Uniting the recycling world for 75 years

The story of BIR 1948 - 2023
“There is nothing permanent except change”

Greek philosopher Heraclitus (535 BC-475 BC)
‘Conserving the future by reclaiming the past...’
Scarcity of raw materials during World War I
In the First World War (1914-1918), Europe was deprived of most of its sea-borne raw materials as submarines and other warships disrupted the shipping of these trans-ocean cargoes to ports in the UK and on the European continent. Hence, recovery and reclamation (the word “recycling” was not yet in use) provided one of the few alternatives to keeping European industry alive.

Luckily, in the early 20th century, Europe still had mines producing coal and metal ores such as iron, zinc and lead, as well as, to a certain extent, copper, tin and alloying metals such as nickel and chromium. In general, however, these were of a lower metal content than imported primary raw materials.

Europe’s primary resources, however, were rapidly dwindling as the “Great War” raged on. There was a growing “spillage” of strategic metals in the form of, for example, thousands of destroyed tanks and guns as well as many millions of shells, which were mostly lying on the battlefields of Belgium and France. And hundreds of ships were lost too, often with their cargoes. All too often, it was not possible to access these for the recovery and reclamation of valuable metals.

Besides, countries in Europe had yet to become accustomed to the large-scale “recycling” of metal products.
The Second World War (1939-1945) brought even greater consumption - and even greater spillage and destruction - of these metals, with millions of tonnes of irrecoverable steel lost in ships sunk in the deep oceans, and comparable tonnages of bombs dropped by tens of thousands of bombers, fighters and other airplanes which were now made of aluminium instead of the steel and large amounts of canvas used in the First World War. There was little bauxite available for mining in Europe and the thousands of airplanes shot down during the Second World War were mostly burned out and hence were seldom recoverable.

However, in most European countries and also in North America, recovery of metals, rubber, glass, old clothes and other products and materials (including even organic waste) became mandatory. Severe penalties could be applied if these materials were not handed in to the relevant authorities or were not collected.
Export bans survive into post-war period

Many forms of transportation - including ships, railway wagons and trucks - were lost during this dark era. Hence, economic recovery in Europe, the USA and other industrialized countries was slow in the post-Second World War period. As a result, most countries continued with their systems of rationing and controlled distribution of scarce goods and materials even into the late 1940s. Virtually all of them maintained an export ban on "strategic" commodities such as scrap even after this proved to be no longer necessary.

In the UK, for instance, the Ministry of Supply saw to the procurement and even price determination of scrap metals. It was only in 1953 that all scrap metals became exempt from daily governmental monitoring. During these days, "scarcity" was often used as an excuse for national authorities to restrict free trade in secondary materials; export bans were too often applied by them as a means of protecting or enhancing their own recovering industries.
In the post-war period, virtually all Western and Eastern European countries pursued a continuing ban on exports of ferrous and non-ferrous scrap metals. Local mills could consequently dictate their purchase prices for secondary raw materials, whose values were kept as low as possible. The bans also hampered recycling, trading and processing companies from resuming international business; for instance, shipbreakers could no longer buy foreign vessels unless they had managed to obtain one of the scarce licences available.

One of the first manifestations of general international trade co-operation was initiated in 1939 when plans were devised to form a geographic and political entity known as “Benelux”, incorporating the kingdoms of Belgium and the Netherlands, as well as the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. However, the Second World War prevented the economic and political alliance of these three adjacent but relatively small countries from taking root. Non-governmental economic alliances were scarce indeed, and did not exist at all in the global recycling business.
Three years after the end of the Second World War, European recyclers looked to fill this international void, with the primary aim of achieving a resumption of the free international trade in secondary raw materials which had existed before the conflict.

It was on March 18, 1948 that leading recyclers from the Benelux countries came together in Amsterdam's Amstel Hotel for a reception to mark the 125th anniversary of the then-oldest scrap recycling company in the world, namely B J Nijkerk NV (BJN) of the Netherlands. [The company had been founded in 1823 as a small-scale copper smelter which required copper-bearing scrap to feed its ovens. In the 19th and early 20th century, it developed into Benelux’s leading company involved in ferrous and non-ferrous scrap trading, processing and also new metals.]

Immediately after the reception, two of the directors and owners of BJN - Bob and Hugo Nijkerk (the latter was to become BIR's fifth World President in 1954) - suggested to their foreign guests that a Benelux recyclers’ association should be founded, leading as soon as possible to the development of a wider international recyclers’ organization.

Their idea found support from neighbouring countries’ recycling bodies. Amsterdam-based barrister/solicitor Dr Jaap Caron, who at that time was Secretary of the Dutch ferrous scrap organization, was chosen as the Secretary of this embryonic international association.
On that memorable date of March 18 1948, the first transboundary recycling organization effectively came into being. It was a remarkable idea for the time given that many of today’s well-known international bodies still did not exist. For example, Benelux was only officially launched in 1958; the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was founded in 1951; and even the European Economic Community (EEC) had not yet been formed. In effect, recycling established one of the first examples of economic co-operation between nations.

The founding fathers could not have hoped - even in their most optimistic dreams - that the infant BIR would have evolved over the ensuing 75 years into a global organization with a membership drawn not only from the great majority of industrialized countries active in recycling but also from developing nations.

At the meeting in the Amstel Hotel, the presidents of the Belgian and Dutch scrap organizations decided to invite Luxembourg, France and Great Britain to join BIR. Later, the same invitation would be extended to the Scandinavian countries. At the first official, international meeting in June 1948, held in the Amsterdam Carlton Hotel, Luxembourg and France officially joined BIR (now officially named the Bureau International de la Récupération). They were followed by Great Britain at the start of 1949.
Also at the meeting in June 1948, Emile Savigner of France was elected as BIR’s first President and Dr Jaap Caron as its first Secretary General. BIR’s headquarters were established in Amsterdam. Mr Savigner was succeeded by, in turn, Gerald Keith of the UK, Joseph Dohmen of Belgium, James Flannery of the USA and Hugo Nijkerk of the Netherlands.

On October 8 1948, Italy’s application to join the organization was immediately accepted.

It was also decided that BIR members would meet twice a year, in the northern hemisphere’s spring and autumn. These meetings would alternate between the capital cities of the various member countries and other important trading/recycling cities.

BIR was created as an international association of national federations. Commercial firms affiliated to these federations would be invited to participate in BIR programmes and meetings, but did not need to join BIR as members. BIR Conventions were places to do business and to discuss trading issues. Four divisions were created to deal with the major “materials” traded internationally to supply the world’s industry: ferrous and steel scrap; non-ferrous metals scrap; paper; and textiles.

In 1951, the Secretary of the French federation Jacques Valton replaced Dr Caron as Secretary General and BIR’s office moved to Paris.

BIR soon became acknowledged by national and also international bodies, as well as by governments. Other countries applied for membership - including Switzerland, the USA and Sweden, where BIR held a conference in 1951. In 1953, during the BIR Convention in Paris, the Federal Republic of Germany joined the organization. And following a goodwill mission by Hugo Nijkerk and Lewis Hobday to Czechoslovakia in 1956, this became BIR’s first member country behind the “Iron Curtain”.

Six World Presidents are present at this table: Gerald Keith, Hugo Nijkerk, Joseph Dohmen, James Flannery, Robert Angles, Emile Savigner.
In 1971, BIR’s headquarters left Paris for Brussels, which was becoming home to a growing number of international organizations and associations, and which was also the seat of the EEC. The office of the world recycling organization was initially located in the Place du Samedi in the centre of Brussels. Its newly-appointed Secretary General was Marcel Doisy, a multi-lingual non-ferrous scrap merchant and Financial Director with B J Nijkerk Belgium. Together with Marie Schaeffer, who had been working for BIR in Paris for several years, he gave the world recycling body fresh impetus.

Independent European scrap trade associations - subsequently to become EFR (ferrous), EUROMETREC (non-ferrous) and ERPA (paper) - were created to look after the interests of their specific recycling sectors within Europe and to represent the industry at the European Commission.

BIR continued to expand beyond Western Europe, particularly into Eastern Europe, Russia and Asia. Under the direction of Mr Doisy and the leadership of BIR Presidents Sidney Danziger of the USA and Jan Levin of Denmark, BIR developed strongly between 1971 and 1981 to become the international federation for recycling.

New communications programmes and tools were developed, the well-known BIR logo was designed and adopted, and direct membership from commercial enterprises was encouraged, particularly from countries where there were no national federations.
BIR and its first member countries managed to secure the opening of frontiers to recycling commodities within what was to become the European Community (and subsequently the EU). They also began to open up trade to non-European destinations, or to so-called “third countries”, but it was not until 1979 that, after intense lobbying, the Netherlands became the first country within the EEC to free up this trade such that Dutch scrap exports to the whole world were legalized. Within a short time, virtually all EEC members followed suit.

Mr Doisy retired as BIR Secretary General in 1981 and was succeeded by Francis Veys, a lawyer specializing in international matters who had been Mr Doisy’s right-hand man for six years.

During the 1980s and 1990s, BIR took on another dimension in building its global status as it attracted and nurtured interest from large international institutions for environmental protection, energy saving and waste management. Recycling became a highly-recognized activity and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UNCTAD, the OECD, the EU and governments of all the major nations looked to BIR for its assistance and expertise in recycling matters.
BIR restructures itself to address legislative and other issues

Back in 1972, the Swedish capital Stockholm had hosted the first world summit on the environment during which leaders from all the major countries decided to focus on sustainable development. In the same year, the Club of Rome predicted an imminent scarcity of raw materials while the first oil crisis had compelled the world’s governments and its citizens to acknowledge the dangers and nuisance caused by non-regulated economic growth and uncontrolled production of consumer goods. Environmental legislation and waste management regulations became ever stricter, hampering the normal flow of key recyclables and forcing the original recycling sector to reorganize itself.

The Basel Convention (UNEP) and the OECD were the two main bodies with which BIR had to co-operate in order to ensure the continuity of free and fair international trade in secondary materials. Having always focused on international meetings to facilitate trade worldwide, BIR and its members had now to become more active on legislative issues which could potentially impact on the world market and prevent new, emerging economies from being supplied with vital raw materials.

Having already held meetings outside of Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, BIR decided to pay more regular visits to new markets in Eastern Europe and the Far East. The twice-yearly Conventions were now attracting more than 1000 delegates, making the choice of venue ever more difficult. BIR held its first meeting in Asia in 1990 - an event which attracted hundreds of international recyclers to Singapore, including many new Asian companies.

But it became apparent in the 1990s that BIR, which was originally based on the membership of national associations, could not progress without deep restructuring. Indeed, many national associations could not muster the financial strength required to fund BIR programmes as they also needed to deal with similar legislative changes in their own countries. Also in many of these new countries where recycling operators wanted to be more active within BIR, there were no structured national associations.
In 1995, a new BIR emerged following considerable work and intense internal lobbying under the leadership of some key BIR officers such as Anthony Bird, Raymond George and Jean-Pierre Lehoux. Individual company membership would henceforth be compulsory for attending BIR meetings and for sitting on BIR divisional boards. At the same time, national associations’ membership dues would be heavily reduced. A decade earlier, it had been decided to add several commodity committees to the four original commodity divisions: covering stainless steel, plastics and tyres, no membership dues would be required for these.

BIR also acquired a new name: the Bureau of International Recycling (in French, Bureau International de la Récupération et du Recyclage). Internal decision-making procedures were altered to facilitate rapid action while Mr Veys was named Director General (rather than Secretary General) of the organization. In parallel, BIR’s daughter associations within the EU were made financially stronger through higher national association membership dues; EFR, EUROMETREC and ERP were based at the BIR office in Brussels in order to ensure synergy and efficiency in dealing with EU issues and in working with EU institutions. BIR’s finances became healthier, allowing the organization to appoint top professionals in-house and to hire external consultants and law firms to deal with issues which were becoming more and more complex.

BIR took a major step in 1998 by investing in new headquarters on Avenue Franklin Roosevelt in the stylish embassy and consulate district of Brussels. This move to a prime location in the Belgian capital was designed not only to add to the prestige of the world organization but also to solidify its financial platform.

To enhance its prestige and profile still further, BIR staged its first-ever international symposium in 1999, dealing with the deeply relevant topic of “The status of secondary raw material - when waste ceases to be waste”. This event welcomed the participation and support of the European Commission, involving also the European Parliament and Council, and attracted some 200 participants and 30 speakers. Over subsequent years, such gatherings have provided BIR with an opportunity to increase its visibility and to communicate the recycling industry’s views and concerns on a wide range of issues to decision-makers from across the globe.

By the closing years of the 20th century, BIR was fully established as one of the world’s most august bodies, comprising more than 40 national member federations and 750 commercial firms from more than 70 countries representing hundreds of thousands of employees. It had also positioned itself as a global leader in sustainable development in that it had come to represent a model industry in terms of energy saving and reduction in carbon dioxide emissions.

But as one century was drawing to a close, the recycling industry was coming up against new challenges from which BIR could not hide.
To help pursue its indispensable activities, the recycling industry was increasingly required to take account of social, technical and regulatory imperatives which, if not mastered, could prevent the sector from truly fulfilling its role. New regulations and legislation began to emerge with ever greater rapidity: on the plus side, some of these led to improved material flows, modernizing of recycling techniques and optimization of the quality of recycled products; on the downside, some of these regulations hampered the free and fair trade of secondary raw materials, undermining legitimate flows of recyclables around the world and, in some cases, deeply modifying the traditional supply-and-demand rules of business.

Original recyclers had to accept new players in the marketplace such as service companies and eco-bodies. There was also the creation of new monopolistic organizations and closed-loop systems, in some instances contradicting the principle of free and fair trade of recyclables and secondary raw materials.

BIR took every opportunity to remind government leaders, legislators and stakeholders that a flourishing recycling industry was absolutely essential to the proper functioning of the much-vaulted Recycling Society. It is worth remembering that, back in 1972, the “Report to the Club of Rome” suggested virtually all metals would become exhausted by the year 2000. But as BIR pointed out to policy-makers around the world, that spectre had been removed by the efforts of millions of recyclers across the planet and, most notably, by the expertise and investment of the world federation’s own members.
The recycling industry underlined that it had a major role to play not only in **preserving the health of the planet** but also in **driving the world’s economic and industrial growth**. Through the early years of the new Millennium, secondary raw materials flowed increasingly from industrialized countries to emerging and developing nations, helping to feed the latter’s industrial processes as they looked to respond to ever more globalized consumerism.

With newly-industrializing countries in, for example, Eastern Europe, South East Asia and the Indian Sub-continent coming to **depend to an ever greater extent on secondary raw material supplies** from other regions of the world, it became yet more important to safeguard the free and fair trade of such recyclables in order to **support the growth of these developing countries’ national infrastructures** so as to help them play a full economic role in the 21st century and beyond. With primary raw materials being both scarce and expensive, secondary raw materials were increasingly recognized by these nations as an alternative which could not be ignored.

**China continued to emerge as a major market for imported scrap material**; at the same time, the Beijing government looked to strengthen the controls on overseas suppliers of recyclables as well as on its own importers, such as through AQSIQ registration. Again playing a leading role, **BIR missions visited China** so as to build up a rapport with the country’s relevant officials and bodies in a bid to obtain the best solution for exporter members and to smooth international flows of vital raw materials.

Thanks partly to the continued expansion of BIR’s services to members and partly to a boom in the recycling markets, the world federation’s **membership numbers soared 10%** in the early years of the new Millennium. In order to connect with members both old and new, and to ensure BIR continued to cater to all of their needs, an **in-depth membership survey** was conducted in 2003, leading directly to the publication of a **Toolkit document** detailing all of the services and benefits to be derived from belonging to the world’s only truly global recycling association.
Within BIR, communication activities were further extended in 2001 with the launch of the "Non-Ferrous Metals World Mirror", drawing together reports from experts around the world to provide members with an up-to-the-minute summary of developments affecting the sector. These publications quickly became established as a globally-respected, go-to source of information and data to assist recyclers in their day-to-day business activities. Similar Mirror publications were soon created for ferrous, stainless steel and plastics; the long-standing recovered paper report was also re-badged as a Mirror.

Also as part of BIR’s push to enhance its profile and to establish its credentials as the prime source of reliable recycling information, the world organization staged a couple of specialist day-long symposiums early in the Millennium - one covering copper and the other aluminium.

And then in 2008, Roger Brewster of Metal Interests Limited acted for BIR in commissioning a team led by Professor Sue Grimes of Imperial College London to determine the carbon-related benefits of recycling. It was calculated that the annual reduction in CO2 emissions obtained through recycling seven metals (ferrous, aluminium, copper, lead, nickel, tin and zinc) plus paper was approximately 500 million tonnes - equivalent to the emissions of the global airline industry at that time. This report was a game-changer: it marked a shift in focus within BIR towards highlighting the positive environmental impact of recycling and securing rightful recognition for the recycling industry as a force for good in safeguarding the health of the planet. It was also an early reflection of decarbonization as a key benefit of recycling activity.

The following year, BIR further widened its profile and sphere of influence by becoming a sponsor of Project Kaisei - an expedition to assess the impact of marine debris in the Pacific Ocean as well as techniques for removing it. This was a pioneering role played by the global recycling organization as it was only several years later that the world as a whole began to wake up to the environmental tragedy of plastics contaminating rivers and oceans. Also in 2009, the world recycling federation attended its first-ever United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP) meeting on climate change, participating in the Bright Green exhibition in the Danish capital Copenhagen.
Partly reflecting a run of several years of positive market conditions, BIR’s sixth decade ended on a spectacularly high note for the organization as some 2000 guests converged on Monte-Carlo in June 2008 for a stylish celebration of its 60th birthday. But as the industry had discovered on many previous occasions during BIR’s lifetime, the good times were not destined to last forever.

At the very start of BIR’s seventh decade, there was an event so cataclysmic in world terms that a new norm was created within the recycling industry. The global financial collapse of 2008 triggered a raft of business closures and broken contracts, massive disruption to trade flows and further loosening of the established market laws around supply and demand. Some recovery systems were driven to the verge of collapse by a slump in orders and prices, the result of weakening global demand.

Nevertheless, the recycling industry’s status as a guardian of the world’s future remained undiminished - not only as a major sector supplying more than 50% of industrial raw material needs worldwide, but also as a public resource because of its protection of the environment as well as its role as an economic powerhouse and jobs provider on a massive scale. Faced with a multiplicity of market and regulatory challenges, BIR stepped up its drive to build awareness of the recycling industry’s multi-faceted, global contribution among policy-makers, governments and the public at large through the collation and provision of hard data. Under the presidency of France’s Dominique Maguin, this was to be known as the world organization’s Statistical Observatory.
BIR’s intensified drive to quantify the environmental, economic and social benefits derived from the activities of the recycling industry led to the release of a number of expert analyses, including the Ferrous Division’s launch of “World Steel Recycling in Figures”, a review of latest data drawn from around the world by Statistics Advisor Rolf Willeke. This annual stats-based publication with quarterly updates remains a must-read for anyone with an interest in steel scrap recycling.

Other special publications commissioned by BIR included: “World Markets for Recovered and Recycled Commodities”, which emphasised growing market volatility and risks to global commodity trading; “Global Non-Ferrous Scrap Flows 2000-2011, with a focus on Aluminium and Copper” (subsequently updated and expanded), which enhanced understanding of these material flows in the context of economic developments; and in 2018, a study entitled “World Statistics on E-Scrap Arisings and the Movement of E-Scrap between Countries 2016-2025” turned the spotlight on a sector experiencing rapidly-growing volumes. Also late in the decade, BIR began publishing an amplified annual analysis of world recovered paper statistics.

BIR’s regular Mirror publications on ferrous and non-ferrous metals, stainless steel, recovered paper and plastics were supplemented by monthly eBriefs, which not only provide updates of latest regulatory discussions and developments affecting all recyclable commodities but also outline the potential relevance to recycling businesses.

The ground-breaking study of 2008 into the carbon emission savings achieved through recycling was updated in 2015, with its more detailed and refined methodology yielding an even more compelling conclusion: that use of aluminium, copper and ferrous scrap alone saved 572 million tonnes of carbon emissions each year when compared to adopting the primary production route.
But while recognition of the crucial role played by recyclers was increasing around the world, the seventh decade of BIR’s existence brought no resolution to some of the more intractable problems in its path, fully justifying the world body’s continued advocacy/representative presence in all of the major international and supranational forums where decisions affecting the recycling industry were being made. For example, there were still struggles with end-of-waste and at the interface between waste and chemicals legislation. And as in the immediate post-Second World War period, protectionism and bans/levies on scrap exports were to become even more common currency for governments around the world.

Having already formed an International Environmental Council to monitor and respond to the ceaseless tide of “green” legislation, it was decided that BIR also needed to create an entity specifically to address threats to free and fair trade in recyclables. The International Trade Council was launched with the aim of delivering a practical response, where appropriate, to all issues impacting the movement of secondary raw materials, including onerous licence requirements, tariffs and outright bans.

Several years earlier, in 2010, BIR had already reinforced its commitment to developing services of practical, time-saving value to its membership by introducing a revamped arbitration service for faster and more cost-efficient dispute resolution.

More new committees were created as BIR sought to keep itself in the vanguard of modernization. A new E-Scrap Committee was formed in recognition of the importance of this rapidly-growing waste stream. This was followed by the creation of the Latin America Committee whose goal was to promote BIR membership, as well as recycling progress and good practice, in the region; a Latin America Mirror publication was subsequently launched to assist this process.
In other developments, the Tyres Committee was renamed the Tyres & Rubber Committee to more faithfully reflect the true breadth of its coverage. And an Exhibitors Committee came into being as a mouthpiece for the interests of those equipment, machinery and service providers who lend their invaluable support and presence to BIR’s Conventions.

The decade also brought a significant change at the top of the BIR Secretariat in Brussels, with Francis Veys retiring after almost 40 years with the world association. And in a major structural development, the European Recycling Industries’ Confederation was formed as the umbrella organization to represent the interests of the continent’s companies involved in collection, processing, recycling, transport and trade across the spectrum of recyclables, including metals, paper, plastics, glass and textiles.

BIR continued to maintain its high profile on the world recycling stage through its established and well-supported programme of twice-yearly Conventions, responding to the globalization of secondary raw material movements by visiting geographically diverse places: in its seventh decade alone, BIR staged events in Dubai, Istanbul, Singapore, Shanghai, Miami, Hong Kong and Delhi, as well as throughout Europe. Miami was also the venue, in 2014, for another of BIR’s special targeted events: the International Textile Recycling Summit, co-organized with the Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles Association and the Council for Textile Recycling in the USA, addressed industry trends, concerns and emerging markets.

The organization further enhanced its leadership role in the recycling arena by masterminding the development of the World Council of Recycling Associations. This body was created to give a unified voice to the international recycling industries as part of the bid to maximize awareness of their crucial role not only in conserving natural resources but also in job and wealth creation. The aim of the World Council was also to promote best sustainable practices around the world, particularly in developing countries.
With French national Arnaud Brunet now at the helm as its Director General, BIR’s mission to gain appropriate recognition for its pioneering environmental role reached new heights on its 70th birthday (March 18 2018) with the first-ever Global Recycling Day. This initiative was inspired by BIR President Ranjit Singh Baxi and his campaign to have recyclables recognized as the world’s Seventh Resource alongside water, air, coal, oil, natural gas and minerals. The messages put out during Global Recycling Day, such as the annual prevention of more than 1 billion tonnes of carbon emissions through recycling industry activities, reached more than 13 million people and attracted 10.5 million impressions on social media.

The Global Recycling Foundation - a private organization formed by BIR in 2018 - spearheaded efforts to build on the success of the first Global Recycling Day in celebrating recycling and harnessing the ever-widening interest in this subject, particularly among the younger generation. Initiatives have included inviting families, schools and youth-orientated clubs to download and share a list of “seven recycling promises to become a global recycling citizen”.

During his time as BIR President, Mr Baxi also attended two United Nations COP meetings - in Paris and Marrakesh - to ensure that the recycling industry’s positive environmental contribution was as widely understood and appreciated as possible.

As the 2010s were drawing to a close, a tightening of import policies in China ushered in changes to the recycling world order. The country had long been an outlet for many of the raw materials from recycling produced elsewhere in the world, and so relief greeted the news in 2019 that China was to re-classify a number of non-ferrous grades for the purposes of importation, thus sending out a clear message that the country did not intend to turn its back on high-quality recyclables from overseas. Chinese BIR members associations worked with Chinese government agencies to ensure recycling industry input into the drafting of new standards for imported scrap.

But in the very final weeks of the decade, the world began to learn a new word: COVID. Just as with the financial crisis in 2008, the emergence of this virus was to have a devastating effect on every corner of industry, including recycling and thus BIR.
BIR’s Annual Report for 2019 carried the following comment: “If there is one particular skill that the recycling industry has honed through necessity over many decades, it is the ability to remain resilient in the face of shape-shifting adversity.” That resilience was to be tested to the full at the very start of the 2020s as the global COVID pandemic undermined business operations and crucial transportation links.

While acknowledging the need to shut down certain businesses in order to stop the spread of COVID, BIR urged governments to formally recognize recycling as an essential sector that served to protect human health and the environment. Furthermore, it argued, the recycling industry was providing secondary raw materials that were critical to downstream industries, some of them directly involved in combatting the pandemic. Many governments around the world grasped the importance of the recycling industry’s activities and allowed operations to continue with disruption kept to a minimum.

Steered through this crisis by President Tom Bird of the UK, BIR demonstrated its adaptability to this new COVID-induced reality by switching to online meetings and by intensifying its push into social media channels, thus becoming even better connected with its global membership while at the same time developing links to a whole new audience of interested parties. By harnessing the power of latest technologies, the world organization’s voice was being heard by more people than ever before.
With lockdowns and other restrictions becoming facts of daily life, BIR issued news, statements, updates and overviews to ensure that, at all times, members were kept informed about what was happening within BIR and within the global commodity markets regarding the spread and impact of the pandemic. A dedicated COVID-19 Info Centre was created as a hub for all information of relevance to members during this challenging period.

Even prior to COVID, a review of BIR’s communications activities had prioritized a revamping of the world organization’s website. The new version unveiled at the very start of 2020 was designed to reflect the multiple facets of the recycling industry and of the world federation as well as to target a wider audience, including the general public, the younger generation, politicians, legislators, policymakers, NGOs and other interest groups.

The overarching aim of this new format was to underline: the crucial role of recycling in delivering solutions to such globally high-profile issues as greenhouse gas emissions and ocean plastics; and the magnitude of the recycling industry’s environmental, social and economic contribution.

Of course, BIR’s celebrated face-to-face Conventions also fell victim to the pandemic. However, the world organization drew on all its determination and expertise to stage two major online events in June and October 2020.

Both featured much of the content that would have been presented at physical Conventions and also enabled representatives from the various commodity groups to update members on the latest industry impacts of COVID, thus providing targeted and much-needed clarity and transparency.

Further demonstrating its well-honed organizational abilities as COVID restrictions began to be loosened, BIR made a swift return to in-person meetings with its Global Trading Forum in 2021 - a major achievement given the restrictive health regulations and travel barriers still in place. For many, this gathering in Brussels represented a significant milestone in the return to a more normal way of life.

To provide even more regular practical support for members and to build engagement, BIR launched a live show - known as "The Challenge" - which was devised and hosted by the Chairman of BIR’s International Trade Council, Michael Lion, with support from fellow BIR luminaries Murat Bayram and Mark Sellier. With the first of several editions to date taking place in January 2021, these informal conversations with high-quality guests are aimed at lifting the lid on pressing issues of the day across all sectors of recycling.
Even once the last remaining COVID-related restrictions were lifted, development of social media outlets has remained a major focus for building BIR’s brand and communicating with all existing and potential stakeholders. In 2022 alone, BIR’s following on LinkedIn quadrupled to over 8000 while its presence on other platforms such as Twitter was also expanded. Social media training was arranged for all of BIR’s senior leaders, covering key tasks such as developing personal profiles and sharing posts with commentary.

BIR’s information output has focused not only on saving resources but also lives. Reflecting the paramount importance of workforce safety, BIR has initiated an annual worldwide survey of shredder owners and operators in order to identify the risk factors leading to accidents and injuries at shredder facilities. The feedback is analyzed and then presented in a report to help shredder owners and operators to benchmark their own safety performance against similar operations around the world while also providing a basis for safety briefings at shredder sites.

Greater understanding of sustainability and of how to achieve it has led to several positive developments over more recent years, such as the proliferation of minimum recycled content legislation for plastics which recognizes the importance of creating a reliable demand for recycled material. And the environmental debates increased focus on the need for decarbonization should also play into the hands of a recycling industry whose major contribution to carbon emission reduction has been confirmed by a slew of research studies. As reported in the 13th edition of the BIR Ferrous Division’s “World Steel Recycling in Figures” publication, steel scrap recycling alone prevents each year nearly 950 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions that would have resulted from producing steel using virgin raw materials.

And yet despite all the compelling evidence favouring maximization of recycling’s potential, BIR is - at the time of its 75th birthday - facing many of the same issues that confronted the organization’s founders and forefathers. The globalization of previous decades has turned full circle into widespread protectionism, perhaps most notable in primary industry-led support for stricter control of the EU’s scrap exports via the revision of its Waste Shipment Regulation. This self-evident threat to free trade and therefore to the future prospects of the recycling industry has emerged at a time when the global steel industry is under customer pressure to deliver “greener”, decarbonized steel, most obviously achieved through greater use of scrap. But as BIR has argued, this requires a healthy recycling industry rather than one compromised by trading restrictions.

BIR’s 75th year coincides with the Ukraine conflict, wider geopolitical tensions and an energy crisis, as well as worryingly retrograde policies and regulations. The list of challenges seems endless and yet the world organization not only persists but also flourishes. Its famed resilience is perhaps best reflected in its phenomenal recovery from the period during which COVID-related pressures were at their most acute: in 2022, the world association recorded a staggering 23% growth in numbers to 869 members drawn from almost 70 countries. And its twice-yearly Conventions are more popular than ever before among those recycling professionals looking not only to network but also to glean vital market information from BIR’s world-renowned programme of meetings; in 2022, the Conventions in Barcelona and Dubai each attracted an impressive 1300 registrations from more than 60 countries.
expert view whenever questions of wide-ranging significance for the future of our industry are under discussion, such as legal identity as recyclers and when a waste ceases to be a waste. Only recently, BIR has been afforded a pivotal role in the Basel Convention Plastic Waste Partnership and has been involved at the ground floor of a United Nations initiative to draft a new Global Plastics Treaty.

As the recycling space becomes ever more crowded with a wide range of vested and often conflicting interests, a strong BIR voice is more important than ever before to bring reason amid the hubbub and to deliver its well-researched and telling pro-recycling messages.

The recycling industry was once described as one of the world's best-kept secrets. Today, however, no international or supranational body concerned with the economic and environmental welfare of the planet can afford to ignore recycling. The secret is finally out. And those same bodies must also take account of BIR as the apex of recycling expertise; our global organization's story has already covered three-quarters of a century and has many more chapters to be written.
The Presidents of the Bureau of International Recycling

- 1948-1950: Emile SAVIGNER (France)
- 1950-1951: Gerald L KEITH (UK)
- 1951-1952: Joseph DOHMEN (Belgium)
- 1952-1954: James T FLANNERY (USA)
- 1981-1982: Leon LAZAR (France)
- 1983-1987: Heinz DE FRIES (Germany)
- 1987-1991: Jake J FARBER (USA)
- 1991-1995: Jean-Pierre LEHOUX (France)
1954-1957
Hugo
K M NIJKERK
The Netherlands

1957-1960
Dr Josef
HUSLER
Switzerland

1960-1964
Robert
ANGLES
France

1964-1970
Lewis
H HOBDAY
UK

1970-1973
Sidney
DANZIGER
USA

1973-1977/
1982-1983
Jan
LEVIN
Denmark

1977-1981
Alfred
COOPER
UK

1954-1957
Anthony
P BIRD
UK

1995-1999
Barry
HUNTER
USA

2003-2007
Fernando
DURANTI
Italy

2007-2011
Dominique
MAGUIN
France

2011-2015
Björn
GRUFMAN
Sweden

2015-2019
Ranjit
BAXI
UK

2019-2023
Tom
BIRD
UK
Seven BIR World Presidents on stage during BIR’s 70th anniversary celebration in Barcelona in 2018: Björn Grufman, Dominique Maguin, Fernando Duranti, Anthony Bird OBE, Barry Hunter, Tom Bird, Ranjit Baxi
Authors

The opening sections of this BIR history were contributed in 2008 by Alfred Nijkerk, who was present as a teenager at the founding of the world federation in Amsterdam back in 1948. In 1956, he became the sixth generation to join the Amsterdam-based family scrap business established in 1823. During more than 50 years in the recycling industry, he was actively involved in the scrap and ship dismantling/recycling sectors, becoming Chairman of the then Shell-Billiton Recycling Division. For seven years, he was President of the Dutch Metal Recycling Federation (MRF) and later became an Honorary Member. He spent 26 consecutive years as President of the Dutch Scrap Federation. He was Vice President of BIR's Ferrous Division and also of the organization's Shredder Committee and Stainless Steel & Special Alloys Committee. In addition, he served as Chairman of BIR's Press Relations Committee.

Mr Nijkerk founded "Magazine Recycling Benelux" in 1966 and remained Chief Editor for over 25 years. He also wrote the "Handbook of Recycling Techniques" in 1995, as well as the ferrous and stainless steel market reports for "Recycling International" magazine for many years.

In 2023, BIR's story has been brought up to date by Ian Martin, who has been writing about recycling for almost four decades, initially as Assistant Editor and then Editor of the UK's leading recycling magazine, now known as "Materials Recycling World". Having set up his own freelance business in 1994, Ian has written for more than 20 magazines across a wide range of business sectors, always including recycling. Mr Martin was Consultant Editor of "Recycling International" from 1999 to 2018 and has been BIR's Communications/Editorial Consultant since 2001, in which role he has: contributed original writing spanning the entirety of the world organization's activities; edited numerous publications; authored press releases for the trade/general media; and produced minutes for BIR's twice-yearly Conventions.

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