

The Editor recently interviewed our new Chief Executive, Sue Jacques.

Here is a summary of their discussion:

Ed: Thank you very much indeed for agreeing to be interviewed. Can you first tell us a bit about your background and where your roots are?

SJ: I'm actually a Yorkshire lass. I was born in Saltburn – a Victorian seaside town – and grew up in Guisborough for most of my formative years, attending local schools and the sixth form college there. My mother's side of the family were big farming people and some of my family are still rooted in the Yorkshire farming community now. My father's side were more business people - he had a small engineering business.

I had an idyllic childhood in a very supportive family. I'm one of three girls. I'm the eldest – the bossy one! I was indulged incredibly as a child and my absolute passion then and now is horse riding. At about the age of twelve, after years of wearing my parents down, my middle sister and I were given a horse, which I had saved lots of money up for and she hadn't saved anything for! But after about three months my parents realised we couldn't possibly share because we had completely different ideas about how to school this young thoroughbred horse, and so my sister Wendy was given a horse as well, to keep things settled in the family. For me this was just brilliant - my passion for riding was already well honed, and what this opened up for me in terms of competitive riding was just great. Living in a small town with access to some of the best riding country in the whole of England was just fantastic.

Ed: So do you still ride?

SJ: I still do. I'm a little busy – I've got two teenage daughters, and a dog and a husband all of whom keep me extremely busy, and with work my time is much more limited. But I've got a very good friend who's a retired histopathologist who has three



really good horses who have in the past competed at quite a high level. He lives in Northumberland, and most weekends I indulge my passion for riding and go out riding with him for three or four hours each Saturday and Sunday. And despite being significantly older than me, he'll have me jumping stone walls and fences that get my heart racing like nothing at work does! So it's a really wonderful way to spend my weekends. It's such beautiful countryside, and around the time of the Great North Run I was riding through a corn field by myself. There was a beautiful blue sky – just such a time when I'm by myself to think about work, life and the universe – when I saw in the distance three or four red darts in the sky and couldn't quite work out what was going on. As they got closer I realised they were the Red Arrows heading across to open the Great North Run. The minute they went past the horse had a bit of a fright, but I managed (just) to stay on. But it's a great way to spend the weekend out in the fresh air. I do it very early, so my teenage daughters can even still be in bed when I come home!

Ed: Do you have your own horse now?

SJ: No. My friend has three. Up until about three years ago I had my own, but to be fair, with my job and everything else, I can't devote the time to keep a really good horse in the nick that sort of horse needs to be kept in. So I let my old horse retire and paid for her to be kept in the style to which she had become accustomed in Yorkshire. For the last few years I have been riding just with my friend in Northumberland which means I don't have the commitments, and because he is retired he can look after all that side of things.

Ed: So you've not been given a horse by the Metropolitan Police?

SJ: No I haven't – I can categorically say no, I have not!

Ed: So after sixth form college, what then happened?

SJ: I had a clutch of science-based A levels. I wanted to do physiotherapy, but also wanted to do a degree. At that time you could only combine the two at the London Hospital or in Ireland. So at the age of eighteen I set off on a train, by myself with a suitcase, and pitched up at the London Hospital and put in accommodation co-located with the medical student accommodation. I had a year that was an absolute ball, and I guess I really started to grow up. It was three hundred miles away, before the days of mobile phones and I was on my own for a very formative period in my development. It was a year of great fun, although by about Christmas I was seriously starting to doubt physiotherapy as a career option even though I was enjoying the life I was having down in London. At the time there weren't student fees to think about and my local authority agreed to fund me to do a different degree providing I passed my exams. So I stayed until the end of the

year, passed the exams, stayed through the summer - because life was so good and it was such a different lifestyle to what I had been used to. I decided to do something completely different, went to Newcastle University and did a degree in mathematics. I thought, having had my fingers burnt with something quite vocational, I would do the opposite and do something very purist and something I had enjoyed at A level.

So three years of incredible fun at Newcastle University. I was president of the Newtonian Society in my second year – which was unheard of as it only ever went to a third year student. It was the social society which tried to bring a bit of modern fun into mathematics, which actually is a very interesting subject.

Ed: The Newtonian Society was only for maths students?

SJ: Absolutely. It was a bit of a social thing. Some of it was maths orientated. Maths students perhaps aren't the most outgoing and party-type people, and I tried to introduce something of that spirit, a bit of sport and things. We had a great year and I had a lot of support from the other officers of the Society. We had a ball, and to a degree livened things up. After graduating – this was in the eighties - I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but possibly something in the marketing or business world. So I applied for the graduate scheme in the Burton Group. I'm probably about the least fashion-conscious person you could possibly come across, but at the time they were major high street fashion retailers and consisted of Dorothy Perkins, Top Shop, Top Man and such like. So I began life post degree on their graduate scheme in the Dorothy Perkins division working for Jackets and Coats and had a great introduction to the world of commerce and

business. What was fantastic was that I was back in London reconnecting and living with all the friends I had made four years previously. I had a very interesting time on the scheme. That's really how my interest began in business and how business works, how businesses can be successful and what leads to that success. I was getting a lot of exposure to how that worked in what was then largely a UK-based operation, but doing a lot of importing. In those days a lot of clothing was coming in from places like Turkey – things hadn't really yet moved to China. There were interesting things with issues like exchange rates, how do you get fashion items on the shelves in the right place in time for the right season almost straight off the back of the big fashion houses. They work three seasons ahead, and what was fascinating for me wasn't the actual fashions, but how do you maximise the sales when you are working three seasons ahead – how do you get the lines, how do you get the buying and everything aligned so that when you're hitting the high street you have the on-trend lines that other organisations don't, and the way that you're merchandising them maximises sales. So I guess that was the beginning of my business interest.

Ed: Was it while you were working for Burton that you got your accountancy qualification?

SJ: No, not at all. Because I still at that point thought – perhaps a little arrogantly – that accountancy was a little bit dull and that accountants were not what made and moved the world of business. I had met (when I was in studying Newcastle) a dentist. He was quite keen for me to move back to the North East of England – he is now my husband, and has been for a number of years. At that point most of fashion was London-based. There was Next in Leicester and some smaller operations in Manchester,

and a friend suggested that I just made the move back to the North East. She was working in the Health Service in finance and had been on my maths degree course. She said "If you can do numbers and things they will just snap your hands off". So I applied for a job in Sunderland.

Ed: What sort of job was this?

SJ: This was in the NHS – Sunderland Hospitals as they were then – as an accountancy assistant. It was a job to pay my way and relocate me to the North East, with the full intent that this would be a stop gap and that I would move back into fashion. Because whilst there weren't any of the head office operations up here there were companies who were suppliers, and I thought I might move further up the supply chain and have a go at that bit of the fashion world. However I had started in Sunderland in the November and I found by the April that I just loved the NHS. I thought before I joined that it wouldn't be the most stimulating environment and there wouldn't – on the admin side - be really motivated hard-working people. There was a perception back then in the late eighties that it was perhaps a lazy place to go, but I found it full of really, really committed people and a stimulating environment. Bizarrely the accountancy side of me was starting to have a real appeal – but I was working at a very junior level. Peter Dawson – for whom I was working at the time – suggested that I may as well take my accountancy exams. So I studied at night and in my spare time, and it did require a degree of commitment for they are not easy exams to fit in and around everything else. The subject matter – as well as strategic finance, tax and the things you would expect - includes a lot about organisations, about management and a lot of law. So that was all very interesting academic stuff that I'd not been exposed to.

I managed to get through those in first passes which was fantastic, and at the same time I was getting promoted in the day job and ultimately became a qualified accountant in the Health Service. I'd moved around different organisations in the North East and then finally, more than a decade ago, I became interested in a Finance Manager's job in what was then North Durham Health Care. One morning I set off from home in Gosforth for the interview at Shotley Bridge – this was in the days before satnav – and got to Consett. I thought "I'm not really sure I'm in the right place or not – I'd better ask". I stepped out of the car straight into a snowdrift – there's almost a microclimate up there – but managed to get directions to the hospital. I met Stephen Mason there – the Finance Director – and that was my first introduction to the origins of what is now our organisation. I really felt it was a good match in terms of what I wanted out of my career and what the organisation wanted out of a new post that they were bringing into North Durham. From then I've done various things within the organisation. I've been very fortunate with the opportunities it has afforded me. I remain passionate about the NHS – everything it stands for, everything that everybody who works here does every day. I've been very fortunate personally to be very successful in the various promotions I've had as the organisation has gone through all its twists and turns.

Ed: So since that interview at Shotley Bridge you've stayed in this Trust or its predecessors?

SJ: I have – in various guises, working my way up until in North Durham, just before the merger I got my first Director's appointment that I was so delighted about. Shortly after this it was announced that North and South Durham would merge. I had about four months under my belt as Finance Director

when I knew the merger was happening, and I thought it might all be cut rather short and I should look for something else. But fortune must have been on my side, for at this time the experienced Finance Director in the South – Alan Foster – moved on. Fortunately for me the then Chief Executive John Saxby clearly had recognised some potential in a very young individual (and the only female – the other Finance Directors in our patch were all well established and male) and rather than advertising for a new Finance Director kept it as an acting job for a whole year to suss me out. Then it went to external advertisement and I had by then banked sufficient experience that I persuaded the interview panel that I was a good bet. Further to that we have grown as an organisation, I've grown into finance and in a way out of finance, more recently taking on the Chief Operating Officer role. I was very indulged by the board who might have preferred me at that point not to do finance as well – partly probably for my own health – but let me do both. It's been great and really interesting to develop me further, and a massively good grounding for the role I now very fortunately find myself in.

Ed: Did you ever imagine that one day you might be Chief Executive – or is that an unfair question?

SJ: No, I don't think it's an unfair question. It's my dream job. So - yes and no. It's something I've always really wanted to do. I almost didn't dare let myself think too much about it for fear it would never happen.

Ed: So you didn't think of applying for any Chief Executive posts elsewhere?

SJ: I haven't. When we became a Foundation Trust, one of the things around governance that you have to get really "boxed off" is

succession planning. So what the Board needed to be able to articulate to Monitor was what would it do if key individuals moved on. And so the Board has given me a huge opportunity to develop and hone what that would be like because it is a very different role. I used to joke with Stephen that “You lead the Trust but you know that I really run it!” What I really meant by that was that towards the end of Stephen’s tenure what I’ve been able to do, and what the Board has been very happy for me to do, is to extend into the “Ops” world. So the internal-focussed part of things has become very much second nature. And the bit I’ve been growing into more recently is all the very important external-facing things that a Chief Exec needs to deal with. I wouldn’t have dreamt of accepting this job if I didn’t think I could do it, and do it really, really well. And what has been absolutely brilliant is the amount of congratulatory emails, letters and cards that I’ve had – particularly from the clinical community. When you get a new Chief Executive, often it’s an individual new to the organisation and he or she will inevitably turn the organisation X degrees and march you up a slightly different hill. I think what’s great for me and the organisation is that in this period where there’s chaos around us, what we have is some stability. I have been part of developing with clinical colleagues that strategic direction that we’ve been moving down for a couple of years – not a new direction. What hopefully I provide is that right balance in respect of experience and some of the organisational history and the amount of goodwill that I seem to have. In terms of all these messages - you just couldn’t ask for anything more. I just need to be really careful not to squander one tiny bit of it.

Ed: Do you think your background in the

business world is going to be of particular value in the new NHS?

SJ: I think some of the business skills from the Burton Group and some of the disciplines instilled in me from my financial training will help. And I have some other interests outside work that are probably relevant to bring in. This year I’m president of HFMA (Healthcare Financial Management Association) and that is requiring me on behalf of its membership - which are most of NHS finance folk – to be involved with the Department of Health, with Monitor with those sorts of organisations influencing the policy agenda and the best way to go about enacting it from a financial perspective. Some of the skills from the Burton Group and accountancy, but also walking in the hallowed circles of the Royal Colleges have all helped equip me with a blend of different skills and experience. So it’s the business discipline, but also (as we’re a people business) the emotional intelligence, carefully and sensibly to lead the organisation. The Burton Group was where I began to be interested in all of those things, but throughout my career there have been lots of opportunities both within that career but also things slightly to the side of it. I’m also a governor at an independent school where we’ve been doing a lot of re-organisation and marketing of the school, and I’m also involved in a number of other smaller charities. So I’ve got a few other strings to my bow which all help put me in a good position to take this role now.

Ed: This Trust is the result of two trust amalgamations. Do you anticipate that there’s likely to be further reconfiguration of trusts in this region?

SJ: That’s a difficult one to be absolutely clear about, but if there isn’t, what we’ll see is the development of much stronger clinical

networks. Because we need one or the other, or a mixture of both. It's interesting, because as a Trust we serve the largest population in the North East – more than any other acute trust. Our population for most of the things we do is about 600,000 which increases to 1.2 million for some of our services – thinking about dermatology and plastic surgery. The population of the North East is about 2.7 million and no other acute trust has a resident population as large as ours. The District General model conceived at the beginning of the NHS was built around a population of 250,000. What we have already seen is that for some of those specialist services to get the best clinical outcomes, we'll need to look at that offering across our population base which actually is a decent size. But because we are so geographically spread we would be silly to do that without engaging with some of our partners at both of our peripheries.

Ed: You have told us about your horse riding, but other than work-related things, what do you like to do?

SJ: Well horse riding is my big passion, and because I do a few hours a week of it – probably at least four or five – it takes up quite a bit of my time. I guess the rest of the time I am Mum to 15 and 18 year old girls. We have been known to hit the shops every now and again - more frequently than I confess to my husband. I've got a dog, and he really is a part of our family – we've had him for about seven years. Half the nights in the week I'll take the dog out and that involves an hour's walk – so I do quite a bit of walking. My husband and I get away now and again for a bit of time - just the two of us. This weekend the dog came too but not the children. We were up at Kielder. I have a bit of a competitive streak, and my husband suggested a walk we might do that was six or seven miles long, and I said

“why don't we just walk around Kielder?” So we did – it's about 26 miles – and I was hobbling by the end of it but would not give in. It took us about seven and a half hours! So a bit of walking, socialising with friends and teenage girls take up quite a bit of my time.

Ed: Do you have any favourite holiday destinations?

SJ: We tend to do something different each year. We quite like to ski and we are fans of the States. We've done the East Coast, and all the history and similarly the West. We've still got a bit of the middle to do. You could probably spend your whole life and not see the whole of the U.S. We did last year go to Florida for about the tenth time – but we let our girls choose as it was possibly our eldest daughter's last holiday with us! I don't think we'll be going back there – we've probably done Florida to death! Prior to having the children we travelled a bit further afield. I like Thailand, and I'd like to do some travelling around India – I've never been to India. I think as the girls get older Keith and I might travel a bit further afield too, and India would be at the top of my list.

Ed: Something I always like to ask is – if you were cast away alone on a desert island and the Bible and Shakespeare were there already, which book would you take with you?

SJ: That's a really interesting one. I don't get a lot of time to read ordinarily, but I do read on holiday. I like detective novels, murder novels – that sort of thing. Most recently I've read the Stieg Larsson books and I think they are just brilliant. *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* was the last one that I read – that was over the Christmas holidays as I had a bit of time off. But I think if I was stuck on a desert island, what

I would want would really be a book that I could go back to. Perhaps something that would stimulate an interest – something perhaps that I hadn't been able to explore as much in my earlier years but would be very interested in if I had a lot of time on my hands. I think some of the books that Brian Cox has recently produced – I don't know if I'm allowed the whole set?

Ed: We'll allow you the set.

SJ: Well everything that he's done. I know it's quite popular at the moment, but he's able to engage and fire up my imagination and interest in things like neutrinos and quarks.

And I think with the desert island, the solar system and the sky – being able to pick things out even with my failing eyesight – that would give me material that would feed and fuel my interest in how things work and keep me going, for I haven't done physics and things like that since O level. It would keep me going for an awfully long time – so I think I would choose that.

Ed: Sue thank you very much for talking with us.