

25th anniversary

1990-2015



The Coracle Society

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Journal

Autumn 2014



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Cover photograph: coracles and skiffs at Portsoy in June 2014 (Heather Townsend)

The Coracle Society Journal - Autumn 2014

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President's Thoughts

Sir Peter Badge

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It is hard to believe that next year will be the 25th anniversary of the inauguration of The Coracle Society, which took place in Cenarth, and that it is nearly 70 years since I saw my first coracle on the Dee near Llangollen, north Wales.

Since then the Society has gone from strength to strength. Recent developments include the publication of Dr Irving Finkel's seminal work on the "Flood story", which established beyond reasonable doubt that coracles have been made and used for at least 4,000 years; and the considerable interest in coracles in Scotland due to the tireless, pioneering work by our chairman, Dave Purvis. In that regard, some years ago two very distinguished basket makers and I made a replica Spey curragh frame which was covered with hide by Peter Faulkner. This craft is now on public display in the Highland Folk Museum in Newtonmore, Speyside.

One of our founding aims was to revive coracles in areas that had rich coracle traditions which have been lost. I am pleased to report that, hopefully, Welshpool coracles will soon be reappearing on the upper Severn.

May I also say how pleased I am that we are being supported by the traditional coraclermen of the Twyi and the Teifi.

Finally, we would all like to record our thanks to the Officers and members of the Society for all their hard work and dedication.

Ironbridge Regatta

Despite the weather, there was an excellent turn out of both spectators and competitors at this year's regatta. As usual, competitors competed in a number of different events including slalom, water polo (during which Peter Faulkner took goal-keeping to a new level, alighting from his Teme and using it to block the entire goal) and the Coracle Society race which was won (again!) by Steve Miles. There was also a brief appearance of Dave Purvis' currach, 'Wilfridus' (see last year's Journal for details on the Bede currach project).

Many thanks to Gerwyn Lewis for his excellent commentary and here's hoping for much improved weather next year!



Chairman's Chat

Dave Purvis

I am pleased to report that this year has enjoyed a continuous upsurge of interest in coracles by the public and the media.

I have been fortunate to have been able to attend several events across the country and enjoy the decent weather this year, meeting with so many of our members.

It is particularly gratifying to see that the three largest annual coracle gatherings in Carmarthen, Cilgerran and Ironbridge continue to go from strength to strength, all recording increased numbers of competitors and spectators in 2014. This undoubtedly reflects the high quality of the organisation and running of these regattas, although our sympathy must go to Ironbridge - they drew the short straw with the Bank Holiday weather, wet and dismal. Credit to the competitors who did not seem fazed in the least by the rain trying to spoil their enjoyment and a good day was enjoyed by all - including soggy spectators!

The media continue to be supportive, using coracles in TV programmes when appropriate. In May, BBC Scotland's Landward series featured a trip down the river Spey, inviting Blairgowrie member Jane Wilkinson and her daughter Derry to demonstrate and teach the presenter the art of paddling a coracle. In July, Ray Mears put out an appeal for a coracler to participate in a feature on the river Wye and Peter Faulkner did the honours; we look forward to the screening in the spring.

In September our most northerly member, the intrepid Charlie Quinnell of Inverness - whose daytime job is a journalist for the Gaelic channel BBC Alba - featured in a brief TV report on the replica Spey

currach from the Worshipful Company of Basketmakers, presented this year to the Highland Folk Museum at Newtonmore. The report was in Gaelic, though Charlie kindly sent us an English translation for the web site so we Sassenachs were not left out!

Charlie's next exploit is to tackle the Tay Descent from Dunkeld to Perth on the 25th October - the first time a coracle is believed to have done so - accompanied by members Bruce Watson and Tim Jones. Charlie is a taking on this adventure to raise funds for the preservation of Elgin Museum's original Spey Curragh. Best of luck to them all.

Earlier this year, Dr. Irving Finkel of the British Museum published his book "The Real Noah's Ark" and in September, Channel Four broadcast a one hour documentary based on this, supporting his findings that the Ark was really a coracle - fascinating reading and viewing for all coracle enthusiasts.

Unfortunately the year was tinged with sadness when we learned of the passing of two of our senior Vice Presidents, Raymond Rees MBE of Carmarthen and Bernard Thomas of Llechryd. Both were iconic netsmen and they made a significant contribution towards the successful foundation of The Coracle Society. We extend our deepest sympathy to their families.

Next year will be the 25th anniversary of the founding of The Coracle Society and we intend to organise a series of special events to mark this milestone in our history. Please give us your support by attending and swelling our membership wherever

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possible, we will keep you posted in the usual way. If you have any suggestions, please do get in touch.

It is difficult to avoid singling out individuals in the Society, but I would particularly like to thank our president and my mentor, Sir Peter Badge, for keeping me on the straight and narrow as your chair; our secretary Dylan Jones - stalwart and the engine room of the Society; our treasurer, IT whizz and editor, Euan Raffel; and of course your committee for their support and organisational ability to come for events in 2015.

I have not had much feedback from other events involving our members, but look forward to reading about your exploits in the Journal.

Happy paddling!

Heritage Huts update

Jude Walker

The Ironbridge Coracle Trust has now submitted two grant applications in respect to Eustace Roger's hut. The first grant application is for £35,000 from Telford Community Pride Fund, to purchase the hut. The second grant application is for £10,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund, to carry out a conservation management plan. We will receive a response to these applications by mid November.

We will be holding a meeting on 20th November to discuss the next steps further to the outcome of these grant applications. It will take place at Green Wood Centre, Station Road, Coalbrookdale, TF8 7DR at 11am. Everyone is welcome and it would be brilliant if Society members could attend. If you wish to contact me, you can telephone 01952 275606 or email judyawalker@blueyonder.co.uk

A Royal Visit

Julie Rees

HRH Prince Charles was greeted by many local people and was also introduced to some members of the Carmarthen Coracle & Netsmen's Association at the start of his summer tour of Wales.

Whilst sipping a cup of tea in the relaxed surroundings of cnwd, a local food company specialising in coracle caught smoked sewin & salmon, the Prince was interested to find out more on the coracle heritage and said how important it is to keep the old tradition alive.



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For more information contact Julie Rees

[facebook.com/carmarthen.coracles](https://www.facebook.com/carmarthen.coracles)

Email jrees@trevaughan.freeserve.co.uk or phone 07974 772393



Carmarthen Coracle and Netsmen's Association

A River Blessing

Julie Rees

At the start of the 2014 coracle fishing season, the Vicar of St Peter's Church, Carmarthen conducted a river blessing. The church has always had links with the coracle community in Carmarthen. Towards the end of the 1800s, the poor fishing community faced an increase in their license fees. Unable to pay meant they were unable to fish, something their family relied on for survival.

The coracle men approached their parish church, St Peter's. The church agreed to help the families and offered money to help buy their licenses. Since that day, it has always been custom to gift the vicar of St Peter's with the first catch of the season.



Malcolm Rees gifting the first sewin of the season to Revd Leigh Richardson of St Peter's Church, Carmarthen.

Bures Coracle Regatta

Steve Miles

A very pleasant Friday evening was spent at Rushbanks Farm, Suffolk, with Dick and I pottering around on the river dodging the bats and disturbing the fish. The night time entertainment was provided by my friend Captain Morgan, with a Famous Old Grouse to keep him company. This probably wasn't a good idea, but neither is getting in a boat made from cloth and sticks with holes in the bottom. As promised by the BBC, there was heavy rain fall all night - just right for camping!



The weather for the regatta, however, was the complete opposite to the forecast. We had a lovely summer's day, so the day was slow to start, but the numbers swelled as the day went on. Considering the weather forecast it was surprising to see anyone at all!

We had our usual races - slalom, experts and poachers run. We also had enough newcomers on the water for the beginner's race, as most that turned up to watch had a go. Unfortunately I can't remember who won what as I forgot to write it down. The main thing was that every one enjoyed themselves.

The cricket club were also having a
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tournament which was good to watch. One of the captains had a go, but this was cut short as he was batting. The refreshments were supplied by Adrienne and Mark of Stour Valley Lavender, whose ice cream always goes down a treat.

Our thanks must go to the River Stour Trust volunteers who helped make the event such a success. So thanks go to Andy for the safety boat; to Chris and Bob for running around all day, and to the administrators for all the help they gave Dick who organised the regatta.

Next year will be our 10th regatta with camping at Rushbanks Farm and possibly a cruise on the Sunday.



Towy Netsmen's Report

Malcolm Rees

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The fish stocks appear static with a slight decrease in salmon on the previous year. This could be due to the dry summer months we experienced during June and July. Some large sea trout have been caught during the season with some double figure species.

We will face a big challenge in the next three years as Natural Resource Wales (Environment Agency) are recommending 'catch and release'. If this happens, the sustainable commercial fishery of any type will come under increased scrutiny.

2015 Annual General Meeting and Regatta

The 2015 Annual General Meeting and Regatta will take place over the weekend of 25-26 July 2015 at St Fagans: National History Museum. Further details will be published nearer the time

The 'History of the Towy coracle' leaflet

Julie Rees

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We were lucky enough to secure a small heritage grant to produce a leaflet telling our coracle story. The leaflets have been distributed to tourist centres, museums, the National Coracle Centre, St Fagans: National History Museum and handed out to local primary children who visit us during the summer months.



Tay Descent

The Tay Descent takes place on 25th October this year. Society member and BBC Alba presenter Charles Quinnell will be taking part, along with fellow members Bruce Watson and Tim Jones, to raise funds for Elgin Museum. Elgin Museum is home to the original Spey currach, thought to be the world's oldest surviving coracle. The money raised will be used to support the preservation of the coracle. The Tay Descent is now in it's sixth year and to date has yet to welcome a coracle... We wish them all the best on their seven mile expedition down the Tay.

If you would like to sponsor our members taking part in the Tay Descent, simply visit our website www.coraclesociety.org.uk/taydescent or send a cheque, made payable to The Coracle Society, to the Treasurer - contact details are on the back page

Editorial

Euan Raffel

Firstly, I would like to thank those that have sent in contributions for the Journal, newsletter and website over the past year. I do very much rely on your support in order to produce the Journal and newsletter, and to keep the website up to date. Sadly we can't print everything, but you can find anything that didn't make it into print on our website.

Further to my comments at the past couple of AGMs, I have made some updates to the website. The most obvious is the new look - this has been designed to make the site easier to use, whether on a computer or on another device such as a smartphone or tablet. The navigation has been improved so you can access almost every area of the website from the main navigation at the top, rather than having to go in to sections of the site first.

Looking through our inbox and the website statistics, we get a lot of queries from people wanting to find out information on the different coracle types, how coracles are made, how to use them and so on. With this in mind, new content covering these

areas has been added. The introduction on coracles has been expanded, as has information about the Society itself. Guides on how to use and look after coracles have been added, as has a detailed guide on how to build an Ironbridge coracle - many thanks to Terry Kenny for providing his resources to make this. There is also a playlist of coracling videos, including some fantastic footage from the British Pathé archives, and videos from recent coracle regattas.

We are by no means done though. I'm working on a more detailed guide to the various coracle types and intend to include content related to coracle fishing. All of this is designed to make our website an great resource for all things coracle-related. You will have noticed that the Journal has also been refreshed, so that it and the website now better compliment each other.

As always, please continue to send in your articles, stories, press cuttings, photos, etc. Don't forget that if you are planning an event, or know of one taking place, let us know the details so we can publicise it. And finally if you are planning an event, contact us to borrow our event banners and take advantage of our public liability insurance.

Elgin Museum visits Scottish International Boat Festival

Heather Townsend

Although the Festival is held annually around June/July, this year was the first time I had attended the Portsoy Boat Festival. It provided the opportunity for me to meet up with Dave Purvis, whom I had heard much about and been in correspondence with for some time. Dave had asked us to advertise the 'Build Your Own Coracle' course that was being held, which brought my full attention to the event.

A few of us from the museum went along with promises that we would get to see another replica coracle, to meet the makers and - weather willing - possibly see a coracle in use. We were not disappointed! We were introduced to Charles Quinnell, a BBC Alba presenter, who has a passion for and great knowledge of coracles. He advised us that not only did Elgin Museum house Scotland's only remaining original Spey coracle, but it could actually be the oldest coracle in the WORLD!

Dave and Charles quickly set to, wading into the sea (it's supposed to be warm from the Gulf stream; I'm not convinced it is ever all that warm) and showed us how coracles would have been manoeuvred years ago. At first, it did not look all that stable or easy to steer but after a couple of minutes Charles seemed to have it in hand and both Dave and

Charles paddled quite far into the harbour.

I don't think I would have fared too well on the Spey in a coracle myself, whether it were catching fish or helping the loggers direct the trees down the river to take to the sawmills, but it is fascinating just how many communities worldwide did use such a method, with great skill and efficiency. It certainly seems a much finer, eco friendly way of living than those methods we employ today.

As you may have noticed on the Coracle Society website, Charles Quinnell has since volunteered to risk life and limb on behalf of Elgin Museum by taking part in the Tay Descent on 25th October this year. It will be the first time a coracle will have been welcomed to the competition. Charles will need to paddle 7 miles and take on a significant rapids in order to accomplish the course. We wish you all the best Charles - and thank you!



Dr Irving Finkel - illustrious new member

Sir Peter Badge

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Dr Irving Finkel PhD is the assistant keeper of Ancient Mesopotamian script, languages and cultures in the Department of the Middle East at The British Museum, where is the curator of the world's largest collection of cuneiform clay tablets. He is the author of the much acclaimed book "The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood."

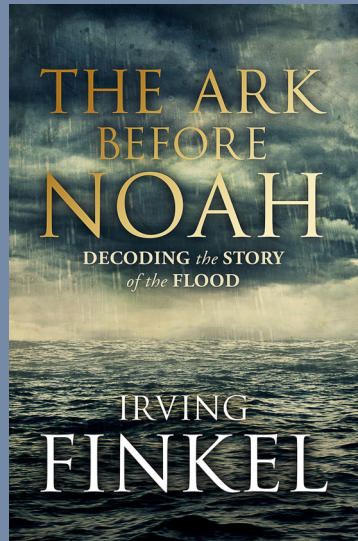
He is a man of many and varied interests. His specialist subjects include Ancient Mesopotamian Studies and cuneiform writing - of which he is a world authority. He has also written a number of children's books, as well as writing and presenting a four part Channel Four series on Mesopotamian medicine, dentistry and magic entitled "The Wedge Between Us."

Irving Finkel is particularly important to all who have an interest in coracles because he translated an ancient clay tablet, which dates from 1850 BC. This tablet is a copy of the Babylonian story of the Flood, which referred to a large vessel capable of surviving the flood, which gave rise to the account of Noah and the flood in Genesis.

Of immense interest is that the tablet makes it clear that the Ark is not a boat shaped craft but a huge circular craft, identical to the modern Iraqi coracle known as a Quffa and in use until very recently. Moreover the tablet contains a full and detailed account as to how this vast coracle should be built, thus enabling us to say with complete certainty that coracles were being used millennia before the birth of Christ and were the earliest form of water transport.



Picture: Channel 4 Television



Dr Finkel's book, "The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood" is published by Hodder and Stoughton and available from all good bookshops RRP £20.00. The tablet is on display at The British Museum in Room 56 (Mesopotamia 6000-1500BC)

In September, Channel Four broadcast a fascinating one hour documentary about the discovery of the tablet and Dr Finkel's research into the subject. In the programme the ark was built according to the details learned from the tablet (pictured left).

Bernard Thomas - 1923-2014

Martin Fowler



Bernard Thomas, Vice President of The Coracle Society, was one of the great characters of coracle life and life in general.

Aged only sixteen, at the outbreak of WWII he joined the merchant navy, shipping supplies from many parts of the world including on Russian convoys. He survived being torpedoed and spending many days in an open boat in the Atlantic. This stood him in good stead for an adventure in later life for which he is best known. In July 1974 he crossed the English Channel in a Teifi coracle. The journey took him 13.5 hours and on his arrival at Cap Blanc Nez, France, he planted a Welsh flag in the sand.

Having learnt his coracle making and fishing skills from his father, Bernard spent

the later part of his life championing the merits of the Teifi coracle over all its other rivals in west Wales. He was very happy to teach others his skills and would insist that whoever bought a coracle from him knew exactly how to handle it - even supplying a video recording for future reference.

He took part in many of the Cilgerran coracle races, which has just held its 62nd regatta. He was also instrumental in having the coracle hall in Llechryd built, which serves as an important venue for the village.

He was a great campaigner for the rights of coracle netting on the Teifi and had many an argument with both other anglers and the water authority, who control the fishing.

He has appeared on many radio and television programmes in both English and Welsh and was always very at ease when being interviewed as he always had a great story to tell.

Shortly after I had started running the National Coracle Centre in Cenarth, I sought out Bernard's advice and knowledge on the art of coracles and fishing, spending many hours at his house drinking his homemade elderflower wine. My biggest memory is the first night he took me coracle fishing and catching a salmon in the darkness below Llechryd bridge. I have used that experience when retelling both that and other stories. Not a day passes where I don't mention Bernard's name, and every day people from all over the world get into the coracle that Bernard made for me twenty years ago. There are too many stories from his eventful life to tell here but it has been very

strange to use his name in the past tense since his death. His memory will always live on.

The River Boat Song

During the summer of 1995 I had agreed to do a broadcast for Welsh television. Having seen the collection of coracles on display at the Coracle Centre, the programme's director asked if it would be possible to have some of the more unusual ones down by the river during the filming.

Most people in Wales only associate coracles with Wales, so I agreed to take the example from Vietnam to the location for the broadcast. As the programme was in Welsh I had to let my wife explain to a live audience that such craft are to be found in many parts of the world. As a non-Welsh speaker, I was relegated to paddling a Teifi coracle and instructed to do so in a casual manner. Meanwhile Bernard Thomas, was being filmed constructing a coracle.

This section also included a heated debate that Bernard was having with a member of the angling club about the rights of coracle netting. The argument got somewhat out of hand; the director had to act like the referee of a match to keep them apart before one of them ended up in the river. Bernard continued to defend the ancient

rights of coracle fishing and was eventually shown the red card and escorted from the scene.

Having carried the Vietnamese coracle all the way over the bridge to the riverbank I thought it would be a pity not to try it out on the river before carting it all the way back to the museum. Unfortunately Bernard had spotted me and decided to give me a hand. We put it on the water, climbed in and without further ado Bernard pushed us away from the river bank.

The last time this coracle had been used it had taken a family of people of Vietnamese refugees hundreds of miles across the south China sea to Hong Kong. As soon as we left the riverbank it was fairly evident that we were going to struggle to get across the river Teifi. The bamboo basket-work was past its best and the bitumen a little patchy. We only just managed to negotiate the twenty feet of water before making the far bank with our feet soaked. We pulled the craft up the bank and emptied the water. Bernard then said "let's go back across!"

As we re-launched the coracle we heard the strains of a song being sung for the programme. We floundered back across, out of shot of the camera with "the magic of the tranquil Teifi" wafting on the breeze.

The Coracle Man's Farewell

Bernard Thomas

When it's Spring time on the Teifi, where the birds sing all the day
Sweetheart of the valley as you flow towards the bay
Once again, I say I love you as I have grown old and grey
When the night has come I meet you, when the stars they shine above
You cradle me my darling in the coracle that I also love
The time has come my sweet one that I must leave you so
Farewell Miss Teifi darling, you must stay by I must go

Carmarthen River Festival

Julie Rees

A great day was had by all at the annual raft race and coracle races on the River Towy. This year we were delighted to welcome two Teifi coracles who took part in the races, it was wonderful to see both coracles on the river together. Dave Purvis presented The Coracle Society Novice Race trophy to winner, Joe Woodhead. Malcolm Rees won the Towy Open Race and Gary Hopkins won the King of the Towy Race.



Eustace Rogers

Bruce Watson has sent in these pictures of Eustace Rogers doing what he did best, back in the summer of 1986. We're not quite sure what part the cat plays in the construction process, though it's clearly an arcane and vital function!

Photographs - Trevor Bagley



Travellers in Wales

Dylan Jones

Travellers in Wales have always commented on the coracles. For many, it was their first experience of seeing these bowl shaped and flat bottomed vessels and we will be eternally grateful for their written observations!

One of the earliest accounts of coracles in Wales is from Giraldus Cambrensis, better known as Gerallt Gymro. He undertook a journey through Wales in 1188 accompanying the Archbishop of Canterbury on a recruitment campaign for the Third Crusade. His account of the journey contains invaluable information regarding Welsh history and geography. Of the coracle he writes:

'The boats which they employ in fishing or in crossing the rivers are made of twigs, not oblong, nor pointed, but almost round or rather triangular, covered both within and without with raw hides: when a salmon thrown into one of these boats strikes it hard with its tail, he often oversets it, and endangers both the vessel and its navigator. The fisherman, according to the custom of the country, in going to and from the rivers, carry these boats on their shoulders...'

From the 18th century onwards we are inundated with English travellers roaming the country and documenting their adventures. The antiquarian and archaeologist, Sir Richard Colt Hoare (1758 – 1838) reports in his diary:

'Wednesday 5th June (Carmarthen). Here I first saw the fishermen make use of coracles and with wonderful dexterity. They are small wicker boats (or rather large flat baskets) covered with leather, just large enough to contain one man, who

guides it by paddling.'

J.T. Barber (1774 – 1841) toured Wales at the beginning of the nineteenth century and 'A Tour throughout South Wales and Monmouthshire' was published in 1803. On seeing the fishermen he writes:

'The fisherman is seated in a sort of canoe, called a coracle... in this he whirls among the eddies of the rivers; with a paddle in one hand, he alters or accelerates his course with surprising dexterity, while with the other manages the net.'

One of the first recorded reference to a coracle on the river Dyfi is from the writings of the Reverend Richard Warner (1763 – 1857). He recorded his travels in letters which were later published in 'Through Wales' in 1797. He would often walk 26 miles a day and on reaching the river Dyfi:

'We passed the Dovey which flows to the north of Machynlleth and it divides it from Merionethshire, over an old stone bridge, from which we were gratified by a sight entirely new to us, the management of coracles and the mode of fishing from them... the man who manages the coracle is seated in the centre of it, and directs its motion by the action of a small paddle, with which it is truly astonishing how he commands this apparently awkward vessel.'

The sighting of the Dyfi coracle is substantiated a year later by another Reverend - the Reverend William Bingley (1774 – 1823) another English cleric and writer that toured north Wales in 1798. His works 'Tour round North Wales' was published in 1800 and gives us another account of the coracle on the river Dyfi:

'Two of the boats called were coracles... these are used chiefly in fishing; they are 5 - 6 feet long and 3 or 4 broad, of an oval shape and so light that one man may with ease carry them on his shoulders... they hold only a single person who can row himself with incredible swiftness with a paddle in his right hand whilst with the other he can manage a net.'

Incidentally, pollution from the lead mines put an end to coracle fishing on the river Dyfi in 1861.

It is thanks to the English scientist Michael Faraday (1791 – 1867) we are able to chronicle the existence of the coracle on the river Conwy for the first time. He visited the Conwy valley in 1819 and subsequently wrote:

'Here and there on the river we saw fishermen in their coracles; little vessels something like a washing tub squeezed by a door into an oval form; a board is put across the middle on which two men sit, one each way and whilst one paddles the other casts the net.'

From the above we are able to glean that the Conwy coracle fished for salmon and intended for two people. An observer to the Commissioners on Salmon Fisheries in England and Wales in 1861 mentioned:

'It happened very frequently... that several hundreds of the men would go out very early in the morning with coracles on their backs, pass over the mountains and come some distance down the river, taking all they could catch with very fine nets. They all met at a certain public house, where large white baskets were filled with what they had obtained and sent to Liverpool and Manchester markets'

Much later, Jack Hughes-Parry wrote the coracle was regarded as essential for fishing on the river Dee:

'On the rough, rocky middle reaches... when, owing to the force of the current and deep hidden ledges and clefts in the rocky bottom, wading is impossible in many places, and no other type of craft, not even a birch bark could possibly be used.'

The aforementioned Commissioners report of 1861 highlighted that coracles were heavily used in the fishing industry. On the river Teifi:

'It happened frequently... that several hundreds of men would go out very early in the morning with coracles on their backs, pass over the mountain and come some distance down the river, taking all they could catch with very fine nets'

The well-known antiquarian and author, Benjamin Heath Malkin, toured south Wales on horseback during his early thirties and wrote of Cenarth in 1807:

'There is scarcely a cottage in the neighbourhood without its coracle hanging by the door.'

Further reading on Malkin can be had from his book 'The Scenery, Antiquities and Biography of South Wales' and generally believed to be the best of the old travel books on Wales.

Coracles were also a familiar sight on the Monnow, Usk and Wye rivers as recorded by J.H. Clark in his book 'Usk Past and Present'. Clark wrote of the vessel:

'It resembled the section of a walnut shell, the length was about five feet and the breadth about four, with a seat placed across the centre; they were made of thin hoops crossed with strong coarse canvas thickly coated with pitch.'

Staying on the Wye, the Duke of Rutland wrote his 'Travels in Great Britain' in 1805 and describes the inhabitants fishing with coracles:

'Each man lays hold of one end of a net, about 20 yards long, and paddles down the river, till they feel a strike. They then haul it up as quick as possible, and draw it on shore.'

Indeed, according to the 1760 edition of Izaak Walton's Compleat Angler it strongly suggests that fishing would be extremely difficult without the aid of a small boat:

'Those of that country use a thing they call a Thorrocle, or Truckle; in some places it is called a Coble, from the Latin Corbula, a little basket; it is a basket shaped like half of a walnut-shell, but shallower in proportion, and covered on the outside with a horse's hide: it has a bench in the middle, and will hold just one person, and is so light that the countrymen will hang it on their heads like a hood, and so travel with a small paddle which serves for a stick, till they come to a river: and then they launch it and step in: there is great difficulty in getting into one of these Truckles; for the instant you touch it with your foot, it flies from you, and when you are in, the least inclination of the body overset it.'

In the autumn edition of the Country Quest that appeared in 1960 a certain Miss M. Wight summed up the coracle perfectly:

'A very interesting feature is the way in which the pattern of coracles differs on various rivers. This must be due in part to the nature of the streams, whether fast or slow, rocky or tidal, but it owes much to tradition, and until recently, never varied; even the form of the paddle is different on each river.'

The distribution of the coracle in Wales was much more extensive than it is today and it is thanks to these writers and their observations that the coracle will forever live on in people's memories and recollections. It is a reminder of a way of life, where its survival was directly associated with use in salmon fishing, and is now an integral part of Welsh history and heritage. To finish, I will give an account of a certain Mrs Mary Morgan, who in the early 20th century was touring the Milford Haven area and became 'Exceedingly startled by four giant beetles that occupied the whole of the road at Abergwili' – they were coraclemen of course!

Coracles and the Media II

Peter Faulkner

Many coracles have been launched nationwide since I wrote an article concerning, mainly, the media in the 2011 Journal. It was at a time when I began to find the tedious and trivial comments about our ancient craft wearing thin! These comments were, I have to say, directed mainly from the media during interviews. I am certain that no harm was meant, after all the coracle does look rather odd out of water, like a beached whale. So, time I thought to take a firmer line and put across a strong case to emulate these most ancient of boats.

The 'trick' was to take command of the interview, be fully armed with facts and figures to educate the person doing the querying. A demo on the water, if done skilfully, will amaze onlookers as the operator skims about like a water boatman using, yes, a single paddle. 'And do they really use nets to catch salmon?' For the past twenty years I have exhibited at the Royal Berkshire Show, Newbury, in the Countryside area. My demos included the use of a large pond where, sporting a radio mic, I am able to give the public a running commentary as I launch and show off the handling skills.

These demos are very successful as very few people have seen a coracle, let alone one being worked at close quarters. I received a very nice letter after this year's show, from a Mr Flint of Newbury, who commented that 'your demonstration and commentary was one of the highlights of this year's show.' Such encouraging feedback makes our efforts worthwhile!

Never be afraid to focus attention to what may seem 'old hat' to us experts - getting in and out of a coracle is a tricky manoeuvre and I spend quite some time explaining the various steps involved. (This is always much better demonstrating on the water). This part of the demo goes down well as there is always the chance of a mishap!

Earlier in the year, ITV approached me with a view to doing a cameo with Ray Mears for his new series, 'Wild Rivers'. After all the preliminary phone calls, the filming day - in late August - arrived. My son Adam and I arrived at Goodrich with the van carrying a Boyne and a Teme coracle. After the usual pleasantries we got down to business and after a crash course in paddling techniques, Ray was soon confidently afloat, in the Teme on the River Wye. Needless to say he worked the paddle with consummate ease and read the currents and eddies perfectly; Ray is, of course, a seasoned canoeist. We plied up and down as the cameras followed us.

High above us loomed great outcrops of rock where peregrine falcons nested and it was such a thrill to suddenly see two of these magnificent birds flying and calling against the blue sky.

Members of the film crew were brilliant and knew exactly what was required for the shot, so the business was soon completed. How often in my early, less experienced years, have I been messed about for hours by a budding David Lean!

The 'Wild Rivers' series begins next spring I believe, so I shall look forward to seeing what survives from the cutting room! For those of you who have yet to experience the ravages of media intervention may I give you a few tips: be well informed as to the context and content expected from you; make it clear who's in charge - don't be messed about; and negotiate a sensible fee!

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Secretary

Dylan Jones, St Fagans: National History Museum, St Fagans, Cardiff, CF5 6XB
Email info@coraclesociety.org.uk | Telephone 029 2057 3438

Membership Secretary

Brian Pearce, 5 Cedar Close, Teignmouth, Devon, TQ14 8UZ
Email membership@coraclesociety.org.uk | Telephone 01626 774844

Treasurer/Editor

Euan Raffel, Apartment A Coppice House, Yates Avenue, Aston on Trent, DE72 2BG
Email euan@coraclesociety.org.uk | Telephone 01332 988334