

# Feature



## The Cumberland Corset

**Kathie Gust\***

*This indispensable gentleman's foundation garment was popular during the Regency era, but is almost unknown today, except in the pages of a few Regency romances.*

During the Regency period, when clinging, neo-Grecian lines were the fashion for women, female corsets fell from favor, corset makers turned their attention to men. At that time, the rise of the *dandy*, a man who aspired to lead an aristocratic life of immaculate fashionable dress and leisurely habits, led to a briefly profitable alternative.

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*'And,' continued Sir Bonamy, hope in his eyes, 'you said I creaked!'*

*'Now, that,' conceded her ladyship, 'I do recall! But don't give it another thought, my dear.*

*I have grown perfectly accustomed to it! Never abandon your Cumberland corset, I beg of you!'*

— "False Colours" by Georgette Heyer

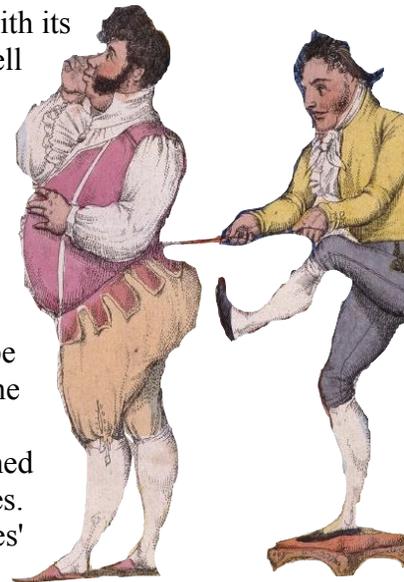
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One garment, the Cumberland Corset, became common wear for men in the United Kingdom during the period between 1815 and 1840. It is a man's corset stiffened with whalebone and laced at the back. In its stringent use, it created a pinched-waist look required for the most extreme fashions of the time.

*"Ordered a pair of Cumberland corsets with whalebone back" --1818, Diary of a Dandy.*

But along with its rivals, the Brummell bodice and the Apollo corset, it was also commonly worn by older men and those who had allowed their natural figures to be overwhelmed by the large meals commonly consumed by the upper classes. The Prince of Wales' (right) waistline was 54" with his corset on!



"Regency À la Mode", caricature of the Prince Regent as an aging dandy or "fat Adonis of fifty" Engraving by William. Heath, 1812.

Adopting any of the male corset styles indicated that the wearer was so wealthy that he had no need to do anything other than look fashionable, since it was impossible for anyone but a young and active man to do any actual work while wearing one. Most men of that type aspired to be sporting "Corinthians" rather than join the "Dandy" set.

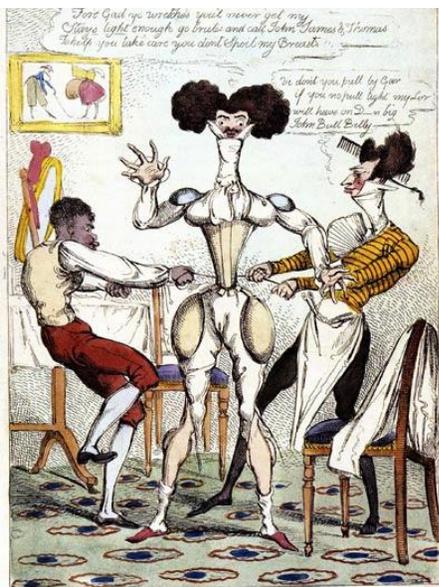
Elisabeth Hackspiel of the Niederrhein University, Moenchengladbach in Germany pointed out in a talk at the 2004 Courtauld History of Dress Association Annual Conference that tight tailoring and tight waists actually reflected generally accepted ideals of masculine beauty and were typical of men's fashion during that time.

The popularity of the Cumberland Corset and its fellows was probably due to the straight, square cut of a gentleman's coat across the waist. It was important for the correct fit of the garments that the male torso be smooth in front and sides, with no overhang. It was also assumed that the human body, of either gender, required "support" and that wearing a corset would contribute to the health of the wearer.

In a 2003 article in TES Magazine, Chris Bunting, describes just how indispensable the garment was to a well-dressed man at the time:

The great Victorian politician Benjamin Disraeli didn't think twice before lacing up his stays. He was actually a bit of a throwback to the heyday of the male corset, between 1818 and 1830, when a contemporary observer, Felix McDonough, stated that "all people of fashion wore them in town" and that the prevailing male fashion was "to be pinched in and laced up until he resemble an earwig". The absence of a corset on an upper-class man seems to have occasioned more comment than its presence. Thomas Creevey recorded in his diary that a friend had "left off his stays and his belly now hangs over his knees".

Still, tight lacing to achieve a fashionable silhouette was caricatured for men in the Regency journals, just as it would be for ladies during the Victorian era.



"Lacing a Dandy" from *The Corset*, Thomas Tegg (publisher) 1819. [Illustration](#) by George Cruikshank.

One of the few surviving [examples](#) from the period is in the USS Constitution Museum in Charlestown, Massachusetts: a pair of man's stays (1825-1830), belonging to Thomas Chew, the USS Constitution's purser during the War of 1812.



According to the physical description: *This sort of garment is exceedingly rare, and the wonderful condition of this one suggests that that it was rarely worn. It is made of brown polished cotton and lined with white linen or cotton. The overall length, including three 7-inch cinching tabs is 45 inches (This means Chew's waist was probably about 31 to 35 inches). The height at center front is 7.5 inches. Whalebone (baleen) battens, inserted into hand-sewn casings, provide stiffening and support to the center front. The points of the battens are reinforced with black cotton. An elastic-like structure composed of narrow coils of fine wire encased in fabric forms the corset's sides. The resulting supportasse is firm, yet flexible. The corset closes with three, three-pronged buckles and tabs to cinch in the waist at the rear.*

Photos: Courtesy USS Constitution Museum.

## References

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"Thomas Chew's Stays," U.S.S Constitution Museum. Last verified 6 Aug 2013. [\[link\]](#)

"The History of Corsets: Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Corsets". Last Verified 6 Aug 2013. [\[link\]](#)

*Kathe Gust* says that curiosity after reading about Cumberland Corsets in yet another Regency Romance lead her to find out more about them. See her article on the "Kensington Project" starting on page 32.