



# Hart bv: Recharged and Redrawn

The past fifteen months have been a roller coaster for many stockists and suppliers as they faced the challenges of a global pandemic, delayed project orders and an unpredictable future market. Based in the Netherlands, Hart drew on their decades of experience to carefully plot a path and are emerging both grateful to have successfully navigated the challenges and excited to implement changes. New branding and house-style, and improved warehouse processes lead the way forward for this quality supplier and stockist of nickel alloys. As Sales Director Lizette Hartholt told *Stainless Steel World*: “It feels good to put a year of extremes behind us by starting something new.”

By Joanne McIntyre

Visiting Hart b.v. in the Netherlands felt like an adventure after months of working from home. With the Covid-19 restrictions only just easing, it was the first company visit for *Stainless Steel World* in over a year, and where better to start than with the Dutch stockist and supplier in the town of Nijkerk. Hart has one of the largest ranges of seamless pipe and fittings in nickel alloys in terms of sizes, wall thicknesses and materials in Europe. Lizette welcomed me with a smile that was obvious even behind her face mask. “Despite the events of the past year, we’ve come through stronger than ever, and that’s testament to the strength of our company,” she explains. “Many stockists and suppliers are in trouble currently, and luckily, we’re not one of them. We have great sympathy for those who are struggling as a result of the pandemic.”

## Looking back on 2020

Lizette begins by looking back at 2020, a year in which the company did well despite being a time of extremes. “It all started so promisingly; by the end of 2019, we were in a very strong position, and 2020 was going to be a top year for Hart. The first quarter of 2020 was great with lots of orders and ongoing projects; the demand for nickel alloys was going from strength to strength...and then Corona appeared. It was like a bubble bursting; we were left wondering how to react; what do we do? Within two days, the country was in a strict lockdown. Fortunately, our team is extremely flexible, and we are very grateful to everyone!”

## Maintaining stocks vital

Hart was never forced to close, with warehouse staff continuing to dispatch orders without interruption.

“It was a challenging time that made us think creatively about contacting people and maintaining service. As it became more difficult to get material, customers were understanding about the resulting delays. By May, everything was running smoothly again. Being a smaller, flexible company proved to be a great advantage; we react very quickly, and communications lines are short. Sticking to our core business of Nickel Alloys also helped.”

By summer, orders were pouring in from across Europe. “Although there were very few new projects, many customers needed materials very quickly after the lockdowns. We chose to maintain full stocking levels and all materials were moving, from Alloy 200 to Alloy C276. Soon we literally could hardly unload and dispatch stock fast enough; it was hectic. We were far busier than



all the information that is needed. It approaches the information from the needs of the customer.”

**Close relationships are essential**

“Cooperation with our suppliers and customers is extremely important,” continues Lizette, “especially in this period of uncertainty. That works both ways; when our suppliers are struggling, we give them breathing space where we can; and if our customers place orders very late, we do everything we can to get their products delivered on time.”

The Hart team is now implementing plans to work even more closely with customers and take on a more proactive role in anticipating their needs. Hart stocks over and above the regular sizes, such as 2 ½” schXXS and 6” schXXS in 625, which is not available at other stockists.

“We are working more closely with our regular customers to anticipate their demands, then adjusting our stocks to meet their emerging. For example, this could relate to certain sizes, products, or materials that we anticipate that they will require.

normal, filling orders that other suppliers could no longer handle. The mills we work with are very happy we continued to restock! By the end of the year, of course, total turnover was lower than we had hoped due to the lack of new projects. However, that gave us the space to work on our house style, website, and look at streamlining our business.”

“Of course, we’ve retained our unique green colour,” smiles Lizette. “The new site fully meets the needs and browsing habits of our customer base. The design is easily navigable and uncomplicated while providing

**www.hartbv.nl – Recharged and Redrawn!**

The Hart team adapts swiftly to change. “You have to be creative,” explains Lizette. “An important part of our work is meeting people, and that simply hasn’t been possible. We found inventive ways to remind customers that we were still there for them, that European mills were still delivering, and the supply chain was still functioning. Now we’re trying to anticipate what will happen for the rest of 2021.”

This transitional period has been ideal for the team to focus on renewing the company branding and image, both online and in-person, explains Lizette. “This has been the perfect time to launch our new brand, house style and website. A lot of business will be done online for the foreseeable future, so it was the ideal time to renew these.”

The new Hart website utilises the most modern technology available, providing a sleek look and intuitive navigation.



*The Hart headquarters in Nijkerk, the Netherlands.*



*Hart b.v. supplies all a customer needs for a project, not just Nickel Alloys from stock.*

It's not a formal contractual agreement, rather a deeper understanding of how we can help meet their future needs." Lizette explains that this is an extension of the Hart philosophy of constantly evolving. "This includes upcoming additions to our already extensive product and material range. Hart has always operated as a forerunner, following our own path. We are continuously reinventing ourselves, re-evaluating our business model and adjusting where necessary. Our main markets remain Oil & Gas, Chemical and Petrochemical; these sectors are undergoing enormous changes so today more than ever, we must adapt quickly."

### Raising responsibilities

A key aspect of Harts renewal has involved taking a critical look at its processes. Lizette continues: "We are a quality company, so although we are small, we have a lot of procedures and processes to ensure we deliver the correct paperwork, markings, colour coding, etc. We looked at how we can shorten the period between an order coming in and being dispatched. Assigning greater responsibility to the warehouse staff - who have received extra training- has shaved a day off this time."

"The past months have also been a time to re-evaluate our IT systems, communications, etc. We've found a happy medium between digitalisation, ensuring top quality, and keeping

human input. Blindly trusting systems is not our style; being well-trained means that every employee is fully engaged and takes full responsibility for the role they play. After all, we aren't a company that has repetitive routines. That makes our business incredibly interesting, but also a little difficult; no two orders are ever exactly the same.

### Changes in international trade

The industry has also been challenged with changes in international trade over the past year. Difficulty in international transports, Brexit, and changing trade barriers are all

challenges, Lizette explains. "Today there are far fewer ships, lorries and planes moving goods globally, leading to sharp increases in prices of up to 300% in the past year. Quite apart from the cost, the delays resulting from the heavily reduced freight possibilities have created problems across the industry. Sea freight which used to take four weeks, can now take up to six weeks. When planes are full, shipments may be stranded. Simultaneously, customers are nervous so place orders at an extremely late stage, which means they can't afford any delays. The whole logistics situation is quite stressful at the moment. We look forward to systems returning more or less to normal later this year. For the time being, a lot of orders are being placed with local suppliers by our customers, which again stresses the importance of being well-stocked."

"Also, we have some important suppliers in the UK who are still working very hard to get their materials moving in the post-Brexit landscape. Some transport companies have struggled with the new regulations and paperwork, with shipments stuck for up to a month at the start of 2021. At Hart, we worked closely with selected forwarders and our suppliers to make the necessary preparations to be up and running quickly. This generated a whole new area of work for us; figuring out the best forwarders to use and evaluating our entire transport



*A typical package in Alloy 400, nearly ready to be shipped to a petrochemical plant.*



The Hart warehouse and vehicle fleet now displays the restyled company logo.

system between Europe and the UK. We are finally regaining control of the transit times.”

**Outlook 2021**

Looking ahead for the rest of the year and into 2022, Lizette is optimistic. “Currently we are supplying to a lot of maintenance activities within Europe. Much of this was postponed last year, but now companies need to catch up because they can’t wait any longer. The Far East is picking up

again in terms of enquiries, but it’s very start-stop at the moment and difficult to predict. It’s good to see that activities in the Middle East are starting to move again; all the big projects that were put on hold are starting up. This is increasing demand for grades like stainless steel 304, 316, the various duplexes and nickel alloys. We also see an upturn in both the materials for the petrochemical industry, such as Nickel 200, Monel 400, Inconel 600

and Alloy C276, as well as in Alloy 625 and 825, widely used in the oil & gas industry. Whatever happens this year and into the future, Hart will be ready to serve our customers with our extensive range of products. Hart is in good stead to respond to the market, with our many approvals from customers all over the world and our highly specified and certified material from renowned manufacturers. We look forward to the rest of 2021!”



Raising the level of responsibility and training amongst warehouse staff has enabled Hart to shave a full day of the time it takes to ship orders.

**Facts & Figures**

Name:	Hart bv
Head office:	Nijkerk, the Netherlands
Key activity:	Master distributor of nickel alloy piping products
Products:	Seamless pipes, fittings and flanges.
Alloys	- (seamless): 200/201, 400, 600, 625, 825 - (seamless & welded): C276
Info:	<a href="http://www.hartbv.nl">www.hartbv.nl</a>