

The scene is Esso Research Centre, a few miles from here, sometime in the late 90s. One day our management tell us that they are going to send a hot-shot patent lawyer down from head office to help us to manage our intellectual property, or IP. Everyone groans. Even I groan – and I'm leading the section, so I have to persuade cynical researchers at least to pretend that they don't think the whole thing is a waste of time.

And then the hot-shot lawyer arrives, this Susan Fletcher Watts, immaculately dressed and coiffured, with an uncanny ability to ask penetrating questions. She remembers the answers and reminds us of them weeks later. She gently introduces us to the subtleties of patenting (about which we know shockingly little), and before we know what has hit us, bingo, we have an IP strategy! We become aware of making real, patentable discoveries – and we're actually enjoying it. She has got us interested in working out how to defend an invention or to find gaps in others' defences. She drives us mad because she will never settle for second best, even in minor matters; if you offer to get Susan a coffee, she issues detailed instructions as to how she likes it. (Not that this does her much good with the Esso coffee machine, which produces the same grey liquid whatever you ask for.) But we admire her work ethic, her positive attitude and her sharp mind, and we look forward to the next time she cajoles us into doing something we weren't expecting.

Let's go back to the beginning of her career. Susan (or Sue, as I was later allowed to call her) decided while at university to become a patent attorney, and pursued this goal with characteristic determination. She began work at Raychem in Swindon in 1982, beating a former boyfriend to the post. Raychem was a fast-growing company with products based on radiation chemistry. There she met Jacquie Auckland who was to become a lifelong friend and mentor and worked with her at De Beers, years later. Sue's competitive spirit now manifested itself in a race to pass the CIPA exams to achieve chartered status – she and another colleague, Simon Belcher, drafted patents for imaginary clockwork toys and blagged their way onto every training course going. They even drove to Strasbourg in the depths of an icy winter to knock off another module. Back at home, in her quest for top marks Sue decided to learn the Patent Act off by heart, all 110 pages of it. Fun evenings in the Watts household involved Terry picking a clause at random which Sue would then quote to him verbatim. Naturally Sue passed the exams first time, and would have been entered onto the register as a member of the Chartered Institute of Patent Attorneys – only she was too young! She had to wait until her 25th birthday to be admitted, and for a while after that she was the youngest patent attorney in the UK.

From Raychem Sue moved on to Courtaulds, manufacturer of polymers and textiles, and then to a decade with Esso, when as well as sorting us out she also found time to give birth to Aidan and Jess. She continued to support the CIPA and was much in demand as the modernising face of the profession – helping to attract a more diverse set of people into careers as patent attorneys. Sue led the reception to celebrate 100 years of the Royal Charter of the CIPA, where she met the Queen – sadly history doesn't relate whether the Queen left that meeting with a list of action items.

Esso Research Centre closed in 2000, and Sue and I went our separate ways – she to BAe Systems and then on to Infineum, the petroleum additives company, which brought her back to Oxfordshire to the very site she had left three years earlier. In this period, Sue's diary was so

packed that if you wanted to talk to her, you had to trot down the corridor with her as she strode to another meeting. You could always email her...but Sue hadn't quite adjusted to the volume of her correspondence; she used to print out all the emails she received, with a view to reading them later. As it turned out, this ambition was unfulfilled; instead, the piles of paper around her desk grew so tall as to make her almost invisible.

Sue escaped from the paper mountain in 2007 and became Head of IP at Element Six, part of the De Beers Group, later becoming IP Strategy Lead for the whole group. Element Six had been outsourcing all of its IP work, but Sue quickly created a flourishing in-house IP department from scratch. Element Six has world-leading technology for making synthetic diamonds. It was Sue's job to protect that technology, notably when she led a major patent infringement litigation in Singapore. Sue had a great sense of responsibility for this case – but she also knew how to enjoy herself. On one occasion, she and her colleague Simon Lawson were tasked by De Beers with posing as a couple of mystery shoppers at a fancy Singapore jeweller's. They were to go through the process of selecting a gem, and report back on the customer experience. Now, it didn't tax Sue's acting skills to look interested in wearing a diamond, nor did she find it hard to insist on the best – the difficulty was knowing when to stop, and Simon began to sweat as he faced a choice between explaining to his boss why he'd bought a high-carat diamond with the company credit card, or explaining to his wife why he'd bought one with his own.

As the trial drew nearer, things started to get a bit more serious. Having received some veiled threats, Sue decided to hire bodyguards, and she and Jacquie came to their hotel lobby to meet two gentlemen with black ties, skin-tight suits and bulging muscles, who solemnly accompanied them to court. During the case, the only place she and Jacquie could find to talk privately was in a swimming pool, looking over their shoulders for spies as they swam; thankfully Sue's exceptional memory meant that she didn't need waterproof notes tucked into her costume. The trial was a tough experience, but with Sue's perseverance and grasp of her material, she and her team won the case.

Sue always wanted to understand the rules of the game, in work or in any aspect of life, and to win! But she knew the difference between real rules and self-imposed constraints, and had no time for the latter. She was an expert haggler, never afraid to ask for a better deal. Altogether, Sue had all the skills of a lawyer in spades (oh yes, and she was good at bridge too). But what was most remarkable was how she brought people together. She was immense fun to work with, and unsurpassed at making friends and keeping in touch; her continued friendship with me resulted (by a happy, if unplanned, chain of events) in her meeting Brian, and she's been a big part of my life ever since. And to cap her many achievements at work, she brought a disparate group of colleagues, friends and family into the Fellowship of the Bobble Hat to walk the Pennine Way ...we would have followed her to Mordor if she'd asked. That fellowship and the sense of purpose that she inspired will stay with us all for the rest of our lives. Sue, we celebrate your life and your legacy – you have given so much to all of us. Thank you.