

A woman with long, wavy red hair is seated in a grand, dimly lit hall. She is wearing a white lace-trimmed blouse with a corset underneath, which has a dark, ornate pattern. A dark green shawl is draped over her shoulders. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background shows a large, arched hall with a table covered in a red cloth in the distance.

A SHORT BOOK FOR THE CURIOUS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CORSET

by

CAYENNA

BEFORE WE START

A NOTE FROM ME

I have spent a lot of my life in corsets. At ren faires, in costume, in my own living room on a Tuesday because I felt like it. And the question I get asked more than any other is some version of "doesn't that hurt?"

The honest answer is no, not when it fits. The longer answer is this little book.

The corset has been blamed for a lot over the last five hundred years. Fainting. Broken ribs. Women being kept in their place. Some of that is fair and a lot of it is myth. What almost nobody talks about is how clever the thing actually is, how much it changed, and how many ordinary people wore one every day without thinking twice about it, the same way we wear a bra now.

This isn't an academic book. It's the story I wish someone had handed me the first time I laced up: where the corset came from, how it changed, why it disappeared, and why it keeps coming back.

Grab a tea. Loosen your laces. Let's go.

Cayenna

CONTENTS

WHAT'S INSIDE

1 Before the corset

2 The 1500s: a pair of bodies

3 The 1700s: stays and the cone

4 Regency: the short stay

5 The Victorians build a machine

6 The S-bend and the end of an era

7 Girdles, war and the comeback

8 Myths I hear every week

9 Wearing one today

A little glossary

BEFORE THE CORSET

CHAPTER 1 · ANCIENT WORLD TO THE 1400S

People have been shaping the torso with clothing for a very long time. One of the oldest examples people point to is a Minoan figurine from Crete, around 1600 BCE, showing a woman in a tight laced bodice. It was worn on the outside, and it was clearly meant to be seen.

For most of the medieval period, though, there wasn't a corset as we'd recognise it. Shape came from cut and lacing. A well fitted gown, laced snug at the side or front, did most of the work. Layers of linen did the rest.

The word itself is old. "Corset" shows up in English by the late 1300s, borrowed from French, where a corps is a body and a corset is literally a little body. Back then it meant a laced bodice, an outer garment. The idea of a corset as a stiff, shaping undergarment comes much later, and the word doesn't settle into that meaning until the end of the 1700s.

If you take one thing from this chapter: the corset started life as clothing you showed off, not something hidden underneath. It went underground later, and it keeps trying to come back up.

THE 1500S: A PAIR OF BODIES

CHAPTER 2 · TUDORS AND ELIZABETHANS

This is where the real story starts. In the 1500s, fashionable European women began wearing what were called "a pair of bodies." The name comes from how they were made, in two halves, front and back, laced together. Later on people called them stays.

They were built from layers of linen, sometimes silk, stiffened with paste and with strips of whalebone. Whalebone isn't actually bone. It's baleen, the flexible plates some whales use to filter food from seawater. It could be split into thin strips that bent, held their shape, and warmed to the body. For about three hundred years it was the plastic of its day.

The shape they made wasn't an hourglass at all. It was a cone. Flat in front, smooth from the bust down to a point at the waist. The look was upright, still and very formal, and it went perfectly with the stiff gowns you see in portraits of Elizabeth I.

The busk

Down the front sat a busk: a single flat piece of wood, whalebone, ivory or metal slid into a pocket to keep the front dead straight. Busks became love tokens. Men carved them with initials, hearts and little messages and gave them to the women they were courting, and she wore it right over her heart. Honestly, that's the most romantic thing in this whole book.

What about the iron corsets?

You may have seen photos of hinged iron corsets from this period. They do exist in museums, but many historians think they were orthopedic braces for back problems, or later curiosities, rather than anything a fashionable lady wore to dinner.

THE 1700S: STAYS AND THE CONE

CHAPTER 3 · GEORGIAN ERA

By the 1700s, stays were simply part of getting dressed. Rich or working, most women wore them. A servant's stays might be plainer and laced at the front so she could do it herself, but she wore them.

The shape was still a cone, a V from the shoulders down to a narrow waist, now often with the shoulders drawn back for that proud, upright posture you see in 18th century paintings. Stays were heavily boned, often almost solid with whalebone, and they gave real back support for women who spent the day lifting, carrying and bending.

That support is something people forget. For a lot of women, stays weren't about vanity. They were about being able to work all day without your back giving out, and about holding up the weight of very heavy skirts.

Jumps: the comfy option

For lounging at home there were jumps: a softer, quilted, unboned bodice. Think of them as the sweatpants of the 1700s. There was even a little saying from 1762 that compared the two, with stays as the proper, formal choice and jumps as the relaxed one.

Toward the 1770s and 1780s, fashion began moving toward something softer, and shorter stays started to appear. That set up the biggest change in shape the corset had seen in two hundred years.

REGENCY: THE SHORT STAY

CHAPTER 4 · AROUND 1795 TO 1820

If you have ever watched a Jane Austen adaptation, you know this silhouette. High waist sitting just under the bust, light flowing dress falling straight down. Very Greek statue.

A cone shaped stay doesn't work under that, so the corset changed completely. Regency short stays were often just a band around the ribcage, sometimes with a little gusset for each breast, designed to lift and separate rather than to shape the waist at all. The waist basically disappeared under the gown.

Some women wore longer stays under these gowns too, for a smoother line, and some wore very little. It was the least restrictive the corset would be until the 20th century.

It didn't last. By the 1820s the waistline was sliding back down to its natural place, skirts were getting fuller, and the waist was about to become the star of the show.

This is my favourite era to sew for, by the way. Short stays are quick to make, comfy to wear, and do wonders for a bust under a light gown.

THE VICTORIANS BUILD A MACHINE

CHAPTER 5 · 1830S TO 1890S

This is the corset most people picture: the Victorian hourglass. And it's the era where the corset turned from hand made clothing into a manufactured product, with patents, factories and advertising.

Metal eyelets and steel

Through the 1830s, metal eyelets and clasps started showing up. Before that, lacing holes were stitched by hand, and if you pulled hard they tore. Metal eyelets meant you could lace tighter and the corset would survive it. Steel boning began replacing whalebone around the same time. Steel was cheaper, more consistent and didn't run out the way whale populations eventually did.

The front opening busk

Instead of a single solid busk you had to lace yourself into, Victorian corsets got a split busk: two steel strips down the front with little studs and loops that clip together. You could put it on and take it off yourself in seconds without undoing the back lacing. Most corsets you can buy today still close this way.

Factories and steam

In 1839 a man named Jean Werly patented corsets woven on a loom, which helped bring the price down. Then in 1868 an English maker, Edwin Izod, developed steam moulding: a finished, starched corset was put on a heated metal form shaped like a torso and left to dry, so it set in a perfect curve. The V&A museum in London has one of his, a wedding corset stamped with his patent.

The pushback

Not everyone was a fan. From the 1850s on, the dress reform movement campaigned against corsets and especially tightlacing, and doctors wrote warnings about health problems, including in pregnancy. Some worries were real, and some were tangled up with other agendas of the time.

THE S-BEND AND THE END OF AN ERA

CHAPTER 6 · 1890S TO 1910S

At the very end of the century, a French corsetière named Inès Gâches-Sarraute introduced a new design with a straight front busk. The idea was to take pressure off the stomach, which sounds healthier, and in theory it was.

In practice it pushed the chest forward and the hips back, creating the famous S-bend silhouette of the early 1900s. Picture the Gibson Girl: pigeon breasted, tiny waist, bottom tilted out behind. It's a striking look and almost impossible to stand in naturally.

From about 1908, the corset started getting longer, reaching down over the hips and thighs to give the long, straight line that slimmer dresses needed. By now the corset was moving away from cinching the waist and toward smoothing the whole body.

That change is what opened the door to its replacement.

GIRDLES, WAR AND THE COMEBACK

CHAPTER 7 · 1910S TO TODAY

Around 1911, better rubberised elastic arrived, and with it the girdle. It smoothed and held without bones or laces, and it moved with you. For a world that was getting busier and more active, that was hard to argue with.

You'll often hear that the First World War killed the corset, and that American women gave up theirs to save enough steel to build warships. It's a great story. I love it. But I haven't been able to find solid records behind the exact numbers that get repeated, so take it as a legend with a grain of truth. What is true is that by the 1920s the straight, boyish flapper look had pushed the corset out of everyday fashion.

It never really left

- **1939:** waist nipping corsets came back briefly, right before the Second World War.
- **1947:** Christian Dior's New Look brought back the tiny waist and full skirt, and with it a wave of waist cinchers.
- **1952:** Warner's released the "Merry Widow," a strapless corselette that became a pin-up classic.
- **1970s and 1980s:** designers like Vivienne Westwood, Jean Paul Gaultier and Thierry Mugler started putting corsets on the outside again, as fashion, not underwear.
- **2020s:** "Regencycore" and corset tops everywhere, most of them without any boning at all.

So, full circle. The corset began as something you wore on the outside to be seen, spent four hundred years hidden underneath, and is now back on the outside where it started.

MYTHS I HEAR EVERY WEEK

CHAPTER 8 · LET'S CLEAR A FEW UP

"Women had ribs removed to fit their corsets."

This one gets repeated constantly, and there's no reliable record of it happening. Surgery before modern anaesthetic and antibiotics was dangerous enough that nobody was doing optional rib removal for fashion. It's a good story, not history.

"Everyone laced down to a tiny waist."

Most women wore their corsets the way we wear a supportive bra: snug, not crushing. Extreme tightlacing existed and got a lot of attention in newspapers, which is exactly why we remember it. It wasn't normal everyday wear.

"Corsets made women faint all the time."

A corset laced too tight, in a hot room, in heavy clothes, could absolutely make someone light headed. But the fainting Victorian lady is mostly a stage and novel cliché. A well fitted corset doesn't stop you breathing.

"Corsets were just about looking thin."

Shape mattered, but so did posture, back support, holding up heavy skirts and, honestly, modesty and fitting in. Going without stays in the 1700s would have been a bit like going out without a bra today. People would notice.

WEARING ONE TODAY

CHAPTER 9 · A FEW THINGS I'VE LEARNED

If this book has made you curious about trying one, good. Here's what I wish I'd known at the start.

Fit matters more than anything

A cheap "fashion corset" with plastic boning and a corset built with steel are completely different garments. Plastic bends and digs in. Steel spreads the pressure. If you want to wear one for a whole day at a faire, steel boned is worth it.

Shape is personal

Curvier bodies especially do better with a corset cut for real hips and a real bust, not a standard size squeezed tighter. A good fit should feel like a firm hug, not a squeeze.

Lace it in stages

Close the front busk first, then tighten the back gradually from the middle out. If you're new, wear it for an hour or two the first few times. Your body gets used to it.

Listen to your body

Pins and needles, sharp pain, or not being able to take a full breath all mean loosen it. Comfortable is the goal. Anyone who tells you it's supposed to hurt is selling you something.

One last thing. If you have a health condition, are pregnant, or have any doubt at all, check with a doctor before wearing one regularly. Corsets are fun. They're not medicine.

A LITTLE GLOSSARY

WORDS YOU'LL BUMP INTO

Baleen

The flexible plates some whales use to filter food. Called "whalebone" and used for boning for centuries.

Boning

The stiff strips sewn into channels that give a corset its shape. Historically whalebone or reed, later steel, now often plastic or steel.

Busk

The stiff piece down the centre front. Once a single carved piece, later a split steel closure that clips shut.

A pair of bodies

The 1500s name for early stays, made in two halves and laced together.

Jumps

A soft, unboned, quilted bodice worn in the 1700s for comfort at home.

Short stays

The short, bust supporting stays of the Regency, worn under high waisted gowns.

Stays

The usual English name for the corset before the 1800s.

S-bend

The early 1900s silhouette created by the straight front corset: chest forward, hips back.

Steam moulding

Setting a finished corset on a heated torso form so it dries into a permanent curve. Developed by Edwin Izod in 1868.

Tightlacing

Lacing a corset well beyond a comfortable fit to make the waist as small as possible.

Thank you for reading.

CAYENNA

@cayennapepper · cayennapepper.com

A Brief History of the Corset by Cayenna. First edition, October 2026.

This short book is written for fun and curiosity, not as an academic source. Dates and details were checked against museum and reference sources where possible. Where a popular story couldn't be confirmed, it's labelled as such in the text.

Further reading: the Victoria and Albert Museum (London) collection of corsets and stays, including Edwin Izod's steam moulded wedding corset; and the "History of corsets" article on Wikipedia, which is a good jumping off point with its own sources.

Cover image: Cayenna. All rights reserved.