



coracles & currachs



Traditional paddle (left) and a more modern, flat paddle, next to a home-made coracle.

what are they?

The coracle (or currach in Ireland) is a keel-less, bowl-shaped boat that was developed for fishing in shallow water or fast-flowing streams. It is a very simple boat that has been made in different ways around the world for thousands of years. In Britain and Ireland they were used in river estuaries to catch migratory fish such as salmon, sea trout and eels. Today, only a little coracle fishing is done in Wales on the rivers Teifi, Tywi and Taf. Near Welsh rivers around 200 years ago, a coracle would be found hanging outside almost every cottage door. The word coracle is an anglicised version of the Welsh word *gwrwgl*. Early coracles weighed about 15kg, and were therefore easily transportable on the shoulder of the fisherman. Fishing was often done in pairs working at night with a long net between the two boats. The pair drifted downstream, controlling the coracle with one hand and holding the net in the other. Sometimes someone working a single coracle would peg the end of the net to a bank, and paddle round in a circle to catch fish. When a fish was felt struggling in the net, it would quickly be dragged into the coracle and killed using a wooden club or 'priest'. This had to be done quickly – a large salmon thrashing about could easily upset the coracle. At the end of the fishing run, the boats and net

were removed from the water and carried back up the river for another run.

Early coracles were made of willow rods that were split and shaved flat. These were woven into a basket shape and covered with the skin of a cow or some other animal, made waterproof using black pitch, applied hot. Later coracles, such as the Ironbridge or Shrewsbury styles were made of strips of sawn ash, woven and nailed together. They were generally built about 1.2m long by 1m wide by 25cm deep. A Llangollen coracle is bigger and sturdier, and can take 2 people. Coracle-type boats that are portable and good in shallow water have been used in many other parts of the world for millennia – for example, Native Americans covered theirs in buffalo hides.

what are the benefits?

Coracle fishing is an excellent, natural, pollution-free way of obtaining food. The benefits of coracles themselves is that they are:

- easy to build
- easy to carry
- good in shallow water
- very manoeuvrable
- able to reach places that are inaccessible by wading or casting a long line

Coracles are a symbol of a time when the human population was lower and there were plenty of fish. Every family could go out and catch a meal without the fear that they were depleting fish stocks. Now the size of our population and economy means that human society is out of balance with the rest of the natural world, pollution and overfishing using mile upon mile of trawler nets means that there are fewer migratory fish coming into British rivers nowadays. That means that you can't fish for trout or salmon without an expensive licence, and not many are issued each year. And since the 1923 Fisheries Act, it's not legal to fish for anything using a net. Traditional Welsh coracle fishing was made a special case in 1999 however, because they 'have a unique cultural and historical significance in Wales'. Not many licences are issued though (see below). Will we ever find that natural balance again, so that we can harvest food from the wild without restrictions? Globally, the situation is getting worse, but because heavy industries have moved to other parts of the world, UK rivers are becoming cleaner, so maybe there could be an increase in coracle fishing in future.

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Building a coracle in a workshop; the gunwale is the strip around the top, to which all the other strips and the seat are connected.

what can I do?

You can make your own coracle, and you can use it for leisure, for fishing with a rod, or for laying eel traps. You're going to find it very difficult to obtain a licence to fish using coracles and a net, as it is severely restricted in the UK, and will continue to be for the near future at least.

If you're going to make a coracle from sawn ash (Shrewsbury style), you need to make sure it's good quality – straight-grained with no knots - 'sporting quality', as it's referred to at sawmills. Start with the seat, nail the gunwale (rim) to it, then fit legs underneath the seat. Then turn the whole thing upside down and start nailing on the cross-strips. The strips need to be bent to shape, and this is done using boiling water.

The frame is then covered with calico (unbleached cotton). This is sold in strips usually 1m wide. A 5m long strip should be cut in half to make a piece 2m x 2.5m. This is tacked on tight, and a second gunwale strip is fixed over the top of it. Then the coracle is made water-proof with a few layers of bitumen damp-proofing compound, obtainable from builders' merchants. If the calico tears, it can be repaired easily with a patch of calico and bitumen. A rope is attached to the seat for carrying the coracle over your shoulder. There are plans available online, or you can go on a course (see lowimpact.org/coracles).

Coracles are paddled one-handed, allowing one hand free for the net. The paddle rests against the shoulder and it moves in an 'S' shape in the water. As one side of the paddle is curved, there is suction (the same principle as an aeroplane wing),

and the coracle is actually sucked forward. Paddles were traditionally carved from one piece of ash, but a simpler paddle can be made from a piece of ply slotted into a broom handle. You don't get the suction with this type of paddle though.

When it comes to using your coracle, you can fish using a rod, and you can use coracles to lay and collect eel traps. There are restrictions on fishing for certain fish though, and on fishing with nets. Coracle (net) fishing licences are obtained through local water authorities, although it's only allowed on 3 rivers in Wales. Only 12 licences per year are issued on the river Teifi, 8 on the Tywi and 1 on the Taf. Licences cost £250 per season on the Teifi, and over £500 on the Tywi. There are several other restrictions too:

- only allowed in tidal waters
- not allowed at weekends
- the season is only April-August
- only between dusk and dawn
- any salmon caught before July have to be put back

Maybe coracle fishing will rise again in future, if trawling practices change, or if the human assault on nature can be reversed. Meanwhile, you can enjoy coracles for leisure or rod fishing.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/coracles for more info, courses, links, coracle makers, books, inc:
- Peter Badge, *the Coracles of the World*
- J Geraint Jenkins, *the Inshore Fishermen of Wales*
- coraclesociety.org.uk: the Coracle Society
- coraclemuseum.co.uk: National Coracle Centre



Coracle in use.

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