



Berry Global

# A plant full of bottles, but no liquids

All photos courtesy of Jean-Louis Vandevoorde.

North Sea Port is home to one of the main production plants of packaging company Berry Global in Europe. It turns out thousands of plastic bottles each day for a large array of customers and houses a R&D department that helps to make a difference when it comes to customisation. The plant plays an important role in the American group and will continue doing so, says General Manager Luc Wattez.



Storing empty containers is a high volume affair requiring a lot of space.



More than half the production lines at Berry Ghent are automated, including the transfer of palletised bottles to the warehouse by AGVs.

### Berry Global in a nutshell

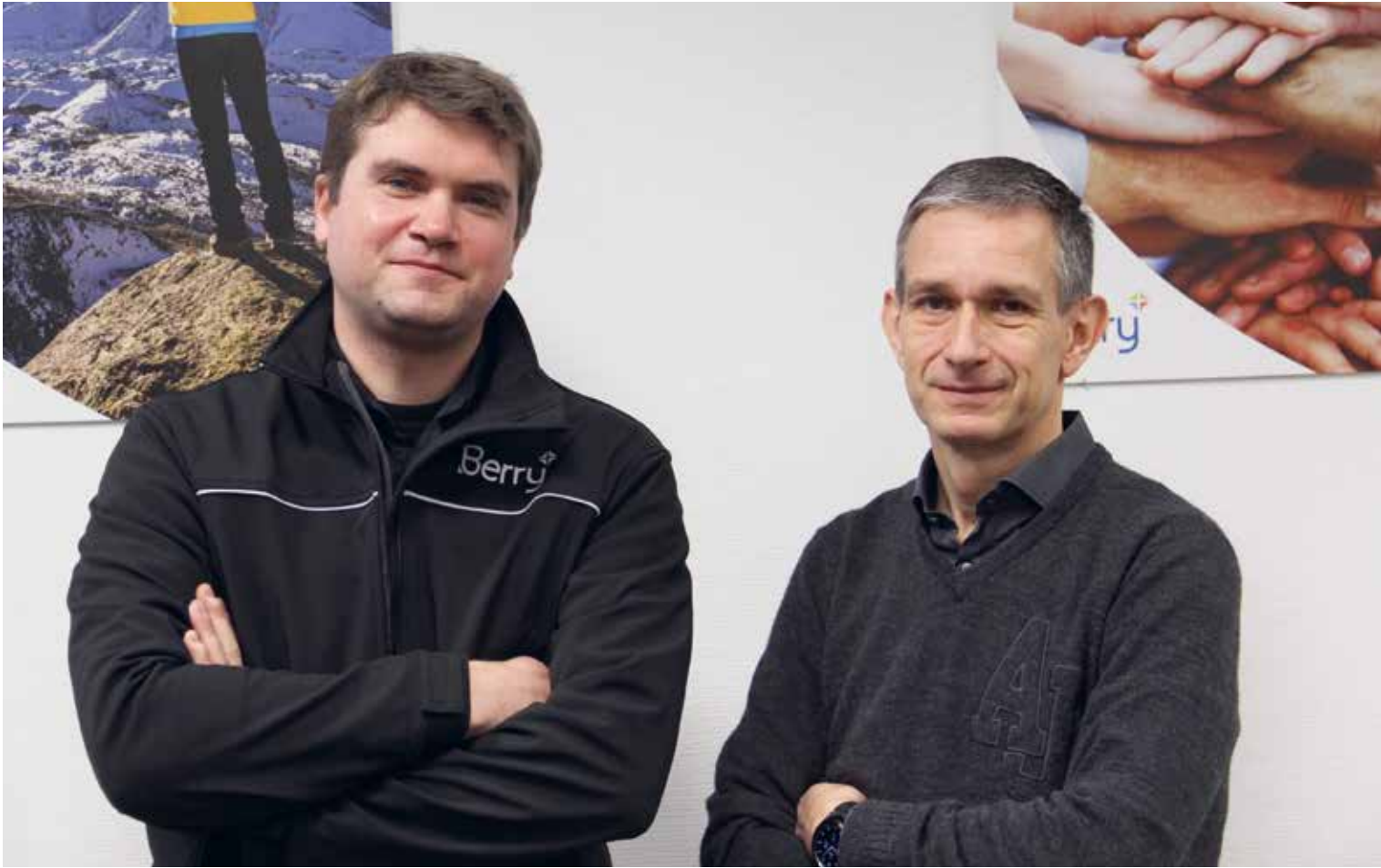
- Fortune 500 global manufacturer and marketer of plastic packaging products
- Established in 1967, entering the container market in 1972, taking over Imperial Plastics in 1983 and acquiring RPC Group in 2019 to become a 'truly global company'
- Headquartered in Evansville, Indiana
- Over 300 facilities across the globe
- More than 47,000 employees
- Record USD 13.9 billion of net sales in fiscal year 2021

Among the 525 companies in North Sea Port, there are many that operate out of the limelight. Berry Global is one of them, even if one could say the producer of packaging and protective solutions is a household name nobody knows. "When you open your fridge, probably half of the products packed or wrapped in plastic in it will be in one of our films, bottles, containers, jars, pots, bags or cups", says Luc Wattez, General Manager of Berry Ghent, with a smile. "And the markets we serve go far beyond the food and beverages business. Agriculture and horticulture, animal and pet care, healthcare and homecare,

beauty and personal care, garden and outdoors, do-it-yourself supplies, building and construction, commercial and industrial supplies, shipping and transportation... we provide our customers with the packaging and protective solutions that meet their performance requirements, environmental impact targets, and aesthetic needs."

Berry is a group with a global reach and a strong presence in Belgium and the Netherlands, with no less than respectively six and eight subsidiaries in these two countries. One of its factories is located in the Ghent area of North Sea Port.





Production Manager Jurgen van Boxel and General Manager Luc Wattez of Berry Ghent.

### 300,000 bottles a day

The Ghent plant has a history that now spans over 65 years. It was part of the RPC Group when, in 2019, Berry Global took over this other big player in plastic packaging, thereby doubling its own size and strongly expanding its capacities in markets like Europe and Asia.

Ghent is one of about fifteen blow moulding factories in the region 'Central Europe'. The plant in Eke, just a few kilometres south of Ghent, is part of this same network of production facilities. But whereas Ghent mainly focuses on plastic bottles and cans in the range of one to five litres, Eke turns out canisters with a higher capacity. Luc Wattez, who is also member of the Board of Directors of Berry Ghent and Eke, is responsible for both blow moulding plants.

In Ghent, where Berry employs 163 people, no less than 36 machines churn out plastic containers on the 32,450m<sup>2</sup> site in the southern part of North Sea Port. The vast majority, 33 to be precise, blow and mould HDPE plastic into bottles, three can make canisters of 15 or 20 litres.

"Ghent is one of our larger plants. On a normal working day we produce about 300,000 bottles, enough to fill the equivalent of some 1,200 pallets", Production Manager Jurgen van Boxel explains. "About half our lines are fully automated, with automated guided vehicles (AGVs) for taking pallets with bottles off the production lines and transferring them to our 6,000m<sup>2</sup> warehouse for intermediate storage. We use automation for the high volumes contracts. The other machines offer the flexibility we need for smaller orders."

### High quality and customisation

Ghent does more than just production, Mr Wattez emphasises. "For blow moulding, we also house an important research &



When you open your fridge, probably half of the products packed or wrapped in plastic in it will be in one of our films, bottles, containers, jars, pots, bags or cups.

development division. We have five people working on this fulltime. Developing and implementing a new product can easily take up to eight months."

"We combine high volumes with a high degree of customisation and quality. It is part of our strategy and philosophy", he adds.

"Here in Ghent, we are able to make bottles to very specific standards and requirements, which can be pretty challenging in technical terms. And we often get involved in the development of new bottles and cans at a very early stage, assisting our customers in defining the products that best suit their needs and taking into account how their own industrial processes function. We have built up a solid reputation in this field, even helping them to fine-tune their installations to obtain the best results. To do that, we can rely on our very experienced staff. The expertise we have gathered here in Ghent is quite exceptional."

Quality is also a matter of safety and security. "Some clients will use our bottles and canisters to package hazardous and dangerous materials like pesticides. They must then be compliant with the very strict UN standards and should be certified after testing. Each bottle of this kind is screened and tested for possible flaws to make sure it can receive the 'UN-approved' stamp."



What we aim for is to always load trucks to the full and try to arrange direct shipment to the customer as much as possible.

### Transporting air

Plants like Ghent concentrate on a well-defined geographical area. “When you transport empty plastic containers, their weight is almost negligible. Volume is the main issue. Our products cannot bear too high a transportation cost. You need to produce locally to absorb the logistical costs. Therefore, a lot of our clients are located nearby, in North Sea Port or Antwerp for example, but our hinterland includes the United Kingdom, the North of France, and the Netherlands.”

“What we aim for is to always load trucks to the full and try to arrange direct shipment to the customer as much as possible, planning production as close as possible to delivery”, Mr van Boxel indicates. “That is not always possible, and since the storage capacity at our Ghent plant is limited and we do not have the room to expand it, we have to rely on external locations – inside and outside the port – to store our products before delivery. That kind of warehousing capacity is also needed because our clients, once they start filling up their plastic containers, will do so at a pace which is faster than we can produce them. You simply need a buffer, and finding one is easier in an area like North Sea Port.”

### Circularity on the rise

Berry Global puts great emphasis on sustainability and is looking hard at ways to reduce its ecological footprint. One of the ways to achieve this goal is using PCR resin. PCR stands for post-consumer recycled.

“Today, we still see a lot of single use plastics. At Berry’s, we do all we can to increase the use of recycled material, setting up partnerships to create circular production chains.” The challenge is multifold, Mr Watzek makes clear. “You do not only have to find the needed material in sufficient quantities. On the technical side, you also have to re-examine all the production parameters because PCR has other properties than HDPE. And, of course, the customer will ask for a reasonable price.” The Ghent plant is already producing PCR bottles. “Among the local players, we certainly are among the front runners in this field.”

Berry Ghent is fighting for sustainability on other fronts too, for instance by recycling the plastic scrap that comes with its own production and aiming at zero waste, but also lowering its energy consumption by switching to new engines when machines receive an overhaul.

### New HDPE silos

Mr Watzek is confident about the future. “In the past two years, we have been through some exceptional times, with a market in turmoil, if only where energy is concerned. Being part of a group with the network and the buying power Berry has, helps us a lot. And Berry considers the Ghent plant a very valuable asset. No demand for capex investments I can recall has been turned down.”

### One of America’s ‘Most Responsible Companies’

At the end of last year, Berry Global Group was named one of America’s 500 Most Responsible Companies. It ranked 35th out of 2,000 public companies in the list presented by Newsweek magazine and global research firm Statista, Inc. In its respective industry, Berry ended in fourth position. Companies were evaluated on their publicly available performance data for the three areas of ESG governance: environmental, social, and corporate governance.

In recent years, Berry has placed special emphasis on its ESG efforts. The goal is to achieve 30% circular plastics use by 2030, surpassing the previous goal to use 10% post-consumer recycled (PCR) resin by 2025. To that end, the group sealed agreements to secure over 600 million pounds of recycled material, including advanced recycled material from top suppliers. For 39 sites globally, Berry also achieved the ISCC PLUS sustainability and traceability certification, an internationally recognised standard for the circular economy.



**Quality control is essential to guarantee the safety of client and end user.**

To better manage the ups and downs on the supply side, Berry Ghent recently installed two additional silos of 70t each for the storage of HDPE, bringing the total to eleven. “It is an investment that should also be viewed in the light of the increasing requirement for PCR. We can still add two silos, if need be. And if a further expansion of production would be necessary, then switching to machines with a higher production capacity is definitely an option.”