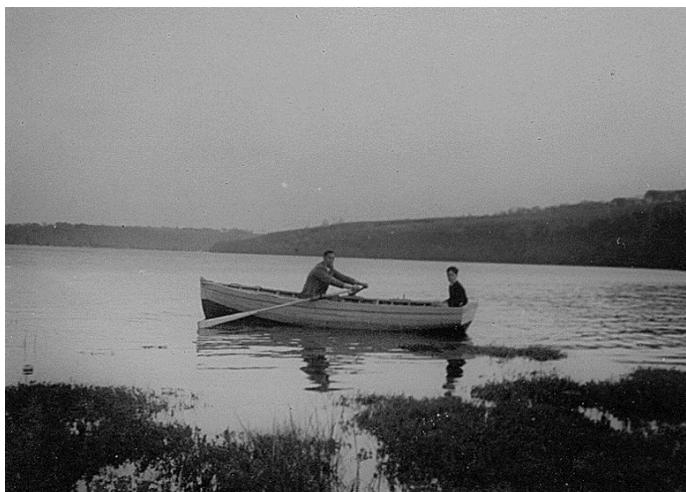


# The Traditional Llangwm (Fishing) Boat



**Graham Stephens**

## The Traditional Llangwm (Fishing) Boat

The Llangwm boat is an important part of the heritage of the village and in its tarred black livery, is as recognisable as a Teifi coracle or an Irish Curragh. The picture below shows a Llangwm boat on display at the National History Museum at St. Fagans. This particular boat was built around 1880 by John Palmer and was in use up to 1970 by Ivor Palmer for salmon fishing using a compass net and also for herring fishing using seine nets.

Boats were usually around fourteen feet long and built of larch or elm on oak frames. Pitch pine was sometimes used for the stem and transom but a variety of timbers might be incorporated according to availability. With many of the fishermen having close association with Pembroke Dockyard, this proved a valuable source of timber. Security for this naval establishment was tight with the dockyard gates being manned by naval personnel but if an occasional baulk of timber happened to fall into the water and then drift upstream on the flood tide, well that was fair gain.

No two boats were ever quite the same and relied on the eye of the shipwright rather than any template or plan laid down in a book. The example in this photograph appears beamier than most although, like nearly every other Llangwm boat, it is tarred inside and out. Occasionally, as in the photo, boats would have the gunwale or topsides painted in a contrasting colour.



### **COMPASS BOAT**

Built by John Palmer at Llangwm, Pembrokeshire in 1880. This boat was used until 1970 by Ivor Palmer for compass netting for salmon and the drift netting of herring in Milford Haven and on the River Cleddau. The boat is positioned for fishing by means of a rope stretched across the river.

DONORS: Friends of the National Museum of Wales and Ivor Palmer

Llangwm boats were carvel built, meaning the planks were laid edge to edge rather than overlapping (clinker built). To ensure the boat remained watertight, it was *caulked* before being put in the water. Oakum (unravelled hemp rope) was tapped into the seams using a caulking iron and hot, molten pitch was then poured over this to ensure a waterproof bond between the planks and to help preserve the oakum. I clearly remember my grandfather and uncle renovating our old Llangwm boat and can still recollect the smell of melting pitch in an old tin can on an open fire on the foreshore at Llangwm Ferry.



A caulking mallet and caulking iron.

In addition, most Llangwm boats were tarred to preserve the timber which also added to the waterproofing process. However, after initial construction or after a prolonged period out of the water, the planks would lose moisture and contract, opening up the seams and causing the boat to leak. To overcome this, when a boat was put back in the water, it was deliberately filled with heavy weights (usually large stones) and sunk. After a few days, the planks would take up water and expand causing the pitch soaked oakum to be compressed in the seams thus ensuring the boat was watertight.

*Alun Lewis's boat following a recent refit. The carvel laid planks can clearly be seen. The deep keel section below the stern of the boat gives it good directional stability under oars.*

*This boat has been handed down within the family and was probably built some time towards the end of the nineteenth century.*



The following picture also shows the *tholes* – pairs of wooden pegs between which the oars were held whilst rowing (modern boats have rowlocks for this purpose). These were opposite each other and positioned mid-ships for single handed rowing with another set slightly forward allowing a second person to row or if the stern of the boat was full of fish. The oars themselves had leather collars which fitted between the tholes and prevented excess wear on the wooden oars. Tholes could be fashioned from soft or hardwood depending on availability but I have memories of my grandfather cutting and trimming hazel saplings to replace old or lost ones.

The single thole on the aft quarter of this boat would have been used both to adjust the lie of the boat when using a compass net and to help secure the aft pole of the compass net itself when fishing. By ‘springing’ the stern line around the thole, the boat position could be trimmed to lie square across the tidal flow (see later pictures of compass fishing).



Occasionally, Llangwm boats carried a short mast which was stepped through the forward thwart (seat). This would have carried a small lugsail. With no depth of keel or centreboard, this sail would have been mainly used when the wind was astern or over the aft quarter.

During their time, Llangwm boats were renowned for their solidity. Compared to modern boats, they were relatively heavy for their size resulting in a low freeboard. After a good catch of herring in the spring, it was not unusual to see boats laden down to the gunwales with fish, making their way slowly back to the Cunnigar at Black Tar. Here the herring would be picked out of the nets and sent off to market. In the 1960s and 70s the development of GRP (Glass Reinforced Plastic) boats sounded the end for the traditional wooden boat. Not only were GRP boats easier and cheaper to construct, they were also simple to maintain and had greater carrying capacity. Perhaps not as easy to row as a traditional wooden boat, they could be powered by outboard motors which superseded the use of oars for fishing and recreational purposes.

Today, the boatbuilding skills acquired in the local dockyard have been largely lost and the sight of a true Llangwm fishing boat is a rarity. GRP lookalikes made by Cygnus Marine in Suffolk are available (also in black!) and have found favour with the few salmon-fishing license holders that remain. Sadly, the boat exhibited at St. Fagans Welsh Folk Museum is one of the few remaining links to a boatbuilding tradition that once thrived in the village. The Dockyard workers skills honed on much larger wooden vessels was undoubtedly what kept the Llangwm boat alive. Examples of chests full of old shipwrights’ tools used to build these craft, can still be found within village families.



*Some of the tools used by Llangwm shipwrights*



*Guildford Pill in the early twentieth century with around twenty Llangwm boats tied up along the shoreline. There would have been even more in Edwards Pill and at Black tar and Llangwm Ferry. One estimate puts their number at more than sixty boats.*



*This boat belonged to the ferryman from the cottage in the Ferry Bay, Llangwm Ferry. Photo from 1920s.*



*The Stephens Family Llangwm boat being rowed by my father Norman with me in the stern sometime in the late 1950s. It had painted topsides and was never used for salmon or herring fishing. It was bought by Graham John (Baker) in the late 60's but there is no records of it after that.*

### **The remaining examples of Llangwm Boats**

There are still a few examples of traditional Llangwm boats to be found but those like Alun Lewis's which are still used for compass netting are a true rarity. Three have been preserved as museum pieces: one at St Fagans Museum, one at Scolton Manor and one at the Maritime Heritage Centre at Front Street, Pembroke Dock. Until recently, there were the remains of others scattered around the foreshore at Edwards Pill and Guildford Pill but these too have disintegrated and, in recent years, have disappeared.



*K3, Kenneth Morgan's old boat which he donated to the West Wales Maritime Heritage Society and which is now stored in their workshop in Pembroke Dock. The Society has no plans to restore the boat at present.*

The following photos were taken about ten years ago but little remains of these boats today.



*In 2010, this boat lay on the bank near the stepping stones in Guildford Pill. It was last fished by Glyn Morgan. Only the transom is visible today in 2020.*



*Sadly, there is little left of this boat which lay on the foreshore of Edwards Pill for a number of years. It was rebuilt by local shipwright Willie Morris in the 1950s. Like most Llangwm boats it came down through the family and was later owned and fished by Morris Thomas of Edwards Pill. When Morris could no longer use the boat, it passed to Michael Roberts to continue the tradition. A sprung garboard plank made in uneconomic to repair and so it was replaced by a new GRP equivalent.*



*K7 at the bottom of Pill Road in Hook back in 2010 where brambles and moss had started to reclaim it. There is little of it left today. Possible former owner Dai Jenkins.*

### **Licensing of salmon fishing**

Boats used for salmon fishing with compass nets are licensed and strictly controlled as a means of preserving salmon stocks. The season for compass netting runs from 1<sup>st</sup> June until 1<sup>st</sup> September with no fishing allowed from 6.00am Saturday morning until 12.00noon on Monday. Only six

licenses are awarded at any time and these run in perpetuity until someone passes away or gives up their license. 'Endorsees' who have previously registered their interest (or occasionally someone who can show that they depend on fishing for their livelihood) then get first consideration for the vacant license. Each boat is obliged to have its license number painted in white on the bow. Originally the designated letter would have been an 'L' followed by the license number. This was changed in the 1970s and boats now have the letter 'K' instead.

A BBC film by John Mead who once had a holiday home in the village was made of compass netting at Hook back in the 1960s. There are still copies of the production to be found within the village and show many of the old characters sadly no longer with us.



*Alun Lewis's K5 moored off Landshipping Quay*



*Dennis Lewis in his boat L5 back in the 1950s. It is now owned by Alun Lewis his grandson.*



*The same boat (K5) recently renovated by Alun Lewis*



*Glyn Morgan and Herbert Jones deploying the compass net on K3 somewhere on the Western Cleddau (photo taken in 1960s).*

## The modern GRP boat by Cygnus Marine's yard in Suffolk.



*Michael Roberts' current salmon boat, a GRP hull from the Cygnus yard in Cornwall which he fitted out himself. In the traditional black Llangwm boat colour and with the K licence number on the bow, it is the nearest thing today to the old Llangwm boat.*

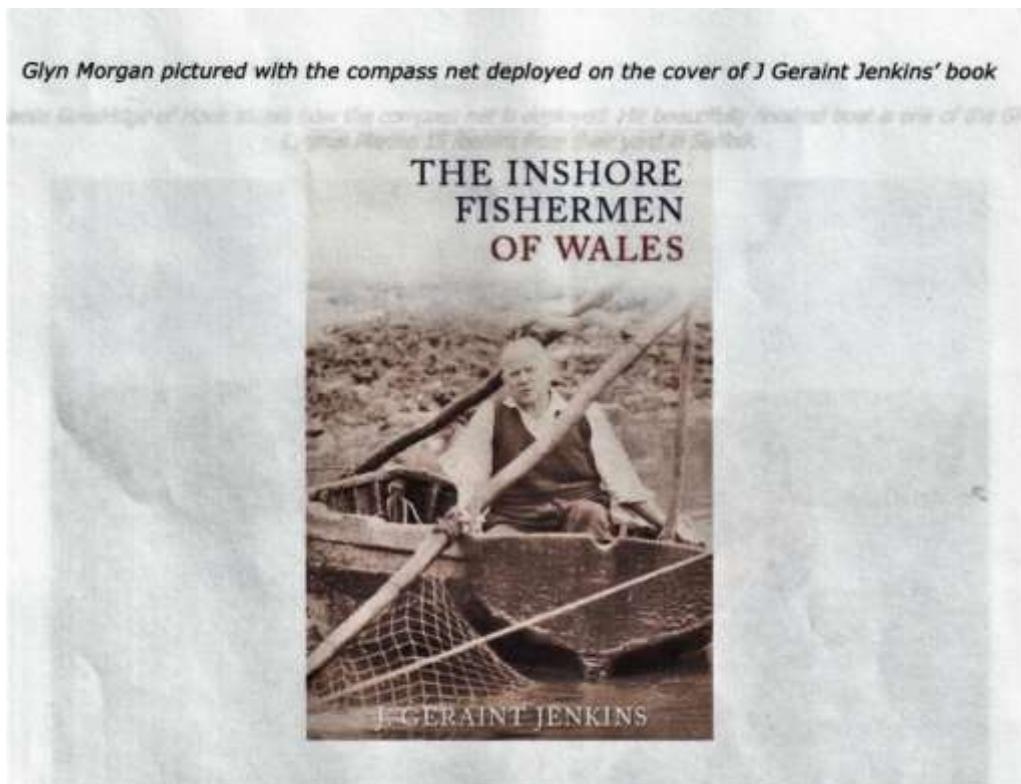


*Jack Griffiths' GRP Cygnus marine boat with Jim Richards' new K7 in the background.*

Further reading about salmon fishing on the Cleddau:

- 'Nets and Coracles' by J. Geraint Jenkins; published by David and Charles. 1974
- 'The Inshore Fishermen of Wales' by J. Geraint Jenkins: published by Amberley Publishing, May 2009
- Article in 'The Countryman' magazine (summer 1968) by F.F.Nicholls

## The art of compass netting



*Same technique; different era: Glyn Morgan in his traditional Llangwm boat and Jamie Goodridge in his GRP Cygnus boat.*

*Jamie Goodridge of Hook shows how the compass net is deployed. His beautifully finished boat is one of the GRP, Cygnus Marine 15 footer from their yard in Suffolk.*



*The origins of the term 'compass net' clearly demonstrated in these photos. Note the stern line of the boat taken around a thole and adjusted to set the boat at right angles to the stream.*

The following are photos taken by Jamie Goodridge whilst compass netting on the Western Cleddau at Hook, July 2020.



*As the tide approaches the last of the ebb, the boat is secured fore and aft to lie across the channel.*



*The arms of the compass are opened and secured with a cross member.*



*A stone counterweight is fastened to the apex of the compass frame.*



*The net is now ready to be deployed*



*The apex of the frame can now be tilted upwards so that the net flows under the boat.*



*A 'feeler line' from the centre of the net is held by the fisherman and gives warning when a fish has entered the net*



*Once a fish has been detected, the frame is tilted upwards to hopefully reveal a salmon.....*



..... which can now be retrieved from the net.

Jamie has also used a drone to take the following amazing footage; click on the link below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCu1lC2Jh9U>

Thanks to all who have helped provide the information and photographs for this article especially Jamie Goodridge and Alun Lewis who still carry on this traditional method of fishing used by their grandfathers.

**Graham Stephens – July 2020**