

## Blighted by an empty house - for 12 years:

### With 650,000 unoccupied homes, why isn't more being done?

By [Ross Clark](#)

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Empty and abandoned properties are a phenomenon more associated with inner-city Salford in Manchester than a well-heeled road in **Tunbridge Wells** in deepest Kent.

Nevertheless, the red-brick Victorian villa which lies to the front of Lis and Stuart Montgomery's house has been derelict for 12 years, blighting their own home in the process.

'We have been confronted by men stealing copper pipes, fireplaces and generally trespassing,' says Lis. 'The police have been called numerous times, and twice in the past fortnight alone.'

The story of the property, in Frant Road, is all too typical of how a building becomes abandoned, even in an area of high property prices, and how councils are reluctant to take action, in spite of being well armed with powers to order owners to improve homes, and to compulsorily purchase them if they fail to do so.

The abandoned property used to be the Acorn Hotel, which closed in 1998.

Subsequent owners applied for permission to turn it back into a house or to convert it into six two-bedroom flats.

These applications were turned down by **Tunbridge Wells Borough Council** on the grounds that it didn't want to see a reduction in tourist accommodation.

However, in 2005 the council's tourism chief gave up the fight and the council granted the then owner, a Russian property developer, planning permission for the building to be converted into a mixture of one and two-bedroom flats. The housing market was then buoyant, yet the scheme was never started. The property is still fenced off.

Chris Anderson, an architect who acted as agent for the planning application but is no longer involved, says several developers have looked at the project but have concluded they cannot make it pay. 'There are too many flats in the area,' he says.

**Remarkably, Tunbridge Wells has 200 properties that have been empty for more than two years, and 40 that have been derelict for more than five years.**

Any neighbourhood can be affected. Bishops Avenue in Highgate, North London, is one of the most expensive streets in the world but it has been plagued for years by empty and derelict properties, many the result of a disagreement between developers and Barnet Council.

Across England as a whole, estimates the Empty Homes Agency, there are 651,000 properties lying unoccupied - although that does include properties undergoing renovation and in the process of sale.

**Tunbridge Wells Council** is aware of the powers it has to deal with derelict properties. Its Empty Property Strategy lists the parliamentary Acts available to solve the problem.

The Law of Property Act 1925 contains powers to help councils to compulsorily purchase empty properties, as does the Housing Act 1985. In addition, the Housing Act 2004 gives councils the power to seize empty homes and make them subject to Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO), whereby they can be let to social tenants for up to five years.

Far from solving the housing shortage, the orders have proven to be a farce: in a written parliamentary answer earlier this month, the Government admitted that just 29 of the orders have been issued countrywide in the past four years, six of them in Norwich.

In 2006, the Government issued new planning guidance to local authorities - Planning Policy Statement 3 - which placed a duty on them to develop strategies for bringing empty homes back into use, using compulsory-purchase orders. Since then, there has been a flutter of purchases: Lewisham and Derby councils, for example, have each bought six properties.

But many councils have been shy to use the powers, pointing out that in a falling or stagnant property market they stand to lose large sums by compulsorily purchasing properties and then selling them back into the market. Neither, says **Jonathan MacDonald, of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council**, is an EDMO a viable option, 'given the extent of the works required to convert the property'.

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