

Mervielde

Expanding in more than one way



Building on 75 years of expertise, Mervielde continues to expand the scope of its logistical activities. At the same time, bursting at the seams on its location in Rieme, the company opened a second terminal on a nearby site along the sea canal, where in due time it will be able to use the waterway in the supply chains of its customers. The family business is already on the lookout for further opportunities to expand, while staying true to its strategy of proximity, high standards, and centralisation.



The first development phase on the company's new site is fully operational since last year.

Photo courtesy of Mervielde.

CEO Patrick Mervielde, who runs the company together with his cousin Koen, will never forget how modest the beginnings of Mervielde were. “My grandfather Cyriel Mervielde started out after World War II by collecting milk with a cart and a horse, before buying his first truck. The first tank truck came in 1967, at a time when more and more chemical companies opted for the Ghent port area to start a new plant. In 1980 we moved to our present location in Rieme, buying up surrounding land over the following years to develop our activities. It was then that the foundations were laid on which we still build today. Being a family business, in close interaction with our clients and environment, is very much at the heart of that.”

Focus

The focus at Mervielde's is on tank transport and storage of hazardous and non-hazardous liquids and on serving a specific kind of customer, mainly to be found in the petrochemical and chemical industries. It is a virtue partly born out of necessity, the third generation manager of the company recalls. “When the European market opened up, many companies flagged out part of their activities to Eastern Europe. We never followed that trail. We lost a lot of long haul traffic of commodities, but we searched our way into niches requiring a higher specialisation and expertise and specific rolling stock and equipment, which allowed us to pay our very well-trained, but more expensive Belgian drivers.”

Three brands under one roof

Mervielde (tank transport and distribution of liquids for the chemical and oil industry)

- 125 tank trailers
- 250 tank containers
- 90 trucks

Van Heesvelde (dedicated liquids logistics)

- 46 tank trailers (for high temperature products, sulphuric acid, printing ink, waste...)
- 32 trucks

TVT (transportation of technical oils and fats)

- 32 tank trailers
- 24 trucks

Together, they employ 215 people, many of whom live in the North Sea Port area, and achieved a turnover of EUR 39 million in 2021

Mervielde made its mark, but the CEO does not overplay his hand. “Even if we are one of the larger tank haulage companies in Belgium today, we are not in the same league as the big pan-European groups. We never tried to build an international network of subsidiaries, for instance. But what we may lack in size, we make up for with our service level and flexibility. For us, proximity is an added value allowing us to be close to our customers both in terms of geography – many of them are located at North Sea Port and the Port of Antwerp – and of personal approach. When they are confronted with labour-intensive, complex operations with high quality and safety requirements, they know they can call on us to provide tailored solutions and 24/7 service. The big tenders requiring very large capacities and deep-sea capabilities are not what we are aiming at. We cater to clients with smaller volumes of specialised liquids.”

Controlled growth

“Mervielde has grown quite constantly, but at a controlled pace and without ever losing sight of the high quality standards and of our identity. Today we employ 215 people. I still know them all by name. Our company structure is kept as flat and our decision lines as short as possible.”

One step often led to another. “The trucks we need are costly and require regular maintenance, so we decided to open our own workshop. Tank trailers and containers have to be correctly cleaned, so we started our own cleaning station as early as 1985 and later opened it to third party equipment.”

Mervielde twice used an external acquisition as a stepping stone in its growth. The first came in 1996 with the takeover of Transport Van Heesvelde, a specialised tank haulier with then seven trucks working mainly for a chemical factory in the neighbourhood. The second dates back to 2017, when TVT (Transport Van Tricht), a company with a focus on technical oils and fats, joined the pair.

“Each company still is a separate entity and has its own identity and field of activity. However, the follow-up of operations is bundled, back-office functions are integrated, they share the same quality systems and they buy new equipment together.”

Going forward in logistics

A major turning point was the building in 2007 of a new access road to the Mervielde premises, allowing trucks to come and



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A Mervielde, TVT and Van Heesvelde truck standing side by side.



Photo courtesy of Jean-Louis Vandevoorde

CEO Patrick Mervielde (right) and Business Development Manager Joris Nauwelaerts in front of the new logo Mervielde adopted last year.

go without having to pass through the adjacent village of Rieme. “It represented a pretty heavy investment, on the eve of the financial crisis of 2008. But it gave us new breathing space, rid us of a serious bottleneck, and set the door wide open for new developments and further diversification into logistics. In the following years we built a first warehouse, we opened a container yard, and we expanded our tank cleaning.”

Storage and added value services (e.g. drumming, IBC filling, blending, filtering) became more important. “Many of our customers now rely on us for the intermediate storage of smaller volumes in fixed tanks, which are often dedicated to specific users, or tank containers. Having products on stock in larger quantities than they can store at their own site gives our customers more flexibility and results in efficiency gains for them, since they can produce products in bigger batches that



Photo courtesy of Mervielde.

we can keep in our tanks of up to 45,000l. At the same time, we can achieve a higher loading rate and an optimised payload of our trucks. That is the kind of service through which we have been able to increase our market share”, adds Business Development Manager Joris Nauwelaerts.

“For us, the way forward is more in logistics, which reinforces the interaction with our clients, than in pure haulage. Our specialisation and the high qualification of our personnel have been the basis of our success. We can only be as flexible as our drivers though, and Mervielde would never have thrived without its very motivated team”, Mr Mervielde stresses. “More than ever, the challenge is to find the right people and to maintain the high standards for the demanding job performed by Mervielde. Finding young truck drivers with the right skills and willingness to go the extra mile for our customers is becoming increasingly difficult. This puts a brake on the plans we make and has even prevented us from making some acquisitions we would have considered if this problem did not exist.”

New site

The growth in volumes and activities meant Mervielde was increasingly bursting at the seams at its location in Rieme in recent years. With the new office building erected in 2016, a recent extension of the workshop and the new carports with solar panels installed last year, room for new developments has become extremely scarce on the 4.5 hectare site.

So five years ago the company started a search for added space. “Finding the right match wasn’t easy. We were looking for a site with a potential connexion to the waterway. And once again, despite our European reach, proximity was an important factor. We have our workshop, warehouse, tank cleaning, waste water treatment and so on here in Rieme. Keeping things close saves kilometres, time, and money. Centralisation has its limits,

Strong partner in logistics

Storage, integrated logistics, and value added services

- Storage of loaded tank containers (Seveso)
- Storage in stainless steel shore tanks (capacity ranging between 15 and 460 m³)
- Transfers between shore tanks, tank containers, flexitanks, IBCs, drums...
- Customs and excise warehouse
- Heating (steam & hot water), drumming, filtering, and blending
- Stock management, order follow-up, administrative support, transport planning, real time loading and unloading information

Intermodal transport

- Tank cleaning
- 3 lanes for non-food
- 2 lanes for food
- Delivering European Cleaning Document (ECD)
- 31,000 cleanings performed in 2021

of course, but in our case it usually translates into enhanced efficiency, and thus is a trump card.”

Mervielde found what it was looking for on the former Kuhlmann industrial site next to the sea canal between Ghent and Terneuzen, which is being redeveloped by dredging companies DEMA and De Nul and is only a few hundred metres away.

The company was able to acquire 6.5 hectares of land in 2019. The first phase, including a Seveso site, a parking lot for tank trailers, a secured area for tank containers with a heating installation (steam and hot water), and a tank park with five stainless steel tanks (with a capacity ranging between 230 and 460m³) and space for two more, is already operational. “So far, we have invested EUR 16 million in this new installation, and EUR 5 million in the expansion and renovation of the workshop and parking lot over the last three years. That sum comes on top of our recurring investments in rolling stock, which amount to EUR 2 to 4 million per year.”

The second development stage will start next summer. It will comprise an extension of the container park, a new 5,000m² warehouse where liquids can be transferred between indoor tanks, flexitanks, IBCs, drums and smaller packages, and a zone for blending tanks.

Connection to waterway

The zone closest to the sea canal will then still be available. The link with the waterway is a strategic choice. “We do a lot of business in Antwerp, where road congestion is often heavy and the flexibility of terminals is not unlimited. Using barges between Antwerp and Ghent, e.g. for further distribution by road to clients in the North of France who are not connected to rail or water, would give us more leeway and would fit into our sustainability drive. Concerning that last point, we were one of the very first companies to obtain the ‘SDG Pioneer Certificate’ for successfully completing the training trajectory on Sustainable Development Goals with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). It is just one more example of how we think along with our clients about further optimisation and enhanced sustainability of their logistic set-up.”