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Veg firm set for official opening

JOHN ROBERTS

A VEGETABLE packing firm is set to celebrate the end of a six-year battle with councils and the Government to move to a new multi-million pound headquarters.

AB Produce's new 75,000 sq ft premises in Measham will be officially unveiled by George Cox, the director general of the Institute of Directors, at a ceremony on October 1.

The move to the new £6.5 million base will boost production and safeguard jobs. The day will mark the end of six years of waiting for bosses at AB Produce, who have been planning a move across the border from South Derbyshire into North West Leicestershire since 1997.

The new factory has cost £6.5 million and will allow AB to increase its capacity fourfold. However, the future has not been always been so clear for the vegetable preparers and packers.

In April 2000 the firm was given planning permission from South Derbyshire District Council for a housing development at its old factory site at Woolstitch Farm in Netherseal.

The scheme was going to finance the move to a new state of the art factory in Measham, which was given planning permission from North West Leicestershire. However, the Government's Planning Inspectorate called in the decision to allow homes to be built at Woolstitch Farm meaning the new factory plan had to be scrapped.

In 2001 the company received permission to use its Netherseal site for five executive style houses, meaning the move to Measham was back on the cards.

Speaking to the Mail last year Mr Andrew Bridgen, chairman and managing director of AB Produce, said interference from the Government and local planning authorities had cost the firm millions of pounds.

The new headquarters will be based on the Westminster Industrial Estate and will give AB produce an extra 50 per cent of production space.

Mr Bridgen said: "We could not expand any further at Woolstitch and we are all very excited about moving into our new purpose-built premises.

"It will not only provide us with the space we need to take on new customers and markets, but it will also improve the working conditions of our employees, improve efficiency and safeguard jobs.

"It means everyone benefits, not the least the people of Netherseal who have seen our business grow, the size of our vehicles increase and the number of journeys made through the village rise each year."

In 2000 Andrew Bridgen was named as UK Young Executive of the Year and, at the same time, the company's board of directors was runner up in the national Executive Team of the Year competition.

George Cox was formerly chairman and managing director of Unisys Europe. An aeronautical engineer by training, he has also served on the Inland Revenue management board, the London International Financial Futures Exchange, Bradford & Bingley Building Society and the supervisory boards of both Euronext and Shorts. He is a board member of Warwick Business School and visiting professor at the Royal Holloway Management School.

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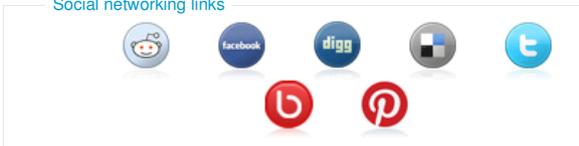
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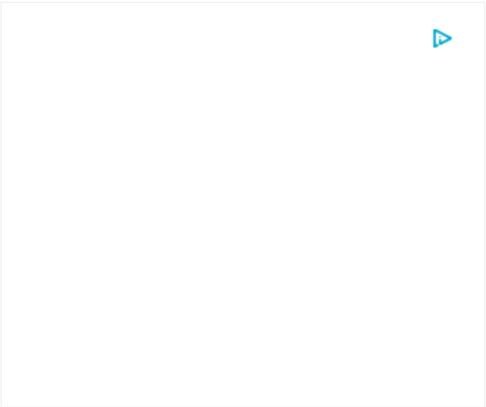
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