

Tudor Corset or Not to Corset...

Written by Kimiko Small



You have decided you will be making an English outfit for the 16th century (Henrician or Elizabethan). You are thinking about what all is involved in this decision. Maybe this is your first time or maybe you have made a few outfits before, but whatever your background, we all usually start at the same place; with the undergarments.

First is the smock, which is pretty simple. There are many sources from websites to books that describe what survived from the 16th century and how to make a smock to fit you.

So then you turn to what comes next, and that is when most women decide you simply must have a corset (modern term for a separate fitted and boned bodice that supports the torso and especially the bosom) to wear under your new outfit. It is a modern assumption that women from all walks of life in the 16th century must have worn corsets. We see them all over today being worn at renaissance faires and other historical events. Costuming books of the past few decades talk about them, how to make them, what corsets that survived look like. Even historical costuming guru Janet Arnold discusses them in her books - so they had to exist back then, yes? And so if they existed, then I must make and wear one today, yes? But... wait a second... did the women of the 16th century actually wear this kind of a garment? What sort of garment actually did support the bosom? What exactly were the supportive garments made from and stiffened with? And do you really need a corset?



Well, the answer is not that simple. Let me explain what the supporting undergarments of the 16th century developed from, and provide a brief timeline to show how those 'pairs of bodies' eventually came to be.

Background Information

The supporting undergarment,s as we understand them now, seem to have come from form-fitting under dresses in the medieval period (worn by women in Western Europe in the late 14th and early 15th centuries). Robin Netherton, in a collection of h-costume emails, discusses the premise of these under dresses and calling them 'Gothic Fitted Dresses'. Later, through classes and articles, she provided plausible proof of their use and how by the use of fabric and close fitting garment construction, they can

easily support a woman's torso and bosom in comfort. But even in discussion with me, she only had visual proof of their use until the mid-1400s, when different fashion styles took center stage.

So I combed through various books, articles, and tailors warrants as they have become available recently to try to understand at what point does the stiffened corset, better known in the 16th century as a 'pair of bodies', become available, and what actually stiffens them. I created a database of information in order to track the progression. I looked at what fabrics and what forms of stiffeners, if any, was put into the possible supporting garments; either gown, kirtle, petticoat, or other garment (as they were mentioned) including stand alone 'pairs of bodies'. Most of the information came from the Tailors Warrants, which covered the reigns of Mary Tudor and Elizabeth Tudor (from 1557-1558 then 1568-1588). For the Henrician time frame (1485-1520), I had to rely on the information provided by Caroline Johnson in her book, *The Queen's Servants*. There is a gap of missing or inaccessible records as well, so although this does not cover everything, it is enough to see some trends.

At first, it was somewhat unclear which garment is doing the actual support work; the gown, the kirtle, the petticoat, or the later stand-alone pair of bodies. The women behind costume book 'The Tudor Tailor' did experiments regarding this and found that the kirtle appears to be best-suited to be the supporting garment during the first half of the 16th century (and is matched by Johnson's research). This does shift over the century of fashion changes.

The Garments, Fabrics & Stiffeners

Note that taffeta or sarcenet (both silks) are frequently noted for linings (among furs and other decorative 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, provide warmth, and/or are too lightweight to be supportive.

Gowns:

Gowns (the outermost dress) use linen of various weight for the interlinings. Listed interlining fabrics were fustian, kersey, canvas, buckram, sack cloth and bay. 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, such as support for decorations or full sleeve shapes, and are used less for supporting the woman's torso.

Kirtles:

Kirtles are the underdress or for the working women; their main dress. In the early 16th century they are the supporting garment as noted by Johnson: *"In more than half the entries for kirtles during Henry VII's reign [and continuing through Henry VIII'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.”* (page 19)



60r from Fella's book or diverse devices. 1590s

Documented lining (or interlining) fabrics for kirtles later in the century include wool, linen, kersey, fustian, canvas, bay, and buckram. From 1575-1582, it's often the case that no interlining fabrics are mentioned.

Entries for kirtles seem to fade by the end of the 1580s, with more pairs of bodies (as a stand alone garment listing, some with sleeves) showing up around the time doublets become popular (doublets are first noted in 1575). During the later 1570s through the 1580s, the kirtle bodies are lined in silks and other materials, or are rarely mentioned in the warrants.

Petticoats:

Petticoats start off as “small coats”, which for women are bodies usually attached to underskirts. When mentioned with upper bodies they tend to not be interlined, although a few later in the century are. In the Henrician era, petticoats are only provided to the Royal women, not the servants. They are usually made of scarlet, an expensive red wool fabric, and may be worn more for warmth than for support.

During Mary Tudor's reign, they are sometimes listed with linings, including linen and kersey.

During Elizabeth's reign, when interlinings are mentioned they list bay and fustian. Most often they don't have an interlining or lining mentioned.

From 1582 to 1588, Queen Elizabeth's female dwarf, Thomasina, is issued many gowns and a few petticoats – usually with interlinings - but she is given no kirtles. She was later issued French pairs of bodies (see below). The few Ladies that are listed in Queen Elizabeth's warrants were usually given gowns, with occasional kirtles or doublets depending on the year, but no petticoats.

Pairs of Bodies:

Stand-alone pairs of bodies were not all interlined and it isn't always clear what role they played. Some



Peasant wedding by Martin Van Cleve. Photo by Chris Auld, used with permission The woman in the center is of interest, even as a commoner. Most likely a working woman's kirtle

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 the word 'tops' is 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. They do list a possible use of bents (a form of grass) as a stiffener, which I will explain about shortly. They do not appear to use whale bone until the French pair of bodies appear in 1590 (after the currently available tailors warrants end, see below).

Other Stiffeners:

There were no entries in either Mary or Elizabeth's tailor's warrants for any cord as a stiffening material for the tailors. 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. However in 1576 there was: "*Item for makinge of foure Stomachers of paste bourde covrid with taphata of our gr(eat) guar(derobe)*" (April 14th, ER 18, fol 94 v). This is the only entry for this type of paste board stomacher among the warrants.

Busks are mentioned as being ordered starting in 1579: "*Item to the said Thomas Grene (carpenter) for sixe Buskes of our great guarderobe.*" (1579, April 12th, ER 19. fol 115 v). These are most likely made from wood. Later busks are made from whale bone, including "*whales bone and wyer coverid with sarceonett quilted*" in 1586. 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 #5609-1859 \(39.9 cm / 15.7"\)](#). The question is, which garment were they attached to during this time period? This is not clear in the warrants. And if they are narrow, they may be used more for keeping the longer bodice fronts down and to help with posture, than to do any support for the bosom.

[There is a surviving German pair of bodies](#) that does have a pocket available that would fit a busk. It was buried with Pfaltzgräfin Dorothea Sabine von Neuberg in 1598. This corset is shown in detail Janet Arnold's *Patterns of Fashion 1560-1620*. The space available for the busk would be roughly 2" x 22" (5.08cm x 55.88cm). But the other surviving pairs of bodies do not have an area to have a busk attached, so this is still uncertain.

On 'Bents'

Prior to 1582, bents (a reed grass) were usually used in farthingales (the hoop skirts), rolls to support gown skirts, or as a pair of rolls for gown sleeve heads to support the full sleeves. Sometimes bent reeds are used along with whale bone. This can be read over and over again in the warrants.

However, 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 (according to Arnold, sleeved pairs of bodies may actually belong to gowns (p.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 nettworke the slevis drawn oute with white nettworke **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.*" (p.147)

I disagree with Arnold's statement that bents were used in bodies as a stiffener, similar to later stays. 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(s) of", or a language shift with the word 'bents'.

The word 'bents' in a later entry that same year (1582) seem to indicate a part of a garment that is round or bent, as well as indicating the reed grass: "*Item to Roberte Siphthorpe for makinge 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 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).

1590 to 1603, Boned Pairs of Bodies (finally!)

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.*" (p.147)

Interesting 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 French 'corps piqué'.

But Arnold states that the forerunner 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. Whenever it first started, a thicker fabric is being used to stiffen the pairs of bodies before whale bone is mentioned.

Please note that the narrow waists described by Lippomano 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. This is an important distinction as so many modern women try to tighten their garments to force a smaller waist, when that isn't what was done in the period and should be avoided for health reasons.

Besides the above info, a quote from the late 1590s give us more on 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, p.146-7)

Note that this 'French bodie' would be made with horn instead of whale bone, and 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 whale bone for the boning, with two larger pieces of whale bone and no separate busk. It is also designed with the laced center-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 Arnold article.

Supportive Tailoring

We can now see that the kirtle, and later the pair of bodies, is the true supportive undergarment. Tailoring and close-shaping of the garment fabric, especially the linen interlining, will actually do the work of supporting a woman's breasts - **even 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 the 'Gothic Fitted Dresses' that I briefly discussed above. The key is to stretch the linen when fitting, and then 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 or side seam to shape for your bosom during fitting. If necessary, add an additional layer of canvas.

It is also probable that the various historical women wearing these outfits were, in many 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 when bodices dipped lower in the front to keep the point down. Earlier, in 1544-45, when her portrait as a princess was taken, she was in her pre-teen years - just 12 or 13 years old - and her body was not fully matured. She also didn't have French bodies ordered for her, but for her female dwarf companion.

Conclusion

What I am hoping you understand in this article is that you generally do not need a fully-boned corset underneath your Henrician or Elizabethan gown. Most likely a close fitting kirtle will do just fine for three-quarters of the century of fashion. For 1575 to 1589 fashions, a fitted, unboned pair of bodies may be all you need. Fully-boned pairs of bodies using whale bone only show up in 1590 for the last decade of extreme Elizabethan fashion, when the fashion dramatically changes to the wheel farthingale among the courtiers. Those of the general merchant or commoner classes would continue using the fitted kirtle or fitted pair of bodies until sometime in the 17th century, unless they are dressing in the latest fashions.

What all of the above clearly shows is that one form of stiffener, or one form of supportive garment like 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 brassiere and body girdle during the entire 20th century. That would change the look of 1920s flappers, or the 1970s disco queens. My recommendation is to tailor your garment to fit and support you well, and only when needed should you make that corset. As always, the choice is yours.

Definitions:

Bay: Lightweight wool cloth of loose, plain weave. The warp is worsted wool and the 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 – see discussion above). 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 of wood, bone or whale bone, that is inserted into a garment.

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.

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Naath Cousins

15.06.2013 10:00



Yes, a well fitted petticoat in a non-stretchy fabric will provide good support; which I have seen work very well even on large and well endowed ladies (I'm take a 30E; and my petticoat keeps everything under control even when I do foolish un-lady-like things like running around or cycling).

For shopping reference Whaleys of Bradford sell a good linen canvas; although not cheaply. It is more breathable than cotton alternatives and more comfortable in the heat.

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Kimiko Small

16.06.2013 23:51



Thanks for your comment, and also for a UK place to get linen canvas. My sources tend to US companies. 😊

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