



The Coracle Society



Autumn 1999

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WHAT NEXT

Priscilla Lambonchere

Closely resembling a de-composing sea-urchin on wheels, I drove home through deluging rain, the coracle I had just built under the expert tuition of Peter Faulkner strapped on the roof of my small van, its tail thudding on the rear window. I had so enjoyed such a productive course that I had hardly given time to hug my husband before setting up to build two more for my 'fleet',

Enjoyment, self-confidence and inexperience are a dangerous⁶¹ mix.

"Would you bring your coracles to the Wootton Bassett Trail Boat Festival?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Would you demonstrate building one at the show?"

"Yes certainly, a three day show, no problem!"

At dawn the first day my stand was set up and I was clamping down the hazel ribs when the crowds arrived and my marathon began. The three serviceable craft were in constant demand and all day I was kept feverishly launching, rescuing, unloading, building and answering questions I often did not know the answer to, but the entertainment value was great. Two people in a coracle, each armed with a small paddle, proved to be the most enjoyable for the uninitiated.

Early on a pair of jittery teenagers went out in a state of high anxiety. On reaching the center of the canal, one of them spotted a spider creeping through the ox hair at the bottom of the boat. With a hysterical yelp she leaped to her feet and stood shakily with one foot on the seat and the other on the rim of the coracle. Never has a coracle been given such good reason to submerge without actually doing so!

What a good lesson can be learnt in co-operation. A pair of aggressively competitive little girls demanded to have a go. Achieving nothing but splash and spinning on their axis, warfare was becoming more than a threat! Hooked back against the bank, I refused to release them until they promised to take care of each other and work together, they then sailed off up the canal, returning the very best of buddies!

Dignity is not a description that is readily applied to coracling, but two elegant ladies, both octogenarians, certainly changed that when they fulfilled one of their life's ambitions by paddling their own coracle.

Towards the end of the first day a lass wearing a mob cap and pinafore came along from her stand. She was demonstrating old mangles and wringers and was chuckling about all the clothes she had been asked to wring out for people who had made an error on the coracle stand!

The closing of the event was fast approaching on the third day when a large family group with a particularly large dad came along. Dad was all too eager to prove his skills and abilities to his admiring entourage and stepped briskly down the bank, which had now become extremely slippery. He placed his first foot heavily at one side of the coracle which sank instantly, causing both me, and a lad who had come to help, to loose our footing and, hey-presto, three total strangers were piled in a heap in 3ft of water where a coracle had floated a few moments before.

The sun was sinking. The next coracle was nearly ready to be covered. I was soaked to the skin and feeling drunk with exhaustion, - but it had been fun!

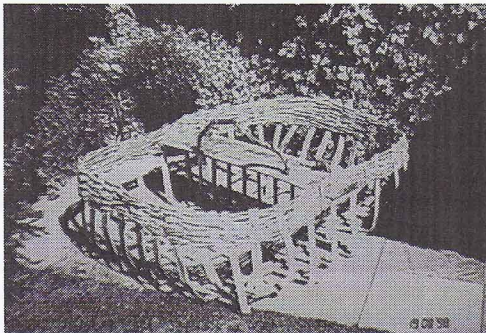
Afon Teifi Source To Sea Coracle Trip

In Aid of The Imperial Cancer research Fund

Since seeing a picture of a celt carrying a coracle back slung in a history book at school as an eight year old, coracles have always fascinated me. In my adult life I have built quite a few coracles, mainly improvised affairs during wilderness survival courses I have instructed on in the Scottish Highlands. In Lincoln where I live, the coracles I have built for friends are starting to become a common sight on our local rivers and as a result enthusiasm for these ancient craft is growing.

The idea for the Teifi coracle trip was born over several pints of fine ale at The White Hart in Cenarth with local coracle builder Ronnie Davies whom I visited around Easter time in 1998 to take a look at his coracles and to learn how to build the Teifi style of coracle, one of my favourite types, properly .

Upon my return to Lincoln I set about building a coracle based on the Teifi but slightly wider and sturdy and stable enough to carry both myself and my kit the 70 or so miles along the length of what my Easter visit revealed to be a rough and dangerous river. The resulting coracle was in effect a hybrid of the ideas of Ronnie and myself. The framework was of the typical drawknifed willow with a woven hazel gunwale with a seat section shaped from a split willow log and yew offcuts from my bow making. No shop bought timber, screws, nails, string etc was used in its construction. Copper wire was however used to attach the bitumen coated canvas to the gunwale.



Coracle framework prior to covering.
Note bark strap or gweden.

On Saturday September 12th 1998 I returned to Cenarth in the company of a canoeing friend of mine, Kev Wrenn, the only friend of mine insane enough to even contemplate accompanying me on such a perilous journey.

Before we set off on our epic adventure, Ronnie and Denzil Davies gave us valuable advice on paddling techniques and Ronnie lent us a paddle for the journey. We found the river to be in a dangerously swollen state due to recent heavy rains. I found myself questioning my sanity and was left in no doubt

as to the seriousness of the undertaking.

Paddling a coracle on the Teifi was nothing like paddling coracles on the sea, Scottish Lochs and my local rivers all of which I was used to and during the following week I found the Teifi not to be at all short of truly trouser filling experiences. This was exacerbated by the fact that the recent heavy rain had turned the upper reaches of the Teifi into a swirling madman's paradise of whirlpools, flooded fields, submerged fences and partially submerged overhanging trees that I could swear must somehow be a mandatory requirement for the outside of the many sharp bends in the river.

Because most of these trees reached far out into the river, sometimes going all the way across, frantic paddling was often necessary to hoik myself clear of the rapidly approaching danger. At one point one of these trees fetched me out after I careered round a blind corner, and led to a proper soaking and a three hour epic trying to retrieve kit trapped on a branch in the middle of the torrent downstream. That was on the second day after which I became more cautious at blind bends and Kev sensibly perhaps, stayed on terra firma until the end of the week when he accompanied me in one of Ronnie's coracles for the last stretch from Cenarth to Cardigan Bay.

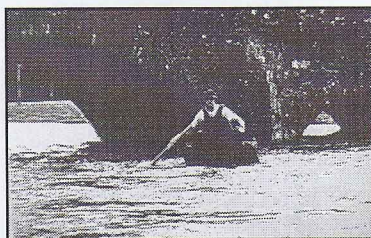


Hotel Rick, standard accomadation for much of the journey.

The trip which saw me set out from Pontrhydfendigaid to the sea at Cardigan Bay was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life made more so by the fact that my craft had been built from nothing by my own hands and had come out in one piece at the end. I lost count of the number buzzards, red kites, kingfishers, dippers and other wildlife I saw along the way though for much of the journey, the concentration needed was such that I dare not take my eyes of the river and the next approaching tree for more than a few seconds which meant that I couldn't pay too much attention

to flora and fauna and made for a tiring week

The various sets of falls were not too much of a problem as usually Ronnie, Denzil or kev were on the bank to tell me where to get out and the sound of the falls advertised their presence well in advance. The stretches of river through Tregaron Bog nature reserve and from Cilgerran to the sea involved the most paddling and the least help from the river. As a lover of solitude and wild places, the flooded wilderness of Tregaron Bog will always remain etched on my mind and heart. At times it was difficult knowing where the river was and it was quite an experience being able to paddle round the ends of partially submerged foot bridges!



Yours truly in action on the Teifi

Perhaps the best aspect of the journey was the kindness and generosity shown to us by the local people, Ronnie especially, whose combined help in many forms made both the trip and the grand total of £1321 raised possible. I thank them all.



Journey's end. The reception committee at The Webley

March 1999, the time of writing sees me preparing laths for the Trifi coracle I hope to bring to Cilgerran this year and which I also hope to cross the English Channel in 2000. I am also building the first of many hide covered curraghs and coracles which as an experiment of primitive survival skills I have a particular interest in. Watch this space. **Rick Taylor Vision Quest**



Coracle Report

by
Clive Ó Gibne

In the Autumn 1997 edition he introduced a new coracle maker Clive Ó Gibne from the Boyne in Ireland. His first regatta was held last year and this is his report on that event

After last years events a lot was learnt, such as don't have a regatta on an incoming tide, give Welsh coracles a handicap, make sure every one knows how to scull the craft (forwards)! With the unrivalled victor in Viv Maine's coracle, we found the Boyne Currach no comparison to the speed and agility of the "saucer".

Last year we found the day far too short for the event. The journey from Slane to Brú na Bóinne proved to be a wet but exciting trip, the weather was great and everyone, almost everyone, ended up dry at the end of the day. There was, of course, Bruce, who following my instructions, over turned at Slane bridge, Heather then found herself stuck in a tree while Viv, in the middle of saying "This is great!" hit a rock and the currach ended up on her head! Brian and Sinéad just kept flowing along while the water babe in the saucer took time out to watch us all follow.

Considering it was the first time for most of us to attempt sculling, and to take up the challenge of the Boyne, I reckon that we did very well. The cans of cold drink were welcome at the end, and the change of clothes! I'd say that some of us spent more time paling than sculling!

This year we intend to combine the meandering of the Currach with the feet of the rambler. With the help of William Wilde's book, written in 1849, we will return to the last century and to the lost valley, finishing at Brú na Bóinne by about 4.00pm. So anyone who may not fancy getting wet, can take the dry route on foot by the river side.

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The Coracle.

(Ironbridge. August 1994)

The lazy warmth of the late summer sun,
With a hint of rain in the air,
Of cloth and wood we built our craft,
In green wooded vale, and weather fair.

The smell, and the chips of wood on the ground,
Green Ash laths are woven and bent,
Stretching, fixing and sewing the
Cloth, and brushing with bitumen paint.

And floating silent in a sunlit pond,
Like a fallen leaf with a curl,
Amid the silvery Willow
Trees, in my own hand-made coracle.

Poem by Robert G. Galbraith



GONE FISHING

JOHN WRIGHT

The old man heard them calling again in the night and when he woke he was crying. His eyes opened slowly and the blurred images of the room brought back his sadness. The days meant little to him now and they passed with the light by the window. Tonight he would go with them he thought, if they called again. With an effort he moved his eyes to look at his left arm lying deep in the silky green eiderdown. The hand was grey and already cold. With his right hand he lifted the arm to his chest and caressed the unfeeling flesh and realized that it was no longer his. Under the clothes his left leg was another dead weight attached to his living body. He could feel his life moving but it could not lift his leg nor stir his arm.

His eyes Closed.

Sounds entered his head again but they were not the voices he was waiting for. He heard them only in the darkness, these were sounds of the morning and he did not want to hear the cockerel and answering dogs. "No," he cried softly but the noises rose to a roar in his head.

"Dad Elias," he could hear his name. "Dad Elias, Dad Elias."

It was Sarah his daughter but he knew her no longer and her words were only sounds and the liquid he swallowed burned his throat. "Wake up, ' she said, "the doctor is coming to see you today and we must wash you." No, not today, he thought, tonight, tonight and the words left his lips: "Tonight they are coming," but she only shook her head.

As the warm wet cloth touched his face he became aware of the room and asked for his glasses.

"Glasses," she murmured. "You don't want your glasses," but when she finished washing him she got them from a drawer and hooked the wires over his ears.

The room was sharper now and he turned his head to the window. Outside and leaning against the wall was his coracle a frail boat shell of tarred canvas and willow. A white number stood out against its black bottom.

It had not been to the river for many months but the time had passed him and he remembered only the fish and the water.

Seventy-seven he thought, and smiled—though his mouth did not move.

The coracle became a vague shape as rain ran down the glass, the white sky burned in his eyes and he longed for the darkness.

It was late afternoon when the doctor came and Dad Elias's eyes were still open towards the window though he saw only his thoughts and the gathering shadows.

When the doctor called his name and felt for his heart his eyes turned but his mind was still away. The words did not reach him for many minutes but then he saw the doctor clearly close to his face with a coracle in each eye. "Tonight," Elias said and raised his arm. The face receded and he heard the doctor saying: "It can't be long now."

No, it couldn't be long now he thought and he knew it was getting dark.

GONE FISHING (cont'd)

Then night came over Dad Elias like a bat and he heard the voices calling from the river. Waves of blackness came with the sounds and he knew the time for going was now.

Strongly he felt his body rising from the bed, there was no deadness in his limbs as he pulled the long boots over his knees and fastened his dark coat around his throat. The stars were singing above him and he lifted the coracle on to his back. He saw the town below him and he moved down the streets, his shadow, crab like, went before him. Gulls screamed from the chimneys and the wires were humming over his head. His feet and heart raced down through the town to the river.

At the side of the small chapel he swung the Coracle from his back, floated it gently on the Water and stepped in. Pools of moonlight swirled around him as he paddled out into the central current. The river knew hint and received him gladly. The voices called more urgently and he could now hear the knocking as his coracle passed under the booming town bridge. Trees dipped in salute to the old man as he passed and he remembered them. As he Curved around the first horseshoe under Llangunor hill he saw them at last, two coracles first and men with nets Waving and weaving each side of the river. Beyond them he saw two more and as he drew closer more Coracles and men moved on the river.

There must be two hundred coracles he thought and he drew in his breath in wonder. The Current Carried hint on and turned hint many times and as he turned he saw Coracles behind him.

They moved together and the knocking and calling ceased. Even the river seemed quiet though the Water pulled them fiercely. The sky grew darker as large clouds moved with the river—and faster the coracles went towards the Confluence.. Dad Elias knew of the danger here where Towy and Gwili joined and coracle men never fished near this union, but he was helpless in the gathering grip of the Water. He pulled his paddle into the boat and sat and watched as the waves grew and currents Wore black Circles. Some Coracles went into the Gwili. Not many, he thought, but they turned with the river and were swept along and the old man knew that they were lost.

His coracle and most of the others passed the place and floated into the Towy again. As they reached the calm water they Collected in pairs and paddled again together and light came again from the sky. It grew lighter than he had ever known before but the light did not worry him for he understood the light in darkness.

Wc arc reaching good water for fishing he thought and almost at once the surface was broken by silver sewin leaping and diving near each coracle.

The old man was happy and there was singing in Welsh as the coracles fished out of sight up the long river.

The following morning Sarah rose early and went to Dad Elias's room. she drew the blinds and looked back to the bed. On the old man's face was a smile. She went across and called softly: "Dad Elias, Dad Elias."

But Dad Elias had gone fishing..

The First Annual Wiltshire Coracle Flotilla

Whilst bringing up the rear just as we came in for the mid-trip break? I saw Cilla Labouchere's sheep dog, Chip, trying to muster up the courage to cross the river to where everyone had pulled up for a rest. I called and encouraged her while she ran up and down the bank trying to find a better place as if this would help her commit herself. Finally she plunged in. I realised straight away that she was heading for my coracle rather than the far bank.

A weird race ensued with everyone laughing and cheering me on from the rest spot. I was glad for the instruction I'd had from David Nicholl on a good accelerating sculling technique, but still I was losing ground. Chip, powered by fear was following hard on my cows tail. At the last minute she realised she was closer to the original destination than my floating leather dish, and headed for the bank. But it wasn't all near escapes that day on the River Avon between Lackham Agricultural College and Laycock Abbey near Chippenham in Wiltshire.

It was the first time I had been in a coracle except for a quick trial on a pond a few days before. Cilla Labouchere, much assisted by her husband Colin, organised this day as part of many activities she now runs. she goes to fairs and works with charities letting children and adults try out four of the round coracles she has made, (all natural material replicas). we picnicked at Lackham Agricultural College and then carried the coracles to the river through a field of over curious bullocks, over a very rickety old bridge. Then it was down another steep bank for the launch. No one came unstuck at this most sensitive of points. Even the two new comers, Richard and Ellie who had volunteered from Lackham College out of sheer curiosity, drifted off looking serenely confident side by side. (This could have been more to do with a fear of doing anything but sitting bolt upright however). Then it was a photo call for the local press. and off past the first fallen tree trunk.

It was like the perfect Alton Towers ride, there were hairy bits and calm bits and the rapids gradually got more difficult. I was nervous on the first rapid but we all came off without even a scrape on the bottom. Then there were lovely calm pools to potter about in, with Olivia Elton Barratt leading the way in her straw boater and Colin mopping up the strays. Chip took a ride lying motionless in the bowels, but soon got restless and decided to go along the bank instead.

It was after the rest and my lucky escape that things got more interesting. Kay Johnson found that she could stand up in her coracle by resting the backs of her thighs against the seat. Others began to try it until there was a splash and an up side down coracle. We waited for a long ten seconds before Cilla appeared looking bedraggled but smiley. This didn't daunt us however as we continued to play water hockey.

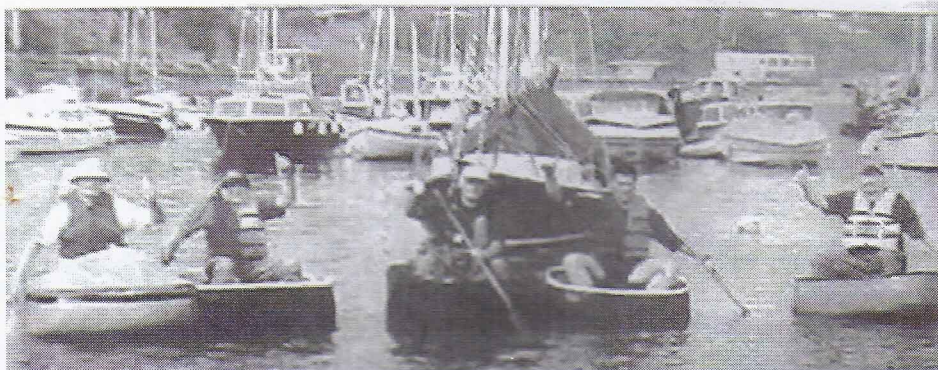
The First Annual Wiltshire Coracle Flotilla. (cont'd)

The next rapids were faster and shallower; more exciting for most of us but difficult for the new comers who were two in a boat and grounded a lot. Then after stopping to look at the Abbey from the river bank we came to the last bridge. I was in front. There, under the bridge was a huge standing wave, or it seemed huge at the time.

I was already committed however and found out more about the coracle in that instant than all the paddling about I'd done in the previous two hours. For the second time that day I was convinced it was a weedy bath for me. The world span and tipped and bumped and scraped and I think I just grabbed the sides giving up any attempt at aiding myself through the troubled waters.

Luckily there was no one on the bridge above to witness the look on my face, only the others following round the corner, to my cries of, 'Go for it, it's fine.' And fine it was although Richard eventually got out and dragged the lady Ellie the final few yards and Cilla somehow managed to sink again, though this time in a more dignified manner. Then there was nothing that could be done but retire for a large cream tea and coracle chatter, from history to hilarity.

Fred's Epic Voyage



Coracle boys join Fred on epic voyage

BY RUTH DAVIES

A PROMISE going back more than a decade saw 65-year-old Fred Beeken paddling his way into the record books on Saturday.

He climbed inside a traditional Welsh coracle to accomplish the three-mile crossing between Tenby and Caldey Island - despite being a sea-hating non-swimmer!

"I was determined I was going to get there," a pleased and relieved Fred, of Princes Gate, said after his two hour 27 minute voyage. "So many people said I was off my head to even try, so it is very nice indeed to have achieved what I set out to do."

Fred's coracle challenge was first conceived 11 years ago when Narberth builder Alan Walters announced he was going to take a holiday to India.

Laughed Fred: "He's worked like a fool all his life, so I told him that if he went to India, I'd paddle a coracle over to Caldey Island. The next thing I knew, he was off on holiday and had everything drawn up by a solicitor to say if I didn't keep my part of the bargain then I had to go for a little holiday myself - on Caldey for six weeks ! "

It was over a few drinks at a British Heart Foundation dinner in Narberth in June that branch chairman Tom Thomas reminded Fred of the wager - and the bet was on as a big fundraising stunt for the charity.

Taf coracle man, 69-year-old Edgeworth Evans, of St Clears, volunteered to be his personal trainer and put Fred through his paces on the water at Ludchurch quarry and Folly Farm lake.

Only 25 licenced coracle men remain in England and Wales, and Saturday's challenge saw a quartet of them joining Fred on his never-before voyage.

As well as Edgeworth, they were his 35-year-old son Matthew, who sped across the water in one hour 38 minutes; 59 year-old Edgar Thomas, of Porthyrtyd, who came in four minutes later and 64-year-old Hugh Evans, who shepherded and encouraged Fred across the water.

With extensive safety boat and radio back-up, the event had been meticulously organised by Tom Thomas, who said afterwards: "I'm over the moon. Not only will we raise over £1,000 for the British Heart Foundation, but we set out what we achieved to do, with the help and support of very many people - not least Fred and the coracle boys."

So has the event left Fred keen to sail off on more maritime adventures? "No damn fear!" he replied. "I still hate the water and I'm just planning to sit quiet for a bit"

YORKSHIRE PUDDING CORACLES



Boat that stays afloat so long as you don't eat it!

ROBBIE and Jack went to sea on a tasty Yorkshire pud boat. They took no money and forgot the honey, but at least it stayed afloat.

They may not have had quite the adventures of the Owl and the Pussycat, but at least the two youngsters can tell their school friends they have set sail in a giant pudding.

The three-foot diameter pud was the brainchild of their uncle, Simon Thackray, to mark the premiere of the Yorkshire Pudding Boat Songs at The Shed, an arts venue in Ryedale, North Yorkshire.

Helmsley bakers Thomas's made the pudding out of pizza dough, and numerous coats of yacht varnish helped to ensure it would float when it came to be tested out on a pond in Brawby, between Malton and Helmsley.

Jack, eight, and Robbie, nine, needed no persuading before climbing into the pudding to check it was seaworthy.

Simon said: "I was quite confident that it would float. I had given it enough coats of varnish, but we had two divers there just for safety."

The idea for floating puddings came to me when I was sitting in a pub one lunchtime. I thought it would be wonderful to go down the river on a Yorkshire pudding boat."

Simon Thomas, director of Thomas' bakers, said they had originally tried to make the puddings with traditional batter, but found this did not provide the required rigidity.

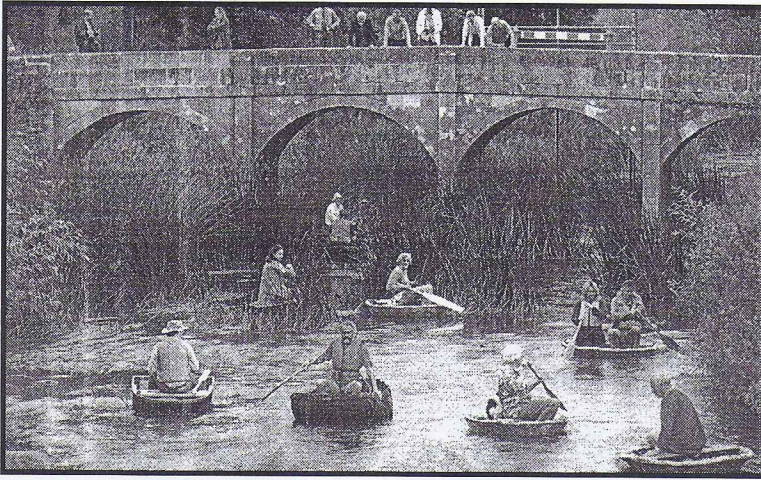
He said about 20-25kgs of flour went into each pudding, making a white bread dough which was then mounded around a chicken wire form.

He said "We had two or three prototypes before we came up with something we thought would work. We call them our high performance racing puddings."

By Nick Morrison



Take a spin in a coracle



Back to basics: Coracle enthusiasts in their craft on the River Avon, near Chippenham

WHAT a lazy, crazy way of spending a summer day - paddling around in one of the oldest forms of boat on a picturesque West river.

A group of coracle enthusiasts brought their quaint craft to Wiltshire yesterday.

They demonstrated their little round vessels on the River Avon at Lackham College, near Chippenham, to the amazement and delight of tutors and students.

College spokeswoman Ellie Phillips was taken out for a spin—quite literally—by countryside, conservation and fishing tutor Richard Cripps.

Neither could quite master the intricate figure-of-eight movements required by the poles which are used to paddle the boats.

They ended up going round in circles but Ellie said: "We enjoyed every minute of it."

Ellie said: "We have all had an excellent afternoon. For many of us it was the first time in a coracle and we have all had loads of fun."

She said: "We have asked the coracle enthusiasts if it could become an annual event because everyone enjoyed it so much."

By Nigel Kerton

