RIVER TEIFI CORACLE.

By Nige Dale.

A STATIC MODEL.

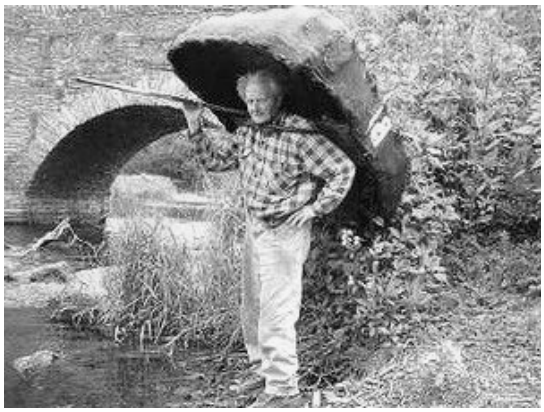
INTRODUCTION.

It has to be nearly sixty years since a family holiday first introduced me to the Coracle, which extended to all boats, and water, and has remained with me all my life. My memories of that fine day in June all those years ago have remained ingrained in my mind, and the magic of that place has not diminished over time either. That place is Cenarth on the River Teifi, and the man responsible for introducing me to the Coracle, and the first boat I propelled by my self was a man I knew as Will' Jones. Will' Jones also made model Coracles as well as the full size vessels used on the river, and it was one of his models that took a place on my grandmothers' book shelf for many years, before I inherited it and still have today. The model Teifi Coracle that I made is a similar model to the one Will' Jones made all those years ago, and also includes the information slip which has information about the model, and is a copy of what Will' Jones wrote all those years ago, although I now included a metric equivalent to the imperial measurements that he used.

Will' Jones model.

My model

For most people of these Isles, Coracles invoke thoughts of Wales, but this type of vessel can be made, used and found anywhere in the world using local materials. Coracles, Curraghs, Currachs, or Cwrwgl, are all vessels of a style we recognise as ancient types of boats used within the British Isles, and the difference in title is most probably derived from the Ancient language of the area to which that particular vessel is attributed.



Bernard Thomas, 1923-2014. Coracle man, Coracle maker, not only used his boats on the River Teifi, but crossed the English Channel as well.

The accepted prefix or suffix in naming the vessel of the waterway or area of use, ie, Tiefi, River Severn, Teme, Spey or Boyne, is possibly a modern one and used by an observer from outside of that area with knowledge of these vessels from other areas of a similar ilk, and therefore having to classify the vessels distinction with a definitive title. However, this vessel type is not limited to these Isles alone, and is still in use in other parts of the world. All the vessels from the other areas of the world, for example, Iran, Tibet, China, India, Vietnam, America and not forgetting the British Isles, (and most probably more) are all capable of being made by using the most basic (Neolithic) tools. Utilising withy, reed, animal skin, sinew thread, surface bitumen (terracotta is not unknown) as the raw materials, these vessels can be made along and around the banks of all watercourses of the world. So we must assume that these styles of vessels were prevalent worldwide at some time.

The coverings of boats with an animal skin, still survives in some areas. Also the covering of a tarred fabric as a cover still survives and is more widely known. But Coracles are now being made from fibreglass taken from moulds derived from the shapes of the prototypes of the rivers of origin.

The mining of tar, the distillation of pine for what we refer to as Stockholm Tar, and the production of town gas and its' by-products, all would have had an influence in its use as a water repellent. I would suggest (subject to discussion) that the expense of woven fabric, and tar in history, would remove the potential for its use until the industrialisation of the processes made it more cost effective as a hull material, eg 1700-1900 AD. In some areas of the world, tar is obtainable from the surface of the planet, without the need of mining. In these areas, a fabric made from local vegetation is often the base of the vessel covering.

It may be worth mentioning that natural free flowing bitumen was found whist digging a tunnel for the Coalport Canal, Shropshire in 1787. Needless to say that the canal project was abandoned in favour of the tar abstraction and an alternative canal route was adopted.

With the raw materials available, and the craftsmen involved in its manufacture, are all parts in this vessels evolution and type. Coracles from along a single watercourse may be similar in principle of design, but the locations along that watercourse will offer further variances, as will the raw materials available, and the individuality of the builder. Add to this evolution process, some other variances such as the environment in which it is to be used, so stability and sea worthiness come into the design intent of the vessel. Although design intent may be the wrong term, the vessel variance would not necessarily be by design in the modern perception of the word, but from a development of survival necessity and the ultimate usage for the vessel concerned. These were not pleasure craft, but a working tool. Vessels used by the working man were working vessels, and affected by the individuality of the working mans' trade, profession, life style, and other uncontrollable/ identifiable variances.

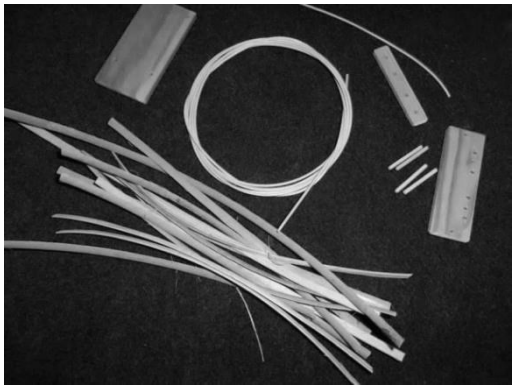
This type of boat, the Coracle, is fascinating as a subject and for those who wish to try, is not a hard boat to build. I would certainly recommend a book, as an introduction to the subject, "The Coracle" by J. Geraint Jenkins, which you can get form the National Coracle Centre in Cenarth, but also would recommend a visit to the centre to see the exhibits and the information that is there. The principles of making a model, or the real thing to use on the water in which you sit, are very similar, out of the few model Coracles I have built, the Teifi is perhaps the most time consuming, and here is how I go about it.

THE BUILD

The raw materials for this model are Rattan cane for the frame, pine stripwood and bamboo sticks for the seat and paddle; lining cloth for the covering, cotton thread to sew the cover to the frame, and finally roof paint to emulate the tar coating of the prototypes.

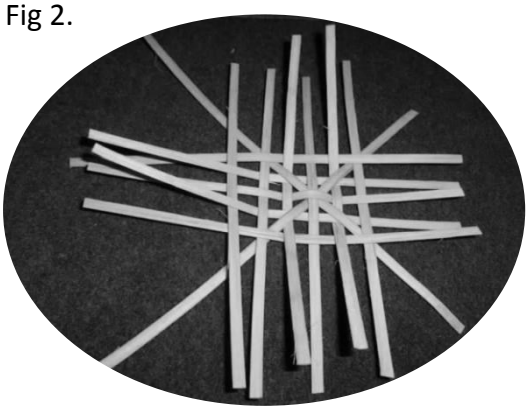
Fig 1, shows a selection of the raw materials which will go to make the frame, the seat and the stand.

Fig 1.



Once the raw materials are grouped together for the model, the soaking of the cane can be done to make the cane more pliable for weaving into the frame. The flat cane will be woven to construct the coracle hull/ body framework, and the smaller round cane will be woven in, to make the gunwale or rim of the boat.

Fig 2.



The woven frame in Fig 2, is based upon and similar to, the prototypes and the Will' Jones models. When building the prototypes (the real ones) the seat is assembled and put onto the woven mat that will become the hull, and then the frame is drawn up and fixed into position by using the withies that form the gunwale or rim of the boat. This is all done whilst you are sat on the seat to hold it all down whilst the frame is fixed in place; but being a model this cannot be done so a jig is used to help the build.

Fig 3.

Fig 3, illustrates the frame being drawn up into a shape that is starting to look bowl shaped. The frame is held in place on the jig by clamping and this also helps create the flat bottom of the boat for which the Teifi Coracle is also renown.

The insertion of the weave/ randing for the gunwale continues until finished, then the final shape of the Teifi Coracle is held in place with lacing until the cane has dried out, see Fig 4.

Fig 4.

Once the cane is dry of excess moisture the boat shape will remain in place, as long as a prolonged total immersion in water is avoided in the future. During the time in which the frame is drying out, the seat components can be assembled.

Fig 5.

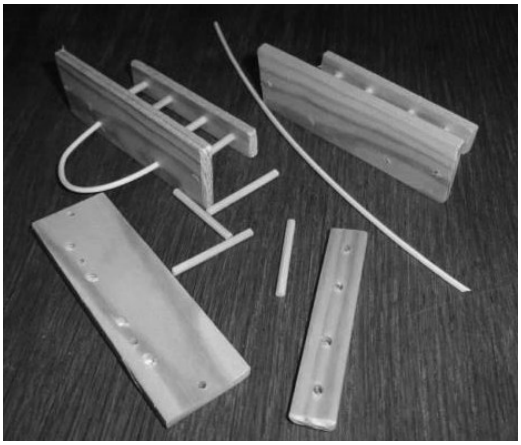


Fig 5, shows an assembled seat and the components that are required to make the seat. Once the seat is assembled it can be installed into the Coracle frame.

Fig 6.

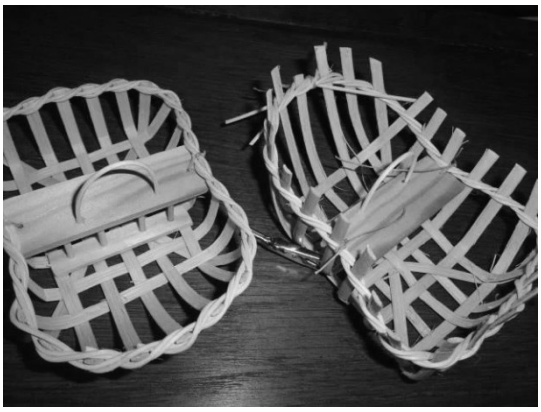


Fig 6, indicates the seat being installed, which is sewn and glued into position, and a spot of glue is then placed on every other joint between the ribs of the frame and where the ribs pass through the gunwale. This is done to offer some stability to the frame prior to trimming off the excess wood, and in covering the frame with cloth.

Fig 7.

Fig 7 shows the cloth covering on one model, (on the left of the picture) and the method of getting the cover onto the frame, held into position by clamps prior to sewing (in the main body of picture). The cover of a River Teifi Coracle has the cover wrapped over the gunwale finishing on the inside of the boat so the make of the gunwale is almost fully covered. This process is quite fiddly on the model, but quite a lot easier when covering a full sized vessel. The difficulty and time involved in covering the model this way is paid off by the result.

Fig 8.

Fig 8 shows the Coracle frame covered and with the stand and paddle made, leaving the final part of the project, the painting. Painting the cover of the model requires a steady hand and a few days to allow the paint to fully dry. Historically model Coracles have had a coating of tar on the cover, but I have not been able to get a modern tar to set as the tar has on my old models or the models I have seen on my travels, so I use a paint that is made for waterproofing a roof.

Coracles, as with all boats can get you absorbed into looking for more information, and as each piece of information is read it can reveal another hint of something equally fascinating, and is hung like a goading carrot leading you onto more research, and then perhaps, another model to build.