

**Bodies: 16th Century English Support Garments
What They are Made From, and When Things Changed
Timeline of Support Materials
Class Handout for GWW By Lady Joan Silvertoppe
Nordwache, Kingdom of Caid, A.S. XLVII**

Definitions:

- Bay: Lightweight wool cloth of loose, plain weave. Warp is worsted wool, weft is woolen wool. May be used for warmth, but at least one entry mentions it being used to stiffen a pair of bodies.
- Bent: A reed used for stiffening garments in various locations (sleeves, skirts and possibly bodies). A member of the agrostis family of grasses, possibly *calamagrostis canadensis*.
- Bodies: Usually noted as a “Pair of Bodies”. The inner garment or upper portion of a woman's dress, usually close fitting, lined or interlined in various materials. What we would describe as a bodice today.
- Buckram: Not like modern millinery buckram. Weighty, fairly coarse linen fabric. Can be glued for paste buckram.
- Busk: a long and usually narrow item that is inserted into a garment to help keep the center front stiffened.
- Canvas: Made of hemp and plain woven, was inexpensive and usually listed as an interlining or for garment cases.
- Cotton: a type of wool that is lightweight, flexible, and given a loose fluffy nap.
- Fustian: a fabric made with a linen warp and a cotton fiber weft. Jean fustian is a fustian from Genoa.
- Kersey: a 2:2 twill weave wool fabric
- Sack cloth: a type of hemp canvas.

Information From the Warrants

Note that taffeta or sarcenet (both silks) are frequently noted for linings (among furs and other fabrics), and are being ignored as a possible support fabric as these are more often decorative, help garments to ease on and off the body, and/or are too lightweight to be supportive.

Henry VII (1485-1509 – warrants researched by Caroline Johnson, 2011)

- Gowns (the outermost dress): They were lined in black cotton or black buckram. “An ell of cheap linen was sometimes specified to 'line the upperbodies' of a gown, or 'to line the aforesaid gown'.” This is most likely an interlining, and was not always recorded. (pg 18)
- Kirtles (dress worn under gowns): “In more than half the entries for kirtles during Henry VII's reign, linen for lining the upperbodies was also provided, usually half an ell (five eighths of a yard). On one occasion, an ell of linen was specified to line 'the doublet' of a kirtle.” Most of the garments were lined with other fabrics, so these were interlinings. “The linen issued was cheap, so probably fairly coarse and heavy; in some instances enough was issued to provide a double layer of interlining. There is no evidence in these documents of any rigid stiffening, such as whalebone, wood or bents (bundles of dried stems), being provided for the upper bodies of kirtles, or indeed for any other of the garments. Nor is there any record of separate bodies similar to the stays or corsets of later periods being made.” (all page 19)
- Petticoat (skirt with attached bodies of some sort): Interlining not mentioned. (see comment from Ninya Mikhaila at the end of the article, pg 6.)

Henry VIII (1509-1520 – warrants researched by Caroline Johnson, 2011)

- Gowns during this time – no changes to linings or interlinings from Henry VII noted by Johnson
- Kirtles during this time – still cheap wool cotton provided (pg 21). No mention of interlining fabrics by Johnson, but probably continued same practice as during Henry VII, with use of linen interlinings.
- Petticoat: Interlining not mentioned. (see comment from Ninya Mikhaila at the end of the article.)

For both Henrician reigns, a linen only interlining could support the bosom in a manner similar to the Gothic Fitted Dress (GFD). While Robin Netherton did not find visual evidence for GFDs after 1450, the curved front form of a GFD can support the bosom in a manner that minimizes the obvious bust with the use of linen alone, which is more of the Tudor ideal. This is reflected in the pattern for the early gown in Johnson's book, although not in the kirtle pattern. A

straight front GFD style would be needed for back lacing kirtles, unless a center front seam is created.

Mary Tudor (27th of April, 1554 – warrant listed by Alison J. Carter, 1984.)

- “[3] Item for making of cone peire of boddyes of crymsen Satten” (pg. 23).

This is the first mention of a separate pair of bodies that I know of. Unfortunately, Carter declined to list non-silk linings for any of the items listed, so I do not know what was used to make this cone pair of bodies, which appears to be singular in these warrants. Because of the lack of interlining fabrics, the rest of the warrants Carter listed is of limited value for my purposes.

Mary Tudor (1557-1558 – warrants listed by Hillary Doda, 2011)

- Gowns usually have fustian linings. One gown has a taffeta and buckram lining, along with fustian lining the bodies.
- Kirtles are usually lined in taffeta silk, with a few in wool cotton or linen. Kirtle sleeves are usually noted as lined in fustian and canvas.
- Petticoats are sometimes lined with linen. Some are lined in kersey.
- Farthingales had some form of bodies, and the bodies are lined in linen or canvas.

“23. ITEM for making of a varthyngall of Crymsin Satten lyned with Crimsen Taffata, garded with Crimsen velvett the garde stitched with crimsen silke and the ropes covered over with rede kersey and bodies lyned with the lynen clothe all of our greate Guarderobe” (pg. 164).

It is possible that farthingales during Mary Tudor's reign, which are clearly noted with upper bodies lined in linen, may have been supportive, although kirtles and petticoats were also lined in linen.

Elizabeth Tudor (1568-1588 – warrants from Drea Leed, 2011)

Fashions for Queen Elizabeth, and the few women for whom she ordered garments for, changed during the 20 years listed in these warrants. This section will have its own timeline, roughly grouped to similar entries, and will focus only on the fitted garments of petticoat, kirtle, gown (not loose gowns) and doublet. Linings (and interlinings) do not always show up in records, but are noted if they show up at all during a given year. Leather garments are being ignored.

1568:

- Gown: fustian, kersey
- Kirtle: kersey
- Petticoat: bay

1569

- Gown: canvas, buckram, or fustian (early in vents only, later full bodies)
- Kirtle: fustian
- Petticoats: bay, fustian

1570-74

- Gown: in fustian, canvas, sack cloth, bay, buckram starting in 1572. Many gowns are lined only in silks, or do not mention linings.
- Kirtle: in fustian (limited to belly in 1571), canvas, bay. Buckram starting in 1572. Most kirtles are simply lined in silks.
- Petticoat: in fustian in 1571. Most have no lining or interlining fabric mentioned.
- Pairs of bodies by themselves are mentioned starting in 1571, but do not mention any linings other than silk.

1575-79

- Gowns: canvas, Canvas & fustian
- Doublet: in canvas, jean fustian in 1576.
- Kirtle: Rarely in canvas from 77-78. But from 1575-76, and from 1579-82 no interlining fabrics are mentioned.
- Petticoat: no interlining fabric mentioned until 1578. Fustian sometimes listed in 1578-79
- Pairs of bodies (possible stand alone garments): canvas, bay, jean fustian “*For making of two paire of jeane fustian bodies*” (1576: September 26th, ER 18. fol 104 v) – only record for jean fustian pairs of bodies in the listed warrants, but other stand alone pairs of bodies of various fabrics and interlinings continue.
- 1576: “*Item for makeinge of foure Stomachers of paste bourde covrid with taphata of our gr guar*” (April 14th, ER 18, fol 94 v). Only entry for this type of paste board stomacher during the entire 20 years of warrants. Paste board was ordered from time to time, but use for those were usually in collars, cuffs, and non-clothing items.

- “Item to the said Thomas Grene (carpenter) for sixe Buskes of our great guarderobe.” (1579, April 12th, ER 19, fol 115 v). First mention of busks in the warrants. These are most likely made from wood.

1580-81

- Gown: canvas & fustian, canvas, fustian, bay,
- Doublet: canvas (possibly fustian and bay - unclear)
- Kirtle: From 1579-1582 no interlining fabrics are mentioned.
- Petticoat: no interlining fabrics mentioned.
- Pairs of bodies: bay, canvas,
- 6 large busks are ordered in 1581 from a merchant. Unknown composition.

1582-84

- Busk & cases: “Item to Robert Siphthorpe for makeinge ... nyneteene payer of buskes of whales bone: “(1583: April 20th, ER 25, fol 185 v). Robert Siphthorpe was the Queen's farthingale maker. “Item for makeinge of two Dossen payer of cases for buskes of vellat and two Dossen payer of taphata of our great guarderobe” (1583: September 26th, ER 25, fol 189 r).
- Gown: canvas, fustian, bay, sack cloth (1582), buckram, possible bents (see below). Multiple interlinings used.
- Doublet: canvas, fustian, bay
- Kirtle: From 1579-1582 no interlining fabrics are mentioned. 1582-84 some canvas stiffened with buckram
- Petticoat: fustian
- Pairs of bodies: canvas, buckram, possibly fustian, bay, cotton, possible bents (see below).

Bents

Bents (a reed grass) prior to 1582 were usually used in farthingales, rolls for gown skirts, or pair of rolls for gown sleeves. Sometimes bent reeds are used along with whale bone. In 1582 it becomes unclear where the bents are located, but most bents are listed in entries for gowns, except for the first item which is for a pair of bodies with sleeves (which according to Arnold sleeved pairs of bodies may actually belong to gowns (pg 146)).

*“Item for alteringe of a peire of bodies and enlarginge the slevis with a partelett of prented cloth of golde coverid with a Shadowe of blak nettwerke the slevis drawn oute with white nettwerke **the bodies lyned with sackcloth** and buckeram aboute the skyrtes **with bentes covrid with fustian** with prented cloth of silver to performe it of our greate Guarderobe”* (1582: April 6th, ER 24, fol 175 r). (emphasis mine).

Arnold uses this as an argument for bents in the bodies as a stiffener, “This form of stiffening continued in use until the eighteenth century, as surviving garments show” (pg. 147).

I disagree with Arnold's statement that bents were used in bodies as a stiffener, similar to later stays. It seems bents in the warrant accounts clearly return to being a part of gown sleeves or skirt rolls by 1584 and no longer appear in the (mostly gown) bodies by themselves after the confusing accounts in 1582-84. It may be a clerical error not listing “roll of”, or a language shift with the word 'bents'.

The word 'bents' in a later entry that same year (1582) seem to indicate any item that is round or bent, as well as the reed grass. “Item to Roberte Siphthorpe for makeinge of a verthingale of blak silke fullocke the rounde bottom bent coverid with blak vellat with bent and whales bone:...” (1582: September 28th, ER 24, fol 179 v.). By 1584 the entries generally list bents along with gown sleeves. Entries after 1584 in some way indicate bents were used for sleeves or skirts (as they were used prior to 1582), like this entry: “Item for making of fower payer of slevis of white fustian bented with whales bone of our greate Guarderobe” (1585: September 17th, ER 27, fol 207 v). and this entry: “Item to Roberte Siphthorpe (entries for making farthingales)... and for iiiic lxxii yerds iii quarter of whales bone and bent Delyverid to William Jones our Taylor to laye in our slevis and bentes all of our greate guarderobe” (1587: November 7th, ER 29, fol 223 v).

I do think that busks, once they started using them, continued in use until the end of her reign and beyond. I did not find any surviving busks from the 16th century, with the earliest being at the Victoria & Albert Museum noted as French ca.1600-1630 (Museum #5608-1859 and #5609-1859). The question is, which garment were they attached to during this time period?

1585-88

- Busks: “Item for making of xii Buskes of whales bone and wyer coverid with sarceonett quilted of our gr guar. (1586: September 28th, ER 28, fol 213 r).”
- Gown: canvas, bay, buckram, bents mentioned with sleeves mostly as rolls.

- Doublet: canvas, bay,
- Kirtle: Only mentioned when altering a kirtle, possibly with canvas & bay to stiffen them. Fewer kirtles mentioned.
- Petticoat: fustian
- Pairs of bodies: fustian, canvas, buckram, bay.

1590 to 1603, end of Elizabeth's reign.

The online warrants end in 1588. Ms. Leed is working to continue the warrants to the end of the reign, but they are currently not available. However, both Arnold and Leed have commentary on French bodies which appear in the warrants in the 1590s.

Leed has the following info from her "History of the Corset" web page.

"French bodies show up regularly in tailor's bills of the later 16th century. Here are some listings found in the bills of Tailor's Bills of the 1590s:

- 2 pair of French bodies (1591)
- 3/4 [yard] of canvas for mistress Knevittes bodies (1591)
- whales bone for the bodies
- an elle of canvas for my mistress's Frenche bodies [and] six yards of green binding lace to them (1592)
- 2 yards of sacking for a pair of French bodies (1594)
- a whale bone bodye (1590)

Arnold thinks that the term French bodies possibly comes from an earlier fashion.

"In 1577 Jérôme Lippomano wrote that:

French women have inconceivably narrow waists; they swell out their gowns from the waist downwards by whaleboned stuffs and vertugadins, which increases the elegance of their figures. Over the chemise they wear a corset or bodice, that they call a 'corps piqué', which makes their shape more delicate and slender. It is fastened behind which helps to show off the form of the bust." (pg 147)

Note that in England in 1576, the warrants note the following "For making of two paire of jeane fustian bodies." (1576: September 26th, ER 18. fol 104 v). It may be possible that these are similar to the early French 'corps piqué'. However, Arnold states that the fore runner for later corsets started in 1583 with a pair of bodies lined in canvas and stiffened with buckram. However, I found a similar entry in September 1582 (fol 179 r), only it has sleeves which Arnold thinks would be a part of a gown (pg 146), although it is not stated as such.

Also note that the narrow waists described, come about through the use of both the corps piqué and the use of 'whaleboned stuffs and vertugadins', which may be whaleboned rolls and farthingales. So it is an **illusion** of a small waist, not a reality caused by the corps piqué or pair of bodies alone.

A quote from the late 1590s give us an idea of what French bodies were stiffened with:

I will have a petticoate of silk, not red but of the finest silk there is...it shall have a French bodie, not of whalebone, for that is not stiff enough, but of horne for that will hold it out, it shall come, to keepe in my belly...my lad, will have a Busk of whalebone, it shall be tyed with two silk points..." (Arnold, pg 146-7)

Note that this "French bodie" would be made with horn instead of whale bone, yet also includes a busk of whale bone.

The 1603 Effigy pair of bodies that Arnold discusses in her posthumous Costume article, could possibly have been a French bodies. It was made from two layers of fustian, and uses whalebone for the boning, with no separate busk. It is also patterned with the center laced front angled on the upper part (above the waistline) and off of the center grain, which provides room and support for the bosom. This aspect is missing from many modern reproductions, including Ms Leed's, which was made prior to the revised information.

More Thoughts

As I noted above, there are changes in the description of a garment, such as a petticoat which originally meant "small coat" which were worn by men and women, and later became a skirt (sometimes with bodies) worn by women. (See the note by Ninya Mikhail I attached below.) Kirtles apparently change meaning over the century, being full garments at the beginning, but become a skirt only by the end.

What is not fully described above, and what I think is important to consider, is the tailoring and shaping that may actually be doing the work of supporting a woman's breasts, especially for those who are well endowed. With no early English garments surviving, and few later garments that are fitted, it is hard to determine a trend, although curved front

seams can be seen in the few fitted garments in Arnold's *Patterns of Fashion*. It is surprising but very doable to support a woman's bosom with only medium weight linen and fitted tailoring, as seen in garments known as "Gothic Fitted Dresses". The key is to pinch in about an inch on both side seams, in a sideways U-shape, just under where the bust would be fitted. It will look odd, but it does work. Or you can create a curved front seam to shape for your bosom.

It is also possible that the various women wearing these Tudor outfits were in most cases rather fit and slender, and didn't need much support from their garments. The first busk appeared in the warrants in 1577, when Queen Elizabeth was 43 and may have needed more support. Earlier, in 1544-45, when her portrait as a princess was taken, she was in her pre-teen years. I don't have the warrant accounts for that time period, to determine what interlinings or stiffeners, if any, may or may not have been used.

What is somewhat unclear is which garment, if any, is doing support work; the gown, the kirtle, the petticoat, or the later stand-alone pair of bodies. It appears to shift over time.

Gowns start with similar interlinings to the kirtle, namely linen, and build from there. I was surprised to find the amount of interlining fabrics and support rolls being added to gowns during the later 1570s and through the 1580s, not only in the bodies portion, but in sleeve heads, sleeves, and skirts. But from surviving garments, it appears that such items are used for presentation of the overall gown, support for heavy jewels, and less for supporting the woman's body.

Kirtles seem to be the supporting garment early in the century, but entries for kirtles seem to fade by the end of the 1580s, with more pairs of bodies (some with sleeves) showing up around the time doublets become popular (doublets first noted in 1575). During the later 1570s through the 1580s, the kirtle bodies is minimally lined in silks and other materials, or are barely mentioned in the warrants.

Petticoats (when mentioned) with upper bodies tend to not be interlined, although some are. Queen Elizabeth's female dwarf, Thomasina, is issued many gowns and a few petticoats – usually with interlinings, but she is given no kirtles (entries from 1582 to 1588). She was later issued French pairs of bodies. The few Ladies that are listed in Queen Elizabeth's warrants were usually given gowns, with occasional kirtles or doublets depending on the year.

Stand-alone pairs of bodies were not all interlined. Some were made of fine decorated linen fabrics that were starched, some were made of leather, or simply were of wool or silk with no interlining listed. Pairs of bodies seems to be a very catch-all phrase, much like "tops" are today. It is also probable that during certain time periods stand-alone pairs of bodies did act as the support garment, although it is unclear when this started exactly. But they do not appear to have whale boning in common use until the French pair of bodies appear in 1590. The use of bents I have already noted above.

A general note. There were no entries in either Mary or Elizabeth's tailor's warrants for any cord or other stiffening material for the tailors other than what I already listed. Paste boards were listed, and were generally used for collars or other small areas that needed reinforcement, or for non-clothing items, and were usually noted in the warrants when used. See above in 1576 for the paste board stomachers.

Conclusion

What all of the above clearly shows is that one form of stiffener, or one form of supportive garment like a corset, or the late 16th century French bodies, is not appropriate for the entire 16th century. Time and fashions change, much like they do today. It would be like wearing 1950s cone brassieres and body girdles during the entire 20th century. That would change the look of 1920s Flappers, or the 70s Disco Queens. One should consider the time frame of your garment, preferably to the nearest decade or less. My recommendation is to tailor your garment to fit you well, and when needed construct appropriate supportive underpinnings for that short time frame.

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Ninya On Petticoats

A note from Ninya Mikhaila concerning petticoats, kirtles and gowns which hopefully explain the shift in terms during the 16th century. (From *Elizabethan Costume* Facebook group, June 23, 2012):

“We (myself, Caroline Johnson and Jane Malcolm-Davies) did a lot of practical experimentation with stiffening each of the layers - petticoat, kirtle and gown. We found that the best results, visually, were achieved with a combination of a unstiffened petticoat (worn over a smock of course) followed by a kirtle with a stiffened bodice (to which the jewelled 'square' was attached) topped off with a gown with minimal boning. That is not to say that the upperbodies of petticoats were never stiffened to offer support. However Caroline's more recent research (detailed in *The Queen's Servants*) has shown that interlinings were often provided for the upper bodies of kirtles which suggests that they were the supportive garment. She also found that in the first twenty years of the C16th petticoats were only provided for members of the royal family (the female servants only received kirtles and gowns) and that linings (or interlinings) were not mentioned. I think this suggests that petticoats, at that period, for women were worn in much the same way as the men's ones, ie for warmth rather than support. However the yardage suggests a skirted garment rather than a waistcoat style, one and a half yards of scarlet is a lot of material as scarlet was particularly wide. The servant women may not have been provided with them either because they were seen as an optional extra, rather than a necessary, garment. At this period the basic 'dress' that ordinary women wore would be termed a kirtle and they would have a gown to wear over the top of it for best. At some point in the century the terminology shifted so that the petticoat (with attached upperbodies) became the basic garment for most women, over which a gown or cassock or jacket could be worn for warmth/best. Middle and upper class women also owned kirtles and these were always worn over the petticoat and under the gown. The materials that they are made from makes it clear that they were intended to be displayed in a way that petticoats were not. They are frequently described as having foreparts and sleeves of expensive, showy material and hindparts of cheaper, plainer stuff which would be hidden by the gown worn over the top. There would be no place for such a garment in the wardrobes of ordinary working women. Finally at the end of the century 'petticoat' is the most common term given to both the basic garment with upperbodies worn by the masses as well as the pretty, decorative skirt(s), without bodies, displayed under the gown of elite ladies.”