

Heat exchange element, a heat exchanger comprising the elements, and an equipment for the manufacture of the elements

5 The invention relates to a heat exchange element of flexible plastic film material, a heat exchanger comprising a plurality of such heat exchange elements, as well as an equipment for the manufacture of the heat exchange elements.

10 More particularly, the invention comprises a heat exchange element of flexible plastic film material bonded to form an expandable bag with inside and outside heat exchange surfaces, the element comprising an inlet opening for supplying a pressurized heat exchange fluid flow, an outlet opening for discharging the fluid flow after heat exchange, and an array of welds bonding the opposite plastic films to define routes for vertical fluid flow through subsequent heat exchange zones inside the bag. The heat exchanger according to the invention has a pack of such
15 heat exchange elements, with the pressurized heat exchange fluid arranged to be fed inside each of the elements, and another heat exchange fluid flow arranged to be fed to each of the gaps left between the elements. An example of such a heat exchanger is a distiller, which evaporates liquid flowing between the elements and, after pressurizing of the vapor, condenses it back to liquid inside the elements.

20 In the prior art, WO 90/01977 describes a distillation apparatus consisting of a pack of upright heat exchange elements comprised of pairs of plastic film membranes, which have spot welds between the membranes to define passages for heat exchange fluid flow. Water to be distilled is led from a distributor basin
25 above the elements to the outer surfaces of the adjacent elements, evaporated between the elements, and the vapor is then collected and sucked to a blower, which blows it inside the elements at a higher pressure. The heat exchange between the inside and the outside of the adjacent elements condenses the vapor back to liquid. Each element has a vapor inlet opening extending along a vertical side edge in the upper part of the element, and a liquid outlet opening in the
30 lowermost corner of a sloping bottom of the element. The apparatus is aimed at the production of fresh water from saline sea water.

35 WO 92/10264 and WO 92/10265 show a modification of the distillation apparatus according to WO 90/01977, in which both the liquid to be evaporated between the bag-like heat exchange elements and the pressurized vapor to be condensed in the inside of the elements are supplied through distributor strips at the top end of the adjacent elements. Another change is that the inside of each element has

been divided to parallel vertical, zigzagging fluid flow channels, by means of correspondingly zigzagging weld lines between the pair of film membranes defining the element.

- 5 WO 98/33029 shows as another modification a bag-like heat exchange element with sinuous welds defining correspondingly sinuous flow channels for fluid flow inside the element. The welds extend from the top end of each element to a tapered bottom, collecting the fluid condensed within the element to a centrally located discharge opening. The apparatus is meant for the evaporation of
10 industrial waste water with a content of suspended solid matter, separating as a residue, which passes the relatively narrow condensate discharge openings and thus provides for self-cleaning taking place in the evaporator.

- DE 25 11 144 describes an evaporator, in which vertical heat exchange elements
15 of plastic material comprise a spot welded vapour distributor zone and a horizontally and vertically channelled heat exchange zone located beside each other. Hot vapour is supplied from a vertical side of the evaporator to the inside of each element, passed through the spot welded vapour distributor zone, and led to the horizontal and vertical channels of the heat exchange zone, to be condensed
20 and discharged as condensed liquid through an outlet opening at the bottom of the element. A solution to be evaporated is supplied from the top of the evaporator to the outer surfaces of the heat exchange elements, to flow downward and evaporate between the expanded horizontal and vertical channels of the heat exchange zone.

- 25 In comparison with the spot welds the sinuous or zigzagging welds have the benefit of forming pathways for fluid flow between the elements which are not easily clogged, especially if the elements are arranged so as to have every second element turned to a mirror-image position in regard of the neighbouring elements.
30 In such an arrangement the expanded sinuous flow channels of the neighbouring elements regularly cross each other, and form pathways outside the elements, which crisscross around those sinuous expansions. Spot welds, especially in a face-to face position in neighbouring elements tend to thin down the pathways between the expanded elements and suppress the fluid flow. As fibrous
35 suspensions are evaporated the flow pathways are easily clogged. The sinuous weld configuration can also withstand higher pressure differences than spot welds and provides superior liquid distribution.

A drawback of the sinuous weld configurations of the prior art heat exchangers is that the fluid flow distribution structures at the top of the elements are bulky, due to the double feed channel arrangements supplying the fluid flows to the inside and to the outside of each element, respectively. The thickness of the double feed channel structure then sets a minimum for the expansion of the elements, so as to bring the surfaces of the neighbouring elements into contact with each other. Therefore restricting the expansion in order to increase the number of heat exchange surfaces and thereby the heat exchanging capacity in a given volume is not possible.

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According to a first aspect, there is provided a heat exchange element of flexible plastic film material bonded to form an expandable bag with inside and outside heat exchange surfaces, said element comprising an inlet opening for supplying a pressurized heat exchange fluid flow, an outlet opening for discharging the fluid flow after heat exchange, and an array of welds bonding the opposite plastic films to define routes for vertical fluid flow through subsequent heat exchange zones inside the bag, characterized in that there is an array of spot welds in an uppermost first zone of the element adjacent to the inlet opening, an array of parallel extended welds in a second zone of the element below said first zone, said extended welds defining fluid flow channels through the second zone, and an array of oblique welds in a lowermost third zone of the element below said second zone, said oblique welds defining channels for fluid flow towards the outlet opening.

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Embodiments of the invention provide an improved heat exchange element, in which the above drawbacks have been avoided. In other words, embodiments of the invention aim at an easy flow of fluids between adjacent heat exchange elements while the elements have a high resistance to wear under high pressure conditions and an improved capacity due to restricted expansion and increased heat exchange surface area. The solution provided by embodiments of the invention is a heat exchange element, in which there is an array of spot welds in an uppermost first zone of the element adjacent to the inlet opening, an array of parallel extended welds in a second zone of the element below said first zone, said extended welds defining fluid flow channels through the second zone, and an array of oblique welds in a lowermost third zone of the element below said second zone, said oblique welds defining channels for fluid flow towards the outlet opening.

Spot welds in the uppermost first zone of the element permit a free lateral spread of fluid, usually pressurized vapor, which is thereby evenly distributed to the flow channels in the second zone below. The vapor inlet opening can thus be located on a vertical side of the element, separated from the inlet channels which feed a fluid to the outside of the elements. The thickness of the feed channel structure at the top end of the elements is only determined by the latter, resulting in a lesser expansion of individual elements required to bring the element surfaces into contact with each other. Furthermore, by increasing the number of spot welds the expansion in the first zone can be reduced and made to be less than in the second zone, which would improve the fluid flow between the uppermost parts of the adjacent elements.

According to a preferred embodiment of the invention the element comprises an array of parallel sinuous welds defining parallel sinuous fluid flow channels extending vertically through the second zone of the element. However, the

invention even covers linear welds in the second zone, useful particularly in a gas-to-gas heat exchanger.

The first and second zones of the heat exchange element may be generally rectangular, whereas the third zone is tapering towards the outlet opening. In the heat exchanger the heat exchange elements are usually standing in an upright position, and the outlet opening is lying at the lowermost end of the element, with the fluid flow channels in the third zone converging towards the outlet opening.

According to a second aspect, there is provided a heat exchanger comprising a pack of adjacent heat exchange elements of flexible plastic film material, each element having the form of an expandable bag with inside and outside heat exchange surfaces to enable heat exchange between a pressurized first fluid flowing inside the elements and a second fluid flowing between the adjacent elements, and each element comprising an inlet opening for supplying said first fluid, an outlet opening for discharging the first fluid after heat exchange, and an array of welds bonding the opposite plastic films to define routes for vertical fluid flow through subsequent heat exchange zones inside the bag. The heat exchanger of the invention is characterized in that in each heat exchange element there is an array of spot welds in an uppermost first zone of the element adjacent to the inlet opening, an array of parallel extended welds in a second zone of the element below said first zone, said extended welds defining fluid flow channels through the second zone, and an array of oblique welds in a lowermost third zone of the element below said second zone, said oblique welds defining channels for fluid flow towards the outlet opening.

According to a third aspect, there is provided an equipment for the manufacture of the above heat exchange elements, characterized in that it comprises a path of travel for a web of double plastic sheet material for provision of a plurality of bag-like elements, a succession of three heatable weld rolls along said path, said three rolls having protrusions for forming welds of three specific different configurations, respectively, and being provided with hydraulic or pneumatic means to selectively bringing the rolls into contact with the moving web and out of contact with it, and a backing roll on the opposite side of the web supporting the weld rolls brought into contact with the web.

The invention is now described in more detail by way of examples with reference to the attached drawings, in which

Fig. 1 is a front view of a heat exchange element according to the invention,

Fig. 2 is a partial front view of two adjacent heat exchange elements according to
5 fig. 1, partly in section,

Fig. 3 is a front view of the upper left corner of an element according to claim 1, as
section IV-IV from fig. 4, including inlet channels for the heat exchange fluids,

10 Fig. 4 is a cross-section of part of a heat exchanger comprising a pack of heat
exchange elements according to fig. 1, as section III-III from fig. 3, and

Fig. 5 is a schematic illustration of an equipment for the manufacture of heat
exchange elements according to the invention,

15 Fig 1 shows a heat exchange element 1 comprising a pair of sheets of flexible
plastic film material bonded to form an expandable bag with inside and outside
heat exchange surfaces. The element 1 belongs to a heat exchanger comprising a
pack of adjacent elements bound to each other by clamping means. One of the
20 heat exchange fluids is pressurized gas or vapor flowing inside the elements 1 and
expanding the elements so as to press the heat exchange film surfaces of
adjacent elements into contact with each other. The other heat exchange fluid
flows between the elements 1, along the outer heat exchange surfaces thereof.

25 The heat exchange element 1 according to fig. 1 comprises an inlet opening 2 for
supplying a pressurized heat exchange fluid flow, an outlet opening 3 for
discharging the fluid flow after heat exchange, and an array of welds 4, 5, 6
bonding the opposite plastic film sheets to define routes for fluid flow inside the
bag. The element is divided into three zones 7, 8, 9 in the direction of travel of the
30 fluid inside the elements, generally downward in an element positioned vertically,
the zones having welds of different configuration bonding the film sheets to each
other and defining routes for fluid flow inside the element. In the first zone 7
adjacent to the inlet opening 2 there is an array of spot welds 4, permitting spread
of the fluid in a lateral direction. The inlet opening 2 is located on a vertical side 10
35 of the element beside the first zone 7. In the second zone 8 following the first zone
7 there is an array of parallel sinuous welds 5 defining correspondingly sinuous
fluid flow channels 11 extending vertically through the second zone. In the third
zone 9 following the second zone 8 there is an array of oblique welds 6 defining

channels 12 for fluid flow converging towards the lowermost outlet opening 3. In the area of the first and second zones 7, 8 the form of the element 1 is rectangular, having a horizontal top end 13 end and vertical side edges 10, whereas in the third zone 9 the bottom 14 of the element tapers symmetrically towards the axially lowermost outlet opening 3.

Fig. 2 shows parts of two adjacent heat exchange elements 1, 1' as positioned in a pack of elements constituting a heat exchanger 15 according to the invention. It may be seen that the sinuous flow channels 11 of the neighbouring elements 1, 1' are in a mutually displaced or mirror-image position, so that the expanded channels regularly cross each other and leave pathways 16 outside the elements, which crisscross around the channels. Fig. 4 showing a pack of elements in cross-section is a further illustration of the mutual position of the expanded channels 11 in neighbouring elements 1, 1'.

As seen in figs. 3 and 4 the inlet opening 2 of each heat exchange element 1 is provided with a vertical bar 17 comprising a set of pressurized fluid feed channels 18 leading to the first zone 7 having spot welds 4. Along the top ends 13 of the elements there is a horizontal fluid distributor structure comprising adjacent bars 19, each with a set of feed channels 20, which distribute heat exchange fluid onto the heat exchange surfaces between the elements. The ends of the vertical and horizontal bars 17, 19 are stacked in alternation and bound together by means of a bolt 21 penetrating each of the elements in the pack.

A heat exchanger with a pack of heat exchange elements according to fig. 1 may be used as a distiller, in which liquid is evaporated between the adjacent elements, the vapour generated from the liquid is raised to a higher pressure and temperature by means of a blower (not shown), and the vapor is then condensed back to liquid inside the elements and discharged from the elements as distillate. Another possible uses are heat exchange from a gas of a higher temperature to a gas of a lower temperature, the gas with the higher pressure flowing within the elements and the gas with the lower pressure flowing between the elements, and evaporation of fibrous or other suspensions to reduce their volume and separate their solid contents as the fluid flows in the gaps and pathways between the compressed elements, the solids being removed therefrom by way of a self-cleaning effect.

An equipment for the manufacture of the heat exchange elements 1 is depicted schematically in fig. 5. The equipment has a path of travel for a web 22 of double plastic sheet material for provision of a plurality of bag-like elements, a succession of three heatable weld rolls 23, 24, 25 along said path, the three rolls having protrusions for forming welds of three different configurations, respectively, and being provided with hydraulic or pneumatic means (not shown) to selectively bringing the rolls into contact with the moving web and out of contact with it, and a backing roll 26 on the opposite side of the web supporting the weld rolls brought into contact with the web. To produce an element as seen in fig. 1 the three rolls have protrusions for forming welds of spot, sinuous and converging configuration, respectively. The welded plastic sheet web is taken up to roll 27, and cut to individual elements 1 at a later stage.

Claims

1. Heat exchange element of flexible plastic film material bonded to form an expandable bag with inside and outside heat exchange surfaces, said element comprising an inlet opening for supplying a pressurized heat exchange fluid flow,
 5 an outlet opening for discharging the fluid flow after heat exchange, and an array of welds bonding the opposite plastic films to define routes for vertical fluid flow through subsequent heat exchange zones inside the bag, characterized in that there is an array of spot welds in an uppermost first zone of the element adjacent to the inlet opening, an array of parallel extended welds in a second zone of the
 10 element below said first zone, said extended welds defining fluid flow channels through the second zone, and an array of oblique welds in a lowermost third zone of the element below said second zone, said oblique welds defining channels for fluid flow towards the outlet opening.
- 15 2. Heat exchange element according to claim 1, characterized in that the second zone comprises an array of parallel sinuous welds defining parallel sinuous fluid flow channels.
3. Heat exchange element according to claim 1 or 2, characterized in that the
 20 first and second zones of the heat exchange element are generally rectangular, whereas the third zone is tapering towards the outlet opening.
4. Heat exchange element according to claim 3, characterized in that the outlet opening lies axially at the lowermost end of the element set in an upright position,
 25 the fluid flow channels in the third zone converging towards the outlet opening.
5. Heat exchange element according to claim 4, characterized in that the upright element has a horizontal top end, two vertical sides and a tapering bottom end with the outlet opening, the inlet opening lying on a vertical side beside said
 30 first zone.
6. Heat exchange element according to any one of claims 1 – 5, characterized in that the element is worked for condensing pressurized vapor or humidity to liquid, which is discharged from the lowermost outlet opening of the element.

7. Heat exchanger comprising a pack of adjacent heat exchange elements of flexible plastic film material, each element having the form of an expandable bag with inside and outside heat exchange surfaces to enable heat exchange between a pressurized first fluid flowing inside the elements and a second fluid flowing between the adjacent elements, and each element comprising an inlet opening for supplying said first fluid, an outlet opening for discharging the first fluid after heat exchange, and an array of welds bonding the opposite plastic films to define routes for vertical fluid flow through subsequent heat exchange zones inside the bag, characterized in that in each heat exchange element there is an array of spot welds in an uppermost first zone of the element adjacent to the inlet opening, an array of parallel extended welds in a second zone of the element below said first zone, said extended welds defining fluid flow channels through the second zone, and an array of oblique welds in a lowermost third zone of the element below said second zone, said oblique welds defining channels for fluid flow towards the outlet opening.
8. Heat exchanger according to claim 7, characterized in that the first and second zones of each heat exchange element are generally rectangular, whereas the third zone is tapering towards the outlet opening.
9. Heat exchanger according to claim 8, characterized in that the heat exchange elements are in an upright position and the outlet opening is at the lowermost end of each element.
10. Heat exchanger according to claim 9, characterized in that each heat exchange element has a horizontal top end, two vertical sides and a tapering bottom end with the outlet opening, the inlet opening lying on a vertical side beside said first zone.
11. Heat exchanger according to claim 10, characterized in that there is a horizontal fluid distributor structure adjacent to the top ends of the heat exchange elements, said structure comprising feed channels distributing fluid onto the heat exchange surfaces between the elements.
12. Heat exchanger according to claim 11, characterized in that the fluid distributor structure comprises horizontal bars containing a set of fluid feed

channels, the bars being arranged in alternation with the top ends of the flexible heat exchange elements.

5 13. Heat exchanger according to claim 12, characterized in that the inlet opening of each heat exchange element is provided with a vertical bar comprising a set of vapor feed channels, said horizontal and vertical bars having their adjacent ends stapled and bound to each other in alternation.

10 14. Heat exchanger according to any one of claims 9 – 13, characterized in that it is worked for condensing pressurized vapor or humidity to liquid, which is discharged from the lowermost outlet openings of the heat exchange elements.

15 15. Heat exchanger according to claim 14, characterized in that it is a distiller evaporating liquid between the adjacent heat exchange elements, pressurizing the vapour generated from said liquid, and condensing the vapor back to liquid inside the heat exchange elements.

20 16. Equipment for the manufacture of heat exchange elements according to any one of claims 1 – 6, characterized in that it comprises a path of travel for a web of double plastic sheet material for provision of a plurality of bag-like elements, a succession of three heatable weld rolls along said path, said three rolls having protrusions for forming welds of three different configurations, respectively, and being provided with hydraulic or pneumatic means to selectively bringing the rolls into contact with the moving web and out of contact with it, and a backing roll on
25 the opposite side of the web supporting the weld rolls brought into contact with the web.

30 17. Equipment according to claim 16, characterized in that the three rolls have protrusions for forming welds of spot, sinuous and converging configuration, respectively.