



The Coracle Society



spring 1997

OFFICERS OF THE CORACLE SOCIETY

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Peter Badge
Charles Fogg
Martin Fowler
Frank Jones
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David Gent
Chris Sauvareign
Sandy Boyd
Terry Kenny

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Chairman's Report

Peter Badge

There have been and will be more changes in 1996/7 than there have been for some time. We are all very sad to have lost the services of our most able Honorary Secretary, John Williams Davies, who was obliged to resign because of enhanced professional responsibilities now that he is in charge of the Museum of Welsh Life. Without John's immense skills as an administrator and the generosity of the Museum of Welsh Life, the Society would never have been able to come into existence and carry on as it has. We express a deep vote of gratitude to him. We are consoled by the fact that Vivienne, the charming and most efficient wife of our incoming Chairman, Peter Faulkner, has accepted the position of Honorary Secretary.

We also lost two stalwart Committee members in Gerwyn Lewis and James Williams-Thomas. They were both founder members. We thank them for all that they did. Happily we are joined by Chris Sauvèreign from Surrey, and Sandy Boyd from East Anglia. They are highly regarded members and we are particularly fortunate that they will be taking a higher role in the Society.

Articles will appear elsewhere about the regattas at Cilgerran and Ironbridge. Anyone with an interest in coracles will find a visit to these regattas very well worth while in exactly the same way as they would if they were to visit the Leintwardine Regatta, so very well run by Peter and Vivienne Faulkner.

We are all committed to supporting local events as strongly as we can. In this regard I hope that soon we will have a regatta in the South West (we do on occasions put in an appearance at the Dartmouth Royal Regatta). Charles and Jane Fogg flew our flag at a N.T. Craft fair in Castle Drogo, Devon last year, and we have been invited to take part in the Exeter Medieval Fayre in August this year. East Anglia could be a similarly fertile area, as we have a number of members thereabouts.

May I end on a personal note. I shall be handing over the Chairmanship to Peter Faulkner at the AGM in Leintwardine. I will, of course, remain as a member.

It has been an immense privilege to have been your Chairman since the Society started, but I think the time has come for some fresh blood so that we can go on from strength to strength. I thank everyone for their many kindnesses and support. May I beg one last favour. I hope to be starting

research into coracles, curraghs and allied crafts at the University of Exeter on my retirement in August this year. I would welcome as much information as you can give me about our beloved craft. Any photographs, drawings, descriptions, cuttings and anecdotes would be most welcome. Might they please be sent to: Peter Badge, Mill End, 6 Springfield, Horrabridge, Yelverton, Devon PL20 7QS

Letters to the Editor

'Is This Spike's Grandad?'

A photograph in our newsletter sparks off some discussion . . .

Dear Sir,

How interesting that in your Summer issue of the NT magazine is a photograph of Terence 'Spike' Milligan's grandfather. It shows the elderly gentleman carrying his coracle on his back. Spike—the well-known writer and humourist—on one occasion dressed as his grandfather and carried the coracle in time-honoured fashion on his back, and the scene was shown as part of a television programme some years ago. The resemblance is quite striking, and it is impossible to avoid the family link. It is surprising the Coracle Society did not mention it in their (news) letter.

Doherty Grant

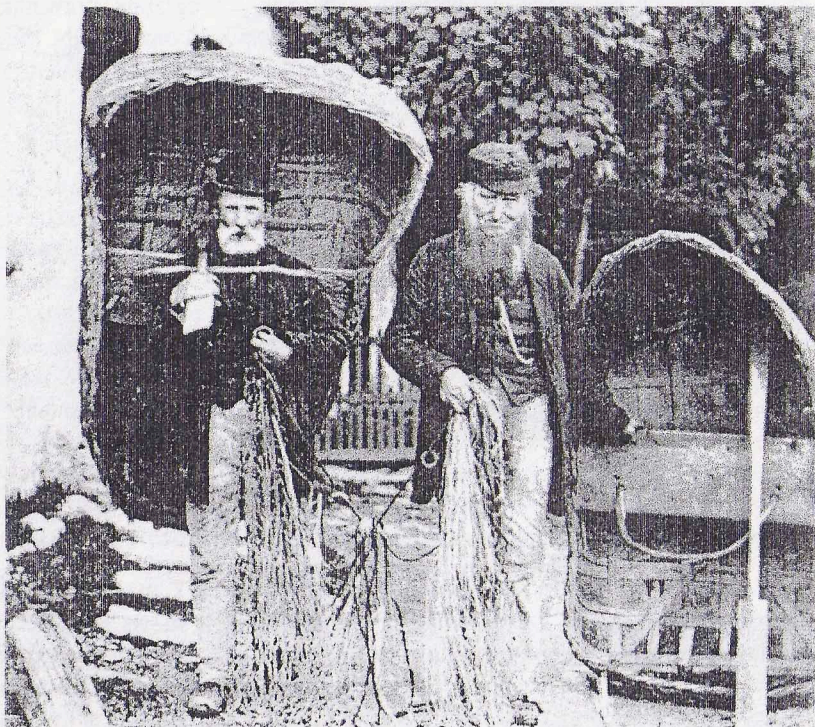
Mr Grant also wrote to The National Trust Magazine, and received the following reply, a copy of which was sent to our editor.

Dear Mr Grant,

Having studied the photograph of coracles and elderly gentlemen, I am amazed at the likeness between Spike Milligan and his grandfather. I do not know if the then Editor was aware of the link, or for that matter if the National Coracle Centre knew. Presuming they are unaware, I have forwarded a copy of your letter to them.

Gina Guarnieri, Editor, The National Trust Magazine

The photograph in question . . .



Editor's note:

And, of course, though the 'family' resemblance may be striking, the dear old gent on the right is not Spike Milligan's grandfather. This photograph of two still unidentified gentlemen was taken beside Cenarth Falls in the early part of the century, when the village was the centre of coracle fishing on the Teifi. I wrote to Spike Milligan and he replied as follows:

Dear Martin,

I just wanted to say a personal thank you for your letter together with its enclosures. Please forgive the brevity of this letter as I am absolutely inundated at the moment on a promotional tour for my latest book and doing some poetry readings. I do hope you understand I just wanted you to know that I did appreciate you writing to me and I would like to thank you for thinking of me.

Spike

Harry Sitting Bear

Martin Fowler

The highlight of 1996 for me was meeting a real-life Mandan Indian here in Cenarth, West Wales. The reason for his visit dates back as far as 1170, when legend has it a Prince Madoc had discovered America 300 years before Columbus, and landing on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, had encountered the natives, and a Welsh colony was thought to have been established there.

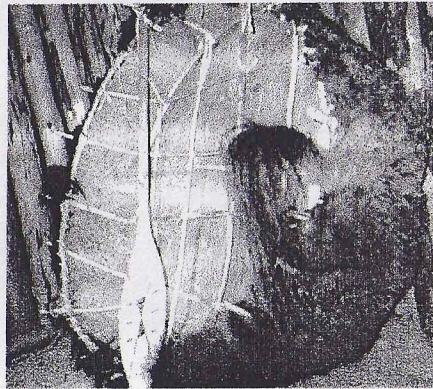
In the 1790's further expeditions to discover the Missouri River led to the great tribal lands of the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians. Amongst the Mandan Indians there were found to be members with fair hair and blue eyes, speaking a language similar to that spoken in Wales. The story of Madoc has become one of the great myths and legends of America and Wales, and because of this, a film company wanted a real Mandan Indian to come to Wales and try to re-tell the story.

It was a bright sunny day in August when I met Harry Sitting Bear perched on the parapet of Llechryd Bridge. The film crew were setting up for the opening shot, which included Bernard Thomas (coracle maker, fisherman and local celebrity) sculling to and fro in the river many feet below. The next scene involved Harry, who is a rather large man, easing himself into a Teifi coracle with encouragement from Bernard.

The pair were filmed locked in conversation about old customs and similarities between the two cultures. As I followed them on the river bank, the scene reminded me of those cowboy films as the goodies escape down river fleeing the enemy.

Later that day Harry and the crew visited the Coracle Centre, and he was very interested in the bull boat built by members of the Coracle Society. He explained that a buffalo, being a large animal, could provide a craft rather larger than the one here.

The photographs on display were also of great interest to him, as they were of an earlier generation



A Bull Boat from Knife River

from his own village. He promised to research the lineage of the people pictured and send me their names.

That evening I visited him at his hotel, and he showed me his buffalo robe which he had spread out on the bed. Many Mandan symbols were painted on it, each depicting aspects of Indian lore, legend and culture. Outside the hotel we stood looking up into a star-filled sky and he began relating further stories about his homeland, and on other such nights I wonder if I will ever meet Harry Sitting Bear again.



*Harry Sitting Bear
at the National Coracle Centre*

From The River Bank

Peter Badge

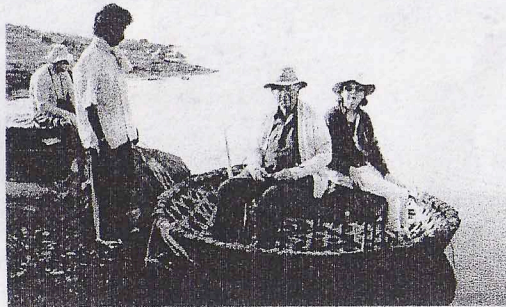
I assisted two distinguished basketmakers, Olivia Elton-Barrett, a member, and Mary Butcher, to construct a replica Spey curragh for the Worshipful Company of Basketmakers. Many will be aware of the historic race between a Thames waterman and a Spey curraghman last century. The Company of Watermen and Lightermen suggested that we revive this race. Any suggestions as to who might be the appropriate person to paddle the curragh would be greatly appreciated.

CORACLES IN THE FENS

An article appeared in the Sunday Times written by Dan Pearson stating that 'It was in a coracle that Boadicea made her way across the shallow waters of the Fens'. If he is right, it is the first firm evidence of coracles being used in East Anglia but he has not, as yet, supplied the source of his information,

CORACLES ON THE USK

Many will have seen the letter from Sir Richard Hanbury Tenison K.C.V.O. describing the catching of a 68½lb salmon on the Usk in a net trawled by a coracle in the eighteenth century. Sir Richard has supplied substantial evidence of net fishing by coracle on the river though, sadly, there are no photographs or drawings of them available.



*Two intrepid British tourists sitting in an Indian coracle
in Southern India in 1995*

CORACLES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

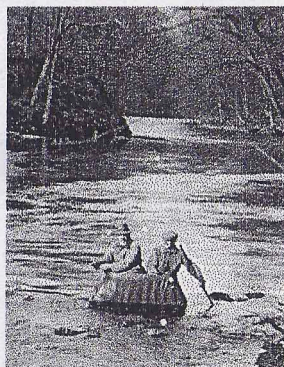
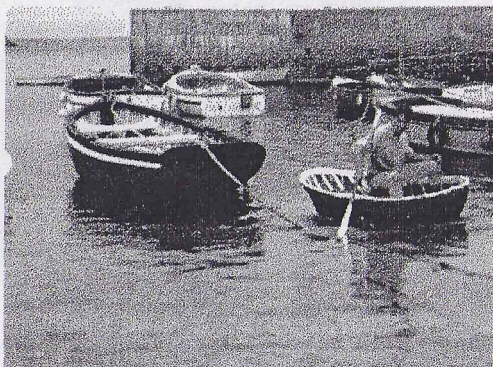
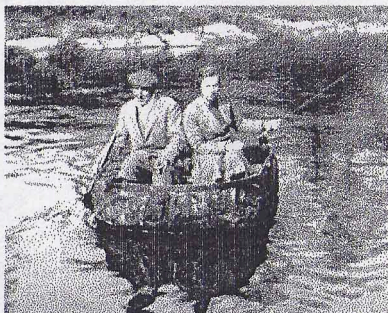
As a result of attending one of the Greenwood Trust's excellent coracle making courses, Bruce Crawford from the appropriately named Crawfordsburn in Northern Ireland, is hoping to start making Boyne curraghs in their native Ireland in the not too distant future. We wish him much luck in this.

CORACLES IN ANGLESEY

A correspondent tells us that in May 1992 she watched fishermen making coracles at an exhibition in Beaumaris Town Hall, Anglesey, which they later paddled in the Menai Straits off Beaumaris Pier.

ONE-HANDLED PADDLING

Recent comments by the Chairman on the importance of teaching people one-handed paddling produced interesting information from David Maybury, whose father was a distinguished fisherman and coracle handler. David sent photographs of his father with an unknown fisherwoman and the late Martin Whitworth, whose widow donated a Llangollen coracle to the Museum of Welsh Life. David points out that he has never seen a Llangollen coracle handled with two hands.



CORACLE IN CORNWALL

This photograph is of Raymond Rees' nephew using a coracle made for him by his uncle in Portscatho, Cornwall, last year

By Appointment!!

Martin Fowler

You never know who is out there wanting to buy a coracle, and neither can you be sure what they want it for or where they may use it. For instance, a phone call last summer led to this sequence of events . . . The person on the phone said she was Lady Walton, and living at the Savoy Hotel in London. She asked if I had a coracle for sale, and as I always keep one of Bernard Thomas's here at the Coracle Centre, I was able to help her. She needed to get the coracle to Italy and informed me that a company she deals with in North London were shipping a crate of her belongings to Italy the following week. Could I get the coracle to London by Saturday?

At the right price, I could. I phoned the company and explained the situation, and they said I could bring it on the Saturday, but to be sure it was there by one o'clock, as the warehouse closed down then for the weekend. My wife and I set out early on Saturday morning on the two hundred and fifty mile trip to London, but encountered many delays on the motorway, only reaching the North Circular Road at Chiswick by twelve-thirty.

I needed to phone the warehouse to reassure them I was within spitting distance and to please wait for me. Precious time was lost trying to explain to the young man what a coracle was. We arrived on the stroke of one. The main shutters were down, but a side door was left open and the coracle just went through. We left it in his capable hands and departed.

We had agreed to meet Lady Walton at her hotel that evening, so spent the afternoon roaming the shopping streets, strictly window-shopping. We arrived at the Savoy Hotel at seven o'clock, enquired at the desk and made our way upstairs. Lady Walton has a suite of rooms on the second floor, and we were ushered inside.

At this point it may be of interest to mention that Lady Walton is the widow of Sir William Walton, who is specially remembered, amongst many other things, for his setting of the well-known tune 'Greensleeves'.

A waiter offered us wine and snacks, and whilst accepting the wine, we felt it rude to crunch through mouthfuls of crisps and make polite conversation at the same time. I asked Lady Walton how she found out about coracles and where she might get one, and the answer was unexpected, "I asked my good friend, who is equerry to Prince Charles, and he faxed me back your phone number."

When I had recovered from this snippet of information, I asked why she

should want a coracle. Lady Walton told us she lives on the island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples in Italy, and runs the William Walton Foundation Musical Competition. The gardens of her home are open to the public, and she needed a coracle to remove dead lilies from her pond, and thought that such a craft would best suit her surroundings.

There may be lily ponds in other parts of the world screaming out for coracles.

Before we left, I gave her some photographs and a video made by Bernard Thomas, who built her coracle. On the video, she will be shown the way to handle her craft, and a little history on the subject. What she will make of it I don't know, but she promised to send a photograph of Bernard's Teifi coracle in action there. Sometimes as I look at her letter of thanks for our help and the copy she gave us of her equerry friend's letter to her, on St James's Palace headed stationery, I wonder — can we now be classed as *By Appointment*?



Lady Walton

Cilgerran and Ironbridge Regattas, August 1996

Peter Badge

It was my great pleasure to visit Cilgerran on Bank holiday Saturday, and Ironbridge on the following Monday, and to witness these two most prestigious events which are only challenged by the June regatta held at Leintwardine.

The weather was kind to us at Cilgerran, but the Ironbridge event took place in monsoon like conditions, which in no way diminished the enjoyment of those taking part or the pleasure of those of us who watched.

There was keen rivalry at Cilgerran between the local coracle men and those from the Towy who were the more successful with Raymond Rees' brother winning more events than any other. When the word 'Birmingham' was mentioned in the Welsh commentary, it identified David Gent in his Teifi coracle holding his own with the local coraclers. Peter Faulkner, who was a winner, caused much interest with his Teme coracle, which the commentator insisted on calling a 'round canoe'.

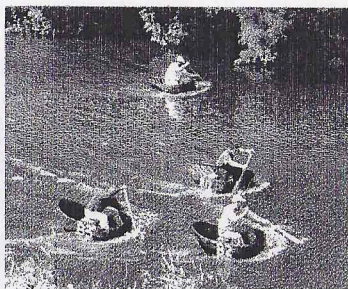
What was particularly interesting to watch was the professional handling skills of the net fishermen from both rivers when racing their coracles. There was a fascinating comparison of paddling techniques between the exceptionally long Towy paddle and the much shorter Teifi paddle. Bob Bird and his partner behaved almost biblically when they netted a 13lb salmon before our very eyes; the cynics thought it might have been in the net all along. If so, they were actors of consummate skill.

It was nice to see one of our vice-presidents, Ronnie Davies, demonstrating his coracle making skills. The atmosphere was most welcoming and I was honoured by being asked to make the draw for the raffle prizes. I shall most certainly return next year and would strongly recommend everyone else to join me.

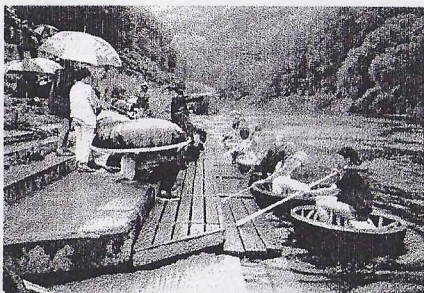
*Champion of Regatta
Cilgerran, 1996*



What immediately strikes one at Ironbridge is that the Ironbridge Coracle tradition is safe and that Eustace Rogers does not have to shoulder the burden of maintaining its proud tradition alone. Terry Kenny and his helpers devised a fascinating number of events which could be enjoyed to the full by those taking part and by those watching, but also provided an opportunity to display considerable handling skills which bore favourable comparison with those exhibited at Cilgerran. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the coracle polo with its somewhat eccentric rules.

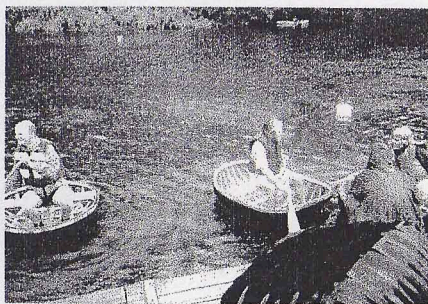


The popularity of this excellent event is demonstrated by the number of those who participated and watched in the worst conditions for a Coracle Event I have ever seen. I hope one day that Terry will take a team of coraclers using Ironbridge coracles to challenge the West Walians at Cilgerran. That would be worth going a long way to see.



*Ironbridge Regatta, 1996
Terry Kenny and contestants
in Ironbridge coracles*

*Ironbridge Regatta, 1986
Gerwyn Lewis and friends*



events—1997

MARCH 15	Committee Meeting, National Waterways Museum, Gloucester Docks
MARCH	Peter Faulkner to Co. Mayo to make 21' curragh (hazel, willow and hide) for voyage from Co. Antrim to Iona in May
APRIL 27	Peter Faulkner Coracles—Baggeridge Country Park—Demonstration
MAY 3—5	National Museum of Wales, May Fair, demonstration coracle handling
MAY 5	Peter Faulkner Coracles—Adlington Hall, Cheshire
MAY 29—JUNE 1	Greenwich Wooden Boat Show—Peter Faulkner Coracles
MAY 30—JUNE 1	Terry Kenny Greenwood Trust Course—coracle making
MAY—JUNE	Voyage of hide curragh to Iona
JUNE 14—15	Terry Kenny at Classic Boat Show, Beaulieu
JUNE 14	Leintwardine Coracle AGM at 12 Noon, and Regatta at 2.30pm
JULY 18—20	Art in Action, Waterperry House, Oxford—Peter Faulkner Coracles
AUGUST 7—10	Risør Trebåtfestival, Risør, Norway—Peter Faulkner Coracles
MID-AUGUST	Klondike, Dawson City—poss. Moose-hide coracle on Yukon River
AUGUST 17	Exeter Medieval Fayre, Exeter Castle
AUGUST 23	Cilgerran Regatta
AUGUST 25	Ironbridge Regatta—1.00pm
AUGUST 30	Dartmouth Royal Regatta
SEPT 6—7	Hull Sea Shanty Festival
SEPT 6	Peter Badge displaying the Spey curragh at the City Livery Yacht Club Thames Sail Past
SEPT 13	Severn Valley Wildlife Park Demo
SEPT 20—21	Newbury Agricultural Show—Peter Faulkner Coracles
NOVEMBER 1	Committee Meeting—National Museum of Wales
	N.B. Terry Kenny will be demonstrating coracle making at most of the advertised Heritage Craft Fairs

