VOID

Empty is Expensive

Steve Bell

Managing Director
The Commercial Property Experts

FREE EXTRACT

Chapter 1 & Chapter 2

thecommercialpropertyexperts.co.uk

CHAPTER ONE

It's Not Just the Market

There is a phrase that gets used more than any other in commercial property when a landlord asks why their unit is still empty. You will have heard it. You may have said it yourself.

It's just the market.

It is the most convenient explanation in the industry, and the least honest. Because here is the reality. In every market, in every economic climate, properties still let and sell. Sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. Sometimes for strong money, sometimes for less than the landlord hoped. But they move.

The question worth asking is not what the market is doing. It is why some properties get taken whilst others sit empty for months and years, gathering blight and quietly losing value.

The market is not a single thing that affects all properties equally. It is a collection of individual decisions made by individual occupiers and investors, each of whom is looking for something specific. When a property sits empty whilst others around it are being taken, the market is telling you something. Most landlords and their agents aren't listening.

There is always a reason why a property isn't being absorbed. Always. Sometimes it is price. Sometimes it is condition or presentation. Sometimes it is a mismatch between what the landlord is offering and what occupiers in that area actually need. Sometimes it is simply that nobody knows the property exists, or the way it has been presented makes it look like more trouble than it is worth. The job of a good agent is to find that reason, say it plainly, and fix it. The job of a good landlord is to listen.

What tends to happen instead is this. The property sits on the market for a few months with no serious interest. The agent, not wanting an awkward conversation about price or presentation or their own lack of activity, tells the landlord it is a difficult market. The landlord, who doesn't know enough to challenge that, accepts it. The board stays up. The details stay online. Nothing changes. And the property starts to age.

This is where the real damage begins.

How long before the market moves on?

Tenants and buyers who are actively looking for commercial property typically start their search three to six months before they begin viewing. By the time they walk through a door, they have seen everything available in their target area. They know the competition. They know what has been sitting there for six months and what came to the market last week. They know more about the supply in their particular niche than any agent, surveyor or accountant ever could, because they are living it every day.

When those people see a property that has been available for a long time with nothing changed, they draw a conclusion. If nobody else has taken it, there must be a reason. Maybe the landlord is difficult. Maybe there is something wrong with the building. Maybe the area doesn't work. They don't know exactly what the problem is, but they assume there is one. And they move on.

This is how blight sets in. Not dramatically, but gradually. The property that was slightly overpriced or slightly poorly presented six months ago becomes the property the market has quietly decided to ignore. The longer it sits, the harder it becomes to shift — not because the fundamentals have changed, but because perception has.

> *Commercial property ages in the shop window like bread, not wine. The longer it sits there, the less appealing it becomes. Unlike wine, it does not improve with time.*

But it is not impossible to rescue. That is the other thing worth saying plainly, because some landlords reach a point where they have all but given up. Defeatism sets in alongside the blight, and the two reinforce each other.

The market's tolerance for a property being available is shorter than most landlords realise. Douglas Parker, director of Montbart and an independent commercial asset manager, has observed this consistently across the assets he has worked on. Interest begins to wane significantly after around three to six months. By that point the stigma of the property that still has not been let has taken hold. Prospective occupiers assume something must be wrong — with the building, the terms, the landlord, or some combination of all three. They do not know exactly what the problem is. They assume there is one. And they move on.

Time is not neutral. The landlord who treats a property available for a year as simply one that has not yet found its tenant is misreading what is happening. Every month without a result is a month in which the pool of genuinely interested parties shrinks and the assumption that something is wrong deepens. The property is not waiting. It is ageing.

The phases of perception

Douglas Parker of Montbart describes this shift with a precision worth pausing on. In the first month or two of a vacancy, passers-by are curious. They notice the empty unit, wonder what is coming, perhaps glance at the board. That curiosity is not damaging. It is neutral. But by months four to six, something has changed.

The curiosity has become what Doug calls grim observance. People are no longer wondering what is coming. They are asking themselves why it still has not been taken. And that question, asked often enough, quietly settles into an assumption. There must be something wrong with it.

The same dynamic applies whether a property is being offered to let or for sale. A freehold that has been on the market for six months carries the same stigma as a vacant unit with a to let board. Buyers, like tenants, watch the market. They notice what has been available for a long time. They draw the same conclusions. And they move on in the same way.

The vacancy that feels static from the landlord's side of the relationship is moving through phases on the public's side — from curiosity to suspicion to dismissal. By the time dismissal sets in, the agent's job has become three or four times harder than it was at the start. Not because the property has changed. Because perception has.

The landlord who can’t see it

One of the most consistent observations in this book, repeated by almost everyone I spoke to, is how poorly most landlords understand what is happening with their vacant property at any given moment.

They know the property is empty. They know it has been empty for a while. They receive the occasional update from their agent — usually vague, usually framed around market conditions — and they accept it, because they don't have the information to push back. They don't know how many times the property has been viewed. They don't know what feedback those viewings generated. They don't know how their property is performing on Rightmove compared to similar properties in the same area. They don't know whether their agent has made any proactive calls in the last month, or whether the entire marketing strategy consists of a portal listing and a board.

They are operating in an information vacuum. And into that vacuum, justifications flow freely.

The asking rent is right. The market is difficult. There are no active requirements in the area. The economy is uncertain. The agent is doing everything that can be done.

Most of the time, none of this is true. But the landlord has no way of knowing that, because the agent has no incentive to tell them. And so the void extends, month after month, while the story of why it is happening becomes more elaborate and the actual reason — poor agency, or an unrealistic asking price, or a presentation problem that nobody has been honest about — goes unaddressed.

This is not a small problem. It is systemic. And it starts from the moment the instruction is taken.

What the data shows

According to CoStar data from Q1 2026, the retail vacancy rate across the United Kingdom stands at 2.9 percent — nearly double its pre-pandemic level of 1.7 percent and still close to its recent peak of 3.0 percent reached in late 2024. The picture varies sharply by location: Aberdeen's retail vacancy rate sits at 6.9 percent while Cambridge's is 1.2 percent.

Office vacancy nationally has reached 9.1 percent, up from 4.8 percent before the pandemic, with major cities including London at 11.2 percent, Manchester at 10.7 percent and Bristol at 10.3 percent all carrying significant levels of empty office stock.

Industrial vacancy, by contrast, has risen from historic lows driven by e-commerce demand but now sits at 5.7 percent nationally as the post-pandemic supply correction continues.

Across all three sectors, millions of square feet of commercial property is sitting empty, costing its owners money every single month and contributing nothing to the communities around it. The market is not equally difficult everywhere. It is not equally difficult for every property type. And it is not equally difficult for every landlord. The ones who understand this are the ones who act on it.

CHAPTER TWO

The Agent Problem

Let's be honest about something that most people in this industry won't say in public. A significant number of commercial agents are part of the reason commercial property stays empty. Not all of them. But enough that it is worth saying plainly, because landlords deserve to understand what poor agency actually looks like before they hand over an instruction and wait for results that never come.

I have worked in this industry for over two decades. I have worked in firms where poor agency was not the exception but the norm, where the culture was built around avoiding difficult conversations rather than having them, and where the measure of success was how many boards were up rather than how many deals were done. I know what bad agency looks like from the inside. I have watched it grind good people down. And I know how much it costs the landlords on the other end of it.

How most commercial firms actually work

In a typical firm that offers both residential and commercial property services, the commercial department tends to occupy a floor or a wing somewhere removed from the main office. Away from the activity, the phones ringing, the energy of a busy residential team. The admin staff sit in an open area. The chartered surveyors have offices with doors, and the doors stay shut.

When calls come in, the surveyors don't pick them up. They are too senior for that. If a landlord calls asking for the person handling their property, the call gets put through, and nine times out of ten the response from behind the closed door is the same: *Can you tell them I'm busy please.*

This is not an exaggeration. I spent a significant part of my early career in firms like this, and I can tell you that the landlord waiting for a call back about their vacant property was rarely at the top of anyone's priority list. Because in a firm where the fee earners are chartered surveyors first and agents second, there is always something more urgent to deal with. Something that pays today rather than in six months' time, if it pays at all.

This is the part that most landlords don't understand about commercial agency, and it explains more about the quality of service they receive than anything else.

The most thankless fee structure in professional services

Commercial agency operates on a no sale, no fee basis. The agent earns nothing until the transaction completes. Not when they take on the instruction. Not when they find a tenant or buyer. Not when heads of terms are agreed. Only when contracts are exchanged and the deal is legally binding.

Think about what that means in practice. The agent invests time, effort and money from the moment they take on an instruction. Portal listings, CRM systems, phone systems, fuel costs for viewings, photography, marketing. All of it carries on regardless of the outcome. None of it gets recovered unless the deal completes.

And completion can take a very long time. Finding the right tenant or buyer might take months. Then the legal process begins, and with cheaper solicitors involved, that process can take another four to eight months. At any point during that entire period, either the owner or the incoming occupier can change their mind. The deal falls apart. The agent receives nothing. The costs carry on.

Compare that to the other professionals involved in the same transaction. The solicitor gets paid for their time regardless of whether the deal completes. The surveyor or valuer gets paid for producing their report. The agent gets nothing unless everyone else does their job properly and neither party gets cold feet.

> *In a firm where the fee earners have a choice between working on a transaction that might pay in six months or might never pay at all, and completing a valuation report that generates a fee this week, the choice is not a difficult one. The valuation report wins. Every time.*

This is not laziness. It is rational behaviour given the structure of the business. But the landlord with a vacant property waiting for a call back doesn't see the economics. They see silence.

Understanding this dynamic doesn't excuse poor agency. But it explains it. And once you understand it, you can see clearly what to look for when appointing an agent — and what to demand from the one you already have.

What listing looks like from the outside

Most commercial agents list property. That is the core of what they do. The instruction comes in, the details go on Rightmove and CoStar, the board goes up, and then the agent waits for enquiries. When enquiries come in, viewings are arranged. When viewings happen, the agent attends. When the prospective tenant or buyer moves on, the agent moves on too. And the cycle repeats.

This is what listing looks like. It is passive. It is reactive. And it is what the overwhelming majority of commercial landlords in this country are getting, whether they know it or not.

Listing is not marketing. Marketing is the active identification of people who might want your property, followed by direct outreach to them, followed by a structured process that creates momentum, competition and urgency. Listing waits for the right buyer or tenant to find the property. Marketing goes and finds them.

The distinction matters enormously. A property that is listed sits on a portal alongside every other property in the area. A property that is properly marketed is being actively brought to the attention of specific businesses or investors who have been identified as likely fits. One approach produces a phone that occasionally rings. The other produces a conversation with someone who didn't know they were looking until they found out your property existed.

The feedback problem

Viewing feedback is one of the most useful things a landlord can receive — and one of the most consistently mishandled parts of the agency relationship.

The standard process is this. A viewing happens. The agent follows up with the prospective tenant or buyer. The prospective tenant or buyer says something vague. The agent reports back to the landlord with something equally vague. The landlord accepts it, because there is nothing to push back against. Nothing changes. And the next viewing produces the same outcome.

Structured feedback is different. It asks specific questions. It captures actual objections, not impressions. It tracks patterns across multiple viewings. If three consecutive viewers mention the same issue — the condition of the car park, the asking rent, the absence of three-phase power — that is a signal worth acting on. The agent who collects this information, synthesises it, and brings a clear recommendation to the landlord is doing their job. The agent who summarises a conversation and moves on is not.

Most commercial landlords receive the second kind. They have no idea they are entitled to the first.

How to appoint the right agent

If you are about to appoint a commercial agent, or if you are reviewing the performance of one you already have, there are a small number of questions that will tell you more than any amount of marketing material or claims about local market knowledge.

Ask them how many commercial lettings and sales they completed in your area in the last twelve months. Not instructions taken. Completions. The answer will be revealing. Some agents will be able to give you the number immediately. Others will become vague. The ones who become vague are the ones whose metric for success is instructions taken rather than deals done.

Ask them to show you the Rightmove data from a comparable property they have recently let. Not their brochure. The actual Rightmove analytics showing views, saves and enquiries over time. If they cannot produce this, they are not monitoring how their properties are performing, and they are not in a position to tell you what needs to change on yours.

Ask them what they will do in the first thirty days if there are no enquiries. A good agent will have a specific answer. A poor one will tell you it's early days.

And ask them to name the three most active businesses currently looking for space in your area. Not a general sense of demand. Three actual businesses, in your sector, in your size range, who are actively seeking premises right now. If the agent knows their market — and by knows I mean truly knows, not knows in a general sense — they will be able to answer this question. If they can't, they don't.

You will learn more about how that agent operates from fifteen minutes of that exercise than from any number of conversations about their marketing strategy.

And one final thing. Do they give out a mobile number, or only the office number? It seems like a small detail. It isn't. An agent who only gives out the office number is an agent whose calls get screened. Sooner or later, one of those screened calls will be the tenant who wanted your property.

The right agent exists. They are out there, working hard, building their reputation one instruction at a time, and doing it because they genuinely believe they can get a better result than the person who had the property before them. Finding that person, rather than defaulting to the firm everyone has always used, is one of the most valuable decisions a commercial landlord can make.

Continue reading

VOID is available in full on Amazon.

Chapters 3 to 11 cover the owner problem, the policy problem, the high street, hidden costs, what good agency looks like in practice, the legal side, what to do when things go wrong, and the questions every commercial landlord should be sitting with honestly.

The vacancy drag calculator is live at **thecommercialpropertyexperts.co.uk/let** — use it to find out exactly what your empty property is costing you each month.

Steve Bell | Managing Director | The Commercial Property Experts

steve@thecommercialpropertyexperts.co.uk | thecommercialpropertyexperts.co.uk