A Story About a Coracle Shed

The Insh Coracle Club began life in late 2011 when we took our sole coracle for a paddle in the vast wetland of the Insh Marshes. Half the population of the village seemed to appear out of nowhere wanting a go and we were off.



Three more coracles were in action by the spring of 2015 when a chance conversation between Rachel Chisholm, Curator at the Highland Folk Museum in Newtonmore, and myself, Raymond Green of the Club, took our little coracle club in a new direction.

The Museum had been gifted two coracles, one a replica of the River Spey Coracle at Elgin Museum and the other a lathe-basket Ironbridge pattern coracle, but they were both kept in store and not usually visible to visitors.

I told her about the Insh Coracle Club and we both felt that it could be of interest to visitors to the Museum to see coracles afloat, learn about them, and possibly try them if they were brave enough. I offered to take a couple of coracles to float on the curling pond near the Museum's 1700s township. We decided that Vintage Day, 24 May 2015, would be a suitable date when there were many other vintage vehicles and special activities going on. Of course, there would be lots of people too!

Early that morning Jeremy Usher Smith and I took two coracles to the curling pond in preparation for the day. We quickly discovered the pond was far too shallow to allow paddling although the coracles floated perfectly!! Panic.



We were aware of the nearby Millpond and thought it might be worth a try. We didn't know what to expect but an exploratory paddle quickly reassured us as we found a good depth of water, perfect for our purposes. It is a relatively small pond, supplying water to drive the waterwheel of the adjacent sawmill, but large enough for a good paddle. We had found our 'home' and later that morning, soon after the Museum had opened, we had the first of many paddlers wanting a go. They were students from New Zealand.



The event proved very popular and we were invited back for further special days through that summer and so, for convenience, we left the coracles in the main storage area of the Museum, Am Fasgadh. However, carrying them the length of the Museum each time, over a kilometer and against a headwind, was hard work and the sawmill having broken down and with no moving machinery, we were allowed to store them inside the building for the season, bringing them back to Insh for the winter.

We realized that we needed more coracles to cope with the considerable number of visitors wishing to paddle and by the following year we had built two more. This then became a problem as transporting them between Insh and the Museum was not easy. We had arranged in 2016 for the Museum to collect and return them to Insh but the problem became even more acute at the end of 2018. We had 665 paddlers that year.

The national Coracle Society had become aware of our activities at the Museum and especially of the inevitable damage being done to the coracles through wear and tear caused by such large numbers of paddlers. They gave us a grant to purchase three very robust fibreglass coracles, made from moulds of working coracles, and these were delivered to the Museum on the 18 December 2018. We now had nine coracles.



Throughout the 2019 season the coracles were kept in the sawmill but as the season was drawing to an end we had to plan for their return to Insh. We realized that they could not remain in the sawmill indefinitely as the Museum was planning to restore the sawmill to working condition in 2020 and it would be unsafe for us to continue using it as storage space.

Meanwhile, a new direct access from the sawmill to the pond had made life much easier for us. Carrying the coracles round from the sawmill was eliminated and we could paddle and tow across the pond to the newly rebuilt jetty. We had over 1200 paddlers during the 2019 season.



The Museum had agreed to store the three new fibreglass coracles in the main store. However, there remained five of our own hand-built coracles to consider. An idea grew about building a shed alongside the millpond near the jetty.

Several informal discussions took place with the Museum management team and we investigated the materials available within the Museum that we could repurpose. We wanted a coracle shed that would blend in with the location, be large enough to accommodate eight coracles, be suitable for display of the coracles on non-paddling days, and not cost us too much. We agreed that we would retain ownership of the coracles and have access at all times.

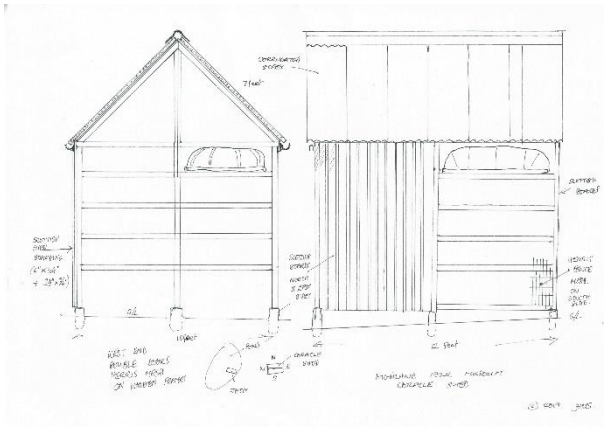
Over the previous two seasons we had fashioned a bivouac for ourselves between trees near the jetty and we felt it to be the ideal location for a shed.



Jeremy set to work straight away and when, on 26 August 2019 Liz English, Curator Large Object Collections, emailed us asking if we had any more thoughts about a boat house - *'it would be good to schedule it in, if we were keen to build it for the Museum. If not*

– *it would be useful to have some design ideas'*, he already had a draft design and we had a final design ready by 30 August.

By 10 September 2019 Jeremy had developed scale drawings and we had established, with the help of Hannes Schnell of the Museum staff, that most of the materials we would need for the build were available around the Museum site.



Meantime, I had made a scale model using stiff card to get an idea of proportions of the building. These plans were forwarded to Liz on 12 September 2019.



Liz replied the next day offering further materials to help our build and also suggested a site meeting to consider the detailed siting of the boathouse. We met on 16 October and confirmed and marked out the area near to the jetty. It would require some excavation work on a bank to make the area reasonably level.



Jeremy and Nic Winter from the Insh Coracle Club met again with Hannes to identify all the materials we wanted. They identified some large granite blocks suitable for the foundations and a considerable quantity of sawn timber from the recent Forest Fest Day. This resulted in some slight changes to the detailed drawings taking account of this better-quality material. The modified drawings were submitted to Liz on 31 October 2019. In addition, news that the Museum was planning to have a digger on site during November prompted them to ask if it could be available to excavate our site for us?

The digger arrived on 2 December 2019 and we met the following day to excavate the area for our foundations. All went well with the efforts of Museum staff, Liz, Hannes, James, Dougie, and ourselves.



Our next job was to transport the very heavy granite blocks, originally from a farm near Laggan, from the storage area near the Museum workshops and get them on site. This was accomplished on 10 December 2019 with the help of Hannes and James. It required more pick and shovel work to complete levelling ready for the blocks to be set in concrete.

Because of frosty conditions we were unable to mix concrete over the remainder of December but in the meantime Hannes had put a quarter ton of aggregate, the concrete mixer, two bags of cement and two buckets at the sawmill.

The weather became somewhat warmer and on 6 January 2020 we leveled, accurately placed and embedded the granite blocks in concrete.



We had decided that with our own commitments we would work on Tuesdays but the weather the following week put a halt to work. We had a planning meeting to refine the order of future work.

A break in the weather on 21 January allowed us to concrete-in reinforcement straps to hold the wall studs, drill the granite blocks for plugs and then screw down the timber wall plates. These were accurately placed ready for the wall frames. We also managed to spread some coarse aggregate, brought down by Dougie, over the floor area.



In the afternoon we ripped some of the timber supplied by the Museum into 3”x 2” lengths for the wall frames.

There was a significant snowfall on Monday 27 January but we decided to go ahead the next day. The Township at the Museum looked beautiful under snow cover but it was a lovely clear morning and work proceeded in the flat area outside the workshops.



We cut the timber to the required lengths and assembled the frame for the rear wall. It was heavy but we managed to carry it over to the site and brace it in position. The side walls were assembled on site after we had transferred the prepared timber round to the sawmill in Nick’s van. Liz helped us carry the timber from there down to the site.

The side wall assemblies and the end frame were a perfect fit on the base plates so we were highly pleased with the day’s work, snow notwithstanding.



Our next working day, 4 February, was a beautiful, warm, and clear day. We worked at the workshops ripping planks for the roof trusses and formed one truss to ensure fit. It

actually fitted very well so we then disassembled it for use as a template for the remainder of the trusses. After storing the prepared timbers we returned to the site and installed the heavy 4x4 timbers for the door frame.



We were concerned about the condition of the old corrugated sheets needed for the roof as they had a considerable number of old nail holes. We asked the Museum about new corrugated iron but with no budget for this we acknowledged the need to use the old sheets. To ensure a sound roof Hannes offered us sufficient 8ft x 4ft waterproof panels left over from the building of Am Fasgadh and Liz confirmed that she had acquired sufficient roofing felt for our needs.

The plan for 11 February was to cut the remaining roofing truss timbers to shape, assemble the trusses on site and then install on the wall frames. Then heavy snow intervened and the workshop was inaccessible. We sat at home.

Weather on the 18th was not much better, wet snow, rain, high winds, and sodden ground. However, we could get to the workshops so spent all morning preparing the boards for/and assembling the roof trusses. The afternoon was spent cutting the waterproof panels to size and preparing the cladding boards, ripping planks in to 8" and 6" widths. The weather was much improved the next day, so Jeremy & I went over and, with the help of Hannes and the Museum lorry, transported yesterday's work to the sawmill ready for our next working day.



The water level in the millpond was higher than we had ever seen it. The jetty was not accessible from the bank although not quite afloat! Fortunately, the ropes securing it had stopped it floating off.

Heavy snow and icy conditions the following week prevented any work but with the arrival of Spring we were able to start making up for lost time with two consecutive days of work.

Monday 2 March saw the roof being installed. The roof trusses were a perfect fit on the wall frames and the waterproof panels, to our great delight, were an exact fit on the trusses. We had concerns that the panels were too brittle for nails and that we would need to drill and screw. In the event, after experimenting, we found that the nail gun could do the job to perfection.



The whole roof was then covered with a waterproof membrane.



The following day, in perfect weather, we were able to fix the battens across the roof ready for the final installation of the corrugated iron sheets, recycled from the yard. We were unable to use them immediately as we needed to repair old nail holes before installation. We also discovered that our recycled gutter clips were the wrong size for the cast iron gutter so it will require a further rummage in the yard.

After lunch we began to put the cladding on the walls: the rear gable end was finished ready for the sealing lathes and a third of the rear side-wall was covered.



Our luck with the weather continued for our next working day, 9 March, and we were able to complete the wall cladding. Just. We were running out of timber quite rapidly and had to 'patch' a small area above the door opening.



However, all was not lost as a quick recce around the workshops, and with much generous help from Hannes, we sourced more planks in the wood store which were suitable for ripping. This was completed the following day inside the workshops which was most fortunate as it poured with rain. We now had sufficient timber to complete the build and the doors.

A further recce around the yard also yielded sufficient damaged Heras fence panels we could adapt for the mesh wall and doors. The remaining problem is the condition of the corrugated roofing sheets.

The weather smiled on us the following week. On Monday 16th we completed nailing on the 'laps' – the narrow strips of wood covering the gaps between the cladding boards. It was a slow tedious job. We also prepared the timber for the platforms/shelves for storage of the coracles; we planned on four platforms to take eight coracles. We also sorted out our final selection of corrugated sheets ready for cutting and hole repair.

We focused on the Heras fencing the next day. There were several damaged panels available to us although some were too badly damaged for our use. However, we managed to cut sufficient mesh for two panels for the open wall and fixed them in position.

The door timbers were cut to size but unfortunately the Museum had no glue for the 'gluing and screwing' of the assembly. As we could not make them up on-site, Nick agreed to take the timber home for assembly. We also measured and cut the mesh to cover them. Hannes had supplied hinges from his store but they were old and rusty so Jeremy took them home to wire brush and paint with Hammerite.



Then came Covid-19, we were locked out and there the shed remained, unfinished.

Lockdown eventually began to ease and on 7 July 2020 we were allowed back on site. Oh joy! We had to provide the Museum with a covid-19 Risk Assessment about safe working and understand the Museum's own procedures but we were so glad to be back.

Remembering where we left off, Nick went directly to the boathouse to hang the doors, which he brought from home, with the hinges Jeremy had cleaned up. Jeremy and I went to the workshops and spent all day hammering and straightening the fourteen old corrugated roofing sheets we had found. All were in poor condition and rusty on one side, some had been used more than once and were peppered with nail holes so we had to flatten them ready for filling with mastic, and others were just buckled and bent..

There was now an imperative to complete the shed as there were plans for a possible reopening of the Museum toward the end of July. The Museum was anxious for us to remove the coracles from the sawmill and in any case we wished to finish well before that date so we agreed to work two days a week until completion.

Thursday 9 July saw some real progress. The doors were now installed and opening/closing perfectly and we had transported the corrugated roofing sheets to the site. They were not quite ready for installation as the nail holes had to be filled with mastic and the sheets cut to correct length They also had to be sorted to fit the roof as they were all of different widths. It took us all day to finally get one side of the roof fixed.



The other side of the roof was completed on Tuesday 14 July and the ridge pieces fixed. All that remained to do was find and fix gutters and downpipes (no easy task as we discovered most of the material in the builders yard, being cast iron, was cracked or broken), build the platforms inside ready for the coracles, paint the whole structure, re-

surface the inside floor, and complete the groundworks outside. Not much! Nevertheless we felt the end was in sight.



On Thursday we found a pile of fine scalpings had been left for us by the Museum staff. The floor hitherto was quite rough so our first job was to spread it creating a good surface.

Nick went off on a final hunt for guttering and downpipes and came back with a very big smile and enough mis-matched bits which he magically cobbled together.

The roof was wire brushed and cleaned off ready for painting and already looked much better.



We were very aware of covid-19 precautions being planned by the Museum to ensure the safety of visitors and in particular the one-way travel along the footpath. Accordingly, Jeremy formed a new exit from the shed to the path to enable social distancing as required, should any visitors come down for a closer look.



Raymond built the coracle platforms inside from the prepared timber hoping the measurements were correct. We simply couldn't resist bringing the coracles from the sawmill and paddled them across the pond to their new home. They went onto the platforms perfectly! Amazing! This of course was the primary reason for the whole endeavour.



The Museum had supplied us with Cuprinol for the walls and bitumen paint for the roof but by end of the day we had only managed to get the rear gable wall painted.



We had high hopes of completing the work on our next visit, Thursday 21 July 2020, and we nearly made it! Some of the Heras mesh on the side was a little rusty and had to be cleaned and painted. The guttering was removed for painting, and painting of the walls and roof were finally completed. We ran out of Cuprinol to finish the double doors but Hannes saved the day with a fresh supply and all of the paint work was done.

Hannes also brought down two more loads of scalpings which we spread to tidy up the area in front of the shed.

We were unable to re-fix the guttering because of wet paint so another day was needed to finish the building.

Our last day – at last!! Thursday 23 July 2020. The job is finished. Nick refitted the guttering, Jeremy installed a temporary fence to facilitate one-way working because of covid-19, and Raymond did some more tidying around the site and inside the shed.

All was now ready for opening day, as far as we were concerned. The Museum had installed some signage for one-way traffic and are preparing an information board to be fixed to the wall outside.

We collected our tools and went home in time for lunch.

Until…….



LAUNCH DAY!

July 29 2020