

## INTRODUCTION

- 6.1 Gypsum and anhydrite are minerals of national importance used for plaster and plasterboard products; in cement production and in many other industrial processes. Although not rare minerals in Britain, their occurrence in economically workable conditions is limited to a few areas. They are mined in East Sussex, Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and Cumbria. The resources in East Sussex form the largest deposit within the United Kingdom and the only economic source of these industrial minerals in the South of England making them regionally and nationally important.

## CURRENT PRODUCTION

- 6.2 Gypsum has been mined and processed at Mountfield since 1876. In the 1960s, a second mine was opened at Brightling with raw material transported to the plant at Mountfield (known as the Robertsbridge Works) by an aerial ropeway which was replaced in 1989 by an overland conveyor. In the 1960s and 1970s a new plaster mill and a plasterboard manufacturing plant were built and subsequently extended. The Robertsbridge Works has direct road access to A2100, 1.5km south of its junction with the A21 trunk road, and is served by rail sidings from the Charing Cross - Hastings line. In 1990, the Mountfield mine was abandoned, and all mining is now concentrated at Brightling.
- 6.3 The whole mining and works complex lies within the High Weald AONB. Overall, it has little impact on the environment, the underground workings being accessed by an adit which requires little surface development. Subsidence is not a factor as the mine is worked on the 'room and pillar' system which leaves the overlying strata supported. The main works area is contained within undulating, wooded countryside and is not a prominent feature in the landscape.
- 6.4 Mountfield/Brightling is regarded by British Gypsum as a strategically important site with a modern mine and modern plasterboard plant well placed to serve the south-east and parts of the Greater London markets. The UK gypsum industry is under increasing competitive pressure from imports from the rest of the EU, notably Spain. Mountfield is regarded as well located to meet this competition. The industry's recent performance has been affected by the recession and the sharp downturn in construction activity.
- 6.5 In resource terms, Mountfield/Brightling has a long term future. British Gypsum, as a policy, seeks to have some 20 years proven reserves of gypsum available. The modern Brightling mine has a mining capacity of 1 million tonnes per annum. Although there are no plans to resume production from the Mountfield mine, it is possible that its reserves might be mined from Brightling. There are proposals to enlarge the nearby Darwell reservoir which could lead to substantial sterilisation of gypsum and anhydrite resources but the timing remains to be confirmed.

- 6.6 An alternative to mined gypsum in the U.K. has recently become available through gypsum produced as a by-product from the flue gas desulphurisation programme at selected coal fired power stations, initially in Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire. The current industry view is that this new source of gypsum supply will not have a major impact on the use of mined gypsum as the industry's strategic resource in the longer term, although it seems inevitable that it will reduce the need to mine natural gypsum at Mountfield/Brightling. However in 1994 planning permission was granted for the import by rail of desulphurgypsum for processing at Robertsbridge to supplement local rock, and trains now operate from Drax in South Yorkshire.
- 6.7 In recent years, British Gypsum has shown strong commitment to their Mountfield/Brightling operation with major investment in the mine and in plant, including the overland conveyor. The various mineral related operations at Mountfield/Brightling constitute one of the largest industrial enterprises in the Plan area. They currently employ about 200 people, although there has been a significant loss of jobs in recent years. It remains an important source of employment in the Rother and Hastings area.

## FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

- 6.8 The Structure Plan indicates the mineral planning authority's general support for the present gypsum mining and production activities in the Robertsbridge area. This commitment is regarded as consistent with its policies for the High Weald AONB. However it would be desirable to agree a programme of environmental management with the operator to ensure that the high standards appropriate to the AONB are maintained. This could include landscape and ecological issues, and cover the area adjoining the Robertsbridge Works and its access, the Brightling mine entrance complex, and the connecting overland conveyor.

**POLICY 26** The mineral planning authority will support the continuation of the present gypsum (and anhydrite) mining, processing and manufacturing activities at Mountfield and Brightling. Favourable consideration will normally be given to developments which sustain these activities as follows :-

- a) the maintenance of adequate reserves of gypsum with planning permission for extraction;
- b) developments associated with the extraction of gypsum at Brightling or Mountfield and the overland transport of gypsum to the processing plant at Mountfield (the Robertsbridge Works);
- c) developments associated with the processing plant at the Robertsbridge Works;

- d) developments associated with the manufacturing of gypsum products where an alternative location outside the High Weald AONB is not appropriate;
- e) the importation by rail of desulphurgypsum for processing and associated manufacturing at the Robertsbridge Works.

In all cases, development proposals will be subject to the 'most rigorous examination' in accordance with Government advice; the need to locate the proposed development at Mountfield and Brightling will have to be justified in the national or local economic interest and the local environmental and traffic impacts of proposals must be acceptable.

**POLICY 27** The mineral planning authority will initiate discussions with British Gypsum to secure an appropriate programme of environmental management for the area of the High Weald AONB adjoining the Robertsbridge Works, the Brightling mine and the overland conveyor.

## TRANSPORTATION

6.9 Road transport is used to import raw materials, apart from local gypsum and desulphurgypsum, to the Robertsbridge Works and to distribute plasterboard and other plaster products to local and regional markets. Although the rail link is no longer used to export gypsum for use in cement manufacture on Thameside, it is now used to import desulphurgypsum in rail containers for use at the plant. The mineral planning authority wishes to see road transport minimised and the use of the rail link increased.

**POLICY 28** The mineral planning authority supports the retention of the rail link to the Robertsbridge Works and wishes to encourage its fullest use for all appropriate importing or exporting operations associated with mining and production activities.

## WASTE PRODUCTION AND RECYCLING

6.10 The mining process does not give rise to waste which has to be landfilled on the surface, although there have been pollution problems related to the discharge of mine water. Reject rock is normally sold as a fill material. Scrap from plasterboard production is currently landfilled within the site and this presents environmental problems. The County Council, as waste planning authority, granted planning permission in 1991 for a new tipping site and this has less than 2 years life remaining. In doing so, British Gypsum were informed that any further extension of the tipping area into adjoining land was unlikely to receive favourable consideration and they were urged to bring forward proposals for waste recycling at the earliest opportunity or investigate the disposal of waste underground.

6.11 The technology exists for recycling plasterboard scrap within the production process, requiring specialised plant. There is a complication in the manufacturing process in reusing scrap at the Robertsbridge Works due to its having two product lines which must not be compromised. British Gypsum are considering the introduction of recycling facilities which would minimise waste and eliminate the need for further on-site landfill.

**POLICY 29** The mineral planning authority would not normally support further landfilling of waste material from the plasterboard manufacturing process at the Robertsbridge Works, and would support the introduction of recycling processes or other appropriate means of dealing with this waste at the site at the earliest opportunity.