



In 1969, following the discovery of extensive dry rot at Bank Street Unitarian Church, Bury (1852), a decision was taken to sell the building and its neighbouring Sunday school to a developer. In exchange for the sale of the land, a new smaller church was to be erected by the developer on the Sunday school's former car park.

Meanwhile, the government's elaborately named Department of Employment and Productivity was busy identifying potential sites for new local authority offices, the site of the old church being one. Consequently, Bury Unitarian Church (1974) and the neighbouring office block, Craig House, were erected simultaneously – both to the designs of architect James T Ratcliffe. Together, they form a pleasingly uniform backdrop to the well-maintained gardens off Silver Street; gardens that were substantially enlarged when the disused graveyard associated with the old church was leased to the local authority.

Having begun his practice in 1965, Ratcliffe's early experience working in the commercial sector taught him an appreciation of quality materials, ease of maintenance, and building longevity: clients did not take kindly to having their money wasted, after all. This purely pragmatic approach was reflected in the subsequent designs for Bury Unitarian Church – a well detailed, functional, yet flexible, building.

Square on plan, the building is faced externally with GH Downing 'Heather Rustic' engineering bricks, with special radial stretchers used at the corner extremities. Facing out onto Silver Street, vertical slot windows, framed in aluminium and with white mosaic panels at the head, are sufficiently recessed to obscure views into the main worship space, yet offer those inside intermittent views of the gardens.

Beyond the heavy teak entrance doors, two storeys of accommodation including a lounge area, the vestries, and an assembly hall

– brilliantly lit from above by a series of rooflights – wrap around two sides of the double-height main worship space. It is from the hall that one can access, via ladder, a crawl space incorporated by Ratcliffe to make tasks such as changing light bulbs simple – a cause championed by the likes of George Pace, but often overlooked in many modern churches.

Inside the main worship space, little has been altered since the church opened in March 1974. The terrazzo flooring of the entrance lobby gives way to durable teak parquet, the walls are finished in an acoustic render, and the ceiling is underdrawn with timber strips. The altar furniture (excluding the font which is actually a salad bowl mounted onto a pedestal) is bespoke, and was designed by Ratcliffe himself. The interlocking chairs, by the furniture designer Clive Bacon, seat around 140 persons.

Above the altar, in place of the usual cross, is the 12ft high sculptural work *People Praising* by Elizabeth Mulchinock: the Unitarian's rejection of the Holy Trinity means that, whilst respecting the teachings of Jesus, they do not worship him. Despite this, a vertical strip light mounted on the front tower of the church sheds horizontal light to form a purple cross on the face of the brickwork when illuminated.

Although the solid massing of Bury Unitarian Church is reminiscent of Louis Khan's First Unitarian Church, Rochester (1959), Ratcliffe (Terry to those who know him, never James) insists that he did not follow any precedents for his design. Similarities with Essex Unitarian Church, Kensington (1977) by Morgan & Branch suggest Ratcliffe may have had imitators of his own, however.