



CORSET CURSE: Costume dramas such as *Bridgerton* are prompting despairing designers to jump on the wagon, with corsets seemingly on the way back

Fashion victimhood to the fore – thanks, of corset, to costume dramas

AVERT your eyes gentlemen! This one's not for you.... Hello ladies. I glean from a fashion magazine that corsets are on their way back, apparently prompted by the influence of costume drama on television.

Despairing designers in an economic recession, are jumping on the wagon. Ho hum, fashion is cyclical. What goes around, comes around. As a post-war baby-boomer I was reared in a society of well-armoured women, for many of whom corsets were an effective policy of containment and a signal remedy against the cold in their kidneys. They were not so much dressed as upholstered. Attempt to hug an elderly aunt and you ricocheted off her.

The rite of passage from childhood to budding adolescence, from socks to stockings, began with the wordlessly supportive presentation of a cotton bra and a suspender belt that cruelly delineated every undulation of puppy fat and the beginning of a life of bondage.

At 16 came the 'SlimJim' girdle, encasing waist to hip, made of strong elastomeric fibre 'with fingertip panels for extra control'.

Weighing only seven stone I could barely get one leg past the other in it. Modesty was all. Necklines below the collar bone were met with acerbic remarks like, "Nice girls don't put all their goods in the shop window."

Mini-skirtmishes over decent hem length went on for years until the hippy-dippy, drapey-trailly, patchouli-scented '70s and Women's Lib, though, to the best of my knowledge, there were few bras burned in Norn Iron.

And so it continued, the arbitrary diktat of fashion decreeing the ever-changing silhouette of women and we, like sheep, wore it whether it suited us

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or not. The photographs live on to embarrass us. *Dynasty* dominated the '80s with shoulder-pads like rugby prop-forwards, eccentric asymmetric hairstyles and ankle-breaking platform soles.

I'll not dwell upon the rigid zip-fronted undergarment bought to achieve Joan Collins-like contours, save to say I had to be cut out of it at three in the morning by the Loving Spouse, very gingerly, with a Stanley knife. Today, morals are looser, clothes are tighter. Now it's all sporty, second-skin stretchwear and big hoovy trainers, worn mostly by people sitting on sofas eating popcorn or chips and watching telly.

There are many fewer formal occasions for

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making a sartorially elegant effort, but when they arise, induce a flurry of flabby panic.

Fear not. At the back of every sizeable dress shop is a lingerie department and at the back of that department is a discreet display of 'flesh-toned' undergarments – though I've never seen flesh that colour. It resembles a medieval gibbet of beige boneless corpses

Here is salvation for the 'well covered' who've tried and failed to slim into the special occasion outfit.

Here comes a steady stream of quart-sized women, anxious to pour themselves into pint-sized garments bought more in hope than expectation and recognising with relief a last resort when they see one. Ah, bliss! Thy name is Lycra. It's generally agreed that clothes look better on slender people, but for the well-padded, these are a boon. Few of us are naturally of model proportions. Most have put on weight during this pandemic out of sheer boredom or comfort eating. Half-an-hour's brisk walking per day is counter-productive if you come home to an Ulster fry.

Suffocating undies don't exactly guarantee a fret-free outing, but it's the price we pay for self-indulgence – and here, on the rails is salvation of a sort. The 'all-in-one' has much to recommend it – a svelte, seamless silhouette from shoulder to knee with not a corrugation in sight, but unsuitable for those fond of energetic dancing (so perspiration-inducing,) or the weak-bladdered (very iffy in a small toilet cubicle with a faulty lock.) Separates, while more comfortable, create a series of horizontal midriff folds of escaping blubber, reminiscent of the Michelin man. Better avoided.

Sadly, while weak-willed women secretly espouse such subterfuge, we cannot yet claim to be fully liberated. Still, it's surely wiser to base life on a firm foundation.

ON THIS DAY

FEBRUARY 9 1921

Special Killed in Down Attack

ABOUT 10.15 last night an attack with bombs and revolvers was made on three policemen in Warrenpoint as a result of which one was killed and the other two seriously wounded. The attack took place at Back Seaview. One of the policemen – Constable Scott – belonged to the regular force; the others – Constables Cummings [who died] and Wallace – belonged to the Special Constabulary.

Pogrom Silence Denounced

IN his Lenten Pastoral, Bishop Joseph MacRory refers to the trials of his Catholic flock in Belfast. 'Six months have passed since they were expelled from their work. They had given no offence to anyone. ... A very disappointing and disheartening feature of the pogrom is that the great non-Catholic community of Belfast, with the honourable exception of a few clergymen, has been content to look on silently at this continued injustice. It may be that many of them have been afraid to speak up. Nor can the inaction of the British government in Dublin Castle be easily comprehended. We are being constantly reminded of their burning desire for law and order yet here, in the protracted victimisation of thousands of working men, is a most flagrant example of lawlessness but still the powers that persist in ruling us have not thought fit to move a finger to have justice done.'

Death of Parnell's Widow

MRS KATHERINE Parnell (76), widow of Charles Stewart Parnell, died on Friday at Brighton. This lady was an Englishwoman – the daughter of (Rev) Sir John Page Wood (an Anglican clergyman). Her brother was General Sir Evelyn Wood, a famous English soldier. In 1867, aged 21, she married William Henry O'Shea, a member of an Irish family of the 'shoneen' class who had some connection with commerce and sport. Seeking to advance his own interests, O'Shea managed to get elected as a [Home Rule] MP.

Parnell's relationship with Mrs O'Shea was suspected by her husband as early as 1881 when the Irish leader was challenged to a duel by Captain O'Shea. At the Commission trial [1888], Captain O'Shea swore that letters attributed to Parnell [condoning the Phoenix Park murders] were really written by the Irish leader; it was later proved that the documents had been forged. In December 1889 Captain O'Shea filed a divorce action against his wife citing Parnell as co-respondent. (As partition loomed and IRA attacks gained momentum, Bishop MacRory highlighted the fact that the British government had failed to seek the reinstatement of the 8000 Catholic workers driven from their jobs in 1920.

Speaking later in Belfast City Hall on 'unemployment', the Chief Secretary, Greenwood pointedly ignored the issue to Nationalist outrage.)

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