



The Coracle Society

Founded 1990



Jane Pearce at the Iron Bridge - Photograph by Conwy Richards

January 2004

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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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Eustace Rogers – A Tribute

On 31st January 2003, the coracling world suffered a grievous loss when Eustace Rogers, the famous Ironbridge Coracle maker died at the grand old age of 88.

It was my privilege and pleasure to have first met him over twenty years ago when he agreed to make me Ironbridge and hide coracles. Thereafter I spoke to him on many occasions and learnt an enormous amount about the coracling way of life. Many people referred to Eustace as the last English coracle man following in the proud tradition of his grandfather, father and uncle. Eustace never used that term himself and with characteristic generosity of spirit told people of the Davies family of Shrewsbury.

His fame never spoilt him nor did it diminish his impish sense of humour. The world is poorer for his passing particularly for members of The Coracle Society to whom he was such a good and generous friend.

Peter Badge
President of the Coracle Society
Devon

Coracle Society AGM – Ripon 5th July 2003

A small but select band of Society members travelled north for this years AGM held in the historic Cathedral City of Ripon, North Yorkshire on Saturday 5th July 2003.

This is the first time the AGM has been held in Yorkshire and the event was hosted by Ripon City Youth Arts, Ripon City College and Ripon City Council. Although the sky was overcast all day, at least it didn't rain (there is an old Dales saying "ow can you tell it's summer up here? – t' rain gets a little warmer lad!")

The day kick started with a coracle display and demonstration 'build' on the market square in front of the 300 year old obelisk. Members parked their boats on the square as they arrived, with visitors milling around the displays asking the usual 'coracle' questions. Knottingley Silver Band provided entertainment. We all proceeded, coracles on backs, across the square to the Town Hall for a Civic Reception in the Council Chamber and we were welcomed by The Right Worshipful The Mayor Councillor David Parnaby and Mayoress Sheila Simpson. Ripon City ties were presented to our President: Sir Peter Badge and Chairman: Peter Faulkner as a souvenir of their visit. This was followed by a humorous presentation by Mr Jim Vauvert, the Sargent-at-Mace and deputy Hornblower, on the history of Ripon City and various artefacts, regalia and silver on display in the Mayor's Parlour. The start of the AGM was signalled by a long blast on the 1610 ox-horn which is used in the Market Place every evening at 9.00pm to announce the nightly curfew when good citizens of Ripon are safely tucked- up in their beds! The agenda was quickly despatched in the Council Chamber. After which, the hungry and thirsty members departed for a snack at the Royal Oak Hotel, a local coaching inn. We caused much amazement to Malcolm, the landlord, who remarked, "We have had many visitors here over the last four centuries but I don't recall that many coraclers have passed this way before!" We then travelled, in procession, down Kirkgate for a quarter mile or so to the Canal Basin with a welcome respite for a photoshoot on the steps of the Cathedral en-route.

Ripon Canal and the River Ure Navigation was planned in 1766 by the engineer John Smeaton who presented a proposal to Parliament for a ten mile stretch of waterway and five lock structures which would connect Ripon to the two thousand mile National Waterway Network. A Bill authorising the Navigation received Royal Assent on 15th April 1767 and the canal was opened in 1773. At the present time Ripon is the northernmost canal connected to the waterway system in England.

The day concluded with members pottering about in the canal basin for the amusement of the local residents – a large and voracious population of Mallard Ducks. The society are grateful to Harrogate District Council for the use of the Market Square and the Town Hall, to Ripon City Council for the hospitality and to British Waterways for the use of the canal, all of which helped make this a memorable day for this year's AGM.

Dave Purvis
Organiser of AGM



Chairman's Report

"Summer has gone on swallow's wings", as Thomas Hood observed and what a summer it was. The AGM at Ripon seems but a blink away and yet the cloudless skies of August and September seem strangely distant and dream-like now.

We as a society have had another very busy year. 'The Ripon Youth Arts' contingent sporting at least eight events. Again there has been much media interest both in print and on the television and the quality and accuracy of this coverage has in general been excellent. This I am sure, reflects the diligence of members in giving sound information to reporters.

On 10th February, Terry Kenny and I attended the funeral of Eustace Rogers at St. Luke's Church which was filled to capacity. The main address was both moving and enlightening and the hymn singing inspirational and uplifting. A fitting tribute to a remarkable man. It seems appropriate to feature the famous Ironbridge on the covers of this issue.

In May Dave Purvis and I flew the flag at the International Festival of the Sea at Leith (Edinburgh). Our separate displays attracted a constant stream of enthusiastic punters. The native Scots were surprised to learn of their very own coracle heritage on the River Spey.

Our loyal band of officers continues to serve the Society well. Brian Pearce was seriously ill earlier in the year and it was good to see him looking fit and well again at the AGM. Chris Sauvarin maintains our website (which he created) but would be very happy to hand it over to an enthusiast. If anyone is interested please let me know.

I did spend eleven days, during the August heatwave, coracling down the Thames from Cricklade to Teddington but by far the most outstanding achievement this year belongs to Olivia Elton Barratt and Kay Johnson. Olivia and Kay (combined ages 142 years!) with their 'coracles for charity' raised a staggering £20,000+ for the Lord Mayor's Charity Appeal 'Save The Children (see separate article). What a magnificent effort well done indeed!

The regattas at Leintwardine, Cilgerran and Ironbridge had record crowds and together with media coverage continue to keep our profile high. The September issue of 'Best of British' magazine covered the Leintwardine event.

Our sincere thanks must go to Dave Purvis for hosting our AGM at Ripon. It was a splendid day reflecting the hard work and organisational skills of Dave and his team. The next AGM is provisionally booked for Saturday 17th July, 2004 at Carmarthen (River Towy) and promises to be well worth the journey. Full details will appear in the Spring Events Flyer.

Yes the membership subscriptions have risen slightly to keep finances healthy. Our biggest expense is of course the newsletter and this has again been produced to a very high standard by St. Leonards Press, Ludlow. Do renew your membership in January and keep our small but successful society afloat. Coracles and allied craft not only have an ancient and fascinating global history, but also a bright future at the forefront of which is the Coracle Society, its members and its officers.

Peter Faulkner

Chairman of the Coracle Society
Leintwardine

Coracles For Charity

Twelve months of careful planning came to fruition this summer when Olivia and Kay realised their 'dream' of using coracles to raise money for Save The Children by covering the Thames from its source down to Oxford. You will remember the appeal in our 'Spring Events Flyer'. Congratulations to you both on such a magnificent achievement.

Here are the diary notes covering the last three days of that 'dream'

WEDNESDAY 27TH AUGUST

The first of the last three days and a rather grey and breezy day. Eight of us launched coracles from the Cokethorpe School boathouse at Newbridge; Olivia, Rae Gillott, Tony Raven, Peter Rooke, June & Gerry Pulman and Peter Badge.

With encouraging waves from our supporters, many of whom walked the path to keep us company, (one amused himself later on by shying sloes at us from the laden bushes on the banks!), we paddled off down river. The wind was not kind but the determination of the paddlers was undaunted, Peter Rooke who had never even sat in a coracle before, was making good headway but had to keep in touch with the office on his mobile.....It was such a long day, a distance of about 4½ miles which doesn't sound very much but as our top speed was about ½ mile an hour!...Some of us were seen to struggle to the bank and carry our coracles for a short distance to ease aching back and knees, others in greater pain finally thumbed a lift from our support boat skippered by Dennis Hill and his wife Jill.

Bablock Hythe at last, the goal for the day and huge congratulations to Tony whose wife wondered if she would ever see him again as it was also his first coracle marathon.

THURSDAY 28TH AUGUST

Numbers of coraclers somewhat reduced. Peter Badge gave us a demonstration of different paddling techniques. One handed over the side, used by fishermen on the River Teifi in Wales. This stroke enables you to sit up straight and move gently sideways in the river. The other stroke over the front using both hands and swinging the paddle like a pendulum. It looked so smooth and easy when demonstrated by Peter. We had all day to practise and it certainly helped to ease the aches and increase the enjoyment of the river.

Reaching the halfway stop at Pinkhill Lock for a late lunch we were met by my daughter Olivia and her three boys who had walked down to meet us from Swinford Bridge. Wonderful sunny weather and no headwind.

Another frequently asked question "Any problems or accidents on the journey?" Nothing dramatic until now....During the afternoon my grandsons amused themselves by throwing blackberries to me, reaching to catch one granny capsized and disappeared under the water. Shrieks of laughter of course! Rescued by my daughter and Jill from the support boat. Dry towels, tea laced with whisky and Granny was on her way paddling on to Eynesford.

FRIDAY 29TH AUGUST

The last day. Six new coraclers to join us. Another lesson from Peter Badge at Eynesford Lock before we started out. The wind freshened, a headwind which blew steadily all day and no matter how many bends and changes of direction the river took, the wind always



managed to find us. If we slackened our efforts we were likely to find ourselves going backwards! Some fell by the wayside, others had a lunch stop in a field. A portage across the field cut off a very windy stretch. Kings Lock in a brief but heavy rainstorm, under the main A34 road bridge and then just short of the lovely old bridge at Godstow we all fell out onto dry land and each other.

“We did it!”

Supper at the famous old inn, The Trout, where we sat on the terrace and watched old father Thames slip slowly (and effortlessly!) down to London the sea and beyond.

SATURDAY 30TH AUGUST

We woke to another beautiful sunny morning. Leaving the campsite, our home for the last three days, we were soon off to Henley for the final celebration party at the River and Rowing Museum. Norman and Julie, from the Basketmakers Livery Company, were already moored by the museum pontoon with their narrowboat ‘Bruin’ splendidly decorated with bunting.

By 11am about 14 coracles were launched, crowds of well wishers and onlookers arrived. Peter Faulkner brought his hide covered coracle all the way from Herefordshire. His demonstrations of speed paddling left us breathless! Catherine Howley, the Lord Mayor’s Event Manager had a spin in a coracle. Many members of the livery were present, friends and enthusiasts came. Representatives of Save The Children. The press arrived, Meridian TV and crowds of onlookers who added another £200 to our collecting boxes. There was a wonderful party atmosphere so when one of the reporters shouted “won’t someone fall in?” Well it was a lovely hot day, and I’d already done it once so why not?

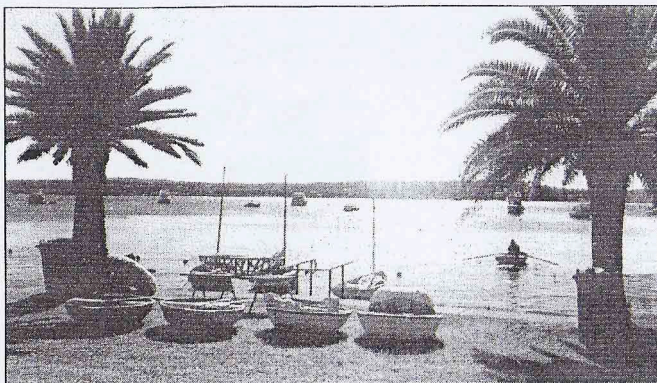
On September 5th an article in the Henley Standard with colour photo of the event carried the headline:-

‘GRITTY GRANNIES COMPLETE EPIC JOURNEY IN OVERSIZED SAUCERS’

Coracles for Charity raised in excess of £15,000 which, with Gift Aid applied should translate into £20,000. Thank you again so much for your support.

Kay Johnson and Olivia Elton Barratt

Coracles Down Under



Coracles may have existed prehistorically in Australia but there is no evidence of their existence in modern times. Undoubtedly from time to time there has been the occasional person who has built a coracle here in OZ but interest in building these wonderful little boats is low key.

In 1994 I was reading a back issue of 'Classic Boat' magazine when I came across an article titled "Calico Boats The Ironbridge Coracle". After reading this I contacted a Mr Terry Kenny who was mentioned at the end of the article and he sent me plans to build one.

Eventually this coracle became 6 and I organised the first ever official coracle race held in Australia on the Nepean River in Penrith NSW during Riverfest in November 1994.

The construction of these coracles became the therapy I needed after a traumatic family loss in early 1994.

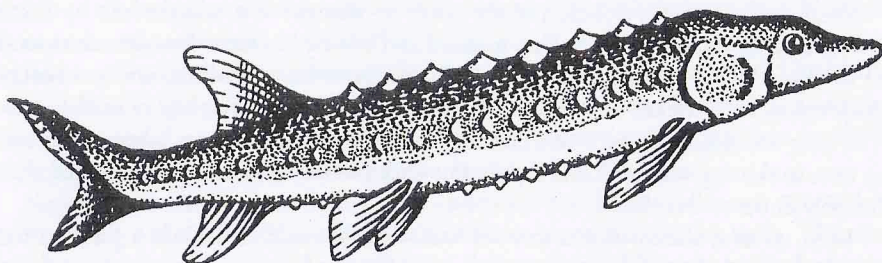
The races were such a huge success I felt a need to keep on with it. So I did, with two more years of racing in Penrith, a construction demonstration at the "Working with Wood" show at Homebush Bay. Then a demonstration/race event at the National Maritime Museum/WBA's Woodenboat Festival held in Darling Harbour Sydney then another hugely popular race event at the "Heritage Afloat" weekend at Toronto Lake Macquarie Newcastle during the Easter weekend in 2000. This was topped off with three wonderful days in Hobart at their absolutely brilliant woodenboat festival centred around Constitution Dock. My wife and I had coracle number 7 on display there and I also took it out paddling on the waters of Constitution Dock and its environs, and then visiting numerous vessels and their crewmoored there for the festival.

During one of these trips I was interviewed by a television crew and afterwards by the ABC radio 2bl crew asking me about the coracles and their part in my life.

These interviews naturally created a tremendous amount of interest.

Ken Lyneham
51, Borrowdale Way
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Australia

Stirring Sturgeon Stories



The rivers of Wales are famous for their salmon and sea trout but a little known fact is that another fish visits these waters to breed; the sturgeon.

The fish is well known for its caviar but an often overlooked fact is that the fish grows to the size of a shark and may weigh hundreds of pounds. A salmon weighing thirty pounds is considered a challenge to land whether on the end of an anglers line or in a coracle net but a sturgeon weighing hundreds of pounds would endanger the safety of any angler or coracleman.

H.M. Queen Elizabeth the Second can claim any sturgeon caught in Great Britain and it was in 1969 that one was eaten at Buckingham Palace. The fish has now been added to the priority list of protected species of special interest to the European Union. It is the Common or Baltic Sturgeon (*Acipenser Sturio*) which is the only Sturgeon species to be found in all the major European river systems and adjacent seas.

It is recorded that on the Welsh side of the River Severn a sturgeon was stopped and turned by a Coracle net to be caught later at Shrewsbury. It was weighed at 80 lbs. If the coracles had not turned it how far upstream would it have gone and might it have spawned in the upper reaches of the river, something that was common two centuries ago in many of our rivers.

In June 1896 on the Afon Tywi (River Towy) at Carmarthen a sturgeon was caught that weighed 320lbs, was 8 feet 4 inches long and had a girth that measured 3 feet 4 inches. It was caught by Billy Boy and sold to Slippery Dick and during the netting two coracles were overturned and three nets broken. It was written in 1955 of coracles catching sturgeon "twice in living memory" and also "...a dozen coracles closed in on the bigger fish and brought it ashore..." This fish was exhibited at three pence a viewing. More recent confirmed sightings on the Tywi were on 4th June 1986, 11th June 1990 and on 25th June 1993.

Conwy Richards

Letter From Iraq By Guffa

Some years ago, Heroditus (490 – 420 BC) the intelligent Greek now known as the father of history, visited Babylon on the Tigris river. The hanging gardens and the tower of Babel had by then collapsed. So Heroditus wrote about the meat trades instead.

Sheep and goat herds frolicked in the north of Mesopotamia – in the hills by Tikrit, Mosul and Kurdistan. Water buffalo moaned and boomed in the willow-strewn swamps of the upper Tigris. In due season, the sheep and goats were loaded into strings of round deep vessels with wicker walls and rush strewn bottoms and coverings of buffalo hide. The fleet was floated down river; the shepherds cursed their charges ashore from time to time in skirting waterfalls and rapids; but once past Samarron, the river floated them serenely down to Babylon.

Then, as now, the town was short of fuel and meat in October when the northern supplies arrived. So the boats were used as kindling and firewood for the orgy of fiery meat eating which followed and became incorporated into Semitic religions and onisms in latter centuries as the Feast of Passover and of Maharram, as kebabs, as burnt offerings and as suburban barbecues.

Heroditus often exaggerated, especially for the sake of clarity. Not all Tigris coracles were so consumed. When Sir Ronald Storrs, Oriental Secretary in the British Administration of Egypt visited Baghdad, 50 miles upriver from Babylon several thousands of years later (8th May 1917 actually) he wrote in his diary:

“... we had the amazing good fortune to be gliding into Baghdad about the setting of the sun.

Everywhere God's plenty of palm trees. The red light splashed about like blood on the uneven glass of the windows of the strombouli houses opposite. Amid a mass of shipping, paddle boats and heavy barges, hard by an ancient Babylonian Guffa – a deep round hide coracle – exactly one month since the train took me out of Cairo station, I came to rest at my goal.

There, magnificent stood Lieutenant Colonel Sir Percy Zacchariah Cox, K.C.S.I., K.C.I.E., Chief Political Officer in Mesopotamia and future High Commissioner of Iraq, very welcoming and taking me with Gertrude Bell to his house whose middle balcony with an ultra-Venetian sensation projects far over the flood.”

Readers will know that the magnificent Cox and Bell and Storrs and Lawrence restored a settled peace for decades in the Middle East. That peace depended profoundly on the intelligence systems the four created. Sir Percy well disguised and manoeuvring his guffa adroitly through the currents of information flowing under his balcony, was dominant. Mighty Cox as Lawrence described him.

Perhaps The Coracle Society should moor a hide covered coracle in the Thames outside the Intelligence Service's smart new HQ in London as a stubborn memorial to past achievement.

Frank Jones
Treasurer of the Coracle Society
Leintwardine

Jane Pearce

Most society members are familiar with at least the names of the officers who serve us. To produce a detailed Who's Who would be OTT but from time to time a detailed sketch of a personality will I'm sure be well received. One such personality is Mrs Jane Pearce who became an officer in 1999.

Jane was born in London where she lived until starting college in Bristol. Qualifying as a teacher in 1959 Jane moved back to London to teach infants. Somewhere along the line she bumped into Brian (membership secretary) resulting in a marriage in 1960. From this happy union they produced two daughters and two sons.

Now coracles had fascinated Jane since childhood and her curiosity was renewed in 1992 during a holiday in Shrewsbury, where she encountered coracles again. This was not to be the only encounter that year. Later she met Bernard Thomas at Cardigan and then visited the Greenwood Trust at Ironbridge meeting Terry Kerry who later built Jane's first coracle – a modified Shrewsbury. Not satisfied with a single craft Bernard was commissioned to supply a Teifi coracle.

By this time Jane was quite fired up with the coracle bug. The London Boat Show in January 1993 introduced her to a relatively new boy on the scene who was exhibiting his hide covered coracles! That meeting resulted in a hide bound 'Teme' joining her collection in 1994. At this juncture Brian intervened but instead of saying, "Please Jane no more!" offered a trailer to transport the fleet. Was this the first coracle road show? August of that year saw a return to the River Severn to take part in her first Ironbridge Regatta, the first of many.

In June 1995, after demonstrating her skills at Watford Canal Festival, the trailer turned up at Leintwardine. Jane had arrived for the second of Peter Faulkner's River Teme Regattas. There was a good turn out, much activity and in the 'Ladies Final' Jane was just pipped at the post by Louise Faulkner. They became instant friends as is often the case where happy folk congregate and compete in serious but healthy competition.

This year (2003) Jane and Brian attended their ninth consecutive regatta on The Teme. Indeed they have travelled the length and breadth of the country with the coracles. Sightings of Brian in a coracle **on the water** are rare indeed but no one can mistake the familiar vision of Jane, usually in her Bernard Thomas Teifi, clad in athletic kit, with red buoyancy aid and sporting those black 'I mean business' gloves!

Jane now resides in Devon with her 'keeper of the fleet' and is often seen paddling on the River Teign and the Exeter Canal. We wish you both many happy aquatically active new years.

Front Cover Photo: Conwy Richards

From The Chairman's Bookshelf

The following extract appears on pages 57- 58 of "Rivers" by Ronald Russell, 1978, David & Charles (Publishers) Ltd.

The most local of boat-builders are probably the coracle-makers of the Severn, Teify, Tavy and Taff. These little portable craft, 5-6ft long, were usually made for an individual owner - almost tailor-made, one might say. The Severn coracle was shaped like a bowl, with a paddle similar to a canoe paddle, usually made of ash. They were popular in the Gorge as they enabled local inhabitants to cross the river without having to pay the penny for using the Iron Bridge. In flood time they were used for catching rabbits. William Gilpin found coracles in use on the Wye in 1770, and reported on one famous one as follows:

An adventurous fellow, for a wager, once navigated a coracle as far as the Isle of Lundy, at the mouth of the Bristol channel. A full fortnight or more he spent in this dangerous voyage; and it was happy for him that it was a fortnight of serene weather... Sometimes his little bark was carried far to windward, and sometimes as far to leeward; but still he recovered his course; persevered in his undertaking; and at length happily achieved it. When he returned to New-Weir, report says the account of his expedition was received like a voyage around the world

Its comforting to find that there were 'nut-cases' over two hundred years ago who were prepared to spend endless hours cramped inside a coracle!

Two Types Of Tywi

The back cover of the December 2002 newsletter sported a photograph of a Tywi coracle made by Conwy Richards during the summer of that year. He followed an instructional video made by Raymond Rees, of Carmarthen, who is descended from many generations of coracle fishermen.

In his video he instructs how to build this type of coracle in a clear and straightforward way without the need for woodworking skills and using just basic tools. For anyone wanting to build this type of coracle then the Tywi is recommended for being very safe and infinitely more stable on the water than the River Severn Bowl (Ironbridge) coracles that many society members own, also it is very easy to use with a little practice. Of course the stability of any coracle very much depends upon the skill and assiduity of its operator!

Ted Pitman, a member from Langport, made a 'Tywi' coracle in what he describes as 'the original manner', i.e. using shaved willow laths (plenty of willow in Somerset) and three wraps of plaited hazel for the gunwale (as in Tywi at St. Fagans – see also Jenkins 1988 p51).

The photo on the back cover highlights the rusticity of Ted's coracle. Those who have ventured into 'Rees country' may well have seen a Tywi made out of fibre glass. Has anyone experimented with carbon fibre yet?

STOP PRESS!

John E. Davies Shrewsbury Coracle Man

The saying 'one door closes and another one opens' is very familiar. This evening (22nd January) I received a phone call from John Davies a member of the famous Shrewsbury coracling family that spans at least six generations of coracling tradition.

John had 'disappeared' from the coracle 'scene' several years ago and despite a concerted effort during the autumn of 2000 I was unable to locate him. I was naturally delighted to make contact again today and for several minutes there was much C.C.T. - Concentrated Coracle Talk.

John is planning to coracle the Severn from Shrewsbury to Gloucester early in the summer and would more than welcome some company on the trip. Details of dates etc will appear in our 'Spring Flyer'.

In the meantime may I, on behalf of the Society, welcome John back 'on board' although of course he has been a Vice-President of the Society since its inception in 1990.

We shall all look forward to the Shrewsbury coracle scene blossoming again. What an ideal setting for an A.G.M.! Food for thought.

Peter Faulkner



SPRING FLYER 2004

Please let me have full details of your coracling events/activities
by March 23rd.

Failure to do so may result in disappointment.

The Committee would like to see the 'Flyer' contain some short
articles too.

Don't hide your paddle under your coracle.

Send your contribution in NOW!

A Memory To Treasure



The 2002 AGM report mentions a wedding party at Ironbridge. Here is the happy couple, Stephen and Karen Urbickie. The photo was sent to me by Stephen's aunt Jenny Gurney, who lives near Wigmore; three miles down the road. Small world isn't it!



Tywi Coracle made by Ted Pitman, see article.