

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEA KAYAKING FROM A BRITISH PERSPECTIVE

*A PERSONAL ACCOUNT BY JOHN RAMWELL
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I have been 'paddling my own canoe as skipper and crew'



for some fifty years. Fortune often comes with being in the right place at the right time and I was able to be both as our sport began to really take off back in the 1960s back home in Britain

First let us be clear as to what we understand by the term sea kayak. For readers of 'Sea Kayaker' this may seem a little trite but it often benefits for clarifying. I see it as a discreet craft with a soft or hard shell covering hull and deck with the exception of the cockpit/s. The paddlers sit with legs outstretch before them and propel the kayak with double bladed paddles and/or a small sail,

(lug and/or jib). A lengthier definition describing size and appendages is not necessary, I'm sure.

To trace the origins of the contemporary sea kayak you need to look at the history of the Inuit. There are few water craft with a history as old as that of kayaks. There is evidence that they existed 2000 years ago and David Zimmerly believes their existence goes back by probably 5000 years.

As fascinating as it is to discuss the origins and development of kayaks this far back I want to dwell on the comparatively recent history with an emphasis on how this recreational



activity has developed in the United Kingdom (UK). But before I do I shall briefly go back in time to well beyond my own period and discuss how this sport of ours has moved on from being undertaken by the Inuit to ensure their very survival to it being adopted by European

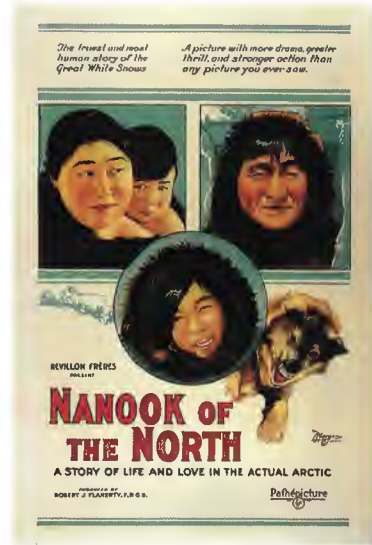
paddlers as a tool for recreation, for adventure and for exploration.

It is often believed that we in the UK based our early kayaks on the Inuit design. There is much archaeological evidence to demonstrate that canoeing in Britain goes back into pre-history. Skin covered currachs (type of Irish boat with wooden frame covered over with

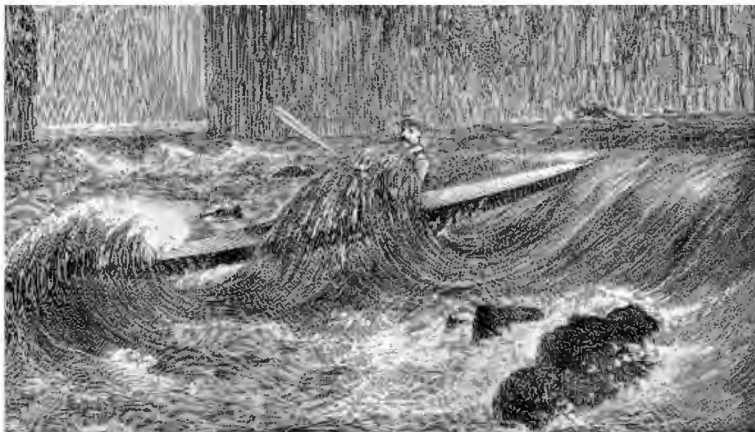
animal skins) and coracles (small light weight rounded one seat craft traditional to Wales) from the ancient Celtic period have been uncovered during excavations for the building, for example, of canals. Though bearing little resemblance to our modern Inuit style of sea kayak, they do represent the start of the evolution of man propelled water craft in the UK, very much as they did around the rest of the civilising world.

Moving on from the Celts to much more recent times.

The tradition of long open water and coastal kayaking journeys has always been a feature of our sport. Initially the Inuit travelled great distances through often big seas (Refer to film, 'Nanook of the North', 1922) in search of new fishing grounds or brides. In the 19th and 20th Century these long trips have been emulated by European paddlers as they pushed the boundaries of open water recreational kayaking; this time to pursue adventure and exploration rather than sustenance.



Among the first known recreational craft that can be described as a kayak comes to our notice in 1830 when a Mr. Canham, a London based engineer, paddled from France to the Channel Islands. A description of his craft appeared in a newspaper of the time and reads as follows, *“much like an Icelanders ‘caiak’, consisting of a light weight wooden framework some 10ft by 2ft, covered with tarred canvas. At one end was a receptacle for containing provisions and at the other, one for holding Congrave rockets, to be used in case of ship wreck. Each gunwale had attached to it a long thin bag filled with bladders to aid stability.*



The owner, sitting in the centre, was protected from spray by a covering of tarred canvas” So not much is that new after all!

In 1865 a Scot, John MacGregor, had a kayak built, reputedly modelled on native canoes of North America and Alaska. It was 15ft long and 28ins wide and 9ins deep. It weighed 80 pounds. He named it 'Rob Roy'. An unfeathered 7ft paddle and a lug

sail (The **lugsail** is an evolved version of the classical [square sail](#). In both [rigs](#), the upper side of the sail is attached to a [spar](#), the [yard](#), which is hoisted up the mast by a rope) and jib were the two methods of propulsion. John MacGregor went on to write an account of his journeys and one of these he called, 'A Thousand Miles In The Rob Roy Canoe'. This book did a lot to encourage canoeing in Britain at the time.

I could go on to elaborate on other canoeing exploits in the 19th Century. Suffice to say that the Scots undertook some remarkable and pioneering trips. A visit to the north west coast of Scotland will make it clear why this area is a Mecca for sea kayaking.

Just before leaping ahead to discuss the developments in the 20th Century I will mention that in 1887 the British Canoe Association was formed and though it only lasted thirty years it was the embryonic start of the forming of the British Canoe Union (BCU), of which more later.

In moving to the 1900s I recognise that I do grave injustice to the many other pioneering individuals of the 19th Century and their exploits who did much to lay the foundation of many equally innovative exploits that occurred in this, the 20th and 21st Century. Again the Scottish paddlers led the way. Folding kayaks and more available time and money led to the sport becoming so much more available, particularly between the two world wars.

For me one personality stands out, that of Gino Watkins. In 1930 he led the British Arctic Air Route Expedition to Greenland. He and his team obtained kayaks from the local Inuit who taught them how to use these craft.



Gino became very adept at using his kayak and was able to provide much of the fresh seal and fish to feed his group. He returned to Greenland in 1932 to continue his research and whilst out hunting met his untimely death. His body was never recovered but his kayak lies in a corridor at the Royal Geographical Society building in London. I have often campaigned for its proper location and preservation but there it lies, hardly in state.



You may think that Peter Brays' crossing of the Atlantic from St Johns to Ireland in 2001 was remarkable, as indeed it was. But in 1928 Franz Romer set out alone from Portugal, travelling 4,000 miles, spending 58 days continuously at sea before landing at Puerto Rico. Perhaps you may have heard of



Oskar

Australia, arriving there in 1939.

Speck used a wooden framed Folboat double kayak.



Oskar Speck

Oskar Speck. For the longest time his story went untold but his journey by kayak remains one of the longest at over 30,000 miles. He left Germany in 1932 and paddled to

He was met by the police who, after

congratulating him, promptly arranged for his internment. World War Two had just started.



Dr. Hannes Lindeann Standing Next to the Folding Boat He Crossed the Atlantic

Another legendary journey and one by which all open water expeditions by kayak are measured is probably that done by Hannes Lindemanns' when he crossed the Atlantic in 1956. While he was not the first to make such a crossing, his book, 'Alone At Sea', caught the imagination of many. His trip from the Canary Islands to the Bahamas took 72



Klepper Aeriis Quattro XT in military

days. It was quite a feat of survival. He used a 17 ft folding Klepper kayak. (A folding kayaking with wooden frame and covered with canvas as made by the Klepper Company)

Now I realise that Specks and Lindemanns exploits were not British but any history of kayaking should not, in my opinion, fail to mention them.

In 1970 Geoff Hunter, an old paddling buddy of mine, almost circumnavigated Britain in his self made Ammassalik kayak. I say almost as he cut through the middle of Scotland rather than go round the northern end of Scotland and encountering the wrath of Cape Wrath. Geoff stayed at the home of my parents the night before he attempted to cross the Solway Firth, the twenty mile or so stretch of water separating Scotland from England on the west coast. Within sight of the English coast Geoff became separated from his kayak and clung to a buoy for many hours before swimming to the English coast. Once recovered, he borrowed another Ammassalik kayak from Ian Bourn and went on to complete his trip to Maidstone, his departure town on the south coast. His subsequent book, 'Ammassalik Round Britain' became a popular read and probably inspired Bill Taylor et al to go on and complete a circumnavigation of mainland Britain and Ireland in 1986.

Before focussing on the development of sea kayaking in the UK I will add a few further names and their exploits to the list of 'interesting' kayaking journeys.

In 1975 Derek Hutchinson and team attempted to cross the North Sea, west to east. A crossing not without epicI know, I was there.

In 1977 Frank Goodman et al circumnavigated Cape Horn. In the same year Geoff Hunter and Nigel Foster went round Iceland. In 1981 Nigel went on to paddle from Baffin Island to Labrador, this trip also not without incident as he came to grief at the south end of his Hudson Bay crossing. It is a fascinating tale of survival and good fortune.

In the same year I went to the Bering Sea with two buddies to circumnavigate Nunivak Island. Another paddling story; for another time perhaps.

The list of 'interesting' kayak journeys goes on as boundaries are pushed outwards. South Georgia, Bass Strait, Gulf of Carpentaria; these are the venues of fairly recent expeditions that come to mind as are Australia to New Zealand in 2007 and the circumnavigation of Madagascar, 5000Km in 12 months.

These expeditions continue to fuel an even greater interest in sea kayaking as more and more clubs, schools, organisations and individuals take up the sea kayaking challenge. Many years ago I led a small group towards Fingals Cave off the west coast of Scotland. I was extolling the fact that we were enjoying an activity yet to be discovered. I had hardly got the words out of my mouth when 20 or so kayaks appeared from around the headland also making their way to the Cave which soon became rather crushed with kayaks; a sign of things to come.



Fingals Cave

We have moved on from a small clique of paddlers all known to each other to a huge number of ever increasing paddlers. Long may this continue.

Along with this increasing attraction and interest we have seen a plethora of kayak designs with improvement to kit such as paddles, hatches, rudders, PFDs, camping gear. Watching the docudrama of Scot and the Antarctic I am never failed to be amazed at the gear they had to use, all state of the art for the period but light weight and reliable they were not. We have come a long way thanks to the progress of technology. My first paddle across the English Channel (a distance of +/- 20 nautical miles between England and France) was done in a touring slalom kayak with a skeg held in place with a shock cord. No bulkheads, no pumps and little directional stability. Sponges sufficed to keep the kayak dry-ish. Improvisation was the order of the day. I kept my flares dry by keeping them enclosed in a length of plastic



plumbing pipe and used dry bags to keep kit dry-ish. Now we have a huge choice of kayaks fitted out with electric pumps, GPS navigation and equipment that remains truly water proof. Cell phones in particular have made a big improvement over the recent years as they are more reliable and have features like navigation and cameras. All far removed from the 'good old days'.

Earlier on I mentioned the birth of the British Canoe Union; said it was initially the formation of the British Canoe Association in 1887. Though this Association lapsed it was reborn in 1933 when it merged with the Camping Club of Great Britain. The problem with this arrangement was that being an 'association' it was precluded from being recognised as a national governing body. Only by being such would it be recognised by the Olympic Games Committee and so in March of 1936 nearly all the big canoe clubs and organisations met in London to agree on the establishment of the British Canoe Union; thus allowing British paddlers to compete in the 1936 Olympic Games. It was until 1978 that it was unanimously agreed to form a federal structure to embrace the Scottish, Welsh and Irish Canoeing Associations; so defining the constitutional structure of the BCU for the next 20 years. Currently we are seeing the formation of a new federal BCU Ltd. with the inclusion of the English Canoe Association. I hope this is all clear as there will be questions later!!

One of the most important contributions to canoe sport from the early BCU was the introduction of a coaching scheme. This provided a comprehensive syllabus of skills and knowledge combined with a series of tests and awards to take a paddler from novice to senior coach. It meant for a progressive learning and teaching structure which encouraged the sport to flourish at all levels, be it recreational or competitive, with an appropriate balance between adventure and safety. The BCU Coaching Handbook became the bible. I sometimes think we are caught up with our own success as I firmly believe the BCU should remain within its own geographical boundaries and encourage other national governing bodies around the world to devise their own coaching scheme, albeit based on that of the BCU should they so wish. I digress.

There have been books on canoeing that included chapters of sea kayaking going well back. Alan Byde's book, 'Living Canoeing' was an early inspiration to me as was such as 'A Thousand Miles In The Rob Roy' and 'The Rob Roy On The Jordan', both by John MacGregor. As far as I know the first book devoted entirely to sea kayaking was mine. I called it 'Sea Touring' and first published it in 1976. This was an attempt to bring together a variety of relevant subjects important to sea kayakers such as meteorology, navigation, charts, buoyage, safety, expedition planning, etc. It clearly served a purpose as it went on to four editions and sold, even in those early days, over 22,000 copies. Apparently, so I was told, it was the book most often filched from outdoor centre libraries.

Even before the formation of the BCU there were many flourishing canoe clubs around the country. With a well structured coaching scheme it was easy to welcome and retain many new comers to canoe sport. The fairly rapid growth of sea kayaking was therefore well supported. Improved kayak design together with the advent of glass fibre sea kayaks in the early 1970s and the tenacity and enthusiasm of a particular bunch of paddlers from the North East of England meant that sea kayaking was here to stay, here to flourish and here to be enjoyed by a growing number of enthusiasts.



Turning now to the more recent past. In terms of providing the impetus for the design of modern day kayaks based on the Inuit kayak, the Igdllorsuit should take pride of place. This original Inuit seal skin covered kayak was brought back to the UK, (Scotland) by Ken

Taylor back in 1959. Ken was an under-graduate at Glasgow University when he undertook a solo expedition to Greenland. Here he learnt how to use these craft and was clearly an avid student and subsequently keen to share his new skills and knowledge with fellow paddlers back home in Scotland. It was his kayak that was probably the one used as a template for our contemporary sea kayaks.

In 1966 another Brit., Chris Hare, also returned home to the north east of England from Greenland with his own Inuit kayak and, for my money, this became the real spark that lit the present day fire. Names such as Derek Hutchinson, Chris Jowsey, Lofty Wright et al, all from the NE England, joined Chris in encouraging the growth of sea paddling which was to spread around the world as a recreational activity. It seemed that all the necessary ingredients came together. Available kayaks designed for the British paddler and based on the Inuit kayak, (after all, why re-invent the wheel when the Inuit had successfully produced a sleek hunting machine and had take thousands of years to do it), an enthusiastic bunch of young people looking for an adventure outdoor activity, a local environment with some fantastic paddling opportunities (The Farne Islands with its fast tides, plentiful wildlife and close enough to the coast to be accessible) and a strong local history of boat building. The cake was ready for cooking.

My guide and mentor in putting this paper together has been Duncan Winning, OBE, Hon. President of the Scottish Canoeing Association. It was from Duncans' paper, "It's Inuit I'nt it" that I learnt Geoff Blackford used the kayak brought home by Ken Taylor in 1959 as his inspiration when designing his own kayak for the benefit of the bigger torsos of the Europeans, a kayak he called the 'Anus Acuta'. This design was subsequently taken up by Frank Goodman whose company, Valley Canoe Products (VCP) responded to the growing interest in sea kakaking by producing well made sea kayaks that soon spread around the world. His best known has to be the 'Nordkap', a great expedition kayak made in several versions. I had to arrange for thee of these kayaks to be transported from the UK to Nunivak Island in the Bering Sea for our 1987 expedition to go round this Island. This feat of logistics alone deserves a story but I must move on.

By the early 1970s the BCU identified the need for a specialist committee to cater for this blossoming aspect of canoe sport. The BCU functions on the back of such committees which care for all the different aspects of canoeing such as slalom, white water, sailing, coaching, racing, surfing, touring, river access etc. Hence the Sea Touring Committee came together with myself as it's first chairman. I pulled together a group of fellow enthusiasts including many from the NE England. I saw communication as being essential and so regularly produced a broad sheet of information regarding progress and potential agenda items to keep the ball rolling between meetings. Thus was inadvertently started the International Sea Kayaking Association which was separate from the BCU Committee but worked in parallel with it to bring in paddlers from all over the globe. It certainly fulfilled a role as it lasted for over forty years, producing a 20 page newsletter every two months. There was no internet in those days and my newsletter provided a whole range of material from trip reports, gear reviews, general information, etc. to promoting such as meets and symposiums, (events you term as retreats). Though producing this newsletter was always lying over me like a cloud in that every spare moment was taken up, it was always a 'labour of love' and gave me tremendous satisfaction. In the early days I used an old battered

printing machine bought for a few pounds from an auction. Ink and bad language used to spray around my garage at each publication. Then I moved to a state of the art Gestetner machine linked to my computer and was able to produce something that actually looked like a newsletter. I miss it but after 40 years and with the advent of the internet and professionally produced specialist magazines both from the USA and Britain my efforts were becoming redundant. Quit whilst ahead has been my belief. Operating ISKA provided me with many opportunities. I attended symposiums and coaching courses around the world, usually with all expenses paid and I remained strongly attached to the BCU. All this gave me some influence over the early development of sea kayaking in Britain and so felt my efforts were more than amply rewarded.

I believe I am credited with putting on the very first sea kayaking symposium back in 1975at least Duncan Winning says so in his official history of canoeing. I do not remember where the idea came from, it just seemed right at the time. I staged in the middle of England, in Birmingham at their university. It was not possible to get further away from the sea and I took some criticism for this but I stuck to the line that this was to be a true symposium where the flow of ideas and information would take precedence over paddling. 51 weekends of the year could be used for getting wet; this was to be a learning and sharing experience. The university provided food, accommodation and lecture facilities and we made excellent use of them all as well as the bar. Since this first event symposiums, albeit most often water based, have become a regular feature of the sea kayaking scene the world over. Nigel Dennis's meets on Anglesey, North Wales encapsulated everything that was good about symposiums. They are based on a wonderful coast line with plenty of exciting tide rips, overfalls and destinations worth exploring. There are coaching sessions, mini expeditions and plenty of presentations by class speakers.

Our first symposium in Birmingham did not get off to a good start. I had invited H.M.Coastguards to talk to us. I saw this as important as I wanted to change their attitude towards us. This government body is charged with the safety and protection of all mariners using UK coastal waters. They co-ordinate every response to any emergency situation along and within our coastal area from flooding, ship wreck, environmental pollution and rescue from distress. They were at best disinterested and at worse very dissuasive each time we informed them of a kayaking trip that would be considered 'adventurous'. In the event, though they had clearly agreed to attend and address us, there was a 'no show' and we had to improvise in order to fill the vacant session.

I wrote to the Coastguards and told them just what I thought. In short, I let them have it. Here we were doing our best to approach our sport in a safe and responsible manner with a wish to bring them on side by involving them in our activities. Their less than professional failure to meet with us having agreed to so do was nothing short of crass behaviour. It worked. At the following symposium the Deputy Director of H.M.Coastguards himself, Dick Richards, turned up. He became our best advocate. He joined the BCU Sea Touring Committee. He opened the pages of the Coastguard house magazine and I wrote a lengthy article explaining what sea kayaking was about and asked for an acceptance of our sport alongside that given to the yachting fraternity. This was readily given and no longer were we told that our proposed trip was unsafe and should not be attempted.

In fact the relationship between us and the Coastguards has changed. They have been reorganised and no longer have look out stations around the coast. Modern technology such as radio, radar and cell phones allows for effective monitoring. All small boat pleasure craft are expected to rely on a shore based third party to raise the alarm with the Coastguards should they go beyond their ETA and/or sea and weather conditions suddenly deteriorate. None the less, at the time it was important to bring this professional organisation on side and this we achieved.

From the early days when our sport, ocean paddling, was frowned upon as being foolhardy, we have come full circle to the current time when ocean paddling is the fastest growing aspect of canoe sport. From the time when I had to air freight my kayak across the world to the situation today when it is possible to hire kayaks from almost every beach around the world, we have come along way. I hope to write on the changes that have affected our sport over the last fifty years. For example my research thus far shows just how much technology has changed the face of how we approach our sport. Watch this space!

John Ramwell