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'Gunpowder Factory
Leisure Centre
Plan'

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Gunpowder factory leisure centre plan

A GRAND 'plot' has been hatched to determine the future of England's oldest gunpowder factory in Waltham Abbey.

It is to be abandoned and sold after 400 years of production.

And Epping Forest District Council — the local planning authority — has prepared extensive guidelines for its future use.

The 247-acre site in Powdermill Lane belongs to the Ministry of Defence and is one of the two PERME (Propellants, Explosives and Rocket Motor Establishments), works in the town.

For several years the idea to consolidate the secret work at the Sewardstone Road premises to increase efficiency has been in the pipeline. The move is expected to take place next year, with no job losses and not 1984 as first thought.

The site looks likely to be acquired by the Department of the Environment, because of its immense historical and environmental value, or the Property Services Agency.

In either case, the district council's development committee has been keeping an eye on the situation since July, when the planning brief was prepared.

It was released to the public after Wednesday's meeting where members agreed its contents.

They also recommended that if the DoE does not take the site — designated as a conservation area — the Property Services Agency be advised to offer it to their council, Essex County Council or Lee Valley Regional Park Authority.

If none of them can afford the land once the valuation has been made, the committee wants it offered on the open market as a single Ancient Monument property to be used mainly for purposes suggested in the brief.

Several main options have been laid down: Leisure possibilities — nature reserve; centre for studying industrial archaeology or transport, the countryside, or rural industry/crafts; environmental education centre; explosives/armaments museum; American-style amusement park with the theme as gunpowder; some indoor and outdoor sports; use of theatre

and library for their original purpose.

The development committee agreed that a combination of the options with the historical, archaeological and ecological features stressed might offer the "best solution."

An EFDC planning department spokesman said at present development was "very much in the air".

He said the planning brief had been prepared at this early stage so it would stand less chance of being ignored or examined only lightly by the Property Services Agency.

It was also suggested in the brief that if some buildings were rented for industry or residential use, the income could finance leisure activities.

Officers from the Nature Conservancy Council and county council advised EFDC the "ideal" use would be for leisure, based on the site's specific connections.

The NCC has already designated the northern woodland a site of special scientific interest as it has remained almost untouched for 200 years.

It is believed the Royal Gunpowder Factory first produced gunpowder for use by English soldiers at the Battle of Crecy in 1346.

Remaining artefacts include a unique two-level canal system for providing water power and transport; a rare water-powered gunpowder press; unusual steam gunpowder mills, and other numerous pre-Victorian buildings.

Although the site is already within the Lea Valley Regional Park area, some of the interesting structures have been put forward to be protected under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979, and town and Country Planning Act.

