



# Giant rotating wheel carries boats between canals

**A** UNIQUE wheel-like construction, now being commissioned, will transfer boats between two canals in Central Scotland, thus connecting a vertical gap of about 32m. The wheel measures 35m in diameter, with an axle length of 28m. It will simultaneously lift and lower two 22m-long caissons which

each holds a payload of 300t, comprising water and up to four boats.

The Falkirk Wheel, located close to the Scottish town after which it is named, is a new giant rotating boat lift and is the only structure of its kind in the world. It is the centrepiece of the Millennium Link, a \$216 million project led by British

Waterways, which reopens and reconnects the Forth and Clyde Canal, and the Union Canal between Glasgow and Edinburgh. The wheel measures 35m in diameter, with an axle length of 28m, and will transfer boats between the two canals, over a vertical gap equivalent to the height of eight London buses.

Up until the 1930s, the two canals were linked by a series of 11 locks. However, along with the demise of the canals, the locks fell into disrepair, were filled-in, and have remained unusable. As a result, the idea of connecting the canals via a rotating boat lift was put forward and was originally conceived as a giant Ferris wheel with suspended gondolas. For this design, SKF, the Swedish bearing company, proposed large, double row, spherical roller bearings and specially designed bearing housings to support the wheel.

The new design came from the successful collaboration of several designers led by the Morrison Bachy Soletanche Joint Venture. It follows on from an initial design by Dundee Architects Nicoll Russell Studios and designs by Engineers Binnie Black and Veatch.

Situated in a natural amphitheatre, the wheel itself is considered to be a form of contemporary sculpture and is endorsed as such by the Royal Fine Art Commission for Scotland. It takes the shape of a Celtic-inspired, double headed axe, in which two axe-shaped arms rotate in a continuous circle, 180° at a time. It simultaneously lifts and lowers two 22m-long caissons. Each caisson holds a payload of 300t, comprising water and up to four boats, and uses a series of synchronous gears to positively keep the caissons in the horizontal plane.

Butterley Engineering, of Ripley, Derbyshire, England won the contract to build the wheel and its engineering design consultant, Bennett Associates, of



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Rotherham, Yorkshire, invited SKF to provide a new bearing solution. To support the wheel, SKF developed a solution which used a pair of purpose-designed, four-metre diameter, three row, slewing bearings. One of the bearings is positioned at either end of the wheel. Outer rings are bolted to the support structure and inner rings are bolted to the arms. The inner ring of one of the bearings is equipped with gear teeth to transmit the drive to the wheel.

The use of the slewing bearings was an unusual solution, as these bearings are normally used in applications with heavy axial loads, such as those encountered in the rotational movement of large cranes. However, SKF specially designed the slewing bearings to be positioned on a horizontal axis and to cope with the specified combination of radial and axial loads. When the wheel is fully loaded, it weighs 1800t, which results in a radial load of 9095kN for each bearing. Each slewing bearing has three rows of cylindrical rollers – one for the radial load and two with smaller rollers for the axial loads.

The wheel is rotated by ten hydraulically

driven gearboxes, via the geared slewing bearing. It turns at a rate of about 0.125r/min, which sees it lift and lower boats at an average rate of 4m/min. With consideration given to the time taken for loading boats, the wheel is expected to complete a half turn about once every 15 minutes.

In operation, the wheel will be maintained close to perfect balance. With the caisson and the canal watertight doors open for loading and unloading, the water levels in the caissons will depend on the level in the canals to which they are then open. Any vessel which enters a caisson will automatically displace its own weight of water back into the canal and therefore has no net effect. When the caisson and canal watertight doors are closed, a pump system will be brought into action to equalize the water levels in the two caissons to establish near perfect balance. The wheel drive system has been designed to handle a degree of imbalance due to differing water levels in the caissons. However, even allowing for this potential out of balance, the very low friction torque of

the antifriction bearings means that a rated torque of only 2972 kNm is required to rotate the wheel.

Although the bearings come with their own integral seals and have been designed to have a life expectancy of 120 years, SKF also supplied extra CR seals of 4m and 2.5m diameters. This type of seal is specifically designed to withstand the conditions found in heavy-duty applications and, in this instance, will virtually guarantee the prevention of any ingress of water.

SKF has also provided bearings, in the form of cross roller bearings, to support the idler gears, which keep the caissons level at all times. The caissons themselves run on a wheel arrangement on circular rails, with each wheel mounted on two sealed spherical roller bearings.

As the centrepiece of the Millennium Link project the Falkirk Wheel is part of the largest canal restoration project currently underway in the UK. The Millennium Link will see the removal of over 30 obstructions on the Forth and Clyde, and Union Canals to make the 200-year-old waterways navigable once more. Although

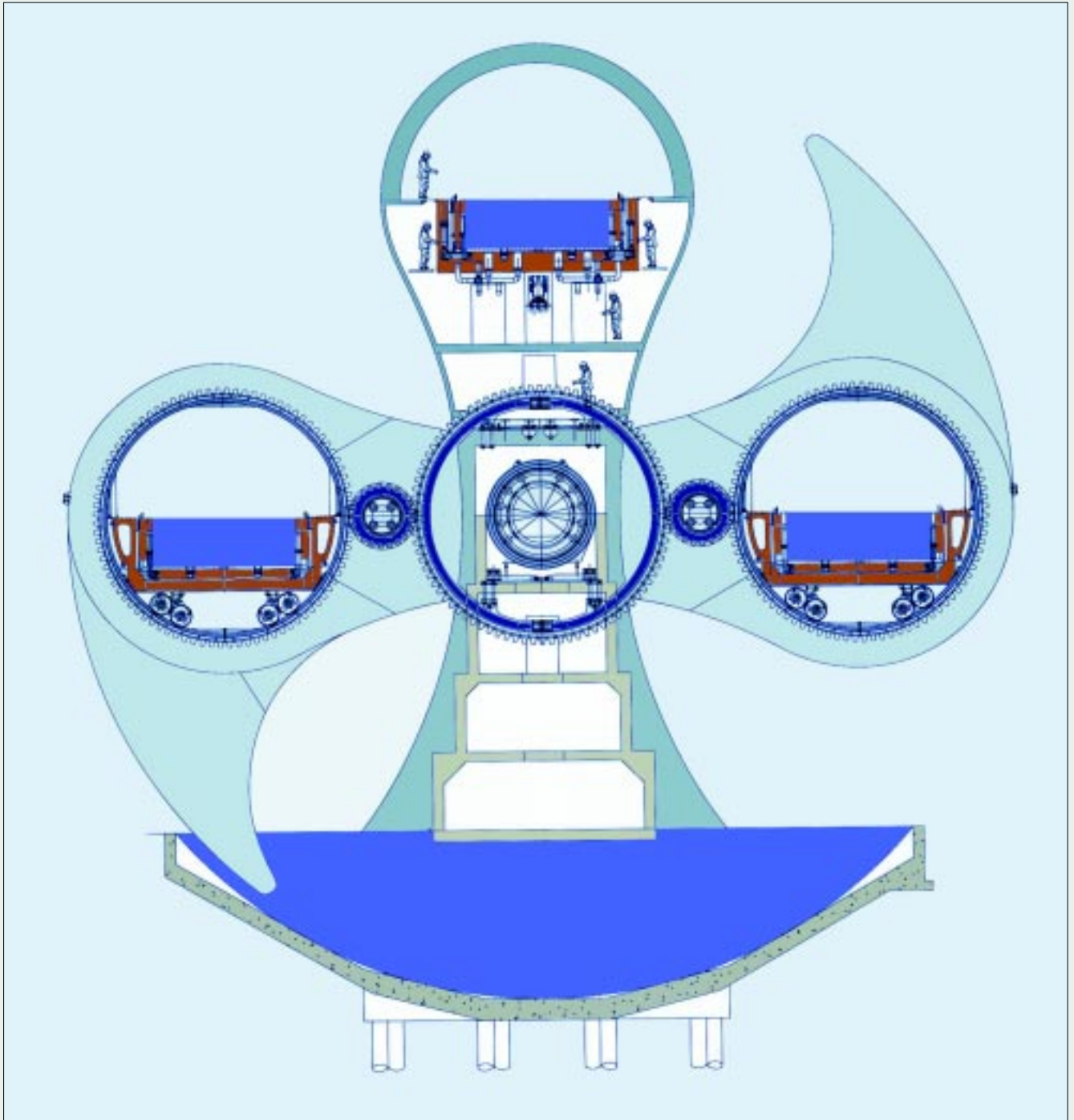
the canals were reconnected late last year, this is just the beginning of the story. It is expected that over the coming years, the regenerated network will attract increasing numbers of boaters, and visitors to the area with the waterways acting as a catalyst for further economic regenera-

tion and the revitalisation of communities across central Scotland.

Jim Stirling, Director of British Waterways, Scotland, said "We always said that the Falkirk Wheel should be something special, we wanted to create something elegant that people would want to

come and see. The wheel will be a symbol for Scottish innovation and ingenuity as well as a unique, thrilling experience for visitors." ■

*Article and photos courtesy of Minett Media, Cambridge, UK.*



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