



The Coracle Society



1990
2010



20th Anniversary Journal 2010

Officers of the Coracle Society

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Chairman	Terry Kenny
Vice Presidents	John E Davies Ronald Davies B. Irlwyn John Terry Kenny Raymond Rees Bernhard Thomas
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Journal Editor	Alan Grove

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Some Thoughts from the President on the 20th Anniversary of the founding of the Coracle Society

Much has happened in the last twenty years, some sad and much encouraging..

Sadly our founding President Dr J. Geraint Jenkins and a good friend of the National Coracle Centre, Earl Lloyd George of Dwyfor died this year but happily; our founding members, John Williams-Davies (*Secretary*), Jane Fogg (*Treasurer*) and committee members Charles Fogg, David Goddard, Gerwyn Lewis, Robert Kennedy and Jane Williams Thomas are in sound health.

Happily we have only lost one of our Vice Presidents, Edgeworth Evans and the others continue to support us. We have also been fortunate in now having two representatives of the Coracle Net Fishermen, namely Mike Elias (Twyi) and Rod Bowen (Teifi)

The committee inevitably has changed over the years and I would like to thank former chairmen, Peter Faulkner and Conwy Richards as well as our present chairman, Terry Kenny for all they have done for the society. Terry and the present committee are doing a marvellous job for us and deserve our enduring gratitude.

Over the last twenty years there are many things of which we can be proud. In no particular order, I would like to mention the following:-

1. *Peter Faulkner has created a new coracle of which there are many - the Teme coracle.*
2. *Alan Grove has emerged as a coracle maker of the highest quality and has discovered very worthwhile information about Taf and Cleddau coracles.*
3. *East Anglia has seen the emergence not only of considerable coracle growth but also the use of these craft for the purpose of net fishing.*
4. *Dave Purvis has done sterling work in spreading the coracle gospel in the North East of England and Scotland.*
5. *Bruce Crawford and Clive O'Gibney have reviewed the use of coracle style Currachs on the river Boyne in Ireland.*
6. *Members of the Worshipful Company of Basket Makers have made three pioneering replica Spey coracles.*
7. *Chris Partington has established the waters of his mill for the regular use of coracle men and women.*
8. *Paul Jones has established a wonderful photographic coracle archive.*
9. *The Society was able to play a significant role in persuading the Welsh Assembly of the importance of the traditional West Wales Coracle Net Fishermen to the national heritage.*
10. *The Society maintained its vital link with the National History Museum at St Fagans when Dylan Jones succeeded John Williams-Davies as our Archivist.*

Over the years many members, particularly Alan Grove, Paul Jones and Conwy Richards have provided me with invaluable information which greatly enhanced my book "Coracles of the World", which was published last year. Moreover Paul Jones drew my attention to an article in the Guardian in which it was claimed on the most compelling evidence that Noah's Arc was in fact a Quffa (Mesopotamian coracle) I consider this to be of the greatest importance because it provides us with a firm date by which coracles were in use rather than well intentioned supposition as to when the first coracles were made and used.

Peter Badge

Chairman's Chat 2010

What would we do without the Internet? There are rumours of primitive tribes without email, but for the rest of us, the web is our constant companion. Stuck on 15 down? There's answerbank.com as a last resort after you've hunted all over cyberspace for the answer. Need to know the Prime Minister of Bhutan? Forgotten who came after Edward IV? How to prune redcurrants? There's an infinity of information out there, and the Coracle Society is part of it. We get a variety of emails, ranging from enquiries about coracles used by the Romans in Wroxeter; or the best style of coracle for long distance paddling. We also get many requests to mount demonstrations or run courses. We know of a number of members who can oblige, but if you would like to be added to our database, let us know.

Even before the CS website I had many enquiries through my own site, which showed the world-shrinking effects of the web. An email from USA wanted to locate a good source of hazel in Massachusetts, while an Aussie asked me to recommend a local substitute for ash. Apparently, spotted gum works well. I was able to pass this information on to a gentleman who ordered a set of building instructions as a project for his men's shed. The men's shed is a popular idea in Australia, and it sounds worthy of exporting. Basically, a bunch of blokes get together in a "shed" and do the normal kind of things normally done by one man in one shed, multiplied by several. Beer was not mentioned, but I'd think it's inevitable. That might be the reason to photos they sent me didn't look anything like my coracles. But if it floats, it's good enough. They'd enjoyed the project, which is the reason most of us make coracles.

Some years ago I had a phone call from Ken Lynham, who'd seen the website and wanted to know more about building a coracle. We chatted for a bit, then I asked where he lived. "About 60 miles from Melbourne" was the answer. I sent him some instructions, but received no payment. Thinking it not worth chasing up a fiver from the other side of the world, I forgot about it. Three years later, I was running a course at the Green Wood Trust, when there was a call from home. "There's an Australian lad on his way to see you." It was Kevin's son on a visit to the UK. He brought photos of the coracles they'd made-from exterior ply laths-and the regatta they'd held. And I got my £5.

Another request for instructions came in a letter from Canada. It was written in a beautiful copper plate hand and very correctly phrased, so I assumed it was an older lady who was interested in the historical aspects. Eventually, a photo came back of a young lady with coracle and backpack setting off "backwoodsing". Apparently, all you need is a bedroll and an axe.

So the net is an excellent source of information and a means of keeping in touch. Witness the growth of social networking sites in recent years. Since Euan simplified our forums, it's easy to let the rest of us know what your up to. Unbeknown to you, there may be a coracler in the next street. Put out a call to see if there's anyone in your area who fancies meeting up for a paddle. It would be great if the website brought about the formation of informal groups of paddlers around the country.

Happy Paddling.

Terry



20th Anniversary Symposium group photograph of all those present at the National Coracle Centre, Cenarth Falls. Courtesy Paul W. Jones ©

20th Anniversary Symposium at the National Coracle Centre, Cenarth on the 21st August 2010

It was standing room only when the President of the Coracle Society opened the meeting.

He described how the Society was formed out of a profound concern for the lot of the West Wales Coracle net Fishermen and how the inaugural meeting of the Society had been held at the Centre which, at the time, had been roofless.

He went on to explain how the three prime aims and objectives of the Society, namely; the support of the traditional coracle men, the attempt to revive coracle traditions in areas which had lost them within living memory and to promote the leisure use of coracles, had all been successfully met.

After this introduction four very informative, varied and entertaining talks were given.

The first speaker was Martin Fowler, who gave an illustrated talk about the beginnings of the Centre and its progression to its present splendid state. He went on to describe how the building he and his wife, Melita, had bought had progressed from being a redundant flower mill and pig sties to the finest collection of coracles and allied craft in the world.

At the conclusion of his most entertaining talk a formal presentation of the Geraint Jenkins Memorial Trophy was made by Martin to the first winner, Terry Kenny, in the presence of Geraint's widow, Nancy.

Martin was followed by Terry Kenny, our Chairman and the long term Ironbridge coracle making course instructor at the Greenwood Centre in Coalbrookdale, Telford, Shropshire. He described that these courses had their genesis in an inaugural instructional session in which the late Fred Davies, a traditional Shrewsbury coracle man, showed representatives from the Greenwood Trust (as it then was), and Bewdley Museum how to make a Shrewsbury coracle which progressed into making Ironbridge coracles.

Terry emphasized that he was an Ironbridge coracle maker but did not regard himself as a traditional Ironbridge coracle man, the preserve of Eustace Rogers, whilst he was alive.

It was apparent from what Terry had said that he was personally responsible for the making of a huge number of coracles for leisure purposes, either as a result of making them himself or teaching others to do so.

The third speaker was a former chairman of the Society, Peter Faulkner, who described the many long journeys he had made in a coracle. During these journeys he had kept a log, from which he read extracts, which not only amused his audience but which graphically conveyed what it was like to make such unaccompanied journeys. This had all started when he had had an irresistible urge to traverse his local river, the Teme, in a craft he had made himself. To achieve this he had visited Eustace Rogers and studied a craft Eustace said had been his idea of what the earliest coracle would have looked like and, later, he had developed his own "Teme" coracle based on Eustace's prototype. He went on to describe journeys he made on the Teme, Severn, Wye, Thames, Shannon and, most recently, the Spey.

The initial talk was given by Raymond Rees, the legendary Twyi coracle maker and coracle net fisherman.

He related how he had been brought up by his grandfather, the only man to have been decorated for his services to Coracles; his own father having been away on military service throughout the second World War. His grandfather had insisted that education at Carmarthen Grammar School must come before coracles for Raymond'.

He surprised the audience when he told them that unlike the Twyi the Teifi was for a long time a "free" river. He said that the advantage of the Twyi being a river on which a licence had to be obtained before one could fish on it with a coracle and net was that the Licence holders could set their own rules which they had done after careful consideration.

Raymond covered a very wide range of matters relative to coracles, nets, fishermen and, most importantly, salmon and sewin.

This final talk was followed by a highly entertaining and informative Question and Answer session.

The second part of the anniversary celebrations consisted of a visit to the famous Cilgerran Coracle races where coracle handling of the highest quality was on display. Three of the Society's members took part, namely Terry Kenny, Peter Faulkner and Bruce Crawford, the Boyne (Coracle style) Currach maker from northern Ireland. Peter and Terry, between them, secured a first, second and third in the races.

In all it was a most successful and enjoyable day with an excellent attendance of members, some of whom had travelled great distances to be there.

Peter Badge

Looks Fishy

Medieval river trap found on Google Earth

An ancient fish trap has been discovered off the coastline of Wales after research carried out on Google Earth. The 853ft long construction is thought to have been built 1000 years ago, around the time of the Domesday Book, using large rocks placed on a river bed. Scientists believe significant numbers of people worked together to build the structure.

The trap in the estuary of the River Teifi, near Cardigan, West Wales, lay undiscovered for a millennium until a strange underwater shape was spotted from a plane flying overhead. Archaeologists then

examined the area using Google

Earth, the website picture of the globe built from satellite and aerial photographs. They clearly saw a large V-shape and divers were sent down to examine the structure. The trap is believed to have been made from locally quarried rock, or possibly boulders carried in by glaciers during the last Ice Age. The structure is about 3ft wide and protrudes about 12in above the underwater sand, although the water in it would have been shallower 1000 years ago when the sea level was lower. Fish would have swum into the estuary but become trapped in the structure as the water ran out with the outgoing tide. Dr Ziggy Otto, a marine environment lecturer at Pembrokeshire College who examined the trap said: "It would have taken a number of fishermen to work on a structure of this size. The fish were herded into the trap and when the tide went out they would be scooped out with nets."

Sent in by Wyn Bowen- proprietor of Bowen's Fish and Chip Shop 'St Dogmaels, Cardigan. (not a society member, but his without question, the best 'fish n chips' in Wales)



Editorial

As your incumbent Editor, it gives me great pleasure, during this celebratory year, to collate what amounts to a welter of rich and varied topics and events during a very eventful year.

On a personal note, Nina and I apologise and are saddened not to have been present at Cenarth, not least because we had arranged our holiday in the village to coincide with the most important event of the year.

The AGM at Broughton Castle, our second at the venue, with grateful thanks to our hosts; Lord and Lady Saye and Sele, is ideal for our needs and is proving very successful. I must mention however, that at this venue in 2009 a significant event took place, which, although not the launching, was the first viewing for most society members of our president's eagerly awaited book "Coracles Around the World". Unfortunately, at this time our 2009 journal had already gone to press so I now bring it to general attention. Peter's book is a result of a very long and exhaustive study, not only of British coracles but, as the title states, coracles of the world over and is easily the most definitive study on the subject to date. It was both a great honour and surprise to find that the 'Dwyrdd' coracle replica which I had built, and photographed by Nina my wife, found its way onto the front cover of the book.

As most of you know, Peter was a founder member of the Society but I wonder if many of you know that it was his wife, Mary, who instigated the whole coracle 'thing'. She commissioned Bernard Thomas (without Peter's knowledge) to build a Teifi coracle as a very important birthday present for her husband. The rest is 'history' as they say.

Alan Grove



*Peter Badge signing copies of his book
Broughton Castle, 2009*

Broughton Event 2010 ©Photographs by Nina Grove



Lady Saye and Sele in her own coracle



Model coracles in Peter Badger collection

Ironbridge Regatta 2010

After days of heavy rain and a week spent anxiously watching river levels on the Environment Agency website, we found on August Bank Holiday that the river was flowing serene and clear past the Ironbridge Rowing Club. Wales had obviously done a good job soaking up the downpours. Plus which, the sun was shining! As ever, the Lions had set up a splendid range of stalls on the field, the burgers were sizzling and the ice creams beckoning. So we were all set for a good afternoon.

The usual suspects turned up from all over. For many of us, it's our only meeting of the year, so it's good to see familiar faces and catch up on the news. Several folks reappeared after a spell of absence - we demanded notes from their parents - to join with newcomers from this year's courses. In total we had about 30 registered paddlers. Lorraine and the Chapmans organised the registrations with their usual efficiency, so most people knew what they were supposed to be doing most of the time. As Gerwyn said, this operation is in danger of becoming slick.

It being a sunny Bank Holiday in Ironbridge, the crowds were out in droves. The Shropshire Star estimated there were over 500 spectators. It was the perfect day to sit and watch people make fools of themselves on the river. Throughout the proceedings, Gerwyn provided an excellent commentary over the PA. He manages to educate without being stuffy, and his race commentary is a fine blend of information, encouragement and derision.

All the events were keenly contested. The participants were obviously motivated by the news that organisers had been to Poundland for the prizes. Simon Harper came out of retirement to win the Expert Sprint ahead of last year's winner, Mike Twitchen. We have to point out that Simon was paddling a go-faster coracle built under conditions of extreme secrecy. Steve Miles came third, being hampered by the weight of his disgusting hat.

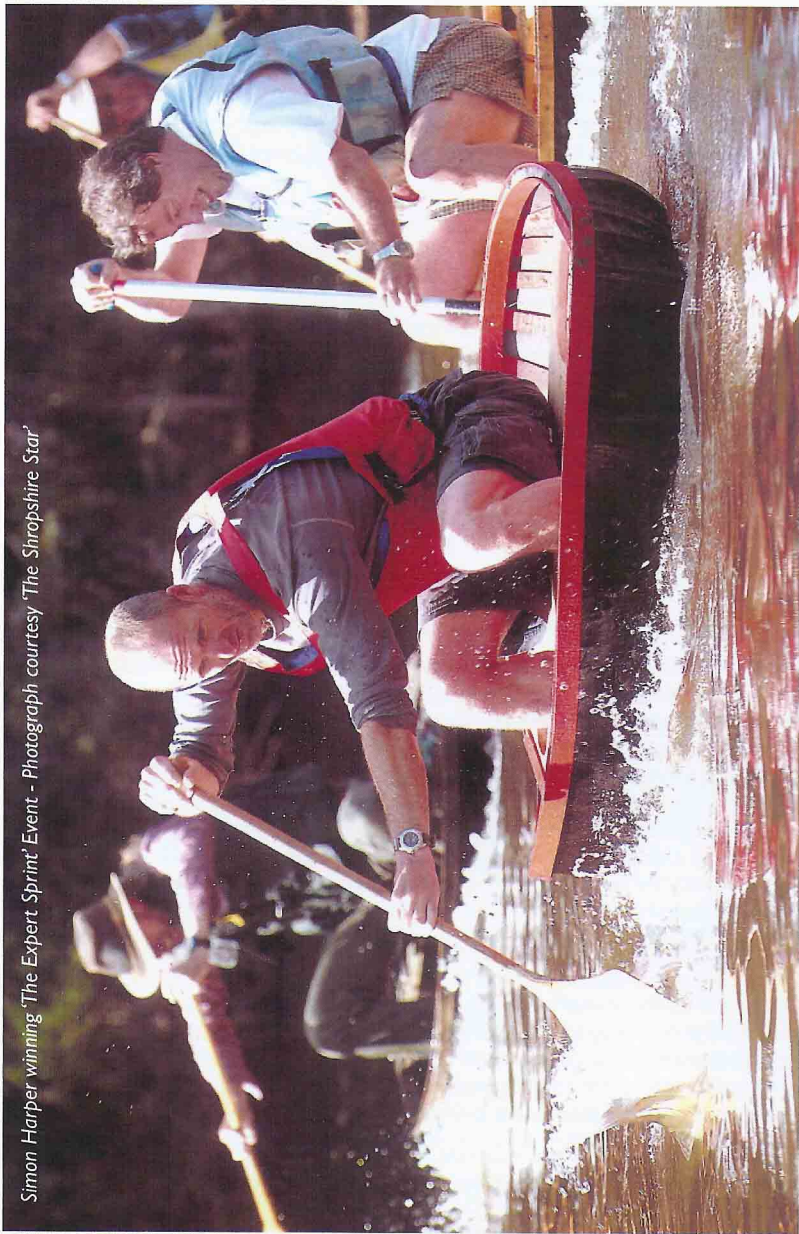
The "have a go" session proved so popular that we had to do two more. So lots of people were introduced to the coracle.

After the normal programme of sprints, fish kebabs and 360 spins, it was time for the highlight of the afternoon, the polo. This event is a great crowd pleaser. As always, it was a fiercely fought match, with a satisfyingly high number of capsizes. Our rescue boats really earn their keep. Some capsizes were off the ball incidents worthy of Match of the Day, but mention must be made to Steve's heroic self sacrifice in the goal mouth, and the game even had a winner this year. Thanks to the new goal line technology.

Then all that remained was the prize giving. The winners were speechless at the quality of the prizes, while the vanquished wept with envy and vowed to train harder next year.

Terry Kenny.

Simon Harper winning 'The Expert Sprint' Event - Photograph courtesy 'The Shropshire Star'



Blackpool Mill Revisited

When James Hornell wrote his groundbreaking paper entitled 'British Coracles' for the 'Mariners Mirror' in 1936; his last entry was an all too brief description of the Eastern Cleddau coracle made by G.W. Pike; tenant farmer at Blackpool Mill, Pembro; then the estate of J.W. Phillips, and now the Slebech estate owned by (2003) Sir Edward Dashwood.

Unfortunately, Hornell recorded only the initials 'G.W.' of Pike's first names and chose to include just two photographs of Pike's Cleddau coracle. These two different views showing it in framework form only. We had to wait some years before photographs of Pike's completed coracle were available to general readers thanks to the late Geraint Jenkins who reproduced two different pictures in his books on coracles. These photographs taken by Miss Wight of Hereford c.1936-6 are reproduced in 'Nets and Coracles', 1974 on page 169 and in the later book 'The Coracle' 1988 on page 89.

I have in my possession prints from the original plate camera which are in superb quality of detail. At this point it is vitally important to emphasise that contrary to previous coracle society archival reports that these two photographs portray different coracles by different makers, they are in fact the same coracle.

Either by intuition or an astute grasp of unfolding political events threatening world peace, due to the ambitions of Adolph Hitler, Miss Wight took on the task of recording British rural craft but of particular interest and importance to us; coracles of different types possibly before they disappeared into historical oblivion. When Nina and I joined the Society in 2001 I set myself the task of reproducing all surviving recorded coracles aiming for 'museum' quality accuracy.

I began with the 'Cleddau' coracle used on the Eastern Cleddau River. This required research and despite assurances from various people that research had been carried out to exhaustion, I remained unconvinced and decided to embark on a complete 'detective investigation'. I began with Blackpool Mill, Canaston, Pembrokeshire. Despite reports that no descendants of G.W. Pike had survived I could easily have left it at that but decided to check for myself. I did several things; I obtained really good photographic prints from St Fagans Museum taken from Miss Wight's original plates. Following several weeks work on my drawing board I was able to eventually build a very accurate replica of G.W. Pike's coracle using Hornell's dimensions but more importantly, my own mathematical methods plus a good 'eye' gained from many years experience as a craftsman.

It was at this point I discovered that information in coracle society archives was both incorrect and misleading with the statement that there were two different types of Cleddau coracle, namely 'A' and 'B'. This is incorrect since careful study of first generation photographs taken from Miss Wight's photographic plates and then enlarged prove my arguments that both photos represent the same coracle. Proof is borne out by the fact that the seats in each case display identical grain and knot configurations. This level of detail in printed book illustrations cannot be seen. My point therefore is why had no one done this before?

In all his books, Jenkins does not elaborate on Cleddau coracles and until someone in the future can prove otherwise, the only evidence of one Cleddau coracle having ever existed and that is the type made by G.W. Pike.

The 'so called ' Cleddau coracle in the Blackpool Museum is only Cleddau shape in general; the seat and its bearers are incorrect and are based on Towey coracle construction, it is wrong in other details also. Several other attempts in some museums are also wrong despite a general 'Cleddau look' to the untrained eye.

The earliest attempt and which is completely accurate is by our own President and is housed at St. Fagans but why isn't it on view?

If coracle replicas are to find their way into museums they should be completely accurate, achieved at by deep study otherwise it 'muddies the waters' for future scholars. This doesn't mean that coracle sizes can't be altered as some people seem to think but constructional methods and details must be adhered to.

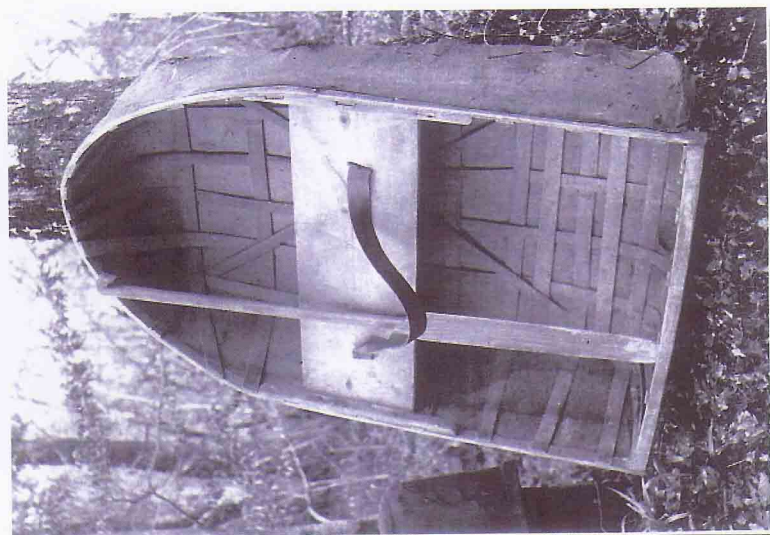
Late in 2002, I walked into the tearoom at Blackpool Mill and showed one of the 'tea ladies' my photograph of the Cleddau Coracleman in Canaston Wood'. She immediately identified the man as Billy Phillips, adding that he was farm foreman to G.W. Pike. I then asked the question; did she know of any surviving relatives of either men? She replied by handing me the local telephone directory in which we found fifteen names of 'Pike' in the Narbeth area. Later, at home, I settled one evening to the daunting task of making fifteen telephone calls to check them out. Astonishingly, the very first call produced Pike's grandson, John Alan Pike, who very kindly agreed to meet and talk with me.

On meeting, I had for the very first time, full names, dates and family history. I had sight of the only photograph on record of a Cleddau coracle on water; in fact two large identical coracles showing George William Pike alongside Laura, his wife, photographed c1907. He was a big man, typically in a flat cap, whilst Laura is in typical 'Sunday Best' Edwardian finery with tall flowered hat; going to church perhaps? What is really interesting is that Laura has a 'hook ended' paddle as in the 'Wight' photograph. George has a 'crutch' topped paddle of Shrewsbury type, unheard of in Welsh coracles before. Sadly, I was not allowed a copy of this unique photograph which is a serious gap in our archives.

John Pike did allow me copies of his grandfather's own photographs of the coracle in frame form from which enlargements allowed me to work out the huge diameter of the circular saw blade used to convert the ash into laths for his coracles.

So we discover 'George William Pike', his dates:- 1867-1937. His wife 'Laura' and they were blessed with two children. 'William George' b. 1899 (note name reversal of significance later) and 'Beatrice' b. 1911 who was amazingly still alive in 2005 aged 94, and still being taken fish by our very own Raymond Rees.

A certain amount of confusion surrounds the identity of the author of the instructions for the making of a Cleddau coracle dated 1977 and signed W. G. Pike. We now know that the author was John Pike's father, 'William' and not 'George' (understandable due to first name reversal) who sketched diagrams for an American enthusiast who subsequently returned it to Wales. William, as a boy assisted his father in coracle building but was not interested in building or using them himself. He eventually served as village policeman in Kilgetty.



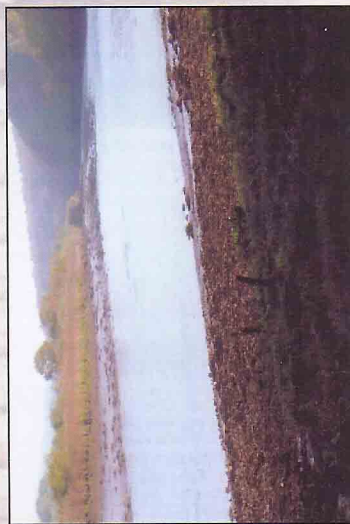
George Pike coracle at Hammonds Ford, 1936



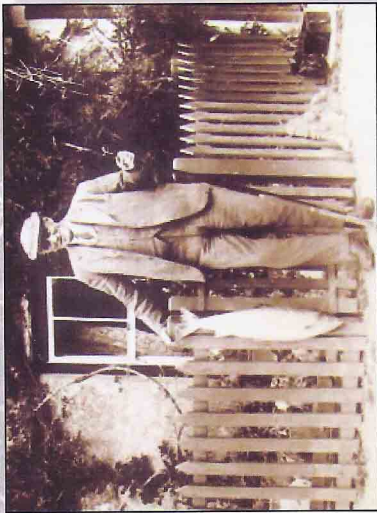
Replica coracle by Alan Grove taken at the same spot in 2006



Blackpool Mill, Canaston Bridge



Eastern Cleddau, Hammonds Ford



G. W. Pike with 'big catch' c. 1930 Courtesy Sir Edward Dashwood



Ancient limekilns, Hammonds Ford where Pike stored his carcases



The dimensions for a Cleddau coracle are somewhat smaller in these instructions either due to inaccurate memory but more likely because his father's coracle was extra large as he was a tall and heavy man. His grandson gave his height as over 6'3" Hornell gives George Pike's coracle size as length: 4'4", width 3'4" with the deepest depth of 14" at the front.

A hitherto unseen photograph of George Pike, outside his Blackpool, Mill farm shows him sporting a massive salmon, freshly caught, but clearly demonstrates his own size.

In 2003, I arranged to meet Mr Jim Brown, Slebech Estate Gamekeeper; at his home, Nash's Farm. Following a warm welcome, he very kindly took us round the estate, firstly inside Pike's farmhouse where a huge photograph of Billy Phillips with Pike's coracle on his back was hanging over the fireplace. This is the one in Jenkins's book, but links the

coracle to George Pike once and for all. This plate camera photograph was given to George by Miss Wight.

Long before this day, I had formed a picture in my mind of a situation in 1935/6 when Miss Wight would have arranged an appointment with Pike in order to take this and other photographs, on arrival at the farmhouse, she would have been met by an ailing man (he died a year later) too unwell to deal with this young woman's request, and so passed her over to Billy Phillips to show and demonstrate his coracles. In fact this is exactly what transpired, being verified by grandson John.

Next, we were taken along the lane to where George kept and launched his coracles. This was 'Hammonds Ford' and is arrived at after a long winding brick laid path through Canaston Wood. The path was laid by 19th Century limestone workers to facilitate access to the lime kilns at the edge of the river estuary. It was in these disused kilns George stored his coracles. A few steps from the kilns the wood opened out to the very wide Cleddau tidal estuary. Jim Brown pointed to where at low tide the skeletal remains of the passenger steamship (so often represented in Victorian postcards at Blackpool Mill) were sometimes revealed.

The following year, there was just one unfinished task to carry out. Nina and I returned to Hammond's Ford with our Cleddau coracle replica, to the exact spot where Miss Wight had taken her photographs of Pike's coracle against the tree. We placed our replica in exactly the same way for comparison this time using a 'Canon' digital camera.

Alan Grove

Editors Footnote: The footpath leading to the lime kilns is strictly private and permission must be obtained from the estate office before entry.

East Keswick Wildlife Trust

Newsletter

Issue no. 33

Autumn 2009

How to make a Coracle

It was a cold and snowy day in early February 2009 when we chose to cut down an Ash tree; one as straight as possible. Why? We had been in contact with a coracle expert in Ripon (www.worldofcoracles.co.uk) who was willing to give up a weekend to teach a few of us How To Build A Coracle.



The Ash tree was to be cut into 35mm planks before being split into 6-7mm laths that would eventually form the frame of the finished coracle.

But when we saw the planks at the sawmill we realised that they would not do... in spite of our careful choice, the planks had a few knots which if we had split into laths for the frame would have broken very easily. This meant that we had to buy all the raw materials despite our best intentions.

We made the coracles over a three-day weekend in mid-April.

The frame is fabricated around the seat, or "thwart", which is fashioned from a plank of pine with three "legs" acting as supports.

Firstly the gunwale was tacked to the



sides of the seat to form an oval. One rib was pinned under the seat supports and bent round to meet and to be tacked to the sides of the seat. All the time, the laths had to be kept wet so that they remained supple and careful choice had to be made to select those that would not crack or split on bending.



Three stringers (fore-to-aft strips) were placed under each seat support with two further stringers, one either side, again bent up to meet the gunwale.



Finally, five more ribs, three forward of the seat and two aft, were woven through the ribs and again bent up and tacked to the gunwale. All the sections of lath that protruded above the gunwale were cut off flush. Things were beginning to take shape. By the end of day one, we had fabricated nine coracle frames.



report by Paul Holmes



Day two was spent covering our frames with calico. After stretching and pinning the fabric to the frame, the excess triangular gussets were stitched up and the outside was given four coats of liquid bitumen paint to make it watertight.

The paddles were simply constructed by inserting a paddle-shaped piece of marine ply into a slot cut into a length of dowelling with a small cross piece for a handle.



Day three was spent finishing painting the vessels and then... we enjoyed ourselves.



To paddle a coracle, one sits in the centre of the seat and with the paddle in the water in front of you. The usual paddling action, or sculling, is a figure of eight, angling the paddle so that water is pulled towards you with each sideways movement. continued

Coracles... continued



....In this manner, you pull yourself towards the paddle propelling the craft in the direction you hope to go! Variations of sculling include a "J" action, and sculling with one hand with the shaft nesting in the crook of your arm.

Coracles are made around the world and have been used for thousands of years. There are 22 known types of

British coracle.

In Scotland and Ireland they are called Currachs or Currachs. They are mainly inland water craft usually used for fishing but there is a large sea-going version still to be found on the west coast of Ireland. Our coracles were based on the Shrewsbury design from the River Severn.

Our 'expert' in this article was of course our very own 'indefatigable' Dave Purvis. Well done! Editor

We are in the Old Goods Shed,
Harbour Road, Watchet, directly opposite
the West Somerset Railway Station.

Opening hours are:

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday,
Saturday and Sunday 2pm to 4pm,
from Easter to October.

Visits outside these hours are welcome
and easily arranged, for groups or
individuals. The Museum has a range
of study material available, but please
make an appointment to view.

Wheelchair access to ground floor only.

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Email info@wbm.org.uk
www.wbm.org.uk

The Hon Secretary
The Friends of the Flatner
14 Wedlakes, Watchet
TA23 0JL
01984 633804

Membership of FOFA is open to all, for
a minimum annual fee of £5.
Should you wish to build your own
flatner, plans are available.

President:

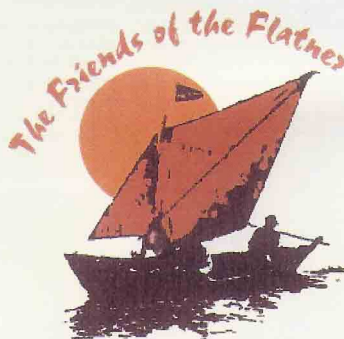
Commander GI Mayes OBE C.Eng MRINA

Line drawings by Eric McKee,
reproduced by kind permission of
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© 2007 Watchet Boat Museum



Somerset's
boating traditions
brought back to life



Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2009

In 2007, Betty Belanus, one of the Curators of the Smithsonian Institute and Ceri Jones of the Welsh Assembly Government visited St. Fagans: National History Museum. They were conducting research into the feasibility of Wales being the featured nation at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, a ten day cultural event held annually in Washington DC.

Both travelled extensively in Wales visiting various institutions and individuals gathering ideas and opinions in trying to ascertain what Wales could offer at the Festival. The Festival had been in existence since 1967 and invited International involvement since 1970. It was a unique opportunity for Wales. An agreement was finally made with the Welsh Assembly Government that Wales would be the featured nation at the 2009 festival. The goal was to present Wales 'as a country with a vibrant and creative contemporary culture which builds on the past and extends to the future'. Our overall theme would be sustainability, with four concepts being explored:

Keeping the Best Traditional Practices
Recycling in the Broadest Sense
Thinking Locally, Acting Globally
Planning for a Sustainable Future

People and institutions all over Wales were involved in compiling the information needed to turn these concepts into events and activities. I was fortunate to be asked to deliver research for a sub theme titled Along the Water: Rivers, Lakes, Canals and Sea which focused on traditional fishing methods still used today in Wales. This was to be done through interviews, photographs, film and written reports. Areas covered included:

Coracle fishing
Lave net fishing
Cockles
Mussel fishing
Lobster and crab fishing

Word had already reached the Smithsonian Curator of the coracle fishermen and she was undoubtedly anxious for coracles to be included in the research! The field work began with Irlwyn John who kindly spoke about his experiences on the river Taf. He told us times were hard but fortunately there was a plentiful supply of fish. Today, fish stocks are at an all time low, and the younger generation show little or no interest in the coracle. He sincerely hopes the ancient craft will survive but ultimately fears for its future.

Next, Raymond Rees and Bernard Thomas had to be contacted as both are undoubtedly masters and keepers of knowledge of their respective rivers Tywi and Teifi and care passionately about the well-being of the environment in which they live. The two are immersed in the history and traditions of the coracle but luckily both are prepared to pass their knowledge down to others. It was a privilege to meet and record them. generations of would be coraclemen / women have been guided by these two greats and long may it continue.

A man who certainly has learnt at the feet of these masters is William Karl Chattington of Cwmdare in the Cynon Valley. Karl, from his dairy and beef farming background has always been interested in the old traditions. His interest in coracles began in the 1970s, when Bernard was protesting outside the House of Lords against increased fees and reduction in the number of coracle licenses. By the time Bernard had crossed the English Channel, Karl was well and truly hooked! To him Bernard Thomas and his like are icons of Welsh heritage and tradition - a living tradition that should be protected and brought to the public's attention.

So began a lifetime's interest in the craft. In time, he became good friends with both men and became the willing disciple who in turn became a coracle maker himself. He was also recorded for the Smithsonian project and the Assembly were suitably impressed to invite him to Washington with the specific aim of constructing a coracle. More of Karl's exploits in a later issue.

By recording Irlwyn, Bernard and Raymond the three main coracle rivers in Wales had been covered and it would give the American audience an insight into the long history of the craft in Wales.

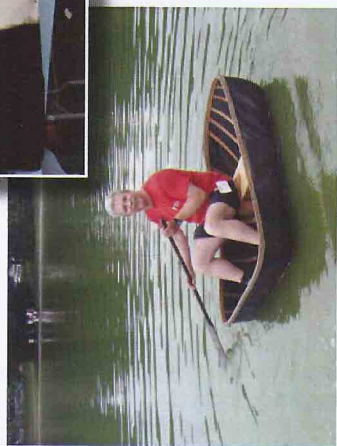
Coracle fishing was not the only area covered by the Festival. South Wales, especially the Burry Inlet has always been renowned for its cockles. However, at the time I recorded Thomas Hughes and Louvan James it was sad to see that this once thriving industry was beset by problems due to pollution in the estuary. Both had worked in the industry for over thirty years and came from a tradition of cockle picking families. A once thriving industry was slowly eroding in front of their eyes. Let us hope that the situation improves in the years ahead.

The number of lave netsmen have also dwindled over the years. The lave net is a Y shaped hand net which is held by the fishermen who wade in the shallow water at low tide, known as 'spring tides' and attempt to intercept any fish approaching. The lave netsmen are as skilled as their forefathers, but due to the diminishing fish stocks they are lucky to reach double figures in their three month short season, whereas years ago salmon was in abundance. They fish to keep their centuries old craft alive.

Mussel fishing in Conwy dates back to Roman times. Before the town was built the monks from the nearby abbey came upon the idea of using long rakes to gather the mussels from deep water. Here the best mussels could be harvested as they are submerged in water all the time and continually growing. The technique survives to this day. Thomas Jones, the youngest member of a fishing family, was able to explain his rich heritage tradition at the Smithsonian Festival.

The lobster and crab industry thrives in north Wales and they were represented at Washington by Keith Jones who managed the Porth Meudwy Fisheries Project which is an initiative to support sustainable fishing in the area.

It was a great honour to do the groundwork for the Festival. The construction of the coracle on the National Mall was a major draw. We had the same visitors coming back day after day to see the work progressing. Once completed the coracle was carried by Karl on his back across the site where he was asked by one inquiring individual if it was Wales's traditional hat! I will be forever indebted to the fishermen of Wales for allowing me access to their working lives and I can only hope that we did them justice at a very successful Smithsonian Festival.



The Curragh Project

Like so many things in life, I became involved with Boyne curraghs by accident. It all started in 1994 when my wife, Heather, and I established Crawfordsburn Conservation Group to reinstate the derelict mill pond in the village of Crawfordsburn near Bangor, Co. Down where we lived at the time.

Together with our volunteer workers, we cleared the area of the pond, rebuilt the dam (rather lower than the original to avoid flooding the childrens play park) and constructed two crannogs (artificial islands) as havens for water fowl. The project was a great success winning several awards and being one of six national finalists in the Shell Better Britain campaign in 1995. However, there was one problem - how to get to the crannogs!

Enter Heather with another idea. Why not build a coracle? She had seen an advertisement for the Greenwood Trust featuring Terry Kenny's coracle building course. I was duly dispatched to Ironbridge in July 1996 where, during five days of glorious sunshine, I completed an Ironbridge coracle under Terry's excellent instruction.

As soon as I got home it was off to the pond to try out the new craft. Heather went for a few circuits too and enjoyed it so much that we decided that there should be His'n' Hers.

It was while I was trying, with little success, to source ash laths for a second boat that I started to think that there was probably an Irish version of the coracle which would be more appropriate for use on this side of the Irish Sea. I contacted the Coracle Society for information and received photocopies of pictures from James Hornells "British Coracles and Irish Curraghs" courtesy of our President. A series of about a dozen shots showed the late Michael O'Brian building a Boyne Curragh in the 1930's. Next I visited the stores on the National Museum of Ireland in the wilds of Co. Offaly to see their two one hundred year old hide covered curraghs and understand in a bit more detail how the whole thing was put together.

The first attempt at building a frame was in the vegetable garden at home as Heather and I reckoned that pushing the rods into soft earth would be easier than forcing them through grass. Quite correct, but as soon as we started weaving the gunwhale, the rods went in every direction. We adjourned to a nearby area of grass and tried again, this time with more success. We experimented with different weaves for the gunwhale, various tying methods for the intersections of the rods and a couple of ways of fitting the canvas cover before we had a reasonable looking boat.

I was aware that it was probably the first time for decades that a Boyne curragh had entered the water when I stepped gingerly into it at the mill pond. It floated! It didn't leak! It could be paddled forwards and backwards and round in circles!

About a week after this triumph, my copy of the 1999 Coracle Society magazine arrived in the post. I opened it to have a quick look before leaving for work and to my amazement there was an article about Claidhbh (pronounced Clive) O'Gibney with his newly completed Boyne curragh! It turned out that Claidhbh, who lives close to the river Boyne had been carrying out the same research as I had and neither of us knew about the other.

I contacted Claidhbh and met him at his home a few weeks later. We shared much information about currachs and how we thought the knowledge and building of them could be developed and spread. We also both wanted to build hide covered boats - my two were to be part of a Millenium Commission funded research project.

Having no knowledge of working with hide, I enrolled with Peter Faulkner to build a Teme coracle at his workshop in Leintwardine as part of my Millennium project. It was a most enjoyable and rewarding experience and the resulting boat is a pleasure to use.

Back home, I found a source of raw hides and transported three to Claidhbh's where we spent two days cleaning and fleshing them ready for tanning. Claidhbh, who had previous experience of leatherwork, did the tanning with alum and saltpetre in a plastic water tank. Saltpetre is a constituent of gunpowder and could not be bought or used in Northern Ireland at that time without a police permit but the restrictions were less severe in the Republic.

One of my hides, by then made into a curragh, returned to the Boyne the following summer for Claidhbh's famous annual regatta. This boat had the best frame I had made so far: I had previously used a simple 'in and out' weave for all of the gunwhale but this one used a traditional 'four mouth whale' or weave which gave much greater strength. I was taught this by Joe Hogan, a basket maker from Co. Galway (with an interest in currachs) whom I had met at a craft event at Benburb, Co. Tyrone the previous autumn.

The last educational course of my Millenium project was coppicing at the Greenwood Trust in 2000. Claidhbh was keen to learn about this craft and had struck a deal with a local landowner to coppice a few neglected hazel trees near his home. In mid February 2001, I spent the weekend there imparting my rather limited knowledge to my pupil. I remember the date because we adjourned to the Conygham Arms in Slane for a drink and a meal on the first evening. We didnt realise that it was St. Valentines night and all the guests there were couples looking self conscious with candles and red roses on their tables. I dont know if Claidhbh felt self conscious too but I certainly did, especially as he was sporting a luxuriant pony tail in those days. For the record, we each had a wife and two children at home.

The learning period by then was drawing to a close. We both continued building boats, Claidhbh experimenting with larger and much longer craft with hide and canvas coverings. We both run curragh building courses and the number of boats at the summer regatta keeps increasing. Heather and I have missed the regatta for the past few years as we have been on holiday at mid summer but we are there in spirit.

In conclusion, there are two points to be made. First Boyne currachs are alive and well, being enjoyed by a growing number of people throughout Ireland. Second, there is nothing unusual about this sort of North-South co operation. Ninety nine percent of the population of this beautiful island have a genuine liking and respect for each other - believe what you read here, not what you may read in some newspapers!

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a half finished curragh frame in the garden...

Bruce Crawford



Claidhbh O' Gibney (right) and Bruce Crawford, Boyne regatta 1999



Start of Boyne regatta, Navan, Co. Meath, August 1999

Was Noah's Ark a Coracle? something to ponder

According to newly translated instructions inscribed in ancient Babylonian cuneiform script on a sun baked clay tablet, telling the story of the ark, the vessel that saved one righteous man, his wife, family and livestock from God's watery wrath was not the boat shape of popular belief but rather a giant circular bitumen covered reed craft; in other words a coracle.

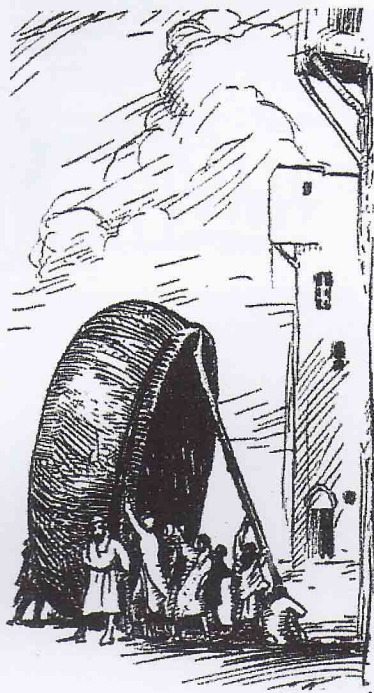
That coracles of similar form are found world over is now generally known amongst 'coracle people', differing only in size. By far the largest coracles are to be found in Iraq, Iran and former Babylonia. Irving Finkel, of the British Museum, and translator of the recently discovered clay tablet, believes it was during the Babylonian captivity that exiled Jews learned the story of the Noah figure, brought it home with them and incorporated it into Genesis chapter 6, verse 9.

This particular story on clay differs very importantly from dozens of similar versions in that it is the only one to describe the ark's shape: that it is circular and is exactly the same type of round vessel still used in Iran and Iraq today. A type of round coracle or Quffa (Isbiya) which they would have known exactly how to transport animals across flood, rivers and importantly in which animals could freely move around.

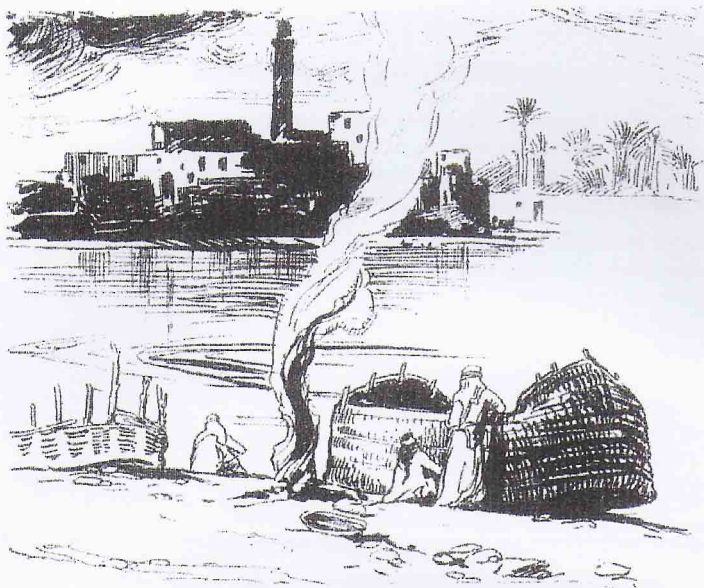
The tablet in question is 3,700 years old and translates as 'the god' who has decided to spare one righteous man, speaks to Atram-Hasis, a Sumerian King who lived before the flood and is the Noah figure in earlier versions of the ark story. "...Wall, wall, Reed wall, Reed wall! Atram-Hasis, pay heed to my advice, that you may live forever! Destroy your house, build a boat, despise possessions and save life! Draw out the boat that you will built (sic) with a circular design; let its length and breadth be the same..."

The tablet goes on to command the use of plaited palm fibre, waterproofed with bitumen before the construction of cabins for people and animals. It ends with the dramatic command of Atram-Hasis to the unfortunate boat builder to caulk up the door once they were all in the boat, thus leaving him behind to his watery fate,

This section compares with Genesis Ch 7:16 except that in Genesis it is God who seals the door on Noah.



Raising a large Quffa ready for launching



Pitching a Quffa with bitumen at Hit on the Euphrates, where most supplies of bitumen were traded.

Back then to the ark's construction; the dimensional shape and size would have been drawn in the sand of the river bank, and built upside down by pushing the longitudinal and transverse ribs into the soft land and proceeding by interweaving the covering in between. This type of coracle, called a Quffa, varies in diameter and can be as large as 57 feet in diameter; easily capable of holding up to twenty or thirty people and/or animals. After all Noah had no particular destination and the keelless craft could drift in any direction until making land.

In Shropshire, Ironbridge Severn coracles have been recorded transporting four standing adults across the river in a coracle three feet in diameter merely to deprive the river keeper of the one penny toll feet back in the 1950's.

Alan Grove

2009 Journal Crossword Solution

Across:- 1. Pitch 4. Crocer 7. Lava 8. Gaff 9. Tuck 13. Den 14. Lime 15. Willow 16. Ice 17. Paddle 18. Sewin 20. Saga 21. Lamprey 22. Lake 25. Teifi 26. Splice 27. Lemon 28. Wine 30. In 31. Shaving

Down:- 2. Trammel 3. Haff 4. Cardigan 5. Cat 6. Race 10. Knock 11. Close season 12. Cledau 17. Pike 18. Salting 19. Braiding 23. Keel 24. Quote 28. Win 29. Ebb

Editors Comment:-

Sadly, no one sent in an answer to this puzzle so I saved my £10 prize! Surprisingly, few people realised that Dick Whittington's 'cat' was a type of merchant vessel by which he made his fortune in trading up and down the Thames. It was not a domestic cat.

From our French Member

Dear Alan

As I was visiting a museum called Musée Albert Kahn, I was amazed to see a beautiful colour reproduction of a coracle.

These may be one of the first colour photos of a coracle. These autochromes were taken in June 1913 by one of the photographers a French millionaire had sent around the world to take colour pictures of traditional skills, people and monuments.

Maybe you have already seen these amazing pictures, if not, it would be great to reveal one of them in the 20th anniversary edition of the journal.

Best wishes

Charles-Henry Groult

7 Rue Saint Laurent

14400 Bayeux

France



Courtesy "Archives de la Planète."

Happy Days

In the early 70's, Keyth and I and our son, Shaun spent holidays at Folly Bridge, Oxford in a houseboat owned by Salter Brothers. One day, travelling in a 'steamer' to Abingdon and passing under Donnington Bridge we saw, with a group of kayaks, what looked like a kayak cockpit mounted on a 'subuteo' base! I recognised Alan Bye of the British Canoe Union whom we had met at the BCU Crystal Palace Canoe Exhibition

The next day we walked down to Donnington Bridge and met Alan Bye who was then running the Riverside Canoe club at the Bridge. Alan let us try this strange craft which was a glass fibre coracle he had designed and built himself and paddled using kayak paddles. It was very stable.

I think it was the following year when Keyth contacted Alan to see if he still had the coracle. He hadn't, but he was going to build a batch of Towey coracles in glass fibre. This he did and delivered one to us. Keyth can't remember where he got the paddle from, but it was great on the Lodden.

Ours is black with white coaming, a wooden seat with a large block of polystyrene underneath. Alan also made one for the Museum of Rural Life at St. Fagans, Cardiff. Alan and some friends also made a genuine curragh in Ireland and I believe they paddled it over the Irish Sea. It was then brought back to Oxford on top of Alan's Hillman Hunter (don't think it did the springs much good).

Keyth and I visited Alan in January 1975 in Llantwit Major, South Wales. He was working at Atlantic College, St. Donats and had been involved with Atlantic 21 Inshore Rescue craft.

Gillian C. Musson

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.

A Coracle Fisherman's Farewell

When its springtime on the Teifi
When the birds sing all the day
Sweetheart of the valley
As you flow towards the Bay
Again I say 'I love you'
As I grow more old and grey
When night has come I meet you
While the stars they shine above
You nurture me my darling
In the coracle that I love
The time has come my sweet one
That I must leave you so
Farewell Miss Teifi darling
You will stay but I must go.

Bernard Thomas
Lechrydd



Nina C. Grove '10



Photographs by Paul W. Jones ©

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