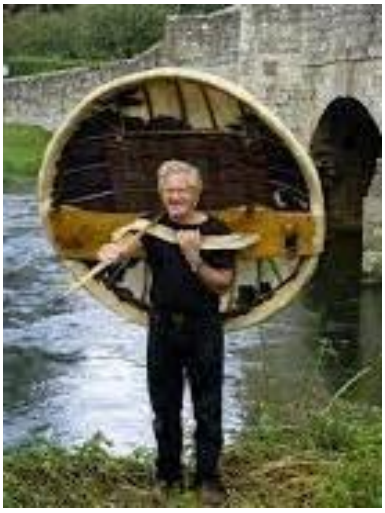
Peter Faulkner

Born 1945. Coracle maker.
Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk



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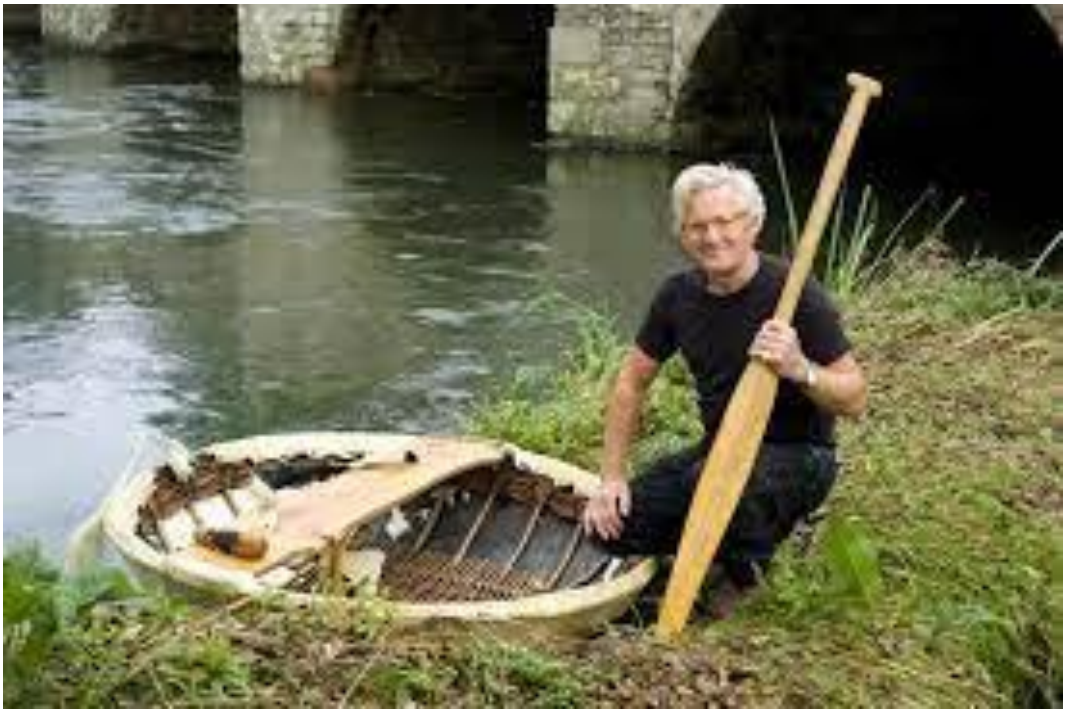

Peter Faulkner with one of his coracles.

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Worcester News website at www.worcesternews.co.uk. The article was published in March 2004.

Ever since pre-historic man decided there was a limited future in the shipping industry for hollowed out logs, the coracle has held sway when it comes to home-made boats. All you need are some lengths of hazel and willow, plus an ash plank for a paddle, long hairs from the mane or tail of a horse and a few dead cows. Items which, admittedly, were probably more available to our ancient ancestors than they are now. I may be wrong, but I don't recall a horsehair or cowhide counter at B&Q.

The wonderful thing about coracles is they take you back. They are timeless river travel. One man, or woman, in a little round, flat-bottomed boat tootling along the waterways, in and out the reed beds, silent and peaceful, just like it's always been almost since the dawn of time. Not an outboard motor or a plastic hull in sight.

Coracle making is a true country craft, personified around here by the skills of Peter Faulkner, who must be sick to death of the fact that every time we write about him, which isn't too often, we remind you he used to work in insurance for Norwich Union in Worcester.

That was a long time ago, not quite when cavemen trod the Earth, but long enough for a lot of water to have passed under his personal bridge since then.

Now, Peter is a special needs tutor who lives among the rolling Herefordshire hills at Leintwardine and has his coracle-making workshop a few miles away in the village of Brampton Bryan.

A melodic folk singer and a naturally affable man, he was recently elected chairman of the Coracle Society.

He got into coracles, quite literally, in 1987. "I was visiting Ironbridge Gorge Museum when I saw them being made and that was it," he recalled. He made some line drawings, took lots of measurements, went home and set about building a boat.

Now although coracles are at the basic end of boat building, they would represent a challenge for the average Joe. But Peter had several advantages over him. For one thing, he was good at DIY. For another, he had served in the Merchant Navy and while it is not suggested all our merchantmen made their own ships before sailing the seas with their cargoes of coffee beans, cotton or whatever, a sound knowledge of what keeps things afloat did come in handy.

Throughout his coracle-making career, which has taken him to many parts of Europe and beyond, Peter has remained true to what he calls the "geographical inertia of old time craftsmen". In other words, all his materials are found locally, just as they would always have been.

Pre-historic man wasn't into jumping into a white van and driving to Norwich for a plank of special wood. He had to make do with what was within walking distance.

Coracles are constructed by stretching cow hides, which Peter buys from his local butcher, over a wooden frame of hazel and willow from his own growing beds. The hides, individually selected to be free of cuts and blemishes, are cleaned and soaked in a salt bath for 10 days before they are ready to use. After being stretched over the frame, they are held in place by plaited horsehair and then left to dry naturally for everything to tighten up.

Coracles are powered by a single paddle, which is worked in a figure of eight in front of the boat. This is made from an ash plank, using a hand axe, draw knife and shaving horse.

"A lot of the time in coracle making is taken up with preparation and drying afterwards," Peter explained. "The actual construction probably takes a couple of days."

It's a process that goes back a few years. Coracles have been known to exist in Britain since the 5th Century, although the Romans probably used them when they first arrived in around 55 BC. Similar craft were discovered in North America, Iraq, Vietnam and India. This does not infer Julius Caesar

and his mates flew around the globe in a Lear jet stopping off in a few disparate countries.

Just the basic idea of making a small boat from a wooden frame and animal hide was one of the first ones Early Man had, wherever he lived.

This modus transportus has certainly got Peter Faulkner around. In a coracle he has sailed the rivers Severn, Teme and Wye and parts of the Shannon in Ireland. In all, he has covered well over 400 miles, which is a lot of paddling.

He also makes a longer, thinner "skin boat" called a currach, more like an elongated rowing boat. In one of these last August, Peter and a group of friends attempted to sail back across the English Channel from France, but had to give up when the wind died.

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2. Coracle History

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Heritage Crafts website at www.heritagecrafts.co.uk.

History

The coracle is a small keel-less boat with very little draft, and is usually light enough to be carried by one person. The name comes from the welsh word ‘corwgl’. There is evidence of the use of coracles from the early Bronze Age, and perhaps as far back as the Ice Age. They are found all of over the world, and it is likely that such basic vessels came into use simultaneously in different regions.

The history of coracle making is closely related to the uses to which they were put over the centuries. The Iceni would have used them in the shallow waters of the Fens and there is evidence that Caesar, having seen them in Britain, used them in his expedition against Pompey to transport his troops across the Segre when the bridges had been washed away. Pliny, in his account of Britain, speaks of a six day navigation in the open sea in coracles.

In the west of Britain coracles were sometimes used along the coast, but the majority would be found on the larger rivers of Wales and the border counties. Erasmus Philipps, recounts fishing on the Tywi in 1717 “in a sort of boat called a coracle which is made of hoops, and pitch’d blanketing and is portable.” Many later tour reports record various types of construction of coracles. In 1760 W. Linnard “saw here the portable fishing boats made of horsehides, [coracles] which the inhabitants here use for their fishing in the springtime. It was one and a half yards long and one wide and so light that the man can put it on his back and carry it home with him together with his basket. It was rowed with one paddle which the man operated with his hands without supporting it against the boat. This was made inside of thin wooden laths, which hold the boat in its shape.”

Where transport was needed to cross rivers, especially before there were toll free bridges, the coracle was larger, to accommodate the ferryman and his passenger. This was also true on the upper Dee near Llangollen, where landowners would employ coracle men to take their guests angling.

It was only at the beginning of the 19th century that coracles were adapted for net fishing, with a pair of boats stretching a net between them. Malkin tells us that, “There is scarcely a cottage in the neighbourhood of the Tivy . . . without its coracle hanging by the door.” Jenkins reports an estimate that by 1861 there were 300 coracles being worked on the Teifi alone.

Ironbridge Coracles

In the Ironbridge Gorge coracles were widely used by poorer residents for transport across the river, in times of flood and for fishing (Hornell noted in the 1930s that most cottages had a coracle hanging on the wall).They were also used by the local group of poachers.

Coracles provided a necessary resource for crossing the river for people to go about their day to day without travelling considerable distances to reach a bridge and paying a toll for convenience of using it. Indeed it was a common sight to see coracles stabled outside residences in the area when they weren't being used – as described by James Hornell in 1933″… [nearly] every villager had his own coracle, hung in a tree when not in use…"

The uses for a coracle influenced it's shape and manoeuvrability. These are some of the uses for an Ironbridge Coracle:

Transporting people and property (both lawful and unlawful!)

Net fishing for salmon

Laying of eel lines

Securing driftwood

Rescuing people and animals

Recovering corpses

Poaching

Coracle Racing

The Cilgerran coracle races have been going for approx 75yrs in association with the Cilgerran festive week celebrations.

The Ironbridge Coracle Regatta was reported on as a well-established event by the Illustrated London News in 1881 with an illustration. The event was recreated in the 1980s and runs annually on the River Severn at Ironbridge.

Techniques

The earliest forms would have been made of green poles lashed together with twine made from animal hair, and covered with the skin of a large animal. The fat from the animal would have been used to waterproof the skin. The maximum size would be dependent on the size of animal used. In most areas the poles were replaced by thin laths, of either ash or willow. Originally they would have been cleaved and formed using hand tools, but now they are usually made in a saw mill. The laths are then interwoven or in some cases nailed together. The gunwale is either formed from more

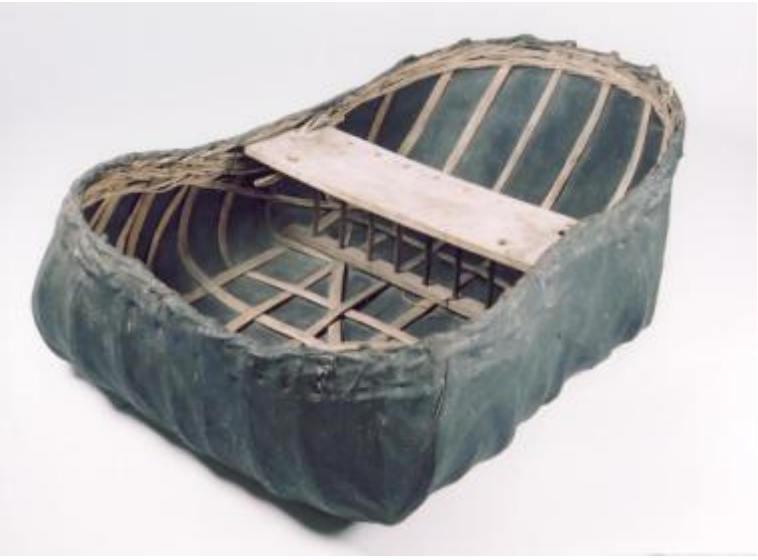
laths to hold the top of the frame together, or is made of woven willow or hazel rods. The seat is either worked into the gunwale weaving or is nailed on across the top. A carrying strap is fixed to the seat. The original twisted willow gave way to leather and rope, but has now sometimes been replaced by thick electricity cable.

By the 18th century hide covers were being replaced by flannel that had been soaked in a melted pitch. This was in turn replaced by calico or canvas that was painted in a pitch and turpentine mixture. The waterproofing is now usually done with bitumen paint. People are now exploring other coverings, and at least one maker uses the pvc coated fabric produced for the curtains on 'soft-sider' lorries, which does not require waterproofing.

There has been an increase in the production and use of fibreglass coracles. They have the advantages of lasting much longer than ones with canvas cover, being less likely to be damaged by rocks in the water, and being repairable. The remaining fishermen on the Tywi made their own mould from an original handmade coracle.

Local forms

The size, shape and materials used in coracles vary across the UK, and the Coracle Society identifies more than twenty different coracle types in the UK. The types are usually named after the rivers they were used on, although those from rivers with several types tend to be named after their locale.The Coracle Society identifies the following types – Teifi, Tywi (Towy), Taf, Cleddau, Llwchwr, Usk, Wye, Dyfi, Welshpool, Dee, Llangollen, Conwy, Dwyryd, Severn – Ironbridge, Severn – Shrewsbury, Teme (derivative of the Ironbridge), Avon, Bewdley, Spey, Boyne, Donegal.



The Teifi coracle (above) is the easiest to identify, with its flattish prow coming in to a ‘waist’ at the central seat and a smaller semicircular stern. It sits deeper in the water than most other coracles as the user has to cope with some very turbulent water. Other varieties are more saucer shaped allowing the boat to ‘skim’ across the more gentle waters of rivers such as the Tywi.

The Ironbridge and Shrewsbury varieties tend to be the staple of coracle making courses. They are simple craft for beginners to make in a weekend, and are ideally suited for first time coraclers on the water.

Dimensions varied considerably, as each traditional coracle was originally made for a particular fisherman, whose height and weight had to be taken into account. This will still be done for specific commissions, but the coracle made on a weekend course will be from laths pre-cut to a standard length.

Issues affecting the viability of the craft

As the coracle is a purely functional object, the viability of coracle making is totally dependent on the uses to which it can be put in the foreseeable future. The issue is complicated by the growing use of fibreglass coracles. Whilst coracle making itself may not be endangered, the skills involved in producing a traditional vessel may well be in danger of being lost.

Regulation: Commercial netting of migratory fish provided the main demand for coracles until the mid-19th century. In 1863, the introduction of the licence fee greatly reduced the number of coracles made and used on the rivers of west Wales. During the 1930’s, the river authorities decided that angling as a sport would be more profitable if there were no nets on non-tidal sections of west Wales rivers. At this time, a licence lasted the holder a lifetime, and could be passed down from father to son. As each holder died, these licences were revoked, but it would take 40 years to clear the fishermen and their nets from the upper reaches of these rivers. Only 12 licences are now issued per season to fish the tidal sections of the Teifi. Eight are issued for the river Tywi, and only one licenced pair can fish the river Taf from St Clares. The season on all rivers is limited to five months – between 1st March and 31st July.

If angling interests succeed in removing all netsmen from the rivers, the commercial need for coracles will disappear. At the moment young people are still following the family tradition of coracle fishing, but there is no longer the possibility of making a living from the occupation, so it has at best become a secondary source of income, and mostly a hobby that pays for itself. For example, there now only about 750 fish landed from the Tywi each year. Viability is partly dependent on what one fisherman remembers about his own involvement: “When I was young and not particularly

interested in coracle fishing, my father said to me, ‘It’s in your blood and it will come to you.’ When I was approaching my 40s it ‘claimed’ me.”

New markets: Interest in coracle making has been revived recently due to the efforts of a few individuals and organisations such as the Coracle Society and the Carmarthen Coracle & Netsmen’s Association. These and other groups organise regattas and races (as well as attending events around the country publicising coracles). They are also keen to engage with the media, writing articles and giving talks. The Coracle Society believes that, thanks to these efforts, the future of coracles in the UK is now pretty much assured.

New markets: There is a small market for one-off projects for the TV and film industry, with an increasing emphasis on authenticity in period dramas.

New markets: Outdoor activity centres are making increasing use of coracles as an alternative to kayaks, but these are all made of fibreglass. Even so the interest created may lead to some individuals becoming more interested in making traditional coracles.

Dilution of skills: Courses are also now available in many parts of the country. These are mostly two day weekends, but some last four days for wickerwork boats. These should be monitored and encouraged in order to maintain interest. However there are few people learning all the skills to make traditional coracles. There are maybe six people in South Wales who could go to the woods, select the timber and withies, cleave the wood, form the laths, make the frame, weave the gunwale, cover the boat, and seal it with a pitch and turpentine mixture. There is only one skilled craftsman in the South Wales area, but there are 6 people learning the skill. The total number of people making coracles in South Wales is twelve.

Support organisations

The Coracle Society

Carmarthen Coracle & Netsmen’s Association (Facebook page)

National Coracle Centre – contact via the Coracle Society

Ironbridge Coracle Trust

The Ironbridge Coracle Trust is one year into a 3 year heritage fund project, which involves the restoration of the Rogers Family Coracle shed, creation of an exhibition and interpretation about coracles and coracle making. Part of the funding will be used to subsidise places on coracle making and traditional paddle making courses.

Craftspeople currently known

Peter Faulkner, Shropshire (hide covered)
Kevin Grimley, Small Woods Association, Shropshire – modern (calico covered)
Alistair Phillips, South East England – modern (calico/PVC covered)
Mark Aplin, Overwater Boats, North West England – modern (calico covered), laths or willow
Fred Gillam, The Wild Side of Life, South West England – modern (calico covered), willow
Rebecca Oaks, Cumbria Woodlands, North West England
Claidh O'Gibne, traditional Boyne Currach maker (Republic of Ireland)

Teifi Coracle Makers (contact via Teifi Coracle Netsmen's Association).
Peter Davies
Rod Bowen
Mark Dellar

Other information

Response from Jude Pilgrim after consulting with colleagues in the Coracle Society:

Minimum no. of craftspeople required to maintain the viability of coracle making: there are sufficient numbers teaching, demonstrating and practising calico coracle making – around 20-30 across the country. There is currently only one person teaching and practising hide coracle making, and there are rumours that he is retiring.

Current no. of trainees: Current courses are training around 20-25 people every year in calico covered coracles. There are no current courses or trainees in making hide coracles.

Current no. of skilled craftspeople: The calico covered types of coracle are generally well catered for in numbers having skills, as several courses are run each year. However, we have a severe shortage of people with the skills to make a hide covered coracle, with perhaps only 3 or 4 remaining active with the skills to teach this craft, including sourcing and treating hides and sourcing willow or hazel for the frame.

Current total no. of craftspeople: The Coracle Society has around 110 members, with about half of those being active in practising the craft through teaching courses, demonstrations at events or regattas, or making coracles for sale. There may be a similar number (50) of non members.

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3. The Teme Coracle

Peter Faulkner with a Teme coracle.

The Teme coracle is an interesting one - it is an example of coracles being resurrected in a place where there may have been coracle usage in the past, though this cannot be verified as there is no knowledge of this in living memory. The association of the coracle on the Teme has a lot to do with Leintwardine resident, and Society vice president Peter Faulkner. Peter Faulkner recounted to Sir Peter Badge as he was writing his book that he remembers his grandfather using a coracle - thought to be some Severn type - on the river at Ludlow. He also heard of a story of coracle usage at Leintwardine in the 1920s.

Peter Faulkner first built his Teme coracles in Leintwardine in the late 1980s, after visiting Ironbridge coraclemaker Eustace Rogers for tuition and guidance. Eustace at that time was building a hide covered Ironbridge coracle, using traditional methods and locally sourced materials. Peter was keen to build his own coracle so he could explore the length of the Teme, so took this newly found knowledge back to his village and built his first Teme coracle. Along with exploring the Teme by coracle, Peter has travelled along the Severn, Wye, Thames, Shannon and Spey rivers - the latter he wrote about in our 2012 Journal.

He uses locally coppiced hazel - which receives no treatment, such as cleaving - to form the frame of the vessel. The Teme has 5 longitudinal and 5 transverse laths. A tightly woven base is added for extra strength. A seat and seat post made from ash is added, and a single, whole, cow hide obtained from the village butcher is used as the vessel's skin. Note, the hair

is not removed from the hide, and is placed facing in to the boat. Often, as can be seen in one photo below, the tail of the hide remains and is a signature feature of Peter's Teme coracle. The hide is cured in a mixture of salt petre and alum before being applied to the coracle. Horsehair bindings are used to secure the various components - no screws, nails or staples are used in this traditional construction method. The coracle is completed with a paddle, again made from ash. Lanolin is used to preserve and protect the outside of the coracle. Often, the seat and paddle has a unique marque carved or pyrographed on.

Peter soon gained a respectible living, as a maker of traditional coracles. He has run courses and made boats to order, both for members of the public and for use in film and television. In recent years, Peter has worked with the likes of James May and Richard Hammond on BBC factual programming. Peter also inaugurated coracle regattas at Leintwardine in the 1990s, which were always well attended and were quickly established as one of the highlights of the Society's calendar. These continued until the mid 2000s.

It's not surprising that, given Peter's tuition by Eustace Rogers, the Teme coracle is similar to the Ironbridge. The Teme coracle tends to be slightly larger, much more bowl-like, more rigid in construction and Peter uses horsehair bindings, as opposed to hide bindings used by Eustace on his hide covered coracle.

Peter also constructs Boyne currachs in a similarly traditional fashion. He is known for travelling in one of these from Northern Ireland to Iona in the late 1990s.

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4. Learning from Peter

This chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Guy Mallinson Woodland Workshop website at www.guymallinson.blogspot.com.

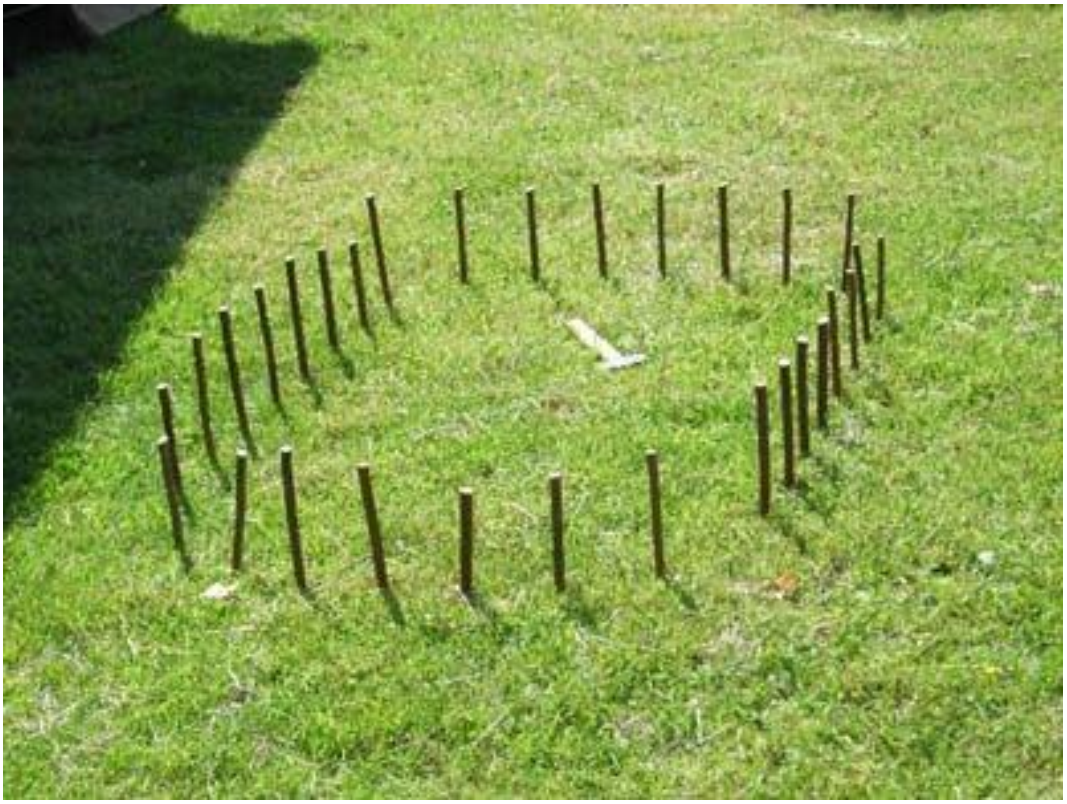
Coracles In Herefordshire

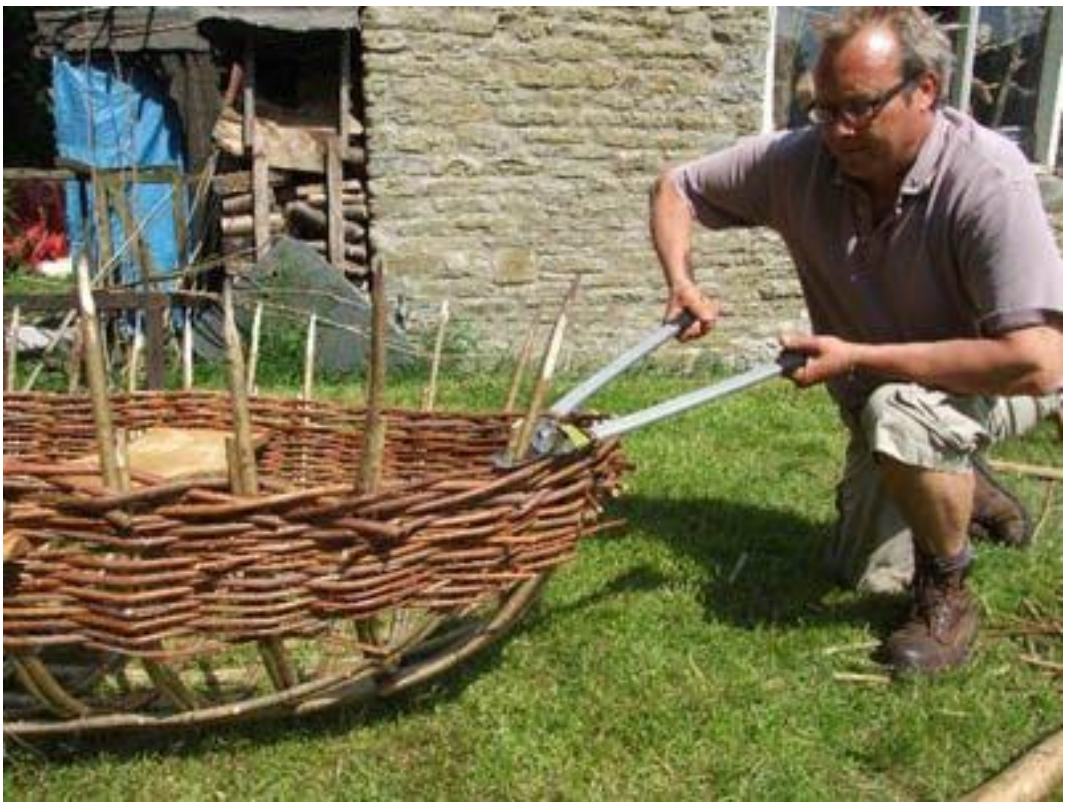
At the end of June I spent an absolutely magical time with Peter Faulkner in Herefordshire. Peter is the only hide-covered coracle maker working in Britain today.

I've long been an admirer of Peter's work and I had hoped he would come to teach coracle making here in the Woodland Workshop. Unfortunately, I then discovered that he's just about to retire - which is nice for him, but rather scuppers my plan!

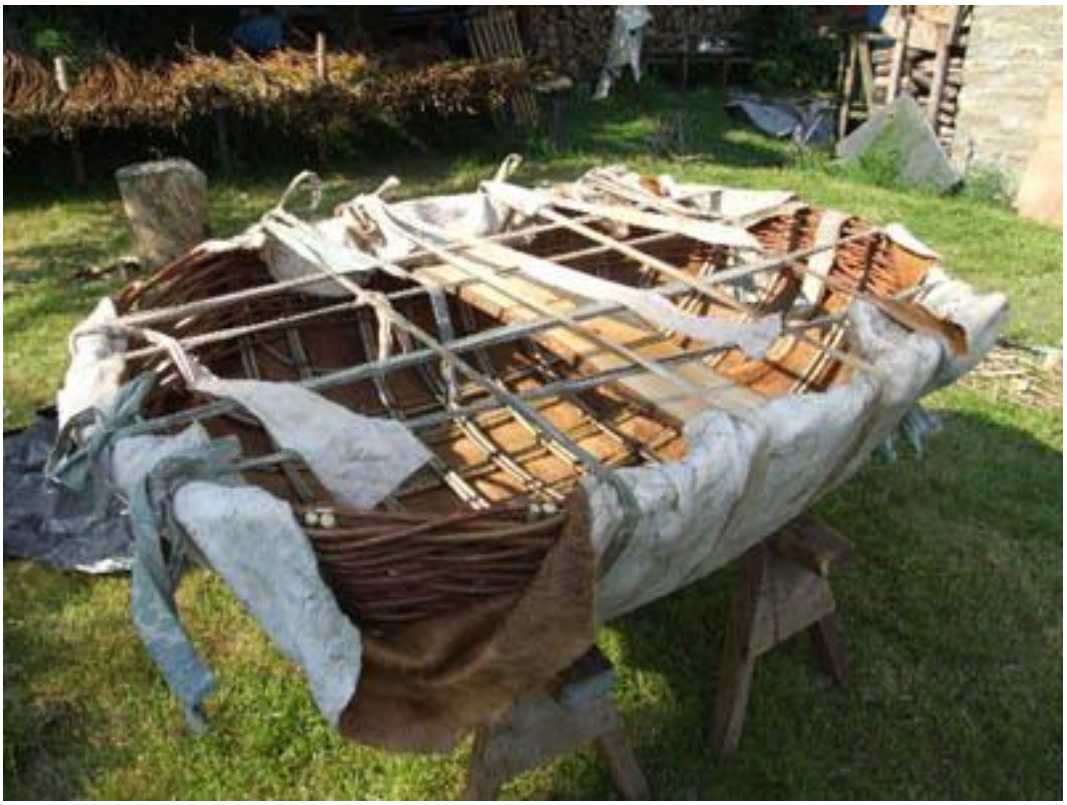
As you can probably imagine, I was therefore absolutely delighted when Peter very kindly suggested that he train me in this very ancient craft of making the greenest of vessels.

The process of building a coracle is relatively straight-forward - if carried out under the watchful eye of an expert - and by the time we'd finished weaving the willow and hazel and tied all of the joints we had an incredibly stiff lattice structure.



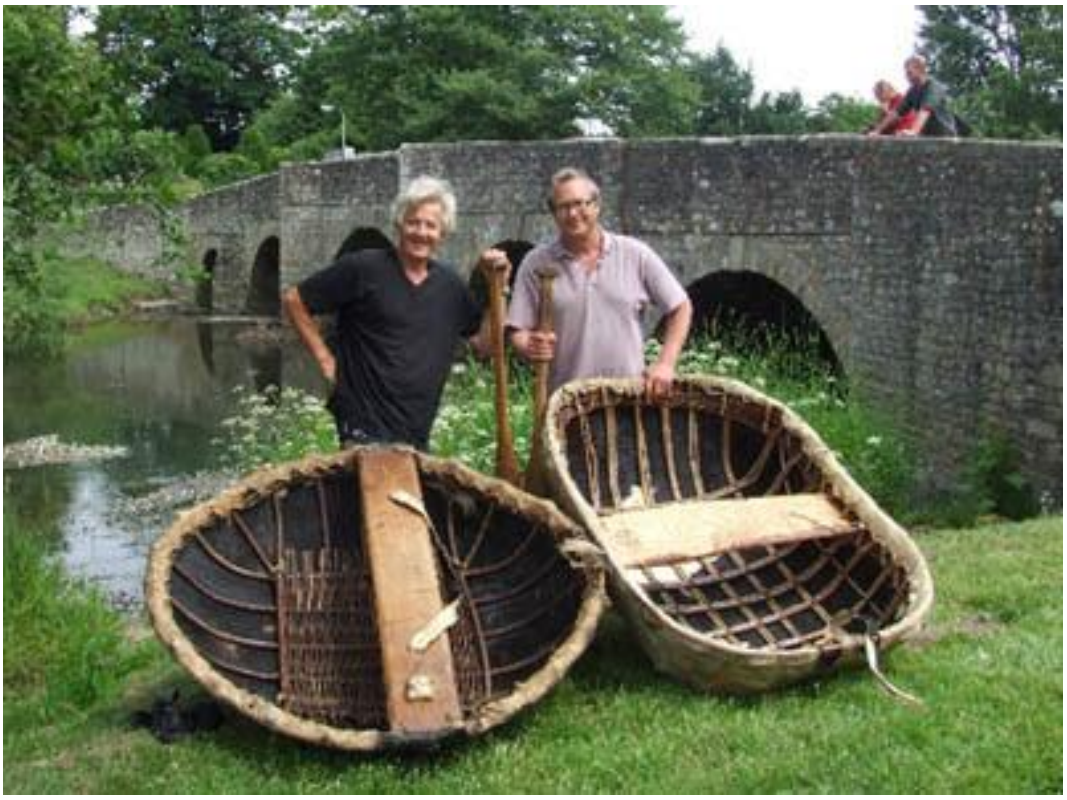


Working with a hide skin was a totally new experience for me and wonderfully direct, and with a bit of practice I got the hang of the lashing and ending up feeling inordinately proud of the end result. This is something that I see in our guests on a regular basis, and for once it was really nice to be on the receiving end of the satisfaction of learning something new and fulfilling.



As well as learning to make coracles, Peter also showed me the 'figure of eight' rowing technique and we tried this out for real on his local river - the perfect end to a experience I shall never forget and one that I'm looking forward to passing on to future coracle makers on our courses.

Peter's web site has some more details about his amazing achievements with coracles and currachs - boats that should never be underestimated!



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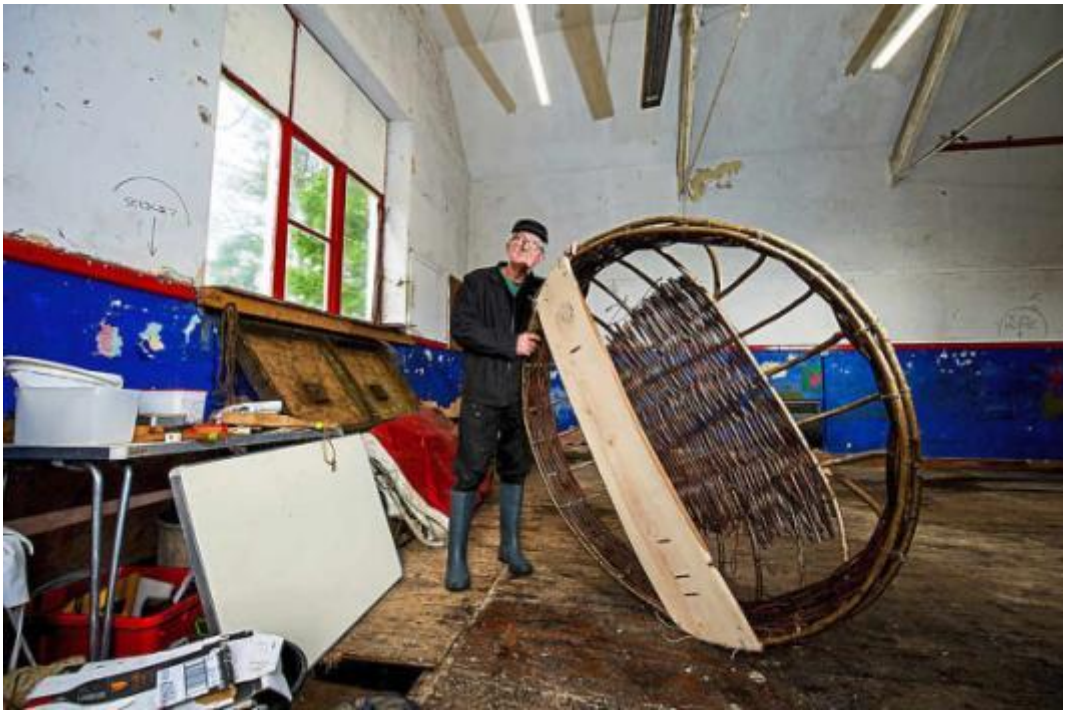
5. Peter's Workshop

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the South Shropshire News website at www.shropshirestar.com. It was published in February 2017.

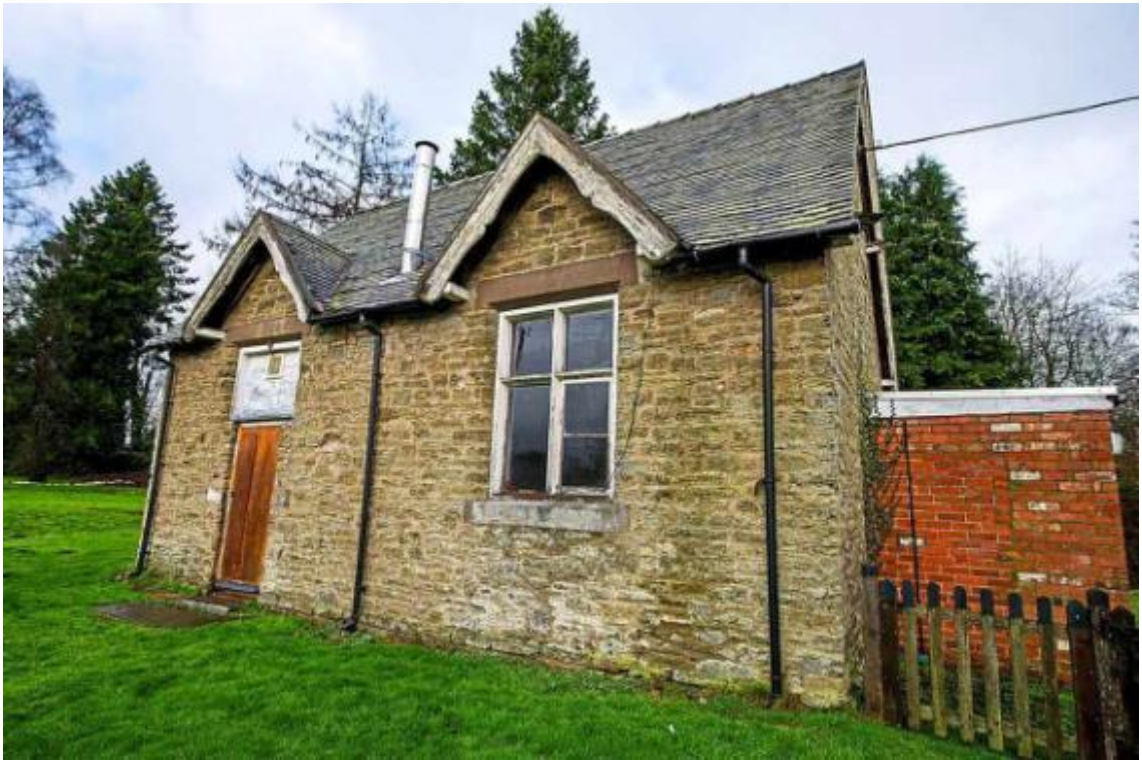


Seeking a new future for coracle man Peter's workshop

For years it has been home to a world-renowned coracle builder but now a village's former infant school is empty and the public are being invited to pitch ideas for how it might be used.

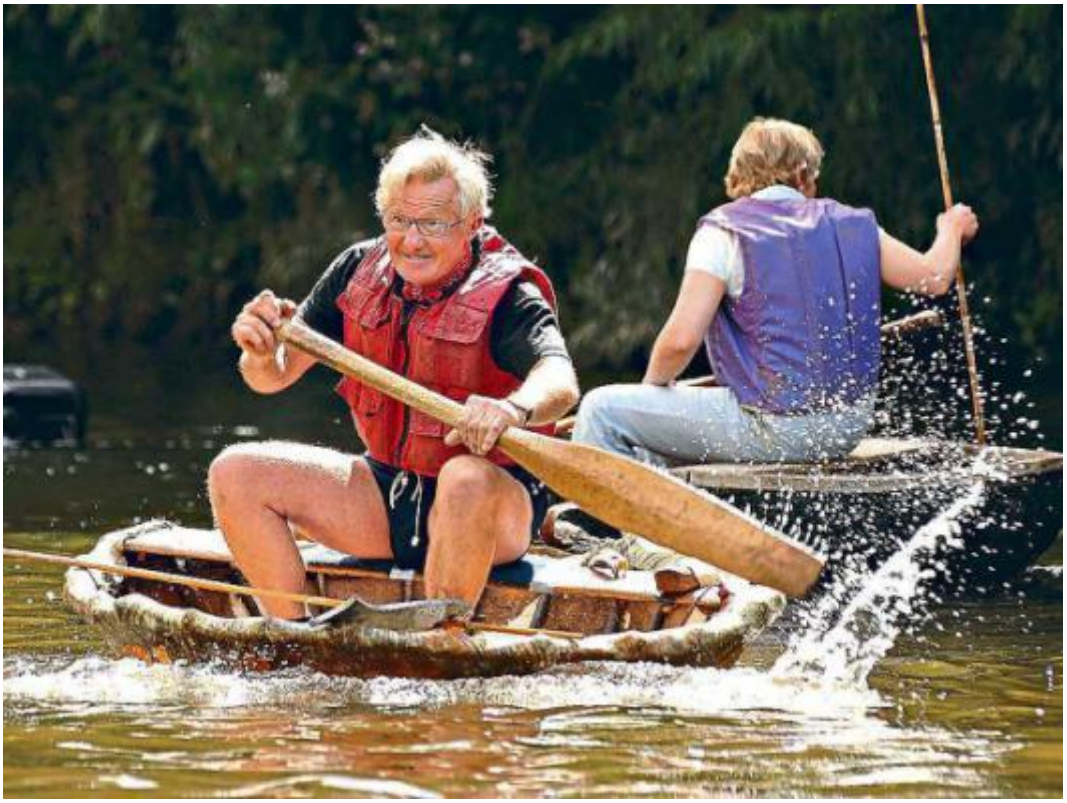
This weekend the doors will be thrown open on the building in the village of Leintwardine, at the rear of the community centre complex off High Street, until recently the base and workshop of historic boat making guru Peter Faulkner.

The committee that runs Leintwardine Village Hall and Community Centre is calling for ideas as to what it could now be used for – although a bid for the village's own craft-beer-producing micro-brewery is probably off the table. The Leintwardine Centre complex is based around the former main school at the village near Ludlow, which along with its 'reading room' next door houses everything from a large hall and separate meeting room with catering facilities, to Leintwardine Community Library, and is home to groups such as am-drammers the Leintwardine Players and Leintwardine History Society. But behind the main school is a smaller infants school building, which has now reverted to the ownership of the Leintwardine Centre committee.



Leintwardine's former Infant school is now empty and in need of refurbishment.

Secretary Terry Clough said: "We've recently recovered the former infants school building behind the main hall, which has been in use as a coracle workshop for the last umpteen years.

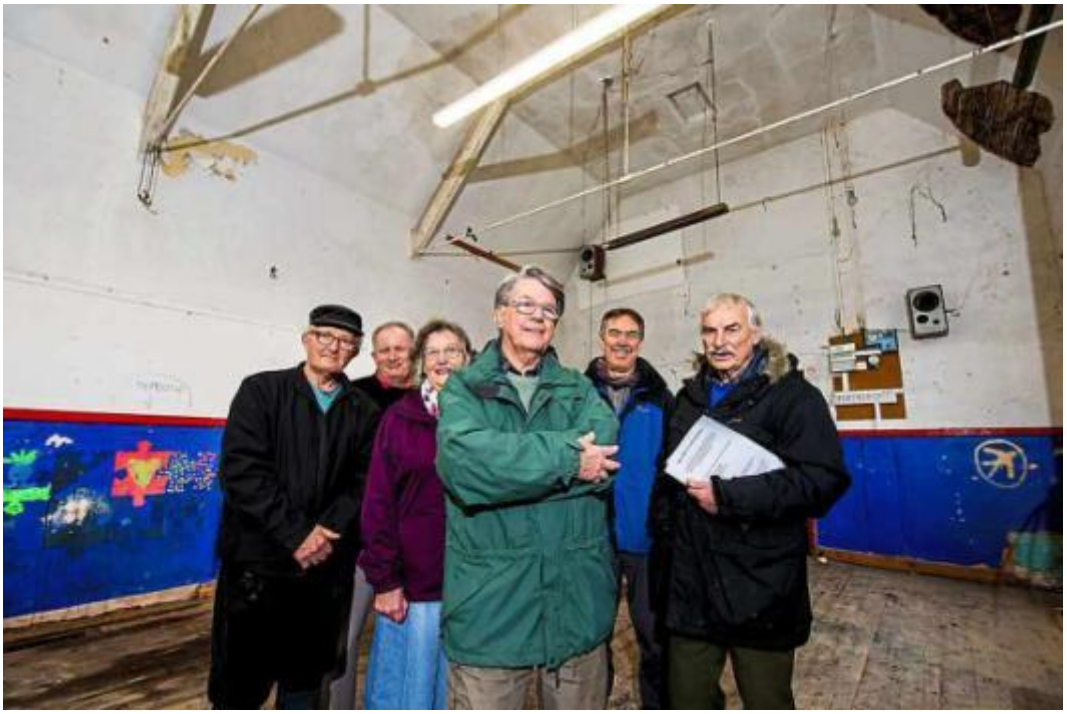


Peter Faulkner in one of his coracles.

"We've begun the process of preparing a specification for the work to be done to bring it back to good condition, after which we'll start applying for grants. "What we need then is somebody to take it over and use it. "There were mutterings about a micro-brewery at one point, but that idea seems to have evaporated, sadly."

He said to help generate idea the building will be open to visitors from 10am to noon on Saturday, to coincide with the centre's usual coffee morning.

"Even if you don't want to take it over yourself, you might have an idea as to what it might be used for, so do come and have a look," he said. Committee member Malcolm Turner said the building was in a bad state and would need some investment. It was a good opportunity, but also sad to see Peter go, he said.



Peter Faulkner, Paul Kennedy, Marjorie turner, Malcom Turner, Robert Cock and Richard Sudworth.

"Peter is in his seventies, he has retired. He is quite well known, not just locally but internationally," he said.

Mr Faulkner has been a leading light in the revival of the ancient craft of making the little round boats that were once common on rivers such as the Teme and the Severn.

He first built his Teme coracles in the late 1980s, after visiting Ironbridge coracle maker Eustace Rogers for tuition and guidance, and went on to make a living as a maker of traditional coracles, as well as running courses

and writing about his expertise and experiences navigating the rivers of the British Isles in the tiny vessel.

He inaugurated coracle regattas at Leintwardine in the 1990s, drawing enthusiasts from across the county and beyond, and in recent years worked with the likes of James May and Richard Hammond on BBC television.
