

Primary zinc alloys focus for UK metals supply specialist

Six years ago, The Brock Metal Co Ltd decided to focus exclusively on the supply of primary zinc alloys, a strategic decision that has been instrumental in the management team transforming the business and its performance. Here, Managing Director Gerard Keane and Operations Director Martin Smith assess why the change has been so great, what it means for Brock Metal and the benefits brought to customers in the UK and Europe in particular in terms of faster deliveries, on time deliveries, metal specification and traceability.

Brock Metal has long been a key part of the UK primary metal supply network, well known for its technical support and the quality of its zinc and aluminium. In 2007, the business was purchased by CZP Zinc Plant, after which the management team conducted an in-depth strategic review. This resulted in a decision to focus exclusively on the production of primary zinc alloys and to cease production of aluminium alloys in 2009.

"It was important that we focussed on what we were best at, on where we could compete the most effectively in Europe and beyond and where we could develop our business to best serve our customers" says Gerard Keane. "The market for all primary metals including zinc alloys is very competitive on a global scale and we needed to find our niche in that market by building on our strengths."



Gerry Keane (left) and Martin Smith of The Brock Metal Co.

Business focus

By looking outward and setting the company's sights on the European diecasting and galvanising market, the team has transformed the business, with output up 40% to well over 30,000 tonnes/year. Approximately 50% of production is now exported compared to 6% five years ago. This sales growth has been accompanied by equally significant productivity improvements, such that the output per man today is more than double what it was in 2009.

In addition, the company now exports to 15 countries across Europe, Asia and the Middle East as its reputation grows. To assist these efforts, Brock produces brochures and specification booklets in six languages, with more on the way.

"Our main competitors are now the large European suppliers, capable of supplying very large quantities of very high quality standard alloys" Gerry Keane continues. "So we have positioned ourselves to supply a range of sizes of customer by offering the same quality but with greater flexibility and responsiveness."

Brock supplies a broad range of zinc alloys to all standard European specifications (EN1774 for diecasting alloys) but also prides itself on its range of specialist alloys, including an ability to supply customer specific alloys or ingot shapes where necessary. "By redesigning our facilities and

manufacturing processes, we are now very 'fleet of foot' and can be flexible to changes in customer requirements in a way that the largest producers find difficult" said Martin Smith, Operations Director at Brock Metal. "Fast responsiveness to the customer means we can now get deliveries into mainland Europe within 48h of an order being placed and we are currently achieving 98.5% OTIF (on time in full) deliveries and zero customer returns."

Export growth

The Brock Metal Co is proud to be a British company generating successful export growth. "The reliability of our manufacturing and supply is the direct result of all our people taking responsibility for their part in continuous improvement and serving our customers better" Gerard Keane reflects. "Our success is built on a second-to-none workforce, supportive owners and a loyal customer base with whom we have developed longstanding and close relationships."

Product quality

It is not all about service, however, product quality also having received a great deal of attention. Producing only from primary zinc and using only 99.995% special high grade metal which is all European sourced, as well as using

only primary additions, Brock's close tolerance control and tight composition monitoring means its output is second to none.

As the tolerances of diecastings get tighter and their performance criteria and testing becomes more intensive, the quality and dependability of the metal is also becoming more fundamental. Castings for the petrochemical industry for example have become a growth area in recent years, as the integrity of metal and castings enable the process to deliver benefits in areas it could not previously deliver.

"Our diecasting customers around the world know that they can depend on our metal, its traceability and its composition" Martin Smith continues. "And if they can depend on our metal to deliver, then it's one less problem for their customers to worry about and everyone wins. Engineering and manufacturing is a chain where, in

the past, the material has often been the weakest link because its properties and quality cannot be seen. Our customers know that Brock's alloys fully and consistently meet the criteria laid down."

To achieve this level of consistent quality has required considerable changes in the production process and a workforce that has been part of those changes. Every stage of the process has been reviewed and developed, from metal management to delivery, to build in quality and build out unnecessary cost. Housekeeping changes have been fundamental, as has reorganising the travel of the ingot through the plant.

"We have also worked hard to change the delivery process, removing the need for pallets and excess wrapping that have both a financial and environmental benefit" Martin Smith concludes.

"We have to keep moving forward to stay at the forefront of this very volatile business" Gerard Keane confirms. "Our changes over the last five years show our ambition for the business and our capability to grow and evolve to meet our ever more stringent customers requirements. We plan to continue that evolution and expect to be a different company again in five years time. We are proud to be a British company expanding its business across the world."

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