

Falkirk Wheel: canal engineering in the 21st century



The Falkirk Wheel stands 14 double decker buses high and forms a striking contemporary link between the Forth & Clyde and Union Canals



The world's only rotating boat lift is a unique visitor attraction

Scotland's Falkirk Wheel links the Forth & Clyde Canal with the higher level Union Canal and provides a 21st century alternative to a traditional flight of locks. Historically, the two canals had been joined at Falkirk by a flight of eleven locks but these were dismantled in 1933 and subsequently lost. The Wheel, which cost £17.5 million, now ensures through navigation between Glasgow and Edinburgh and is the centrepiece of the £84.5 million Millennium Link restoration project. Visitor numbers have topped 500,000 per annum.

The Wheel caters for a range of visitor experiences. Some come to marvel at the engineering, and many enjoy a short boat ride. Facilities include a visitor centre and viewing gallery, shop and cafe, picnic area and playpark and an educational trail. In addition, the Antonine Wall can be accessed from the site and there is also a tourist information centre and links to nearby paths and cycle paths. The visitor centre is fully accessible by wheelchair and trip boats provide disabled facilities too.

Short circular walks are available around the site with links to the towpaths on the Forth & Clyde and Union Canals and regular bus services link the Wheel site to Falkirk railway station. The Union Canal also benefits from a number of nearby stations between Falkirk and Edinburgh which can facilitate one-way walks.

Key issues which drove the project forward included planning for a novel design which would attract visitors, the lack of tourism facilities in the immediate locality and perception of Falkirk as a visitor destination, and the engagement and support of local communities. A consortium of partners was responsible for funding the Millennium Link and the Wheel, including the Millennium Commission, the European Regional Development Fund, Scottish Enterprise, the Waterways Trust Scotland and seven local authorities.

The developing Helix Eco Park, extending down the Carron Valley between Falkirk and Grangemouth, will further increase the attraction of the area to visitors. This new country park will include a canal extension alongside the River Carron, accessed from the existing terminal basin via a new lock flanked by two 30 metre sculptures of mythical Kelpie water horses.

Further information: www.thefalkirkwheel.co.uk