

- 4 These matters therefore came before me at a hearing on 30 April 2008 at which the applicant was represented by its patent attorneys, Mr Nigel Hackney and Mr Graeme Moore of Messrs Newburn Ellis. The examiner, Mr Matthew Lawson, also attended. The agents submitted revised claims two days before the hearing which addressed some of the examiner's clarity objections. This decision relates only to the remaining objections not addressed by the revised claims.

The invention

- 5 The invention claimed in the application relates to a double-layered sintered sliding member used for a connecting device, such as a thrust bearing, of a construction machine. In particular, it can be a component of a bucket connecting device of an excavator. Such sliding members need to be wear- and heat-resistant under high-stress conditions. The object of the invention is to provide a sintered sliding member excellent in abrasion resistance, seizing resistance, and heat crack resistance.
- 6 The sintered sliding member of the claimed invention is made of a ferrous alloy characterised by its composition. Claim 1 (as proposed with the agent's letter of 28 April) reads as follows:

A sintered sliding member comprising a back metal and a ferrous sintered sliding body which is combined to the back metal,

wherein said ferrous sintered sliding body contains carbon of 0.6 to 1.9wt%, Cr of 1 to 7wt%, V of 0 to 3wt%,

either P of 0.1 to 1.5wt or both P of 0.1 to 1.5wt and B of 0.01 to 0.2wt%, Mo of 3.5wt% or more and Mo+0.5xW of 4.5 to 30wt%, in which 0.5xW represents half of a real amount of W,

in which a content of carbon satisfies the following equation:

$$0.05 \times (\text{Mo}(\text{wt}\%) + 0.5 \times \text{W}(\text{wt}\%)) + 14 \times \text{MC-type carbide (volume fraction)}$$
$$\leq \text{Carbon}(\text{wt}\%) \leq 0.038 \times (\text{Mo}(\text{wt}\%) + 0.5 \times \text{W}(\text{wt}\%)) + 0.33 + 14 \times \text{MC-type carbide (volume fraction)}$$
and has martensite phase

in which said martensite phase, having a solid soluble carbon concentration of 0.2 to 0.45wt% contains M₆C-type carbide in a content of 5 to 40% by volume and MC-type carbide in a content of 5 to 40% by volume dispersed therein, and a balance of Fe

wherein said ferrous sintered sliding body contains one or more compounds selected from the group consisting of Fe₃P, Cr₂F, FeMoP, and V₂P dispersed therein in a content of 10% or less by volume.

The law

- 7 Section 14 of the Act sets out the requirements for an application. In particular, Section 14(3) states:

The specification of an application shall disclose the invention in a manner which is clear enough and complete enough for the invention to be performed by a person skilled in the art.

8 Section 14(5) is concerned with the claims:

The claim or claims shall -

(a) define the matter for which the applicant seeks protection;

(b) ...

(c) be supported by the description;

...

9 Further, section 1(1) defines the requirements for a patentable invention, namely that:

1.-(1) A patent may be granted only for an invention in respect of which the following conditions are satisfied, that is to say –

(a) the invention is new;

(b) it involves an inventive step;

...

10 Novelty and inventiveness are dealt with in sections 2 and 3:

2.-(1) An invention shall be taken to be new if it does not form part of the state of the art.

(2) The state of the art in the case of an invention shall be taken to comprise all matter (whether a product, a process, information about either, or anything else) which has at any time before the priority date of that invention been made available to the public (whether in the United Kingdom or elsewhere) by written or oral description, by use or in any other way.

...

3. An invention shall be taken to involve an inventive step if it is not obvious to a person skilled in the art, having regard to any matter which forms part of the state of the art by virtue only of section 2(2) above...

Definition and Support of Claims

11 Claim 1, as quoted above, defines the ferrous sintered sliding member in terms of its composition, the various components of the alloy satisfying the given equation and percentage presence, and certain percentages being present in a martensite phase. The examiner accepts that, given a sintered sliding member, it would be possible to analyse it to determine whether it meets the various requirements of the claim. There is therefore no issue regarding clarity of the claim insofar as determining whether a given item would infringe (or not) the claim.

12 The examiner's objection is twofold: that the claims are defined in terms of unusual parameters (particularly the requirements on the martensite phase), and that the claim is unduly broad and speculative.

Definition by unusual parameters

13 The equation given is undeniably not straightforward. The examiner faces considerable difficulty in identifying prior art - with the large number of parameters and a complex interaction between them, it is difficult for the examiner to determine if a given prior art disclosure would actually anticipate the claim. The examiner points out paragraph 14.121 of the Manual of Patent Practice which rightly warns against the use of unusual parameters to disguise a lack of novelty or inventive step:

Where the invention relates to a chemical compound it may be characterised in a claim in various ways, eg by its chemical formula, or, exceptionally, by its parameters or as a product of a process. Characterisation of a chemical compound solely by its parameters should, as a general rule, be allowed only in those cases where the invention cannot be adequately defined in any other way, for example in the case of macromolecular chains. In such cases however only parameters usual in the art should be employed to characterise the compound, since use of unusual parameters may disguise lack of novelty...

- 14 The above quotation is, however, referring to chemical compounds. The present case concerns alloys, which are mentioned in the Manual at paragraph 14.123:

The extent to which the ingredients of a composition need to be specified in order adequately to define the invention depends greatly on the subject-matter concerned. Thus a claim to "a pharmaceutical composition containing compound X together with a diluent or carrier" is allowable, X being a medically active compound which characterises the composition, and the diluent or carrier being any material suitable for the purpose and being choosable by knowledge of the art or by non-inventive experiment. In the field of alloys, sufficient of the constituents should be specified such that the claim is not speculative and is adequately supported by the disclosure.

- 15 The examiner maintains that the way claim 1 is defined renders it unclear, as the vast majority of patent documents which disclose ferrous sintered bodies do not disclose eg the amounts of carbide and phosphide compounds present, even though they are present in such alloys. Furthermore, the reference to the different percentages present in the martensite phase are, although not unknown in the art, unusual.
- 16 In response, Mr Moore argues that the parameters are in no sense "unusual". Percentages of composition are standard for alloys - the only potentially "unusual" parameter is the use of the equation. But Mr Moore argues that this equation is in fact the heart of the invention - it defines an area within which the alloys possess the desired characteristics. He argues it is simply not possible to define the invention in a different way.
- 17 I accept this. It may make the tasking of searching prior art a difficult one, but one key to the applicant's alleged invention is that alloys falling within the given area and meeting the other constraints possess desirable qualities not found in alloys falling outside it. As the examiner and the applicant agree that a person skilled in the art is capable of assessing the relevant parameters for a given alloy, I do not think that the claim can be said to use unusual parameters - even if the percentages in the martensite phase are not usually given. It may be that the applicant's inventive insight lies in specifically recognizing the importance of the percentages of the components, and in particular in the martensite phase. I therefore do not uphold this objection.

Broad and speculative claim

- 18 In essence, the examiner doubts that the benefits of the invention are to be found in all the alloys satisfying the requirements of claim 1. Specifically, the alleged benefits of the invention derive from the particular microstructure which the application indicates is formed when the appropriate composition is used. The examiner points out that the application does not show that every possible composition falling within claim 1 has been checked to see if it does indeed

possess this microstructure.

- 19 In response, Mr Moore asserts that all the alloys falling within the parameters do indeed possess this quality. He further argues that the approach taken by the claim is the clearest and most reasonable approach to take - clearly marking off the boundaries within which the claimed advantage is said to occur.
- 20 In my view, Mr Moore is right as a matter of general principle. The claim clearly identifies the necessary characteristics of alloys required to gain the alleged advantage. Furthermore, I have no evidence to suggest that the applicant's assertion that alloys within this region do possess the advantage is incorrect. Therefore I do not uphold this objection.

Enablement

- 21 The examiner has objected that the amounts of carbide and phosphide compounds present and the amounts of certain constituents present in the martensite phase can only be determined after the alloy has been made. Therefore the examiner considers there is not enough information on how to ensure the correct proportions in the martensite phase, and thus the application does not enable the invention to be made.
- 22 Mr Moore pointed to various embodiments describing how to create appropriate sintered alloys and then analyzing the resulting alloy to check the composition of the martensite phase. He therefore argued that a skilled person could use this disclosure to produce an alloy falling within the scope of claim 1.
- 23 The examiner's concern is essentially that the skilled person may be being asked to take "pot luck" and it may require an unreasonable number of trials for the skilled person to eventually come up with something falling within claim 1. I can see the force of this submission, but ultimately there is a dearth of evidence as to how difficult it may be. In the absence of such evidence, and with the application appearing on its face to show a way of producing an alloy according to the invention, I do not uphold this objection.

Novelty

- 24 The examiner has cited JP 57-108244 comprise carbides dispersed in a martensite matrix. The amounts of carbide and phosphide phases present and the amount of carbon present in the martensite phase are not disclosed. However, the examiner considers JP 57-108244 to disclose a range of alloy compositions which overlaps the range specified in claim 1. He argues that at least some alloys lying within the composition range of JP 57-108244 which also meet the first composition requirements of claim 1 will meet these latter requirements. The applicant contends, simply, that there is no disclosure of whether the alloy meets those conditions and therefore there is no anticipation.

- 25 The examiner's argument was essentially deployed as a "squeeze" argument with his sufficiency objection, dealt with above: if all alloys meeting the first part of the claim meet the second part (which the applicant might argue to show sufficiency), then the alloy in JP 57-108244 must anticipate. However, as I note above, I do not consider this to necessarily be the case, and therefore the squeeze argument fails. In the absence of clear indication of the carbide and phosphide phases, or the amounts of the other elements, and the general lack of evidence as to whether the second conditions follow from the first, I do not consider that anticipation has been made out.

Inventive Step

- 26 No argument was made that claim 1 lacks inventiveness if it is novel, and given the advantages alleged by the applicant for this particular composition, I am willing to accept that it is inventive over JP 57-108244. As the examiner's objections to the dependent claims were premised on claim 1 lacking novelty or inventiveness, I similarly do not uphold those objections.

Conclusion and next steps

- 27 The applicant has conceded that there is added matter in claim 4, and amended the claims to address some of the examiner's clarity objections. I do not uphold the examiner's remaining objections on sufficiency of disclosure, clarity and scope of claims, and novelty and inventive step. I therefore remit the application to the examiner for further processing in the light of my findings.

Appeal

- 28 Under the Practice Direction to Part 52 of the Civil Procedure Rules, any appeal must be lodged within 28 days.

J ELBRO

Deputy Director acting for the Comptroller