



# The squint

In the first of our series taking a peep at architectural oddities, **Rachel Morley** sees what's what on the other side of the squint...

Squints are fairly common in England. In fact, for some reason, they are more common in England than in Europe. Squints were most popular during the Middle Ages, those years of prolific church building.

Deep oblique openings, usually through chancel or transept walls, squints offered a sideways glimpse of the elevation of the Eucharist during Catholic mass. External squints allowed society's sickly and undesirable to see the service without upsetting the congregation. Historically it was believed that this view was saved for those ravaged with leprosy, but this is a common misunderstanding. In rural areas this may certainly have been the case, but the city faithful were not so compassionate; such limping contagion would never have been

allowed past the town walls.

Internal squints allowed priests in side chapels to co-ordinate their dedicated service with that at the High Altar or give attendants the cue to tinkle the sanctus bell. They also allowed nuns, anchorites and other solitary devout to attend mass without compromising their isolation. According to the records, the mischievous Benedictine nuns at St Helen's, Bishopsgate, London, were too fond of kissing secular persons. To prevent sins falling from their lips, a viewing channel was cut from their convent through to the adjacent church.

Most squints in external walls have now been infilled, creating cosy nesting spaces for pigeons or handy storage niches, depending on which way you look at it. ▲

## Above

A view from the chantry chapel, Holy Trinity, Goodramgate, York (Graham White/CCT)