



## **The Carmarthen Coracle**

Authors: Andy Edwards, Project lead volunteer, Carmarthen Coracle & Netsmen's Association, and People's Collection Wales.

From generation to generation the skills and traditions of coracle fishing in Carmarthen have been passed down.

In the twilight of the day you will see the beetle like crafts beginning to congregate at the water's edge. Ghostlike shadows can be seen drifting quietly in the nightfall along the River Towy.

A pair of coracles with a net between them float with the tide. From the dark waters salmon and sea trout inadvertently get caught in the coracle web.

The coracle fishermen retain the ancient tradition. Their culture is deep in the Welsh psyche but is a dying lifestyle as fishing stock decline and the pressure of modern living increase. Numbers of working pairs have decreased and slowly the ancient tradition is disappearing.

Discover the customs of the old coracle families of Carmarthen, the way of life, the myths and legends that surround them, the superstitions of the river. Delve into a traditional world and help to keep alive an ancient culture.

### **Curriculum links**

**Progression Step 3:** Expressive Arts, Health & Wellbeing, Humanities, Languages, Literacy and Communication, Mathematics and Numeracy, Science and Technology, Digital Competence Framework (Citizenship, Interacting and collaborating), Drama, History, Geography, Science, Global Citizenship

## Teachers' notes

This resource consists of 10 sections that can be used as fact sheets for your pupils. Each section contains links to further content that is available on People's Collection Wales. Section 1 contains a link to a video produced for this project, and Section 6 contains links to oral history videos of Coracle men talking about Coracle life.

Below are suggestions for cross-curricula activities and questions based on the fact sheets:

### Section 1. The Carmarthen Coracle

- **ESDGC:** Research fishing at a river or the coast nearest your school. What fishing methods are used today? What has been used in the past? Are there any traditional fishing methods that continue in your area? Why have methods of fishing changed?
- **DCF:** For any online aspect of your research, create a space where pupils can digitally save useful information they find including hyperlinks (*2.3 Storing and sharing*) and ask them to correctly cite their online sources (*1.3 Digital rights, licensing and ownership*).
- **ESDGC:** What other things are rivers and the sea used for that might bring money into an area or benefit the local people?
- **Geography:** Create a map of the rivers/coast/waterways in your local area.

### Section 2. Coracle through the ages

- **History:** Draw a timeline to show the use of coracles in Wales. Place the Romans in Wales on the timeline.
- **History:** What evidence do we have of coracles in Wales? (Written evidence, stories passed down through families etc.).
- **History, ESDGC:** Research where coracles, or similar round handmade boats, are made in other parts of the World.

### Section 3. Coracle construction

- **Science, Design and Technology:** activity - making model boats. What helps a boat float? Does it have to be 'boat' shaped? Try experiments in class with different objects to see what floats. What materials float best (paper, wood, metal, plastic)? Design, build and test your own boat.

### Section 4. Coracle net

- **ESDGC, Science:** Why do you think modern coraclers use different materials today than in the past?
- **ESDGC:** Today, the numbers of fish caught are strictly controlled and coraclers must have a license to fish. Why do you think this is? Do you think this was true in the past?

- **Science:** The 'lead line' mentioned in the fact sheet is a weight that is attached to the edge of the fishing net. It helps one edge of the net fall to the bottom of the river. Lead is a type of metal. Why do you think lead is used as a weight in the 'lead line'? What properties does lead have that make it a good weight?
- **Music, Physical education:** Using the descriptions in this resource, could you act out what it would look like to fish using a pair of coracles? Pupils could find water-inspired music to accompany this. Or make their own instruments and create their own music.

### Section 5. Life cycle of fish

- **Science:** Explore the life cycle of salmon and sea trout. Pupils could draw their own diagram to represent the life cycle.

### Sections 6 & 7. Life and culture & Myths and legends

- **History, Geography:** Research the links between Wales and the legends of King Arthur and Merlin. Create a Welsh map of places that are linked to legends.
- **Literacy (reading and writing):** There are lots of opportunities for reading and creative writing inspired by this resource. Pupils could research, read and re-tell Welsh legends, write their own creative stories, myths and legends, or write stories or poems inspired by water.

### Section 8. Coracle families

- **History, Literacy (writing and oracy):** Pupils could research and draw three generations of their own family tree, to include themselves and any siblings, then parents and grandparents. They could interview their parents and grandparents to find out about their work/jobs/professions and add this to the family tree.

### Section 9. Coracle stories

- **History, ESDGC:** Research the Rebecca Riots, linking to the daily lives of poor and rich people in the 19 Century. There are KS2 resources available on Hwb. Link to modern day in the UK by discussing minimum wage/working wage and child labour law. You could look at work conditions around the world, e.g. we can buy products in the UK that have been made in countries with no minimum wage and poor working conditions.

### Section 10. Carmarthen Water Safety Partnership

- **PSE:** Water safety is important for all children. Is there a local group, similar to the Carmarthen Water Safety Partnership, who could come and deliver a water safety session in your school?

## 1. The Carmarthen Coracle

The coracle is one of the simplest and strangest-looking boats ever designed for use on our rivers.

Coracle fishing is one of Britain's oldest traditions. It is a **highly skilled** and ancient Welsh traditional method of fishing. Small boats shaped like baskets are made by skilled fishermen using ash and willow.

Two fishermen work in perfect harmony. Fishing at night to avoid casting shadows on the water, they keep steady and hold a net between them ready to catch the fish.

During the 18th and 19th Century coracle fishing was the main source of income for poor families living along the banks of the river Towy. There used to be 200 coracles on the river. During the late 1930's the number of net licenses was restricted to 12.

Coracle fishing has been handed from generation to generation and is still practiced on the River.

[Carmarthen Coracles - The Last Coracle Men](#) project video



## 2. Coracle through the ages



### How long have coracles been in Britain?

The coracle dates back over 2000 years, to pre-Roman times, and has been used by hunter gatherers for many centuries.

The Romans saw coracles when they invaded Britain in 55 BC. Julius Caesar wrote in detail about skin-covered boats he had seen while travelling the coastline.

Amongst the oldest poetry in Wales is the poem known as *Y Gododdin* written by Aneirin, dated to the **7<sup>th</sup> Century**. Part of the poem is a lullaby called *Pais Dinogad*: a mother tells her son, Dinogad, of his father's skills in hunting:

*'ef lledi bysc yng corwc mal ban llad, llew llywywg.'*

*'he would kill a fish in his coracle, as a lion kills an animal'*

In medieval times, **Welsh law** gives the value of a coracle as **eight pence**:

*'corwc wyth keinhawc kyfreith'*

The first clear description of the true Welsh river coracle appears in the writings of **Gerallt Cymro** (Gerald of Wales) who in **1188** accompanied the Archbishop of Canterbury on a journey through Wales recruiting men for the **Third Crusade**. He wrote:

*'To fish or cross streams, they use boats made of willow, not oblong nor pointed at either end, but almost circular or rather in the form of a triangle, covered without but not within with raw hides.*

*When a salmon thrown into one of these boats strikes it fiercely with its tail, it often oversets it and endangers both vessel and boatman.*

*In a clumsy manner, in going to or coming from the river, the fishermen carry these boats on their shoulders.'*

[Coracle through the ages – further content](#)

### 3. Coracle construction

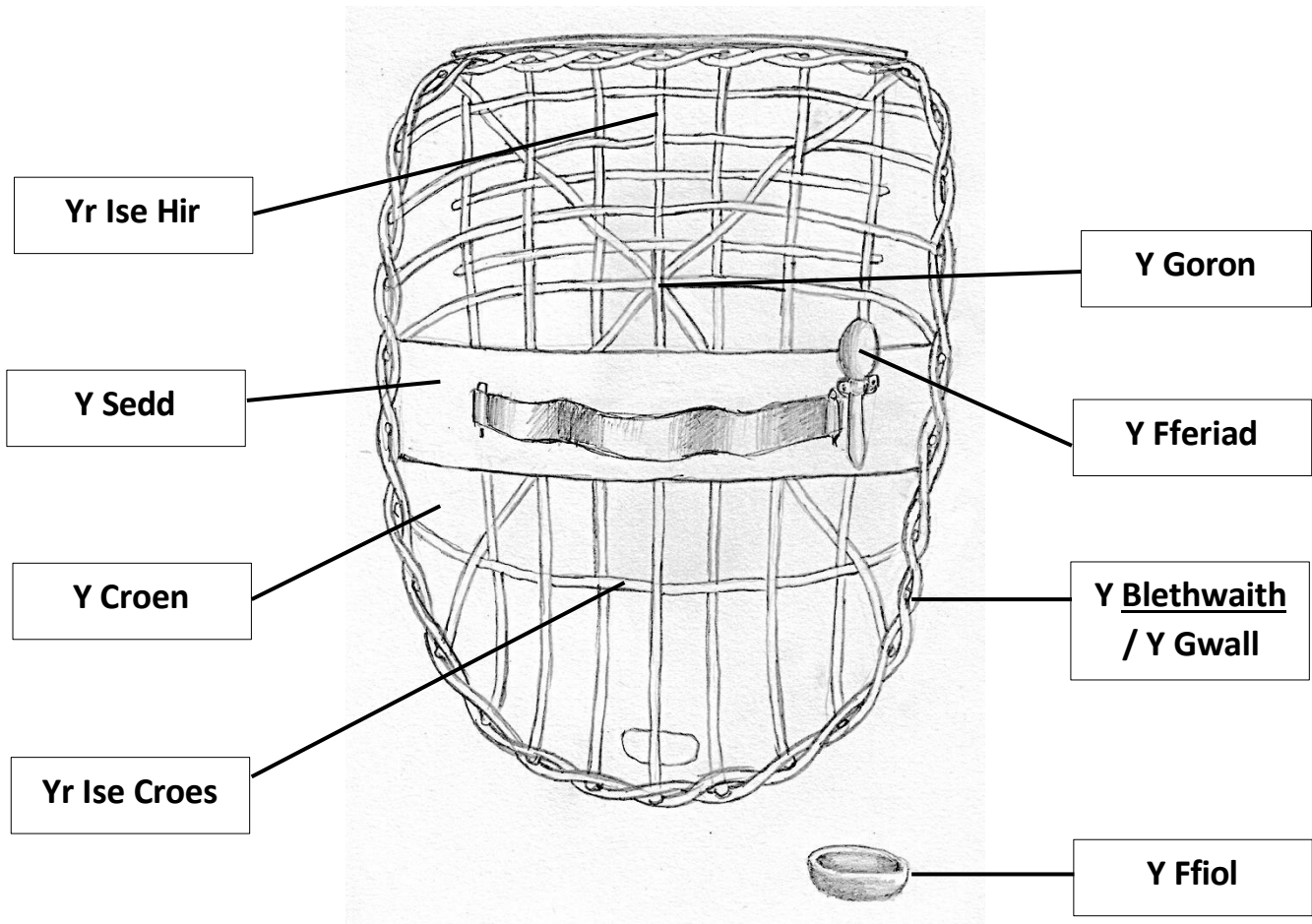


Some modern coraclers continue to construct their coracles using traditional methods using larch, ash and willow. However, most of the coracles on the river today are made out of fiberglass.

The next diagram shows the parts of the coracle labelled with the traditional Carmarthen Welsh names.

[Coracle construction – further content](#)

## Y Corwg – The Coracle



**Yr Ise Hir** - Long sticks go top to bottom and weave in and out of the cross pieces.

**Y Blethwaith / Y Gwall** – the weave of willow that goes around the coracle and acts as a gunwale.

**Y Croen** – The skin of the Coracle, was made out of the hide of animals but is now made out of flannel or fiberglass and is covered in tar.

**Yr Ise Croes** - cross members of wood that are weaved in and out of the longer pieces.

**Y Goron** – the crown of the boat, where the sticks cross - strongest part of the boat.

**Y Fferiad** – the hitting stick, – known as **The Knocker** and known as **The Priest**. It is used to hit the fish once caught.

**Y Sedd** - the seat of the Coracle. It has another purpose: the **Astell Orlais** forms the box behind the seat which is where the caught fish is kept.

**Y Ffiol** - a scoop for getting the water out of the Coracle kept in the **Astell Orlais**.

#### 4. Coracle net

Traditionally cow's tails were used to make the nets. Coraclers would go to the slaughterhouse to get the tails and sawn-off cows' horns. The hair and horns that came from the slaughterhouse were covered in muck and blood.

Today modern coraclers use a nylon man-made rope. The net used is 40 feet stretched. They fish in a semi-circle, an arc meaning the coracles are 25 feet apart. The net opens like a purse with its mouth a maximum of 3 feet, stretched.

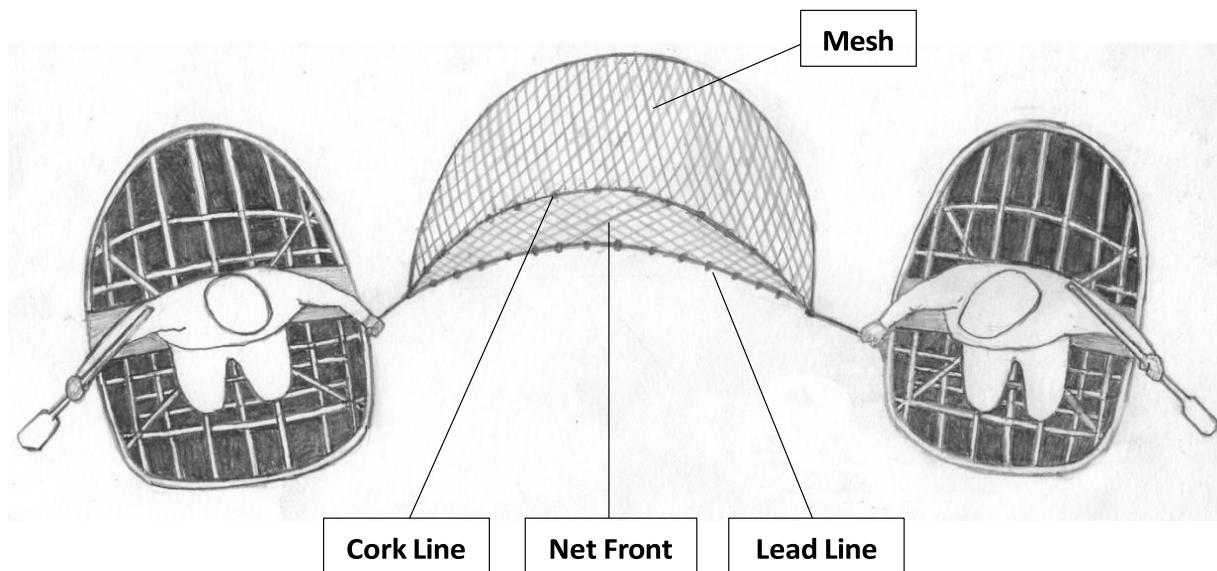
They paddle **one-handed**, dragging the net in the other, and draw the net downstream to catch the fish.

When a fish is caught, each hauls up an end of the net until the two boats are brought to touch, and the fish is then secured, using a **priest** (or **knocker** – a small block of wood) to stun the fish.

The numbers of fish caught are strictly controlled. Each fish is **tagged** and can be traced.

The net has a lead line which contains a complex sequence of **80 pieces**. One lead too many or too few will make the difference of catching a fish or not.

[Coracle net – further content](#)



## 5. Life cycle of fish

There are two fish commonly caught by the Carmarthen coraclers in the River Towy; **salmon** and **sea trout (sewin)**.

The salmon is an ocean wanderer and feeds on krill in the deep oceans. The **sea trout**, also known as **sewin**, is a coastal fish. Its flesh is not as red as the salmon.

Salmon and sea trout return to the rivers where they hatched from eggs to breed. They travel upstream from the sea.

When she is ready to spawn the female salmon or sea trout selects a site where the water flows over clean gravel. She creates a pit in the gravel, known as a **redd**, through a digging process with her tail. She releases her eggs into a nest within the redd and the male fertilizes the eggs.

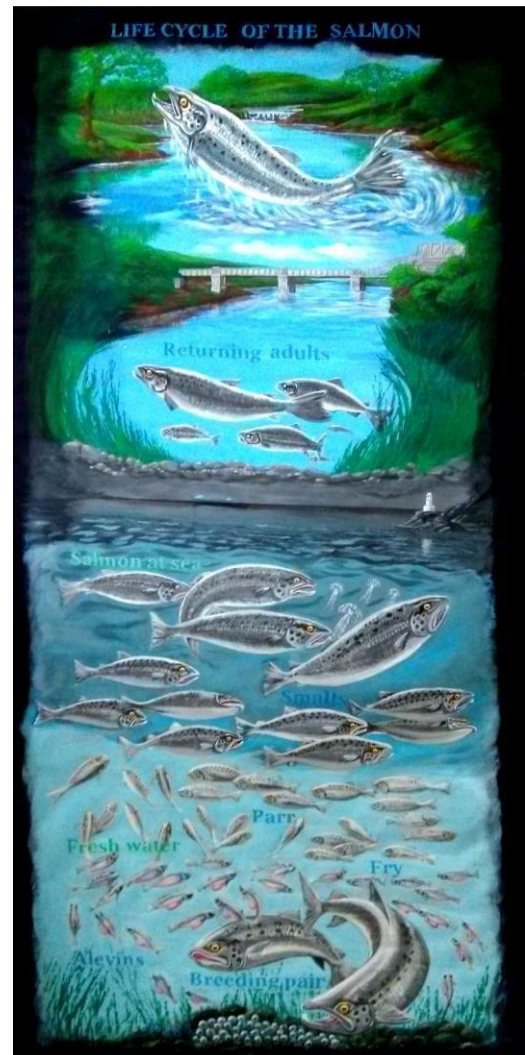
The eggs develop and hatch into **aelvins**. They grow into trout or salmon **fry**. Around this stage the young fish emerge from the gravel and begin to forage for food in the stream where they hatched.

When they leave the hatching site they are known as **parr**. These young fish now defend their territories and develop feeding stations.

When the fish have reached a certain size, which takes between 2 and 5 years, they lose their **parr** markings. Sea trout and salmon are called smolts at this stage, their bodies turn silvery in colour.

The **smolts** move down stream preparing to run to sea. The distance fish travel can vary greatly. An adult fish will return to spawn in the same river they hatched in.

[Life cycle of fish – further content](#)



Lifecycle of the Salmon: An original artwork painted for the Carmarthen Coracle project by artist Jeff Phillips in 2019.

## 6. Life and culture



Some of the ceremonies have died away lately but are still remembered.

One example is **The Crowning** of an apprentice coracleman when he was considered a skilled netsman. If you weren't related to one of the old traditional coracle families, you were known as a **foreigner**, and you had to be crowned.

A group of coraclers would put the front of their oars resting on his head. Then the oldest coracler of the group would bring his oar down, hard on his head whilst saying, "**Get up, you have been crowned**"

**Burning of Coracles** - when a fisherman died, the night before his **funeral**, his coracle would be burnt on the Towy riverbank. Traditionally, it would only be lit when the men had heard the **owl** calling. The bird was believed to guide the dead to the heavens. It is believed that hundreds of years ago the custom was to burn the body of the fisherman with his coracle.

Not many people know that the coracle community use their very own Welsh language when talking about coracle terms, these words are thought to have been derived from medieval Welsh words.

These words have been used on the River Towy for hundreds of years and are still used today. A secret Welsh language only used and understood by the small community of the Carmarthen Coracle.

They have their own names for the fish they catch:

**Ginyn** – Salmon 7lbs or less

**Gemyn** - male Salmon ready to mate

**Eogyn** – Salmon over 7lbs

**Gwencyn** – Sewin over 3lbs

**Twlpyn** – Sewin 1 ½ - 3lbs

**Shiglyn** – Sewin 1 ½ lb or less

**Lloro** - Salmon or Sewin after spawning

Place names were important so that good fishing haunts were kept secret: The Bwtri, Pwll Du, Shutters Gate, Cook's Bank, Gweli Tomos the Ancw Pool.

In the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, many coracle families lived in Dan Y Banc at the bottom of Jail Hill. These families lived off the river. A poor area of the town, the families depended greatly on catching fish.

Today there are four pairs of coracles that work the river. Their season starts **April 1st** and ends **July 31st**. The season has been made shorter because of the decline in stock of fish.

There are coracle men who rely on fishing as an income. They fish between the slipway in Carmarthen and the **Bascule Railway Bridge**, a distance of 900-1000 yards.

Only fishing on **weekdays** and only fishing successfully at **night**. The river cannot be fished on high tides over **7.5 metres** as the silt is disturbed and the river becomes a muddy bath that fish will not travel in.

Many coraclers also had nicknames: Lewis Hard Up, Billy Boy Brown, Dai Martha, Llew Sara, Billy Boy Peg.

[Life and culture – further content](#)

[Carmarthen Coracle Life – oral history videos](#)

## 7. Myths and legends



The coraclers will fish during the **Clyfwchwr**. It is the time between dawn and dusk, usually about 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. In the picture the two coracles are waiting for the tide to turn.

They will know the correct time when the water level is the level of **the fourteenth step**. The men will wait for the seven stars that give them hopefully enough light to fish by.

**Tradition** tells us that the coraclers waiting for the seven stars in the sky are linked to the legend of Arthur and **Merlin**. The wizard believed that the seven stars they were waiting for were the seven warriors who would return from the Battle of **Camlann**. It is known to some coracle families that Camlann may well be the site of the castle known as Camelot.

Camlann was a fierce battle that took place not far from Dolgellau in North Wales. **King Arthur** and his villainous rival, Mordred are supposed to have died at the battle.

[Myths and legends – further content](#)

## 8. Coracle families



Coracle families can be traced back hundreds of years. They are the backbone of the coracle fishing trade in Carmarthen.

The Elias family (in the photo above) are the longest serving coracle family on the River Towy. Official records confirm that it was the main occupation of the Elias family in 1766 and probably goes back even further. Amazingly this tradition has been proudly passed down through 7 generations. The Elias family can be seen coracle fishing on the Towy today as they strive hard to protect this age-old tradition.

William Elias, born 1876, was awarded the **British Empire Medal** for his services to coracle fishing and was determined to pass his knowledge to his grandsons, Raymond and Brian Rees. Both Raymond and Brian, became skilled coracle men in fishing, coracle building and racing. In 2011, Raymond was awarded an M.B.E. by HM The Queen for Services to **Coracle Heritage and Inland Water Fishing in Wales**.

Today, keeping the tradition alive, the Elias family still fish the River Towy and make coracles in **Danybanc**. Raymond's son, Malcolm, fishes with Dai Elias. Keith Elias and Joe Woodhead are now the youngest generation of Elias coracle fishermen.

[Coracle families – further content](#)

## 9. Coracle stories

There are an assorted number of stories highlighting coracle life in Carmarthen.

One story tells of the Rebecca Riots in 1843. Carmarthen coraclers were at the forefront of every riot in the town, they controlled the **'Carmarthen Mob'**.



They were leaders against the Carmarthen Workhouse on Penlan Road. The building was saved from being burnt down by the 4th Light Dragoons galloping along Waterloo Terrace on their horses waving their swords and wounding many of the rioters. The charge ended the riot. Many of the rioters were exiled or imprisoned by magistrates.

John Lewis, a teenage coracler from Dan Y Banc was jailed for eight months in Carmarthen Prison. His punishment included 8 hours daily on the dreaded treadmill. They were, however, excused hard labour on Christmas Day and Good Friday. However, he could have been easily deported to Australia.

Another story tells of a tradition that started way back in the late 1800's. The Reverend Latimer Maurice Jones was Vicar of St. Peter's Carmarthen 1863-78. He was involved with various associations in the town and was the founder of Priory Street Hospital.

The coracle community were the town's poor folk and sought help from the church when they couldn't afford the increase in the cost of the net license. The Church agreed to help the coracle men pay for their license as it was the only means of survival for the large fishing families of the Dan Y Banc area.



The only way the coracle families could show their appreciation to the Church was a gift of a fish every year. The coracle people have gifted a fish to the vicar of St. Peter's as an expression of their gratitude ever since: the first sewin of the season!

*Malcolm Rees gifts a Towy Sewin to Reverend Canon Leigh Richardson of St Peter's Church on behalf of the Carmarthen Coracle & Netsmen's Association.*

[Coracle stories – further content](#)

## 10. Carmarthenshire Water Safety Partnership

Over the years Carmarthen has sadly lost young people to river accidents. Traditionally coracle fishermen were involved in the search and rescue when people found themselves in trouble on the river.

A new charity movement, Carmarthen Water Safety Partnership, has been set up to make children aware of the dangers of waterways and to educate the public. They manage lifesaving equipment on our community waterways and publish documents promoting water safety that are distributed to schools and other organizations.

[Carmarthen Water Safety Partnership – further content](#)

