



The Coracle Society

Journal

Autumn 2022



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Cover image: Prehistoric coracles with hide coracle at Ironbridge Queen's Baton Relay (Ironbridge Coracle Trust)

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Membership Renewals & Keeping In Touch

Membership renewals are now due for 2023. You can renew online with your debit or credit card, or send a cheque to the Treasurer with the member's name and postcode written on the reverse. Membership rates are unchanged at £10 for individuals and £15 for joint, family or associate members.

If we have your email address on your membership record AND you've consented to receiving emails from us, you will receive your membership renewal details by email. Otherwise, please find enclosed your personalised membership renewal form.

Whatever way you receive your renewal notice, **please carefully check your details BEFORE renewing!** Every year we have members who have moved but not informed us, and queried why they weren't receiving post from us!

If you have an online account, you can make any necessary changes to your address, phone number or email address yourself. Simply log in and follow the link to My Account. Alternatively email any changes to treasurer@coraclesociety.org.uk, or correct the renewal form and return to the Treasurer.

Don't forget you need to renew your membership by **31st January** to maintain a full year's membership. This is regardless of the date you joined the Society; our membership year runs 1st January - 31st December. We look forward to welcoming you to another year of membership in 2023.

Do you have an email address?

Since GDPR came in to force in 2018, about a third of our members have not opted back in to receiving emails from us. This is down from a high of around 90% in 2017. This means our postage costs have increased significantly over the past few years as items such as the spring newsletter and AGM notifications need to be sent by post to members around the world.

If you use email, please opt in to receive emails from us. We only send a handful of messages through the year, so your inbox won't be inundated. You can opt in using our online form at www.coraclesociety.org.uk/gdpr or if renewing by post simply enter your email address on the form before posting back to us with your payment.

President's Thoughts

Peter Faulkner

.....

The initial shock and impact of the coronavirus on society in March 2020 has long passed. We seem to have accepted it as part of life and the vaccine certainly allowed us to lead normal lives again. I still feel that Covid 19 has robbed us of two years that seemed to have disappeared without trace. Many of the things that we took for granted were suddenly snatched from us.

We have, over the years, taken it for granted that all ills are curable or treatable and, by pressing buttons on electronic machines, we can find the answers to most things. Being a technophobe, I find it mind blowing. Yes, it is wonderful, but don't forget the 'old' methods.

Yes, let's make fibreglass coracles – so easy to produce and maintain – but the thrill of making a traditional coracle gives the maker that overwhelming feeling of satisfaction and pride. We are custodians of the oldest boat afloat. Enjoy the heritage and above all enjoy your coracling.

Finally, I offer my sincere thanks to the Officers of The Society for their time and effort in keeping us afloat. May 2023 bring you health and happiness.

Chair's Chat

Mark Dellar

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To start off I would like to express my thanks to all the Coracle Society members and committee for sticking with the Society once again this year.

With the covid restrictions lifted and the start of the 2022 coracle fishing season under way it was quickly evident that the salmon stock in the river Teifi was looking rather healthy.

Even with the reduction of two months of the fishing season, the numbers of salmon released during the new three months season was encouraging to say the least. With Natural Resources Wales figures showing a downward trend in numbers over previous years, the numbers reported last year and the evidence seen this year gives us all hope for the future of the salmon population.

The 2022 season has seen fewer coracle fishing licences being taken out for varying reasons like retirement of the licence holder or the lack of experienced fishing partners. So, if you're interested in learning the art of coracle fishing during the 2023 season get in touch with the licence holders via the Teifi Coracle Netsman's Association Facebook page.

2022 has been a productive year for the exhibition side of coracles with the guys attending the Royal Welsh Show and the Welsh Game Fair.

At the Royal Welsh Show, the guys spent their time doing daily demonstrations on the pond whilst educating the visitors on the finer points of the coracle and its history. They even had a royal visit to pondside with Rod Bowen and Ian Harries explaining the how the coracle is made.

The inaugural Welsh Game Fair held at the Vaynol Estate in North Wales saw the guys take the fleet of Teifi fibreglass demonstration coracles and a mix of traditional coracles for display and have a go session with the public.

The guys once again excelled with the on-water displays, whilst educating the visitors all about the art of coracle fishing and handling the craft. Overlooking Mount Snowdon and the countryside, visitors enjoyed a taster session in a Teifi coracle - with one lady stating "she had just ticked off one of her bucket list items" as she had always wanted a go in a coracle.

There was a great day of activities held on the banks of the Teifi by Cwm Arian Renewable Energy, with the participants being able to make a small coracle during a craft session as well as watch Teifi coraclemakers Rod Bowen and Mark Dellar build a traditional willow and hazel coracle throughout the event.

Members of the Teifi Coracle Netsman's association had the opportunity to take part in a variety of television programmes over the last year. Two programmes that have aired already are Britain By Beach (Channel 4) and Countryfile (BBC). The filming of Weatherman Walking (BBC) along the banks of the Teifi will showcase Derek Brockway having a go in a coracle and taking part in the Cilgerran Festive Week coracle races. This is due to air in the new year.

The Cilgerran coracle races were back on after the covid break and were a great success with a fantastic turnout on and off the water. The Carmarthen coraclers



Photo: Hywel Morgan

turned up to support the races once again (many thanks), helping make the racing more interesting with the 2 different coracles going head to head on the water.

The longevity of the races looks good with the 2 main races. The Teifi mens and Teifi ladies races being won by two of the youngest racers on the day, Dyfrig Dellar (17yrs) and Ffion Dellar (15yrs).

Insh Coracle Club Update

Raymond Green

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Not much, and a great deal, has happened to the Club over the last 12 months. To start with, Storm Arwen in November 2021 caused considerable damage in the pinewood area of our Coracle Shed at the Highland Folk Museum. Many trees were brought down and we feared for the safety of the coracles. We were not allowed access to inspect the shed or the coracles for safety reasons. Then Storm Corrie at the end of January made it infinitely worse when hundreds more trees, already weakened by Arwen, fell. We had no idea of what was happening to our shed until late July when we were finally allowed in to the woods and to the shed.

We were amazed and distressed by the destruction in the pinewood but our shed withstood even the very large Scots Pine trees which had fallen across it. It seems the trees had supported each other somehow and the only damage done was a big dent in a ridging piece of corrugated iron. All the coracles were intact and the roof remained waterproof. What relief!

Our relief, however, was very quickly dampened. The Millpond, an artificial pond, had been hit by falling trees and was punctured in many places, resulting in major water loss. The end of our jetty was high and dry and the pond was full of small branches and debris left by the contractors who had cleared the fallen trees. Three days of work by club members, some in waders and others in coracles, managed to clear it out but the water remaining was of course very muddy and silt laden.

The Museum finally opened the area to visitors but we were unable to get adults afloat for the rest of the season. The muddy shore would have resulted in very wet and muddy feet. We did however manage to get about 80 small children, ones we could carry, out on safety ropes just for the experience of sitting in a floating coracle. The pond will be repaired but no work has been possible because a family of



Photo: Raymond Green

moorhens with 4 chicks and a duck family with 5 ducklings were in residence despite everything going on around them. Work to drain and repair has had to wait until they all matured.

In the meantime, all we could do was chat to folk about coracle things and of course renew our friendship with the ducks. Quite frustrating all round.

On a brighter note, a group of us did manage to have a couple of paddles on Loch Insh and on the river Spey in August and September. In addition, three of us - Jeremy, Nick, and myself - were jointly nominated for and received the Volunteer of the Year Award by Highlife Highland, who run all the Library and Leisure facilities throughout Highland. We were called 'The Coracle Guys' at the Award Ceremony! Quite an honour for us.

Carmarthen Coracle & Netsmen's Association Update

Julie Rees

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The Association were grateful to The Coracle Society for their £500 donation towards the 2022 coracle net licences. With each Towly licence costing £555 per year, it was a welcomed financial gesture for each of our coracle men.

With a shortened fishing season that now starts on the 1st of May, we can confirm there was an increased number of salmon, which were all released back into their river. Sewin numbers were on the low side.

It's been another busy year for the coracles of Carmarthen as we welcomed back school visits to the Quay Centre. Over 150 local pupils from primary and secondary schools were given an insight into our important history.

We continue to promote the coracle as we have been involved with a number of projects; we have welcomed well-known bloggers, visitors from America, celebrated photographers (who now hope to use their collection of photos into a small documentary) and we look forward to watching Gordon Ramsay's programme featuring the Carmarthen coracle, which is due to be aired this autumn (on National Geographic).

It was wonderful to see the Carmarthen River Festival return for 2022 and to see so many children (approx. 200) enjoy the excitement of paddling their own coracle in the children's coracle pool. The coracle races proved to be another huge success as we saw record numbers attend this community event. On Saturday 20th of August we attended the Cilgerran Coracle Races with a large bus of coracle supporters – it was another great day for the coracles of West Wales!

Eustie's Hide Coracle

Peter Faulkner

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When in February 1987 I first met Eustace Rogers, my knowledge of coracles was practically nil. He proudly showed me one of his traditional 'Ironbridge' coracles that he'd made with ash laths and calico, which of course I admired. But spotting one of his rustic hide covered coracles tucked away in the corner of his workshop, I fell instantly under its spell. I was not aware that some 18 different types of coracle existed, each having its own traditional shape. Eustace called this hide one a 'Spey'. I had no reason to disbelieve him. It would be some 23 years later that I discovered the full story.

In the summer of 2009, I began planning a voyage down the river Spey – some 85 miles. This was successfully done in a Spey coracle I'd made with Edmund, a basket maker who now runs a café on the Isle of Muck! Due to perfect timing, I was able to leave the river and enter the saline waters of Spey Bay.

After mugs of hot strong tea and slabs of fruit cake, I was shown into a strange storage building near the Spey Centre and immediately spotted a coracle frame that only Eustace could have made. The framework was identical to the ones he used for his hide boats. This frame, however, didn't have a woven bottom - instead he lashed four straight hazel wands across the bottom sections and was thus unfinished. This was puzzling. Had he run out of time or had he not worked out how it might have been done?

There were photos of Eustace in the store and I strongly believe that he must have visited the centre many years ago. If so, he must have gone to Elgin Museum and examined the remains of the 100-year-old Spey coracle. I say 'remains' because the bottom was missing and some of the hide skirting too. There were no clues at all as to how the bottom half was constructed. Did Eustace then deduce how the bottom half could have been formed? Food for thought.

We now know that the Spey body was not formed from framework, but was a completely woven basket of withies - a fact that Eustace was not aware of. Instead, he devised a floor of willow rods woven in and out of parallel hazel wands. This made good sense producing a strong floor that also gave rigidity to the whole framework.

Traces of horsehair were found around the gunwhale of the ancient Spey, indicating the method of lashing the cured hide on to the woven basket. Eustace fashioned a crude but serviceable cord by twisting hunks of horsehair together. I tried to replicate this but failed miserably. I eventually succeeded in forming my cords with a three-strand plait.

Some years after our initial meeting I asked him who had designed the framework of his hide coracles. He simply answered 'It was my idea!' It seemed plausible therefore that the framework of Eustace's circular hide coracle was, in its origin, rooted in his encounter with the remains of the original Spey coracle combined with his own knowledge, skill and intuition.

I may, of course, be wrong and if anyone can enlighten me on the matter, I would be delighted to hear from them. Eustie's hide coracles, though water worthy, were very rustic. He used sawn plane pine boards for the thwarts and pillar. The four hazel corner struts were straight rather than having been pre-formed into a curve so as to fit snugly against the hide.

My first few creations were identical to Eustie's but I soon began to put my own mark upon them (as Virgo's do!) The first major change was to replace the pine seat with one of ash, preferably with a wavey edge. The plain 2"x2" pine seat pillar was replaced by a hand fashioned one, again using ash, leaving the bark on its rear side. I had failed to replicate Eustie's twisted hair cord, producing one made from a three-cord plait. It worked beautifully – it was strong, elastic and virtually knot proof. After much practice, I was able to plait a 7-metre cord in an hour.

I doubled the number of willow rods in the gunwhale from 24 to 48, making for a much stronger rim. Slowly as output increased, I made other subtle alterations, but did not alter the main framework in any way – thus maintaining the integrity of Eustie's design.

The traditional Spey paddle is unmistakable when first seen, being more akin to a shovel and the blade being practically square in shape. We know that each type of coracle has its very own paddle design. That of the river Spey may have something to do with the fact that it is the fastest flowing in the British Isles. (Having coracled 85 miles of its length I can confirm that. Doing a 3 mile stretch at 7 knots was something else!)

Eustie's Spey paddle was very substantial, more akin to a weapon than a means of propulsion. I eventually made a streamlined template that could be placed on a 1¼" thick ash plank cut out on a bandsaw. Using a shaving horse, hand axe, drawknife and spokeshave, a Teme paddle was produced. The finished blade was plano convex and cut through the water with ease. The shaft ends in a T-shaped handle. I still have my original paddle, made in 1987 with 600 miles on the clock.

It seemed appropriate to call my coracles after the river here at Leintwardine and so the Teme coracle was born. Historically, the Teme is therefore a direct descendant of Eustie's rawhide coracle. The meeting in February 1987 therefore secured the fate of his craft, which would have otherwise disappeared with his passing. All I have to do now is pass my knowledge on to prevent the Teme coracle passing into oblivion.

Having recently become an octogenarian, it seems that this needs to be instigated sooner rather than later!

Sparkling Dunbar Pirate Festival

Dave Purvis

.....

Saturday 13th August 2022 saw Dunbar's annual Sparkling Dunbar Pirate Festival.

To celebrate the event it was decided to attempt a record breaking build when two new Dunbar coracles would be made from scratch, fully fitted out launched and sailed all in one day !

Impossible they said, can't be done they said, who thought that one up they said...

The job seemed to be doomed to failure until the ever resourceful Captain "Mauler" Maule had a brain spasm - "dump it on Coracle Dave's lap and let him pick the bones out of that one - he is yer man for the job, and daft enough to give it a go!"



Photo: Kenneth Maule

And the rest now is history as they would say.

Never missing the opportunity to get dressed up, coracle accepted the commission and slurped into action.

First job was for him to select a suitable pirate disguise to cover his Batman playsuit so he would blend in the the rest of the scurvey Dunbar rum-swilling bilge rats,

Next-handpick his crew; turned out to be two from Dunbar's Mans Shed .and a laddie and lassie from Dunbar's Sea Cadets, and the project was " bankrolled " by Dunbar Harbour Trust, so they would get first pick of the spoils at the end of the day (a shrewd move Cap'n Maule)

Fast forward to 9.30am on the morning of the 13th, coracle and crew hit the ground running (OK - maybe walking briskly then!) and not a bacon butty or mug of steaming tea in prospect, the decision was taken to make a start until the promised Caribbean pizzas arrived at lunchtime.

After much banging, sawing, sanding, bending, grunting, drilling, and clenching of nails and buttocks, by the said lunchtime, two unlikely looking craft were beginning

to emerge from the seemingly organised chaos, and local visitors changed their chant from "wat are yer doin" to "OOOH look, I think it is some kind of boatey thingys they are doing?"

Several pizzas and an ice cream later, we cracked on and with several good hearted locals who offered to help us get finished and clear up the site, we had reached our objective of not only one, but two one-day coracles being completed.



Photo: Kenneth Maule

Finished indeed, and fully fitted out, and launched on their maiden voyages by a squadron from Dunbar Sea Cadets at 4pm all on the same day, I wonder if anyone amongst the coracle fraternity have done that before in under 8 hours? (answers on a £5 note please)

Unfortunately we do not seem to have made the Guinness Book of Records, but I certainly did enjoy the two bottles of draft Guinness when I got home that night, and slept like a babe-and maybe I will take my pirate suit off in the morning?

Once again, my personal thanks to Capn. Maule and Barnacle Bob for inviting me back to this wonderful Harbour Town just south of Edinburgh, and to all the brilliant people who helped out, and those who expressed a lot of interest in what we were trying to do, and the many visitors we had to our stand on the day and their questions - most of which we had heard before and of course the hardworking Yvonne and her team for organising the festival events over the year - many thanks.

Building a rawhide-covered coracle

Bruce Watson

Friday 4th June this year, at the Green Wood Centre in Coalbrookdale, a small group of people met to build four hide coracles. The course was organised by the Ironbridge Coracle Trust, of which I am one of the trustees.

Our tutors were Jane Wilkinson and Peter Ananin, who had travelled all the way from near Inverness. Jane is a basketmaker, and Peter does natural tanning of hides.

This coracle is a design that Jane came up with herself, loosely based on the Boyne currach. All the materials are natural, and were prepared just before the course by Jane and Peter.

We were recreating something that could have been made by Iron Age, or even Stone Age people.



We started by laying a pattern on the ground, a piece of carpet with the shape of the gunwhale drawn on it and with holes around the circumference at intervals. The main frame is made from green willow rods about the thickness of a finger, and we pushed these through the holes in the carpet, thick end first, firmly into the earth.

The next stage was to start weaving the gunwhale using buff willow rods about the thickness of a pencil. Taking a small

bunch of 3 or 4 of these, they were woven in and out of the thick willow rods, but also twisted at the same time to produce a sort of rope effect. Easier to do than explain! After the gunwhale layer was woven, the wooden seat was fitted, this being a board with two holes bored at each end, which was pushed down over two rods at either side of the frame until it sat snugly on the woven gunwhale. We then continued weaving the thin buff willow around as before to produce a broad woven band which held the seat and the main rods firmly.

Now we carefully bent opposing frame rods towards each other to produce a double lath. Although the willow was pliable, we had to go carefully to produce a nice even curve, and avoid snapping any. This was a step that needed patience! We then tidied the whole frame up, trying to achieve symmetry, and then every intersection of the frame laths was securely tied with rawhide strips from red deer. The whole assembly was left overnight to dry out and set into shape.



Our next stage was to carefully release the frame from the ground and turn it upright. Getting the frame even and symmetrical required skilled brutality! A willing volunteer

Photo: Bruce Watson



sat centrally on the seat whilst others used a heavy hammer and a piece of wood to bash the gunwhale and even up the height and shape of the frame. It surprised me how strong the frame was, and how much rough treatment it could withstand. We now spent some time sawing off the surplus lengths of the main frame rods, and tidying up the ends of the thin willow in the gunwhale. Again, the frame was left to dry for another night.

On day 4, we finally got to the covering. Peter had prepared the cow hide so that the hair was removed, and the fat layer scraped off. The hides were in a temporary tank and had been treated with lime and other things to prepare them. They were surprisingly heavy, needing two or three people to carry them. The hide was laid flat on the

ground with the outer side facing up. The coracle frame was then laid on it and the position adjusted so that there was enough overhang of hide to wrap over the gunwhale all round. I think we aligned the long axis of the frame with the length of the hide rather than the width. Gradually the hide was wrapped over the gunwhale and holes were cut in it with a knife so that it could be slipped over the projecting ends of the large willow rods. This was not an easy job as the hide was very tough to pierce and it required some tugging and levering to persuade it to behave. Finally, surplus hide inside the frame was trimmed off and the edge of the hide was lashed down to the frame with more thin strips of red deer hide.

And then? The wet coracle was incredibly heavy but I got it in my car and left it in my workshop to dry out for a few weeks. After removing some traces of lime, and some scraps of fat, I treated the whole thing inside and out with a wood preservative as a precaution against mould. Then I soaked linseed oil into the hide which gave it a nice colour and a degree of translucency.

My first test run was at the Ironbridge regatta on Bank Holiday Monday, and I can confirm that it floats, is stable, and pretty much indestructible!

Finally, a huge vote of thanks to Jane and Peter for their hard work, patience and tireless energy over 4 days.

Ironbridge Coracle Trust Update

Marion Blockley

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It has been a busy year for Ironbridge Coracle Trust.

We were finally up and running after Covid and have delivered more than 155 events over the three years of the Heritage Fund project.

This is despite all the lockdowns caused by covid, extreme flooding and road closures in Ironbridge. We managed to deliver all the coracle making courses we originally planned and also paddle and net making courses.



Uncovering the original slipway for the Rogers Family Coracle Shed



Photo: Ironbridge Coracle Trust

For a long time we have wanted to see whether the original slipway at the old coracle shed could be repaired and reinstated. Back in May we dug two small trial pits to see if the slipway survived and if so, how deep it might be.

The slipway was built around 1920 when the coracle shed itself was built. According to Rogers family members and longstanding local residents the slipway stopped being maintained and started to silt up around 1966

when Harry Rogers died.

Over the last 56 years it has been covered by more than six foot of silt. It was a challenging task to uncover the slipway and could not have been done by hand. We were lucky to commission a highly skilled digger driver who specialises in working on unstable slopes and has the only machine of its kind in the UK.

The consent from the Environment Agency and local planning authority specified that we could not remove any silt from the site. So we landscaped it, seeded it and secured it with coir matting and biodegradable pegs.

The river is now high, and regularly in flood, so we will complete work to make it safely accessible next



Photo: Ironbridge Coracle Trust

spring and set up a regularly monthly maintenance programme with our crack team of volunteers.

Round house at the New Coracle Shed, Green Wood Centre, Coalbrookdale

As the New Coracle Shed is quite small, we have used some of the Heritage Fund grant to build a round house with canvas roof over chestnut laths to provide additional space. This skilled task was undertaken by volunteers from the Small Woods Association, some of whom have been volunteering since Gerwyn was in charge of the Green Wood Centre! This space and the garden surrounding it will be used for workshops. Earlier this year we carried out a hide coracle making workshop in the garden.



Photo: Ironbridge Coracle Trust

Queen's Baton Relay

On 19 July we took part in the Queen's Baton Relay celebrations in the run up to the Commonwealth Games.



Photo: Dave Bagnall

Bruce Watson's Lower Dee Coracle was painted bright red and emblazoned with a royal coat of arms as it was used to transport the Queen's Baton.

The baton coracle was followed by a flotilla of 27 coraclers, plus rowers from our local rowing club, and canoes from Stafford Water Sports.

The coracles were decorated with colourful silk bunting and flags produced by local community groups.

We set off early in the morning on what was the hottest day of the year and were met with a huge crowd of supporters along the Wharfage and on the Iron Bridge itself.

Ironbridge Coracle Regatta

The traditional August Bank Holiday Monday Coracle Regatta was a great success and welcomed experienced coraclers from Nottingham, Wales, Essex, Bedfordshire and Bath. Our expert race was won by a local from Broseley, with Mark Dellar edged into third place. Next year Mark! We had our largest ever entry of novice coraclers, 23 took part in two heats. We look forward to welcoming you all back next year for a great day out.

Photos and more reporting on the regatta is available on our website.

The Coracle Society Officers 2022-23

President	Peter Faulkner
Vice Presidents	Rod Bowen John Davies Martin Fowler Terry Kenny
Honorary Chairperson	Mark Dellar
Honorary Vice Chairperson	Malcolm Rees
Secretary/Archivist	Dylan Jones
Treasurer	Euan Raffel
Committee	Gary Fruland June Lewis Jude Pilgrim Dave Purvis Julie Rees Peter Stanyon Bruce Watson
Teifi netsmen's representative	Mark Dellar
Tywi netsmen's representative	Malcolm Rees
Ironbridge representative	Terry Kenny

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