

## MODERN SEA KAYAKING – RECENT HISTORY

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My name is John, John Ramwell, and i have been paddling my own canoe as skipper and crew for some fifty years.

Today I want to share my personal take on the development of ocean paddling over this period. History shows the path we have followed and also shows us the way ahead. We ignore history and its' lessons at our peril. Ideas and inventions are built on what has gone before and the inuit and their use of the kayak as part of their culture, a tool for their survival, have certainly left us a tremendous fund, a fantastic legacy.

Of course, it was not only the inuit who used the kayak to great effect; so did the beothick as a visit to the rooms or Boyds cove will testify. But as the beothick had access to sustance from the land that the inuit could not enjoy, the kayak was perhaps not such an absolute necessity for their survival though it would have been vital for such as transport and hunting..

The west country of England is very rural. Rolling farmland, narrow lanes and pretty villages attracting tourists – including me. I am hiking down one of the narrow lanes when i come across a farmer bringing in his cows for milking. I asked him for the best way to tiverton. “oh, ah!” Says he. “well, you don’t want to be starting from here”, which of course i found very helpful.

I have the same problem now. Where best to start with this brief explanation on the story of the recent development of ocean paddling in britain from my own perspective. Where ever i start i am reminded of the old farmer from the west country, “oh ah, well you don’t want to start from here!!”

I have opted to start by stating the obvious.

For all and any information these days just search the internet. It’s all there; names, dates and events for all and every subject. Wikipedia is wicked. And if you’d rather, there is more literature on the subject today than you can shake a paddle at. Consequently i am not going to regurgitate such material that is so readily available. In fact, i am not going to start from there after all.

I am going to start from the north east of England – geordie land, as we call it, where they speak another language. Here there has been a strong tradition of fishing and boat building going back for generations. For example, the first unsinkable lifeboat for saving the lives of ship wrecked mariners was commissioned by the duke of Northumberland way back in 1804.

The ne gives us the farnes islands; a great sea kayaking venue with its’ wild life and turbulent tides and currents. I digress.

First a little background. Canoeing in britain was, at least since the early 1950s, based on a recreational approach with a coaching scheme from the bcu to support it, canoe sport was and is to this day, club based and there are clubs well scattered around the country making our sport very accessible, particularly to beginners.

Many books came on the scene including my own, ‘sea touring’ which, to the best of my knowledge, was the very first to specialise on the topic of ocean paddling.. It was an attempt to draw information useful, even necessary, for sea paddlers from a variety of sources such as nautical almanacs, pilots, books on weather, etc. Apparantly it was the book most often stolen from outdoor centres – or so i was once informed. Anyway, it went to four editions and seemingly it was found to be useful by those coming into sea kayaking back in those early days of my period of history. I have written a fifth edition but have yet to publish, - maybe one day.

Of course mine was not the first book on canoeing by a long way. Some excellent literature was available including a book called 'living canoeing' by alan byde. I read this from cover to cover and it was one of the factors that got me hooked on canoeing as a sport worth getting into.

Sea kayaking was certainly a popular activity with a few paddlers before and after the two world wars. The scottish paddlers enjoyed paddling their klepper kayaks westwards to sail them back to land with the prevailing westerleys. Names such as john macgregor, gino watkins and john ross-brown gave us a wonderful legacy of ocean kayaking long before the ne of england set the modern day ball rolling.

I am going to start my story of the past with a paddler called chris hare. Chris brought back a greenland kayak ffrom his visit to this country in 1966 and his fellow paddlers seem to have used this as the impetus to take to the sea. Many will tell you that access to decent inland waters for touring was becoming more and more restricted as access agreements with anglers were very one sided in favour of the fishermen. What ever the reason paddlers were beginning to notice our wonderful and varied coastline as worth exploring by canoe and what finer craft than an inuit kayak that had had over 4000 years development to make it sea-worthy. It just needed a few modifications to make it fit for purpose for its use by europeans as a tool for exploration rather than for hunting.

Hence designers of our modern day sea kayaks came on the scene and names such as frank goodman, derek hutchinson, tom caskey, 'lofty' wright, alan byde, nigel dennis, et al became among some of the main players in spreading ocean paddling, first nation wide and then world wide, as a canoe activity or sport in it's own right.

It was about this time, in the early/mid 1960s' that i came to sea kayaking. Previously i had been a competitive marathon or long distance paddler with a particular focus on the devizes to westminster race which occurred each easter, was 175 miles long with 78 portages taking a course from the west of the country down a canal into the river thames and down to westminster in the centre of london. A killer of a race, done by seniors in one hit, by juniors over three days. It took me thirteen years before i realised that there were other ways of spending easter!!

In fact i started ocean paddling before sea kayaks became available. My first lengthy open water crossing was from england to france and we used touring slalom kayaks with skegs fitted as extra. I wish i had the time to tell you of at least one interesting occasion when crossing the english channel. But i must move on.

With the crowd from the ne really setting light to this re-born activity we call sea kayaking and with some excellently designed and constructed kayaks and with a large number of people being attracted to this activity, many coming to it directly rather than with a background of inland canoeing, there was a mushroom explosion of interest.

Bt the early 1970s the bcu saw a need for a specialist committee to oversea this blossoming activity; to advise tha national coaching committee (the bcu is made up of committees looking after the interests of every aspect of canoe sport) on any modifications to the bcu coaching scheme as well as represent the bcu at club and local level in sea kayaking. Hence the sea touring committee was put together and i got the job. I pulled together a bunch of fellow enthusiasts, many from the ne. We agreed a constitution and terms of reference and we were established. To keep the ball rolling and maintain involvement i circulated a newsletter every so often to these 'embryonic' members. Thus i inadvertantly started the international sea kayaking association. This was separate from the bcu sea touring committee and gave sea paddlers world wide access to trip reports, info. Re: gear and the development of the sport in general. For over forty years i published and distributed a 20 page newsletter every two months. The early days were fun; long before the advent of computers and publishing soft ware. I bought an old gestetner copying machine from an auction. I installed it in the garage where every second month i set to print

sufficient newsletters. It broke down frequently and ink and paper would fly in all directions. Life became easier as i invested in a new copy machine linked to a desk top computer. The quality of the newsletter improved accordingly. Though it was always a labour of love it did come with perks and for many years i travelled the world to contribute towards symposiums and coaching events. I made many friends over the years, several i still maintain contact with to this day.

I believe i am credited with putting on the very first sea kayaking symposium. At least duncan winning, obo, president of the scottish canoe association, says so in his official history of canoeing. I don't remember where the idea came from. It just seemed right at the time. I set it up at birmingham university, a venue further away from the sea you could not get! When challenged about this i said it was one weekend out of 52 where we would stay dry and swap stories and be 'educated' in the comfort of a lecture hall with food provided. Despite it being early days a large crowd turned up including most of those now making a reputation for themselves.

At this, our first such event, the key note presentation was to be by h.m. coastguards, the official body policing, if you like, the coast and coastal waters. They were not 'on-side' in those days, often condemning us for being foolhardy when all we wanted to do was paddle across the bay. Here was their opportunity to lecture us on the dangers of such small and frail craft going out into the wide open ocean. I saw it as an opportunity to persuade them that this was not the case and that we were doing our best to take our activity seriously with safety being paramount. Now comes the bad news and the good. The bad news was that the official from h.m.coastguards failed to show. We filled the gap and this first symposium was successful.

Subsequently i wrote to the coastguard organisation. I let them have it. I was polite whilst pointing out in the strongest possible terms that whilst we were doing our best to accommodate the negative attitude of their officers by trying to explain what our sport was about, they had patently failed to meet us half way, etc. Etc. I was in tears myself as i sealed the envelope!!

The good news is that at our next symposium the deputy director of h.m. coastguards turned up and not only did he become a convert of sea kayaking he opened the pages of their in-house magazine to my article on sea kayaking and the professional and safe way we were attempting to approach it. This all went a long way to changing their attitude towards us. I need to explain that way back then the coastguards manned observation posts or 'look-outs' all around our coast and monitored all craft passing through their patch. It usually paid to let the local officers know of your plans prior to setting off as well as letting them know of your safe arrival. Today the look-out stations are gone and only major and sub stations now exist. These are often no where near the sea and are staffed 24 hours a day as radio and radar monitoring is the order. The system today is that one informs a third party remaining on land – a friend or relative –of your plans and eta and they raise the alarm if necessary.

What about the way ahead. Ocean kayaking has grown so that it has easily become the fastest growing branch of canoe sport. Countries, yours in particular, have seen the attraction for tourists. Indeed it is why my wife and i now live part time over here on new world island. There are very few places in the world where sea kayaks are not available for hire or purchase. It was'nt that many years ago whyehh i had to take my own sea kayak, a nordkap, as air freight in order to paddle prince william sound in alaska. Now there are more outfitters than you can wave a paddle at.

There will always be room for further development of the sport. I was recently watching a bbc documentary about our natural environment and to visit inaccessible places along the coast they were using 'sit on tops'. For day paddles for many this is the way to go. New materials, new designs; not only of kayaks but of such as paddles, pfd's, clothing, navigation equipment, etc will continue apace as new frank goodmans and nigel fosters make their way to the fore.

Mobile phones or, as you refer to them, cell phones, have made their impact on sea kayaking as they have in all walks of life. An issue today is whether it is too easy to summon help whereby encouraging risky expeditions, thus putting rescue personnel at greater risk. This discussion will, no doubt, continue on.

There are other modern day issues that did not face us quite so starkly as they did years ago. One is the that of duty of care to self as well as to others which, in Britain, is now covered by legislation, particularly since the Lyme Bay incident of the 23/03/1993, a date indelibly engraved on my memory. Four dead and one man sent to prison. They were using perception 'dancer' kayaks 'sans' inherent buoyancy and spray decks and were being led by novice instructors. Apart from an off shore breeze and outgoing tide the conditions were fairly benign. One capsize led to another and then another and it all went down the tubes from there. Sea kayaking, like most outdoor adventure activities, demands that leaders develop a sense of just what might go wrong and this only comes with experience. The most important qualification, as ever, is the Q.B.E. with it comes the ability to constantly look for potential escape routes and for deteriorating conditions as well as monitoring the weakest paddler/s.

As leaders of either peer groups or of those along for coaching or paid experience trips, the responsibility issue looms large. The BCU use the mantra, "what will you say to the coroner". In other words there is a requirement to get it right every time. The problem is that the sea, wind and waves do not understand this.

But I am digressing from my history lesson, for which, in this instance, I make no apology.

In fact, there does end my lesson. Hopefully you have not been too bored. Should anyone like a transcript of this paper you only have to contact me at my email address and let me know.