

From 1947 to 2017

# The Unique Story of Pellikaan Bouwbedrijf

One sunny Thursday afternoon, Mrs Pellikaan-Grosveld and her son Gerard Pellikaan were looking at their old photo albums. The result was a collection of memorable anecdotes, wonderful memories and a bright vision of the future.



Henk Pellikaan together with his wife Paula Pellikaan-Grosveld & Gerard in 1982. In the background is Bas Pellikaan.

At six thirty in the mornings, seventy years ago – in 1947, Henk Pellikaan would leave his house on Pelgrims-weg in Tilburg, and get into his old ramshackle car. Every day, as long as his car was working, he drove to Oosterhout, returning to his family in the evening. It was there in Oosterhout that Henk actually laid the foundation stone of Pellikaan Bouwbedrijf; he built forty semi-detached houses, with attractive wooden dormer windows, window frames with a playful geometric design, and cleverly disguised drainpipes rainwater pipes. Who could have imagined that this project would be the beginning of an internationally operating organisation in the construction and sports industry? Probably Henk himself.

Henk thrived on adventure and challenge. When he was eighteen, he moved to Tilburg, away from the safety of his home and 12 brothers and sisters. In the 1930s, he played in thirteen football matches for

the Dutch national football team, the only player from outside the Randstad (the metropolis of the Netherlands, including Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht). What is more, and what was most unusual in those days, he also got the blessing from his critical father-in-law to marry Paula Grosveld, his ten-years-younger girlfriend. In Mr Grosfield's words: 'If you're good at football, you have the right mentality to do well in life'. He was right.

#### From Oosterhout to Houston

'I remember it well', the now 97-year-old Paula Pellikaan-Grosveld told us. 'In 1946 Henk and I sat at the kitchen table and had a good talk in 1946. He wanted to do more than just architectural drawings, and I said to him: 'Well, why don't you start your own company?' Henk hesitated, particularly as he didn't have a start-up capital. 'But I believed in him, in his determination and his popularity as a former footballer. And indeed, he had the

finances arranged in no time.' The homes he built in Oosterhout were followed by a constant stream of projects. In 1951, Henk landed a contract in Terneuzen, the first contract outside the province of North Brabant. Leeuwarden and Twente came next. His home office became too small. On 13 October 1954, Pellikaan opened its first office building. There is a photo showing how son Gerard laid the first brick.

'Sport brings people together', says Paula. 'Wherever Henk went, the conversation went straight to his football career, which always made business meetings convivial and informal from the start.' But the company did not grow simply as a result of the fertile football foundation that Henk had laid in the 1930s. Paula: 'Henk continued to develop professionally. If there was a new planning technique, he wanted to know all about it. He once read an article about a baseball hall in

The founder of Pellikaan Bouwbedrijf BV, Henk Pellikaan, was a sportsman. After this football career ended (he played for the Dutch national team in the 1930s and 1940s), he discovered a new passion for tennis.



Houston, built without supporting pillars. We were on the plane together the very next day.'

#### A tennis court with a roof

Paula comes from a family that is mad about tennis. She has seven national senior tennis titles to her name. When Henk was no longer able to play football due to an injury, it was no surprise to anyone that he swapped his football for a tennis racket. "He was determined to excel at tennis, so he arranged to have lessons from the best trainer in the Netherlands, Joop de

Mos", said Paula. "Every Friday we would drive specially to The Hague, which was most unusual in those days.' He also wanted to practice at home, of course. In order to do this, Henk, Paula and the family used the courtyard behind the office in Tilburg. Paula: 'I can still hear him say it: 'It needs a little roof over it so that we don't have to stop playing when it rains.' So that's what happened.

The Pellikaan family thus created something unique in the Netherlands: a covered tennis court. 'All

the big names in Dutch tennis came to Tilburg: Tom Okker, Evert Schneider and Jan Hayer, to name but a few. We let them play tennis there, on the condition that they would teach the children. It was a typical example of Henk's incredible enthusiasm, as was his publicising the success of it all. He organised tournaments at the hall in Tilburg, which attracted much attention and was a great way of advertising; it resulted in another contract that same year, a covered sports hall in Middelburg." Who could have imagined,



fifty years ago, that that one roof over the courtyard would one day become a historic milestone? Or that it would lead to something far bigger: the construction of over a thousand covered sports centres? Or that the distinguishing factor of Pellikaan would begin right there in Tilburg? Probably Henk himself.

### The birth of Pellikaan Bouwbedrijf, Belgium

Going back to that Thursday afternoon in 2017, as Paula and Gerard were looking through the photo album. They noticed a newspaper article from 1967: 'Brand new Sports Hall for BAVI Vilvoorde'. It wasn't about just any old sports hall, but rather 'the most modern in the entire country', according to the journalist. This was Pellikaan's first international project, in a Belgian town just north of Brussels. Paula: 'It was at the opening of the first sports hall in Middelburg that the mayors of Middelburg and Vilvoorde first met. And the Belgian town wanted a hall just like it!'

This was the start of the Belgian branch of Pellikaan Bouwbedrijf, which this year celebrates its fiftieth anniversary.

### Further international growth

In 1972, five years after the opening of Pellikaan Bouwbedrijf in Belgium, came Pellikaan Bau. The business did well in Germany, because in 1973 no less than twelve projects were completed, ranging from swimming pools to schools to sports centres. That same year, the company's entire staff went to Berlin for the opening of the Eis-sporthalle; it was a special moment that got plenty of attention from the press. Quote: 'The real winner is, of course, Pellikaan Bouwbedrijf, which, with this project, has once again demonstrated the professional expertise of its staff.'

Obviously, the English could not fall behind; in 1984 Gerard signed the contract to build a sports hall for Oxford Wheatly University, and a year later Pellikaan Construction built a sports hall in Birmingham. Gerard: 'Now, thirty-three years later, we are once again building in Birmingham city centre. That is so amazing!'

Gerard puts the fact that Pellikaan Bouwbedrijf has always been successful and healthy down to its international activities. 'If the construction industry was a bit slow in one country, we could shift our focus to another one for a while. Without the efforts and flexible attitude of all our staff and former staff, this would never have been possible. That's something I'm extremely proud of.'

### Operation: a brilliant move

We thumbed a few pages back in the photo album, to the year 1975. The small tennis hall in Tilburg, near the office, was fully booked from seven in the morning until two the next morning. Day in day out. 'We grumbled about it', said Paula. 'Because it meant we couldn't play ourselves. One Sunday afternoon we came up with the solution: a large covered tennis complex.' In 1976, the Pellikaan Tenniscentrum was opened in Goirle, with nine courts. It was the first time that the family took care of not only the construction but also the operation. Gerard: 'We learned quickly and were very motivated to do better.' The family travelled, learned all they could about this new aspect of business, and looked beyond borders, not only those of The Netherlands but also beyond the construction and sports industries. Gerard: 'Department stores, hotel chains, America, Germany; we got inspiration from everywhere and put the best things we discovered to use in our projects.'

The decision to operate the tennis hall turned out to be a brilliant move. The Pellikaan team learned all there was to know about running a tennis hall. Where to put the restaurant, where the best place was for the changing rooms,

and which type of routing resulted in maximum contact between the clients. Thanks to that operational experience, the company surpassed the status of a traditional building firm. To this day, it is still what gives the company real added value: knowledge of construction combined with knowledge of operation. Who could have imagined, forty years ago, that here in Goirle the foundation would be laid for the current brand name 'Pellikaan Design – Build – Operate'?

### The baton is passed to Gerard

'As a teenager, I could always pop in to my dad's meetings', Gerard told us. 'There I sat, listening fascinated to all the men. It was a strange setting really, but I realise that my father did it intentionally. He let me into his world, which might one day also be mine.' When Henk was 71, Gerard took over the helm. 'Dad let go of more and more tasks and I gradually took them over,' Gerard said. He initially focussed on the branch in Germany, and later on the other three countries.

### Everything under one large roof

In the early 90s, Gerard was closely involved in the operation of the Riverside Club. 'There, I didn't see clients that just popped into a sports centre now and then', he said. 'No,



2011: Gerard's 40th anniversary - at the annual summer drinks in the greenest office in The Netherlands

what I saw was members who were prepared to pay their club a fixed amount every month.' He brought the concept back to the Netherlands, to the town of Amersfoort. There the team built a complete sports centre with everything under a single roof: swimming pool, fitness, wellness and tennis courts. Members paid a fixed amount to be able to use all of the facilities. This is where - 24

years ago - the very first Pellikaan Health & Racquet Club came into being. It was once again the first in the Netherlands and historic moment for the construction company and all its staff.

### History repeats itself

There are currently seven branches of the Health & Racquet Club, whose name has now been changed to

Club Pellikaan. It is run by Gerard's sons Dennis [39] and Patrick [44]. His son Roy [42] has been director of the Dutch and German branches of Pellikaan Construction since 2010 and 2016 respectively. Gerard: 'I know that they are currently writing history.' What is that history? Who knows? That is something the fourth generation will be able to tell us, on a sunny Thursday afternoon as they

browse through a pile of digital photo albums.

### All credit to the staff

It's a great story, of course, about the Pellikaan family and the history of the company. 'However', Gerard says as the story closes, 'we don't belong in the spotlights. It's all down to the staff - both in the office and on site - and all the former staff. We have

got where we are today thanks to their knowledge, immense devotion and personal development. I cannot emphasise this enough.

We are facing a bright future together with our fantastic team; and how could it be otherwise, with our versatility, our exceptional history, international expertise and operational experience?'



**With our fantastic team, our versatility, our exceptional history, international expertise and operational experience, we are facing a bright future together.**

