



INTOCO – respected speciality supplier of high-end alloys

For over fifty years, Independent Tool Consultants Limited T/A INTOCO has supplied special stainless steels and nickel alloys with exceptional levels of service, speed and reliability. With a wealth of technical knowledge developed over the decades, INTOCO is now one of the largest on-site stockholders in the UK for specialist alloys such as high-end nickel alloys and duplexes. Stainless Steel World sat down with Tony Preece Managing Director, Emily Price Head of Finance and Nigel Johnson Head of Steel Division, to learn more about the company's journey so far and its plans for the future.

By Joanne McIntyre, Stainless Steel World

As one of the largest independent stockists and distributors of specialised materials in the UK, the INTOCO team know the importance of offering consistently reliable, fast service to customers. They supply high-end alloys to customers who manufacture components for demanding applications such as oil and gas, where quality and reliability are essential. After more than fifty years in the business, their smooth operations

and calm, orderly factories may make it seem easy, but every process is backed up with quality control and a keen sense of responsibility to their customers.

The cornerstone of INTOCO's ongoing success is its very high stocking levels, begins Mr Preece, who heads the company from its headquarters in Cheltenham, UK. The stainless steels and nickel alloys it supplies range in size from 6.4mm to 764mm in diameter.

"Our motto is: 'If you don't have it, you can't sell it', and this has stood us in good stead over the decades," Mr Preece explains. "Our warehouses are fully stocked with around GBP 15 million pounds worth of stock, translating to around 2,400 tonnes of specialist alloys. As each order is processed, replacement stock is immediately ordered. INTOCO's ongoing orders with steel mills with lead times of up to a year account for an extra 30% of stock incoming at any time. While



The Steel Division

markets may fluctuate, our customers know they can trust us to deliver what they need, when they need it."

Worldwide rapid delivery

"We're renowned for rapidly shipping products anywhere in the world," adds Mr Johnson. "Our specialised shipping department ensures products are delivered on time and in perfect

condition, protected in top-quality packaging. More than half of our business is outside of the UK, with Europe being our largest geographical market. Following Brexit, we adapted swiftly to overcome any logistical hiccups and continue to work closely with customers to meet their demands with a minimum of fuss. For example, our products reach customers in mainland Europe within 7-8 working days thanks to the dedication of our logistics team."

Global presence

The main markets to which INTOCO supplies steel are the oil and gas industry, followed by the food industry. "In addition, our high-end alloys go into many demanding industries, often for critical parts and components. Our steel customer base includes very demanding applications, including the petrochemical, valve engineering, sub-sea, wind energy, and pharmaceutical

industries. We also have customers who are aerospace-qualified and require some of our materials for that sector."

Demanding Quality Management System

Traceability and certification are key to INTOCO's success, and every product can be traced back to the mill that produced it.

"INTOCO has been ISO 9001:2015 certified for many years," continues Mr Johnson. "We work and adhere to a very strict and demanding quality management system (QMS), and welcome external audits by clients." Dedicated members of staff have roles solely focused on ensuring quality and technical expertise at all levels within the company. "These team members review all certificates and requirements to ensure we are always meeting or exceeding quality requirements. Regular internal audits ensure nothing is overlooked."

Over the past twenty years, INTOCO has developed and worked to its own stringent specification for all incoming material. "We adhere very strictly to that specification," explains Mr Johnson. "Some manufacturers are initially surprised by our demands because they are so high, but we expect the best of the best. We consistently monitor our suppliers to ensure they are meeting our expectations."

While the company's accurate stock and order system ensures smooth operations, sometimes simple ideas can provide clever solutions. For example, a colour coding system has been implemented to make identification of the various grades the company stocks easy and immediate. "The products are colour-coded on receipt for checking



5 axis machining capabilities up to 8 tonnes



The meticulous machine shops are fully equipped to offer extensive value-adding services

and confirmation,” explains Mr Johnson, “and this is backed up with colour-coded paperwork. The process starts in the office and finishes in the workshop, so every grade is associated with a particular colour. It’s a simple idea, but it works brilliantly.”

Selected manufacturers

With such a laser-like focus on quality, it’s unsurprising that INTOCO works with a small, select group of suppliers for their materials. “Every single one is thoroughly audited and understands exactly what our demands are,” explains Mr Johnson. “Striving for quality requires hard work and a long-term commitment from both parties. As a result, we work with a select, stable group of suppliers who have worked with us for many years. This creates strong relationships built on trust. While we will occasionally take on new suppliers to fill any gaps in our product offering, they must go through a very thorough process before gaining approval. As we’re constantly anticipating demand for more than a year head, stock projection is key to fulfilling customer needs. Our trusted supplier pool allows us to anticipate demand and ensure the smooth continuation of supply.”

Fully cash funded

Remarkably for such a large supplier of high-end alloys, INTOCO works entirely without any external financing. “All of our operations are based on our extensive cash reserves, which are constantly increased to facilitate the purchasing of stock and provide

services to our customers,” explains Ms Price. “It’s very important to us that we are fully cash-funded, and it’s fairly unique in the industry. Having large cash reserves means we can immediately purchase what we need, get it on the shelves, and ship it to the clients without delay. This has been the INTOCO policy for many years, and it applies to both the manufacturing and the distribution sides of the company.”

The INTOCO family

With a reserved, almost humble attitude, the INTOCO management team is a no-fuss, hard-working group that quietly and consistently delivers an extraordinary level of service to demanding applications. However, one aspect of the business of which they are clearly very proud is their team,

A history in machining & manufacturing

INTOCO started its journey in 1972 as a machining and manufacturing company manufacturing and pre-machining die blanks for the aluminium extrusion industry. It went from there in 1978 into supplying hot work die steel by carrying immense stock of W.2344 & W.2714 from diameters 150mm to 650mm and were able to offer blanks close to their finished size with 24 hour delivery anywhere in the county. This was a radical change for the die industry who previously had to heavily stock rough forged unannealed die blanks massively oversized on their diameter thickness. It was a game-changing strategy which set up INTOCOs success for the future. It generated the capital for the company to expand into a very large manufacturing facility serving the metal extrusion industry. From that point, the company branched out into the stainless steel and nickel alloy supply, which was a second huge success. “When we only stocked two grades of steel we had every diameter available, and that business model is still in place today with regard to stock levels” explains Mr Preece. “We can deliver the sizes our customers need, on demand, every time, without delay.” The enormous expertise the company gained in early days in the metal extrusion business allows it to offer extensive value-adding activities for customers today.



Sawing a 764 mm diameter piece of 316L steel

many of whom have been with the company for decades. Mr Preece: "We've got people who've been on the workshop floor for up to 40 years! It is truly unique, and the loyalty of our team is heartwarming and a testament to how much they enjoy sharing this journey with us. There is so much experience and expertise within our workforce. In today's world, where employees may job-hop every few years, to have people choosing to stay with us for their whole career is quite remarkable."

This loyalty is the result not just of favourable working conditions, but also of the environment in which staff operate. "We truly are a family, all of us. It says a lot about a company when people are loyal."

Manufacturing experience = technical expertise

INTOCO is, in fact, two divisions operating within the same company. One division is a speciality steel supplier; the other is a manufacturing division targeted mostly to the aluminium extrusion press industry. The divisions operate as completely separate entities.

"Our manufacturing division, which specialises in tooling and press parts for aluminium extrusion presses, serves that application in almost every country in the world," explains Mr Preece .

"With that business dating back to our foundation over fifty years ago, it is the basis for our extensive knowledge in machining and manufacturing" (see box 'A history in machining & manufacturing').

Experts in adding value

In addition to providing specialist alloys in a huge variety of sizes, INTOCO also has extensive machining capabilities to add value to raw materials. The company's vast in-house knowledge of machining gained and sharpened through its manufacturing division, has provided in-house capabilities and technical know-how to carry out extensive machining operations.

"Our team has in-depth knowledge of machining and manufacturing far beyond that of a regular supplier, with our workshop able to handle components weighing up to 8 tonnes," explains Mr Preece. "The team can machine everything from very small to extremely large items to provide



State of the art saws provide accuracy on sawn faces

some added value. These include activities as diverse as deep hole boring to heat treatment and a range of ancillary services. Our machines can provide high-quality finishes on sawn products."

"An ongoing investment program ensures our capabilities are forever increasing to meet customer demands," Ms Price continues. "Usually, we are asked to rough-machine raw materials to a certain point. However, we're careful not to encroach on our customers' activities. We will never compete with them by producing finished products; our activities are limited to helping them save time and machining costs."

Future developments

The company's steady success over the years means the INTOCO team is accustomed to planning ahead. Upcoming developments include a significant expansion of the warehouse and office facilities to increase stock

levels; and plans to expand into more demanding applications requiring high-end alloys.

Ms Price explains: "We recently acquired land to build a new large-scale facility. Our plans include expanding our product range to include additional grades of alloys, which will lead to an expansion in our customer base. We're also considering expanding fully into the plate and aerospace sector. Our current pool of suppliers can already provide us with the alloys required for this, while our internal systems and quality control are already up to the standard required to serve this exceptionally demanding sector."

"We place high value on the quality of our products and the integrity of our business. So we welcome open conversations which can be the start of a long-lasting relationship based on respect, integrity and stability. That is exactly how INTOCO has become a trusted supplier of special stainless steels and nickel alloys." ▲

Facts & Figures

Name:	Independent Tool Consultants Limited T/A INTOCO
Founded:	1972
Headquarters:	Cheltenham, UK
Sales office:	Dundee, Scotland
Stainless Steels:	(Super) duplex, 17-4 PH, 904L Austenitic, 440C, Super austenitics, Integrex (NIT) 50 HS, Integrex (NIT) 50, Integrex (NIT) 60, 316
Nickel Alloys:	718-AMS, 400, 718-API, K500, 825, 625, C276, A286/660
Website:	www.intoco.co.uk