



Stahl, Waalwijk



Stahl invests in China

The ground breaking ceremony took place for Stahl's manufacturing facility in Suzhou, a 2,500 year old city in the southern part of Jiangsu province, located between Nanjing and Shanghai, on the March 2 last year.

As Stahl Europe enters its 51st year, this latest project in China will cost Stahl \$18 million and is scheduled to come on stream in April 2006 with a capacity to manufacture 17,000 tonnes of product per year. These will initially include acrylics, pigments and lacquer emulsions for the leather and shoe industries and surface coatings for the flexible substrate industry.

In his speech at the ceremony, Willi Vaskovich said, "I am proud to be present at the start of another Stahl venture, our eighth manufacturing facility in the world. With the building of a manufacturing plant in Suzhou, Stahl affirms its confidence in the dynamic growth of the Chinese market while honouring its commitment to give local support to its customers all over the world."

Stahl Europe

Stahl's European history started in the 1940s when its products were needed to help the rapid rebuilding of the Dutch leather and footwear industries. The leather industry grew and provided a valuable market for the American company founded by Harry Stahl and for its European trading partners, Wil Levenbach and Frans Barnards who were owners of M Levenbach NV, a leather trading business based in Amsterdam. They owned an active tannery business NV Leerfabriek "De Kroon" in Waalwijk and it was this business which acquired the European representation rights allowing them to import Stahl products into Europe.

Wil Levenbach and Frans Barnards soon realised that there were many benefits to be gained from manufacturing Stahl products in Europe. Waalwijk was the obvious location. On April 18, 1955 Stahl Chemische Industrieën was formed. The board also included Harry Stahl's son, Louis, and Paul Petit, to be joined later by Felix Levenbach, a close relation of Wil's and their partner in the USA. Henry Psuik was brought in from Stahl Finish Company in Peabody, USA, to lead a ten man team to start-up production and on January 2, 1956 the first drum of Camotex Red was produced, the first of over 400 tonnes of finish to be produced in that successful first year.

Beatrice Foods

Beatrice Foods purchased Stahl in 1965. Around this time Stahl's Research and Development team were working on the development of water-based finishing products and in particular on aqueous polyurethanes. They happened to hit the market at a time when events in the Middle East were making solvents less readily available and escalating in price. So these water-based products which then became available from Stahl offered tanners an opportunity to use products that produced finished leather of high quality and economy at a critical moment in the history of the leather industry.

Growth of Stahl in Waalwijk

Over the next twenty years, Stahl was to experience major growth in its markets and products, in its staff and in its facilities at Waalwijk. During this time, Beatrice Foods sold the company to ICI, which later devolved some of its business, including Stahl, into Zeneca, thence into Astra-Zeneca and later Avecia. What could have been a lengthy period of turmoil actually became a period of steady planned growth, mainly because Stahl's directors had the foresight to understand the value of the Stahl brand in the leather industry and insist that the Stahl name and image be retained.



Left to right, Frans Barnards, Louis Stahl and Wil Levenbach



Willi Vaskovich



Philip Rothwell



Frank Policky



Jürgen Hemmrich

Towards the end of this period Willi Vaskovich was appointed general manager and became "the face of Stahl". Until his retirement at the end of 2003, Willi had worked for Stahl for 38 years, and it was his far-seeing vision that drove the company forward over that period. He became president and chief executive officer following the management buy-out that led to the formation of the independent Stahl Group in January 2002. He remains a director of the management board of Stahl Holdings bv hence his representing Frank Policky at the Chinese ceremony.

Under Willi's leadership new manufacturing facilities and application laboratories were built in major leather centres around the world. A new modern office building was built in Waalwijk in 1978 to include applications laboratories, research laboratories and offices. Perhaps the most outstanding contribution to the development of Stahl in Holland was the multi-million Euro Leather Technology Center in Waalwijk, which followed not long after new research and development laboratories had been built. In more recent years Stahl has set up manufacturing facilities for Stahl India at Ranipet. Other new applications and development laboratories and manufacturing units have also been established in Mexico, Brazil and USA.

When Willi became general manager of Stahl International, he was succeeded as general manager of Stahl Holland by Philip Rothwell who had moved to Waalwijk two years previously from Stahl GB.

He became managing director of Stahl Holland in 1990. By that time the company consisted of three sales divisions, Leather Finish representing around 50% of the total business, Shoe Finish and Permuthane. The first two were closely related as both were associated with the leather industry. But the Permuthane division, which had been founded in 1967, was a little different. It supplied coatings for synthetic leather, flooring, textiles, automotive trim and some other technical applications classified as being non-leather substrates.

Also at this time ICI decided to merge the Francolor business that consisted of wetend products and dyestuffs with Stahl. It was a major move to bring the two businesses together, and it included a large application laboratory at Blackley on the north side of Manchester, UK. By January 1, 1991 the new Colours and Tanning Products division was established and a year later the applications facilities had been relocated from England to Holland.

Globalisation and rationalisation

Hitherto Stahl had manufacturing plants in Spain, France, Italy and the UK. This approach tended towards small batch production methods with the associated loss in efficiency.

Philip supported the need to rationalise production of key products between the European manufacturing facilities, a move which has led to the formation of a "Europe" culture with the many benefits of economy of scale, tighter quality control and the ability to adopt large scale manufacturing technology with computer-controlled automation.

On Philip's departure for India in 1998 to lead Stahl's project to construct a manufacturing plant at Ranipet in Tamil Nadu just outside Chennai, Frank Policky and Jürgen Hemmrich filled his role jointly.

Frank joined Stahl in 1984 and in 1997 he became business manager, Leather Products Europe, joint general manager of Stahl Holland and chairman of the Stahl European management board, positions which he has held until his recent appointment as President and chief executive officer of the Stahl Group.

Frank succeeded Willi Vaskovich on his retirement. In turn, Willi's son, Michael Vaskovich who returned to Holland after spending several years with Stahl Brasil, succeeded Frank as general manager of Stahl Holland, now Stahl Europe.

In recent years

Stahl has seen some important changes in recent years. Avecia decided to sell the company in the early years of the new Millennium and this led to a management buyout, backed by the global investment group Investcorp.

With this significant financial backing Stahl has since acquired wetend products from the Salem Oil & Grease range and the leather finishing product range from the Spanish leather chemicals manufacturer, Pielcolor, both of which are important additions to the company and to its product portfolio. Last December it acquired full control of Pielcolor Uruguay including its subsidiary companies Colorcuer, S.A. of Argentina and Pielcolor Chile, S.A.

In 2004 Willi Vaskovich retired to be succeeded by Frank Policky as president and chief executive officer. Both Jürgen Hemmrich and his wife have retired. And Willi's son, Michael has returned to Waalwijk from his position of executive vice president of Stahl Brasil to take up the appointment as executive vice president of Stahl Europe in succession to Frank.

What started as a small manufacturing facility fifty years ago has now grown into a massive manufacturing complex complete with applications and research laboratories, extensive quality control capabilities, business and marketing centralisation and computer facilities that enable the world-wide company to be controlled from its centre in Waalwijk. And "yes" the original factory building remains on the Waalwijk site, albeit surrounded by modern warehouse buildings that have come into being since its conception. 🌐