



The **Coracle** *Society*

Founded 1990



B. Irlwyn John

A Vice President of the Coracle
Society with his Taf Coracle today...
and in 1984

Journal 2009

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Journal Editor	Alan Grove

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Advice on Coracle Safety

Always wear an approved buoyancy aid.

Be able to swim proficiently, wearing light clothing and footwear - never go in a coracle wearing Wellington boots.

Learn to handle a coracle properly from an experienced coracle handler.

Remember and be aware:-

If a coracle capsizes it cannot be re-entered.

Due to its shallow draught and susceptibility to strong winds, a coracle is easily blown downwind.

A coracle is at the mercy of strong and unexpected currents in inexperienced hands.

If a coracle is holed it will quickly sink. Be aware of your own limitations.

Avoid going out in a coracle alone and if unavoidable, inform a reliable person of your whereabouts.

Never walk with a coracle on your back near the water's edge, especially on a windy day.

Be very vigilant of your surroundings and in particular, look out for submerged debris in the water that might puncture the coracle 'skin'.

Safe paddling!

Ed.

President's Column

May I start by congratulating our Chairman, Terry Kenny, and his excellent committee for their sterling work since last year's AGM.

It is hard to believe that the Society will have its twentieth birthday next year.

The Society came into being because of the concern of some of us for the future of the Coracle's heritage. I am pleased to report, however, that the Welsh Assembly's Minister for Rural Affairs has expressed her appreciation of the importance of the traditional Coracle to the culture and history of Wales and has made practical proposals for protecting the heritage of the Coracle.

On another happy note, I am pleased to announce that the Society has been invited to take to the water at Broughton Castle near Banbury, Oxon, on the 21st June 2009. This is a beautiful location with a sizeable moat surrounding the castle. Do come along if you can.

We have heard so much this year about Darwin and his theory of evolution. This made me think of the origins of the Coracle.

The late and great James Hornell hypothesized that Asia was probably the genesis of the craft because of its very wide distribution stretching as it did from Iraq to modern day Vietnam and that the various migrations of population would have lead to the dissemination of coracle making and usage skills as far as North America and Europe. Whilst that theory might relate to the various countries within Asia it is hard to believe that the skills in question could have travelled to North America and Europe.

It is my belief that Coracles probably originated spontaneously in various areas without any connection with one another to answer particular common local needs. To make the most primitive type of Coracle such as the Bull Boat of North America required very little in the way of tools or techniques of manufacture.

The writings of Herodotus and others clearly indicates the existence of Coracle like craft before the birth of Christ but nowhere is there evidence of the coracle making craft having been disseminated from one area to another.

I would very much welcome the views of members of this fascinating subject.

Peter Badge

Editorial

As your new editor I am fully aware of the very hard act of following in the footsteps of previous editors of the Coracle Society Journal who have, each in their turn, done such a splendid job of collating and then presenting material submitted by Society members. As I put pen to paper (literally, since as yet, I do not have access to the Internet, except through the kind forbearance of friends), I make no apology for continuing to promote the qualities of a 'Journal' in book form as some sort of record of our Societies' activities. On a personal note, nothing replaces the pleasure of being able to reach to my bookshelf and browse through material, especially technical and historical information in my continuing obsession with all things 'hand crafted' and not just my latest pursuit, Coracles. My wife Nina and I rely almost entirely on the Journal for contact with what is taking place and whilst much of this information is available on the web, it is not easily available to us and still, I am sure to a number of Society members. It is with this argument in mind that I want to play my part in keeping the 'Journal' alive and continuing, however much the computer takes over our lives. Nina and I belong to two other societies, the prestigious 'Galpin Society', founded in 1945 and yes, still going strong, who present their members with a beautiful and informative 'Journal' annually, with newsletters in between. The same is true of the 'Robert Bloomfield Society', more recently founded and so it will be noted by astute readers that I am using the term 'Journal' for the more substantial magazine, published annually and the term 'Newsletter' for the interim communications. The committee has agreed with me therefore, in the avoidance of confusion, to establish this terminology once and for all.

Another issue on which I feel strongly is the importance of more in depth articles about the history and construction of Coracles. Despite all of the admirable work done to date, there are still many unanswered questions and I sometimes wonder whether some researchers are quite tenacious enough in 'ferreting out' every last ounce of information. Just to give one example, I was told on good authority that the Cleddau Coracle had been completely researched and that there were no descendents of G.W. Pike. I could so easily have been put off at this juncture only to find that he had a grandson alive who furnished me with hitherto undisclosed information and photographs. This will be the subject of a future, separate article. My interview with B. Irlwyn John contained within this issue has revealed some interesting new material which has enabled me to build a 'Taf' coracle in the genuine old pre-war manner; again, the methods used are to be a subject of the next issue of the Journal. I might add that this should in no way diminish the importance of articles and reports recording coracle events and meetings; the 'recreational' side of coraceling which plays such an important role in encouraging new members, especially amongst the young.

Finally, all members are invited to submit material for consideration and possible inclusion in future issues of the 'Journal', after all, it is your Society.

Alan Grove

Chairman's Chat

Welcome to the 2009 Coracle Society Journal. Unfortunately, we did not produce a magazine last year, so this one is doubly welcomed.

When Alan asked me to write a few words of Chairman's Chat, I went to previous issues of the magazine in search of inspiration- i.e. to pick somebody else's brains. Conwy had passed a complete set of magazines on to me, so what should have been a quick dip into the past became a prolonged immersion. There are so many interesting articles, including interviews with traditional coraclemen, reports of early regattas, accounts of trips and details of building methods. There's a twin hulled coracleman, Dick Mundy's aluminium framed coracle and even a knitted coracle. It is our aim eventually to have all past issues archived on the website. What a temptation to waste time that will be!

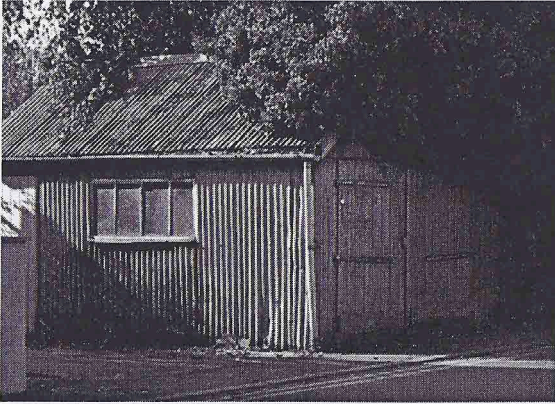
Of course the quality of a journal depends on a number of things, and one of these is the contributions received. The editor can't make sticks without straw. Feedback is also important. If you think some aspect of the coracling world is under- represented, let the editor know. Be warned though, you might be asked to write an article.

Last year saw the worst summer weather since Noah, which had decidedly adverse effects on the regattas. Cilgerran had to be cancelled due to dangerous river levels, and Mortimer's Mill was restricted by a fallen tree on the Miller's Mile section. The Severn was flowing very fast over the August Bank Holiday weekend, so the decision was taken to abandon the Ironbridge regatta. As the shore based demonstrations were still going ahead, I went down to set up a coracle display. So many coraclers had turned up that Gerwyn Lewis and I had to arrange an impromptu event, although on a much reduced scale. It just goes to demonstrate the indomitable nature of many coraclers. Let's hope we all get better conditions this year. A warm, sunny summer drifting down the river and we'll forget wars and rumours of wars, the recession, daytime TV and all the other evils of this world.

Happy paddling

Terry

A Tale of Two Sheds

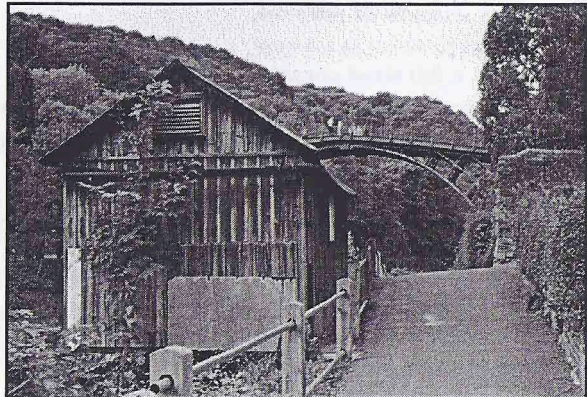


It is quite extraordinary that two sheds, used as coracle making workshops by two 'famous' coraclemen, should have a question mark hanging over their future existence at precisely the same time. They are namely that of John Christmas Thomas ('Jack' Thomas, 1904 - 1976) of Cenarth and the Rogers family workshop at Ironbridge, Shrops, last used by the late Eustace

Rogers (1915 - 2003). The 'knight errants' in this noble tale of rescue are Martin and Melita Fowler, of the Coracle Centre at Cenarth, and Peter Faulkner who actually knew the late Eustace Rogers of Ironbridge very well.

I can report that Martin has been given the Thomas shed completely 'free of charge' by its new owner who would have demolished it in order to redevelop the site, not having an inkling as to its importance to coracle history. Martin has already begun the difficult and delicate task of dismantling the shed as I write. Its future will be safe and secure in its new and very appropriate home relocated at the Coracle Centre complete with internal fittings and tableau display of Jack working away at his bench with the original tools, coracles etc.

The fate of the Rogers workshop is less sure at the moment but we can all rest assured that Peter Faulkner is working diligently with the estate agents and authorities in order to preserve the shed for the nation. We extend our very best wishes and grateful thanks to all of them.



B. IRLWYN JOHN TAF CORACLE FISHERMAN

In conversation with Alan Grove

Irlwyn John is a newly elected Hon. Vice President of the Coracle Society, representing the river Taf. Although now retired, he has been involved with net fishing and coracle-making since boyhood and he is a valuable and vital link with the past Taf fishing tradition.



Irlwyn, where were you born and what are your earliest memories of childhood?

I was born at Glandwr, Backe, St. Clears - my earliest memories are of my father, Thomas and his next-door neighbour, David Walters, fishing on the Taf.

Where and when on the Taf did this take place?

Well, it was back in the early 30's. It was higher up stream in those days, from underneath Woolstone, all the way down to Bridgend Bridge at Lower St. Clears, but they stopped this and now its only allowed from Bridgend Bridge to Lower St. Clears, which is approximately a mile further down stream.

Was your father involved with coracle-making as well as fishing and was there a tradition of coracle-making in the family?

Well yes - there was. My grandfather, Benjamin John made my father's first coracle when my father was only 13 years old.

Was this a full sized coracle?

No, it was a bit smaller, probably. I never saw it of course but I remember my father, who used to talk about it, telling me it was slightly undersize.

Which other coracle men featured in your past?

Well, obviously my father, his father and David Walters and his two sons, Howell and Willy Walters - they were all fishermen.

When you say 'all fishermen', were they full-time fishermen?

Oh no! part-time fishermen, but they sold their fish - Howell worked on the railway as a lengthman, in charge of a gang of men.

Quite a responsible job then?

Yes it was, yes - in charge of a length of railway - a gangman. I'm not sure about David because he was retired when I remember him, he had a smallholding but he must have had a job as well. Willy worked on farms around the area.

Are you saying he was a farm-labourer?

Yes, I suppose so. His son Idris is alive now, he would be about 75 but he has no interest in coracles whatsoever - he won't go near them - won't go in a coracle - he's afraid of the water - he fishes though.

You mean he is a river bank angler?

Yes.

Were all the Walters family coracle-makers as well as fishermen?

Oh yes, all except Idris.

With whom did you fish?

I fished with Howell Walters in the 40's - late 40's early 50's.

You were a coracle pair?

Well, yes, Howell would catch hold of his end of the running line and I would catch hold of my end, and when the fish hit the net, we would let both ends loose and Howell would pull in the running line, and that would close the net. I would go round then and catch hold of the back of his coracle to stop him tipping in while he pulled the salmon in - then he would kill the fish with the piece of wood.

.....and by that you mean the 'cnocer' and did you, in fact, always stick to the same side of the river?

Yes, and I was always the 'right-hand man', I never killed the fish - we always stuck to our particular roles.

Did one have the cnocer in ones pocket or fixed to the seat?

Fixed to the seat, held on by a strap. Howell was the left hand man and he killed the fish and put it behind the seat.

I find this very interesting - all the photos of Taf coraclemen are showing no evidence of cnocers fixed to the seat. Is this because the photos just happen to show 'left hand' men?

Probably.

That's fantastic!, I have always wanted to put a crocer on the seat of one of my coracles but being a purist felt that with the particular types I have copied, this would be wrong.

At this point Nina looks up from note taking and laughingly points out that a) I have never caught a fish, b) I am not a very competent coracle-handler and c) I can't swim!

So Irlwyn, talk me through who fished with whom?

Well, Willy Walters fished with Benjamin Davies for a while and when Benjamin died, Howell, who worked on the railway, came back then and Howell and Willy worked together down at St.Clears. When Willy died, I went in with Howell - D13. Jack Davies and Harry Davies - no relation - worked together with licence No. D14, Willy and Howell held D13.

So there were only two pairs of coracles on the river at this time?

Oh yes.

If I can interrupt for a moment, were these coracles all 'old style' traditional Taf coracles, made from Apple-tree wood?

Sure to be, Howell eventually had an old Carmarthen one when he finished because he had gone too old to make Tafs - he had been given one by an old Carmarthen fisherman.

You mean a Towey type coracle?

Yes.

So this could be the point at which the Taf men began to depart from the traditional Taf coracle?

Sure to be, they had them made of aluminium too, I remember the old Carmarthen boys experimenting with them but they didn't take on - too unstable!

That's also interesting, the only reference I have seen to aluminium coracles is to the river Dee men trying them back in the 30's?

Yes but the Carmarthen men tried them too.

Where do characters like Billy Beynon and Edgeworth Evans fit in, did you know them?

I knew Edgeworth very well, he was a lovely man, Billy I don't remember, I was too young but he is 'famous' of course. Edgeworth came in after Jack and Harry, 'D14'. Edgeworth Evans and Huw Evans (no relation) took over D14 for Jack and Harry, leaving me and Howell with licence No. D13. When Howell died then, about 30 years ago, I packed up due to pressure on the farm. I was having to get up at 5 am every morning to do the milking and fishing until 1 and 2 am in the early hours. It was hard labour, so it just became too much and licence D13 was withdrawn - only one licence then, D14. When Edgeworth died recently, Dewi Williams and Huw Evans carried on D14*

.....and I presume still are today? The one remaining Taf licence?

Yes - Billy Beynon and Billow Watts were the first working together in living memory and held 'D14'.

At this point, Marian, Irlwyn's wife brings in a very welcome pot of tea and a plate of her delicious home-made cake and cheese straws and I press the 'pause button' on my tape recorder. After 15 minutes or so of very different conversation between Nina and Marian, I resume my chat with Irlwyn

Obviously, because of where we are in St.Cleares, Carmarthanshire, you have traditionally been more closely associated with 'the Camarthen Men' as you call them, on the river Towy, more than with any other rivermen?

Yes.

.....but to the outside observer of coracle types, the original style of Taf coracle is quite unique and astonishingly different from all other coracles. It is immediately recognisable due to the tradition of constructing the gunwale from conveniently shaped branches from an Apple tree. Why an Apple Tree? Well, it is the way in which the branches of an old Apple tree bend and you can see the curves which are needed.

Being an artist myself, I can immediately understand what you mean - but it does take a trained eye to spot what is needed?

Yes, it is extremely difficult to find the right piece and the piece has to be long enough to reach the seat, 22" 23" or so. The branch then has to be split or sawn into two halves to form the front of the coracle.

I immediately see what you are saying because with my other 'hat on', as a musical instrument maker, we split logs of wood, open them out and join them to start a soundboard or the back of a violin. We call it 'bookmatching'. It must be very rare these days to find exactly what you want?

Very difficult - I remember as a young man asking Willy Walters which was the best time of year to take a good branch from an Apple tree 'as soon as you spot it' was his reply!

One authority has a rather facile and in fact, unjust explanation of why the Taf coracle makers used this method of constructing the gunwale, when at the time, Towy and Teifi makers used a woven Hazel gunwale, the implication being that Taf coracle builders were avoiding the complicated and acquired skill of 'basket weaving' by using a solid gunwale?

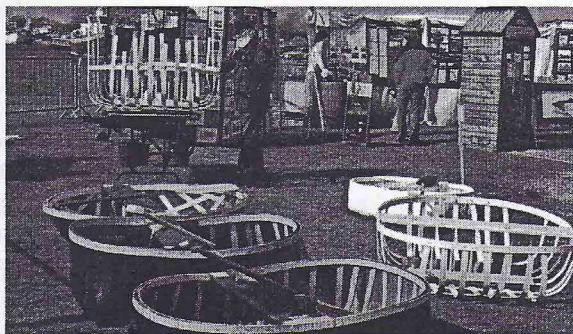
No - that's not true - you see it was all about the river. The stretch of Taf we fished was very narrow and the banks steep, we were continually bumping the sides and the Apple wood frame withstood the knocks better.

News from Ripon.....

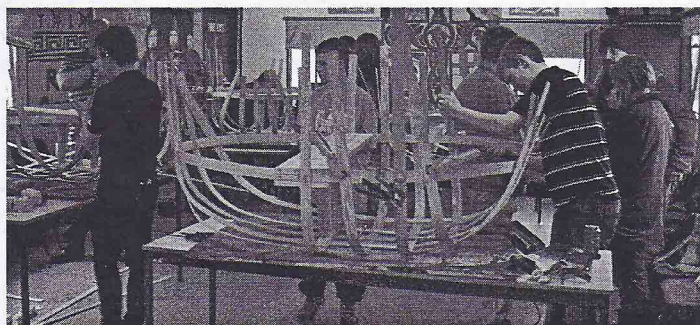
**Some of the excellent work being done by
Dave Purvis in Yorkshire**



The build team with completed frames, ready for covering.



Dave Purvis of Ripon City Youth Arts demonstrates on the Coracle Society stand at the Lancaster Shanty Festival, Glasson Dock over Easter Weekend, 2008



A coracle build in full swing for South Shields Sea Scouts at Bede's World Museum, Jarrow on Tyne in February 2009

Crafty Corner

Traditional Manner of Making A Seat Strap For A Teifi Coracle

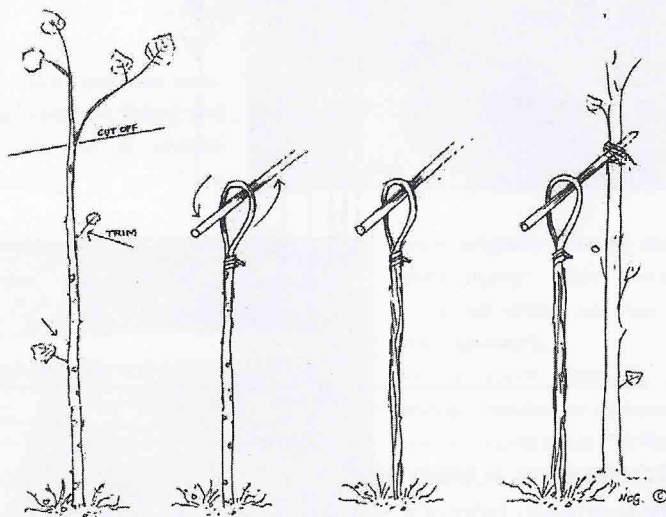
Select a straight, growing branch of Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) of much greater length than needed and of 16 - 18mm diameter.

Trim off the top and side shoots and leaves then form a 'loop' at the top securing it to the main stem with wire, rope or cable tie.

Insert a broom handle and twist round and round until the stem begins to split along its length and becomes very pliable.

Secure ends of broom handle to nearby branches to prevent the twisted stem from unwinding. Leave to 'set' for as long as possible before cutting the stem near to the ground. Fit to the coracle in the traditional manner.

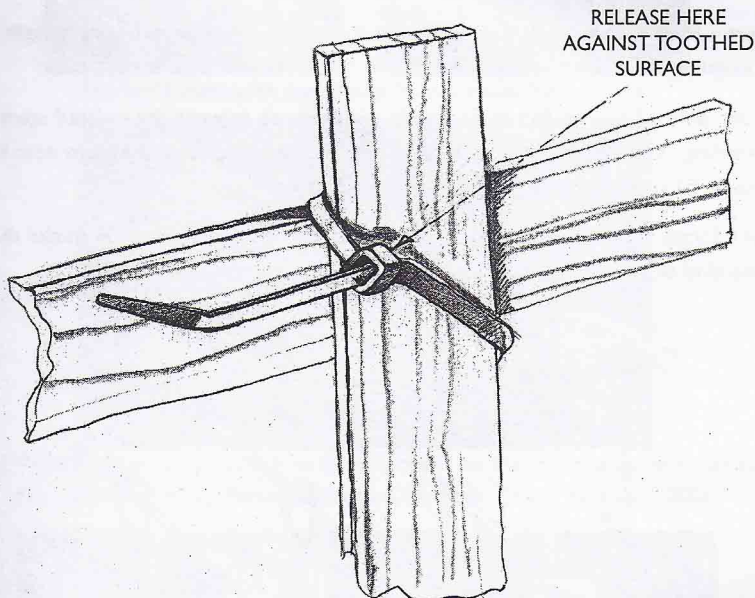
Don't forget to ask the permission of the landowner first in case he thinks there is some kind of strange witchcraft 'ritual' taking place on his property!



My grateful thanks to Ronnie Davies for this invaluable information
Ed

Coracle Building Aid

Cable ties, easily procurable from DIY stores make the holding of laths in place, prior to drilling, so easy and speeds up work considerably. There can be a certain amount of flexibility in moving the laths for spacing and they are cheap enough to just snip off once fixing is made permanent or if thriftiness is your virtue, then a thin bladed screwdriver, or in my case a simply made tool can be poked through the slot in the head of the tie thus releasing it enabling re-use.



SOCIETY MEMBERS PLEASE NOTE THAT A NEW CORACLE SOCIETY WEBSITE HAS BEEN SET UP & IS BEING MANAGED BY EWAN RAFFLE.

www.coraclesociety.org.uk

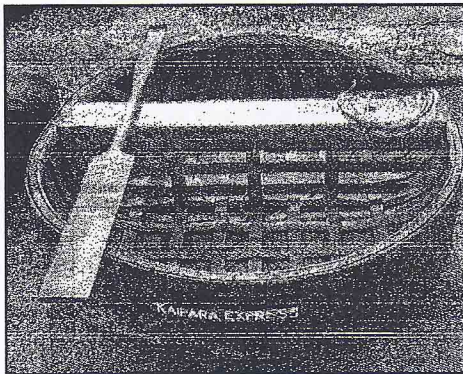
Drifters - New Zealand

Newspaper cutting sent in by Cam Calder, New Zealand,
Coracle Society Member

By Rani Timoti

Its a leisurely way to explore tributaries of the Kaipara Harbour. Sit back and let the current do all the work. Drifting is a much loved pastime among members of the Coracle Owners Club. Jorg Schulze from South Head has just completed his second day out on the Kaipara with friends Cam Calder and Dave Knowles from Devonport. They did the trip in coracles - small light-weight boats that look like half a walnut shell - starting at the Kaipara Cruising Club and finishing at the Spring Rd landing in Parakai.

A holidaying friend from Germany, Johnny Lettich, accompanied them in a kayak or "rescue waka" and was used for leisure, transport, fishing and even during war as shields against missiles at sea. They



were originally covered with animal skins though other makers have preferred willow and Ash laths for the framework.

In the south island, It only has enough coracles for its members and the occasional guest "drifter".

'We like to invite kindred spirits - it's not about building empires' Mr Calder says.....

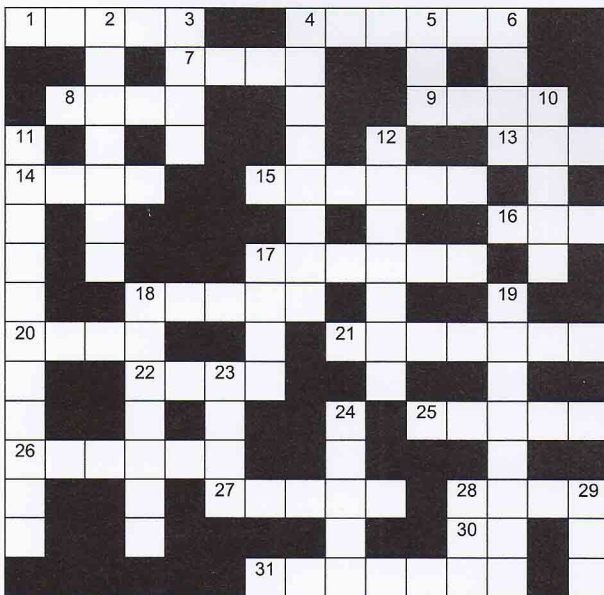
POETRY IN MOTION

(With apologies to the former Poet Laureate)

C O R A C L E
O R A C L E P
R A C L E P A
A C L E P A D
C L E P A D D
L E P A D D L
E P A D D L E
P A D D L E C
A D D L E C O
D D L E C O R
D L E C O R A
L E C O R A C
E C O R A C L
C O R A C L E

Adding one to the other
achieves greenest mode
of transportation

Coracle Crossword



Clues Across

1. Hitting the right note as a sealant for coracle skins (5)
4. Welsh priest (6)
7. Flows like a river (anagram) (4)
8. An error if used at the wrong time (4)
9. Pleat in coracle cover (4)
13. Lurking place for poacher perhaps (anagram) (3)
14. Ancient welsh mining product (4)
15. Coracle making material (6)
16. Unwise to be on whilst carrying a coracle? (3)
17. No coracle progress without one (6)
18. 'Almost' a complete meal for a seamstress (5)
20. A fisherman's tale perhaps (4)
21. Contributed to the demise of an English king (7)
22. Still waters run deep? (4)
25. River with mouth at Cardigan (5)
26. Fisherman's method of joining rope (6)
27. Popular fish dish garnish (5)
28. Some would say essential accompaniment to fish meal (4)
30. Season for fish flavour (2)
31. Horse unable to run (7)

Clues Down

2. Type of fishing net (7)
3. Fishmonger's knife handle (4)
4. Article of clothing from Welsh town (8)
5. Dick Whittington's trading partner shipshape, not feline (3)
6. Sporting use of Coracle (4)
10. Method of dispatching a fish (5)
11. Possibly a fine time to go fishing (5, 6)
12. Rivers starting in the Preseli Hills (7)
17. An appropriate surname for a historical coracle maker/ fisherman (4)
18. One method of preserving fish (7)
19. Net- making needle (8)
23. Never found on a coracle (4)
24. Fishing catch limit (5)
28. Triumphant end of coracle regatta (3)
29. Reflux of a tide (3)

**The first correct entry to be opened
by the Editor will receive a
£10 book token - Good Luck!
The correct solution will be announced
in due course.**



Cenarth Coracleman Denzil Davies putting Alan Grove's traditional Taf Coracle through its paces on the river Teifi. The coracle was built from Apple tree branches of one of Denzil's own Apple trees.



Broughton Castle, Banbury, Oxon, the home of Lord and Lady Saye and Sele. The venue of the Coracle Society AGM and Coracle Event on the 21st June 2009 by their kind invitation on the occasion of their open day.