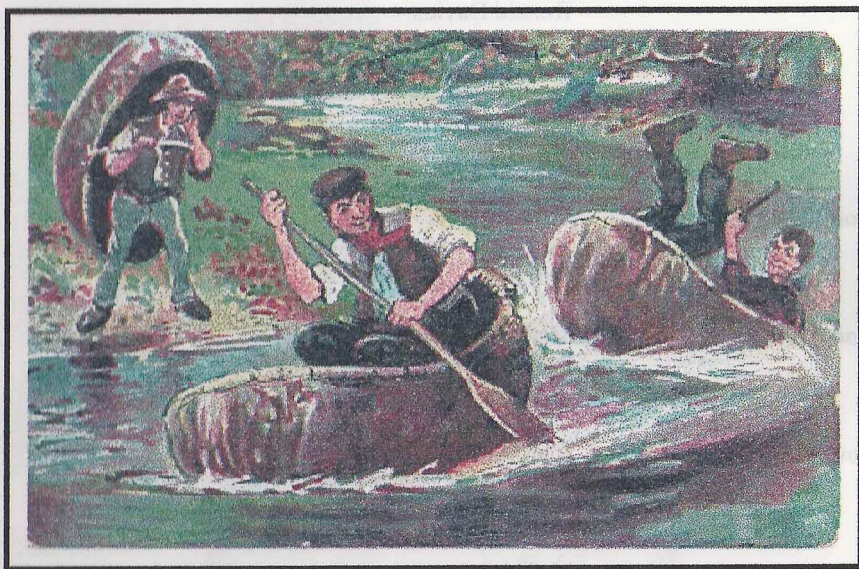




The Coracle Society



autumn 1997

OFFICERS OF THE CORACLE SOCIETY

President	Mr Peter Badge Mill End, 6 Springfield, Horrabridge, Yelverton, Devon, PL20 7QS
Chairman	Mr Peter Faulkner, 24 Watling Street, Leintwardine, Craven Arms, Shropshire, SY7 0LW
Vice-Presidents	John E. Davies Ronald Davies Edgeworth Evans David Maybury Raymond Rees Eustace Rogers Bernard Thomas
Hon Secretary	Viv Faulkner 24 Watling Street, Leintwardine, Craven Arms Shropshire, SY7 0LW
Hon Treasurer	Madeleine Bigland Seedley Barn, Leintwardine, Shropshire, SY7 0LF
Hon Archivist	John Williams Davies Museum Of Welsh Life, St Fagans, Cardiff, CF5 6XB
Membership Secretary	Mr Brian Pearce 1 Eastcote Road, Pinner, Middlesex, HA5 1DS
Committee Members	Martin Fowler Chris Sauverin Frank Jones Sandy Boyd David Gent Terry Kenny

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Chairman's Report

It was on the 27th July 1987 that I launched my first hide coracle here on the River Teme. It was named 'Teme Dipper' outside the famous Sun Inn, using a bottle of brown ale. Ten years on I was elected your new chairman inside the said inn. I shall strive to do my very best for the good of the Society and coracling in general.

We all owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my predecessor Peter Badge, without whom there would be no Coracle Society. His vision, dedication and steadfast work over the years has established the Society internationally.

I was greatly relieved and thrilled that Peter Badge accepted the Presidency upon Geraint Jenkins' resignation, also through ill-health. It is no small comfort to know that Peter will be at hand for guidance and advice. We must thank Geraint for his leadership, having served the Society admirably since its inauguration in 1990. His books, 'Nets and Coracles' and 'The Coracle', are classics in their field and greatly sought after, The AGM unanimously agreed to make him a Life Member of the Society. To those great pillars of the Society we say a massive 'Thank you', and wish them long and happy retirements.

Jane Fogg has retired as founder Treasurer. A presentation was made to her at the AGM for her dedication in keeping our finances in such good order over the years. We welcome Madeleine Bigland, who takes over from Jane, bringing the total of Committee Members in Leintwardine to four.

Please spread the coracle gospel wherever you go. I am still amazed to see folk who have never heard of a coracle, let alone seen one. Their origins must surely go back in excess of 10,000 years and it is up to all of us to promote them wherever the opportunity arises.

May I personally wish you happy paddling. It is for me the only way to explore freshwater habitats, seeing them, in John Leach's words 'from the inside'.

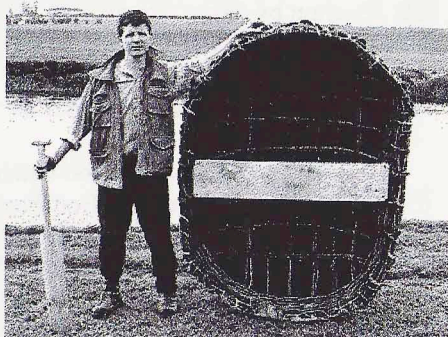
Peter Faulkner, Leintwardine.

CORACLES ON THE BOYNE AGAIN

Clive ó Gibne

I have recently completed my own Boyne Coracle! Last year (1996) I managed to purchase a hide from the local slaughter yard, and Peter Faulkner sent me information on how to use it. I cleaned it down with a knife and soaked it to preserve it. It wasn't until January of this year that I completed the basket—using willow (from my own garden) and hazel (from the Dublin mountains). Last month I soaked the hide again in water and covered my basket with it.

I live in the same parish as Mr Michael ó Brian—a name I'm sure you're familiar with—who was the last man ever to make a coracle on the Boyne River back in the 1930's. Also as I live only a stone's throw away from the banks of the River Boyne and the canal, it



seemed to me to be the only way to pass the weekends—preserving a history almost forgotten in this area. The photograph is of myself and my coracle on the River Boyne, and behind me is the 'Newgrange', the megalithic passage tombs where the sun shines in on the shortest day of the year.

My occupation is wood-carving—I am self-employed and living beside Newgrange Visitor Centre. I cater for tourists in the way of Celtic Art. Presently I am working on a large commission of a life-sized uiliun pipe player.

I wish to set up a Coracle Society here. Since I completed my coracle, there has been huge interest in it, both locally and further afield. I hope to call it 'Cumann Cruchán ne Bóinne' and to have a fleet of coracles by next year. Hopefully I will be able to get help from the local County Council and hold an annual festival or flea on the Boyne. If this does take off, I will be extending an open invitation to all our Coracle Society members to participate, to ensure its success.

I would like to teach other people how to make their own coracle and so increase the size of the 'Boyne fleet'. In July of this year I plan to travel from the source of the River Boyne—the bog of Allen—to its estuary in Mornington and maybe in the future we could carry out a few raids on our Welsh neighbours! (as we did at the fall of Rome 400-600 A.D!).

River Conwy Coracle Paddles

By Christopher Sauvarin

In May 1997 I visited the Museum of Welsh Life to examine a number of coracles and paddles held in the museum store. I found the museum staff extremely friendly and helpful.

In the Museum collection there are three paddles held in store described as originating from the river Conwy. The museum possesses only limited information concerning these. The paddles were donated to the then Welsh Folk Museum by Owen Goodwin in 1969. They were accompanied by the Conwy coracle that was featured by Geraint Jenkins in his excellent books [Ref. Jenkins 1974 and 1988]. Geraint Jenkins states in his books that the coracle belonged to John Jones of Tanrallt, Betws-y-Coed and was in use until circa 1900.

Two of the paddles [Accession numbers F69-243/3 and F69-243/4] are strikingly similar to one another: Both bear terminal knobs, which are flattened in the plane of the blade. The looms are slightly elliptical in cross-section, with the major diameter in the plane of the blade. Paddle F69-243/3 has a blade that becomes broader towards the tip. Paddle F69-243/4 has a blade that tapers towards the tip.

It seems likely that both paddles originally had rounded tips, but one has become damaged and both show signs of wear through use.

A photograph in Jenkins 1988: page 109, shows the paddle being used over the fore-end of the coracle in a two-handed stroke. The paddler's right hand is shown cupped over the top of the loom which is entirely consistent with the paddle possessing a terminal knob.

The third paddle [Accession number F69-243/2, branded with 'clark' on loom and blade], is radically different and appears to be a deviant type. This third 'paddle' has a number of features that are consistent with it being an oar instead of a coracle paddle. The features are:-

- A sub-diameter grip which is indistinguishable from that of an oar.

- A massive loom which is too large to grasp comfortably; excessive length.

- The loom exhibits a region of reduced diameter which seems consistent with wear due to rowlock damage and no coracle uses oars, it is probably not a modification to allow the paddler to grip comfortably the otherwise massive loom since it seems too high up the loom for this.

An eyewitness (Michael Faraday) stated that Conwy coracles accommodated two men, although only one paddle was used. Therefore, only

one of the paddles could possibly have been 'paired' with the coracle, presumably the other paddles came from other coracles which have been lost. It is quite possible that 'paddle' F69-243/2, may either have become associated with the Conwy coracle F69-243/1 through error. Alternatively it may be that this oar was used as a substitute for a purpose-made paddle, but it is almost certainly not traditional. The grip located at the top of the loom of this paddle is better suited to a circumferential grip as befits an oar, not the grasp shown in the photograph previously mentioned, although such a grip is used by Tywi coraclemen, [Ref. Hornell 1938: part 1, page 22, plate 1 Fig. 2 (William Elias)].



References:

Hornell, James: 1938 British Coracles and Irish Currachs.

Jenkins, Dr. Geraint: 1974, Nets and Coracles.

Jenkins, Dr. Geraint: 1988, The Coracle.

In the photograph the paddles are: (from right to left), F69-243/3, F69-243/4 and F69-243/2.

Conwy Coracle Paddles

Dimension	Inches	Inches	Inches
Accession number	F69-243/3	F69-243/4	F69-243/2
Blade cross-section	Bi-convex	Bi-convex	Faces are parallel
Blade Length no shoulders	21.5	22.7	27
Blade Length with shoulders	22.75	24.8	31.5
Blade width at shoulder	2.81	2.92	4.78
Blade width at tip	3.36	2.77	3.85
Length Overall	55.25	52.375	64.875
Loom length	32.5	27.575	33.375
Loom Perpendicular to blade	1.20	1.21	1.15
Loom in plane of blade	1.215	1.28	1.64
Terminal Knob breadth	1.78	2.07	N/A
Terminal Knob height	2.10	2.31	N/A
Terminal Knob thickness	1.67	1.75	N/A

Leintewardine Regatta 14th June 1997

Peter (Mole) Faulkner, Organiser.

Despite grey skies and a cool wind, our 4th regatta was a great success. In the absence of our Mayor, Miss F. Lane, Frank Jones opened the event. Mike Bigland officially launched *The Yarpin*, a 'Teme' coracle he'd generously donated to our village coracle group.

The afternoon progressed with never a cross word or a scowl, despite the usual duckings and fouls during the various events; everyone had a thoroughly good time, literally throwing themselves in at the deep end to take advantage of the fun. With well over two dozen coracles available, the events were fully subscribed and jam-packed with excitement. The 'Sprint' heats seemed endless, but finalists were eventually found.

A strong contingent from the Dragon School participated under the watchful eye of Tim Crane, swelling the ranks and sharpening up the competitions in a truly sportsmanlike manner. They did their school proud.

Fred Versfelt from Holland put on an intriguing display of photos and text relating to his aquatic involvement with youth groups in Holland. The centrepiece was an extraordinary canoe-type vessel made from willow and covered with calico. Fred is a great coracling enthusiast and is a familiar face at Society events. Well done to him and his colleague for their fine and unusual effort.

As at previous events, the water polo proved the most popular, whether viewed from the bank or on the water, where paddles lashed the Teme to a boiling froth, and spectators were whipped into a frenzy. This year we had a single 'goal' suspended across the river, with teams playing up and down the stream, proving far better for all concerned, keeping the game open and fluent.

Other events included 'Under 15s' and a 'One Handed' race, the latter being a true test of navigational skills.

The 'Hide Owners' race (now an annual feature) was won by Daniel Talbot-Ponsonby in a ten-strong field.

In the 'Sprint' finals, Jane Pearce retained her title as Ladies' Champion with Sandy Boyd from Suffolk pulling through his final to take the Gents' title. Both races were close-run right up to the line amid gasps and cheers from the excited crowd. That normally would have been it, but this year we finished with a Grand National organised by Frank (Ratty) Jones. It was an 'open' handicap of ¼ mile starting well up the Brockley Meadows. Despite

a slow beginning, due to low water, the race hotted up as the coracles neared the finish, and despite all the adults' efforts and ploys, Christopher Arzyll (U 15) came through in splendid form to take the prize of £40, much to his absolute amazement.

The Regatta, officially closed, was followed by a 'hands-on' session for the general public. David and Sandra Allen laid on a splendid evening barbecue in the riverside gardens of the Lion Hotel, where tired but happy coraclers relaxed at the end of a near perfect day.

I would personally like to thank my wife Vivienne for coping so admirably with the registration and the job of organising all the heats and finals, and also Bob Henderson, a dear friend from Crosby, who officiated as Clerk of the Course. Finally, a sincere thank you to everyone who attended and thus contributed to such a wonderful day.

St Colomba Currach Voyage (June 1997)

With due deference to Tim Severin, the 'Brendon Voyage' to America completed in June 1997 was done in a 'modern' sawn timber hull covered with 49 tanned oxhides. The vessel, made earlier this year in Mayo Abbey and eventually sailed up through the Western Isles of Scotland from Co Antrim, was constructed from wholly sustainable materials viz. hazel and willow in the round, freshly cleft green ash and covered with a membrane of eight salt-cured cowhides (hair retained). It was in my opinion a truly pre-historic vessel propelled by six 14ft oars and a single square sail of 120 square feet.

There is not the time or space to write the full story here (perhaps a book one day). My involvement with the project, brain-child of David Clough, Director of Kilmartin House Trust in Argyll, started in July 1995. We made two prototypes, the first being a crude 12ft x 6ft three hide craft, which eight of us paddled around Crinon Harbour in April 1996. In the October, David, his father Ralph and I constructed a 22ft x 6ft hazel and willow framework. I sourced and supplied all the materials. As you can imagine, a great deal was learned from the two experiments. I then set about designing the size and shape for the sea-going currach, combining the Boyne coracle building techniques with designs of 'modern' Irish currachs. From my plans I then constructed a one-sixth scale model in willow, which was to prove an invaluable visual aid during construction of the full-sized craft (22ft x 7ft and 4ft at the bow).

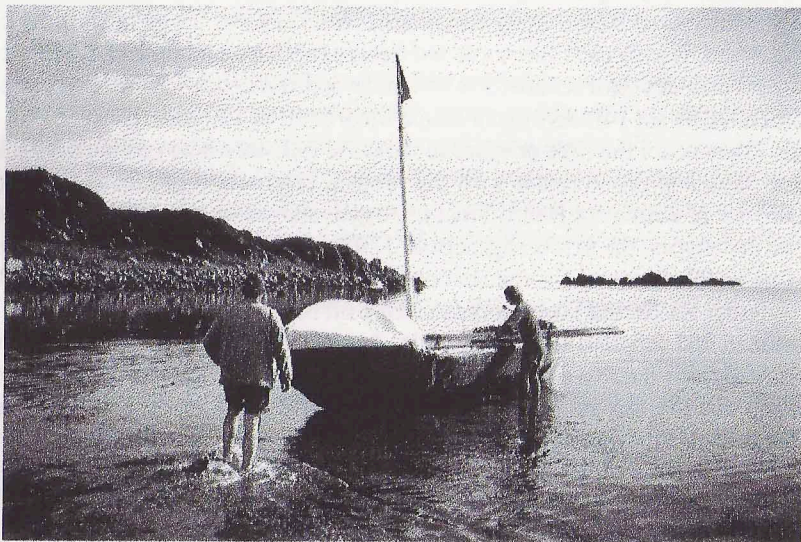
I sourced all the hazel, willow and hides for the project, transporting these by van to the derelict famine church at Mayo Abbey (a sister abbey to Iona, hence the link). Here with some local help I constructed the main framework (it eventually held 57 local junior school children). David and his team then arrived and after a total of 4 weeks' intensive work the currach was ready to be hauled by road to Ballycastle Co Antrim.

On Sunday 1st June we set sail, or rather rowed into a very choppy sea. Laden with boulders for ballast, stores, seven crew and a BBC cameraman, not to mention Ottie Crawford, the ship's mascot otter, the currach, named *Farrigeach Naofa* (Holy Sea Voyager) weighed around 1½ tons.

The voyage, following in St Colomba's paddle strokes, was eventful, thrilling and unique; the first crossing from Ireland to Scotland by an authentic skin boat perhaps for centuries. The craft proved sea-worthy beyond doubt and exceeded all expectations. Currach and crew were at Fionnphort (Mull) for June 9th (1400th anniversary of St Colomba's death on Iona) where we met Mary Robinson, the Irish President.

The whole project was an incredible experience and I salute the mighty David Clough, project manager, for his vision, organisation and diplomacy. BBC Scotland have produced a 60 minute documentary about St Colomba, which includes our voyage. The currach is on show at Kilmartin. Tel 01546 510278.

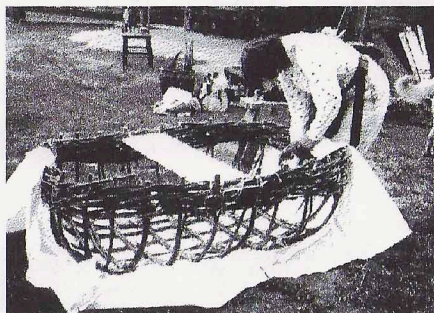
Peter Faulkener



TRAVELS WITH A CORACLE

Olivia Elton Barratt

One fine May morning, with summer just beginning, I set off from Gatwick Airport in a nice modern aeroplane, taking with me in the hold a more ancient form of transport, my one-man version of the Boyne curragh. We were bound for the USA and Canada, to teach coracle making, rush, and willow baskets. It had taken a lot of planning to get the coracle this far—first making a specially small and lightweight model using willow and calico, measuring no more than 4ft by 3ft (I am not very tall, but it still takes a fairly large man!), then having a packing case made to fit it, and finally organising its passage as ‘excess baggage’. The journey itself was easy, apart from trying to balance the packing case on an airport trolley, and convincing the Customs of its innocence.

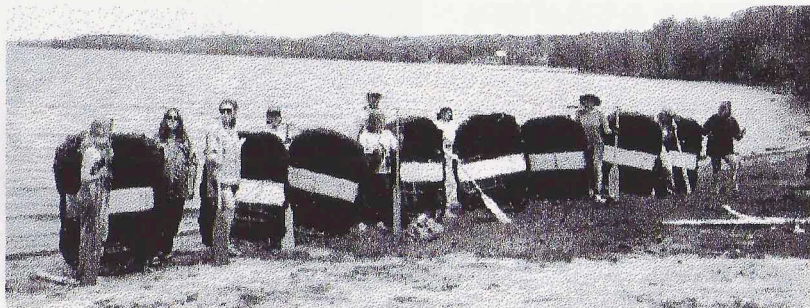


We went first to New York State, where the coracle disgorged its contents of sample baskets and wellington boots (Spring was only just beginning, and there was rain about), for basket-making classes in a beautiful rural setting. Then it was back into the packing case for the coracle, and into a truck for the long drive up to Canada. The first coracle course was to be held near Ottawa, the home of Coracle Society member Ankaret Dean, and the journey was wonderful, so much to see I rarely stopped exclaiming and asking questions. The farm where Ankaret and her husband John live has a drive very like an English country lane, and the farm house is beautiful and homelike.

We had a couple of days to sort out what we needed for the course, and I was very apprehensive about the differences between English and Canadian waterproofing compounds, and what sort of materials the students who were bringing their own would produce. Ankaret and a friend had worked like fury cutting willow for this and the second course (hazel not available), and providing calico, wood for seats and paddles, and all the necessities.

With my coracle on display as the objective, eight students started work on Day 1, driving their frame rods into very hard ground (thank heaven for some rain!), weaving the gunwales, putting in the seats, and tying down the rods to form the frame. No time on a three day course for ‘setting’ the frame with a barn door and weights, we tied the frame down onto the seat to hold

he shape. We were aiming for a slightly larger and deeper model than my baby', and as well as the willow there were maple and alder rods, and one or two fairly anonymous woods. Some of them looked a bit hairy at first, but many knots later the sun was shining, spring was starting again, and everyone was sitting around stitching calico over some very promising frames. By the end of Day 2, every coracle had a coat of waterproofing and we all had a party. The next morning was second coat and paddle making time. Broomsticks and exterior ply make good paddles, and Canadians all seem to be at home with a draw knife—very useful. I learn new ways of doing things every time I teach, and picked up some good tips on woodworking.



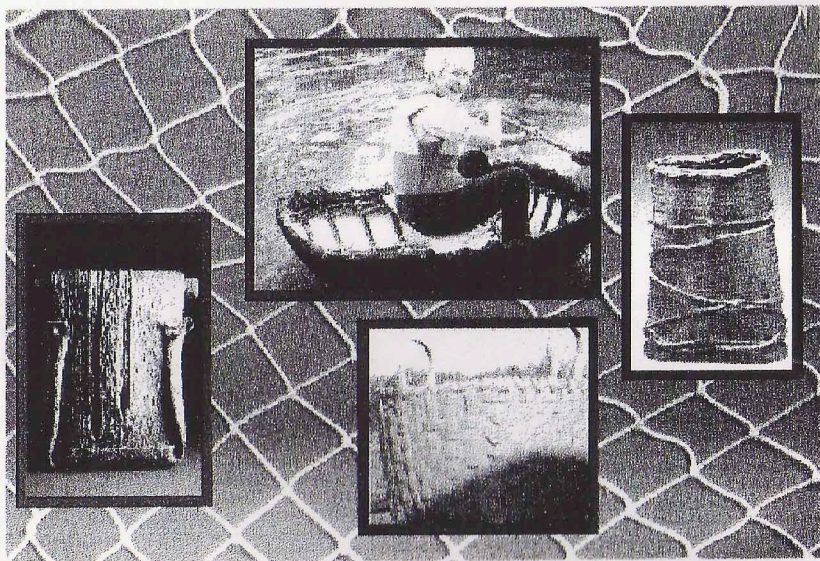
After lunch came the Great Launch on a nearby lake. The sun shone, the water was shallow and safe, and everyone had a riotous time learning to embark and disembark, and to paddle in the required direction. This was when my much travelled coracle came into its own, it is so much easier to teach the paddling action when you are on the water yourself. The only faller-in seemed to enjoy it, because she promptly did it again.

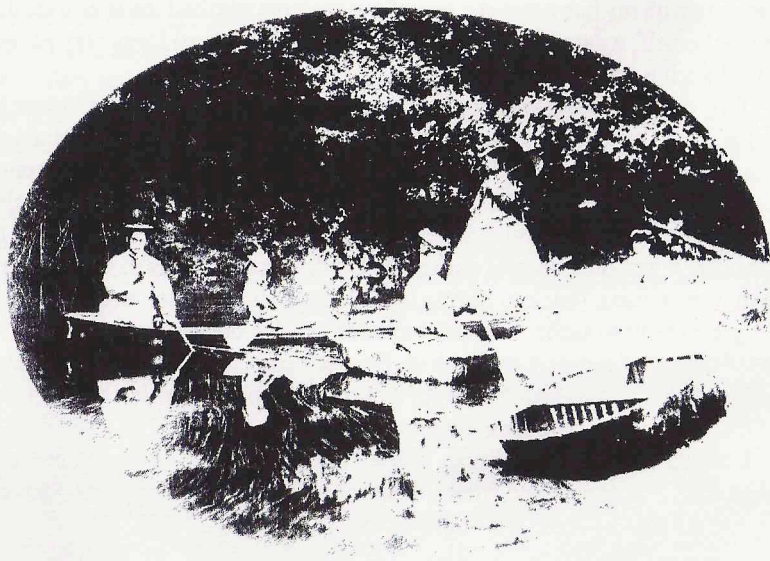
After a day to recover and restock, Ankaret and I, the coracle, and a load of willow, set off for Geneva Park, the YMCA Conference Centre near Toronto, where the second course was to be held. A long and fascinating drive, with lots to see, and more questions to ask! Coracle-making was to be a 3 day pre-conference course at Basketry Focus '97, with the launch forming the entertainment on the first evening of the conference proper. We had a lovely workshop' under the trees, but once again hard ground to drive into. Crowbars and a lorry wheel brace were extremely helpful. Seven coracles this time, with Harriet Meacher and Joleen Gordon, both members of the Coracle Society, working together on one. Joleen made a Boyne curragh several years ago, and it is in the Maritime Museum in Nova Scotia. As before, we were ready to go on the water after lunch on the last day. Again a shallow safe beach (Geneva Park is on a most beautiful lake), and the students were really at home in their little craft when they put on an excellent display in the evening. Here I parted

company with my baby coracle; one of my students who had made an excellent one for herself, wanted a second one for the grandchildren! I was very pleased to find such a good home for it.

Two days teaching basket-making, and then I left with Harriet Meacher for the 1,000 mile drive to her home on Prince Edward Island, with Harriet's coracle on the roof rack. This was quite an experience, so many scenery changes, fascinating buildings, Quebec, wood carvers, junk shops, and then finally, The Confederation Bridge, all 9 miles of it. We both crossed it for the first time, it was only opened during the Conference. P.E.I. is so beautiful, red earth, green grass, (back to Spring again) lovely houses, and everything and everyone seems to smile. The visit included a rush workshop with the Spinners and Weavers, of course showing them Harriet's coracle, and then we re-crossed the bridge to drive to Dartmouth for a party with Joleen Gordon before I took off from Halifax for the long journey home.

It was all such an adventure, and such a happy time. How can one ever repay such hospitality and friendliness, or forget such experiences. I love to think of all those coracles bobbing around in Canada.





Coracles on the Towy, above Carmarthen— c 1865



Floods at Llechryd—but the post must get through!

FROM THE NEW ZEALAND HERALD

June 7, 1997



Cam Calder (left) and Andrew Tyson at Ngataringa Bay, June 6, 1997

On the expanses of the Waitemata Harhour, they look like Tom Thumbs floating along in walnut shells. But the tiny coracles are serious boats which have plied Welsh waterways for thousands of years. Two Auckland doctors have indulged their childhood dreams by having the coracles built for them. The lightweight, round boats are powered by a paddle and date back to pre-Roman times. Coracles are still used today by Welsh fishermen. Cam Calder, a Devonport doctor responsible for cultivating the game of petanque in New Zealand, has started what he hopes will be a coracle craze on the Waitemata Harbour.

"I saw a picture of one in an encyclopaedia when I was six years old and thought it was such an amazing craft," he said. After seeing a coracle at the Maritime Museum in Auckland, Dr Calder found a launch-master in Manapouri, Paul Brimecombe, who built the boats. He makes them from laths of macrocarpa wood and heavy-duty calico, covered in bitumastic paint. They were traditionally covered in animal hide. "It weighs about 30lbs and you can carry it home on your shoulder," Dr Calder said. A new coracle costs \$350.

Dr Calder and his friend, Andrew Tyson, plan to use their boats to go fishing in Ngataringa Bay, near Devonport, and eventually hold races if a fleet grows. "I hope that by the time the America's Cup comes round, we'll be able to have a coracle regatta—and maybe bring some realism to the crazy, multi-million-dollar yacht race in our tiny boats."



Bernard Thomas on the Teifi at Llechryd