

## Elizabethan Bodies

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During the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century the term “bodies” was used to refer to both the bodice of a gown as well as the stiffened supportive layer we often refer to as a corset or stays. These items were also often referred to as a “pair of bodies” in much the same way as we refer to a pair of jeans<sup>1</sup>. While, the term “stays” was often used in England during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries to refer to this supportive garment<sup>2</sup> the term corset doesn’t appear to have been used in England until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>3</sup>. It does seem to have first appeared in reference to bodies in French fashions in 1611<sup>4</sup> but it doesn’t seem to have taken hold in England until much later.

While the term “bodies” does also refer to the bodice layer of a gown as well as a woman’s supportive garment, it is these supportive garments that we will explore and discuss in this article.

### How they were worn

Bodies were worn over the smock but beneath the gown or kirtle layer. Primarily they were used for support and stiffening the torso to achieve a fashionable shape. Wearing a pair of bodies also aided in fitting<sup>5</sup>. It’s significantly easier to fit a gown or kirtle over a smooth and stiffened shape than it is to fit it over a curved and unstiffend shape.

Bodies were also often used to support petticoats or the farthingale. Both the Dorothea bodies and the effigy stays have eyelets worked at the waist that petticoats or the farthingale could be pointed to. Pointing these garments to each other would ensure all the layers stayed in their proper place and help prevent shifting.

### How they were constructed

#### Materials used

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d*. (Hudson Road, Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons LTD, 1988) p. 145

<sup>2</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d*. (Hudson Road, Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons LTD, 1988) p. 145

<sup>3</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d*. (Hudson Road, Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons LTD, 1988) p. 145

<sup>4</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d*. (Hudson Road, Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons LTD, 1988) p. 145

<sup>5</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d*. (Hudson Road, Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons LTD, 1988) p. 146

Bodies were made out of sturdy materials so that they could perform their jobs of stiffening and supporting the bust to the best of their ability. However, their utilitarian purpose does not mean that they were plain.

Silk, linen, and fustian appear to have been very popular fabrics in the construction of bodies. Warrant accounts for Elizabeth I list several pairs of bodies that are not indicated as having been part of a gown or kirtle. It is believed that these bodies are most likely supportive foundation garments worn under the gowns but over the smock<sup>6</sup>. Among these items are listed “a payer of bodyes of black cloth of Silver with litell skyrtes bournd with gold lase lined with black sarceonett<sup>7</sup>”. These are noted as having been made for Her Majesty in 1571 and their description is very similar to several other bodies also listed among the warrants. Another pair of bodies listed as having been made in 1579 is described as being made of “sweete lether” and Arnold notes that it may have been an early version of the leather stays that were popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>8</sup>. Also in 1583 a pair of bodies is listed as having been made for Her Majesty by William Jones “of blake vellat lyned with canvas styffenid with buckeram drawn oute with white sipers”<sup>9</sup>. The bodies of Pfalzgräfin Dorothea Sabina von Neuberg were made of an ivory silk<sup>10</sup> with a linen lining and Elizabeth Vernon is wearing a pair of bodies in vibrant pink in her portrait. It is believed that the effigy stays were made by William Jones, Elizabeth’s tailor, or possibly by one of the journeymen from his shop although it is not known for sure. They are made of white twill woven fustian<sup>11</sup>. It is believed, however, that they were made especially for the effigy as other stays listed in the warrants were generally listed as having been made of silk and satin<sup>12</sup>.

### **Thread used**

Based on extant examples linen and silk thread appear to have been the mostly widely used in the construction of bodies. The Dorothea bodies were sewn with heavy

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<sup>6</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d*. (Hudson Road, Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons LTD, 1988) p. 146

<sup>7</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d*. (Hudson Road, Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons LTD, 1988) p. 146

<sup>8</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d*. (Hudson Road, Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons LTD, 1988) p. 146

<sup>9</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d*. (Hudson Road, Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons LTD, 1988) p. 146

<sup>10</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 4*. (New Warf Road, London: Macmillian, 2008) p. 112

<sup>11</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 1

<sup>12</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 1

silk thread<sup>13</sup> while the effigy stays appear to have been fully constructed with linen thread<sup>14</sup>.

### Construction and Boning

While there was stylistic variation the construction methods for bodies during the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century were fairly standardized. Both whale bone and bents appear to have been popular boning materials and there are accounts of buckram being used for some of Elizabeth's bodies. There is even an account of a young woman requesting her bodies be boned with horn<sup>15</sup>. Bones appear to have been sandwiched between the lining and outer fabric or the lining and interlining of the pair of bodies and channels were sewn to hold them in place. In the Dorothea bodies the channels were sewn using back stitches<sup>16</sup> while running stitches appear to have been used for the effigy bodies<sup>17</sup>. In the case of the effigy bodies the tabbed skirts that are cut and boned integrally to the body pieces. The bones also run over the chest to provide additional support<sup>18</sup>. With the Dorothea bodies however the boning channels were sewn so that unboned cups were left at the top of the bodies for the breasts. The skirts are unboned and made up separately from the bodies themselves<sup>19</sup>. In addition, an early 17<sup>th</sup> Century pair of bodies front depicted in Arnold's *Patterns of Fashion* was made of linen and boned with reeds. The reeds were held together in stitched channels and reinforced with whalebone. While the remnant of these bodies that remains is made of linen Arnold asserts that the top of the bodies, which have not survived, would most likely have been covered with silk<sup>20</sup>.

The effigy stays (also described by Arnold as a "pair of straight bodies") open in the front and are laced spirally through eyelets worked in linen thread. The center front widens upward from the waist so that the neck is ~3" larger than the waist. Interestingly

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<sup>13</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 4*. (New Warf Road, London: Macmillian, 2008) p. 112

<sup>14</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 6

<sup>15</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*. (Hudson Road, Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons LTD, 1988) p. 146-147

<sup>16</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 4*. (New Warf Road, London: Macmillian, 2008) p. 112

<sup>17</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 3

<sup>18</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 3

<sup>19</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 4*. (New Warf Road, London: Macmillian, 2008) p. 112

<sup>20</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 4*. (New Warf Road, London: Macmillian, 2008) p. 46

this upward sloping is cut on the bias<sup>21</sup>. Rather than a straight line there is a slight curve to the side back seams<sup>22</sup>. The outer back piece is cut so that the center back in on a fold but interesting the lining back piece is pieced along the center line<sup>23</sup>. The side back seams appear to have been over sewn from the inside of the bodies with linen thread<sup>24</sup>. It also appears that once they were over sewn from the back they were pulled tight and then reinforced with additional over stitching from the outside<sup>25</sup>. The skirts of the effigy stays are tabs that are cut integrally to the body pieces. The stays themselves are boned with whalebones with two slightly wider whalebones in the front running on the grain to provide extra stiffening<sup>26</sup>. In addition the bones run through the body pieces to the base of the tabs. The shoulder straps of the effigy stays are unboned and unlined. They attach to the top of the back piece and have an eyelet worked at the tip of the strap so that they can be pointed to the front of the bodies. Finally, the stays are fully bound with green suede leather<sup>27</sup>.

It is interesting to note that all the eyelets in the effigy bodies appear to have simply been over sewn with linen thread rather than buttonhole stitched. The eyelets of the Dorothea bodies appear to have been worked in the more standard buttonhole stitch and have also been worked over metal rings for additional strength<sup>28</sup>. It is possible that as the effigy stays seem to have been intended only for Elizabeth's effigy that the stronger method of working the eyelets with buttonhole stitches was not seen as necessary. However without more research we cannot know for sure.

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<sup>21</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 1

<sup>22</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 1

<sup>23</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 1-3

<sup>24</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 6

<sup>25</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 6

<sup>26</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 3

<sup>27</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 3

<sup>28</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 4*. (New Warf Road, London: Macmillian, 2008) p. 112-113

Unlike the effigy stays the Dorothea bodies open in the back, although they are also spiral laced though worked eyelets. These eyelets were worked with silk thread over metal rings for strengthening. The bodies and boning channels were sewn with silk thread and the front of the bodies were reinforced with a wooden busk. We do not know if the Dorothea bodies were boned with whalebone or bents as the boning has not survived but, as we mentioned earlier, the channels were sewn so that unboned cups were left at the top of the bodies for the breasts. The bodies were bound in silk and silk bound skirt tabs were also sewn to the waist<sup>29</sup>.

Finally, both the Dorothea and effigy bodies have eyelets worked at the waist in addition to the eyelets for lacing the bodies closed. The Dorothea bodies have 4 pairs of eyelets worked along the waist binding and the effigy stays have 7 pairs of eyelets worked into the top of the tab slits. Presumably these eyelets are intended for attaching petticoats or farthingales<sup>30</sup>.

While few extant examples remain, a pair of bodies was an integral foundation garment in an Elizabethan woman's wardrobe. They were utilitarian but not plain and were often made of beautiful silks and vibrant colors. Now that we have explored how these garments were constructed and worn during the Elizabethan period let's discuss creating a pair of our own.

### **Creating a pair of Effigy Stays**

The pattern I will be using was developed from Janet Arnold's article *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. This [article is available online](#) at Ingenta Connect and I have included a scaled sketch of my pattern in this article. While bodies of the period would have been sewn by hand using the stitches we discussed earlier in this article, in this tutorial we will be using a machine for the bulk of our sewing. If you wish to sew your bodies by hand please refer to the *Construction and Boning* section of this article for a discussion of the stitches that were used in the construction of two extant pairs of bodies.

### **Materials Needed:**

- Pattern

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<sup>29</sup> Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 4*. (New Warf Road, London: Macmillian, 2008) p. 112

<sup>30</sup> Arnold, Janet. *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey*. (Costume, Volume 41, 2007) p. 2

- 1.5 yards of 55-60 inch wide silk or linen for the outer layer of your bodies
- 1.5 yards of 55-60 inch wide fustian or linen for the lining layer of your bodies
  - \*note: if you wish to add an interlining layer for added strength and support you will need an additional 1.5 yards of 55-60 inch wide fustian or linen
- Thread
- Scissors
- Pins
- Boning
- Sewing Machine
- Measuring Tape
- Straight Edge
- Awl
- Heavier weight silk thread for sewing eyelets

### **Making and Fitting a Mock Up**

The first thing you will want to do once you have your pattern is to make a mock up so that you can double check the fit and make sure everything is sitting where you think it should be.

1. Trace your pattern out onto a sturdy fabric, approximately the same weight as you will be using for your bodies. If you are making your bodies up with an interlining you may use that layer for your mock up.



Fig 9



Fig 10

2. With your sewing machine baste the front pieces to the back piece along the back side seams.
3. Baste the shoulder straps to the back piece.
4. Place the mock up on you subject or dress form and check the fit. When making bodies that are fully boned all the way around as the Effigy bodies are you will often get some shrinkage of you pieces because of all the boning and boning changes you are adding. In the past I have gotten as much as 2-4 inches of shrinkage so when I do my fittings I want my front edges with just enough overlap to pin together. Remember, you are not looking for significant waist reduction with these bodies. You want the front of the bodies to lace fully closed and you are looking to achieve a flat front, a nice conical shape to the torso, and good breast support. You will still have the natural squish of the body to consider but I have found that the 2-4 inches of reduction I naturally get from the boning channels is more than enough to achieve this. However, every fitting is done to the individual so use your best judgment and make alterations until have a fit you are happy with.



Fig 11



Fig 12

5. In addition to checking the fit through the torso you also want to check the fit of the shoulder straps. They should be long enough to go over the shoulders but not so long that they are loose when pointed to the bodies. I like to make mine a little shorter than the length from the back shoulder seam to the top of the bodice so that I can adjust the tightness to suit. In Figure 13 you can see that my straps look a little long. I will probably shorten them up about half an inch.



Fig 13

6. Make any necessary alterations to your pattern.

### **Completing the garment**

7. Using your final pattern cut out the outer layer and lining of your bodies. If you plan to add an interlining you will need to cut that out as well. For the purposes of this tutorial I have included an interlining.



Fig 14

8. Starting with the back piece pin all three layers together.



Fig 15

9. Baste all three layers together at the top.



Fig 16

10. Mark the top line of the boning area for the back piece and sew the seam.

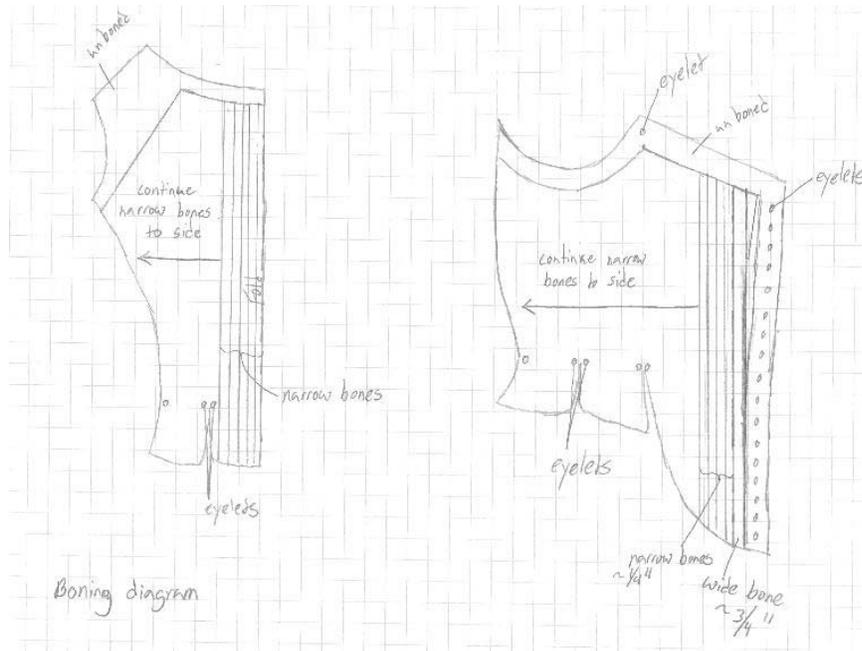


Fig 17-Boning diagram



Fig 18



Fig 19

11. Sew the boning channels for the back piece.
12. Moving on to the front piece, pin and baste your three layers together. When basting the front baste the front edge of the bodies and along the top of the front piece.
13. Again, mark the top line of the boning area for the back piece and sew the seam.



Fig 20

14. Mark and sew the angled bones located on the front edge of the front piece. You will need to add the bones at this point as well because you will close up these channels when you sew the next channel.



Fig 21

15. Next, sew the third boning channel, the channel for the wide bone. At this point you can go ahead and insert the bone into the channel or you could wait and insert it with the rest of the bones.



Fig 22

16. Sew the remaining boning channels for the front piece and insert the bones.



Fig 23



Fig 24

17. Repeat the process for the second front piece.
18. Pin the two side pieces to the back piece and sew them together.



Fig 25

19. Pin the seams open and turn the edges under. Using a whip stitch hand sew the seam open.



Fig 26

20. Repeat steps 18 and 19 attaching the shoulder straps to the back piece.



Fig 27

21. Bind the edges of you pair of bodies. For my bindings I like to use fabric left over from either previous projects or my current project. However, you can also you purchased bias tape or thin leather. If you have questions about binding stays [Your Wardrobe Unlock'd has an excellent tutorial.](#)



Fig 28

22. Once you have bound your stays the last step is to add your eyelets. Work eyelets along the front edge of the stays, at the tip of each strap, and at the top of the stays. If you like you can also add eyelets along the waist of the bodies like the original. If you have questions about sewing eyelets, Marion McNealy has an excellent [eyelet tutorial](#) on her website, [The Curious Frau](#).
23. When your eyelets are done your stays are ready to wear. Put them on, lace them up and enjoy!



Fig 29



Fig 30

**Figures:**



Fig 1: Elizabeth Vernon wearing a pink pair of bodies. Elizabeth Vernon, Countess of South Hampton. Unknown artist. c1590. Image from Wikimedia Commons.  
[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth\\_Vernon\\_big.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth_Vernon_big.jpg)



Fig 2: Detail of Elizabeth Vernon wearing a pink pair of bodies. Elizabeth Vernon, Countess of South Hampton. Unknown artist. c1590. Image from Wikimedia Commons. [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth\\_Vernon\\_big.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth_Vernon_big.jpg)



Fig 3: Detail from Nonsuch Palace. The noble woman depicted appears to be wearing a boned kirtle or possibly a yellow pair of bodies which you can see peeking out from underneath the bodice of her pink over gown. From *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*. Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg. 1598. Image from Wikimedia Commons. [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nonsuch\\_Palace\\_by\\_Joris\\_Hoefnagel.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nonsuch_Palace_by_Joris_Hoefnagel.jpg)

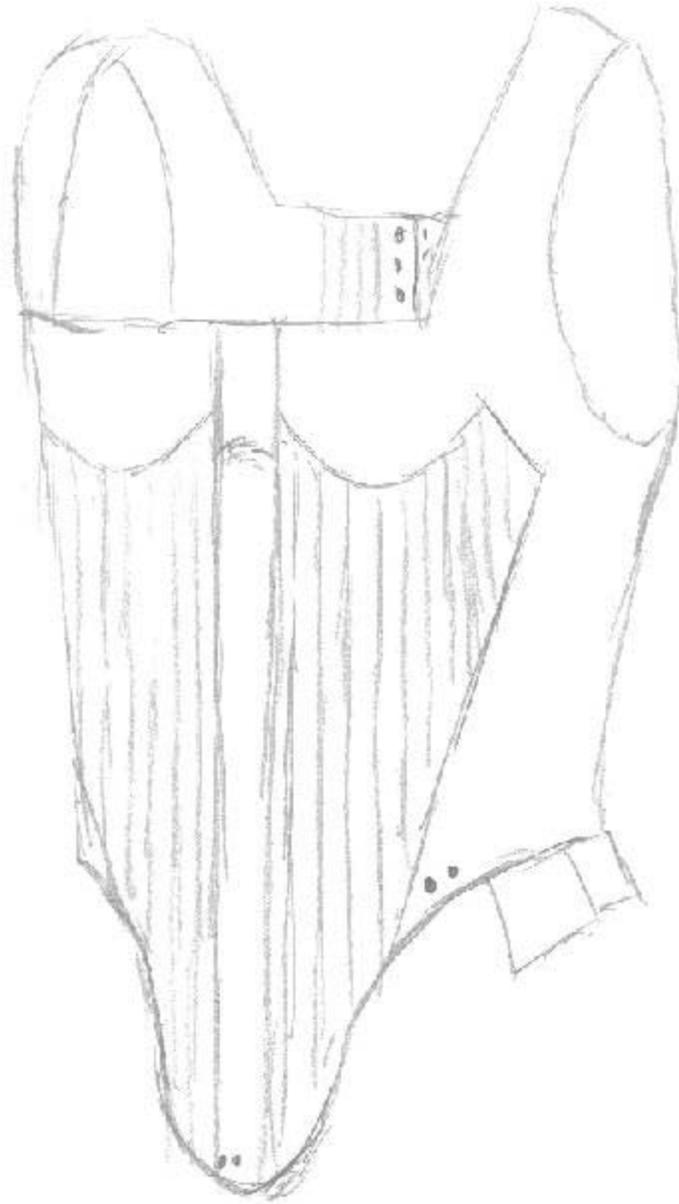


Fig 4: Sketch of the Dorothea Bodies.  
Sketch by M. Alison Kannon based on image in *Patterns of Fashion: The cut and construction of clothes for men and women c1560-1620*.

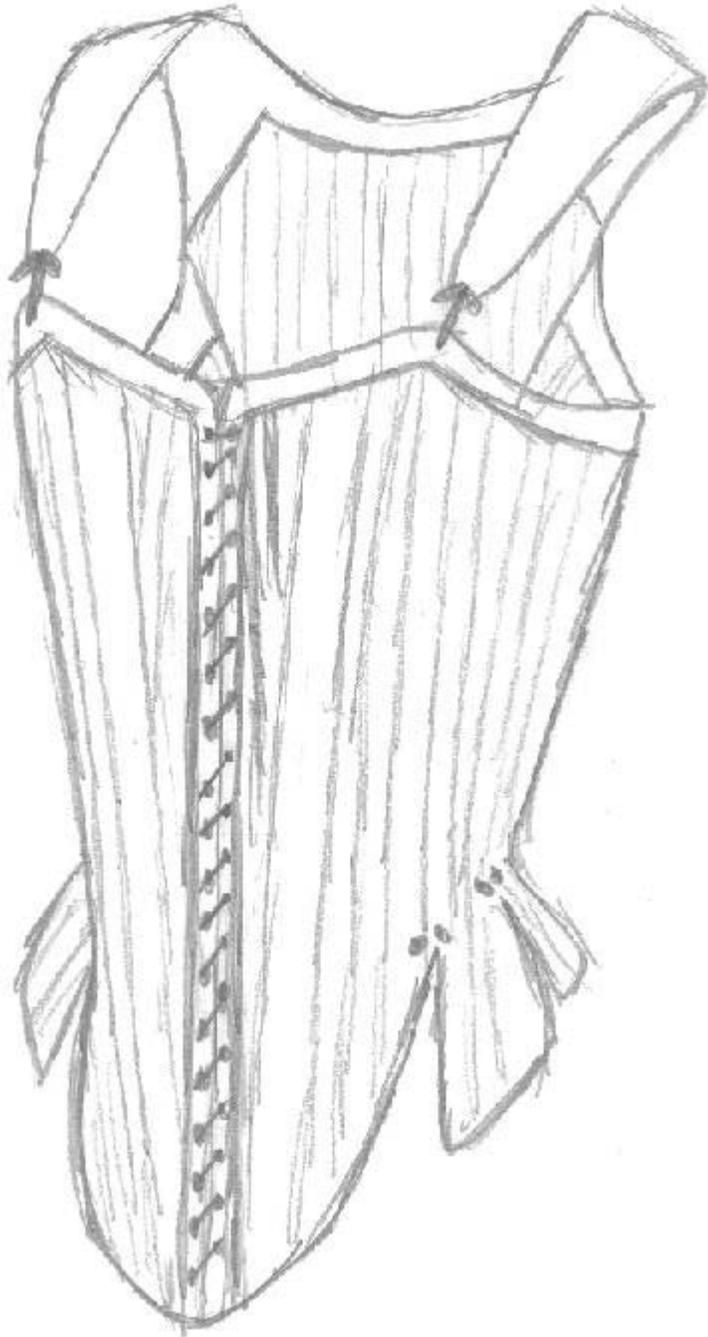


Fig 5: Sketch of the Effigy Bodies.  
Sketch by M. Alison Kannon based on image in *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey.*

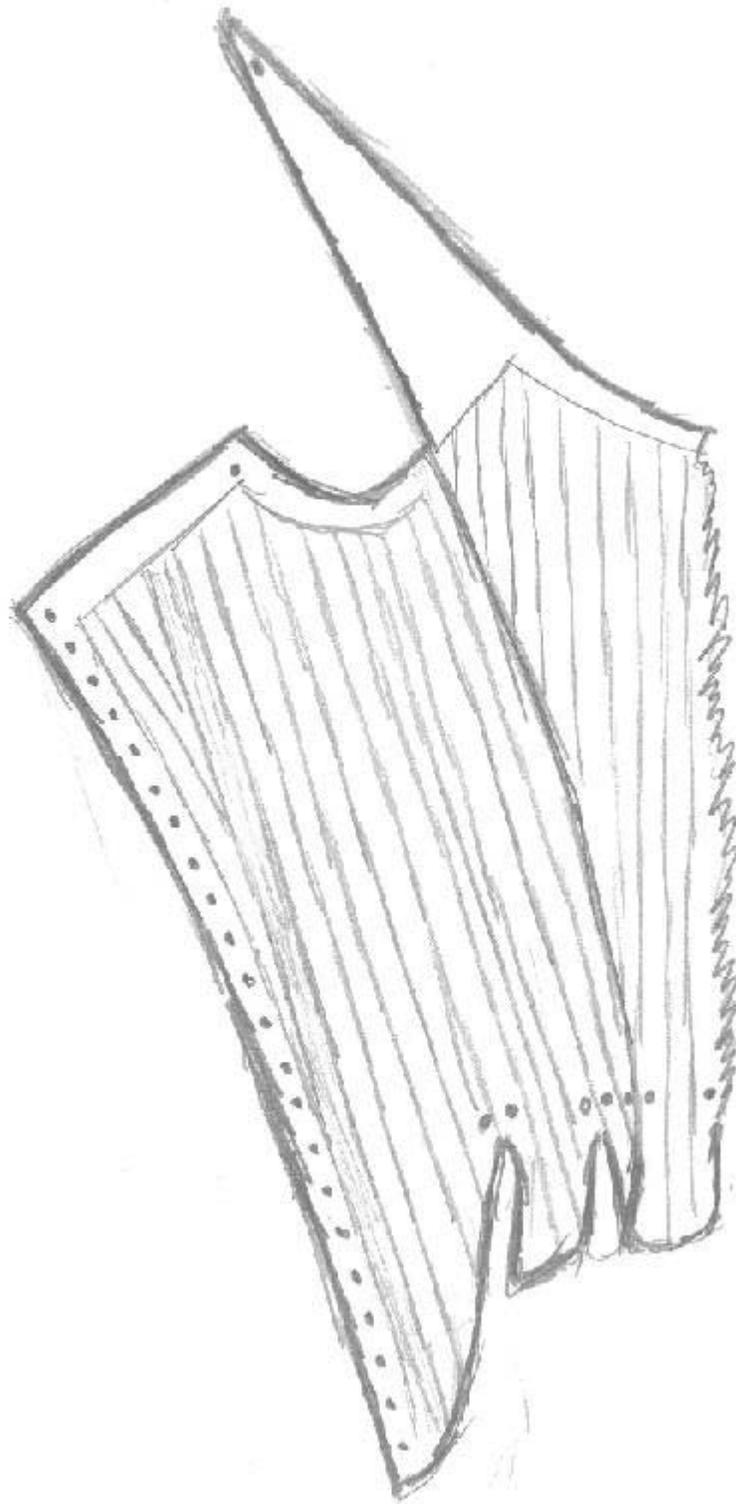


Fig 6: Sketch of half of the interior of the Effigy Bodies.  
Sketch by M. Alison Kannon based on image in *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey.*

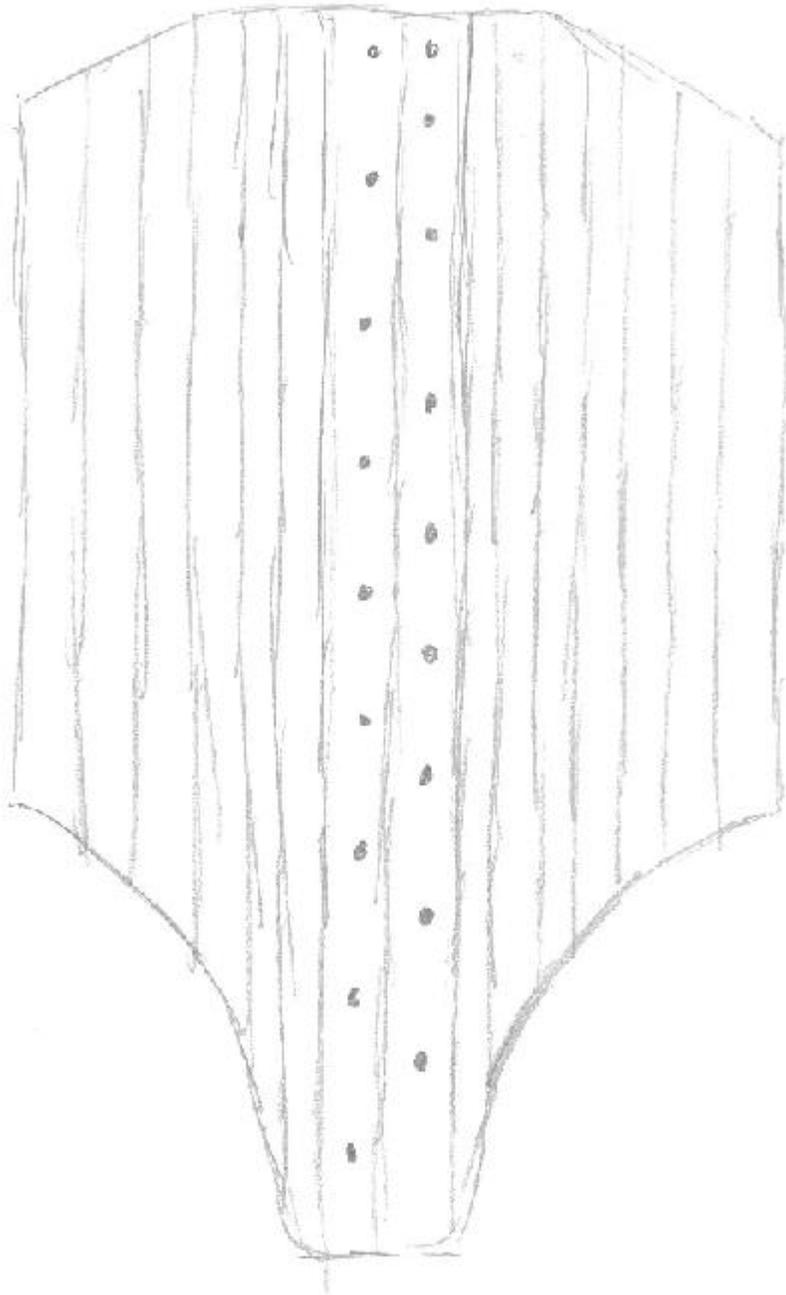


Fig 7: Sketch of a remnant of the front of a 17<sup>th</sup> Century pair of bodies.  
Sketch by M. Alison Kannon based on image in *Patterns of Fashion: The cut and construction of clothes for men and women c1560-1620*.

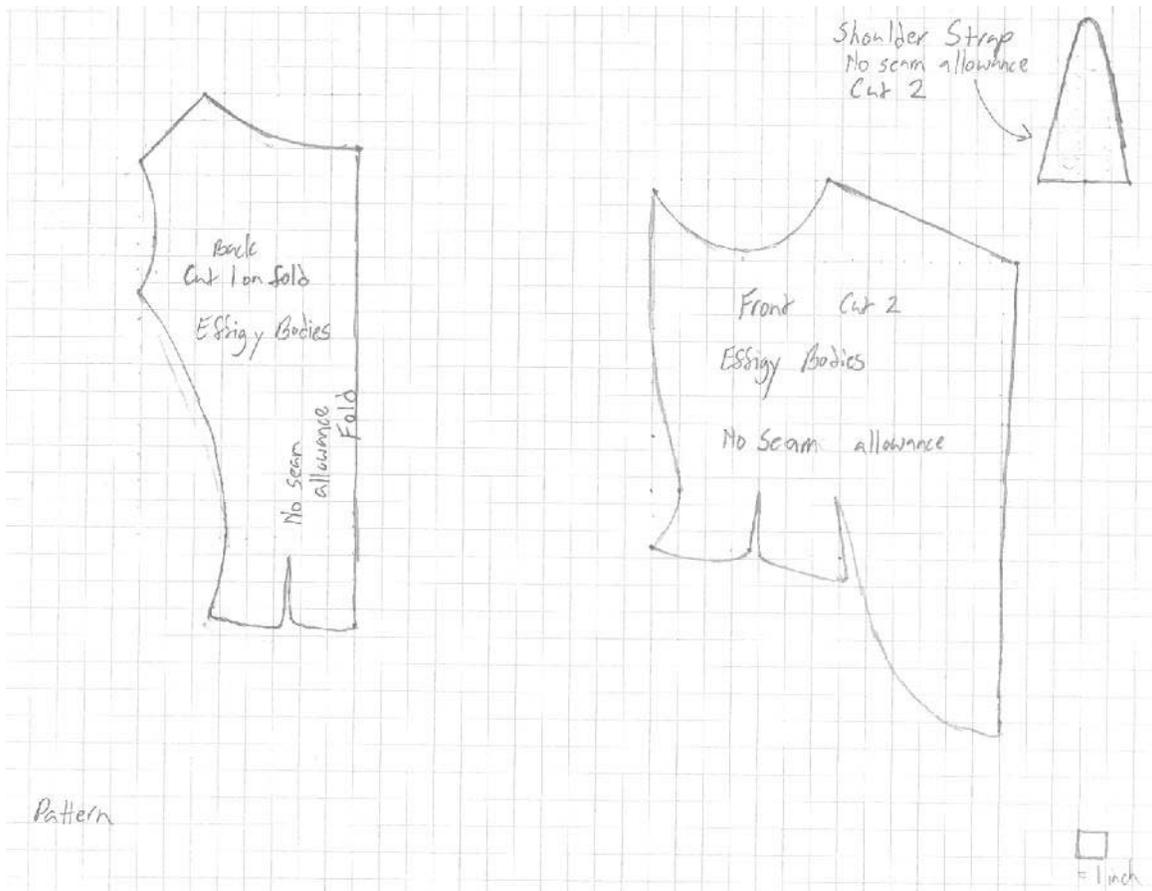


Fig 8: Scaled drawing of my Effigy Bodies pattern. Pattern has been drawn out on a grid so that it can be easily enlarged for use. One square equals one inch. Pattern developed from *The 'pair of straight bodies' and 'a pair of drawers' dating from 1603 which Clothe the Effigy of Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey.*

## References

Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion: The cut and construction of clothes for men and women c1560-1620*. Macmillan. London, England. 1985

Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*. W.S Maney & Son's LTD. Leeds, England. 1988

Harvey, Anthony and Mortimer, Richard. *The Funeral Effigies of Westminster Abbey*. The Boydell Press. Woodbridge, England. 2003

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