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Consulting **the coracle**

Will this boat survive or sink without trace? **Clive Fewins** builds one and takes his chances on the river

You might expect a fragile boat that consists of basketwork covered with calico, weighing only 25lb and looking like an upturned turtle when carried on the back, would sink the moment a full-sized adult stepped into it.

Not so. It may look precarious and will take you around in ever-increasing circles until you master the recommended technique of paddling from the front in a figure-of-eight movement. But if you sit firmly on the seat in the middle, as I did in my newly constructed coracle, pray hard and strain every muscle to maintain your equilibrium, both mental and physical, then you should stay afloat.

I managed, though I would be the first to admit that taking one of these cantankerous craft out for the first time on the Thames at Wallingford on a cold November day was an unnerving experience.

Constructing my primitive vessel in the breezy but dry surroundings of an open-fronted barn in a Chilterns farmyard four miles from the river proved far less taxing on the nerves. Even when you hear the crack of a reluctant ash lath as it refuses to be bent in the desired direction, it does not carry with it the fear of an immediate capsizing into icy waters.

When I arrived at the workshop of

coracle expert, Alistair Phillips, he presented me with a pile of 30 "green" ash laths, all about 8ft long. They had been cut using a bandsaw, a vital piece of equipment for any backwoodsman-type like Alistair who earns his living from making woodland products and teaching the skills of the forest.

Under my tutor's careful guidance I used the laths, plus a handful of other materials and a great degree of care, to produce what he calls an "Ironbridge" style coracle with a waterproof covering of one of two types.

The first is the traditional type, rolled calico, which is Egyptian cotton that has to be waterproofed using bitumen paint. Type two – a recent innovation Alistair has pioneered – is covered with a heavy-duty plastic used mainly for manufacturing the flexible sides of goods lorries.

Type two, Alistair explained, is more robust and lasts longer than the traditional calico, and has the advantage of being easier to mend when there is a split or a hole that threatens a leak. But it comes in rather garish colours and is a lot more expensive than traditional tarred calico. I choose the traditional style, although it takes longer to make because of the time needed for the three coats of bitumen paint to dry.

I discovered Alistair, 29, too late in the year to go on one of his regular courses, so he kindly agreed to a one-to-one tuition session, taking the usual two days. By using one of his previously manufactured coracles I manage to fit in both the manufacture and a few lessons on the water in this time.

Making the coracle really did turn out to be as straightforward as Alistair had promised. "Coracles of various types are known to date back to pre-Roman times,

Wet set: Clive Fewins works on his coracle under the watchful eye of Alistair Phillips, before taking it onto the icy waters of the Thames

but little one-man craft like this were originally devised to take people in the Ironbridge area of Shropshire from one bank of the river to another, and also for fishing," he explained. "You really don't need to be a skilled woodworker. It really doesn't matter if the coracle turns out to be a little lumpy and bumpy: building one is not a precise science and no coracle is designed to be hydrodynamic and streamlined."

The key to the process is creating a strong frame from the pre-sawn laths and rejecting any that look as if they will break or split. This is done by starting with the seat – the most rigid part of the vessel – and teasing the bendy laths into an oval shape that can be nailed to it to form the rim or "gunwale". The rest of the frame construction involves interweaving the other 13 key laths in as even a fashion as possible. They are fixed using clenched (bent over) nails.

It is rhythmic, therapeutic work, especially if you follow Alistair's advice to "go with the materials". If you go too fast or do not preselect the best laths by bending them around your waist and shoulders then you are likely to have

to unweave part of your previously constructed web.

Covering the frame with calico can be fiddly if you are determined to produce a craft that does not look like an upside-down Christmas pudding with a large boil on its side. A tuck is taken at each corner and sewn into place to keep things shipshape.

Alistair stresses at all times that these are fun craft that are easily transported in an estate car or on a roof rack and designed to provide entertainment. "Coracling is a great pastime," he says. "I prefer to use mine in conjunction with friends on some of the small rivers in Oxfordshire. We generally go in twos or threes – one per coracle – and the whole object is to avoid capsizing, and having to get out and carry the craft around obstacles.

"Coracles are slower but much more agile than canoes and kayaks. You can negotiate a path in very shallow water, and usually get through, even when there are masses of vegetation seemingly blocking your progress. In some ways it's like a watery version of mountain biking."



HOW TO DO IT

For details of Alistair's coracle courses, which take place near his home, contact him at: Woodworks, 4, Down Farm Cottage, Ewelme Down Farm, Wallingford, Oxfordshire OX14 6PQ; alternatively telephone him on 01491 834886 or 07776 002467.

Courses recommence in spring 2010 and two-day coracle building courses cost £200. This includes all the materials for a calico covered coracle plus the paddle. Using the heavy duty plastic covering costs an extra £30.

For those travelling from farther afield Alistair is

able to supply a list of local bed and breakfasts.

Other coracle builders offer courses in different parts of the country.

For details about these, and more information about coracles, contact The Coracle Society, www.coraclesociety.org.uk