



ISTORICAL CON- siderations aside, it is not inadvisable to have some idea of just what

principles are at work in the production of a garment with as many technical pitfalls as a corset. Even with as simplified and primitive an example as the corset of the Tudor period. So, before we start working with specific directions, suppose we take a good hard look at just exactly what effects we are trying to produce.

One of the first discoveries people make about wearing properly fitted Tudor corsets, is not that they are actively uncomfortable, but that after being in one for a few hours, they find themselves to be disproportionately tired out in relation to the amount of physical activity in which they have been engaged. I am inclined to believe that the restriction of movement is responsible for this. Modern people are not accustomed to having their spines held in the same position for hours on end, and they literally get tired from it. If you must, it is quite possible to lie down and rest flat on your back (or stomach, or even side) in a Tudor corset. I do not claim that it can be done *gracefully*, but it can be done. A bum-roll or farthingale would tend to complicate matters, however.

And, while we are on the subject of comparative comfort, I do hope that all of the ladies who have never worn a properly fitted Tudor corset are not suddenly going to assume that I, who have, can't possibly know what I am talking about, or that I must automatically be some sort of masochistic freak when I state

that a properly fitted Tudor corset is not actively uncomfortable. I mean precisely what I say. Tudor corsets are restricting, yes. They are inconvenient, Lord yes! But "uncomfortable," in the sense that they *hurt*, no, *that* they are not.

The majority of you probably came by that particular notion from the experience of having, at some time or other, tried to wear a long-line bra or a strapless merry widow, and made the discovery that the nasty things pinch! Having made that discovery, you conclude — not without logic, I concede — that since a Tudor corset is even stiffer, it must be proportionately more uncomfortable.

In point of fact, the case is almost exactly the opposite. Since a merry widow is not truly rigid, if it is to do its job at all it must be made to fit substantially *tighter* than would ever be necessary in a rigid garment. A genuinely rigid framework, which can literally stand up by itself only has to be fastened securely enough to the human body to assure that said body isn't going to get away from it. There is no need for it to pinch.

A point to remember: it is dangerous to assume that because a process is modern, it will unfailingly be more effective than one which is frankly primitive.

Try not to be caught up in advertising hyperbole and hypnotize yourself into equating *convenience* with comfort, either. A merry widow is a relatively convenient garment. While wearing one you can bend and twist, lean and stretch, and

every time you do it, or even breathe, the wretched thing will buckle, shift, gouge, pinch or bind. Modern "corsetry" despite all claims to the contrary, is — like its predecessors — designed to produce an effect. It is not designed for the purpose of being comfortable, just not permanently damaging.

A Tudor corset, on the other hand, is a frankly inconvenient garment. Once you are in it, you can only move as far as it will let you. When you encounter its limits, there you are, up against an unyielding object. This does not hurt, it just isn't going to work. You cannot get there from here. The corset is more stubborn than you are. Adapt to it. By this point, it isn't going to adapt to you.

The degree of inconvenience you will experience is erratic. You can stand, sit and bend from the hip without difficulty. (People did live in these things, after all.) You can dance, fence, eat dinner, breathe, drive a tiny two-person roadster with bucket seats, stage a dramatic faint, or bend over to touch your toes. You cannot bend down out of your chair to pick up a fallen napkin.

Even the compression of the bosom, which sends the ignorant observer into such a panic, in practice, translates into a sensation no more distracting than leaning against a wall. After all, there is no practical reason to compress the bosom any more than the degree necessary to hold it in place. To be sure, a large bosom is going to require more compression

than a small one. But, at any size, if a corset compresses your bosom more than actually needed for stability, your bosom is only going to embarrass you by trying to climb out of it.

Obviously I am not talking about those rare women who have abnormally sensitive breasts. Let me clarify this. I am not talking about sensitive nipples. I am talking about women whose breast tissue is highly sensitive to pressure. There are such people. Such ladies probably had best forego Tudor costume altogether. But don't assume that "of course" you are of their number. Try taking off your bra and lying down on the floor on your stomach. Now, really, how painful is that? Because that is pretty much what you are going to be feeling.

Those of you whose breasts become sensitive around the time of your menstrual period had better run this test about that time in order to avoid an unpleasant surprise later. Those of you whose breasts swell at this time may have some fitting problems. In this case, you will have to use your own judgement on just when in your cycle you want to do your fittings.

Where you will feel most of the constriction and pressure of a Tudor corset is in your back. Particularly in those areas towards your sides, and immediately above your waist. Those are the stress points. [Figure 3:1]

So, if you must, go right ahead and tell me that you can't wear a corset because you have a bad back, or because you tend to hyperventilate when you are frustrated or constrained. But please don't tell me that my Tudor corset *must*

be uncomfortable because your merry widow manages to pinch.

Another reason why people claim that a Tudor corset is uncomfortable is that the one they did try wasn't made properly, or didn't fit them properly. Proper fit in a rigid garment is absolutely essential. While it is possible to wear a corset which was made for a somewhat thinner person, the result is never particularly happy. For one thing, a wide gap in the back means that the sides have more play

Figure 3:1 - The wearer will feel the greatest stress in the shaded areas, at the back of her waist.

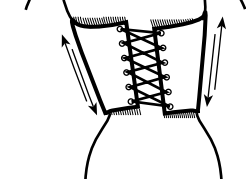
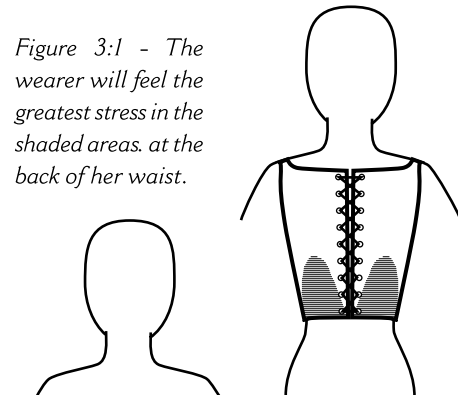


Figure 3:2 - When the corset is laced with a large gap, it shifts uncomfortably with movement.

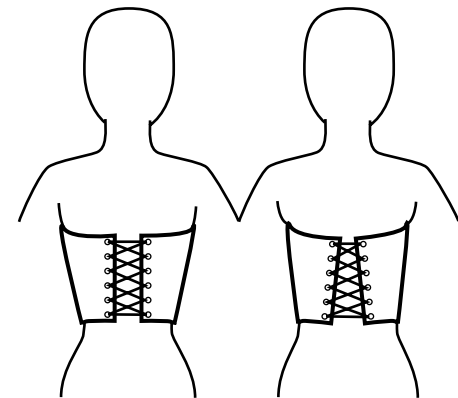


Figure 3:3 - The stress on the lower end of the lacings will cause the extra fullness to gradually shift into this area.

and will tend to shift as you wear them. This will make the edges rub. [Figure 3:2] Even if the corset has been made without straps, your arms may not be emerging at the places which were designed to have arms emerge. A corset with straps may bind because the armholes are not quite in the right place. One of the nastiest surprises which you may have, however, is that, over time, the separation between the sides will not remain even. Since the area at and immediately above the waist is a stress area, unless the outer costume keeps everything in place, gradually the extra play provided by the longer laces will migrate to this region. When this happens, the bottom of the corset will spread farther apart while the top draws closer together and your bosom will receive too much compression and try to climb out of the corset to get away from it. [Figure 3:3] This is why, when we get to work on designing and fitting a custom garment, the directions tell you not to allow for more than about an inch of separation. If possible, plan for the sides to meet.

For temporary needs, such as a theatrical performance — as opposed to a public festival, which goes on all day, the migratory tendencies of the extra play in the lacing can be largely circumvented by utilizing the back spacer such as is mentioned in a later chapter, or by having the dresser use a lot of shorter laces, so that no one lace is responsible for more than one or two holes. You will still have to deal with the shifting and rubbing, however.

The length of the corset is an even more critical matter than the circum-

ference. If the point is too short, it will jab you. While it is possible to partially avoid this, you are still going to come away from the experience with the idea that a Tudor corset is a troublesome and uncomfortable garment.

A point which is too long isn't much better. If the corset's torso is too long the corset may well be totally unwearable. A corset which is too long in the sides and back will dig into the tops of the hips and into the armpit. If it was made for someone who is larger-busted than you, it may be too high in the front as well, causing the edge of the neckline to stand above your bosom in a ridge. If the back is too long, it will certainly dig into the back of the wearer's waist when she sits and may even hamper the natural motion of the hips in walking.

As regards the aforementioned problem of drafting the waist point, a good jumping-off place is to extend the point one-hand's-breadth (with thumb) below your navel, and to adjust from there. The finished point should be long enough to slide over the most prominent portion of your belly when you sit down or bend over rather than digging into it. It ought to be able to do this without being so long as to make contact with the pubic bone, but since variations in human proportions (and posture!) abound, I will not go so far as to promise that this will always be the case, but it isn't very likely. (Although even a corset point which could bump into the pubic bone is far less uncomfortable than one which gouges into the soft flesh of the abdomen.)

The reason a point may gouge is that, in sitting, the belly compresses, rises,

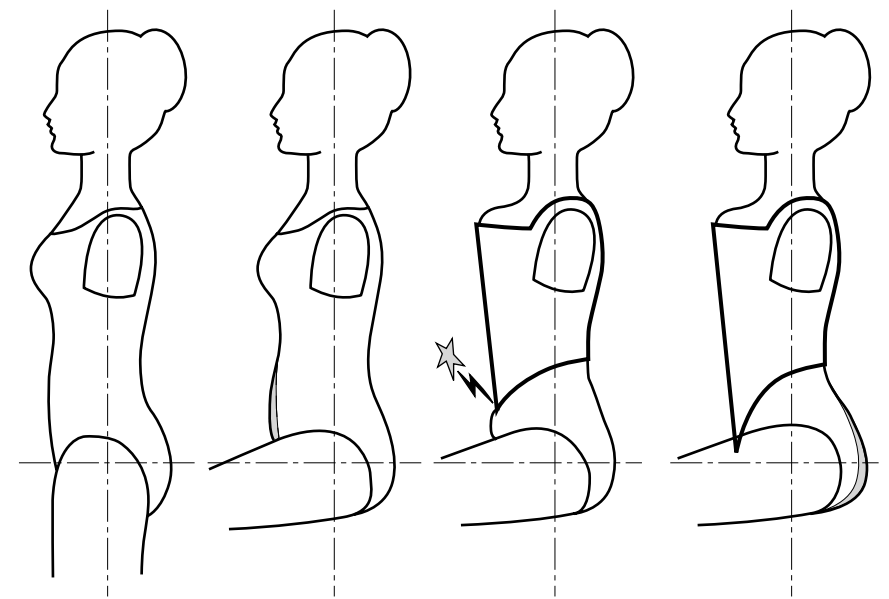


Figure 3:4 - The variations in the prominence of the abdomen brought about by position. The abdomen of the standing figure compresses and projects when the figure sits. If the busk is too short, the point will try to imbed itself in the belly. With a longer busk, the belly slides up behind the busk and the hips swing back to compensate.

and becomes more prominent. Since the busk is not flexible, it does not accommodate this change. Therefore, one will need to sit with pelvis rotated slightly backwards to compensate. If the belly may not project forward, the hips will project backward, or, rather, the ribcage will be carried forward, above the belly, rather than above the hips. This will arch the back somewhat. [Figure 3:4] This is the same principle which was later to be exploited into the Edwardian s-bend stance. The Tudor corset, with its more primitive technology, will not enforce this stance to so great an extent. Nor was the stance of the two periods at all recognizably similar, since the Tudors stuck out their bellies, while the Edwardians projected their seats.

In the finished garment, one does not find this variation in stance to be consciously strained or actively uncom-

fortable since it is not being maintained by muscular tension. You just lean against the corset and let it do the work. The resultant curve in the spine is the reason why the instructions will tell you to make the corset to end at your natural waist, rather than where your blue jeans ride. If the back of the corset is too long, the bottom edge will dig into your hips when you sit down. You will not find this comfortable at all. [Figure 3:5]

Incidentally, if you ever end up having to borrow a corset with too long a point, you will need to exercise a certain amount of caution in sitting. Consciously press your ribcage forward, swing your seat back, sit, and then relax until the end of the busk is braced against your pubic bone. Then forget about it. There isn't anywhere else it can go.

If you find yourself having to borrow a corset with too short a point (for of

course none of *us* would ever make that mistake in designing one) you will need to be every bit as conscientiously swayed-backed. Unfortunately, in this case you will not be able to relax and forget about it without being stabbed. You may even find that the too-short busk will try to stab you while you are standing.

In both cases, you may find it more comfortable, when sitting, to adopt the “wide lap,” i.e. to sit with your knees apart, spreading your skirts. There is no reason to suppose that this may not have been the actual stance of the period, since it would have aided to display the decorative kirtle when the skirt of the overgown was split. You may want to practice this ahead of time, since the balance may sometimes be tricky.

One scarcely needs to be told that the corset is not to be made longer than the torso, but in the event that you (or the designer) get carried away on a wave of “authenticity” and decide that, if the exaggeratedly long bodices depicted in some of the art of the late Elizabethan era were not merely the result of the painters not having quite come to grips with the techniques of perspective, you are going to need one that extends to mid-thigh (as in Plate B-10) — and don’t laugh, there is no telling what a costume designer could decide to exaggerate for whatever reason or other, you may find yourself perched on the edge of your chair, wide-lapped, with the point extending below the seat’s edge.

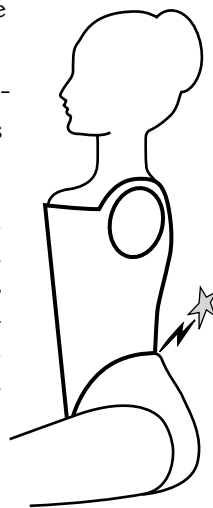
A third reason contributing to the prevailing belief that “Tudor” equates “extreme discomfort” is that someone has tried to be too clever. When dealing with

a subject as lumbered with psychological (and philosophical and *physiological*) ramifications as corsetry, the modern person’s overall aversion to the basic concept and its implications (restriction, discomfort, weight, heat, etc.) provides a fertile ground for evasive innovations. To be fair, some of these may be quite useful. Some are merely ineffective. Some, although effective, are a good deal more trouble than they are worth. And some are absolute horrors.

The commoner such innovations seem to be composed from varying proportions of ignorance, evasion and ingenuity. While none of these are necessarily to be deplored, all hold potential pitfalls. People have at various times ended up with results that have not only borne little relation to the Tudor line, but that were quite unnecessarily intricate, and vastly more uncomfortable than the standard Renfaire corset would ever have been to boot. In short, total failures. In these more recent days, one’s failures more usually fail in no more than two of these three directions, or only fall short in one of them, ending up with what can at least feel like a partial success.

Part of the general confusion results

Figure 3:5 - When the back of the corset is too long, it gets in the way of the hips’ movement when seated and the bottom edge cuts into the back of the waist.



when the developers of the qualified successes, encouraged by those factors in which their method has succeeded, start popularizing their methods, along with all of said method’s real — or fancied — advantages. Since the world consists more of followers than leaders, others will pick up on these and after adapting them even further, pass the method on, either giving themselves credit, or innocently parroting the sales talk they were originally fed. Or they may reject the result, forgetting that they have altered the design, and start bad-mouthing what may have been a flawed, but generally sound system. Some of the methods which fall short, do so only from a lack of attention (or understanding) when it comes to details, and *could* be better. But in any case, it is all ultimately going to contribute to the generally popular view that attempts at Tudor corsetry are doomed to produce results which will be difficult/uncomfortable/ineffective.

Underlying this quagmire is a network of erroneous assumptions. The first, most important and most dishearteningly widespread, being that if a corset is needed, any sort of corset will do. This assumption has accounted for a remarkable host of oddities in the name of Tudor. These range from the modern merry widow, to the Gibson Girl, to “milkmaid” waist cinches, to yet other misguided inanities. A stiffened bodice alone doth not a Tudor make.

A second common assumption is the conviction that a process which is technologically up to the minute, will invariably be more effective than one which is outmoded. In some things this

may be true, but it is hardly a safe line of reasoning to follow when what you are looking for is an outmoded effect.

Another unfortunate assumption is the aforementioned conclusion that a rigid Tudor bodice must necessarily be more uncomfortable than a modern merry widow. This belief encourages unnecessary evasiveness, and leads to fleeing when none pursueth. Related to this belief is the impression that convenience equates comfort.

A fourth false assumption is the certainty that a process which is unfamiliar is necessarily a process which is going to prove to be difficult.

And, finally, there is the determined faith that there is some method out there by which one may circumvent all inconveniences simultaneously. This last is more properly defined as a belief in magic.

When any or all of these assumptions are accompanied by an understandable ignorance of the operative principles and internal mechanics of Tudor corsetry, the results can be disastrous.

Which is not to say that modern systems will not work, or work well. Given that the Elizabethan corset mutated into other forms over 300 years ago, and the original methods used to produce it also evolved into more technologically sophisticated processes, and have, consequently, been lost, strayed or forgotten, all methods currently available to the costumer are, by definition, modern methods. Yes. *All*. Including the ones in *this* collection.

I agree that some costume historians have done a marvelous job of examining the surviving examples of 16<sup>th</sup> and

17<sup>th</sup> century bodices and such surviving written materials on their construction as remain to us. These historians have produced very convincing treatises on the actual sizes, proportions, materials and the uses and treatment thereof, as well as the probable methods used in constructing and embellishing these actual garments. But while their works are invaluable in showing how it *may* have been done, they tend to be rather less than helpful in explaining how to make a corset to order for a modern wearer, taking into consideration that person’s proportions and requirements.

I do not claim that only one method, or set of methods — such as the altered bodice pattern — is valid or acceptable. But as a critical, perhaps *overly* critical, observer, my patience is wearing a little thin with standard unaltered bodice patterns stiffened with six to ten layers of pelon being touted as a “proper” Tudor line. To say nothing of the old-fashioned Hollywood dodge of putting every woman on the set into a pointy-cuped merry widow and then trying to claim that “Of course it’s accurate! *All* of the actresses are wearing *corsets!*” This from people who — assuming that they have taken a good look at Tudor portraits in the first place — certainly ought to know better. In the interests of common sense, I append the following;

**True Observation #1:** any corset is going to be less comfortable than *no* corset. (Well, *duh!*)

Write this one out a hundred times. Or as many times as is necessary to make yourself believe it. You will need this mantra as an exorcism against

attempting to practice “magic.” Unnecessary evasiveness is only going to give you more complicated problems than the ones you already know you have.

**True Observation #2:**

Corollary #1; something unfamiliar is not necessarily difficult.

Corollary #2; just because something isn’t difficult, does not in any way imply that it is not still *work*. (Consider bargello or counted cross stitch.)

Mere opinion: persons who furiously throw themselves into a job which takes three hours in order to avoid a job that takes two and a half hours are in no position to complain about how much time the job they didn’t do would take.

Variation: persons who furiously throw themselves into two and a half hours of familiar work, in order to avoid two and a half hours of unfamiliar work need not be quite so self-congratulatory either. Neophobia and/or mental laziness are not virtues.

**True Observation #3:** the method which works for one person will not automatically work for everyone.

**Observation #4:** saying that a thing is so because one thinks it *ought* to be so, will not make it so. Unfortunately, it isn’t always easy to recognize when you are doing this. (i.e., *caveat lector*.)

**Observation #5:** comparisons between processes which one has discovered, developed, or adapted oneself, and some other process with which one is unfamiliar, are necessarily suspect. Not necessarily *wrong*, mind you, but definitely suspect. (i.e., *caveat vendor*.)

Opinion: making variations in a process that you have adapted without



crediting yourself for them, and claiming that the result was “from so-and-so’s method,” is not particularly fair dealing. It’s like giving someone a recipe without warning them that they are going to have to cut down on the sugar, or add arrowroot or allspice to achieve the same result that you did. (Which is presumably why they asked you for it!)

I will state here and now that of the various methods of corsetry which I will be examining in this collection, I can personally take credit for none. My only innovation was in the adaptation of a process not of my own devising. All of the variations included in this collection have, to the best of my knowledge, been devised by amateurs for purposes other than conventional theatrical productions. For the most part, they were designed for public festivals.

This last consideration is of some importance. In a standard, reasonable sized theater, such as a school auditorium, the audience can be seated no closer than three or four yards from a raised stage which is artificially lit. The details of a costume may not be particularly evident. At any rate, they will not be so evident as they would be at a distance of some three or four feet, at ground level, in the glaring noonday sun. I concede that this loss of detail will be more striking in such matters as the quality of the construction and materials than in the actual shape of the garment. Nevertheless, the eye can be, and frequently is, so dazzled by the ambiance of live theater, that the memory does not retain a true image of the outfit, which is later only recalled to

mind as a “beautiful costume.” Despite the fact that it may have been wildly out of period, shoddily constructed or completely inappropriate to its purported use. (Satin-clad shepherdesses, anyone?) Face to face, presupposing a marginally educated audience, such obfuscation is not possible. And, in this day and age, thanks to the high production standards of the BBC’s costume shop and other professional sources, one can safely presuppose a marginally educated audience. The corsets herein discussed were designed to produce results which hold up to the closest scrutiny. Nor are any of the variations beyond the capabilities of the average seamstress, although some may require more careful attention to the details of fastening than others.

These are not “quickie” methods, however. This collection is not aimed at the simple-costuming-for-the-small-stage market. In all fair warning, this is an introduction to patternmaking. In that field, virtually nothing which is worth doing well can be dashed off in ten minutes. Not in patternmaking. And anyone who doesn’t regard corsetry as one of those things which is worth doing well is probably going to live to regret it.

In order to produce reasonably accurate Tudor foundations, you must be willing to invest a certain amount of time. It will also require a certain amount of work. The work is not particularly difficult work. In fact, a lot of it it bears a rather distressing resemblance to “busy” work, and unfortunately, it is all necessary work. But, while you may find yourself to be somewhat bored, you

can console yourself with the reflection that once you have got your corset and bodice pattern made, you will never have to go through all this tedium again. (So long as you make no drastic changes in size.) Or at least not until your friends so admire the result that they all decide to make Tudor costumes too, and want you to help them...

**T**HE ALERT READER will have spotted a rather telling phrase in the preceding paragraph. The phrase was “reasonably accurate.” Yet another can of worms under an entirely different label. Just what constitutes “accurate”?

Regardless of how delightful it may be to wander in a garden of bright theoretical images, when speculations are put aside, remembrances digested, and mechanical details examined, the question remains: how accurate is “reasonably accurate,” for modern purposes?

Obviously any current theatrical or festival purpose will be a modern purpose. It will be displayed before a modern audience and critics. The end result must be able to satisfy both the demands of modern aesthetics and the prevailing taste for “correct” historical fitness in dress. However historically accurate, I seriously doubt that any actress is going to go so far as to adopt the gothic incline stance. Nor would her audience necessarily admire her for doing so. Modern aesthetics do not prize thick waists or disproportionately prominent bellies. Neither would modern viewers register the historically accurate significance from shoulders which are drawn back and down into an unnatural

position. What they would more probably register, if anything, would be their obvious discomfort.

While it is possible to reproduce by current means any of the above details of stance or configuration — just as it is possible to recreate such Tudor facial idiosyncrasies as pale eyebrows and a tight rat-trap mouth — such reproductions of presumably historically accurate elements are not, in the long run, likely to serve the purpose of enlisting the viewers’ sympathy or support for the characters so portrayed. Quite possibly, this will hold true even if the designers see to it that all members of the company are presented in like manner.

While most modern viewers have attained a fairly high level of sophistication regarding the recognition of visual data from historical contexts, contemporary aesthetics and prejudices are still fully in effect regarding any detail which viewers are likely to regard as nonessential. But not all such details are nonessential. Due to a familiarity with well-produced programs set in the Tudor era, modern audiences are well aware that correct historical costuming for the 16<sup>th</sup> century will display the characteristic flat front of that epoch.

Therefore, any production which omits this detail will be — however attractive or well-made the costumes used — concluded to have “not bothered” to do it up “right.” Allowances for the omission will be made, but the omission will be noted. At the same time, such nonessentials as cosmetics (so long as a natural appearance is attempted) will probably slide past the eye, unremarked.

Unremarked, that is, until some five or ten years later, by which time enough change in contemporary usage will have taken place as to make any anachronism visible as an anachronism rather than being unconsciously edited out as a part of normal human appearance. The film, *ANNE OF A THOUSAND DAYS* is a strong case in point. Made in the 1970s, when reviewed today the critical will conclude that the costuming remains excellent, but the faces are all disconcertingly — or perhaps reassuringly — modern.

Which pretty well sums up the basic tenor of audience reaction. The modern viewer wishes to be respected insofar as not to have what he knows to have been the case in a given period of visual history ignored or unduly distorted. But he desires less to see actual history reenacted, than he does to recognize himself acting in history. Henry, Elizabeth, Mary of Scotland, Anne, all rule, all scheme, all suffer, manipulate, lie, or die, but it isn’t Henry, Elizabeth, Mary or Anne that we see flitting about on a lighted screen. It is not even Mitchell, Jackson, Redgrave or Bujold who we really see struggling through the snares and mazes of 16<sup>th</sup> century kingship. It is ourselves.

Therefore, modern erect posture need not necessarily be subverted into gothic slump. Nor need the carriage of the shoulders be vigorously altered, the belly accentuated, or the waist deliberately thickened. On the other hand, there is also no need to genuflect to the persistent delusion that all 16<sup>th</sup> century noblewomen had 13-inch waists. But if you intend that your production be accepted as a “serious” attempt at his-

torically accurate dramatic presentation, certain expectations must be met.

The bodice must be stiffened. Your audience will notice if it is not. The stiffened bodice must have the flat front. The viewer knows that this is part of the line. To omit it will merely leave the audience deciding that you are too ignorant, lazy or incompetent to reproduce the proper period (while others can and do). The bosom must appear to be compressed. The audience is aware that this is also inherent in the style. You need not compress the waist, or try to eradicate all traces of the corset itself, pretending that the body grows in that shape.

Any corset which is separate from the outer gown, as opposed to a boned outer bodice, will announce its presence by visibly displaying a ridge wherever a boned edge does not coincide with the gown’s edge. Try not to let this upset you too unduly. This will be particularly evident with corsets which are made without straps. When a theatrical company has a large turnover in personnel, it is probably going to find it more practical to use corsets without straps, since it really is easier for several people of about the same size, to make do with the same corset if it does not try to fit the shoulders and upper back. The strapless corset carries other bonuses as well. For example, the Italian styles of the 16<sup>th</sup> century have a practically off-the-shoulder line which would otherwise require a specialized corset design to accommodate. Freedom of the shoulderblades also does make a difference in mobility, which may be necessary for some stage business. Particularly for

musical comedy or spectacle, where the style of movement itself may well be anachronistic. Still, my own preference for the strapless corset does not blind me to the fact that there is going to be a quite visible horizontal ridge across the back, where the corset ends. The contours and movements of the shoulder-blades will also be visible.

There are some possible dodges to minimize the effect of this. For the early period, when the French hood was in wide usage, the veil may be made long enough to cover. Or the costume may be lined with some thick, heavy fabric to help soften the line (it will not eradicate it). In a repertory company composed of a few permanent members doing straight dramatic productions (Shakespearean or otherwise), in which each lady has her own boned underbodice with straps, this issue does not arise.

Of course one may take yet another stand on the issue and resolve to just ignore this particular detail. This is probably a shocking piece of apostasy, but I honestly cannot see that this is really worth agonizing over. The ridge is not period. Or, at any rate, there seems to be no evidence from which to suppose it may have been. But at the present level of public awareness, it is one of those nonessentials, which, unlike most of the rest of them, is noticeable only because we do not live in a corseted age. A Victorian corset characteristically displayed exactly this feature, yet the artists of the period, however naturalistic their style, took no notice of it in their renderings, much in the way that modern artists of the neo-representational schools plac-

idly ignore pantie lines or the ridge of a bra back. It is the sort of detail which the eye that is accustomed to it painlessly edits out. The modern eye, not being accustomed to corset tops, will not play by these rules, (twenty years from now, who can say) but there is no reason to suppose that this will distract attention from the acting. In any event, the audience can see for themselves that the actress is wearing a corset. They are hardly going to be astonished to notice further evidence of its presence.

The Tudor line displays quite a few details which have not been retained in modern dress. Some of these have not been current since the traditional corset was abandoned in favor of the decadent, or Victorian, model. Of these characteristics, three seem to me to be fairly major:

#### The Flat Front.

[Figure 3:6]

This characteristic is so well known and so ostentatious that for many beginning costumers, it seems the only salient characteristic of a Tudor corset. While this is very far from being the case, there is some validity to this interpretation in that once the short-bodied gown of the Cavalier period had lengthened into, first

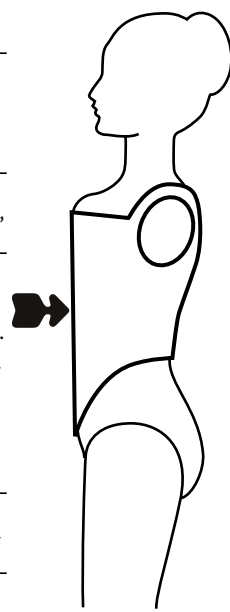


Figure 3:6 - The flat front.

a natural, and then a long-waisted line, the cut had acquired a degree of sophistication which produced a very shallow concave curve from neckline to waist point, rather than an absolutely straight line. But even this difference is less than might otherwise have been noted had not the stance of the two periods differed so greatly. I have gone into this in more detail elsewhere and need not repeat it here. In any case, the corsets of the Restoration are slightly more graceful looking garments than their more primitive forbearers. The absolutely flat front is peculiar to the Tudors alone. This front, with its rigid busk suspended between belly and bosom, covering an airspace beneath, when seen in profile, displays a rather thick, clumsy shape which the modern eye may find unattractive. The Tudor style, unlike that of the Italian Renaissance which preceded it, was not designed to be seen in profile. The sleeves of the gown, either by the large hanging turn-back of the earlier period, or the bombast of the later, will assist in camouflaging or drawing the attention away from this.

#### The Raised Apex of the Bosom.

[Figure 3:7]

This feature, common to all corseted eras, is the one which, more than any other, distinguishes between a true corset, and a garment intended for mere figure control. In fact, so thoroughly unfamiliar are we with this particular phenomenon, that the term may well need further explanation.

In an era of figure control, such as our own, the apex of the bosom is under-

stood to mean the nipple. So obvious is this assumption that there are people who find it difficult to imagine any alternate interpretation. During an era of corsetry, the nipple is an irrelevant detail of anatomy. In a (true) corset, the apex of the bosom is the corset's top edge, wherever it may happen to land.

Our own realization of this feature is somewhat hampered by the fact that the Victorian corset parodied the natural figure to the degree of showing an indentation under the breasts, tapering into the waist. The "ancient" corset, even in the pouter-pigeon form of the 1790s never showed more than a shallow concave curve from top edge to point. The Victorian corset also differed from most of its predecessors in that it never, after 1825 or so, made any exaggerated attempt to raise the bosom's apex to any significant degree above its natural position. Which, when taken in conjunction with the 19<sup>th</sup> century's habit of making day dresses high to the throat, tends to blur the distinctions and encourages us to forget that the apex of even a Victorian lady's bosom was merely an indication of where her corset happened to end, without regard to her private anatomy. [Plate C-1]

Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was not any question

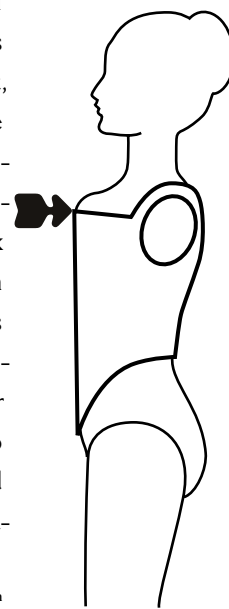


Figure 3:7 - The raised apex of the bosom.

about this. Before there were corsets, or, rather, before corsets were universal, a woman wore a simple underbodice, which was cut very much like her outer bodice, and into this she was snugly sewn, laced, or otherwise fastened. The end result was a more-or-less smoothly rounded bosom which displayed no particular apex at all, merely an overall bulge of soft tissue packed into a fabric container — less a matter of shape than of surface tension. [Figure 3:8] The necklines of these bodices differed, but were generally lowish. Even so, the fullest portion of the bosom was carried at a lower position than the bodice neckline, as is the case today. In a few fairly rare paintings, where the outer gown is shown to be cut extremely low, the bosom, in either a chemise or a closely fitted inner bodice swells out above it. This is the line which careless costumers exploit for 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century "milkmaid" costumes. Those are not particularly accurate. Consider that these paintings were generally painted in the studio, from live models who, when posing, were not actively engaged in physical labor. If they had been, just how comfortably would they have been able to get on with their work in clothing which offered no support?

With a corset, there is a different dynamic at work altogether. In a corset the body is contained within a garment made in an artificial shape, to which it must conform, since the materials of which the corset is made are less pliant than it is. If the corset is to do its job, it must shore up any portion of the body which is not firm enough to stand up by



Plate C-1: *The Duchess of York*, by LaFayette, 1897. As can be seen by the behavior of the fabric of the bodice, the apex of a Victorian lady's bosom was dictated by the top edge of her corset, and had little to do with her anatomy. It can also be seen that although the fabric of the bodice is very light and soft and is, moreover, drawn into soft folds at the waist, the silhouette of the torso is as crisp as if it had been cut from a pattern, suggesting that the photograph may have been artfully retouched by the studio to make the waist appear smaller. The sale of such portraits of the rich and famous formed no small portion of a professional photographer's income.

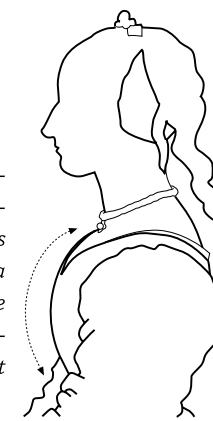


Figure 3:8 - In the close-fitting, unstructured bodice, the bosom takes on the contours of a rounded bulge with the fullness below the neckline edge and without any specific apex.

itself, serving as a handy portable retaining wall.

I have already stated that the technology of these early corsets was primitive. There is literally no shaping in the bosom of a Tudor corset. By this period, tailoring had progressed to the point that a good fit could be made for the back and shoulders. Both are fairly bony areas which impose their own

shape and cannot be easily altered. The bosom, on the other hand, has a tendency to take whatever shape is imposed on it, making any sort of either a stable or an accurate fit problematic. By far the easiest shape to impose, was no shape, i.e., the negation of shape inherent in a flat plane. This was found to work fairly well, with a few reservations. Short of surgery, it is not possible to make an existing portion of the body disappear. If it exists, it has to go somewhere. Therefore, some spatial provision for the bosom had to be made. The method adopted

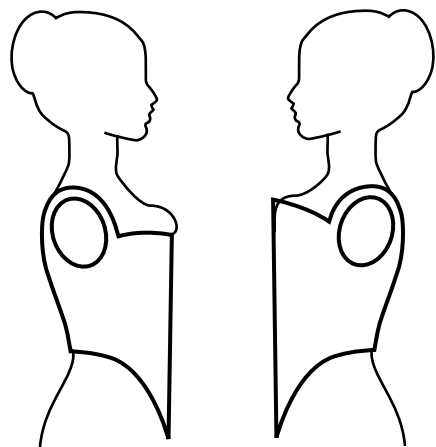


Figure 3:10 - Too low. Figure 3:11 - Too high.

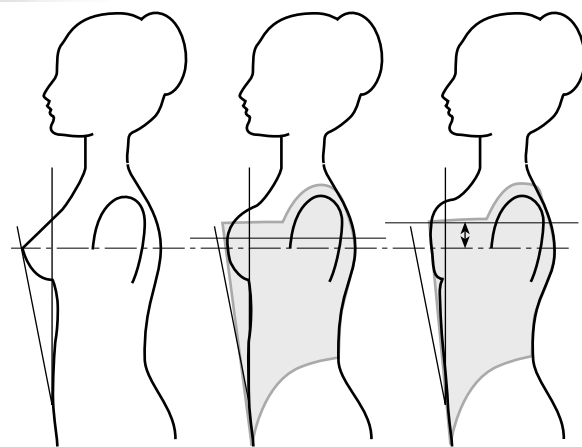


Figure 3:9 - As the bosom receives greater compression from the flat, opposing plane, the apex rises to a higher position.

was to angle the intended flat plane so that it stood farther from the ribcage the higher it rose from the point of contact. The mature bosom, generally speaking, is a rounded portion of soft tissue, of which, due to the law of gravity, the fullest portion will normally be on the lower side. Being soft tissue, however, it will, within reason, take whatever shape its environment will allow. When the shape allowed to it is narrow at the bottom, and widening at the top, it will, without any particular objection, conform to the shape permitted, with the greater fullness shifting to a higher position. [Figure 3:9] Should this retaining wall be too low, the bosom will overhang it. Which is a rather ugly line. [Figure 3:10] If the wall is too high, the edge of the corset will stand in a ridge above the bosom, which is no better. [Figure 3:11] Within a certain range between the two, the corset will shore the bosom up to a level at which it is securely contained. Above the corset's edge, the uncontained tissue will swell into the rounded "peach basket" configuration which is much admired in

period costume. The open neckline of the corset makes this possible.

During the Tudor period, the neckline of the gown almost invariably coincided with the top of the corset, i.e., the "apex" of the bosom. (No great engineering feat, since the "corset" generally consisted of an outer bodice having been stiffened with whalebone.) In the earlier half of the period, a high-necked ensemble was only produced by the addition of a separate, yoke-like addition over the shoulders and bosom which either was tied, pinned or sewn in place, usually with a very visible join line running horizontally along the edge of the neckline of the gown beneath.

The aforementioned doublet bodice of the later part of the period seems to have been a short-lived style which was almost at once reserved for active sportswear, disappearing from general daywear by the time of the Restoration. By the time of the Restoration, the bodice of an average day dress was again cut along the lines of the corset (by this time almost always a separate garment), with the chillier, or more prudish filling in the open neckline with a scarf. Throughout the Tudor period, the low necked bodice had often been worn over a high necked chemise or partlet, which usually had an embroidered neckband, and in the later portion of the era, a ruff.

#### The Nipped-In Sides. [Figure 3:12]

This effect, although apparent during all corseted eras, has not yet been noticed by the general audience. It may therefore, prove to be somewhat dispensable, unlike the other two features,

above. However, it is a feature which is built-in to the altered bodice pattern featured in this collection, so we might as well examine it, and its causes as well. This effect becomes most noticeable when wearing a long-waisted corset with waist tabs. In the standard Renaissance corset, it may not be as evident.

This effect is again the result of the human body taking the line of least resistance against a less pliant material. The process operates as follows; when a rigid busk is propped between belly and bosom with an airspace between it and the midriff area, and a corset is essentially wrapped around busk, airspace and torso, and then drawn closed, the areas of most resistance are the bosom and belly, where the busk is solidly braced. The area of least resistance is the airspace, where the busk is not in contact with the body. The corset will draw the body and busk closer together, first, by causing the back to arch, and second, by placing slight pressure on the sides.

The second factor is about as simple to explain, but takes a little longer. The two points of stress in the corset are

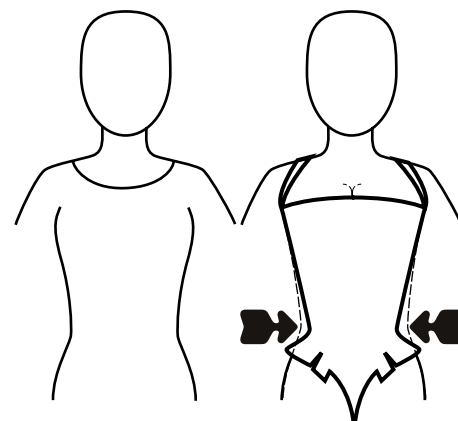


Figure 3:12 - The nipped-in sides.

the center front, where it is anchored, and the center back where the lacings are exerting force to draw the garment closed. Between the immovable object, aka as the busk, and the irresistible force of the lacings, the sides of the corset play generally only a supportive role. Since the sides are being effectively pulled at from both directions, their natural response will be to try to span the distance between the two points in a straight line. [Figure 3:13] The body is in their way however, so the sides press in on the sides of the body in their attempt to travel directly between the center front and back. In a Victorian corset, which was designed to constrict the waist, this pressure was continuous, pressing in from all directions. This is not the case in the Tudor corset. The waist of a Tudor corset is made the same size as the wearer's waist. So her waist is not being roughly pinched. A slight pressure is being exerted on her sides, a fairly strong pressure is being exerted on the back of her waist and no actual pressure is being exerted at the front of her waist at all. As stated above, it is not possible for an existing portion of the body to simply disappear. In a Victorian corset, the unwanted fullness about the waist would relocate in hip and thorax. In a Tudor corset, since the torso is equipped with floating ribs, some of the width of the torso will be guided toward the vacant airspace at the front of the body, behind the busk, changing the shape, but not the actual size of her waist. No pressure is placed on her diaphragm, so breathing will be unimpaired. But her waist, normally

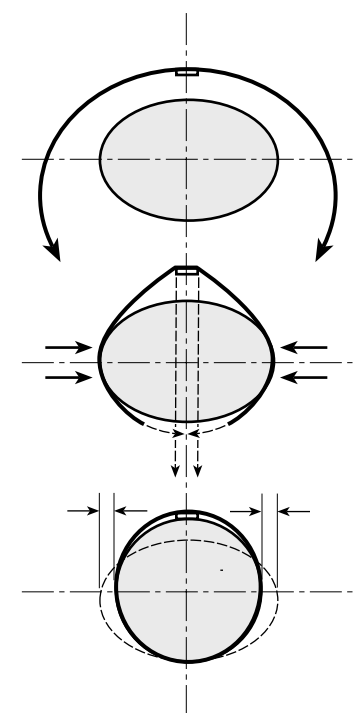


Figure 3:13 - As the corset is drawn around the body, the stress from busk and lacings causes a compression at the sides of the torso, which causes the waist to take a narrower, but thicker shape. The wearer's actual waist measurement generally remains unchanged.

an oval, will become more like a circle. The ever-present pressure on the back of the wearer's waist is probably much of the source of the weariness which the unpracticed corset-wearer experiences. These effects may be more extreme in persons who have large waists.

One notable exception to this last process will be the case of the woman with an hourglass figure. (Or the slender lady with a large bust.) An hourglass figure is bad news in Tudor costuming. In this case, unless the wearer chooses to be very swaybacked, her waist measurement when corseted, may well be anything up to several inches larger than her real waist measurement. This will be because she may not be brought



into full contact with the busk of the corset, which will continue to contain both her torso and an airspace. There may be other exceptions as well but this is the only one which immediately comes to mind.

The visible effects of this process are the slight thickening of the waist in profile, mentioned above, and a strongly tapered line from armpit to waist when seen from full front or back. The pointed bodice will further enhance this line. The hips, in contrast, will display a sharper, and more pronounced curve.

It may well have been an exploitation of this effect which enabled adolescent boys to present a convincing appearance as women in Tudor and Elizabethan theatre, although, as stated above, the effect is less pronounced in slender individuals. Still, the aesthetic taste of the Elizabethan period, if I may remind everyone, at least according to all sources left to us from which to draw a conclusion, seems to have favored a style of female beauty whose configuration appears to have been long-waisted and broad shouldered — essentially a masculine configuration. Evidently, insofar as the clothed figure is concerned, the classical ideal of the boy-with-breasts had made a triumphant comeback. At least in 16<sup>th</sup> century English art.

**In Summary:**

You may stiffen a bodice to a fare-thee-well, but if the bodice you use is a standard, modern shape, it is not going to look Tudor, no matter how much time and effort you put into it.

Which returns us to the starting gate:

**Q.** How does one figure out what must be done to a modern bodice pattern in order to transform it into something resembling a geometric exercise — to say nothing of figuring out how one is going to deal with any garment as unforgiving as a Tudor corset —and still be able to get a proper fit?

**A.** Well, obviously, one starts (or somebody else starts) by making a lot of mistakes. With any luck, they manage to make most of the obvious ones and correct the process from there. With further luck someone else organizes the process into an accessible form and teaches a roomful of other people the steps which must be gone through. With just *fabulous* luck, one of those people composes a many-horn concerto on the subject of antique underwear and starts writing query letters to publishers. (It takes more luck than I possess to get it significantly further than that!)