for coracle makin' immediately after the leaf goes off. I cut all the rods suitable for the purpose, some of them 2 inches and a half in circumference and the remainder of them half that size, from nine to ten feet long - between nine an' ten feet long; takes them home an' cuts them along the facing sun to season. An' when they're seasoned a bit, for a fortnight or so, tie them up again an' puts them up until the coracle-makin' commences in the month o' January. When they are seasoned properly I commence to make the frame of the coracle, on the ground an' puts down the sticks in their proper places after I have the circle made. The makin' of the circle is simply done by two sticks with loops on them, leave one stick lyin' in the ground an' you go round with your other one an' forms the circle. An' when you go round half-ways you make it oval from that to the tail o' the coracle to the length you want.

I commence then an' puts down the 32 rods for the basket of the coracle, an' immediately I have that done I commence an' makes the rim. When I have the rim plaited I commence layin' eight off the side rods across an' goes opposite an' puts the other eight with the points o' them at the butts of the ones I done first, an' when that is done I go to the front of the coracle and puts down the 7 front ones to the tail, an' goes an' puts the tail 7 on with the tops o' them to the front, an' after that's done I put a board⁽ⁱ⁾ on with some

(i) larch or date

heavy stones to weight it. (- Oh! it must be weighted before it's); an' leaves it there for perhaps two days or more; an' commences then with my twine (- well what they call marling twine - marling twine); an' ties them in diamond shapes the whole coracle from the breast to the tail an' when that's done I put on the board again and the stones an' leaves it there for a week to set - that it'll be level when it takes the set. And I go then an' cuts the willows an' immediately I take them home I light a fire an' gives them a slight roasting an' twists them then an' leaves them ready for use until such time as I put on the hide - that may be in a fortnight after.

And in the putting down I forgot to mention the putting down of the standard stakes. I put them 6 inches in the ground. I plait the rim round on the coracle immediately after I put down the standards. This rim is made with a light class of hazel rods an' they are interwoven in an' out through the 32 stakes, one stake against the other until the whole rim is formed (? You couldn't get the net plaiting?)* until you have all those small hazels wasted out to the point, an' the rim is finished then.

An' after it's a week weighted, I take - go round with the spade an' loosens it, an' lifts the whole coracle out o' the ground. And after that's done I cuts some of the top. (End of Record I). (Record II). I cut the sharp spikes off the whole 32 rods round and leaves it one side until I have the hide (leather) steeped in water for 2 days or 2 nights to soften it an' commences then an' sews on the cowhide to the basket with strong twine. And this hide is a large cow hide, the most suitable for the coracle, more suitable nor any other animal hide - (so it is!).

An' when the hide is sewed on round the basket I commence then to put in the seat in the coracle, an' commences to plait the willows across in the coracle for holdin' up the net at the tail of it.

When the willows are all plaited an' put into their proper places on the coracle I get in an' sit on the sate (seat) an' has a mallet an' hammers home these rods in case there'd be any - that they'd be slack agains goin' to the leather; an' goes round gradually, time after time, until I have all those hazels home tight again' the cowhide. An' immediately that I have done that I commence an' cut off the remainder of the spikes - any of them that remains all round, I cut them off to the level of the rim of the coracle.

As soon as I have all the little stakes cut 'round level with the rim, I put on a hazel right round on top of those stakes to keep them from lifting up, an' ties them stakes - them hazel - right round the whole coracle, an' keeps all those butts in their proper place. The meanin' of that is; if any of them spring that there'd be a danger in the nets - in the meshes catchin' in one of those butts that'd spring.

The coracles are dyin' out very much on the River Boyne of late - very few places they are makin' them now at all. The last account I heard of coracle makin' was at Lady Cunningham's of Slane Castle. That's about 12 or 14 years ago. And to the best o' my opinion it was a man o' the name o' Johnson that was makin' them there. He lived in either Slane or Rosnaree. He was over 70 years of age then. Oh! he was all his life-time at them! - very likely the same as meself!

I'm about the last of the coracle-makers at Oldbridge at the present time, except some new beginner starts, an' I don't know of anyone at the present time.

It ran in the family always. Both my grandfather an' my father always was at

* indistinct on record

the business an' always made those correspond in their employ (?). And - yes - I picked it up from my father. I was about 20 years of age when I commenced.

Some years there'd be 4 of those baskets made - put on the coracle.

Yes, I finished the whole coracle from start to finish!. (indistinct - a few words) they would last for 3 seasons, until they'd get broken, or worn with the wet an' the trampin' in of the man's boots on them, of course; it would wear them. But some of them would last for 3 years; more of them would last for 4 years, accordin' to the pressure that'd be on them.

When the season commences the coracle is taken out of the place it's locked up and also the net is taken out, brought up to the fishin' station an' put out on the edge of the river, the net is put into it, an' coiled proper in it, there's a man goes in an' he gets kneelin' with his paddle. (End of Record 2). (Record 3) Starts off then an' shoots the haul right round in a circle, and when the net's all out of the coracle he immediately comes home to the land; there's a rope that'll bring him from the - where the end o' the net leaves the coracle until he lands at the edge of the river back again his and the 3 men pulls in the haul then. An' if there's fish in it of course they'll kill them - they won't let them go! We kill the salmon with a short bit of a stick - one or two blows on the head kills the same. Oh never! - we never use stones - a small short stick. Yes!

We saw some an' had some very good seasons from 1874 until 1884 there was very great fishin' on the Boyne an' all parts at that time - for that number o' years - about 10 or 12 years. And I recollect one week we went down - me father used to have to go to Dublin market every mornin', I might say, that time, with heavy loads o' fish - salmon an' trout. But this was in the month of April an' at the Boyne (?) offices? We went down one Tuesday mornin' an' we took 27 salmon in the one haul, an' the next mornin' we went down about an hour later an' we took 27 salmon in the same place An' that was the most remarkablest event I ever saw on the Boyne - the one number on 3 mornings in the one landin' place. Yes!

At that time the fish'd average about 14 lbs- the whole lot o' them! (The End)

Ediphone Records made by Michael O'Brien (87) of Oldbridge, Drogheda (on the Co. Meath side). 16 June, 1930.

Name in full:	Michael O'Brien
Age:	77. Born September 1853
Father's name:	Thomas O'Brien
Grandfather's name:	Pat MacAnally, a native of Crockfehan, Oldbridge
Occupation of above:	Part-time fisher-farmers
Education:	Can read and write. Went to a "hedge-school" taught by a James Curran on the Donoro road.

Note on the original transcript to say that paddle is of larch.

Note on original transcript to say that: "the hide" (i.e. leather) is procured in spring and is kept 2 nights and a day in water. Then it is rolled in drum shape, as the tail of the cow is the breast of the currach and he takes a portion of leather to fill in that space.

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HOW TO MAKE A SPEY CURRACH

by Shelagh Wynter

(Shelagh, like Olivia Elton Barrett, is a Coracle Society member but also a basketmaker of considerable skill and experience, who is off to work in Bangladesh where she hopes to find a local coracle. There are 'parisals' in Tamil Nadu, S. India, so why not!)

(The Spey currach because of its very different construction from other coracles and currachs is particularly suitable for basketmakers. - Ed.)

Reproduction Spey Coracle - Currach

Materials:

$\frac{3}{4}$ bolt 8'-9' brown willow rods (two-thirds of these are split)

Preformed gunwale of 4 stout hazel rods lashed into an oval 45" x 50"

Horsehair rope

Wooden seat 45" x 11" x $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Method:

Cut 7 50" sticks from the butts of whole rods. Put 3 through the other 4. Put a fourth through the smile with the 3 and tie the slath with its tip and a matching rod slyped and slipped in. Open out the 15 sticks with the pairing that now continues throughout. After 2 rounds a stake made of the hilt of a split rod 30" long is inserted beside each stick, tip towards the centre. Pairing continues using whole rods for 4 more rounds. Sticks and stakes are now opened into 30 singles. Complete centre with two more rounds of whole rods.

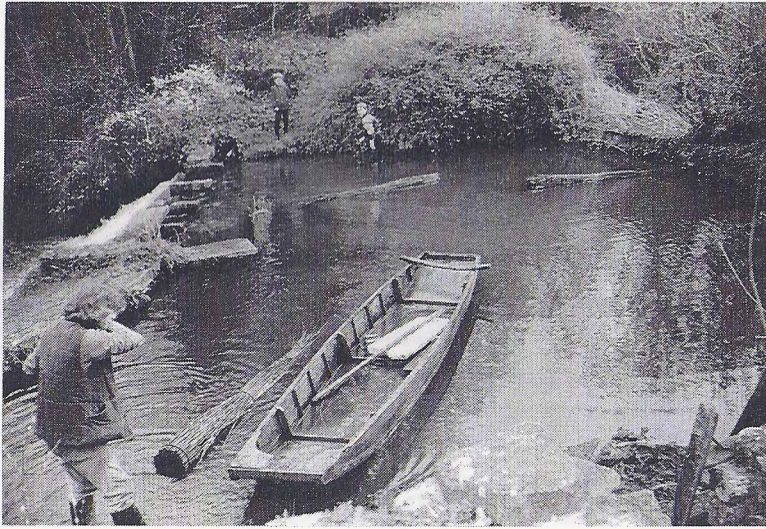
A further 30" split rod is inserted beside each of the 30 stakes. Continue pairing with split rods - skins on the underside - for about 12 rounds. Add extras on opposite sides to form the oval. The base is now flat and about 30" x 35". Replace any broken or short stakes. The stakes must now be turned up to form the bowl shape as pairing continues. Use whole rods where necessary to help with the shaping.

Continue pairing with split rods checking from time to time that the aimed for top size is going to be accomplished. Finish with 2 or 3 whole rod rounds. The depth at the centre 14", sides 45" x 50".

The gunwale is placed inside the stakes and lashed very firmly onto the whole rod pairing all round. (We used split willow or cord instead of horsehair). Cut off the stakes close to the gunwale.

Fit seat across the short side and lash firmly to the gunwale. The carrying rope is made of 2 large rods roped and fixed through the holes in the seat.

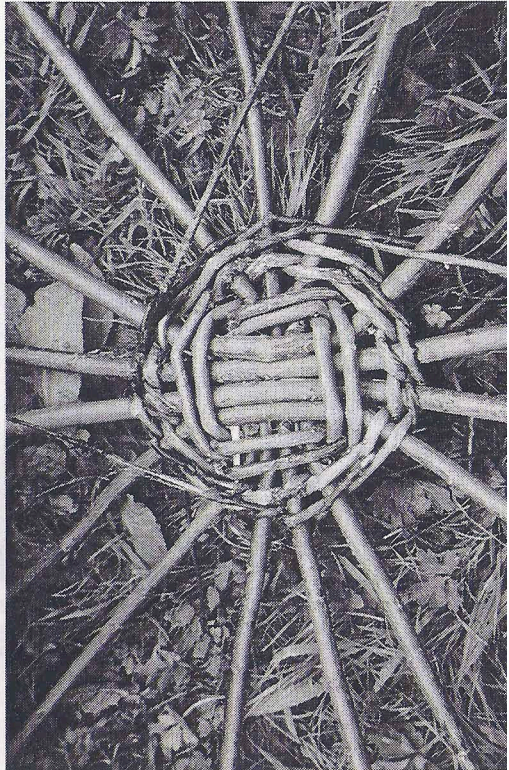
The coracle is covered with a cowhide the ends of which come over the gunwale and are lashed into place. (It can be covered with canvas, but a wooden brace needs to be fixed with struts under the seat for stability).



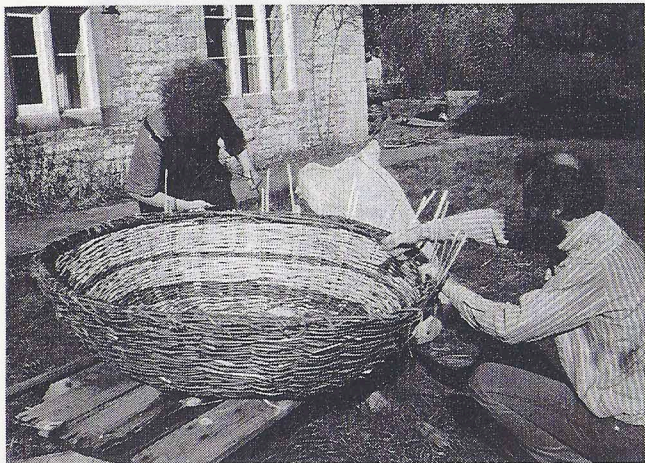
Soaking and mellowing bolts of willow



Splitting rods



Tying the slath



Fitting the gunwale



On the water

A LOT OF WATER HAS FLOWED UNDER THE BRIDGE SINCE

by Peter Faulkner

and

EXPERIENCING WONDERFUL RISOR

by Vivienne Faulkner

A lot of water has flowed under Leintwardine bridge since I launched my first coracle "Teme Dipper" in July 1987. It was to have been a one-off adventure, realising a dream to traverse the river of my childhood from source to confluence - a voyage of 85 miles. Since then - the Wye, Severn and Shannon have fallen to my paddle, voyages totalling some 400 miles.

As the years went by I found myself making coracles though albeit a steady trickle. In January 1992, after watching a BBC 2 programme on the London International Boat Show at Earls Court, it was obvious that they had no provision for my end of the spectrum in environmentally friendly 100% 'green' boats. A car trip to Earls Court that week saw me in the Exhibition Manager's office with provisional invitations to the **East Coast Boat Show** that May and Earls Court in 1993.

Ipswich was a great experience launching me, not only into a new world of boating and sailing, but on the marina twice daily to put the Teme Coracle through its paces in front of a gaping public accompanied by a running commentary over the P.A.

A close friend H.H. (Bob) Savage had agreed to be my P.R.O. at Ipswich and we had many a hoot during the five days of sunshine. One lady, after seeing me on the T.V. news came especially to see our stand and we took the coracle to her garden pond early the next morning after having breakfasted in her 16th Century house.

The **Earls Court Boat Show** was a very different affair. This was the BIG ONE lasting some 12 consecutive days 10 a.m. to 7.00 p.m. (Thursdays 9.30 p.m.!). The build-up alone was almost terrifying with an ever increasing daily post bag. The postman must have been fascinated by mail addressed to 'The Managing Director, Teme Coracles'. No boring dark winter evenings for me. I spent them answering (and binning) correspondence. As the deadline drew ever nearer, the gravity of it all began to dawn on me resulting in more than one cold sweat. However, there was to be no turning back and one afternoon found Vivienne and me driving our bulging car with two coracles on top, into Earls Court itself, and indeed right up to the Classic Boat Stand. I stayed with Peter and Mary Badge for the duration and became a daily commuter into London. It took a few days to get into a routine but my stand was a great success and I only have to look back through my notebook to see the diversity of visitors who came and contributed many interesting comments and stories. A customer, Gerhard Bremicker and his wife Erika on holiday from Germany, came to see me and as a result Vivienne and I were invited to stay with them at Easter. I have now made Gerhard a hide Boyne coracle soon to be despatched. The London show resulted in invitations to Risor Wooden Boat Show in Norway, the Greenwich Wooden Boat Show, a country fair in Cornwall and two sales. David Greenwell of 'Practical Boat Owner' wrote a nice article on my paddle making and I appeared in 'The Times' and 'Classic Boat'. I met the legendary Bill Beattie the curragh expert. The twelve days soon slipped by; it was hard work but thoroughly enjoyable, especially my daily demonstration on the pool watched by

thousands of fascinated punters. I really had withdrawal symptoms for some days afterwards, especially for my pint of draught Guinness at 6.00 p.m. with Des Pawson of "Footrope Knots".

Greenwich International Wooden Boat Show was more of a family affair, much less commercialised but a very enthusiastic public. Viv and I slept in our new acquisition "Jumbo" - a converted Ford Camper Van. It seemed strangely novel camping out inside the grounds of the Greenwich Maritime Museum but quite delightful. The show was officially opened by Robin Knox Johnson and Jack Holt of Mirror Dinghy fame. We had sunshine and I was able to demonstrate on the temporary pool where a small fleet of John Davies's Shrewsbury coracles were available for use to the public. The highlight of the show was when Jane Davey and Lionel brought a group of visually impaired adults to the stand. I watched with fascination as a totally blind lady meticulously examined every square inch of my coracle with her sensitive fingers. I was quite convinced that she could "see" it as well as me, indeed her examination made me see the craft in a much higher plane of awareness.

The National Trust Craft Festival (in late July) was held in the Capability Brown park of Petworth House. We had a tent by the lakeside where I could demonstrate on demand. Despite it not being a boating event the public showed great interest in the coracle and supporting literature. We made an acquaintance with a visiting Norwegian and his family whom we were to meet again at Risør. A number of craft fair organisers from various parts of the country showed interest and may lead to new venues for 'Teme Coracles'. The park was a wonderful setting for the exhibitors campside amongst stands of mature trees and deer browsing. It would not have seemed out of place for a pride of lions to be sharing the sunshine in the knee-high bennetts.

After Petworth we stayed in the south and made our way to **Launceston**, Cornwall for a bi-annual one day show at Werrington Park on the 1st August. We camped and set up our stand by the lake and a large water meadow, bounded on the south by the River Ottery, was the venue for the main showground. Attractions ranged from ferret racing to show jumping, and a large marquee housed a multitude of craft stands. I did hourly demonstrations on the lake which always drew a crowd. It is important to promote the Coracle Society at all these events and we have had many interesting talks with folk who have had some connections with coracles or have sighted them in unlikely places, Japan, California, Tibet (Yak hide), etc.

Returning home on the Sunday evening we hastily got organised for the journey to Norway. Our ferry sailed from Newcastle late Wednesday afternoon and 'Jumbo' was loaded with two 'Teme Coracles' and all the paraphernalia to make a frame at Risør. Colorline did us proud as we heading across the North Sea on only our fourth overseas visit since 1964! The crossing was super and with excitement and some trepidation we arrived at Stavanger and started a 230 mile drive (on the right) to Risør.

* * *

VERDENS GRONNESTE BAT
CORACLE BYGGER - ENGLAND

- or -

EXPERIENCING WONDERFUL RISOR

Standing on a swaying landing stage in Risør harbour at the end of the tenth **Risør Trebatfestival** talking with a friend of one of the organisers he said of this organiser "On his return from the Earls Court Boat Show, Fredrik, with his eyes wide told me of a boat he had seen - 'It was made of COW SKIN'."

What a revelation! From all of those expensive, shiny, classy, million pound boats on show, the coracle had made an everlasting impression.

As I gaze out to sea, on board MS Venus bound for Newcastle a glass of Ringnes Beer in my hand, I reflect on the past week. In a land, strange to both of us, we managed to cause a phenomenal stir (literally, if you think of the paddle). Yes! the coracles! Norwegians loved them. They thought them comical at first, but utterly fascinating. "Is it a bat?" "How do you stop in going round in circles" "Kuwshinn?" (Cowhide). Question after question, amazement after amazement.

Risør, home of an International Wooden Boat Show. From a chance meeting at Earls Court to a three day soirée at Risør. "The Greenest Boat Afloat" was launched. Amongst the tall masts of ancient wooden craft, sails and painted woodwork, Peter paddled expertly for the golden Norwegians. This, our first trip to Norway was wonderful. An atmosphere that was a little reserved but friendly but overall welcoming. We met Brits. who had been there for years, Americans 'doing' Norway, Norwegians who were convinced they had never seen anything like it before. Coracles -touched, stroked, banged and just stared at and talk - we talked for three days! Explanations, demonstrations, exclamations! Risør was a great success.

Norway is beautiful, we've been invited to the show again next year.

See you there?

A fitting end - there is now a coracle in Norway made of "Kuwshinn" nestling under a wooden chalet roof by the side of a lake. A Viking Boat!

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FROM THE RIVER BANK

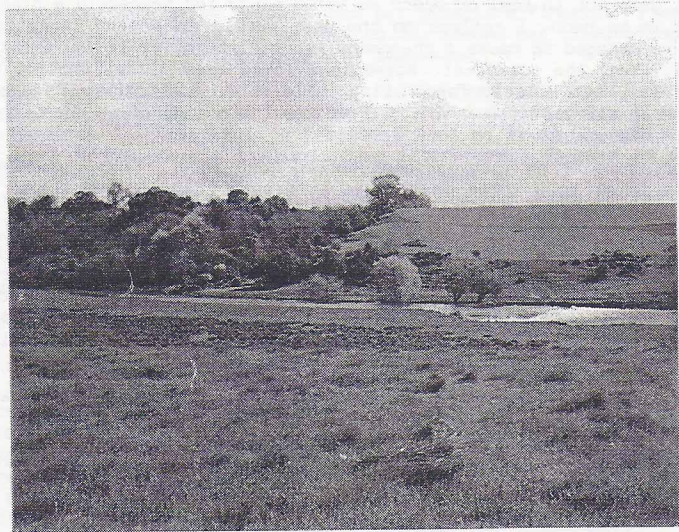
1. For those who have not read it, I commend Nic Compton's article in "Classic Boats", October 9th '93. It covers all types of coracle and is carefully researched.

2. Tim Oakes writes -

"I'm sorry that I missed the A.G.M. at Welshpool - but I think I have a good excuse for not being there; the BBC came to film the Rye coracles in action! In fact, the whole week was taken up by the media interest, and has brought in a lot of interest from the public, and even some older folk who can remember the coracles on the river here at Lydbrook.

But, the media interest also generated a lot of requests to demonstrate the building and using of the Rye coracle, and to this end I started to look for a potential site for a semi-permanent exhibition/demonstration place. My criteria for the place was very specific: and the Dean Heritage Centre fitted the bill entirely. They are proposing to build a "coracle house" in the grounds next to the big mill (in the base of the old mill, in fact). It has a big millpond and (best of all) a 600 yard millstream duct, which I will begin building coracles there, probably around March.

3. Robert Law of Rosnaree, Slane, Co. Meath hopes to revive the Boyne currach in its natural habitat. He intends to hold a regatta for traditional craft.



part of R. Boyne where it is proposed to hold a coracle regatta next summer. C $\frac{1}{2}$ mile of smooth water + access to longer stretches including weirs.

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