

Spotlight On... Spark Nibs

BY CHRIS LEWIS



Fig 1 - Susan Parker of Spark Nibs

INTRODUCTION

When I visit a UK Pen Show, I make a point of trying to catch up with Susan Parker of Spark Nibs and find out what progress has been made in her quest to achieve her goal of producing British made 18kt gold nibs.

The last time I saw Susan was at the March 2023 London Pen Show. I was there, along with nearly all the WES Council on the WES table, in

my new role as Interim Journal Editor. This was following the sad loss of our Chairman and Editor, Ian Williamson. I mention this because Sue was particularly saddened about Ian's passing as he had been a huge supporter of hers and always encouraged her to keep going (just as he did!). Ian's death hit Susan hard, and we chatted about how Ian had asked time and again for her to write an update for the Journal about how things were going (you can read Susan's previous article in WES Journal 113, Winter 2018, pg 73). Susan had promised to get the article written but working so hard in the business (along with her day job and family commitments) meant that she hadn't had time to do it....and then it was too late.

I promised to keep in touch and asked if she would agree to me writing an interview piece so that we could honour Ian's wish to have her update published. (By the way, another

WES Member, Maurice Alston, also spent time speaking with Susan at the London Pen Show and being impressed with her "work and knowledge of nib production" wrote in suggesting that we should feature Spark Nibs). After an enjoyable Sunday afternoon online video call with Susan, here is her update. This time it's more about the personal challenges that Susan has gone through to get to where she is today.

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WHO IS SUSAN PARKER?

Susan is American and is a qualified Accountant and process engineer. Following her work in accountancy in the USA she met her future husband George whilst on holiday in the UK. She moved to the UK, married George and worked in the banking industry for twenty-three years. Susan and George have a grown-up daughter who recently moved out of the family home.



Fig 2 - Susan's company logo

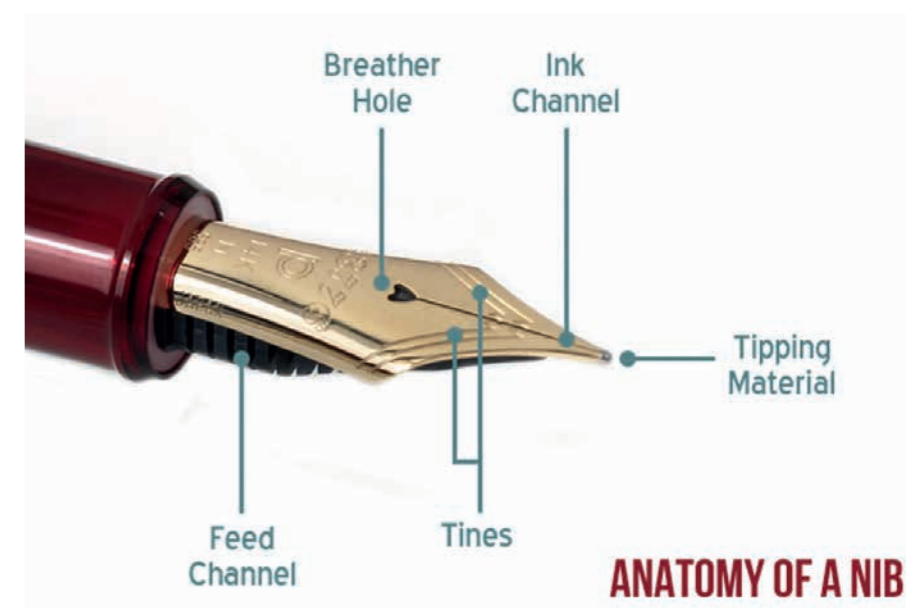


Fig 3 - Anatomy of a nib

Post the 2008 crash, part of Susan's job was to look at how banks streamlined their processes and with her background knowledge and experience, she became more involved in this which led to her becoming a trained process engineer, which she absolutely loves. This knowledge and obsession (Susan's words!) has been very much tested in her efforts to create a British 18kt fountain pen nib.

When the COVID pandemic hit in 2020, unfortunately Susan was made redundant and found herself having to be creative in how she could earn an income. She was already working on her nib business in all her spare hours. What else could she do? She bought some equipment and started printing T-shirts and bags – you may have seen some of her products at a pen show. Another idea was to practise metal engraving, which she would eventually want to do on her gold nibs, so Susan bought more

equipment and engraved pet tags and other products to sell. All this would go towards funding the investment into making tools for the nib production.

Eventually, Susan secured a job at a local university in process engineering which she now works at full time. Luckily, she is able to work from home so she can concentrate on her "day job" and her nib business from opposite desks in the same workshop.

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I did ask whether Susan's husband George worked in the nib business with her. Susan says "No, we don't work together, but we do consult together". After all, finances have all come from the family income stream and it's only right that George is happy with what is being put into the nib business too! You'll often meet George at Susan's table at a pen show being very supportive and encouraging.

OTHER WRITING EQUIPMENT INTERESTS?

I thought Susan was going to tell me that she's always had an interest in other aspects of writing equipment, and this is where her idea for producing a British nib came from. I was surprised to hear that she has no particular interest, but that George does. Susan had bought him a pen (kit) made from the wood of a walnut tree, but sadly the pen never worked properly. George is also a vintage Parker 51 and 180 fan, something Susan says she just didn't "get", but does support his habit of collecting rare and unusual versions of these pens. However, Susan admitted that she did like the feel of the nib on paper, and this gave her an appreciation of what she wanted to create through her nib business.

Oh, and George's walnut pen? This was something he wanted to get fixed. He sent the pen to our well known and beloved nib specialist, John Sorowka, which turned into a lasting and incredibly helpful

The production of a nib can be broken down into 12 steps.

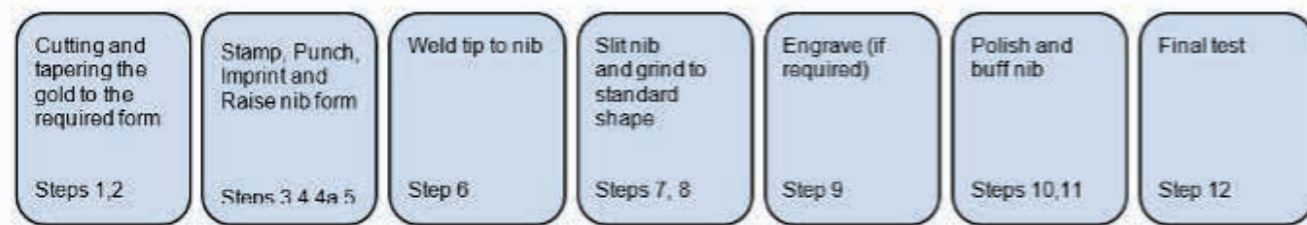


Fig 4 – 12 nib production steps



Fig 5 - Hand feeding a piece into rollers - tapering



Fig 6 - Adding a breather hole

relationship. John of course fixed the pen, but more importantly, John was part of a small group of people who wanted to produce an all-British pen, but that idea could not be achieved without a British nib, and that project ended. However, Susan continued to speak with John and many others about her ideas of a nib business. To this day, John is still helping Susan with advice, moral support, and guidance in the work.

WHY THE NAME SPARK NIBS?

Susan spent some time considering names for the company. Something to identify her original heritage, and also link to the UK. Very much aware of the name issue and no desire to create confusion in the market over the name, a consolidated/truncated version of her name was used “S PARKER” – SPARK. This also fit in quite nicely with her nickname amongst a few colleagues – Sparky – and obviously with her name being Parker (no relationship with THE Parker family I’m told), the name Spark Nibs was born. Her clever daughter

designed the company logo for her which she still uses today (Fig. 2).

THE STORY BEGAN

Since those first discussions back in 2015 about producing an all-British pen which, as mentioned, didn’t proceed further, Susan went on to spend two years researching how to go about making a nib and spoke to many other pen manufacturers to gain as much information as she could. There were some extremely helpful people she spoke to including Charles and Penny at Manuscript, Robin from Yard ‘o Led and many others in several different industries with a wide range of business and engineering knowledge. She travelled around the country and further afield, (including Italy, Spain and the USA) to review processes and test a wide range of equipment from different industries. But as you can imagine, with trade secrets and

non-disclosure agreements in place, many times the door was very firmly closed to her finding out too much!

HOW IS A NIB CREATED?

The process may seem to the uninitiated quite straight forward. Surely, it’s just a piece of metal, bent to shape with a slit in it and a blob of something welded onto the tip – one nib, simples! Oh, were it THAT simple!!

First of all, here’s a helpful illustration of the anatomy of a nib (Fig. 3).

Susan has broken down the production of her nibs into 12 steps. Fig. 4 illustrates this.

In order to develop this process, Susan has needed to design and commission the exact tooling required, which she tells me has been one of the biggest obstacles to her progress.

SUSAN SPENT TIME RESEARCHING HOW TO GO ABOUT MAKING A NIB AND SPOKE TO MANY OTHER PEN MANUFACTURERS TO GAIN AS MUCH INFORMATION AS SHE COULD

WHERE DOES ALL THE GOLD COME FROM?

A really interesting part of our conversation was about the gold and other materials Susan needs to produce her nibs. It’s not as easy as you think – buying gold to make nibs. There are certain mixes of gold that can and can’t be used and these must be procured from specialist bullion dealers. Tipping materials also need to be sourced which are made out of platinum alloys, including ruthenium, osmium and tungsten. Initially, Susan uses Silver to test on as that is much cheaper, having to scrap it at the end. I suggested to Susan that maybe we might see some stunning silver jewellery from her as another side line?!

Then there is the matter of calculating just how much material is needed – how many nibs can be made from how many strips of material. What equipment and tooling are needed for each part of the process and that is just for one nib size. To produce a different nib size will incur a cost

of £40K for each change of tooling. So, it’s an expensive business as Susan is starting out with a 6mm nib, but will eventually offer a 5mm, 8mm and maybe even a flex nib.

I was beginning to wonder how Susan would cope with so many different customer requirements. This is something that will be less of a problem for her as she won’t be dealing with the public direct. She intends to work with trade organisations who will buy her nibs to sell on to their customers but with a bespoke option that she can fulfil if required – engraving for instance and an outside possibility of re-tipping services. She has received many requests for this work, however the tooling to deal with so many different nib sizes and types is yet another challenge. She tells me she is focusing on getting the main product out before any other distractions and other specialist tooling costs.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE CHALLENGES?

Despite knowing exactly what she wanted to achieve, she admits

that she found it difficult to work with engineers in a field that she knew little about and initially struggled to articulate her suggested solutions and outcomes.

Trying to identify companies or suppliers who could assist with even just a small part of a very complex process was incredibly difficult and she has experienced many setbacks, often costing her valuable time and money – with one particularly fraught situation involving a piece of specialist equipment, which someone was very ‘reluctant’ to release, and nearly required legal assistance to resolve the matter!

John Sorowka and Nic I’Anson, another friend and engineer came into the picture. They helped Susan with the language she needed to express her ideas and requirements. This was incredibly helpful, and Susan tells me that she certainly wouldn’t have been able to do this without their help. However, even with the right terminology it seems that some people wouldn’t take Susan seriously because of her gender.

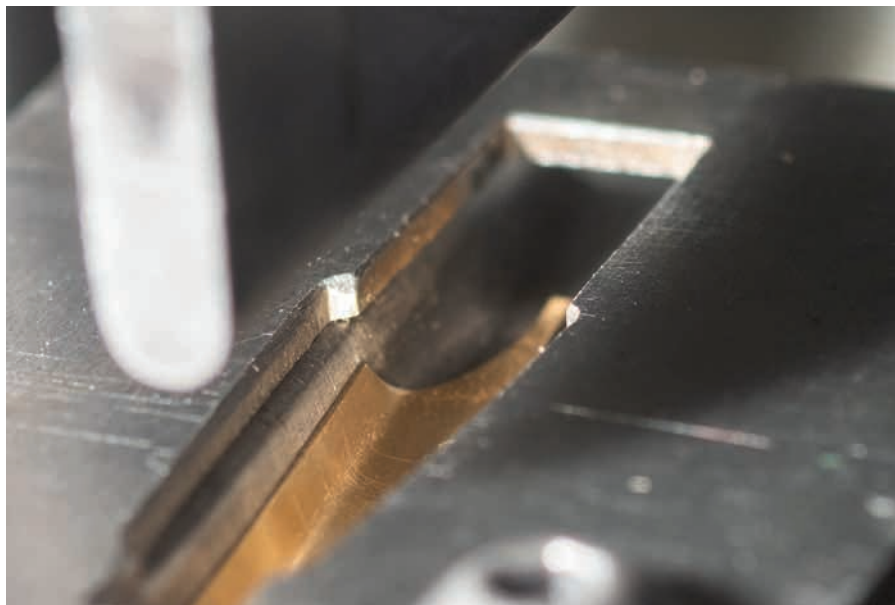


Fig 7 - raising tool – bending the nib into form

EVEN WITH THE RIGHT TERMINOLOGY TO ARTICULATE HER REQUIREMENTS, IN A HANDFUL OF CASES, IT SEEMS THAT SOME PEOPLE WOULDN'T TAKE SUSAN SERIOUSLY BECAUSE OF HER GENDER

TO PRODUCE A DIFFERENT NIB SIZE WILL INCUR A COST OF £40K FOR EACH CHANGE OF TOOLING, SO IT'S AN EXPENSIVE BUSINESS

Luckily, Susan has now found an engineering company to work with who has a female engineer in their family and this has helped the staggeringly difficult discussions Susan has had to have in the past as a female to a male engineer.

THE COST OF IT ALL?

As I listened to Susan's obvious frustrations, I asked her why she decided to do this and, more importantly, why she keeps going. She tells me that sometimes, even she's not sure! "It was an interesting challenge when I started and although I thought it would be a bit difficult, I didn't feel it was insurmountable."

It's obvious that Susan has continued through dogged tenacity and determination, believing that it CAN be done and that she just needs to work out that last little bit...

But the journey has been hard going. Every spare bit of time – evenings, weekends, lunch breaks and holidays – has been spent working on her nib business. A LOT of money – far

beyond her wildest expectations – has been put into the business. It's commendable too, in this day and age, that all the financing of Spark Nibs has been personally funded by Susan and George, with no debts outstanding to anyone else to date.

It has been an emotional roller-coaster, however. Stress, tears, excitement, depression, happiness (hopefully in time) and satisfaction are all how Susan described to me how it's been for her so far.

SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Susan tells me that the best support has been going to the pen shows and speaking to people. Sharing her experiences and challenges (albeit in somewhat cryptic ways at times!). The support of other vendors at the shows and those of us who make it our business to seek her out and see how things are going has been enormously helpful and kept her going when things were looking impossible.

WHERE IS SPARK NIBS NOW?

Susan has now managed to rework each tool she needs, and each step of the process has built on the things she has learned. As finances allow, the equipment is being remade or remade for the improvements she's identified so she is hopeful that she will be able to start testing some of the production line later this year, with the aim to have samples available.

****NOTE:** at the time of going to press, she has informed me that she is now able to perform end to end testing on the process, with the real hope of providing samples to (already) selected people to test.

It's been a long arduous road so far, but I hope you will join me in wishing Susan the very best and with all her efforts to date, I'm sure we will see a Spark Nibs British gold nib available in the not-too-distant future. So, watch this space!

Susan can be contacted at sparker@sparknibs.co.uk and found at www.sparknibs.com