

NEWSLETTER

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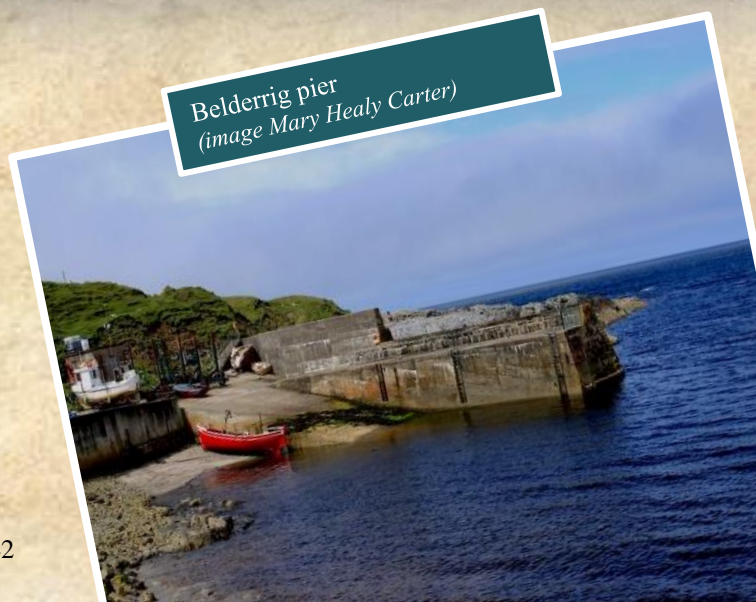
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Cover images: Fishermen with a Currach at Portacloy, Co. Mayo 1942
(image from duchas.ie B005.03.00011 Seamus Ó Duilearga)

Belderrig pier
(image Mary Healy Carter)



THE CURRACH

The currach is the best known of all the Irish boats. For many coastal and island dwellers of the Irish Atlantic coast, it was once the only boat they could afford and was used to fish, to transport animals and people, for harvesting seaweed and a variety of other purposes.

Originally, it was constructed of entirely natural materials such as animal hide, willow and hazel. Since the Industrial Revolution materials such as milled timber and machine-woven calico cloth, waterproofed with coal tar, have been used in its manufacture. More recently, glass reinforced plastic and other hard wearing coverings have been used. Despite all these innovations and improvements in design, the essential qualities of the currach have been retained.

There are two elements that are central for its construction: a lightweight skeleton and an impenetrable and flexible sheet material to cover it which functions similar to a skin over a rib cage. The timber frame is built first. The boat is then turned upside down in order to assemble the hull. This distinguishes it from virtually every other boat type which are built from the keel up.

The wicker-work frame and the covering appear delicate in themselves, but together they form a sturdy and malleable structure that can endure the great forces of wind and wave.

The assembly and design of the currach varies in size, shape and name by region.

Off the coast of Co. Mayo, on Achill Island, the currach is built with double gunwales (the top edges of the hull). In parts of the west coast of Connacht, it is also called a *curach adhmaid*, while it is referred to as a *naomhóg* in counties Cork, Waterford and Kerry and as a “canoe” in West Clare.

The most commonly used currach is the three-hand one which is 21-foot in length. A trained crew can expertly guide these boats on our turbulent Irish coast. Currachs have unusually narrow oar blades which are held hand over hand, an extremely effective method of rowing.

This enables the oarsman to pull the oar back quickly over the choppy sea; the crew do not need to feather the oar. The lengthy oars also reach out further from the boat, giving it greater stability in rough seas.

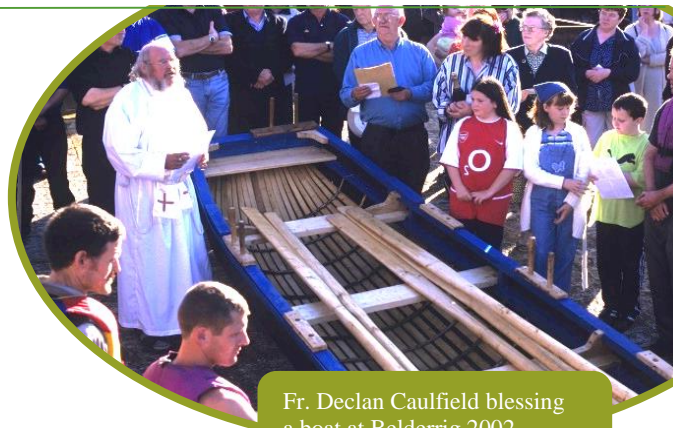
Currachs are stored above the high tide line; tied down to resist wind and storm.

All sizes of these boats are carried on crews’ shoulders, upside down. It is possible for two strong crewmen to carry a 21-foot boat. The currach itself can carry half a ton of fish and nets.

This primitive boat is unique in terms of how it is made and how it is handled at sea. It is laden with rich social history which remains tethered to Irish fishing communities and the skin boat tradition.

References:

www.ouririshheritage.org
www.irishcentral.com/nationalinventoryich.chg.gov.ie/



Fr. Declan Caulfield blessing a boat at Belderrig 2002 .
 (image from dúchas.ie)

A brief history of the townland of
BELDERRIGBEG
 (*Béal Dearg Beg*, little red fort).

Located in the west of the parish of Ballycastle. Bounded on the north by Geeveraun; south by Cregganbeg; east by Belderrigmore; and west by the parish of Kilcommon. It contains 757 acres, 3 roods*, 39 perches. The property of John Knox, Esq. Let to tenants on leases of 1 life at £77 12 shillings yearly for the whole townland. It is all mountain, part of which has been reclaimed, producing rye and potatoes. Houses are stone. In the east of the townland, near the sea, is a Coast Guard Station.

* *There are 40 perches in a rood, and 4 roods in an acre.*

Extract from Ordnance Survey Namebooks of 1838



Five-man salmon fishing currachs at Portacloy, Co. Mayo 1955
 (image from dúchas.ie, C021.03.00003)