



The **Coracle** *Society*



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Charles Fogg
Martin Fowler
Terry Kenny
Gerwyn Lewis
Raymond Rees
- Honorary Auditor:** Position vacant

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

I start with an apology. I am profoundly sorry that the Newsletter has not come out earlier. The fault is not that of the excellent contributors but mine.

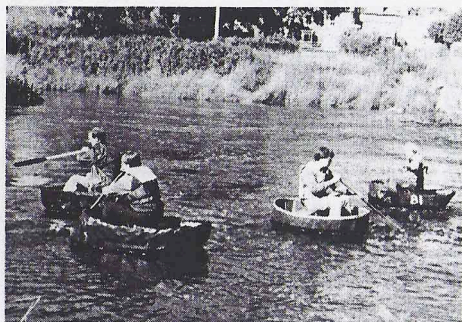
Pressure of work has been particularly heavy over the last six months.

On a happier note, may we congratulate our President on his much merited honour when he was made High Sheriff for the county of Dyfed. Despite this considerable increase in his duties, his support for the Coracle Society has not diminished.

It is a source of much pleasure to observe the continuing and increasing success of the National Coracle Centre due entirely to the admirable way in which Martin Fowler runs it.

Sadly, the net fishermen continue to be treated quite disgracefully over the fee they are called on to pay. Their contribution to Britain's heritage cannot be overstated and yet far from being encouraged and assisted by the Authorities, they are obliged to resort to the media to win support for their merited cause.

On a happier note, we had a most happy AGM and supporting events last year. It started with a visit to the Coracle Centre where Martin Fowler and Bernard Thomas spoke most interestingly and entertainingly. This was followed by a talk and demonstration of coracle handling by one of its finest exponents, Bernard Thomas, who took a party of intrepid members on his beloved Teifi from Llechryd Bridge to Cilgerran. After the AGM which was held at the Castell Malgwyn Hotel (one time seat of the Gower family which produced the famous cricketer, David Gower), a fascinating talk entitled 'The Noble River Teifi' was given by our President. Everyone enjoyed a memorable day.



Member on the River Teifi below Llechryd Bridge under the expert control of Bernard Thomas.



Making their way back from Cilgerran Gorge.

The Coracle Society is very fortunate in the quality of its members; none more so than Peter Faulkner. Wherever he and his hide coracles go, he brings credit to the Coracle Society.

Last June, the first-ever Leintwardine Coracle Regatta was held. The weather was kind, the attendance of local people and coraclers was good and the event was opened with style.

Our President spoke with his customary charm and wit, Peter declaimed in verse and a coracling clergyman blessed the event and took part in it aquatically. That it was such a resounding success was due to the exceptionally high regard in which Peter is held and the trojan work of him and his family. It is with much pleasure I can tell you it is to be repeated on the 10th June this year. Don't miss it. The setting is superb, the locals couldn't be kinder and it will be superbly organized.



A sample of the splendid selection of coracle types on view at the Leintwardine Regatta.

The Society's President, Dr. J. Geraint Jenkins, deep in conversation with Peter Faulkner, organizer of the day.



A 'mighty armada' of coracles on the Teme.

May I conclude by expressing the gratitude of the Society to the Welsh Folk Museum without whose support we couldn't function and our Honorary Secretary, John Williams-Davies, whose exceptional organizational ability is matched only by his courtesy and sense of humour.

RAYMOND REES

by J. Geraint Jenkins

When my book *The Coracle* was published in 1988, the only person who could write an authoritative introduction to the volume was my old friend, Raymond Rees of Carmarthen; a man who has first-hand knowledge of all aspects of coracle fishing. Over the years, Raymond has provided me with a wealth of information on the use and lore of the Tywi coracle, as befitted a person whose family has been associated with the river for well over two hundred years. Raymond and Edgeworth Evans, the Taf coracle man, and I became very firm friends and we spent many a fascinating hour on both river bank and a variety of hostelrys.

It was Raymond's grandfather, William Elias, B.E.M., the doyen of Tywi coracle men who was to instill in his infant grandson a love and respect for the ancient traditions of his beloved river. William Elias lived to the grand old age of ninety-eight and it was he who passed down the wisdom of many generations of river men to Raymond.

'To learn the skills of the coracle maker and the net maker takes many years of diligent apprenticeship', wrote Raymond. 'The patient learning of what is not only a science but an art is extremely rewarding and I suggest that this is a reason for the ancient craft's survival. Perhaps too, the uncertainty of the end result and the challenge of each new season. They have always held me in their fascination'.

Raymond was born in Carmarthen town in a cottage on the once-busy quayside, overlooking the River Tywi in 1933. From his infancy, that river and its activities was the force that influenced his life and work. Before learning to read and write, Raymond could operate a coracle. Although he spent many years on the technical staff of the Ministry of Agriculture, the threat of a transfer to another laboratory in the West of England in the mid 1970s was enough to make Raymond resign from his safe civil service post. After all, there were no coracles on the Bristol Avon. He and his charming and beautiful wife, Linda, decided to set up business as a fishmonger in Carmarthen market. Moving into a purpose-built shop in 1981, Raymond's business has flourished and he is now one of the leading members of the Carmarthen business community. Articulate, sociable and knowledgeable, the fishmonger's shop is a mecca for all those interested in the history and techniques of fish capture.

But the coracle and its traditions still remain Raymond's first love and at present he is preparing a folio of information and measured drawings that will be invaluable to all those who wish to construct a graceful Tywi coracle. Members of the Society will be able to purchase the folio at a reduced price. If any member would like to take advantage of Raymond's kind offer, they should get in touch with him at 22 Richmond Terrace, Carmarthen, Dyfed.

I value very greatly my friendship with Raymond, for he upholds the ancient tradition of a noble river; the tradition of his grandfather William Elias; the tradition of Dai Bigwn, the Yankee, Dai Llosski and Wil-y-Ddr, and the many generations to whom River Tywi was the focus of their lives.

GERWYN LEWIS - THE MISSING LINK?

by Terry Kenny

Gerwyn grew up in an area of Wales where the coracle tradition still existed, so he was always aware that they were still in use. But at that tender age he took no great interest in them. His activities were directed towards other forms of navigation. Forty gallon drums stolen from the dairies, with old pallets provided the materials for Gerwyn's early boat building experiences. 'Going down the river, falling in, getting wet in my Sunday clothes - the usual routine'.

Later, in college, he discovered the lath and canvas PBK kayaks and the stitch and glue plywood designs. 'We had a ruck of those in an outdoor club we had. Really, the only thing we ever did with them was take them out in the surf on Newgale beach and wreck them straight away. They didn't take very well to burying their noses in the sand'. Years later, the Lewis family were to try surfing in coracles, with equal lack of success. The coracles survived a bit better than the kayaks, not having a nose to bury.

Gerwyn entered the maelstrom of teaching in London and eventually ended up in a 'furlined rut' at New College, Wellington. The woodwork staff there made the decision not to use imported timber and about the same time ten years ago, the Telford Development Commission was setting-up The Green Wood Trust. 'I just got involved with Chris Holland and David Griffith. Then when the Development Officer job came up, I thought "If I don't go for it, it's something I may regret for years to come", so I took the plunge. And here I am in sheltered employment at The Green Wood Trust'.

By this time, David Griffith had already looked at building coracles and the first course had been held at Storchley Grange, taught by Fred Davies of Shrewsbury. 'That first coracle I made has only just rotted away. It got left out last year and it sort of moulded back into the ground and disappeared, which is rather nice to think they can die such an elegant death'. Gerwyn had previously tried to make coracles at New College, but they were failures because nobody had any idea how to go about it. 'We were going at it with kettles of hot water and bits of string everywhere, and everything drying out and falling to bits and cracking. They were absolute disasters until we picked up Eustace's idea of working on an old door'.

'Now that we're ten years down the line, we know an awful lot more. I think the whole idea of becoming makers has been a healthy policy, rather than the museum policy of just making a collection, which can be sterile and open to distortion. There is an understanding to be gained by doing and by making the mistakes, in addition to approaching it in a purely academic way'.

Gerwyn was vague (or modest) about whether GWT or Bewdley Museum had been first to persuade Fred Davies to share his knowledge. So the debate as to whether Gerwyn or Charles Fogg is the missing link between the traditional coracle men and the New Wave coracle makers is still unresolved. By running courses, both have introduced many people to the coracle, and one a great deal to stimulate interest in the craft. The practical approach has nicely supplemented the research of the Coracle Society. It's been exciting being involved in starting things off and the way different people with different skills have come together and the remarkable amount of good that's come from it'.



Gerwyn Lewis (centre) paddling hard at Leintwardine.

'I think we've established the coracle as a decent leisure craft to have. It gets away from the whole ethos of everything has to be built in plastic and at high speed. It's definitely not a competitive craft'. People who have seen a coracle regatta might disagree with this last opinion and recent television exposure shows that there is potential.

'What we've done is to investigate the whole area of fishing on the Severn. The actual fishing techniques, the weights, the net-making, and all the rest of it. We've concentrated more on the craft than on the purpose, the skill of fishing from a coracle. Perhaps because those skills are still in use on the Towy and Teifi, we've tended to overlook them in other places'.

These days, Gerwyn finds that he is too heavily involved in the administration of GWT to give as much time as he would like to making things. 'In the end, I much prefer to see at the end of the day something that I have made. I like to see a chair standing in the corner and think to myself "Oh, I made that". That still gives me immense satisfaction because I know I can do that better than most people'.

GALWAY CORACLES AND CURRACHS

by Martin Fowler

'This is Tim McGennis in Dublin. I was wondering if you could come over to Ireland in July for the Festival of the Sea?' The venue was to be Galway on the west coast and my job was to build a coracle over three days and to demonstrate fishing and handling skills in the canal basin. I met Tim in Dublin in February during a rugby visit, Ireland v Wales, and we discussed the details over a pint or three of Guinness!

The journey to Ireland in July involved a van-full of Teifi coracles, materials for building and a photographic display. I also took a co-coracle handler and driver. We crossed to Ireland from Fishguard and drove to Galway. Thursday morning, I was directed to the concrete jungle which was Galway Shopping Centre to meet the man who wanted to help build a coracle. I had sent over diagrams, a model and a list of materials beforehand. The area designated for building coracles contained two half-built sailing boats and a curled up bundle of laths looking somewhat un-coracle-like.

Coracle-building was timetabled from 11am till 1pm, but so far I was alone. I set up my demonstration and exhibition and awaited further instructions. Occasionally, one or two inquisitive shoppers edged around the bundle trussed up in the centre of the floor wondering what it might be, not relating it with the pictures of Teifi coracles on display. My co-coracle builder never did arrive and at 1pm I went with one of the organisers to see where the coracle handling was to take place, and on the way she explained the meanings of Irish and being laid back.

The canal basin proved to be a somewhat smelly venue, with steep access to the water. Although the water was very calm we didn't relish the thought of any contact with it. We were due to perform our party piece at 5.30pm and therefore retired to the nearest inn for refreshment remembering we shouldn't drink and coracle. By 5pm the clouds were rolling in and half-an-hour later it was raining steadily. We parked the van beside the lake and awaited further instructions. A knock on the window woke us, and through the misted glass stood the elusive coracle builder. He decided the weather was too bad for a demonstration and could I meet him the following morning as we had to drive somewhere to pick up hazel wands to build the coracle.

I met Jim Hogan the following day and we drove off into the wilds of the countryside searching for the man who was cutting hazels for us. We eventually arrived at a bungalow miles from anywhere, and was greeted by the lady of the house. She showed us the bundles and I paid the agreed price. The note I gave her was English currency and in a broad local accent she said she would keep it in case they ever came over to England. The rest of the morning was spent cleaning down the hazel wands and creating a mess, which seemed of more interest to the morning shoppers!

The water demonstration took place at 3pm on a much pleasanter day. Our audience contained mostly French students, after all the main theme of the Festival was the Brittany to Galway Yacht Race, and the French Navy had landed the evening before. Two very amused people were from Neath in South Wales, who were surprised to see a coracle in West Ireland.

The highlight of the day for me was the arrival of Brian, the Currach maker. He was keen on handling a coracle which he managed very well, and asked if I would like to go out in a currach.

I didn't need asking twice, and off we went a little further along the coast. All his currachs were lined up below a wall on the beach. A very pleasant afternoon was spent rowing out towards the Aran Islands and after a little practise, he allowed me to go off on my own. The oars crossing over can cause sore knuckles if you get the action wrong, but having learnt to avoid pain the currach shot off across the bay at quite a speed. Only a light dip of the very narrow oar is needed to send you skimming across the water. Many modern currach makers tend to make fibre-glass ones, but Brian only makes them covered with canvas and pitch.

Saturday morning it was back in the Shopping Centre to finish off the coracle. Under observation from passing shoppers and in a very warm atmosphere, we wrestled with the hazels to bind the frame together. Jim provided oak laths which were strong and unyielding as we twisted the hazel in and out, but after a lot of puffing and perspiration, we decided we had what would pass for a Teifi coracle, and Jim was happy to take it away to cover. The afternoon again turned out wet and windy so the demonstration was abandoned. It was a good opportunity to get out into the countryside, so we drove off to the remote boglands of Connemara. The tour ended at a watering hole overlooking the wild coastland towards the Aran Islands, the hunting ground of the currach men. The World Cup was on the screen and the orange, green and white flags were everywhere.

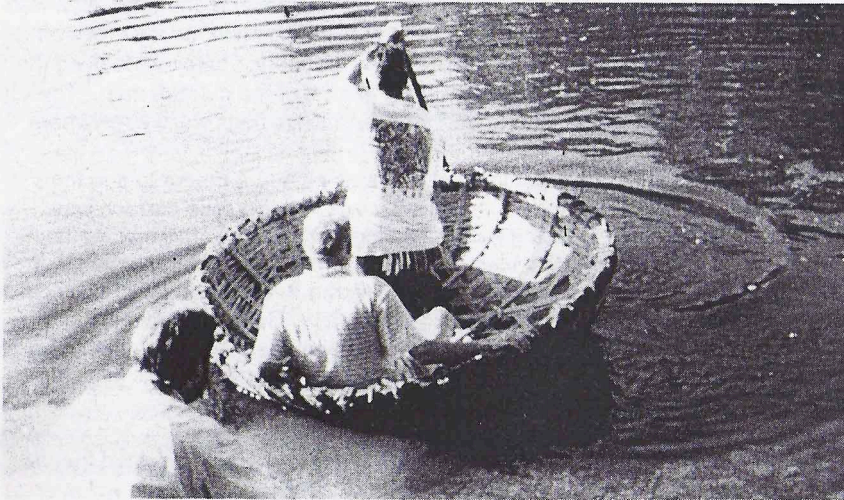
Our journey back to Wales was of great interest to me as I made a detour to see the Brendan boat which is kept in dry dock in the hills above Limerick. The currach was covered with forty-nine ox hides and the hull lashed together with two miles of leather thongs. The original voyage of St. Brendan in the 6th century is thought to have taken them via Iceland and Greenland to America. In 1976-7 Tim Severin and his crew carried out the same journey in their currach using similar materials. He also landed in Newfoundland and therefore argues that it would have been possible for the Irish monks to have reached the New World before the Vikings or Christopher Columbus in a skin boat.

We arrived home having drunk our yearly quota of Guinness, made some good friends and learnt a lot more about the currach men of Galway. Whether Jim Hogan will ever cover his Teifi coracle and take to the water remains to be seen and I await further news.

In July, Graham and Virginia Grerar came to Cenarth on a mission. Four years before they had transported an Indian parisal from Tamil Nadu in Southern India, back to Britain and finally to the Coracle Centre. They had discovered the making of them whilst escorting tourists around India. This year they thought it would be a novel idea instead of just travelling by train, they could take people by coracle down one of the rivers. They came to Cenarth to find out how well they handled and how many people you might seat comfortably in one. We launched it below the bridge and as we all clambered aboard, we discovered it wasn't effectively watertight.

Indian parisals are made with innerwoven bamboo and originally covered with animal skins. These days more modern materials are used, such as sacking or plastic packaging material. This was the covering we had and the gap in the seam was soon located. Deciding to risk it, we paddled out into the river but with five on board and shipping water agreed that four would be more comfortable. Apart from the driver, we were all armed with a mug to help bail water! Despite the damp interior the craft handled very well and four people could be transported quite comfortably.

The idea in India was to set up the original coracle maker to build another one similar in size and to also make three others that fit inside one another for easy transportation. After an hour or so experimenting we nearly ran down a Teifi coracle taking a holiday maker for a ride. Graham said he wasn't worried so much with other water transport in India, he was more concerned with crocodiles and with the lowness in the water that we experienced, I could understand the problems they might cause!



CORACLES IN INDIA

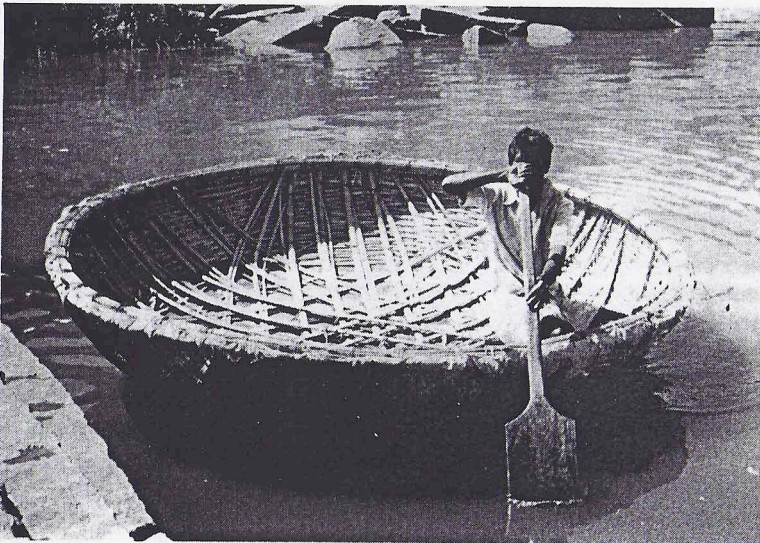
by Peter Badge

There can be little doubt there are more working coracles in India than anywhere else in the world, so it was with added interest that Mary and I joined our daughter and son-in-law, Ginny and Graham, in India for a three-week visit early last year. We knew in advance where we could see some of these fascinating craft because they had acquired an Indian coracle for us which is now on permanent display in the National Coracle Centre at Cenarth.

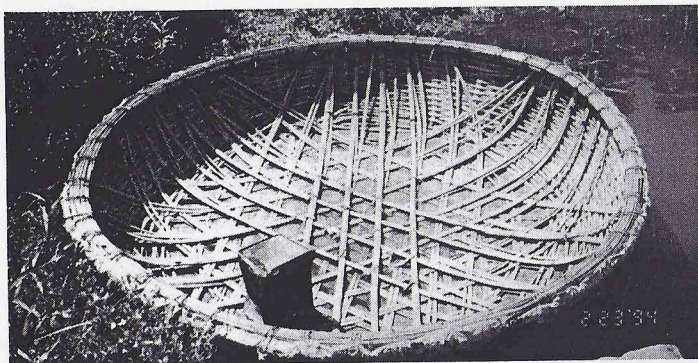
We visited three places where coracles were regularly, but differently used.

Our first port of call was the magnificent dam on the Tungabhadra river in the Hospet/Gunterkal area. Here we saw our first coracles. They were some considerable distance away but appeared to be identical to those we saw elsewhere in India and to that at Cenarth. What was particularly interesting was the way in which they were being used. Two men were on board; one was tending a very long net whilst his companion was propelling the coracle by 'sculling' it with a large oar over the stern in a similar manner to that used by boatmen in the UK when in dinghies, tenders etc. The sculling oar was clearly secured to the coracle but unfortunately, we were too far away to see how.

In Hornell's great work, 'The Origins of Water Transport', there is a photograph (probably taken in the '30s) of a ferry where coracles were in regular use on the Tungabhadra in Hampi. They are in identical use today. Their suitability for such use was obvious because the river is quite shallow, strewn intermittently with rocks, with not a bridge in sight as far as the eye could see.



One set of coracle men was based on one bank and another set on the opposite bank. They operated separately from one another. The coracle varied considerably in size but was quite capable of carrying five adult passengers at a time. The one in which we made our first crossing was about 10 feet in diameter. It had a flat bottom and was identical in construction to the craft at Cenarth. The coracle man sat on an upturned biscuit tin and paddled with a 'c' stroke alternately on each side.



His paddle was heavy and with a very broad blade. The coracle in which we made our return journey was smaller but easily took four of us, and was propelled at great speed with the coracle man kneeling close to the side of the coracle using a similar technique to that displayed by the Donegal paddling coracle men. The charge was two rupees per passenger per journey.

We noticed, with interest, the presence of a pitch boiler with brushes nearby. We also noticed a number of coracles on land, one of which had a large fishing net. We were told that coracles were used for fishing as well as ferrying. I was interested to discover if these coracles were transported for distances, as is the practice in west Wales, or if they were kept close to the river or sea, as in Donegal. The answer was provided graphically when we came across a coracle man some distance from the river. He was carrying his craft on his head without using his hands in any way. Quite a remarkable feat of balance to the Western eye, but in India many articles are carried effortlessly on heads.



A week or so later, we travelled to Sangam on the river Cauvery in Karnataka. Here coracles were used for leisure trips on the river and were more passenger friendly than at Hampi.



They were also used for fishing but only in the morning. By good fortune, our taxi driver could speak the local language, which is Kannda. Through his good offices, we spoke to a local coracle maker.

We discovered that sadly, but not surprisingly, coracles were declining in number. The working life of a coracle was about one year (certainly a number of derelict coracles were visible). Apparently the size of the coracle was dictated by local needs and the nature of the river; the average carrying capacity being 10 persons.

A coracle could be built in about 24 hours and the price was the equivalent of about £30. This was more than twice the price Ginny and Graham paid for the Cenarth coracle but this was at Hogernakal some distance away. The coracle making tradition passes down from father to son and he cuts all his own bamboo. Nowadays coracles are covered with plastic sacks which have been sewn together instead of buffalo hide which is not so easy to patch.

We found the covering technique interesting. First of all, a single thickness of plastic bags was stretched over the frame and secured. It was then given a coat of tar. This was followed by a second thickness of plastic bags. It was pitched also. Sometimes a third thickness was added. The paddles in use here were not the same as those used on the Tungabhadra. They were very similar to modern Iron Bridge paddles but without the 'T' bar. The coracle man didn't sit on a tin but rested his heels against a substantial pole like baulk of timber secured to the bottom of the coracle and put his knees tight up against the inner side of the coracle. Here there was little sign of the 'C' stroke being used. Instead, 'scooping' with the paddle on alternate sides took place.

We gathered that coracles were used on this part of the Cauvery because the river is too shallow and rocky in places for more conventional crafts to be used. Where we saw the other coracles, they were called 'Parisals'. Here, the local name is 'Tepa'.

This year, Ginny and Graham will be running coracle holidays in India for Butterfields tours and have been practising in Cenarth on the Teifi to the considerable interest of the locals.

Their photograph shows Graham practising.



on the Teifi watched anxiously by Martin Fowler; the passenger is Ashley Butterfield. Ginny and Graham acquired the 'Parisal' now on display at the National Coracle Centre, Cenarth from Hogernakal, Tamil Nadu on the river Cauvery.



FROM THE RIVER BANK

1. WATER-PROOF COATINGS FOR CORACLES

by R. E. Child, Head of Conservation, National Museums & Galleries of Wales

The outer covering of coracles and similar skinned boats has always consisted of two components : a skin of some sort stretched over the framework to give a strong physical barrier against water, and a water-proofing agent to seal against water seeping through the skin. Ideally, the water-proofing needs to be effective, flexible, yet strong enough to protect the skin from abrasion against rocks and banks, and wear and tear.

The commonly accepted development of skin and water-proofer through the ages starts with hides stretched over a wicker framework and water-proofed with tallow cake. Tallow is obtained by rendering down animal fats - particularly those of beef or mutton into a hard waxy material that is insoluble in water. When rubbed onto the hides, it would water-proof them but also make them more flexible. It is likely the early coracles would have to be re-tallowed frequently.

With the commercialization of the woollen industry in Wales during the Industrial Revolution, the availability and low cost of woollen flannels made them an obvious choice for coracle coverings to the heavier, clumsier hides. However, the porous lighter nature of flannel meant a thicker more durable water-proofer was needed. Reference is made to two materials - pitch or tar, and molten tar and resin. It is difficult, however, to determine exactly what is meant by these terms. In the mid 19th century, dictionaries gave the following general definitions :

Pitch - common pitched used on boats, casks etc. is the residue after obtaining common tar from boiling the roots of pine or fir; also, by boiling tar until the volatile parts are driven off.

Tar - is the 'viscid brown-black oleaginous' material obtained from distilling pinewood in closed vessels.

Later descriptions of pitch and tar include the by-products from the distillation of coal in the production of coal gas.

Confusion occurs when the naturally occurring tar-like substances were found associated with oil fields etc. Typical early descriptions refer to

- bitumen - a black substance found in the earth resembling pitch
- asphaltum - a kind of bitumen or pitch found naturally, used for pitching ships' bottoms, road-making etc.

Again, modern descriptions broaden the definition so that bitumen can also be the tarry residue from the distillation of coal and a synonym for asphalt.

The use of pitch and tar from pine trees such as Stockholm Tar and Swedish Pitch were ideal for water-proofing boats as they were very insoluble in water, had strong adhesive properties and also helped prevent rotting of the coverings. Their flexibility and durability could be adjusted by altering the proportions of a mixture of the solid pitch and sticky viscous tar. A survey of typical coverings on Welsh coracles by Hornell in the 1930s showed the following proportions in use:

	Pitch	Stockholm Tar
Taf coracles	1 lb	1 1/2 lbs
Ironbridge coracles	2 lbs	1 qt
Lower Dee coracles	2 lbs	1 qt
Wye & Usk coracles	2 lbs	1 qt
Welshpool coracles	2 lbs	1 lb

The Teifi coracle commonly used a variation using 6 lbs of pitch with up to 1/2 lb of lard or linseed oil to soften it.

The ingredients were heated together until mixed and a thin liquid obtained and then applied over the covering. By the 19th century the coverings were usually of calico or thin canvas which had a tight weave and were innately strong. Therefore, a relatively thin coat of pitch/tar could be applied giving a very light strong craft.

In the post-war period where wood-based pitches and tars have been increasingly difficult to obtain, coal-based tars have taken over. Typical of the new mixtures is that used by Raymond Rees of Carmarthen who applies a hot mixture of coal tar and wood resin to his coracles - the resin on cooling helps to solidify the coal tar while maintaining some flexibility.

Now in the last few years, high-tech finishes have occasionally been used as coal tar finishes but have been disappointing. Coal tar products suffer attack from the ultraviolet rays in daylight and 'crocodile' giving a cracked skin. Bitumen from the distillation of petroleum oil goes matt in sunlight and degrades by weathering. Modern coatings include the commercial products Presamit (a coal-based pitch in solvent) which gives a somewhat brittle finish, and Heavicote (a coal pitch/epoxy resin mixture).

Already there has been experimentation with fibre-glass coracle bodies as the ultimate material that is framework, covering and water-proofer in one. But, happily for traditionalists, it has proved heavy and unwieldy.

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2. Michael Johnston, a noted amateur military historian recently visited Vietnam and photographed a number of coracles on red beach near Da Nang, where the U.S. Marines landed in 1965. They are used by fishermen as tenders and are spun down the beach on their sides like large cartwheels.

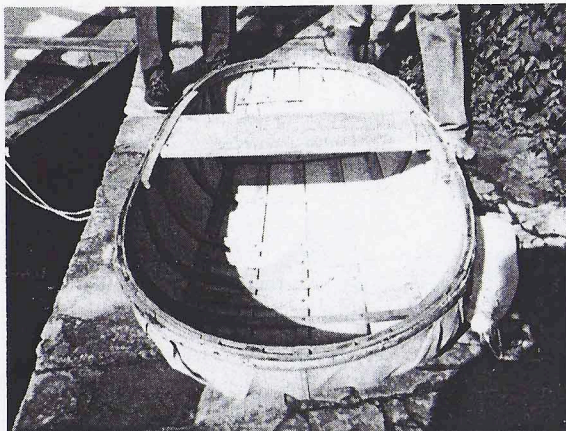


3. Members Graham and Virginia Crerar sent to the Chairman an extract from the Coimbatore Indian Express which shows an Indian Special Task Force comprising eight soldiers crossing the river Bhavani in pursuit of a notorious criminal. Metropolitan River Police take notice! (Sadly, the photo was too poor in quality to reproduce. Ed.)

4. Hornell refers in 'British Coracles' to coracles being in use on the river Avon at Evesham and describes it as a 'recent introduction'. He was, however, writing in 1936! That 'recent introduction' has now become a tradition proudly maintained by Louis and Sally Barman and their family at the family owned mill.



Although it is understood that Harry Rogers inspired their first coracles, they have now developed their own individual type.



The distinctive features are the shape, use of oak laths, brass rivets and coloured covering. In the past the family constructed a sailing curragh.



It is hoped Louis Barman might be persuaded to write an article about their tradition. (He is, of course, an active and valued member of the Society. Ed.)