

WASC 2226

WAI 604

Article in

Daily Telegraph

4-3-2006

on sale of

Loughton house

of Dr. O. Silbertad

PROPERTY OF THE WEEK

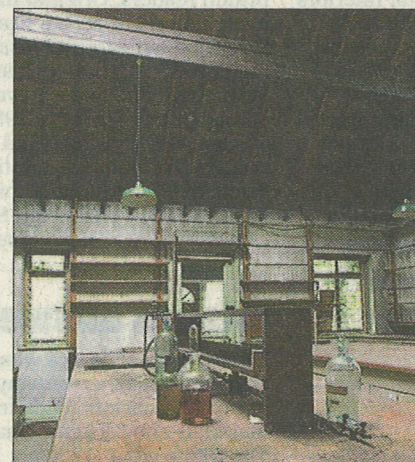
Essex

£1.5-2 million

Working from home has plenty of attractions. It is well suited to many lines of business – journalism, stock-market speculation and Welsh civil service bureaucracy. Industrial chemistry, though, would seem to offer rather a different challenge. Certainly it would take a special kind of home to accommodate an experimental chemist – particularly one with an interest in high explosives. Such a home is Dryads' Hall on the outskirts of Loughton in the Essex greenbelt.

The house was for many years home to the brilliant experimental chemist Dr Oswald Silberrad, the man who discovered how to detonate TNT successfully. In 1906 he resigned from his job as Superintendent of Research at Woolwich Arsenal to continue as an independent consultant, free from the vexatious bureaucracy of the War Office.

He remodelled his attractive, five-bedroom house along



fashionable Arts & Crafts lines, adding a small laboratory with adjacent library (also

Arts & Crafts), and attaching them both to the main building via a glazed loggia.

This west-facing loggia proved to be fantastic for growing delicate plants, while the laboratory was fantastic

for alarming experiments. There was a subterranean "blast room" in the basement, its semi-circular end-wall capable of absorbing substantial shocks. Dryads' Hall became a hive

of experimental activity. To achieve an ideal home/work balance, there was a separate entrance to the laboratory through the garden, allowing the doctor's assistants to come and go without

disturbing his family. Among the young chemists who came to Dryads' Hall was Barnes Wallis, who invented the bouncing bomb.

A sense of scientific inquiry still hangs about the beautifully fitted-out lab with its neat work-benches and half-moon basins. It mingles, though, with the faint odours of mouse wee and neglect.

Since Dr Silberrad's death in 1960 almost nothing has been done to the place. His son lived on in the house as a virtual recluse. The scientific journals stayed on the library shelves. The labels on the chemicals yellowed in the sun. The garden turned into a jungle; only a lone monkey puzzle rising from the tangle hints at the ordered graciousness of the past.

It is a tribute to the sound Arts & Crafts traditions of good materials and good craftsmanship that the house itself is still in such good condition. The fine oak staircase still dominates the half-timbered hall, the elegant panelling in the long drawing-room remains intact. There is much interesting detail: built-in cupboards, circular wrought-iron fire-surrounds, and even a copper bath. But, even so, to recover the house would be a major undertaking. The building, mercifully, is not listed.

It is, however, in a conservation area – and you can see why. Though barely a mile from Loughton Tube station, the house stands on the very edge of Epping Forest. It has a magnificent prospect facing westward, across a sea of trees that stretches to the horizon. For anyone with money and imagination it would have exciting possibilities.

Matthew Sturgis

● *Dryads Hall is on the market through Savills Chelmsford (01245 293233).*

