

Coracle

If you have ever seen the Severn in full flood, carrying all before it – tree-trunks, bridges, small towns – you'll know that it's one of the trickiest of rivers to cross. To try and do so in a round boat, then, weighing next to nothing, looks like the most kamikaze of missions. Yet the folk of Shropshire have been doing exactly this since time immemorial, many of them living to tell the tale.

What we're talking about here is the coracle. A small, boat - more likely oval than circular - made of wood, lath and leather, and weighing not much more than 30 pounds. Here's Stephen Whatley's description of one in action on the river at Shrewsbury back in 1750:

"Coracles, are much used; wherein only one man can fit, who rows very swiftly with one hand, while with the other he manages his fishing- tackle. They are of a form almost oval, and made of split fally twigs interwoven, and that part under the water is covered with a horse's hide. 'Tis about five foot long and three broad, round at the bottom, and so light, that they carry them on their backs to and from the water." I can only guess that fally is a dialect word for willow, which was the most commonly used wood.

Ironically, it's the coracle's lightness and inherent instability that makes it perfect for fast-flowing rivers like the Severn. The coracle sits on the water, rather than in it, and does not fight the cross currents. You might not necessarily get where you want to go, but you're unlikely to sink.

William Yarrell, who published the definitive guide to fishing for the Victorians, adds that the coracle was especially useful, when the riverbank was too steep or overgrown to let a fly-fisher near it. It was equally handy if the river was too shallow for a trow. And so light was the vessel on the water that the fish hardly knew it was there.

The coracle – linked to the Gaelic word currach – is not unique to Shropshire, of course. The Welsh still deploy them, though mainly as a tourist attraction, and variations on the theme can be found as far apart as India and South America. If you want to row the Mekong in one, ask for a thung-chai.

But along the upper reaches of the Severn and the Wye coracles were once seen in profusion, with only subtle local differences to distinguish them: the shape of the paddle or the covering for the hull. The key was that a coracle was made to service one particular stretch of river, and one only.

It's worth adding that coracles were built for the upper rivers. Trying to use one at Chepstow or Gloucester was really not to be recommended.

Down on the Wye, the local name was a truckle, and they were used extensively for salmon netting and angling until the early 20th Century. Here they were made of interwoven willow twigs covered in horse-hide, or, later, with canvas, coated with pitch.

When fishing for salmon the fishermen tended to work in pairs, one to each coracle, with a net stretched between the two boats. Once the net had done its job, the fishermen manoeuvred the two boats together and pulled the net out of the water with the fish inside.

Coracles have been deployed on our rivers since classical times at least. Julius Caesar mentions British skin-lined boats (though it's unclear whether he meant coracles or

currachs, which were rather larger), as does Pliny. Archaeological remains of what looks like a coracle have been found in a Bronze Age burial site at Dalgety Bay in Fife, and two others at Corbridge and Ferriby in North Yorkshire.

Archaeological remains are almost all we have left, to be honest. There's an unprepossessing shed beside the Severn at Ironbridge, which was the workshop of one of Shropshire's last coracle makers, Eustace Rogers, who died in 2003. A campaign is currently underway to save and preserve it.

The Rogers family had been making coracles at Ironbridge for generations, by Eustace's time using unbleached calico, covered in tar and pitch. When Eustace made one out of leather instead, it was for heritage purposes only.

Although the industry (unlike the river) has dried up, we can be grateful that arguably the most famous coracle of them all is safe and sound. This was the one used by Fred Davies to retrieve footballs kicked over the stand at Gay Meadow, Shrewsbury Town's perilously situated ground next to the river. Fred did this unusual job until he was in his eighties, saving the club a small fortune in lost balls. For each ball he saved (probably more than the Shrewsbury keeper did, in all honesty) Fred was paid the princely sum of 25p.

Once the Shrews upped sticks to a new stadium at Meole Brace in 2007, further from the river than even the most agricultural of punts, the coracle was surplus to requirements. Luckily two loyal fans picked up Fred's coracle at a charity auction the following year and presented it to the club.

All of the above is true. The widespread rumour that, on his death, Fred was treated to a fiery funeral on the river, in the manner of a deceased Viking warrior, and in one of his own beloved coracles, is less so.