

## A tower with a view

In 1738 Samuel and Nathaniel Buck came to the Medway Towns to further their project of drawing and printing the prospects of the principal towns of Great Britain. For all their drawings they chose a spot where they could obtain a view which would cover as much of the town as possible, so naturally, for a picture of Chatham, with its Royal Dockyard and Rochester, they climbed the hill to Frindsbury and seeking a higher elevation, climbed the church tower. Their double length picture, which is over five feet long, is considered to be amongst the finest they produced, for not only are many of the buildings still in existence but in the foreground is Quarry House with the promenaders on the slopes down to the river and the many naval ships on the Medway both fully rigged and ‘in ordinary’ waiting for the inevitable next war.

Their use of the tower as a vantage point was confirmed in early 1994 when Ralph Hyde, Keeper of Maps and Prints at the Guildhall Library in the City of London, climbed the tower with me. We laid a copy of the print along the parapet and compared the views. The distant curves of the river towards Sheerness and also up river to Burham matched exactly the print, as did the folds of the hills as they merged together.



**A detail of Buck’s ‘North West Prospect of the City of Rochester’. Note the two cranes on the Town Quay (right) and the out-of-scale castle. The key notes item 8 as ‘ye Blew Bell, half way to Maidstone’.**

**Photo Courtesy of R.L. Ratcliffe**

Mr Hyde describes his visit to the Towns in the first chapter of his new book called ‘Prospects of Great Britain’ wherein he produces the eighty three plates that the Bucks drew for this series.

“In March 1994 I visited Rochester and Chatham on the Medway armed with

copies of Bucks views of those towns pasted together to form one, as the publisher intended. To my mind, these two engravings constituted one of the most significant of Buck's Town Prospects. After checking detail with individual buildings - the Guildhall, castle, cathedral, the Commissioners House, the Long Store and the Ropery I set out to track down the brothers viewpoint. I climbed the hill to Frindsbury and circled the Norman church of All Saints near the edge of the cliff, testing the actual view with Bucks' from various likely points. None of them coincided. I met the All Saints Vicar who recommended me to the churchwarden who appeared with an extremely large key. We climbed the tower together, past the bellropes still regularly pulled on Sundays by dedicated enthusiasts, and the complex mechanism of the church clock which obligingly struck for us. Squeezing through a tiny door onto the exterior of the tower, its oak tiled steeple behind us, we were struck by a great gust of wind. I struggled to unfold my very long photocopy. It was a moment of consternation turning to triumph and sheer magic. There around us was the view, in outline, corresponding uncannily with the view the Bucks had recorded two hundred and fifty five years earlier. It was as if I had become one of the Bucks, clad in campaign wig and dress coat and with my pencils and sketchboard, sheets of paper being tugged at by the wind. Momentarily Buck had possessed me."

This incident obviously made a great impression on the author for not only did he start the book with it but I was invited to the offices of Marlborough Rare Books in New Bond Street for the launch and a rewarding experience it was. Marlborough supplied most of the original prints to copy for the book, a complete set of these original prospects costs over £30,000. However, this excellent book published by Pavilion Books Limited is on sale in all quality bookshops for the lesser sum of £50: and well worth the outlay.

**Derek Barnard, February 1995.**