



National Trust Photographic Library / Andreas von Einsiedel. 1940s pink nylon camiknickers and 'Christian Dior' stockings in the Killerton Costume Collection, Killerton House, nr Exeter. Nylon was a new fabric during and after the Second World War and was considered a luxury.



National Trust Photographic Library / Andreas von Einsiedel. Man's rich satin dressing gown in the Killerton Costume Collection, 1830s. The dressing gown has brown embroidery. Worn to cover up nightwear to receive informal visitors.

the history of underwear by Zita Thornton

Do you know what links the bristles of a toothbrush with a pair of stockings? Or who banned thick waists? Or who said "Without foundation there is no fashion" Answers. Toothbrush bristles and stockings were the first objects to be made from nylon in the 1830s. And it was Catherine Medici who was fussy about waist sizes at the court of her husband Henri II of France in the sixteenth century. And it was the Paris couturier, Christian Dior who made the last statement about his post war collection in the 1950s.

A study of the history of underwear reveals that all three had a significant influence on what women wore beneath their outer garments.

The foundation of underwear

The first under garment was a basic chemise. A simple shift of linen or cotton which was worn day or night up until the twentieth century providing a comfortable and washable layer. Initially made at home, but by the eighteenth century bought from a Lingère in France or a milliner in England, chemises were worn beneath corsets and stays.

It is odd to think that the first foundation garments for women were made and fitted by men, until you realise that there was nothing ladylike about the first stays. They controlled

the wayward flesh of ladies into the fashionable eighteenth century silhouette and moulded the bodies of growing children by means of cord, canes and whalebones inserted into canvas channels which were quilted or stiffened with paste. Some had a pocket for an optional wooden, later metal, busk to flatten the front. Laces at the side or back allowed for adjustments. By the mid-nineteenth century, manufacturers were registering designs for corsets and advertising their unbreakable, hygienic and comfortable qualities. How anything used to achieve a 19-21" waist could be called 'comfortable' is a mystery!



National Trust Photographic Library / Andreas von Einsiedel. 1860s crinoline hoop with a white chemise underneath. Crinoline designs were highly innovative technological designs and were often patented.



National Trust Photographic Library / Andreas von Einsiedel. View of 1940s pink nylon camiknickers and cream lace bra and knickers in the Killerton Costume Collection. Nylon was a new fabric in this period and was considered very luxurious.



National Trust Photographic Library / Andreas von Einsiedel. Detail of 18th century white linen shift in the Killerton Costume Collection. This is a rare example of an early basic undergarment which may also have been used as nightwear.



National Trust Photographic Library / Andreas von Einsiedel. A child's corset from the 1830s. It is off-white satin, has dull yellow stitching and may be a rare example of homemade underwear. It was worn to develop good posture in children.

Although there were corsets for every occasion from riding to pregnancy, quilted jumps could be worn for informal times or chosen as an option by pregnant women. These were not boned but stiffened with reeds instead. Gradually, a variety of more flexible materials were introduced for boning including spiral steels, used until the 1960s. In the mid-nineteenth century, the fixing and unfixing of corsets was made easier by the inclusion of front fastenings, but they were still laced as tightly as possible.

Corsets were worn over the chemise which, after about 1840, was tucked into drawers. Before that time, drawers weren't generally worn. They were introduced as a response to flimsier, sheer fabrics and the wearing of crinolines which had a habit of tipping up and revealing more than was intended. They were long and loose, attached to a waistband and tied with tapes or buttoned at the front. They were decorated with pin tucks or discreet embroidery, always white as coloured underwear was considered very 'fast' until the twentieth century.

A corset cover or an under-petticoat would be worn over the corset. Petticoats were worn both for warmth and to support the lady's gown. In the eighteenth century they were heavily decorated and revealed by the cut of the gown itself. Nineteenth century versions were filled with down or heavily quilted. Although colourful, were not intended to be shown. Petticoats supported the dress, helped by rows of cord stitched along the hem. It wasn't unusual to wear up to sixteen at one time. Given their weight, it is perhaps not surprising that they were replaced by the crinoline. This cage of whalebone or cane hoops was lighter but impractical. Difficult to control and dangerous around open fires and candles, Queen Victoria refused to have anything to do with them until one summer in 1868 when she was forced by the heat to give up her many layers of petticoats.

Crinolines lasted for twenty years until they were superseded by the more manageable crinolette or half hoops.

Supporting fashion

Hoops and bustles have been used throughout the centuries in various sizes and styles to achieve a fashionable outline. In 1709, hoops were first recorded threaded through satin, linen or cotton petticoats so that the wide skirts of a luxurious dress on top could be fully admired. By about 1740 hoops were so wide that women had difficulty walking through doors but men were certainly kept at bay as they couldn't get near women without having their shins banged! Towards the end of the century side hoops gave way to back bustles. These pads which rested on the hips were made from fabric or cork and supported a variety of drapery which adorned the back of dresses.

During the nineteenth century the fashion had been for wide skirts supported by petti-

coats or the crinoline but by 1870, crinolettes, or half hoops and bustles as well as pleating, puffs, trains and draping put the emphasis behind! Ten years later, these were being incorporated into the gown itself reducing the amount of supporting underwear needed. In 1883, the Dress Reform Movement started to free women from the tyranny of corsets but it was many years before women gave them up.

Fashion magazines still advised supporting the bust and apart from the bra burning years of the 1970s, and a brief period in the twenties when breast flatteners were used, the fashion has remained. The twentieth century has seen various devices to separate, uplift and support the bosom using wires, pads and balconettes, all of which are variations on the first bra, officially registered in 1914 by Mary Phelps Jacob. She needed something to wear beneath a sheer silk dress so she joined two handkerchiefs with ribbon. The first patented bra 'Caresse Crosby' was not however, a success and Jacobs sold the rights to Warner Brothers Corset Company for \$1500 who went on to make 15 million dollars from the idea over the following 30 years. We owe the comfort of cup sizes to a Russian Immigrant, Ida Rosenthal, who introduced the alphabetical sizing system in the 1920s.

The New Look

It is Dior's collection of 1947 that has been termed 'The New Look' but in fact it was a fashion which harked back to Victorian times with tiny waists and full skirts. In between, new artificial materials such as rayon and elastic fibres were used to achieve a boyish look. Washable foundation garments moulded more comfortably and the ubiquitous chemise, finally disappeared allowing them to be worn close to the skin with just a light slip on top.

Glamorous garments in floaty fabrics of white or peach were worn by some whilst others went for the practicality of stockinette, elastic waisted knickers or discreetly trimmed wool and elastic combinations. The most significant of the new fibres, was nylon, first discovered by a scientist in the thirties and used for stockings in the USA in 1938 at a time when supplies of silk were cut off from Japan. During the second world war, nylon was used for military purposes and underwear took second place. Bras and girdles were not available but firms such as Berlei still advertised in magazines lest women should forget!

Continued.....

This feature continues on the next page with a price guide to underwear and a heritage feature on the Costume Collection at Killerton House. Includes information on 2001 Exhibition and visitor information.

the history of underwear

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Enduring stockings.

It is easy to think of stockings as being the nylon variety produced in their millions in the thirties, but in fact stockings have been worn as underwear by men and women since before the eighteenth century, only disappearing when the fashion for mini skirts provoked the mass wearing of tights. A local newspaper in 1803 in the midst of the sheer muslin look, reported that for some women their only modesty was the blushing pink dye of their stockings. From the eighteenth century, stockings knitted from wool, cotton or silk replaced those cut from cloth. They were held up by ribbon and later spring garters with decorations which highlighted the ankle. Suspenders were introduced in 1887.

The first stockings were made in bright colours especially when chemical dyes were introduced in the nineteenth century but by the turn of that century colour was only used for embroidery and stockings were usually black, grey-brown or various skin tones.

The values of undercover garments.

For silk stockings with metallic embroidery from the eighteenth century, expect to pay between £400 and £2000.

With twentieth century nylon stockings it is important for them to be in their original packet, preferably with a designer's name. Christie's sold a pair of nylon Schiaparelli stockings from the early fifties, part of a lot which also included black and white striped nylon tights for £207.

Hoops, bustles and crinolines are much rarer, although Christie's had two or three in their costume sale of November 1999. Side hoops of pink striped linen from the second half of the eighteenth century were £9,200. Later hoops from the late nineteenth / early twentieth century in the earlier eighteenth century style were £345.

A crinoline cage of steel bands linked with canvas bands, along with a bustle from the 1880s and an ivory sateen corset from the same period sold for £483, which was £230 more than a year earlier.

The sale also included a collection of petticoats for £345, a corset and suspenders from the 1890s for £253 and a cotton chemise for £150. A 1998 sale had two stays, one in light brown with boning and ivory stitching, front and back lacing which sold for £1,035 and another in silk brocade from 1770-80 was £414. (Includes buyer's premium)

Costume at Killerton

The costume collection at Killerton House near Exeter in Devon, contains many examples of underwear which were the theme of its annual costume collection for 2000. For those who missed the Exhibition, the costume curator of Killerton House, Shelley Tobin has written a book *Inside Out, A Brief History of Underwear*. (Published by the National Trust. £4.99) It contains colour pictures of items from Killerton and other collections, and comprehensive information about the undercover garments that have shaped our fashions and our bodies.

The Art of Dress by Jane Ashelford (National Trust £19.99) features more of the costume collection which was started during the second world war by Paulise de Bush.

From March until autumn 2001 the costume exhibition at Killerton House will be *Dress Sense*, featuring the wardrobe of individuals from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. The Exhibition will reflect the varying styles and tastes of women from differing walks of life from home made to designer clothes. Plans are underway for a Summer Exhibition to exhibit a collection of celebrity clothing.

Visitors to Killerton can also enjoy the house which dates from 1779 with later additions, and the eighteen acre gardens, which includes a rustic 'bear house' once the home of a pet bear and an ice house which, when filled with ice from the lake would supply the house for three years. Throughout the year there are study days on various aspects of costume.

For more information contact Killerton House, Broadclyst, Exeter, Devon. Telephone 01392 881345.



Killerton House and Gardens, near Exeter in Devon. Please see the accompanying text for 2001 Exhibition information.