

AGC Zeebrugge celebrates 100th anniversary



Jean Hardy* spoke to Christophe Neels** on AGC Glass Europe's history at its Zeebrugge site in Belgium as it celebrates 100 years of glass production.

AGC Glass Europe recently celebrated 100 years of glass production at its Zeebrugge site in Belgium. The event also honoured the 50th anniversary of AGC Seapane's double-glazing activity.

In attendance was Davide Cappellino, President of AGC Architectural Glass, and Enrico Ceriani, Vice President of AGC Glass Europe, as well as Carl Decaluwé, Governor of the Province of West Flanders, and Dirk De fauw, Mayor of Bruges.

Christophe Neels (**Pic 1**), Plant and Site Manager of AGC Zeebrugge, Rik Gunst, Business Manager of AGC Seapane, and staff welcomed over 100 delegates.

During an introductory speech, Mr Neels outlined the main challenges the Zeebrugge factory had overcome during the past 100 years. Afterwards, all guests had the opportunity to visit the site before a walking dinner.

History

In March 1914, the first industrial production of drawn glass began in Damprémy, using a process developed by two Belgian engineers, Emile Fourcault and Emile Gobbe.

At the end of the First World War, the idea of creating a site near the North Sea was initiated. Zeebrugge was chosen for its location - near the Brugge-Zeebrugge canal, with access to the English market by sea - as well as its proximity to a coke plant, which provided the necessary energy

▲ AGC Zeebrugge management with delegates.
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for the furnace operation.

As the factories in this area had no experience in glass production, they called workers in from the Charleroi region to assist them. They came with wives and children, participating in the creation of a new village: Zwankendamme

On September 1925, 'Furnace A' was inaugurated with a capacity of 800 tpd. It was equipped with 10 vertical drawing machines (**Pic 2**) and used the original Fourcault-Gobbe process.

On the eve of the Second World War, the factory had over 600 employees and was producing more than 500,000 m² per month (reduced to 2 mm).

Following the outbreak of the Second World War, the factory was shut in September 1939. It was bombed several times during the war. As a result, when the war ended, rebuilding the factory took longer than its original construction.

In March 1951, the furnace was restarted still with 10 vertical drawing machines but this time using the American 'Pittsburgh' process.

The demand for glass, linked to the post-war reconstruction, was so great that a second, larger furnace, 'Furnace B', was quickly built. It was heated up in March 1957.

The Zeebrugge glassworks reached its peak in the mid-1960s, at one point employing nearly 2,600 workers and producing nearly 3 million m² of glass per month.

Customers considered the Zeebrugge glass to be the best available on the market, due to its optical

qualities and suitability for major residential applications.

Furnace A was shut down in August 1974, Furnace B soon followed in September 1977. This was due to the first oil price shock overlapping with the arrival of the new float process, which quickly replaced the traditional process for producing plate-glass, largely because of its lower cost.

At the time, Glaverbel (now known as AGC Glass Europe) had no plans to convert the site into a float plant, as the group's float furnaces in Moustier sur Sambre, Belgium, were sufficient for the task. As a result, Zeebrugge plant representatives and Glaverbel's management in Brussels conceived the idea of creating two downstream activities.

These activities were almost synchronised with the two furnace shutdowns: the shutdown of Furnace A corresponded with the start of the insulating glass activity, while the shutdown of Furnace B corresponded with the start of the mirrors activity.

As in 1925, when the production of drawn glass began, the Zeebrugge staff were not trained to produce processed glass for insulating glass or mirrors. However, they showed just as much resilience as the staff of 1925 had shown; some were even descendants of the founding staff members. Regardless, they all took on the challenge.

Insulating glass

While its sister plant in Mol, Belgium, had been producing double glazing under the Thermopane label since the post-war period, the Zeebrugge plant began the production of sealed double-glazing under the Thermobel brand. This time, however, the Zeebrugge workers went to Germany to be trained in a Flachglas factory.

Since then, the product range has grown substantially, offering solutions that meet the highest level of solar control, acoustics, safety and design. To be closer to its customers, a separate subsidiary featuring the insulating glass business was created in 1997 under name of Seapane.

Today, thanks to improvements in insulating glass production, Seapane helps construct energy-efficient buildings in Belgium as well as neighbouring countries.

Mirrors

In the 1970s, mirror production in Belgium was in the hands of a few processing companies such as Mirox in Gosselies, and Mirodan in Heule, Kortrijk.

Within the prospect of the definitive shut down of production in Zeebrugge, Glaverbel's management became interested in the mirror market. The group acquired the two companies mentioned above and implemented a new business plan. Within this plan, some equipment of Mirox and Mirodan was transferred and refurbished in Zeebrugge, with the end goal to make Zeebrugge the new mirrors producer. Meanwhile, Mirox and

Mirodan would become subsidiaries distributing Glaverbel products.

In March 1977, the first tests were launched on the new mirror line in Zeebrugge. This new recreated line allowed silvering (**Pic 3**) of fixed dimensions up to 3.21 m (float ribbon width) x 2.25 m. The production started in September 1977 with two work shifts per day, allowing a daily production of 6,000 m².

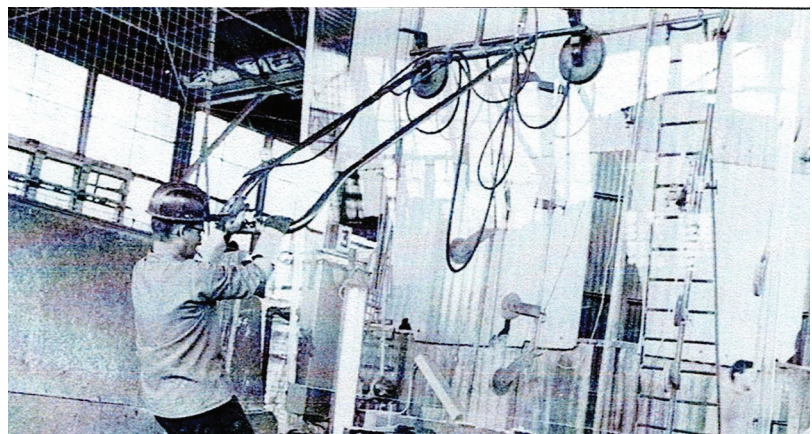
Due to the high quality of the mirrors produced in Zeebrugge, and various measures taken by the sales department (that remained in Brussels), it was possible to convince several small customers of Glaverbel to transfer their basic production to Zeebrugge. The following milestones outline the route taken by Zeebrugge towards its commitment to sustainability.

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► Pic 1. Christophe Neels (right), Plant Manager of AGC Zeebrugge, welcomes Davide Cappellino (left), President of AGC Architectural Glass.
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▼ Pic 2. Reception and cutting of the glass ribbon, at the exit of the vertical drawing machine.





Firstly, the existing conveyor was used at full capacity, running 24 hours a day, seven days a week. By 1986, annual production had reached nearly 90 million m².

In the meantime, a new conveyor in Zeebrugge was built for the direct manufacture of mirrors on 6.00 m x 3.21 m glass sheets, a standard format for float glass (jumbo sizes).

The conveyor was inaugurated on 20 November, 1987, in presence of Gaston Geens, Minister-President of the Flemish Region, and the late CEO of Glaverbel, Philippe Bodson.

In 1995, a superior-quality, copper-free, eco-friendly mirror with a life expectancy three times longer than a traditional mirror was launched under the name Mirror New Generation Ecologica (MNGE).

In 1997, Zeebrugge acquired a line for painted

▲ Pic 3. Exit of the silvering line - a back mark for traceability is applied.

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▼ Pic 4. View on a concentrated solar power (CSP) field, with mirrors supplied by AGC. Every dot is a heliostat, containing four mirrors of 225 x 190 cm. The heliostat reflects the light to the tower where a heat exchanger transforms the heat into electricity.

glass (Lacobel and Matelac), responding to the growing demand for aesthetic interior solutions.

In 2011, it started the production of flat solar mirrors, needed for the production of green electricity, see **Pic 4**.

Recently, the company introduced a high-quality mirror with a water-based protective coating, under the name 'Mirox 4Green+'.

And last, but not least, on 24 September 2025, at 22:16, the factory produced its 350,000,000th m² of mirrors.

Conclusion

Site Manager Christophe Neels believes the success of AGC Zeebrugge is based not only on technological advancement, but also its people.

He said that the site is known within the group for its excellent safety culture, and that the daily commitment and safety awareness of every employee ensures the workplace is and remains a safe environment.

He continued that AGC Seapane's 50 years of expertise in high-performance glass, and AGC Zeebrugge's century of growth in mirror production, would not have been possible without the continued support of AGC Glass Europe and its engineers.

He said: "The story of AGC Zeebrugge is one of continuous transformation." ■

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