

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE - DEVELOPMENT CONTROL SUB-COMMITTEE - 2 DECEMBER 1987REPORT BY COUNTY PLANNING OFFICERCOUNTY MATTER - ROTHER DISTRICTEXTENSION OF EXISTING BOARD PLANT AND WAREHOUSE FACILITIES, CONSTRUCTION OF GYPSUM ROCK HOMOGENISING UNIT, ADDITIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE AND ENGINEERING FACILITIES AND LORRY AND CAR PARKING AREAS, AT MOUNTFIELD, ROBERTSBRIDGE - FOR BRITISH GYPSUM LTD.1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This 'County Matter' application has been referred to the County Council by Rother District Council, with a recommendation that it be approved.

2. SITE

2.1 The application site forms part of British Gypsum's Mountfield Works. This complex incorporates the Mountfield Mine and associated processing plant, and the adjoining manufacturing plant which includes the plaster mill and plasterboard production line. The whole plant is situated in the valley of the River Line, just west of the Hastings-Tonbridge railway, and south-west of Mountfield village. There is a purpose-built site access road direct to the A2100, Battle-Robertsbridge road, about 1km to the east, and the works is also rail-connected.

2.2 The application site itself covers the existing manufacturing plant and adjoining land (see site plan). This is located to the north of the main site road, and east of the Mountfield Mine entrance and its associated buildings. Much of the land is already in industrial use, but the proposals also affect some existing areas of woodland and unused land within the works boundary.

2.3 The surrounding countryside is undulating and extensively wooded, and is part of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

3. PROPOSAL

3.1 The intention of the development is to extend the plasterboard manufacturing plant to meet a demand for increased output, and to carry out other improvements to site operations.

3.2 The main elements of the proposals are shown on the site plan and are as follows:-

- i) the extension of the plasterboard plant building, by approximately 105m, to accommodate an extension to the production line;
- ii) construction of an additional warehouse and loading area, covering 6760m², adjoining the plasterboard plant;
- iii) extension of the existing office building by the addition of a third storey;
- iv) erection of a mineral homogenising unit, measuring about 75m in diameter and 19m high, just to the west of the plaster mill;
- v) construction of a new engineering block, the provision of sundry items of plant associated with the main proposals, and the laying out of some additional areas of parking.

4. CONSULTATIONS

4.1 Rother District Council recommend that planning permission be granted, subject to landscaping conditions.

4.2 Mountfield Parish Council supports an approval, subject to noise levels being kept below these of the existing plant, the provision of a tree screen, and routeing controls to ensure that all lorries only use the private works access roads.

4.3 The County Engineer does not wish to restrict the grant of consent.

4.4 The Southern Water Authority raises no objection.

4.5 The Countryside Commission has no comment to make on the application.

5. CONSIDERATIONS

General Background

5.1 There are two main elements to this proposed development. Firstly, the extension to the plasterboard plant and the additional warehouse are part of the Company's proposals to extend the capacity of the plant from 21 million m² per annum to 32 million m² per annum, to meet a strong increase in demand for plasterboard, particularly in the south-east. This increase would require a further 120,000 tonnes of mill grade gypsum annually to be taken from the Brightling mine. The proposed extension would allow the production process to be speeded up and increase manufacturing capacity for plaster-based products generally.

5.2 Secondly, the mineral homogenising unit is intended to eliminate quality fluctuation in the as-mined gypsum raw material. Located as close to the manufacturing plant as possible, the unit would, in effect, be a large fully enclosed stockpile fed by conveyor from the mine area. The equipment is designed so that incoming rock, which may be of varying quality, is deposited in thin layers within the building; the mineral is recovered for processing from the base of the stockpile in such a way that rock from all layers in the stockpile is blended to a uniform quality as it is dispatched. Full enclosure would also keep the rock dry and minimise any dust problems.

5.3 The Structure Plan states that special consideration has to be given to planning activities within AONBs (policy CAC2). Although there is a general presumption against development in the countryside (policy CAC7), the existing plant at Mountfield is related to a long established mineral working, and associated large-scale processing and manufacturing dates back at least to the 1960s. The environmental impact of the proposal therefore needs to be assessed against this background.

Environmental Impact

5.4 It is generally accepted that despite its sensitive position, the works has been very carefully located and screened, and there are few direct views of the plant and buildings from adjacent areas. The proposed extension to the plasterboard plant would be identical in design and height to the existing building and would be finished in similar materials. The additional storey on the office building would be to an acceptable, matching design and would increase its overall height by 6m. None of the proposed buildings would exceed the existing, maximum height of the main building, which is an important visual consideration.

5.5 The homogenising unit would be a large structure, but it's impact would be reduced by excavating the valley side and sinking the unit into the existing

slope, so that its highest point would be 1.5m lower than the top of the adjoining plaster mill. Overall, therefore, the maximum height of buildings on this site would not increase.

5.6 The plant is located in a valley and much of it is surrounded by mature woodland, including, in the direction of Mountfield, Millham Wood which is in the company's ownership. The nearest dwellings on the edge of Mountfield village are 550m from the application site boundary, and are screened from the works by both topography and woodland, whilst the main part of the village is 1.5km away. To the south, the nearest dwellings in Netherfield village (off Netherfield Lane) are 1 km distant and many views from this area are also screened by woodland.

5.7 Given the relative isolation of the plant, there is no evidence of an existing noise nuisance. The buildings and extensions proposed would completely enclose noise generating plant, and I do not consider that noise levels at the nearest properties would alter as a result of this development.

5.8 The easternmost part of the plasterboard plant extension would involve the removal of a small area of existing woodland, leaving only a narrow strip adjoining the site boundary. However, the reduction in the boundary tree screen at this point would only extend over a distance of about 30m, and existing woodland on either side is unaffected by the proposals. Further, it would not increase any public views into the site. Nonetheless, the Company has agreed to pay particular attention to this area in preparing their landscaping scheme.

5.9 This scheme would provide for suitable planting, and the maintenance of existing woodland areas, within the application site. Particular attention would be paid to the area surrounding the homogenising unit. However, the Company have requested that any scheme be finalised only after the development has commenced, because certain engineering details, relating to the homogenising unit in particular, have yet to be finalised. I would raise no objection to this.

Traffic

5.10 At present, the Company estimates that approximately 200 lorries per day leave the site, using the private access road direct to the A2100. The development is likely to increase this to a maximum of 225, a 12% increase. Given the purpose built nature of the site access, direct onto a major distributor road, this is acceptable.

Employment

5.11 Currently, operations at Mountfield and Brightling directly employ about 455 people. This excludes additional service employment, particularly in the extensive contract road haulage fleet. The Company estimates that the development would increase employment levels by about 38, which is an important consideration in this area where the current unemployment rate is 10.3%. The proposal therefore represents a safeguard for existing jobs and would create additional employment opportunities in the locality.

5.12 In addition, 'knock-on' employment effects are likely, with, for example, increases in the transport fleet and in the mining operation, as well as in the construction industry. An increased demand for local services could also arise. The development also represents, when taken with the proposed construction of the overland conveyor system, a major investment by the Company in East Sussex.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 This development is to secure improvements and extensions to the manufacturing plant at Mountfield, in order to meet increased demand for the Company's products. It is also likely to lead to increased employment opportunities in the locality.

6.2 I consider the proposal to be acceptable in environmental terms, subject primarily to the implementation of a suitable landscaping scheme which can be dealt with by condition in the normal way.

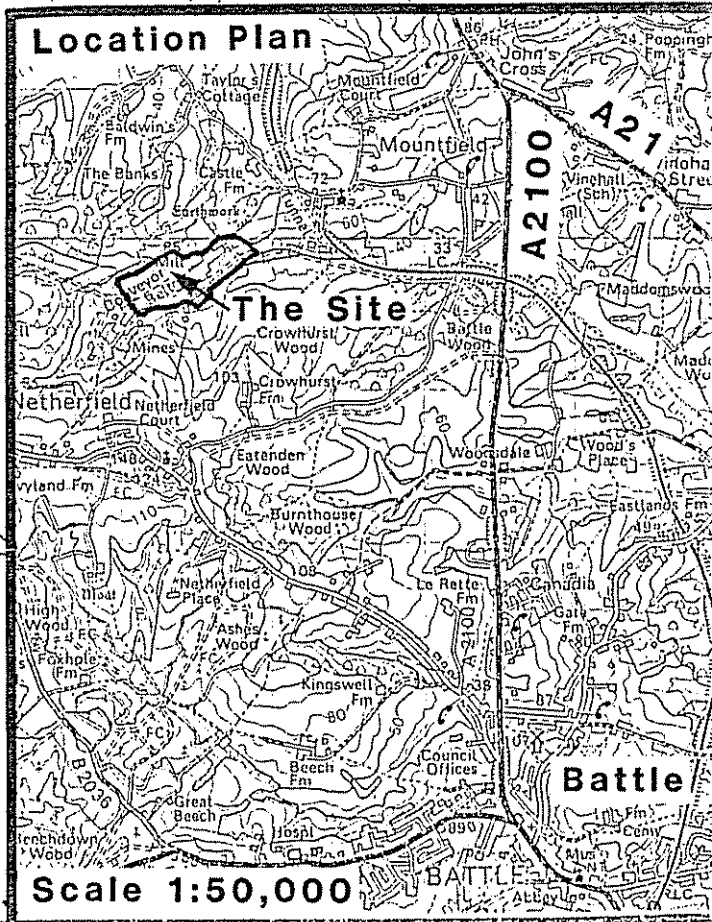
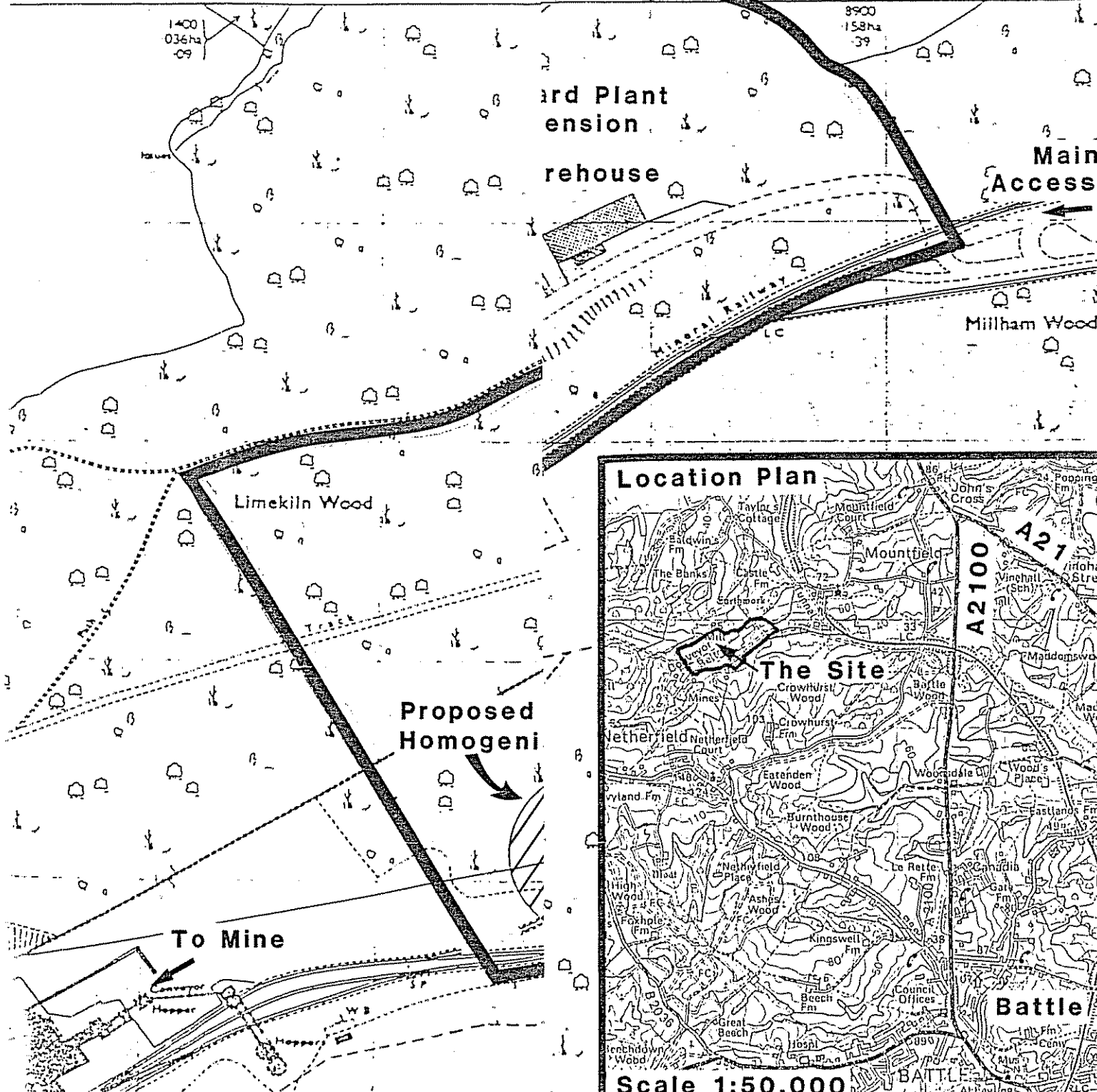
7. RECOMMENDATION

7.1 It is recommended that the development proposed in application RR/87/2260 be approved, subject to conditions to be settled by the County Planning Officer along the lines of the following:-

- i) standard time condition;
- ii) within 6 months of the commencement of the development hereby permitted, a landscaping scheme shall be submitted to the County Planning Officer for written approval, and such approved scheme shall be implemented within one year of the date on which it is approved;
- iii) details of the proposed homogenising unit, and its associated conveyors shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the County Planning Officer prior to the commencement of the development.

MALCOLM REECE
County Planning Officer
24 November 1987
Ref:DCSUB/GYPSUM
RB/seb

BRITISH GYPSUM LTD.
ROBERTSBRIDGE
Boardplant Development
Application Site Boundary
Scale 1/2500



0 metres 60
0 feet 200
Scale 1:2500



Reproduced from the Ordnance Survey Map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office

