

Committee **Environment
Development Control Sub-Committee**

Date **5 January 1994**

Report By **County Planning Officer**

Proposal **Variation of condition no. 3 of planning permission reference
A/64/350 to allow the importation of Desulphogypsum from outside
the County of East Sussex.**

Site Address **Robertsbridge Works, Mountfield, Robertsbridge.**

Application No. **RR/53/CM**

Applicant **British Gypsum Ltd**

Key Issues a) **Need/source of supply**
 b) **Transport arrangements**
 c) **Policy/environmental considerations**
 d) **Employment**

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sub-Committee is recommended to resolve :-

- 1. that the variation of condition no. 3 attached to planning permission reference A/64/350 be approved subject to an amended condition and 'informative'.**
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CONSIDERATION BY COUNTY PLANNING OFFICER

1 THE SITE

1.1 The works complex of British Gypsum Ltd., comprising the Mountfield Mine and associated processing plant, plasterboard factory and offices, is located about three miles north of Battle.

1.2 The whole plant is situated in the valley of the River Line, just west of the Hastings-London railway, and south-west of Mountfield village. There is a purpose-built site access road direct to the A2100, Battle-Robertsbridge road, about ¾ m to the east. The works is also rail-connected, and until very recently the rail link has been used to export material to the cement making industry.

1.3 The main works area is contained within undulating and extensively wooded countryside and is not a prominent feature in the landscape. The site is within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

2 SITE HISTORY

2.1 The site is included within the area covered by the original permission for mining gypsum granted in 1948 (reference A/48/404).

2.2 In 1964 planning permission was granted for the erection of a plaster mill and a plasterboard factory (application A/64/350). The permission was subject to the following condition:-

"(3) Notwithstanding the provisions of the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order, 1963 the permitted buildings shall not be used for any purpose other than the conversion of gypsum rock to plaster, the manufacture of wall plasters, plasterboard and associated products and the storage of materials and products in connection therewith. No gypsum other than gypsum mined within the Administrative County of East Sussex shall be used."

2.3 There are many other subsequent planning applications relating to the gypsum mines, but these do not directly concern the proposal.

3 PROPOSAL

3.1 The gypsum mines at Mountfield are of national and regional importance and provide an important raw material for the construction industry. British Gypsum Ltd is the leading UK manufacturer of plasterboard, bagged plaster and other gypsum products, and is also the major supplier of gypsum to the cement manufacturing industry. The Robertsbridge factory has a large installed capacity of 497,000 tonnes of gypsum per annum, which reflects the large geographical area that the factory serves which includes much of Southern and South East England.

3.2 This year, by-product gypsum, known as desulphogypsum (DSG) arising from the desulphurisation of power station flue gases, will be available from Drax (S. Yorks) and Ratcliffe-on-Soar (Notts) Power Stations, and the Company seeks to vary the condition of the 1964 permission, in order to allow the importation by rail of DSG onto the site for manufacturing purposes.

4 CONSULTATIONS

4.1 The observations of Rother District Council are awaited.

4.2 Comments from Mountfield Parish Council are awaited.

4.3 The Highway Authority has no objections to the DSG being brought into the site by rail but it is considered that in the event of any alteration to this arrangement, resulting in additional road haulage movements, there should be control over the means of vehicular access to the site.

4.4 There are no objections from Southern Water Services Ltd and the NRA's views are awaited.

5 COMMENTS/APPRAISAL

(a) Need/source of supply

5.1 Both National Power's Drax, and Powergen's coal-fired station at Ratcliffe-on-Soar, are being retrofitted with flue gas desulphurisation (FGD) units as part of the UK programme to reduce emissions of sulphur dioxide by 10%. The first unit at Drax commenced commissioning in September this year, with the first quantities of DSG being produced. It is expected that the plant will be fully commissioned by 1995. Commissioning at Ratcliffe-on-Soar is expected to commence in early 1994 and will also be completed by 1995.

5.2 The FGD system to be used at both sites is a limestone/gypsum process which creates, to a strict specification, substantial quantities of gypsum as a by-product. This DSG source offers significant advantages to British Gypsum by virtue of its quality and nature. The Company needs to take advantage of the advent of the production of this type of gypsum to augment its product performance, as well as conserve indigenous reserves of natural gypsum. It is also anxious to maintain its competitive manufacturing capacity at Robertsbridge which will continue to take full advantage of the skilled workforce, currently 197, and the geographical location.

5.3 It is intended that the DSG should be of a quality suitable for processing into plaster and other building materials and, to this end, British Gypsum has entered into a contract with National Power and Powergen to buy the DSG for use at its works throughout Britain, including Robertsbridge.

5.4 It is proposed to use the DSG arising from Ratcliffe-on-Soar Power Station at its plasterboard factory at East Leake in Nottinghamshire, whose gypsum requirements nearly match the forecast DSG output.

5.5 The output from Drax in North Yorkshire will reach substantially greater volumes and cannot be consumed at only one factory. Consequently, the Company proposes to distribute this supply of gypsum to all its manufacturing operations in Britain, including Robertsbridge. It is expected that the output of DSG will rise from c.200,000 tonnes in 1994 to between 1.3M and 1.5M by 1995-96.

5.6 DSG is a damp, very fine grained substance, with up to 10% free moisture. This material is to be substituted for natural gypsum, which has up to 3% free moisture. The process consequences of this change are, firstly, less grinding and, secondly, additional drying to the point where fine dry gypsum is stored prior to processing.

(b) Transport and handling arrangements

5.7 The Company considers that rail haulage will be the most appropriate and efficient method of transport to Robertsbridge and proposes to import the DSG onto the site by rail.

5.8 A convenient and direct rail link into the works from the British Rail Hastings-London main line exists immediately adjacent to the north-eastern boundary of the Company's land and to the south-west of Mountfield Village. There is a gated access at the rail junction, together with sidings close by owned by British Gypsum. The private track into the works is presently being repaired and replaced to British Rail specification.

5.9 The DSG will arrive at the site in specially designed enclosed containers holding some 24 tonnes and will be unloaded at Robertsbridge Works using a mobile container off-loading machine.

5.10 The total volume of DSG brought into the site by rail would to a large extent depend upon market conditions for gypsum products and upon the amount of DSG available. However I have asked the applicants to let me have an approximately guide to the expected number of deliveries and I hope to be able to provide Members with further information on this aspect at the meeting.

(c) Storage

5.11 It is proposed to use the existing storage facilities at Robertsbridge which currently are used to handle natural gypsum. These comprise a 30,000 tonne capacity covered stockpile with a further 150,000 tonnes of open stockpiles.

5.12 The DSG containers will be unloaded using specially designed equipment that will enable the DSG to be discharged either into the covered stockpile building or onto the open stockpile.

(d) Existing supply of mined gypsum

5.13 Although the manufacturing plant is located at Mountfield, the present source of the natural gypsum used at the works is the Company's mine at Brightling. The raw material is transported from the Brightling mine to the manufacturing works by overland conveyor.

5.14 It is the intention of the Company to carry on mining operations at the Brightling Mine, which will continue to produce gypsum for the manufacture of plaster products and to supply gypsum rock to the cement manufacturing industry.

5.15 It is expected that output levels for the supply to the factory will be lowered by some 30%, but this will be dependent on the degree of substitution achieved by using DSG.

5.16 The Company recognises that the long term supply of DSG is not assured and, therefore, will maintain its reserves, underground mining capacity and capabilities to ensure future continuity of supply if, for any reason, DSG is not available.

(e) Policy and Environmental Considerations

5.17 In planning terms the use of rail for Company operations is to be encouraged. The local impact of additional rail traffic is likely to be negligible compared with the problems which are normally associated with road haulage by heavy lorries, and the DSG containers would be completely enclosed to prevent any air pollution problems through "dusting" during transportation.

5.18 Bearing in mind that the rail infrastructure is already in place, additional activity would be confined to unloading/handling operations within the Company's land, and the additional freight movements on the main line. This would involve little environmental impact upon the character of the area and rural amenity.

5.19 Accordingly, I consider that the proposal would be consistent with the Countryside policy criteria of the County Structure Plan.

5.20 I am also mindful that there could be long-term environmental benefits from upgrading the rail link in that an alternative means of transport for the distribution of finished products would be available. The Company has recognised this opportunity for making better use of the railway link in the future, but for the time being there are no proposals for road distribution of plaster products to be discontinued.

5.21 The application can also be assessed against the minerals policies of the Structure Plan, 7th Alteration which is at the 'Deposit' stage. The proposal involves making use of a "waste" product and conserves existing mineral resources in East Sussex. Employment would be maintained, and the use of rail transport, rather than road, would meet the sustainable objectives set out in Policy MIN 1. The proposal is also supported by Policy MIN 3 which recognises the importance of minerals in contributing to the national and local economy.

5.22 The proposal is consistent with the emerging policies of the Minerals Local Plan which is at the 'consultative draft' stage. Subject to economic interests and environmental considerations, the mining and manufacturing processes at Mountfield and Brightling will be supported (Policy 24).

5.23 Policy 25 supports the retention of the rail link to the Mountfield Works and encourages its fullest use for all appropriate importing and exporting activities.

(f) Employment

5.24 Currently the operations at Mountfield and Brightling directly employ about 197 people and involve other associated employment. The Company does not at this time envisage any change to this number resulting from the proposal to import DSG. The proposed 30% reduction in the volume of gypsum mined at Brightling may entail a change in the workforce required for mining operations in the future, but if so, this is likely to be marginal, and redeployment within the works would be considered as a first option. DSG is not a suitable substitute for mined gypsum used in the cement industry and the importation of DSG would not affect the mining of gypsum to be exported for this purpose.

6 CONCLUSION

6.1 I am satisfied that the proposed importation of DSG to the works is essential to the continued success of the Company's operations at Mountfield and Brightling. There is an identified need for British Gypsum to use DSG to augment its production performance, and I believe that change in production processes will be inevitable from time to time if the Company is to remain competitive in the industry.

6.2 The existing Brightling mine will continue to be worked and natural gypsum used in conjunction with the imported DSG. The manufacture of plaster products will continue at the works and there is unlikely to be any major change in the level of the workforce as a direct result of the importation of DSG.

6.3 The intended use of rail for haulage is to be encouraged and I am satisfied that the development could proceed without adverse environmental effects.

6.4 The proposal would not conflict with the policies of the adopted Structure Plan, the 'Deposit' 7th Alteration, or the policies of the consultative draft Minerals Local Plan.

7 FORMAL RECOMMENDATION

7.1 Subject to no material objections being received from consultees, the County Planning officer be authorised to approve the variation to condition number 3 attached to planning permission reference A/64/350, and that the condition be amended and a new condition (3A) be imposed to read along the lines of the following :

"3. Notwithstanding the provisions of the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 and the Town and Country Planning General Development Order 1988 (or any amendment thereto) the permitted buildings shall be used only for the purpose of manufacture of wall plasters, plasterboard and associated products from converted gypsum rock and rail imported desulphogypsum, and for the storage of materials and products in connection therewith. No natural gypsum rock other than gypsum mined within the County of East Sussex shall be used.

3A. No Desulphogypsum shall be imported into the site other than by rail."

7.2 The following INFORMATIVE be attached to the approval :-

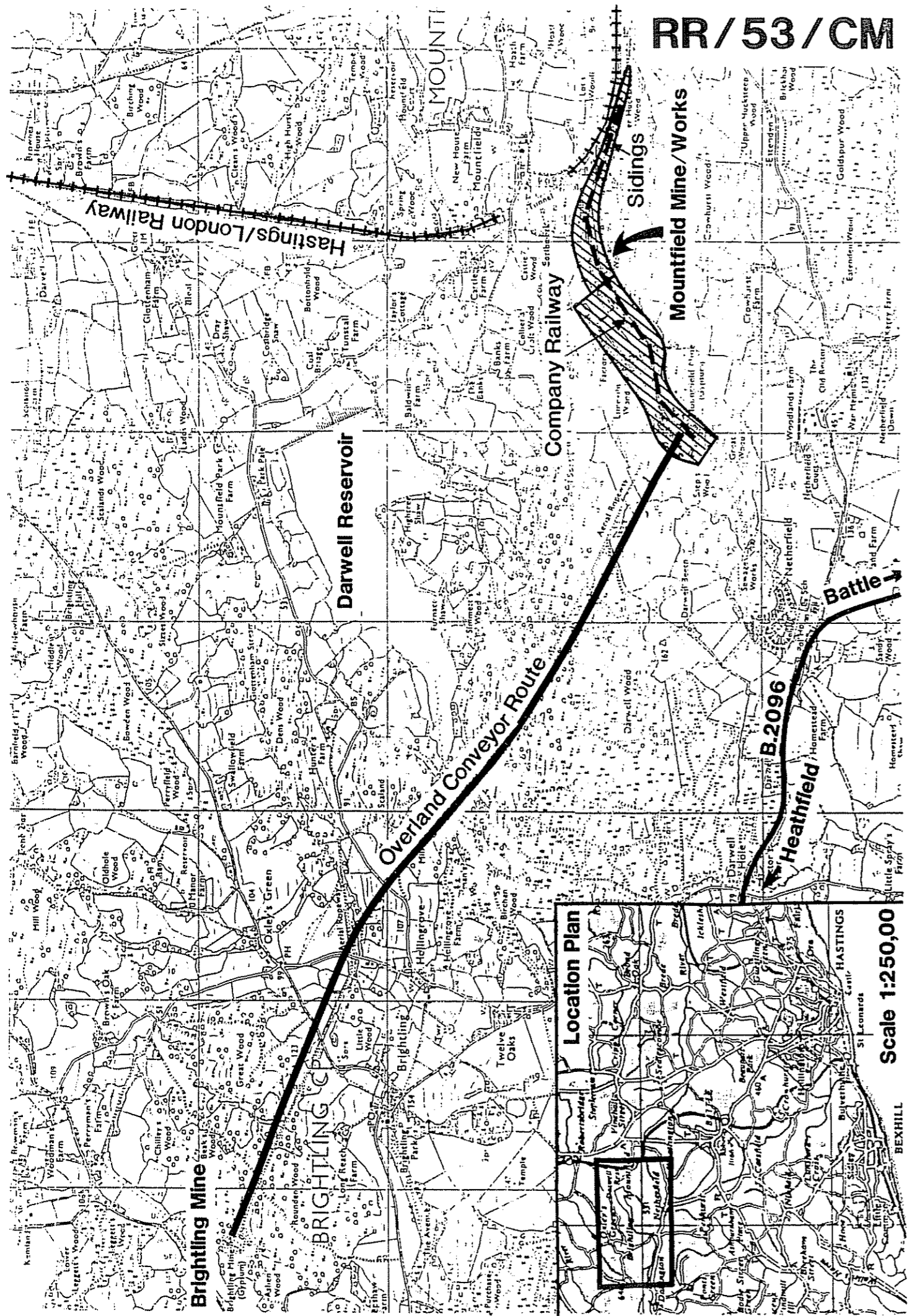
(a) The quantities of desulphogypsum imported to the manufacturing plant at Mountfield shall be generally in accordance with the details specified in application RR/53/CM and that any proposed material increase in the volume of desulphogypsum imported to the works will require, and shall be subject to, the approval of the Mineral Planning Authority.

8 BACKGROUND PAPERS

Application and accompanying details.
Site history.
Policy documents.
Replies from consultees.

CHRIS M WILLIAMS
County Planning Officer
17 December 1993
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