A Coracle is Constructed from Holt Island Willow

By Gavin Hitchcock

In May 2022, I went to a 2-day coracle-building workshop in N Wales, camping in a secluded spot by a small river. There were about 25 participants, of all ages, with a wide variety of motives, but a united in a common enthusiasm and wonder at the simple manner in which a river-worthy boat can be constructed using natural materials and traditional methods. Our hosts were an inspirational couple skilled at making coracles and all manner of other things out of willow.

On a Welsh hilltop, I helped others build their coracles and learnt the skills, but wished to build my own back in St Ives, from locally sourced willow wands.

In September that year, on Holt Island, I was delighted to meet Paul Claydon. The Countryside Ranger for Huntingdonshire District Council, based at Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. He suggested I might take some of the first harvest of wands grown from the old coppiced willows on Holt Island. I proposed to write up my experience of building the coracle, for the Friends of Holt Island Newsletter, and make a contribution. With my friend David onboard, the project was launched on December 22nd, when David and I met with Paul on Holt Island, and drove off with assorted willow wands in the boot of my Ford Panda. We left them soaking in a drum of water until the weather was warmer.

Finally, in sunny July we made a start … The first step was to lay a carefully designed template, and then embed the sharpened ends of the four strongest wands in the ground, aligned with four holes in the wooden seat, which was then removed for a while. The rest of the willow wands were set into the ground all the way round, precisely paired and placed

The hardest part was the weaving of the thinner wands, following ancient patterns, in, behind one, over two, under and in, … . The weave is what gives strength to the coracle structure. After a few layers, the seat is threaded down again, over the four first wands, and then weaving recommences, following

a different pattern now, and laying down a wide collar of woven wands. Any error in the pattern has to be traced back to its source and corrected.

The next step, when sufficient layers of weave have been laid down, is to gently persuade each long wand to bend over and be firmly imbedded in the weave alongside its opposite partner. Temporary ties bind the partners together. One has to be very, very patient, and talk sweetly to each wand, using thumbs to encourage it into shape, little by little. If a wand breaks, a new one has to be inserted. One has to stand back, regularly, and check that the overall shape is emerging as desired. Some wands may have to be shortened, or their curve adjusted. When all feels right, ties are made at each intersection. Then the whole frame is levered very gently out of the ground, and placed right side up, to allow the ends of wands to be pruned neatly down to the weave.

The frame is then covered with calico, carefully folded over the rim and stitched through or below the weave with large needles and string. The willow wands have to be allowed to dry for a while, before painting and waterproofing with bitumen. A combination of weather, health and travel issues meant we only got round to this after another winter had passed.

We gave the coracle three coats of bitumen, ensuring that no pinpricks of light could be spotted from underneath.

At long last, having crafted a wooden oar, attached a rope to the seat, and obtained a licence from the appropriate authority, we launched our sturdy craft on the River Great Ouse near Needingworth, and found it to be perfectly waterworthy. Rowing with one oar – in front – is an ancient art that takes some developing, but a speed of about 2km/h is easily achievable on a good day. On a windy day, however, it is like riding a leaf on the surface of the water, and you are at the mercy of wind and current, as I proved to my cost. There is, to my knowledge, only one other coracle in the vicinity of St Ives, whose owner, Peter, may sometimes to be seen circumnavigating Holt Island. We propose to hold a regatta soon. Any other coracle owners are welcome, do get in touch!