BURY UNITARIAN CHURCH

A history of the present building

2019 marks the 300th anniversary of Unitarian buildings in Bury. The present church is the fourth on the same site and completes a succession of designs from vernacular to Classical, then Gothic, and now the modern building of today. The church occupies an important position in the town centre, opposite the library and close to Bank Street and Silver Street, a key part of Bury's town centre conservation area.

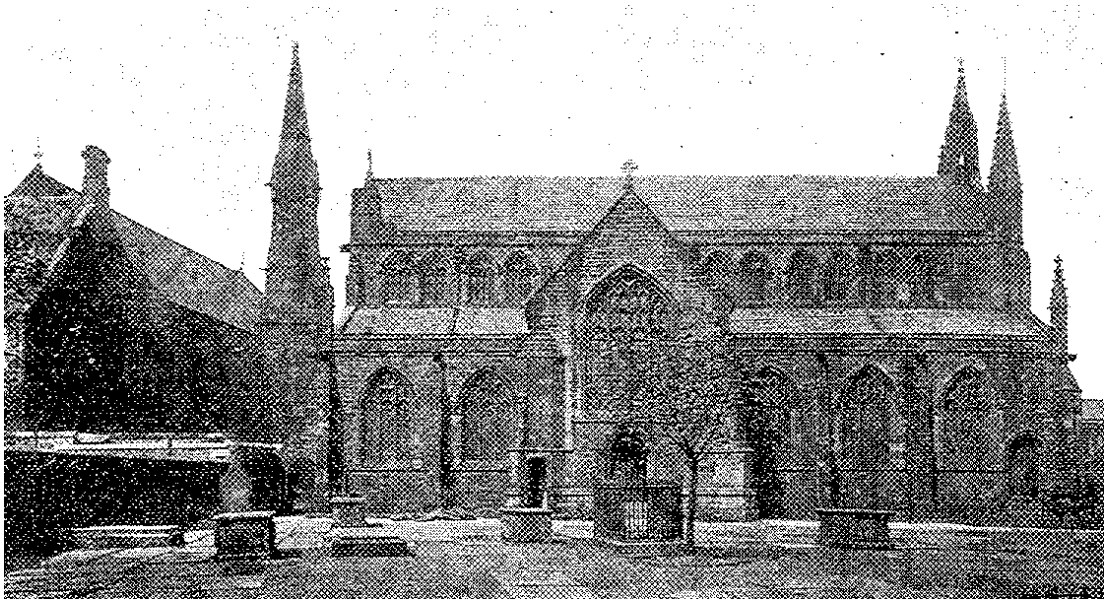
The first building on the site fronted Silver Street and was opened in 1719. It was called the "little yellow chapel", because the inside walls were washed in buff or light yellow.



The second building was erected where the The Exchange is now located. It was opened in 1837 at a cost of £4000, with seats for 800 people. It was a classical design, typical of the period, with a portico of four columns. However, in the 1840s it became structurally unsound because of foundation problems caused either by faulty construction or by the excavations for the adjoining railway. It was therefore demolished.



The third building dated from 1852. It was a large Perpendicular Gothic building designed by Bowman and Crowther of Manchester. By the 1960s it was suffering from both dry and wet rot.



The church made a decision to demolish the building and erect a new church on part of the site (the former car park) and to sell some of the other land to a developer. Part of the site which had been sold would accommodate Craig House (now The Exchange), then the Planning and Architecture department of the the newly-formed Bury Metropolitan borough council in 1974. Craig House was built at the same time as the church and was designed by James T. (Terry) Ratcliffe, the architect of the new church. The adjoining church graveyard became an open garden for public use, maintained by the local authority and leased from the church.

The decision to replace the 1852 building coincided with three Unitarian congregations (Bury, Heywood and Chesham) coming together. Terry Ratcliffe, who was closely linked with the church, produced a design after discussions with the three groups which was enthusiastically accepted by the church trustees. The original drawings were prepared in 1969 and the budget was £85,000. There seems to have been little departure from the original design. The church was formally opened on 21 March 1974. Trenthams of Stoke were the contractors.

There are no specific liturgical requirements for a Unitarian church and the local church did not need to obtain approval from a central office. Care was take to avoid traditional Christian symbols: the “tower” is a focal point of the building but its main function is to provide top-lighting for the worship space. The footprint of the building was determined by the land retained by the church (the former car park), meaning that it would not front directly on to Silver Street. The area between the church and the street was retained as a garden. The entrance was off Back St Mary’s Place to allow direct vehicular access.



The original sketch of the building suggests an open space with the church prominent in the background. However, the now mature trees on the site do not allow such a view of the building and the church is quite hidden, especially in summer. An illuminated purple sign was added to address this issue. The Exchange and the church form a pleasing enclosure to the war memorial and gardens which includes the recently erected statue of Victoria Wood.



Painting by Peter Davey, 1991

A key feature of the design is the curved bricks (radial stretchers) at the corners. The buttressed windows have sloping sill profiles to deter loitering. There is an open platform on the first floor facing Manchester Road, usually hidden by the trees and not used. The main door was on the “rear” of the building, away from Manchester Road, to allow direct vehicular access.

The external materials were chosen for quality and longevity and so that they could be cleaned rather than repainted. The bricks are durable Heather Rustic engineering bricks produced by G H Downing. There are panels of white mosaic tiles at higher levels.



On entering the main door, there is a direct view to the reading desk, with plain coloured glass on either side of it. The doors are of teak; beech and ash are used for the furnishings.

Teak is also used for the parquet flooring and handrails. The windows facing Bank Street allow views out but restrict views into the building. The worship space is lit by natural light from the glazing in the “tower”, primarily over the reading desk.

The worship space is 11.5m square. It is a simple cuboid with white Tyrolean rendered internal walls which have never needed to be repainted, The simplicity of the space and decoration is enhanced by a lack of clutter.

The main feature on the east wall is a sculpture “People Praising” by Elizabeth Mulchinock. Terry Ratcliffe had noted her work at Altrincham YMCA. Her original design of the Trinity was considered too much of a traditional Christian symbol and was superseded by the the current design. It is 12 feet high and represents the family of the church.

One of the finest aspects of the church is the fittings. The pulpit, reading desk and font were designed by Terry Ratcliffe. The pulpit and reading desk are of prime beech; the font has a beechwood base, stainless steel bows and a metal dish to contain the water. The fittings use simple shapes and high quality materials in keeping with the building. Even the hymn board and speakers fit perfectly.

The church seats 140 people. The chairs, designed by Clive Bacon, are interlocking, an idea inspired by those in Coventry cathedral. They feature “pockets” for hymn books. A new organ was designed specifically for the church by Charles Smethurst, one of the first to be accessible remotely.



The topping out ceremony. Terry Ratcliffe is fourth from the left

The church is rightly proud of its building. It functions well and the church appreciates the flexible spaces and the early recognition of the necessary inclusion of community facilities within the church. There is a large hall upstairs with the original sliding partitions (still operational) to provide smaller spaces as required. The building has good acoustics. Care was taken in the design taken over such matters as the replacement of light bulbs through the provision of a crawl spaces. The only issues have been with the roof, which had a projected life of 20 years and was replaced in about 2011. A lift was added, also by Terry Ratcliffe's RGP Architects, in 2018.



Fittings

Left: The reading desk and font

Below: detail of chair



The Ratcliffe Groves Partnership is still active in Bury and throughout the country with several other offices. They specialise in commercial developments of all types but also do master plans and conservation work and many other projects. The practice has, however, done few churches. Bury Unitarian Church is still maintained by the practice.

The church was chosen to represent Bury in the publication Sacred Suburbs, (The Modernist Society, 2007). They suggest that the Essex Unitarian church in Kensington (1977) may have been influenced by Terry Ratcliffe's design for Bury.



Acknowledgments
Thanks to Terry Ratcliffe, Anne and Roger Mills, Betty Kenyon and Rev. Kate McKenna.

References
Scared suburbs, Modernist Society, 2007
Bury Unitarian church web site

David French, September 2019
david@davidfrench.org.uk