



The Coracle Society

Founded 1990



Presented to the Coracle Society by Mike and Madelaine Bigland

December 2002

Officers of the Coracle Society

President	Sir Peter Badge Mill End, 6 Springfield, Horrabridge, YELVERTON, Devon, PL20 7QS
Chairman	Peter Faulkner 24, Watling Street, Leintwardine, Shropshire, SY7 0LW
Vice Presidents	John E. Davies Ronald Davies David Maybury Raymond Rees Eustace Rogers Bernard Thomas
Hon. Secretary	Vivienne Faulkner 24, Watling Street Leintwardine, Shropshire, SY7 0LW
Hon Treasurer	Frank Jones 25, Watling Street, Leintwardine, Shropshire, SY7 0LW
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Membership Secretary	Brian Pearce 5, Cedar Close, TEIGNMOUTH, Devon, TQ14 8UZ
Education Officer	Chris Sauvarin
Committee Members	Martin Fowler David Gent Frank Jones Terry Kenny Jane Pearce Dave Purvis Conwy Richards
Stand in Editor	Peter Faulkner

I hope that you find this issue interesting and illuminating. Positive comments and constructive criticism are welcome. "Copy" is always needed for the Newsletter (its *your* society) so please send any material to the Stand in Editor.

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2002 AGM at Ironbridge

The meeting was held at the Woodland College Meeting Room at the Head Quarters of The Greenwood Trust. There was a good turnout.

The Officers' Reports were delivered, copies of which are on file. Frank Jones was elected as our new treasurer and Vivienne Faulkner as secretary. Dave Purvis was elected on to the committee. Our chairman agreed to take over as editor of the magazine for the next issue but would be pleased for anyone to offer help or indeed to take on the office. The remainder of the committee and officers were elected en bloc.

There was much discussion about the magazine. Mike Bigland had done an excellent job over the past few years, but as our chairman is prehistoric (no I.T. skills!) it was agreed that a professional printer should be given the job. There were sufficient funds available and St Leonards Press in Ludlow would be approached to produce the magazine.

After the meeting the members went foraging for lunch and then in glorious sunshine took to the water and paddled down under the famous bridge to Severnside. Conwy Richards and Peter Faulkner then visited Eustace Roger at his home. Although housebound now Eustace welcomed us in and the talk immediately fell to coracles. We felt very honoured and it was good to see his spirits improve with company.

Walking the coracles back to the car we came across a wedding party having a photo session. Much to our surprise and delight the blushing bride in full white dress posed in the Boyne coracle for a photo.

N.B.: In volume 2 (May 1999) of the magazine a profile of Eustace Roger appeared and it is reprinted in this issue as a tribute to him.

Chairman's AGM Report

A very warm welcome to you all on this the Society's 13th AGM.

In 2000 the AGM was held at Bodnant, Conway County; in 2001 we went to Cilgerran on the Teifi. To complete the "Grand Slam" we are today at the heart of the Severn tradition, the home of the Rogers family. Eustace sadly is housebound now but celebrated his 88th birthday in August – I did send him a card on behalf of the Society. It was in February 1987 that I first visited Eustace with a view to building a coracle. As a result of that visit I subsequently launched, I thought, my first and only hide coracle in July of that year, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Next year's AGM will be held at Ripon and hosted by Dave Purvis who has carved out an impressive niche in that area. Looking at the year's list of events one cannot help but notice their diversity. There are the well established regattas but we now have folk parties, gatherings, family days and water carnivals; all grist to the mill and highly commendable.

The Channel Crossing attempt in the Currach went ahead on 10th August but was thwarted due to lack of favourable wind though French soil was touched. The 'Brest' currach did successfully complete the 22 mile 'Great River Race' on the Thames; our presence stimulated a great deal of interest, Russian T.V. for instance.

Dave Purvis, Rick Taylor, Dave Nichol and Graham Fisher MBE are very active and promote the Society valiantly. Conwy Richard's coracling activities are quite staggering for he travels the length and breadth of the country in search of coracles and coraclers. He really has a nose for research leaving no stone unturned. If Horrell had had Conwy as his right hand man the volumes produced in 1936 would have been twice the size I am sure. He is an inspiration to us all and may the coracling bug continue to bite.

Sadly last September Edgeworth Evans died and Ray Rees kindly wrote an obituary which appeared in the Spring Newsletter.

This year we 'lose' our Treasurer Madelaine Bigland who has in fact occupied that office since autumn 1997. We owe her a great debt of gratitude for she has served the society magnificently over those five years. She has handed over two large folders of immaculately presented accounts for the past 12 years a very hard act to follow indeed.

Madelaine's husband Mike took over the onerous task of producing the Magazine at very short notice and with a tiny bit of help from me has done a superb job. Sitting with him in front of a bank of state of the art I.T. I really did feel pre historic.

Madelaine and Mike have moved from Leintwardine, but I hope that we shall see one more magazine emerge under Mike's editorship. We wish them health and happiness for the future.

Chris Sauverin is kept busy with our web site and our sincere thanks to him for that. Likewise to Brian and Jane Pearce who keep our membership in squeaky clean order. We really are very lucky to have such dedicated efficient officers.

We continue to function as a relatively small but successful society. Our aims are clearly stated and I am in no doubt that they are being promoted not only throughout these islands but also throughout the rest of the world.

Finally I wish to mention the beautiful gift that Mike and Madeleine have presented to the Society. It is a finely embroidered picture of a Vietnamese coracle and was purchased from a war victim during their tour of that country in February 2000. A picture is featured on the front cover of this issue. It will be on show at the Leintwardine Regatta and at the AGM.

Peter Faulkner

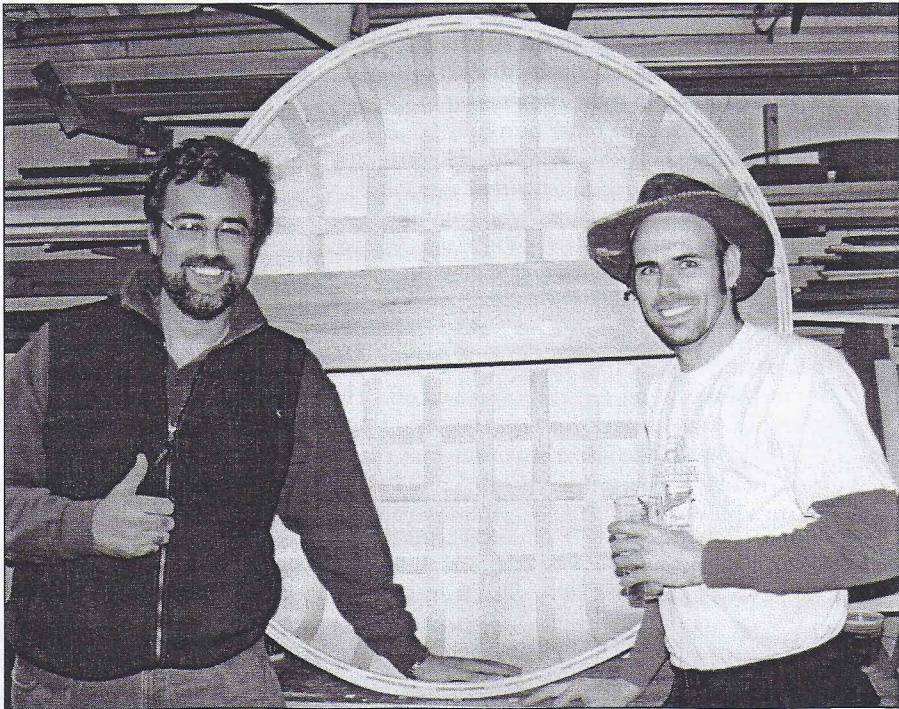
Encounter with a Canadian coracle

Pete Ling

In a quiet back alley in Vancouver, on an island built on river silt is a small boat building workshop that has the ideals of The Greenwood Trust in Coalbrookdale. Robert (Rob) Morrison has a business that was born of passion. He has a love of building skin on frame boats and into that framework (pun intended) fits the coracle. He now works alongside another boat builder, called Mark Reuten but his speciality is wooden boats.

Rob's boats are beautifully made but the main aim of the workshop is to teach people how to build the craft. The latest in production is a coracle. It has the same lines as the ones originally built at The Greenwood Trust under the auspices of Gerwyn Lewis and then by Terry Kenny. Yellow cedar is used for the frame; the covering is 12 oz. ballistic nylon, (although why anyone would want to shoot at a coracle defies imagination). The "paint" ranges from polyurethane to a black matt enamel paint. The outwales have been carefully fixed with copper rivets. The design originally came from Hornell's book.

The obvious question was, why a coracle? Rob explained that he hadn't built one before but one of his students wanted a practical boat for a small pond. The photograph shows Rob and Mark with the craft.



Left: Author and boatbuilder - Rob Morrison. Right: Mark Reuten - boatbuilder and wooden boat restorer.

Traditional Coracleman

Eustace Rogers

Eustace Rogers is more than a coracle maker, he is part of the fabric of Ironbridge. His family have lived on the same site since before there was an iron bridge, and they were all bargemen and coracle men. Indeed, Eustace's grandfather, Tommy, took the last barge down the Severn, loaded with 40 tons of firebricks. When that barge came back up to Shrewsbury, Eustace's father, Harry was a lad on board.

His earliest recollection of coracles – “apart from pottering down here with me Dad and Uncle Jim in the same coracle as them to begin with” is going up river with them to lay eel lines. A long line would be laid across the river, passing back and forth about three times, with a number of short lines tied on, which were baited with “jack-sharps and bullnobs”. These were left overnight to be lifted at first light. As the ends of the line were fixed to sinkers, not fastened to the bank, a drag made from a weighted piece of holly bush was used to find it. The eels were dropped into the back of the boat, which at the time was partitioned off by a solid board rather than the latticework that is usually on the Ironbridge coracles today.

Many of the inhabitants of the Gorge would use their coracles for setting eel lines at weekends, having used them for transport during the week. Because men often lived on the opposite side of the river to their work in the brickyards “they'd got to walk up and pay a toll here (the Iron Bridge) or walk down to Coalport bridge and pay a toll. So me Dad said they'd be up here all the while and have a coracle for a few shilling”. It made sense to use it to supplement the diet. The opening of the Free Bridge near Coalport china worked in 1908 took away the need for a coracle to cross the river, although it continued to be used for other purposes.

While there was once a high concentration of coracles in the Ironbridge Gorge, not many were used for net fishing. Eustace remembers only three, and does not recall his father speaking of many more in this time. The technique was different from that used in Wales in that the coracle operated singly, not in pairs. The net was about four feet deep and had a large mesh outwalling back and front enclosing a finer mesh between them. The net was buoyed with corks and the horsehair footrope was weighted. The fisherman, having pegged one end to the bank “would paddle one handed towards the middle, paying out the net, and then he'd come back to the side. When he'd finished, he was inside this water he'd got cordoned off. He'd got a beating pole with him, like a broomstick with a big leather disc on. He'd plunge that in the water and you'd see them corks going”. The disturbed fish would swim through the first outwalling, driving the finer middle mesh through the wide mesh on the other side “like a rabbit in a purse net. Canna get out”. Net fishing came to an end with the 1923 Act. Strangely enough, given their reputation for poaching, Eustace doesn't know of anybody breaking the law.

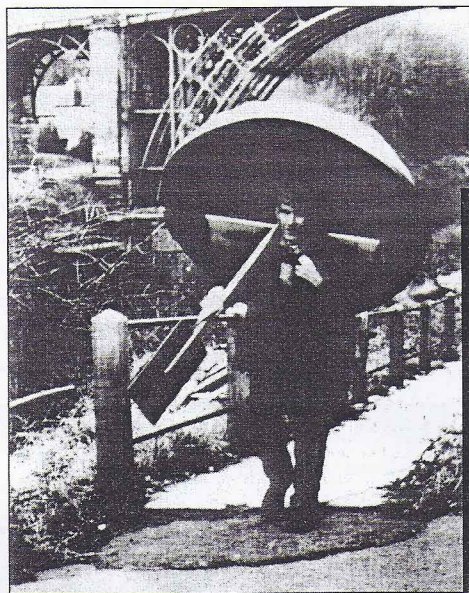
The coracles in use at that time were the same as those Eustace makes now. “The only thing is, there's no hard and fast rule how many splints you use. You'd see one nine by nine, one nine by eight or something. What I've done is use me own discretion about the quality of the timber. If it's been thinner, then I've put perhaps extra one or maybe two splints in”. The cover was often two calico bedsheets, a double thickness being used to compensate for their poor quality. Frames have been painted as long as Eustace can remember, and always green. He pays much more attention to the final

appearance than did the old coracle men – “As long as it would float, they didn’t care what it looked like”. All coracles were much of a size, except that Tommy Rogers, being nearly eighteen stone, had one bigger than average. It was not the practice, as in some places, to build smaller coracles for children. Eustace began in a full-sized boat and believes that a smaller one would be “dodgy”.

Coracles were very valuable in the poaching carried out by Ironbridge men. So notorious were they that this small place once merited twelve policemen and a resident inspector. The Coracle was the get-away vehicle, enabling catches of rabbits to be ferried quietly downstream while the rest of the men walked home free of any incriminating evidence. When they were caught, they were often tried by the landowners whom they robbed, resulting in long sentences. But their activities evidently played an important part in the local economy. “I can bring you now people from up Madeley, when I meet them, they’ve said many times “We were raised on rabbits and fish from the poachers.”

Were it not for the rabbit catching after the building of the Free Bridge and the end of fishing perhaps the Ironbridge Coracle would have disappeared from the Severn

N.B. This article first appeared in Vol. 2 May 1991



Eustace in conversation with Conwy Richards

Dates for your diary 2003

Saturday 21st June (Not the 2nd Saturday) – 10th Regatta at Leintwardine (River Teme).

For and on behalf of the Coracle Society. Registration 1.30 p.m. On site parking.
Free admission

Saturday 5th July – AGM at Ripon. – see article

Sunday 17th August– Wells-Next-The-Sea, North Norfolk. Annual Town harbour day

Informal coracle gathering in tidal waters. Contact Conwy Richards for details on
01366 500867 or look on web site www.coracle-fishing.net (events page) for an update.

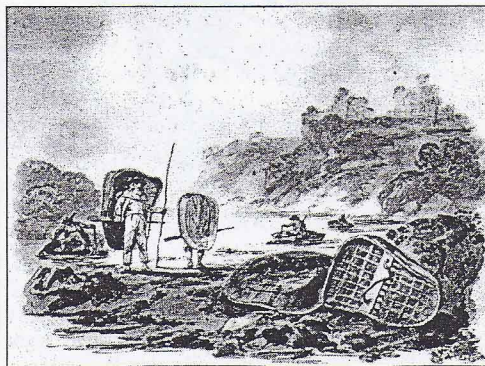
Saturday 23rd August – Cilgerran Regatta (River Teifi) noon onwards

Monday 25th August (bank holiday) – Ironbridge Regatta (River Severn). Starts at noon

The Lucas family From Conwy Richards

In the November 2001 edition of the coracle society magazine John Underhill wrote enclosing his drawing of a detail from the painting “Cardiff from the west” by J. C. Ibbetson (1759 – 1817) which featured coracles on the River Taff at Cardiff. The coracle design more closely resembled the coracles used on the other River Taf. At the time of writing no coracles were actually known to have fished at Cardiff apart from some scant references. Recent information has been found about the Lucas family who fished on the river where the Royal Hotel was later built. Mr James Lucas senior was drowned during “an immense flood” while trying to land opposite the Black Friars from his coracle around the year 1825. His son, also recorded as a coracle fisherman, drowned many years later but as a Port of Cardiff pilot. There is a description of Salmon in Cardiff as being “exceedingly abundant here at the beginning of the present century (nineteenth) and were far from being esteemed a delicacy”.

J. C. Ibbetson also painted coracles at Cilgerran on the River Teifi and when both paintings are compared side by side the coraclemen are almost the same. The figures at Cilgerran have the wrong type of paddle and it is carried the non-traditional way in the painting. The painter probably made his living from selling his landscapes and the correct detail was not important at the time.



*Coracle Fishermen at Cilgerran, Pembroke
Water colour by J. C. Ibbetson, 1759-1817*

BBC Radio 4 – Open Country

Interview with Rick Taylor, coracle maker

Back in July the Radio 4 programme "Open Country" introduced by the presenter Helen Marks visited Lincolnshire, the fourth largest county in England.

Contrary to popular opinion, most of the county isn't flat and has a wide variety of countryside. The Wolds, a series of rolling hills, the cliff like Lincoln edge running like a spine down the county, the Fens with massive skies and network of rivers and dykes and the coastline with its wide sandy beaches as well as salt marshes, dunes and pools.

Helen's first port of call is a river where she meets coracle maker Rick Taylor. He sees his craft as a direct link with the countryside, making use of natural material and keeping old rural skills alive "in an increasingly plastic world". Since seeing a picture of a Celt carrying a coracle in a history book at school as an eight year old, these ancient craft have always fascinated Rick, but it wasn't until his early 20s that he started to experiment with building them.

In the mid 1990s he began to research the methods of coracle building used by the traditional coracle makers of rural Wales. He prefers the Teifi coracle because he likes working with cleft wild woods such as willow, hazel, and ash rather than pre sawn material. This makes coracle building a very personal experience for him as he has to select his own materials from where they are growing before cutting them in a sustainable manner.

Using such a coracle on the water, be it for fishing, bird watching or simply for the pleasure of paddling, it is very much a meditational experience for Rick. "The coracle is built from nature with the utmost respect and reverence for nature. Willows that once bent and swayed in the wind now bend beneath the coracle man to support the 'skin' that keeps me afloat and in a rustic celebration of nature and the skill and patience of the craftsman".

Coracle Society AGM 2003

This will be held on Saturday 5th July 2002 at Ripon, North Yorkshire. Dave Purvis and the 'Ripon Youth Arts' are hosting the event.

The following are provisional arrangements so please check nearer the event.

11.45 a.m. Civic Reception in the Mayor's Parlour, Town Hall, off Market Square.

12.15 a.m. AGM in the Council Chamber

1.15 p.m. Light Buffet at 'Royal Oak' Kirkgate. Compliments of 'Ripon Youth Arts.

2.00p.m. Procession of coracles to Canal Basin for demonstrations/ city tours.

Parking There are a number of parks in central Ripon around the BUS STATION area.

Tourist information 01765 604625 – accommodation etc.

David Purvis 01765 690318 Fax 01765 692291

Email: coracledave@aol.com

This promises an excellent event, make a note now!

(Map of Ripon overleaf)

Paddling into the history books

By Richard Martin

Take a thirteen foot hide currach last used in anger 3 000 years ago and six men of uncertain vintage and fitness – then set them the challenge of paddling 22 miles along the mighty tidal River Thames.

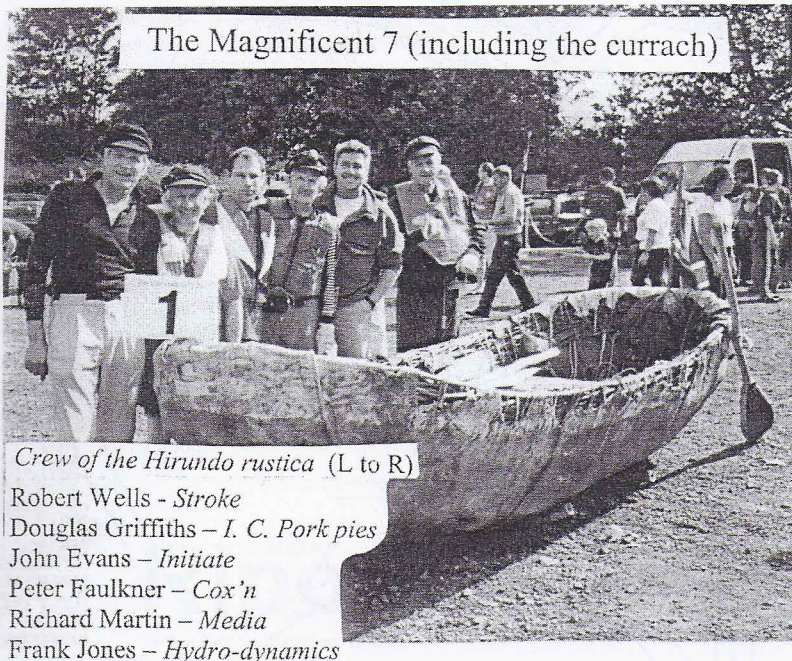
The crew wondered if they could do it. The organisers of the Great River Race were certainly doubtful. They positioned Peter Faulkner's vessel in pole position of the competition from Richmond to Greenwich. More than 250 other entries were behind him. If it could be rowed or paddled it was on the river on 2nd September.

Now don't be fooled into thinking this race is organised along the same lines as Formula 1. In the Great River Race the best start last. The people in charge clearly thought Peter and his currach crew needed the biggest head start. To their shame that meant being handicapped ahead of a half beer barrel being rowed by a reckless pub team, even a dugout canoe.

Cannon fire signalled the start, the first overtaking manoeuvre took place within five seconds and the currach, Great River Race Boat Number One, soon slipped to third place, then fourth, passed by the Dragon Boats and the whalers brought over for the occasion by a number of Dutch teams.

By the second mile some members of the crew were beginning to wonder whether they'd make it at all, a feeling reinforced when they were cut up by a Viking longship, a bunch in a jolly boat wearing Tartan Army wigs and then, dispiritingly, the dugout, with a bailer working as hard as the paddlers to keep them all afloat.

As the limbs wearied the on-board shanty singing became sporadic, the laughs more sparing and the conversation more economical. As the anxious waits for a turn as the



The Magnificent 7 (including the currach)

Crew of the *Hirundo rustica* (L to R)

Robert Wells - Stroke

Douglas Griffiths - I. C. Pork pies

John Evans - Initiate

Peter Faulkner - Cox'n

Richard Martin - Media

Frank Jones - Hydro-dynamics

regulation on-board passenger became more pressing the only real competition for the Currach emerged.....a crew of women in a pink dinghy appeared to be struggling ahead.

The currach might just take them. It did. A small victory, but you take what you can get with 12 miles down, 10 to go. Time to break into the best pork pies in this world, bought by one of the crew members, Doug the butcher from Leintwardine on the north Herefordshire border.

The huge bridges across the Thames started to come and go, Wandsworth, Vauxhall, Westminster, and Blackfriars, each bringing a psychological boost. And then the last, Tower Bridge where the warning had been that the tidal race was at its strongest, where the water works itself up into a choppy temper.

And it did, but the currach, expertly steered by Peter, bested the white horses as the paddlers sensed that if the end was not in sight, then it was at least just four miles away round a couple of bends. Then came the encouragement they'd been waiting for. The dugout had been swamped, their bailer overpowered by the river's mild rage under Tower Bridge.

So the currach was not going to be the last, not by a long way. And at the finishing post there was talk already of building a better currach, a stronger more stable currach, for next year. Mmmm, we'll see.

The cheers from the crowds on the bridges as the little piece of history bobbed under then are still ringing in the crew's ears. The feeling of achievement at having completed the course remains, but so do the aching shoulders. However, with a few pork pies thrown in as an inducement, there's little doubt the currach will be back.

Richard Martin

Eds. note: The crew of six raised a total of £840 for the County Air Ambulance.

Calling all Northerners

2001 was an eventful year for four Society members when they formed an informal "Eastern Alliance" to help each other out at events during the year.

Dave Nichol from Suffolk, Conwy Richards from Norfolk, Rick Taylor from Lincoln and Dave Purvis from North Yorkshire met up for the first time at Lincoln Water Carnival July 2001 to introduce the public to the delights of the coracle (see last November's newsletter). At the end of July we staged Durham City's first Coracle Regatta as part of the Durham Folk Party weekend. In August we all met up for the Wells Harbour Day in Norfolk, and, finally, in September we took part in Ripon's first Water Carnival. Indications are that we are being asked to all four events again in 2002.

We would like to extend our activities further in 2003 and invite any coraclers in the North, particularly in the Tyne, Wear, and Tees and Cumbria areas, to make contact – we know you are out there. (Terry Kenny tells me he has been running well-attended courses in Beamish). This is with a view to running events in these areas throughout the year.

For further details contact Dave Purvis

Tel: 01765 690318

Email: coracledave@aol.com

A Coracle on the Oakham Canal

In 1977 my daughter and I went to a meeting about Industrial Archaeology at Ironbridge. Among other exhibitors, Eustace Rogers was demonstrating the making of a coracle. Mr Rogers said he would sell us the coracle provided that he was satisfied that we could navigate it properly.

The following morning Maggie and I reported at Eustace's boatshed just below the Iron Bridge, he got out two coracles, Maggie climbed into the new one and after he had instructed her they set off in full view of all the tourists on the bridge. Maggie had no difficulty in satisfying Eustace that she could manage the coracle. We bought a roof rack from a garage, loaded up and set off for Oakham. My wife was rather surprised to find that the family had acquired a coracle.

The only water I could think of near Oakham was a preserved stretch of the Oakham Canal used by the local angling club. The Canal, finished in 1802, had been bought and closed by the Midland Railway in 1848. I got permission from the Club and enlisted the other Oakham solicitor, appropriately a partner in the firm that provided Clerks to the Canal Company. We launched the coracle from the old towing path (with some difficulty); I climbed in and set off. All went well, each of us had a turn, and it proved a most successful afternoon; I think I can say without fear of contradiction that this will have been the only coracle ever launched onto the Oakham Canal.

David Tew

Oakham, Rutland, October 2002

Editor's. note: As the above happened some 25 years ago does the record still stand?



1977 Oakham Canal - D. H. Tew setting off.

Coracle bug bites again

Ted Pitman

A neighbouring friend's plan to excavate a lake rekindled my primary school memories of coracles and his enthusiasm to see me using such a craft on the lake inspired me to make one.

My research took me to Cenarth, Hereford Museum and St Fagans (lots of drawing and measuring). Prior to building one on my own I joined a course at The Greenwood Trust with Terry Kenny. My enthusiasm grew as the coracle took shape; I was longing to get on the lake. An official launch was planned, with champagne and strawberries, for invited guests. Amidst great enthusiasm the coracle was put through its paces around the island. Though an excellent confidence booster, champagne does affect the faculty for balance as my wife Joy discovered. Her unplanned nosedive and swim were captured on video. Many of the guests ended up in a similar way and so a good wet time was had by all.

Having lived for many years above Cenarth I fancied making a Teifi coracle on my own. After making a long shave horse and finding draw knives and other tools at car boot sales I set about the task. There were plenty of materials locally, but I had difficulty with bending up until I made a crude but efficient steamer using a camping kettle with a length of downpipe hanging from a branch.

My other project for the winter evenings is to make a collection of one-tenth scale models of all the various coracles; so far I've made eight.

In this area of Somerset there are a few coracle owners and enthusiasts and as our hamlet on the river Cary is called "Henley" I wonder if we might stage an alternative Henley Regatta!

Ted Pitman
Henley, near Langport, Somerset

Time share coracle

Miss Margaret Rees from Milcombe, near Banbury has a special arrangement with her collie. Her Ironbridge coracle serves as a very comfortable Iron age dog basket. But it seems that Shannon the collie sometimes allows her owner to paddle around the local duckpond!

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Some books about coracles

"British Coracles" Hornell, J. 1936

The Society for Nautical Research, c/o The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

"Nets and Coracles" Geraint Jenkins, J. 1974 (Out of print) ISBN no. 0715365460

"The Coracle" Geraint Jenkins, J. 1988. Golden Grove Editions

(Try the Coracle Centre at Cenarth, SA38 9JL, 01239 710980)

From the chairman's bookshelf

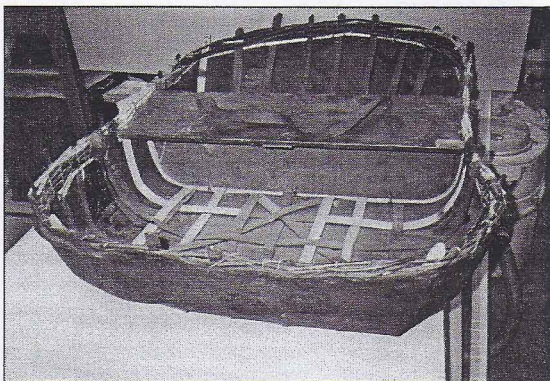
For over ten years I have collected books about rivers. They make fascinating reading and in some the coracle is mentioned. *"Tales of a Wye Fisherman"* (1928), by M. A. Gilbert, for example mentions the Wye 'truckle' or coracle. Here are some extracts:

"These truckles or coracles were on use on the river until lately and were thus described in comparatively recent times (1863):

"Sometimes a little fleet of the tiny boats peculiar to the district, may be seen here anchored up and down the rapids, casting for Trout, Pink, and Grayling. The Coracle, which boatmen and fishermen use today upon the Wye, differs little from that in which their forefathers floated when the Romans were rulers on its banks. In shape it resembles the half of a walnut shell: some laths, or rude sticks laid crosswise form the skeleton; which is covered with tarpaulin: it is needless to say that the ancient covering was generally a horse's hide; a plank across the middle makes the seat; a small paddle is used for directing its movement. The fishermen of the district are much "at home" in this walnut shell, and voyages have been made in them from Chepstow to Bristol."

In 1928 the author was in correspondence with a Mr Pashley who writes as follows:

"As far as I am aware there is only one of the old coracle men, who fished with rod for salmon, left on the Wye, and he resides at Kerne Bridge in my parish – his name is William Dew and he worked on the G.W.R. for about fifty years, I believe. Only a fortnight ago he told me how he was crossing the river with his fly trailing overboard when a salmon took it and he was only just in time to seize the rod; he said that he sold that fish to my mother."



Truckle owned by W. Dew (C. 1880?) now in Hereford Museum

Coracle Society Information

Coracle Society WEBSITE

www.coracle-society.org

Website developed by:

christophersauvarin@bigfoot.com

The National Coracle Centre

01239 710980

www.coraclecentre.co.uk

The Greenwood Trust

01592 432769

www.greenwoodtrust.org.uk

INSURANCE

The Coracle Society now has Corporate Membership, class P, of the I. W. A. (Inland Waterways Association). Our membership number is 3003787.

This insurance provides Public Liability cover for all Coracle Society members whilst participating in 'official' events. If anyone intends to organise a coracding event for and on behalf of the Coracle Society, and wishes to take advantage of our insurance, please contact the Secretary for a schedule of limitations, exclusions etc. and written authority confirming approval for the event.

N.B.: It is a pre-requisite that Accounts for any event must be compiled and incorporated within the Coracle Society Balance Sheet, proving that the Profit is for the benefit of the Society.

Video "Coracles on the Severn"

Entitled "Coracles On The Severn" it is a semi instructional guide to building a Shrewsbury style coracle together with historical annotations on the history and development of other coracles.

It is 30 minutes long and is available to Coracle Society members direct from the following address at the excellent rate of only £12.00 including p&cp.

Graham Fisher MBE
Montgomery Lodge
18 High Woods Close
Kingswinford
West Midlands DY6 9XB

Telephone: 01384 270020
Mobile: 07885 786826
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Seal 8/12

Vietnamese coracles

Peter Badge

Introduction

In search of coracles the world over nowhere have I come across more coracles than in Vietnam which I visited in 2001. My trip was inspired by a visit made the year before by Mike and Mandy Bigland.

Not only are there more coracles in Vietnam than in any other country but in no other country does the coracle play such an important part in the life of its coastal people.

Location of coracles

The greatest concentration is to be found in central Vietnam, particularly in the Da Nang area. I visited not only Da Nang but also Hoi An, and Cham island where I saw a rich variety of coracles. From what Mike and others have told me Nha Trang also has many such craft.

There is clear evidence of limited coracle usage in both the north and south of Vietnam as well.

Coracle Usage

These are 6 in number, namely:

Most commercial fishing boats carry a number of coracles that are used to set the boat's nets at sea.

They are also used for one man net fishing.

They are widely used as boat's tenders and for transport generally.

Flooding is a major problem in Vietnam and most homes in the islands have their coracle for flood evacuation purposes.

Another use is in connection with the gathering of vegetables and spraying of crops.

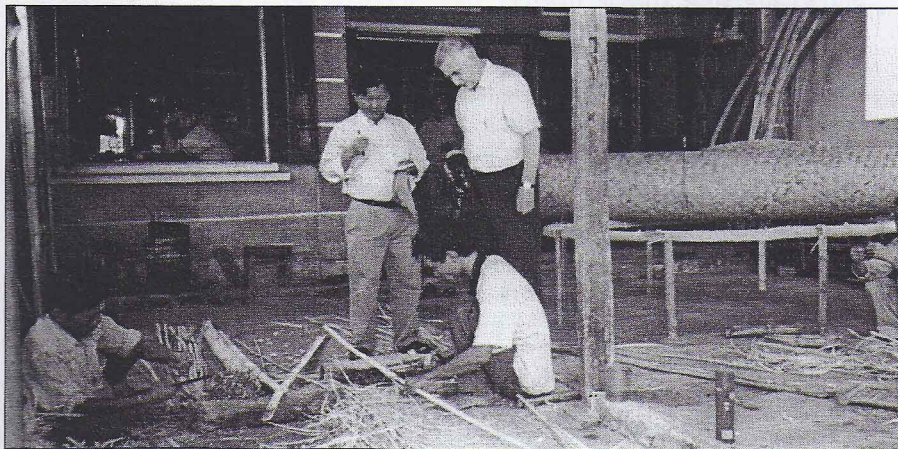
Finally, the Vietnamese told me that coracles were used extensively during their wars for espionage and causing explosions.

Construction

I visited four different coracle makers. Their techniques were almost identical. Moreover, they all worked full time at their craft and none of them used coracles personally. Three out of the four said that coracle making was on the increase but one said it was in decline.

They vary greatly in size and sometimes have either primitive sails or inboard engines as well as a single paddle.

They are made almost entirely out of bamboo that they buy from middlemen. Bamboo poles are split and made into gunwales that are attached to stakes driven into the ground in the shape of





a circle. The next step is for bamboo to be cleaved into thin strips which are woven into a mat which is then placed on the inside of the gunwales to which it is temporarily attached. The mat is then literally kicked into a smooth symmetrical shape. This having been done the mat is attached to the gunwale with nylon line (this has taken the place of the traditional rattan ties).

Ox dung is then mixed with water and painted on the outside of the hull. When it is dry the boiled resin of a local tree is then applied making the coracle completely watertight.

The bigger coracles have interior bracing laths but not the smaller ones. On one occasion I saw a coracle with laths on the outside of the hull.

The coracle's paddles are made from a local wood which is very hard. Some have T bars; others do not. All tend to be long.

Coracle handling

Three methods are used, namely:

Using the "C" stroke as we do in the UK.

By "scooping" alternatively over the bow (as the native Americans did).

A particularly long paddle with a T bar is lashed to the gunwale. The coracle man twists it from side to side and, at the same time, makes a pendulum type stroke. This method is not easy to learn but enables the coracle to move astonishingly quickly.

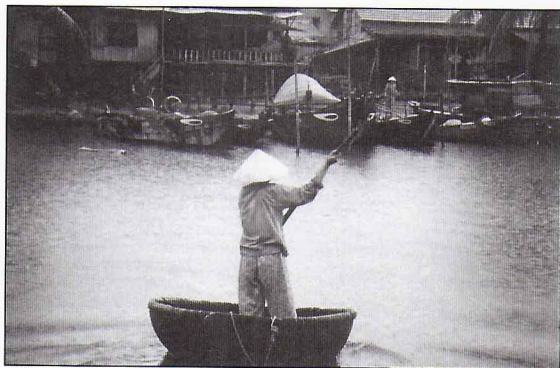
Finally, quite often two people travelling in a coracle will sit on its gunwale and "scoop" paddle it together.

Carrying

As coracles are kept very close to where they are used transportation does not feature in the way that it does, for instance, with West Wales's coracles.

The methods I saw by "cartwheeling" the coracle to the sea's edge; by carrying it between two men with two lengths of wood in a stretcher like manner and by dragging the coracle down the beach.

In conclusion, I would commend a visit to central Vietnam to anyone to see extraordinary stable coracles capable of going as far as two miles out to sea, thriving in great numbers. The Vietnamese are in no way reclusive about their coracles, of which they are rightly proud.





Tywi Coracle made by Conny Richards, summer 2002, from instructional video made by Ray(mond) Rees of Carmarthan.



*Dave Purvis, Conwy Richards, Rick Taylor, Dave Nicol
Net fishing North Norfolk*