

CORSETS

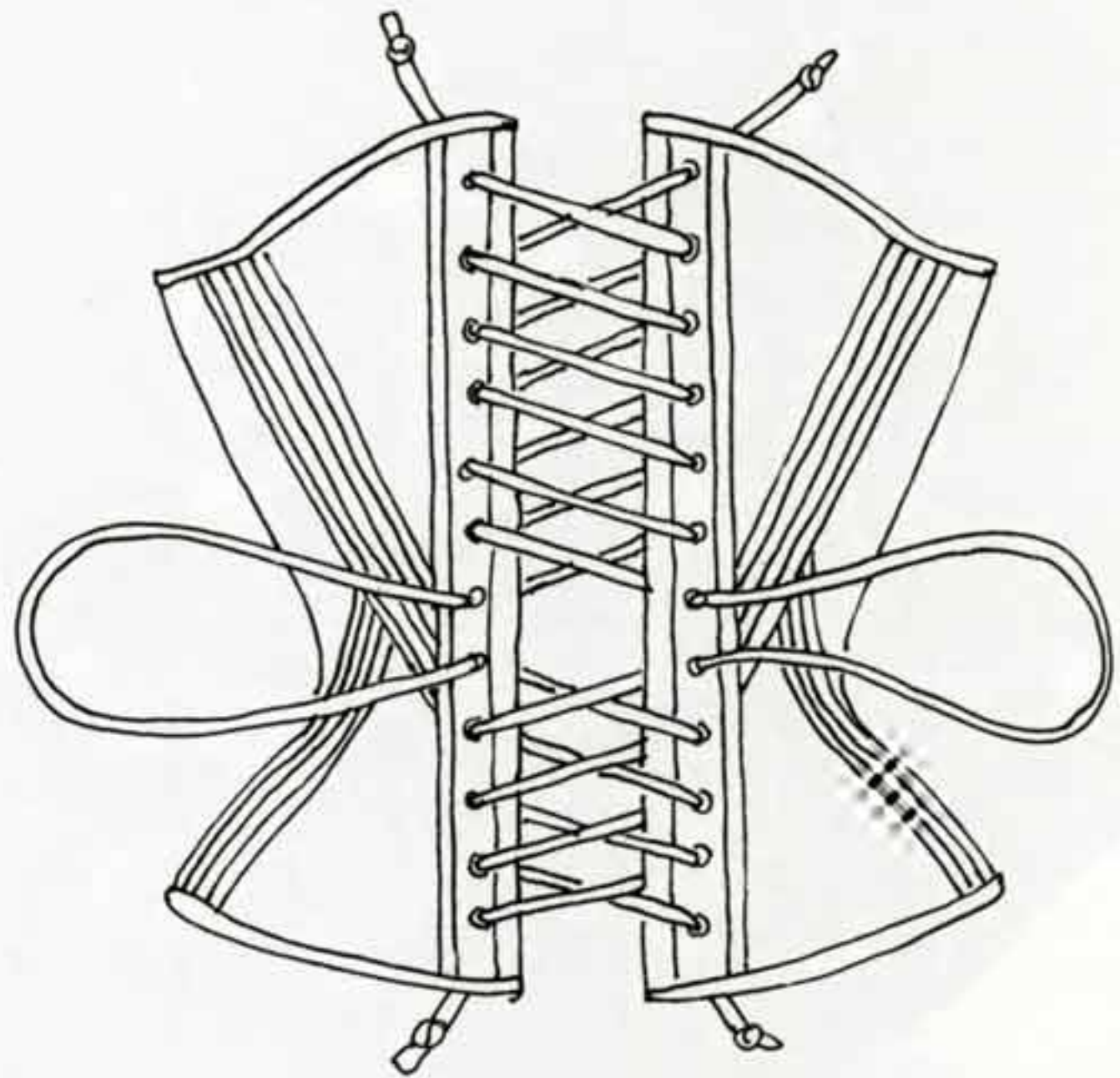
HISTORICAL PATTERNS & TECHNIQUES

JILL SALEN

Corsets

Historic Patterns and Techniques

Jill Salen





Acknowledgements

Compiling these patterns would not have been possible without the support of the museums I have visited. I would like to thank in particular Philip Warren; Alex Davey; Caroline Lockwood and Charlotte Mobbs of Leicestershire County Council Museum Services (Symington Collection); Althea Mackenzie of the Hereford Museum; Rosemary Harden of the Fashion Museum, Bath; Christine Stevens (now of Beamish Open Air Museum); Elen Phillips of St Fagans National History Museum, Wales; Brigit Lapsley and Danielle Sprecher of Colchester Museum; Richard Blakey.

Jean and Pawel Nowak and Vina Cooke have been kind enough to allow me take patterns from corsets held in their private collections.

Many others have helped sustain and encourage me: Susan Hardy; Cissian Rees; Elizabeth Friendship; the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama; Don Moffat; Mary Brittain; Joanna and Rebecca Salen.

More information can be found at www.jillsalen.com.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2008 by
Batsford
10 Southcombe Street
London W14 0RA
An imprint of Anova Books Company Ltd

Copyright © Batsford
Text © Jill Salen

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN-13: 9781906388010

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Reproduction by Rival Colour Ltd, UK
Printed and bound by SNP Leefung Printers Ltd, China

This book can be ordered direct from the publisher at the website: www.anovabooks.com, or try your local bookshop.

Previous page: This corset, from 1875, is held at the Symington Collection at Leicestershire County Council Museum Services, UK.

Contents

Acknowledgements 4

Introduction 6

Patterns

- Finely Whale-Boned Corset, c.1750 10
Brown Jean Corset, 1780 14
Pregnancy Corset, 1780–85 18
Brown Jean Corset, 1790 22
Linen Corset, 1790 26
Pink Jumps, 1798 30
Rural Corded Corset, 1830–40 34
Corded Taffeta Corset, 1840 38
Red-and-Black Lasting Corset, 1860 42
Child's Red Stay Band, 1880–85 46
Gold Exotic Corset, 1885 50
Swiss Riding Corset, 1890 54
'Pretty Housemaid' Corset, 1890 58
Khaki Corded Corset, 1890–1900 62
Large Blue Jean Corset, 1890–1910 66
Black-and-Yellow Flossed Corset, 1890–1900 70
Black Corset with Blue Flossing, 1890 74
White Ribbon Corset, 1900–10 78
Silk Ribbon Corset, 1900–5 82
Long White Corset, 1914 86
German Ersatz Austerity Corset, 1917 90
Doll's Corsets, c.19th century 94

Projects

- White Linen Jumps, c.1790 102
Girl's White Jean Corset, 1900 108

Techniques 114

Further Reading 124

Useful Addresses 126

List of Suppliers 127

Index 128

Introduction

My interest in corsets can be traced back to the 1950s when my grandmother and great-grandmother were still wearing them. I was fascinated by corsets; I did not understand why my grandmother and great-grandmother wore them, and my initial curiosity has led to this book.

Who is this book for?

This book is aimed at the costume maker who has a working knowledge of costume construction. The shapes of the patterns and the direction of the grain found in this book should provide sufficient information. Any finishing details the costume maker might require can, I hope, be found in the photographs provided. All corsets referred to in the book are from museum or private collections so it was not possible to place them on dress stands to photograph them, but I have included museum archive photographs wherever possible.

During my time as a costume cutter at the Welsh National Opera Company, from 1976–82, I wanted more corset and bodice shapes than I could find in Norah Waugh's *Corsets and Crinolines* or Janet Arnold's *Patterns of Fashion* (see Further Reading, page 124). As theatrical costume makers we rarely have time to visit collections and carry out research, so we are dependent on our designers' references and our few books. *Corsets and Crinolines* is an invaluable resource for costume makers, however, 18 corset patterns representing 250 years only gives us a few variations of corset styles that must have existed. My aim was to add to my knowledge, and hopefully supplement the makers' repertoire, with additional shapes and styles of corsets.

Included in this book are instructions for making a hand-stitched corset and a machine-stitched corset (see page 102 and 108), so that the inexperienced corset maker has some guidance. Every corset construction is different and when one seeks to adapt a historical pattern for contemporary use, the methods of constructing the corset need to suit the use to which the corset is to be put, which the maker must adapt and decide upon.

Terminology

Throughout this book I refer to the garments as 'corsets'. Originally they were referred to as 'a pair of bodies', 'stays' or as 'corsets'. A 'pair of bodies' was an early term, most usually used when the garment laced at the back and the front. 'Stays' could lace at the back and/or the front, and later a 'corset' would usually lace at the back and have a split-busk fastening at the centre front.

Earlier corsets used a single lace to close the garment, and later ones had a double criss-crossing lace, which was laced so that the wearer could tighten or loosen her corset herself. Corsets that only closed at the back meant that the wearer needed help to dress.

Factors that affect the corset

When one considers the variety of underwear worn today, we know our choice of undergarment is dictated by many factors. The same would have been true in the past.

Age of wearer: an older woman may have chosen to wear the styles of her youth.

Income: this obviously dictated what the wearer could afford.

Social class: if one belonged to more elevated social circles more fashionable and possibly a variety of styles of undergarments would have been worn.

Occupation: this would have affected what was worn. In the 1950s and 1960s my grandmother wore her older, more comfortable corsets in the morning when she cleaned the house and changed for the afternoon when she would visit and be visited. She referred to this as 'breaking-in her stays'.

Availability of source materials: the properties and qualities of source materials, such as whale bone, would affect the style of corset. The appearance and use of metal eyelets (French holes) after 1828 meant that tighter lacing was possible. Before that date, hand-worked eyelets would have torn if put under too much strain.

Occasion: specific styles of corsets were worn for particular occasions. For example, there were corsets specifically for court dress, riding and (in the late 19th century) sportswear.

Provenance and dating

I have put the corsets in this book in museum date order, but provenance is not always clear – a corset may conform to one period and yet definitely be from a different era.

Leicestershire Museum Services has two 1830–40 corsets in its Symington Collection, which absolutely exhibit the characteristics of that decade. They are completely hand stitched, string corded and have a wide whale-bone centre-front busk. These two corsets could have been made years later, just in the *style* of 1830–40, because someone liked the pattern or had always worn that style. One of the corsets had had additional side panels inserted and machined in, so an 1830–40 string corded corset was being altered for wear after 1855. The reason why this corset was altered for wear years after it was originally created is not clear; it could have been due to hardship, for dressing up purposes, for a play/pageant or it could have been because the owner was ill but, not wanting to go without her corsets, instead chose to revert to this 'old-fashioned style', which was more comfortable than the corsets being worn in the 1850s.

The Symington Collection has a red-and-black corded corset, which is dated at 1860. They also have a grey-and-black corset dated 15 years later (1875), which is very similar, though it has a split busk at the centre front. Platt Hall in Manchester also has a similar corset, which is brown and fawn and dated around 1880–90. Can this mean that the same style of corset was being worn for 30 years?

In the few collections I have visited I have been surprised that the corsets on display seem to cluster around certain dates. The 1860 red-and-black corset and its close relatives explain to some extent how hard it must be to date a corset with no provenance. Luckily Leicestershire Museum's Symington Collection is well provenanced – the curators are certain that the red-and-black corset was created in 1860, otherwise it could have been thought to be a variation of the 1880–90 corset in the Manchester Museum. Two very basic guidelines for dating corsets are:

- if a corset is machine stitched, it will have been created after 1851
- if a corset has metal eyelets, it will have been created after 1828

Now, after compiling these patterns and techniques, I actually have more questions than I did when I first embarked upon this project, and I am happy with this outcome – to be a good maker you always have to be questioning, researching and problem solving.

Construction

These days costume makers rarely have the time to sew a corset by hand. If the corset is to be seen, this book will aid the maker in reconstructing the garment as far as time and budget allows. If the corset is not to be seen, it will help the maker to achieve the correct silhouette for the period.

When constructing corsets I make toiles of corset patterns, near and around the correct date, without altering it to fit the contemporary figure. I then find someone who *fits the corset*, observing how the corset affects the wearer's posture and what it does to her figure. The patterns in this book are presented for the maker – make of them what you will.

Current corset manufacturers

It is an enjoyable process to look at, measure and draw corsets. I am indebted to the staff of the museums who have helped me write this book – particularly Philip Warren at Leicestershire Museum's Symington Collection, who has an in-depth knowledge of the collection and who helped me to understand the mass manufacture of Symington's corsets from 1860–1990.

The Symington Collection was created by the Market Harborough-based company R & WH Symington, which began making corsets for ladies in the 1860s. The company eventually grew into a major international business. This unique collection was presented to Leicestershire County Council's Museums Service in 1980. It includes some pieces made by their competitors, and some pieces that pre-date the setting up of the company. As a collection it provides insight into the development of corsetry manufacturing in the UK.

As part of my research for this book I went to see Ian and Corina Voller of Vollers to discuss why Vollers has managed to survive as a corset manufacturer. The company was started in 1899 by Ian's great-grandparents in Portsmouth, a city where corset manufacturers were the major employers of women from 1880–1950.

Today Vollers have an interesting clientele: lingerie supplier Rigby & Peller, high street stores and a bespoke service by mail order or via the internet. Their business is worldwide – they use the internet as a showroom and can respond to the whims and fancies of the current market. Vollers have survived, unlike larger companies such as Symington's, because they are a small and flexible enterprise offering a bespoke service. For example one of their leaflets from 1950 promised that you could 'have your favourite corset copied'. During the period 1950–80 Vollers grew old along with its customers, then in 1991 Ian and Corina took over and rejuvenated the company's approach. They now sell their corsets through a beautifully photographed catalogue, which inspires the buyer, who now wants a corset that will be seen and worn as a garment. Interestingly Vollers' current corsets are based on their original patterns of 1899.

Why do corset styles alter?

There are many reasons why the styles of corsets have changed over time:

- Changing fashions demanded different underpinnings.
- Availability of/changing materials. For example in the 19th century whale bone became less plentiful, and better quality steel for boning became available.
- The invention of metal eyelets in around 1828 – these reinforced lacing holes allowed a woman to be very tightly laced.
- The invention of steel split-metal busk fastenings in the 1830s. These were in general use by the 1860s, so that a woman no longer had to be laced into her corset by someone else.
- The invention of the sewing machine in 1851. This made it possible for the industrialization and mass production of corsets to take place.
- With industrialization in the 1850s came the ability to produce more corsets for less cost.
- Industrialization led to the marketing of corsets, which reinforced the need for appropriate corsets for specific occupations and leisure activities, such as corsets for housemaids and for horse riding.

- The Industrial Revolution in the 19th century brought the working woman a disposable income for the first time. She spent her money on keeping up with fashion, often emulating her mistress.

How were changes in corset making passed on?

Before the advent of cheap newsprint and illustrated advertisements, how did corset styles change in a seemingly uniform manner across the UK? Word of mouth and observation could be the answer. At the lowest income level, drovers came from outlying areas of the UK, bringing their cattle to London. Presumably they took home information that affected fashion – and consequently the underpinnings of fashion. As early as 1693 occasional periodicals were printed, which were aimed at women. Occasionally these periodicals contained patterns for corsets and fashion advice. *The Workwoman's Guide* (1838) by A. Lady advocates buying a corset from a stay maker and then buying another unmade-up, to take a pattern from it. Occasionally there were patterns in publications such as *Godey's Ladies Magazine* (1830–95). Newsprint became cheap to produce at about the same time as the invention of the sewing machine in 1851, which facilitated the mass production of corsets. Because newspaper advertising was inexpensive corset manufacturers were able to publicize their wares, offering women new styles.

How representative are corsets in collections?

It must be remembered that corsets in collections are no different from the clothes in our own wardrobes today. Often the garments that linger in our own wardrobes are:

- Ill-fitting.
- Expensive special purchases too good to give or throw away.
- Items that no longer fit – but that we hope will fit again one day.
- Special occasion items that conjure up the event they were worn at, such as wedding outfits, a first ball dress, christening robes – in other words, garments that do not reflect everyday wear.

So the garments in museums do not always give us quite the window on the past that we might hope for. Usually these garments are small in size, making us think that people in the past were a lot smaller than we are now, when in fact often the garment was simply too small to cut down for someone else.

Women have worn corsets as underpinnings for more than 400 years. In the past they were a necessary foundation under clothes, allowing women to have a fashionable silhouette – refining the waist and supporting the back and bust. Women have not worn corsets as a fashion aid since the 1950s and at that time both my grandmother and great-grandmother were still wearing them. They would not have felt dressed without their corsets – not because they were seeking to achieve a more youthful silhouette, but because the corsets formed part of their armour of respectability.

Modern women are secure in the knowledge that it is not how you wear your clothes that determines whether you are respectable or not, but the way in which you behave. It is interesting that in 2008 – when 51 per cent of the population is female, when we have had the vote since 1928, equal pay since the 1970s and where we feel more than entitled to have a career and children – that we are still choosing to wear corsets, usually visible for all to see.



Finely Whale-Boned Corset, c.1750

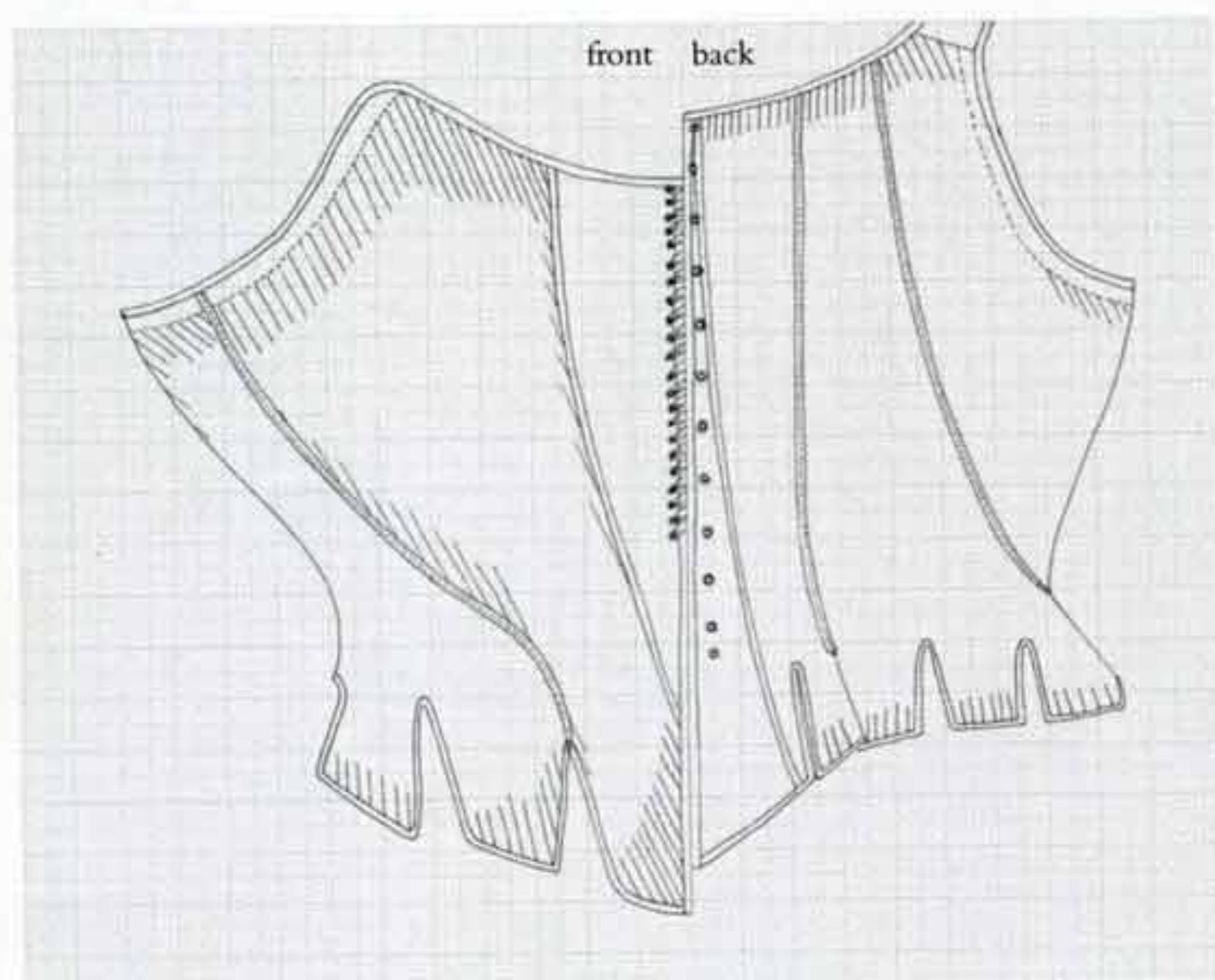
These are brown linen stays with a centre-back closure. The front is open for 8in (20cm) of the 14in (35.5cm) and then stitched together. The remaining 8in (20cm) has hand-worked eyelets and there is a strong single twine laced through them, which is decorative and practical.

Fine bands of whale boning, flowing gracefully into one another, suggests an understanding of the needs and comfort of the wearer, and that it was created by makers who understood the forms they were working with. The whale bone extends down into the tabs of the corset so that it flows over the waist, rather than pushing forcibly into it.

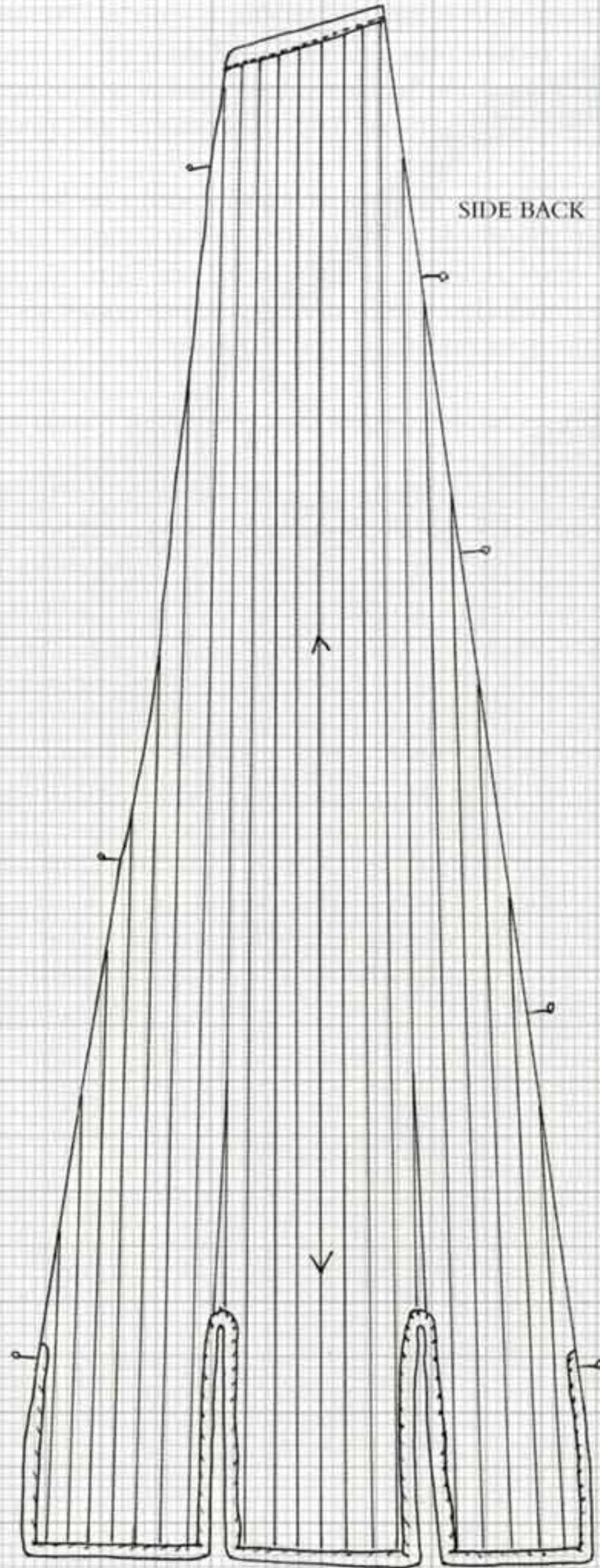
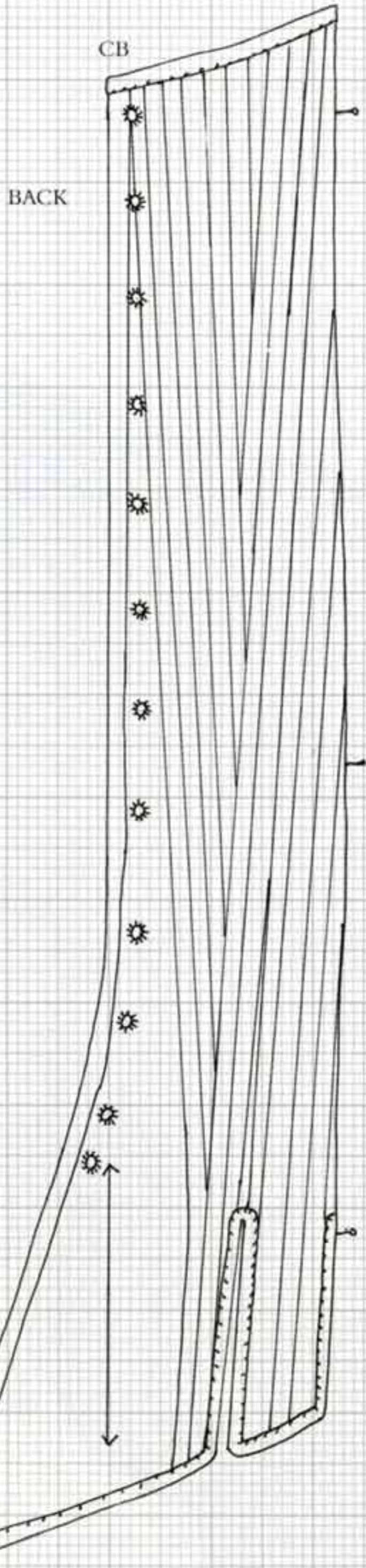
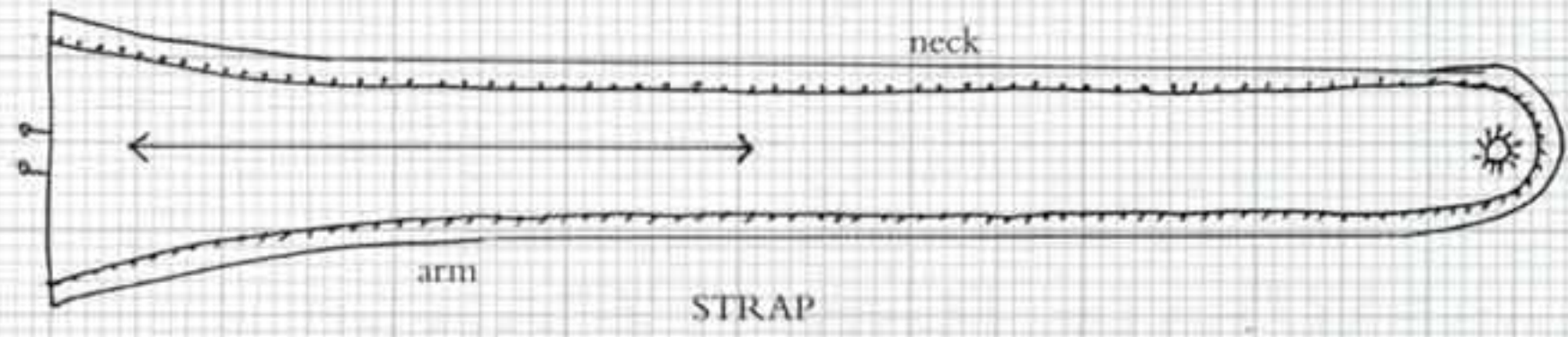
A corset such as this probably needed the strength of a man to construct it but the subtleties of the design suggest a woman's involvement, whether as the wearer or someone engaged with the construction. Indeed, at this time men were the stay makers but they often employed their wives and daughters and could take on girls as apprentices, although they rarely did.

There is no corresponding hand-worked eyelet for the shoulder ribbon tie on the front of the stays, but there are two drill holes, which could have been used to fasten the shoulder strap; there is no evidence of them ever having been hand whipped, which they would have been on a corset like this.

Corsets in the early to mid 1700s did not always have shoulder straps, but by the 1780s, when the boning was becoming more sophisticated, shoulder straps were more necessary for the dynamics of the corset.



Opposite: This corset, dated to around 1750, is held at the Colchester and Ipswich Museum, UK.

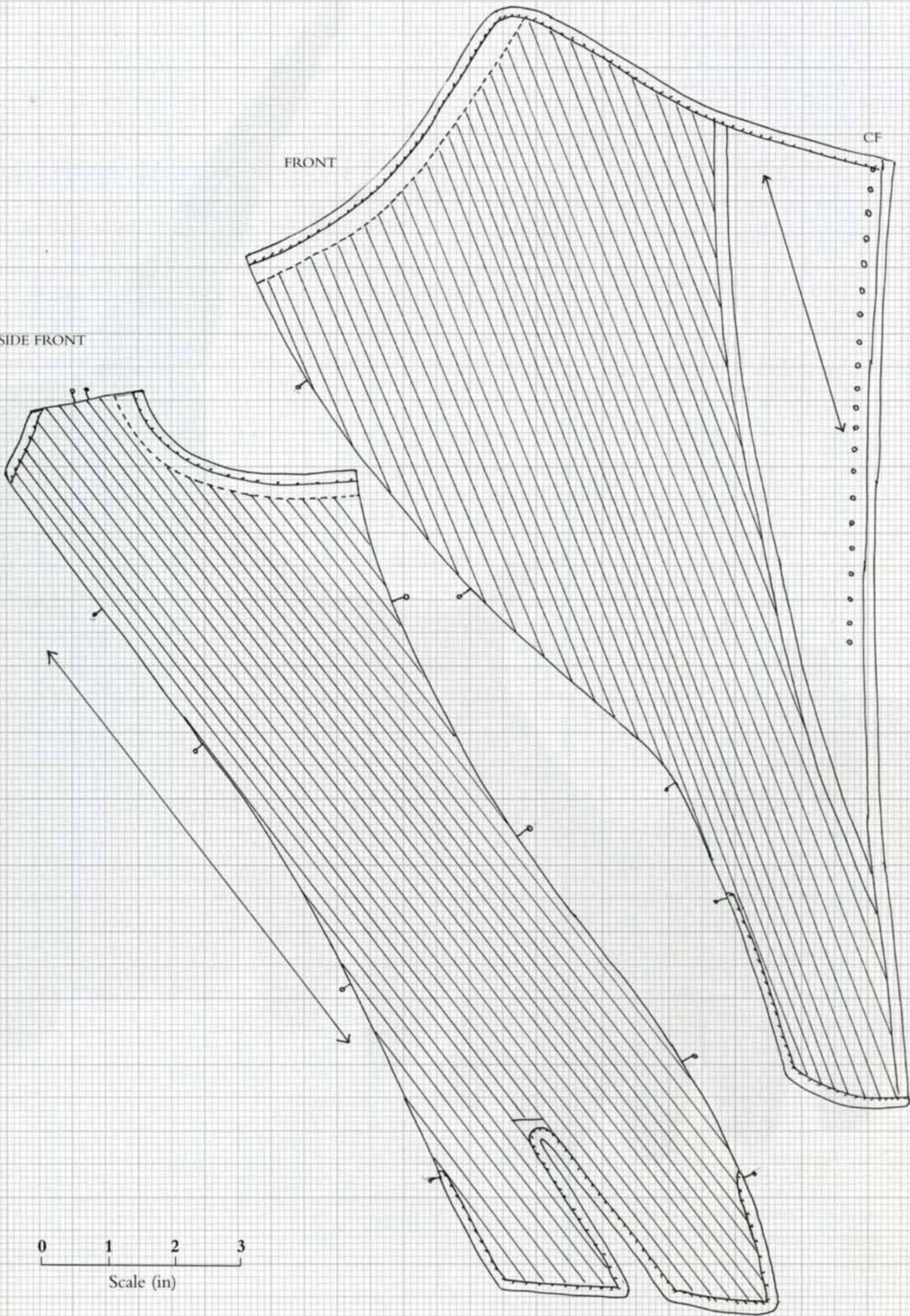


FRONT

CF

SIDE FRONT

0 1 2 3
Scale (in)





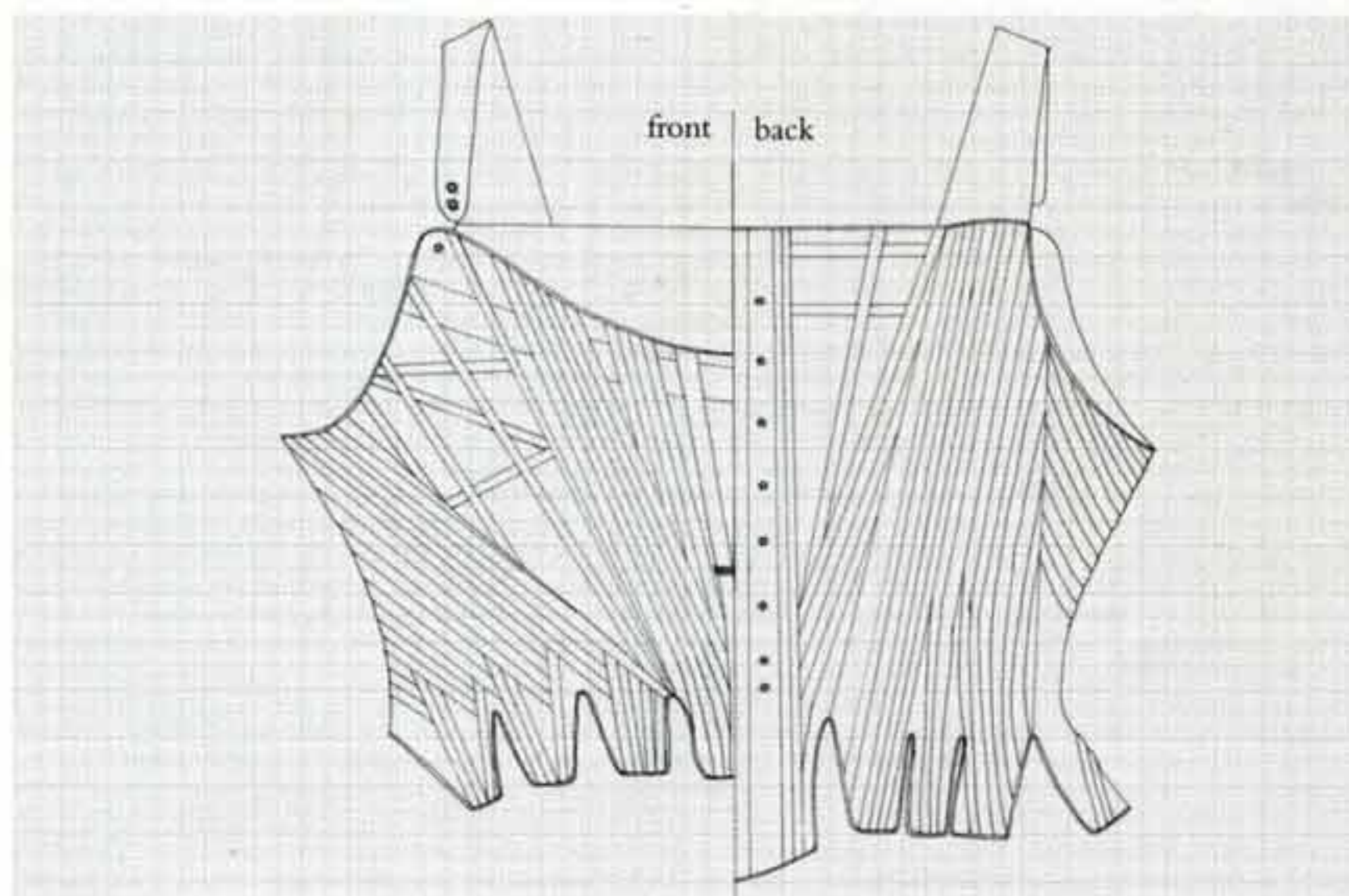
Brown Jean Corset, 1780

This corset is constructed out of twill-weave brown jean fabric, with a linen lining. The boning is whale bone and the corset is hand stitched. There is a delicate fanning of boning, lending support where it is needed and displaying an understanding of the fabrics used, utilizing their properties. There is a stiff, curved thicker piece of whale bone, horizontal across the bust and with straight horizontal bones across the shoulders combined with a long straight back to support this low, exposing front to the corset. The edges of this corset appear to be bound with a narrow white kid or gloving suede.

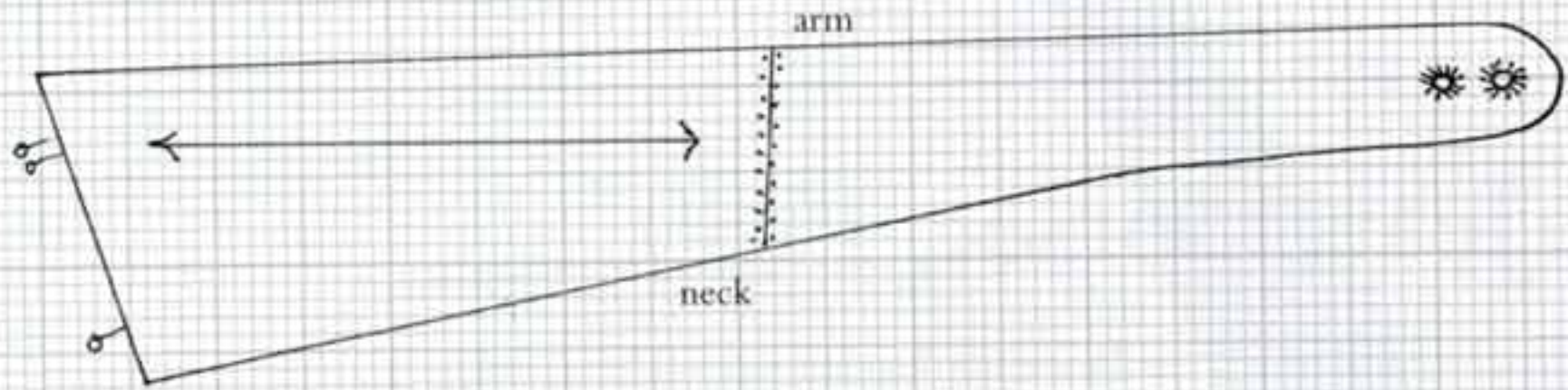
At this time, the corsets could have been centre-back fastening, centre-front fastening or have both, with or without a stomacher under the laces or pinned over the lacing, or even covered in what would be considered a dress fabric – because the corset was going to be seen.

This corset cannot lie flat on the table and reminds one of an ice-cream cone. It would have fitted a woman with a 36in (91cm) or larger bust and a 30in (76cm) waist, not dissimilar measurements to the Pregnancy Corset (see page 18), but much shorter in the body length. This may be because the wearer was shorter or because fashion dictated a higher waistline. If the latter, this suggests that it should appear chronologically after the Pregnancy Corset, but for the chronology of this book, I have followed the date given by the museum.

The swooping side seam is delightful, using the grain of the fabrics to flow around the body and support the bust. The shoulder straps tie closed at the front while the centre back of the corset would have been closed by someone else, using one lace.

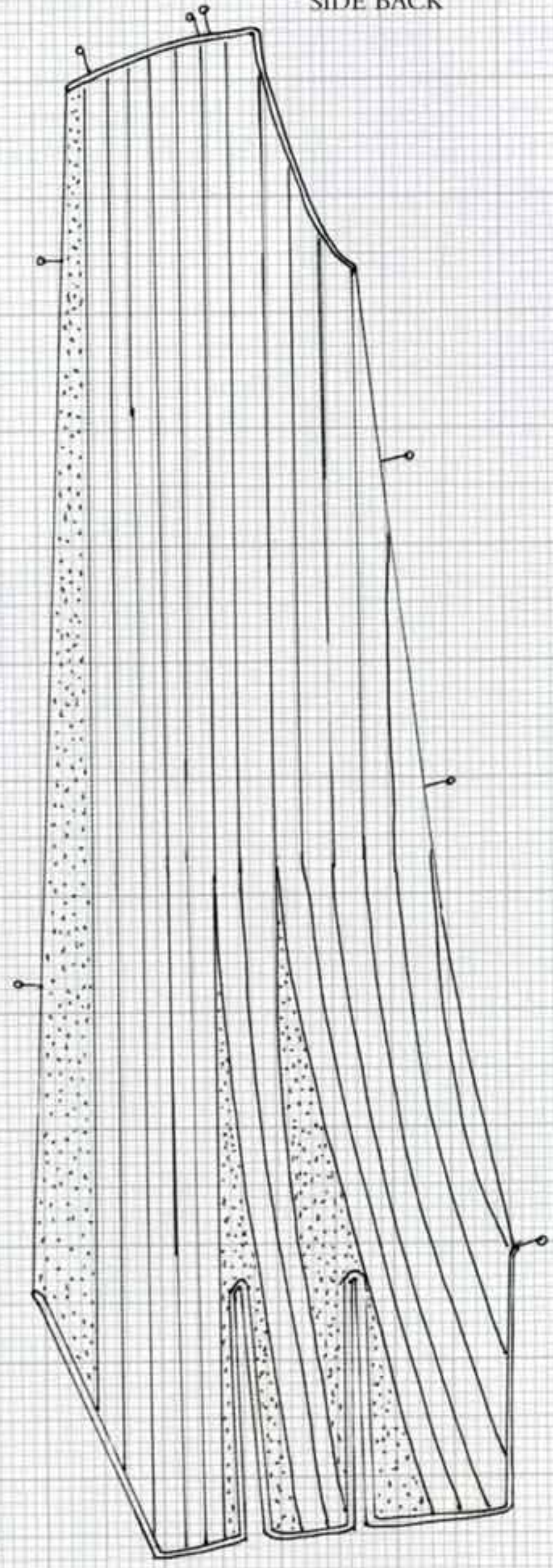
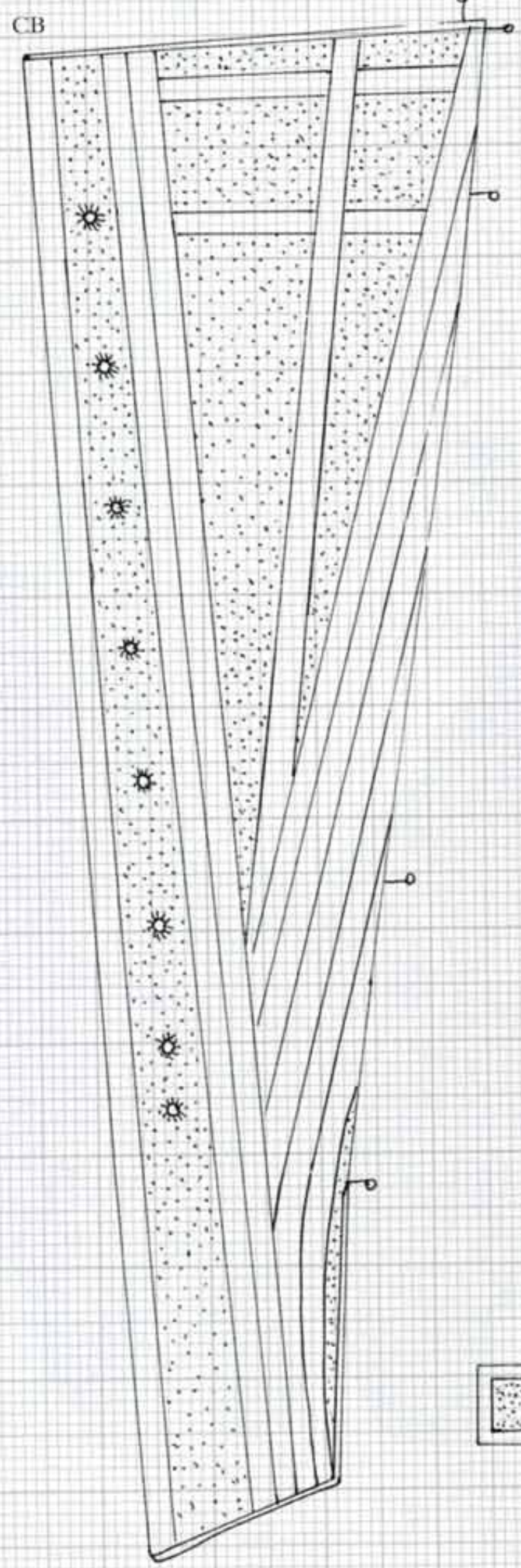


Opposite: Corset from 1780, held at St Fagan's National History Museum, Cardiff.



BACK

SIDE BACK



 no bones

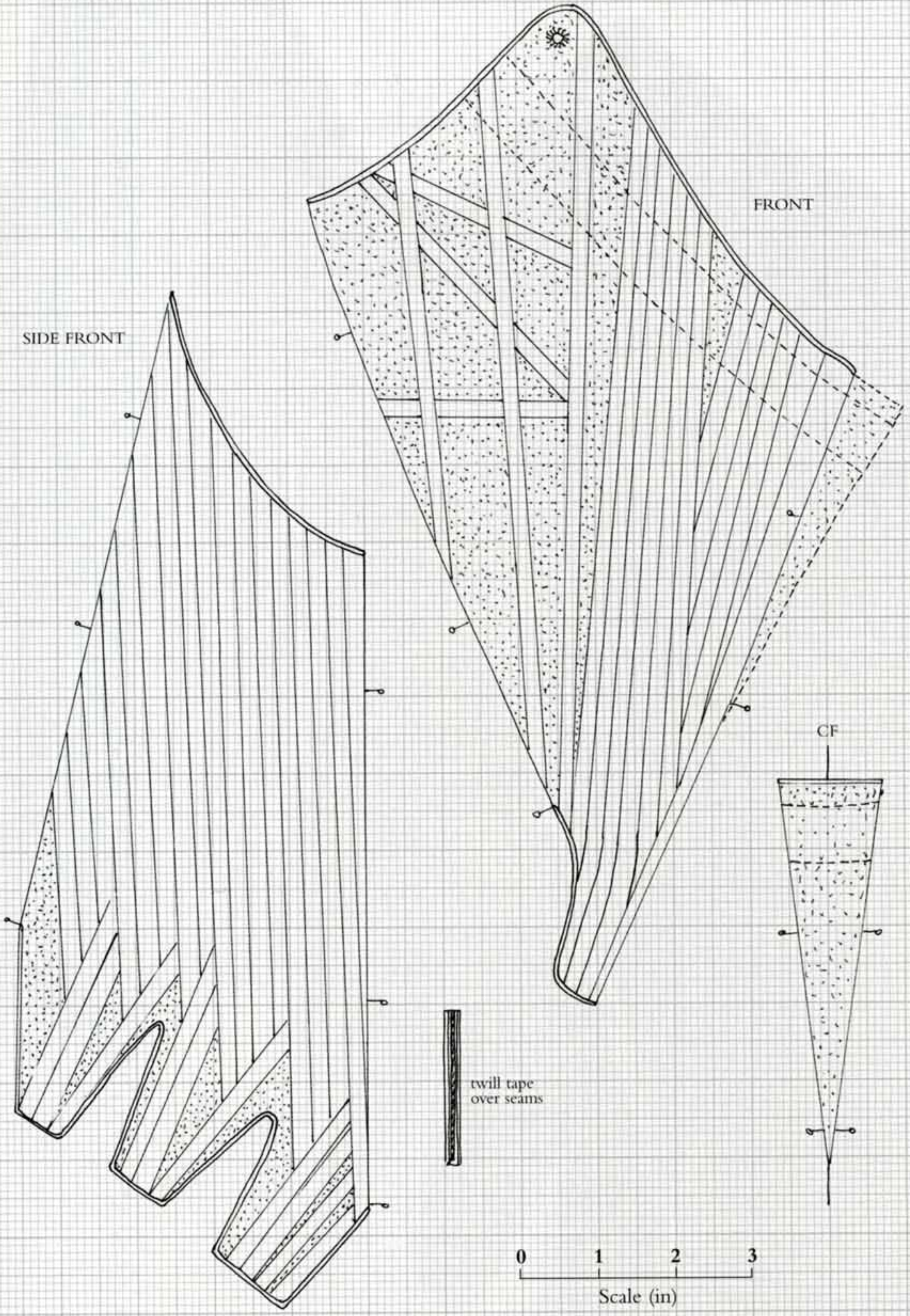
SIDE FRONT

FRONT

CF

twill tape
over seams

0 1 2 3
Scale (in)

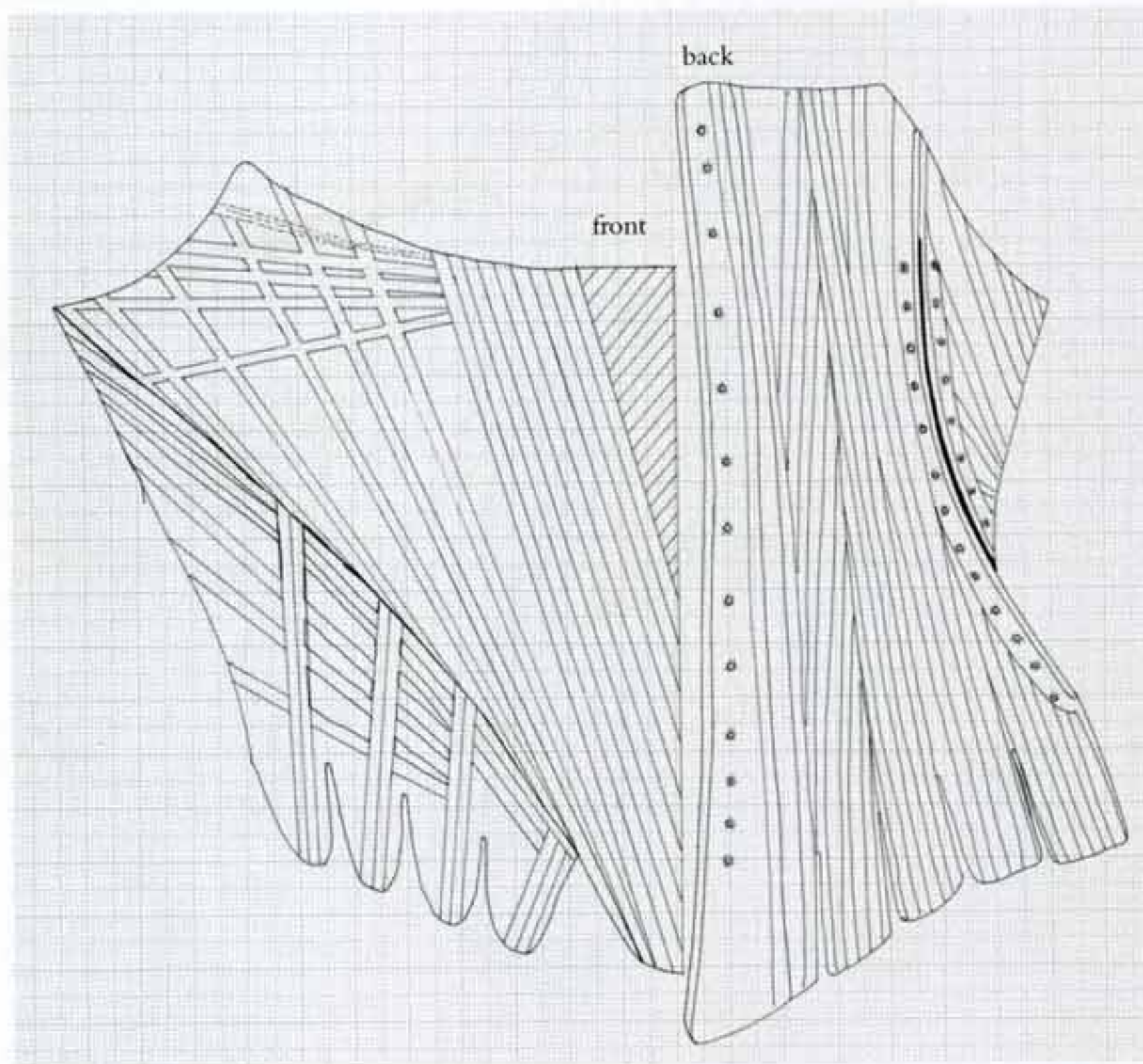




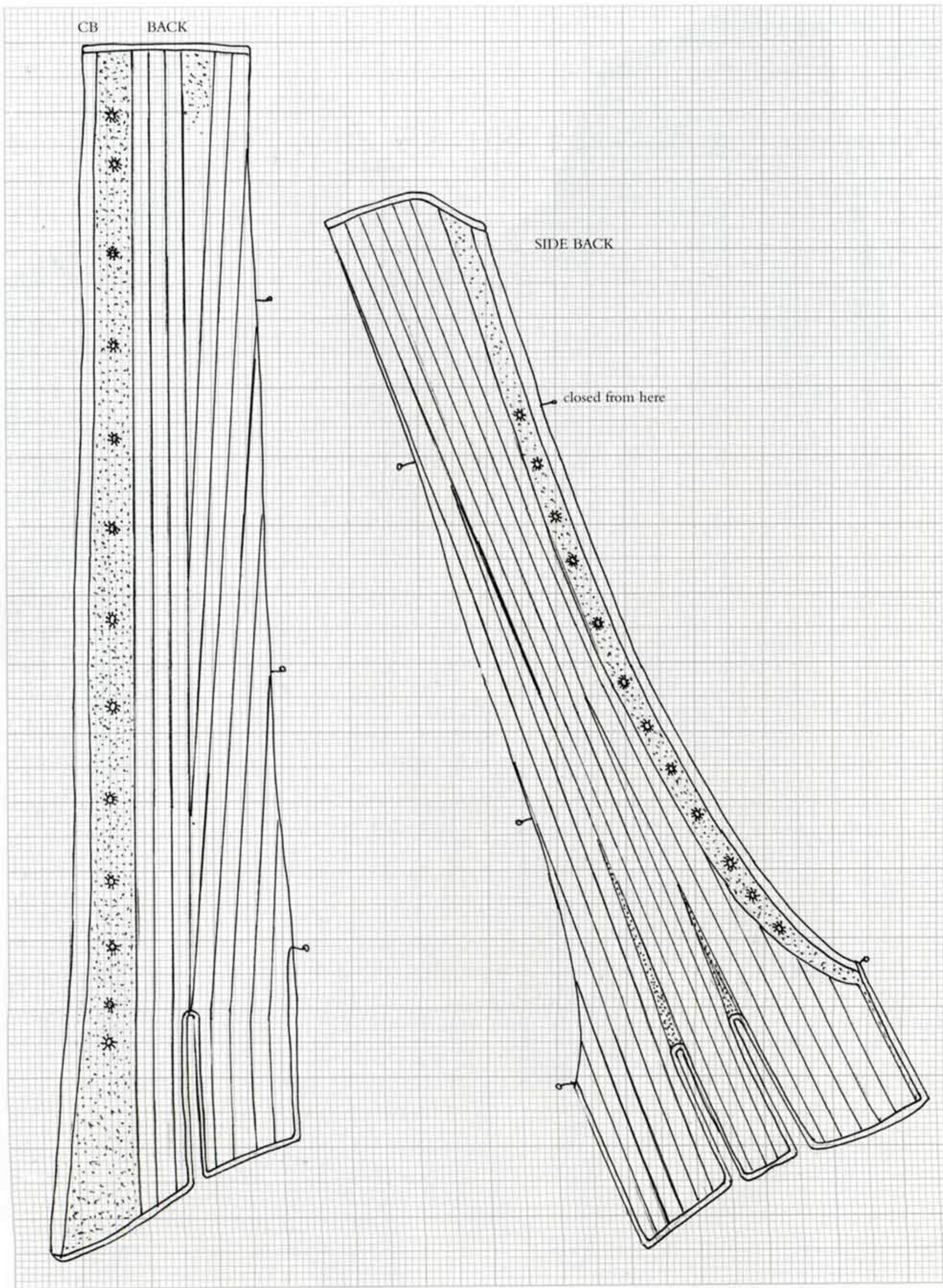
Pregnancy Corset, 1780–85

Jean and Pawel Nowak gave permission for this corset from their costume collection to be measured and included in this book. It was bought many years ago and the seller thought the corset was Victorian. They believe it to be a pregnancy corset, which is certainly possible. This corset will have fitted someone with a 38in (96.5cm) bust and 28in (71cm) waist – not what we would consider stout, but the lacing was present for some kind of ease or comfort. As Willett and Cunnington in *The History of Underclothes* say: 'the open corset was laced in front and behind, and for stout people extra side lacing might be added'. And Norah Waugh in *Corsets and Crinolines* says 'a side lacing seems to have been used for pregnancy' (see Further Reading, page 124).

The corset is beautifully made and has obviously been worn; it shows little damage except for the tape along the centre-front seam, which is unravelling, and the roughly sewn-in linen lining, which does look worn.



Opposite: This pregnancy corset is dated 1780–85. It is held in a private costume collection belonging to Jean and Pawel Nowak.



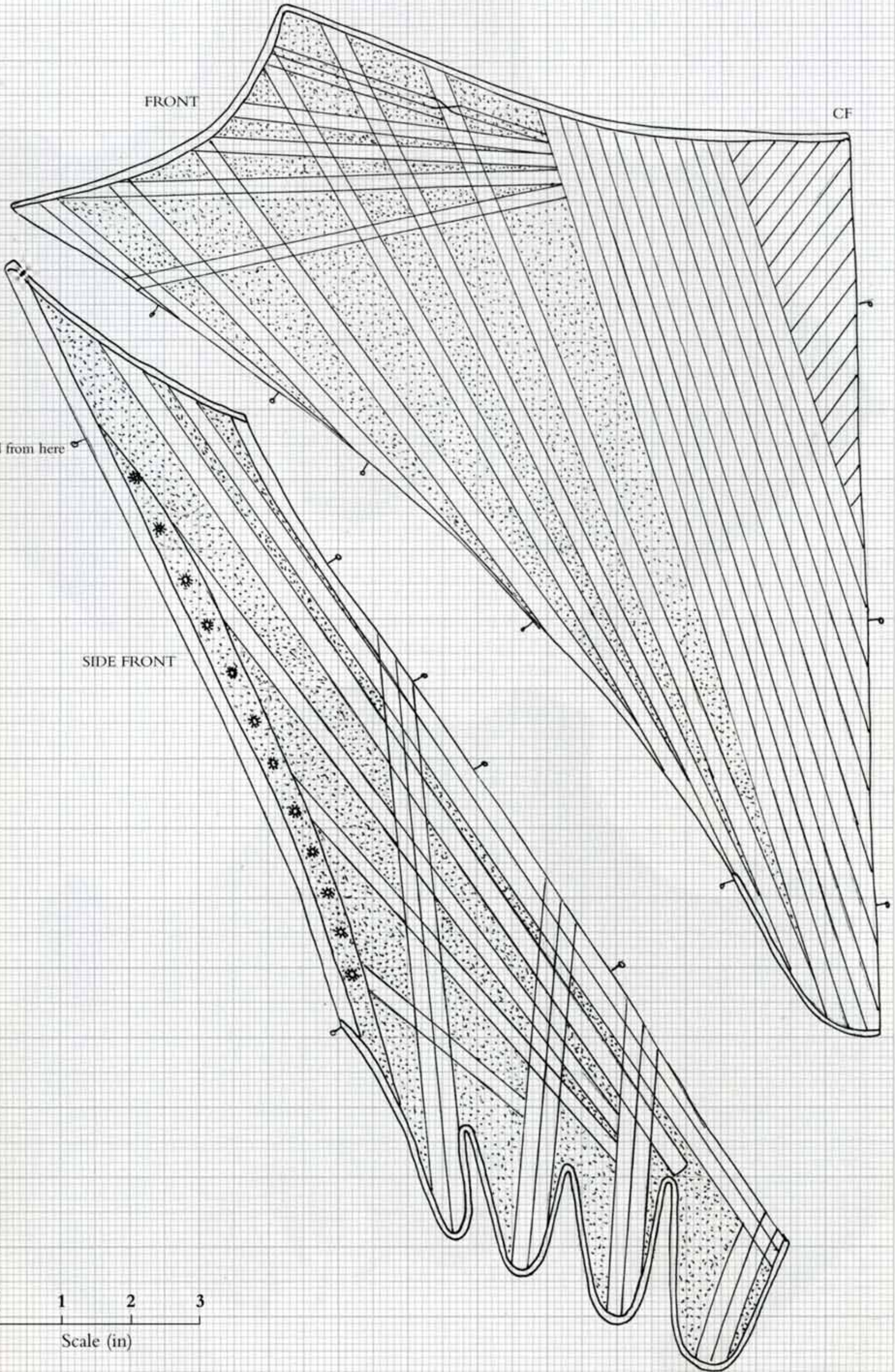
FRONT

CF

closed from here

SIDE FRONT

0 1 2 3
Scale (in)



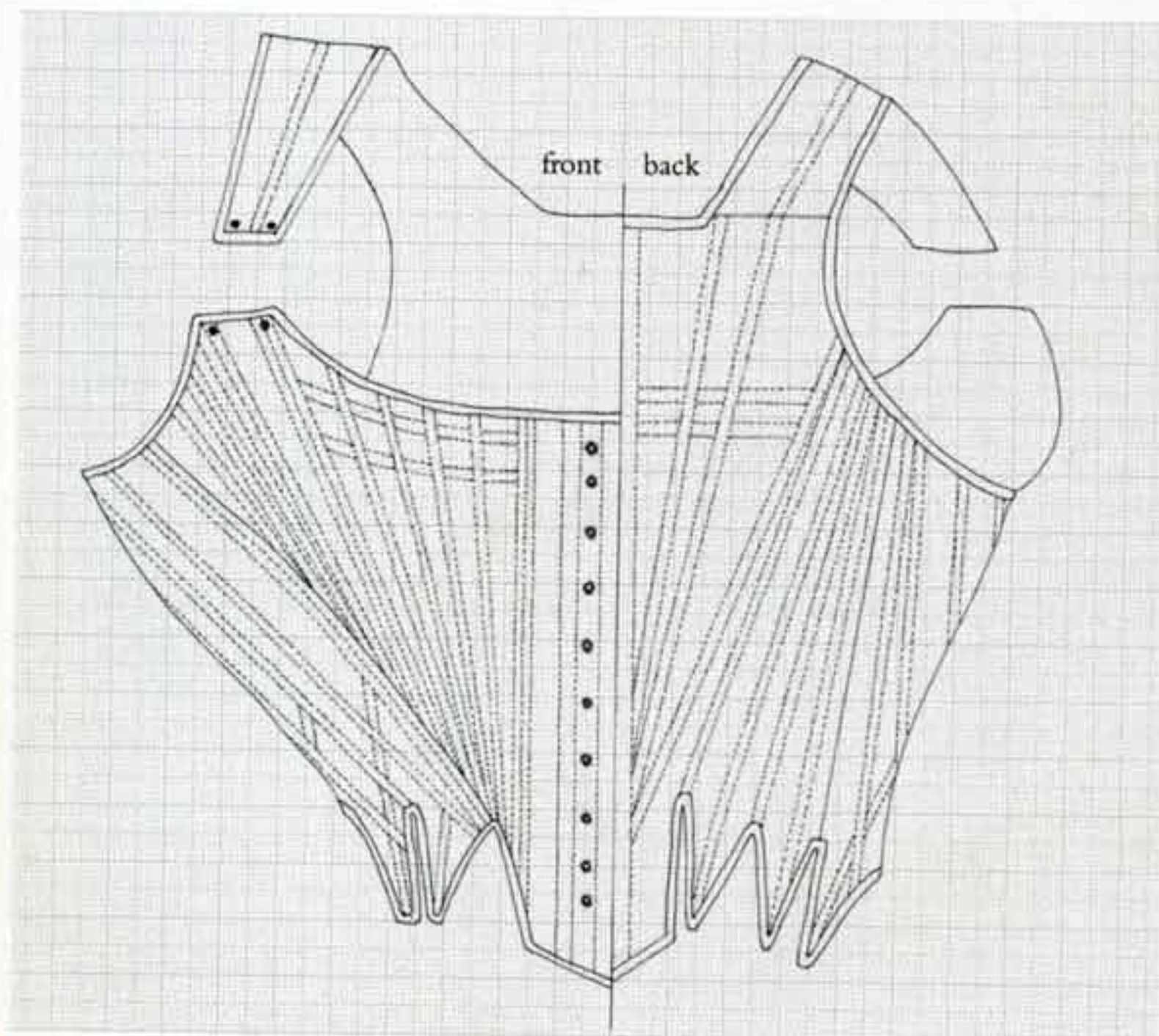


Brown Jean Corset, 1790

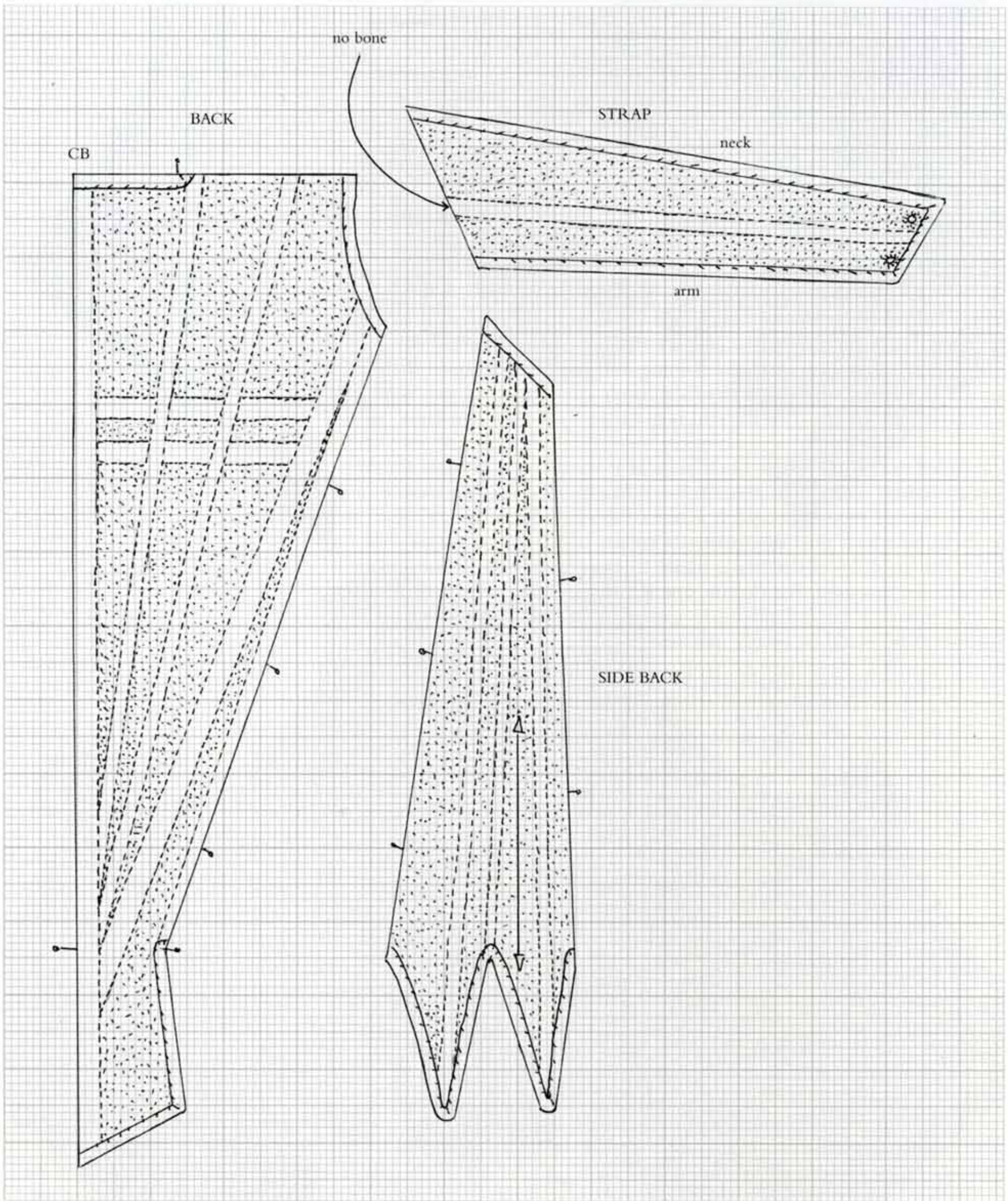
The fabric of this corset is brown jean, hand sewn and with whale bone throughout. It is a beautiful corset, in good condition, with no alterations. A stain on its back panel does not appear to be from wear. There is a boning channel on the shoulder strap but no boning in it and the shoulder strap ties up at the front. The garment is delicately stitched but it would have taken some strength to do the stitching. There is boning fanning out to flow with the body; the crossing of the bones indicating an understanding of the properties and capabilities of whale bone when combined with fabric. The corset looks like the support structure for a bridge.

This corset would qualify as half-boned stays, typical of its period and designed to elevate and push the bust forward. It is supported by 50 or more fine whale bones gradually fanning out, and the horizontal bones across the bust would have ensured a smooth line to the low-cut front. The long back of this corset would help support the very low front.

I included this corset in this book because it would be achievable for the modern corset maker, as it presents less difficulty than the fully boned stays shown on previous pages. It is one of the styles seen from 1770 onwards, by which time the makers of corsets had begun to realize that it was the direction of the whale bones that was important, meaning that less seaming was used. For closure, one lace would have been used. One of the eyelets has been displaced, so that when the two fronts came together they would be evenly matched.

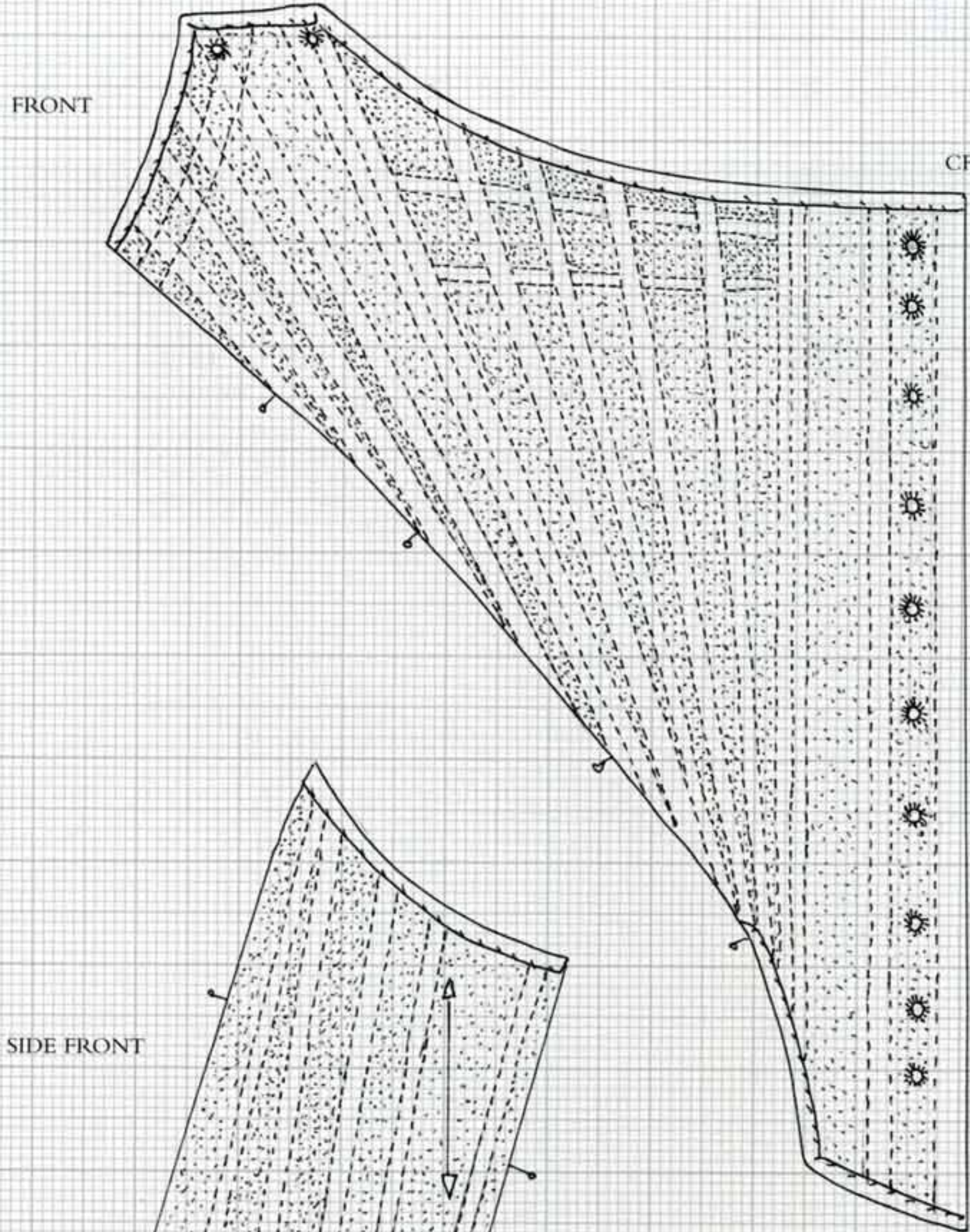


Opposite: Corset from 1790, held at Hereford Museum, UK. These photographs show the outside of the corset (top) and the inside (bottom).

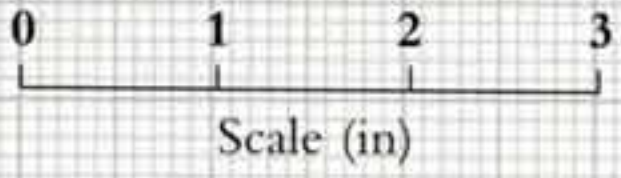
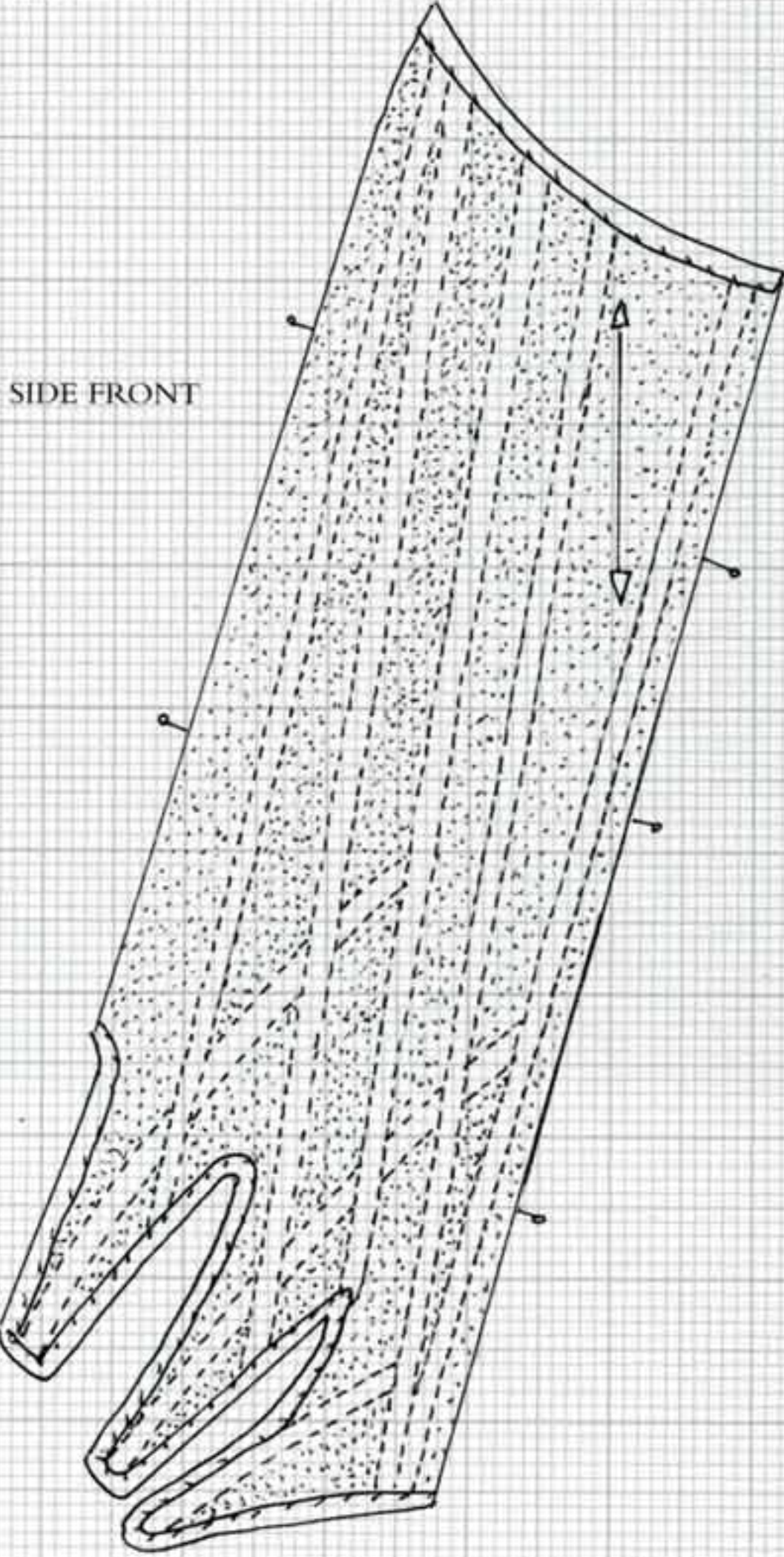


FRONT

CF



SIDE FRONT



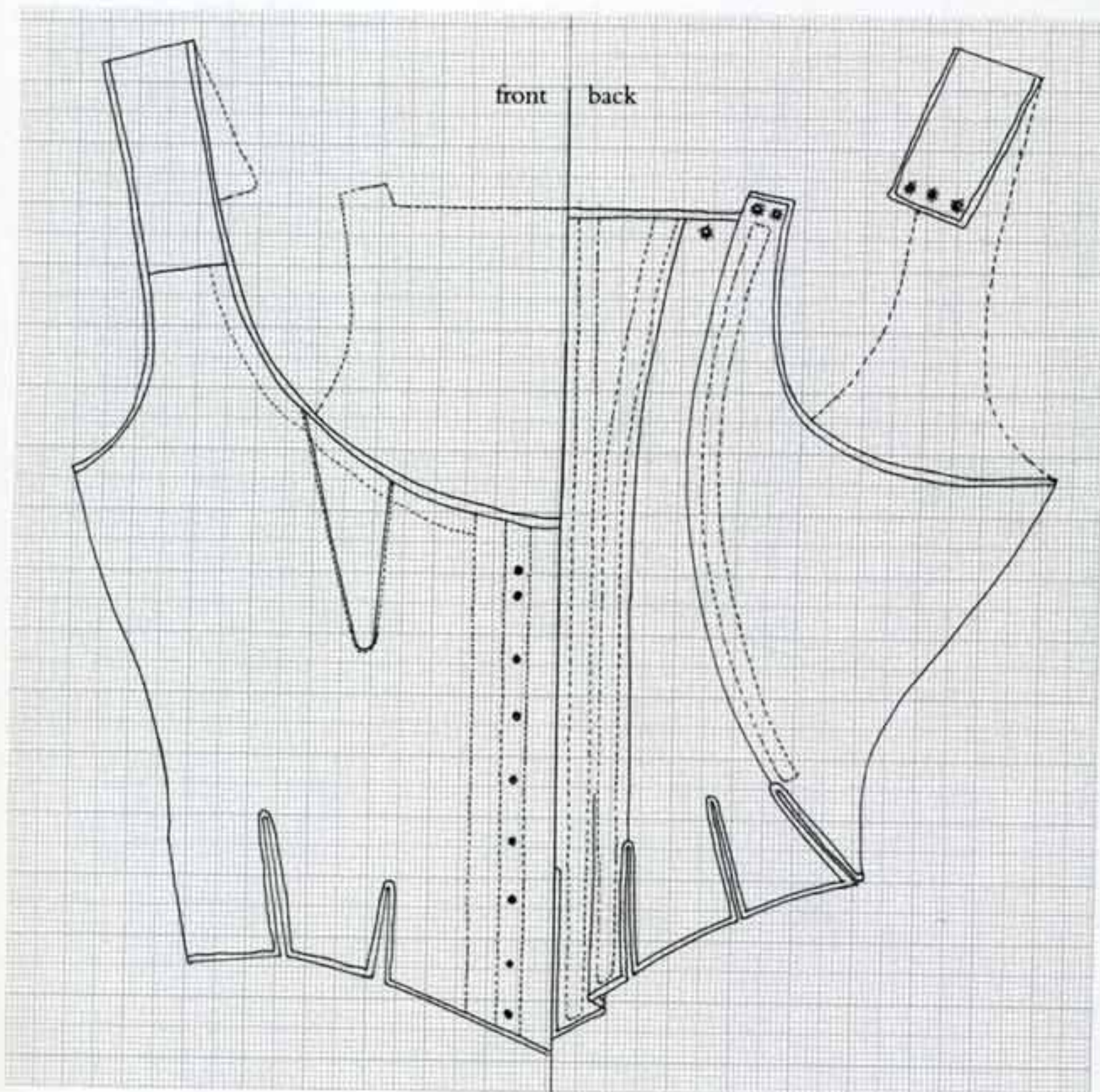
Linen Corset, 1790

This corset is made up from two layers of linen; unusually the lower edge of the corset has been faced with its binding rather than being bound with it. It has two bust gussets and a fine drawstring in a channel along the bust edge of the garment, to allow the wearer to draw the edge in.

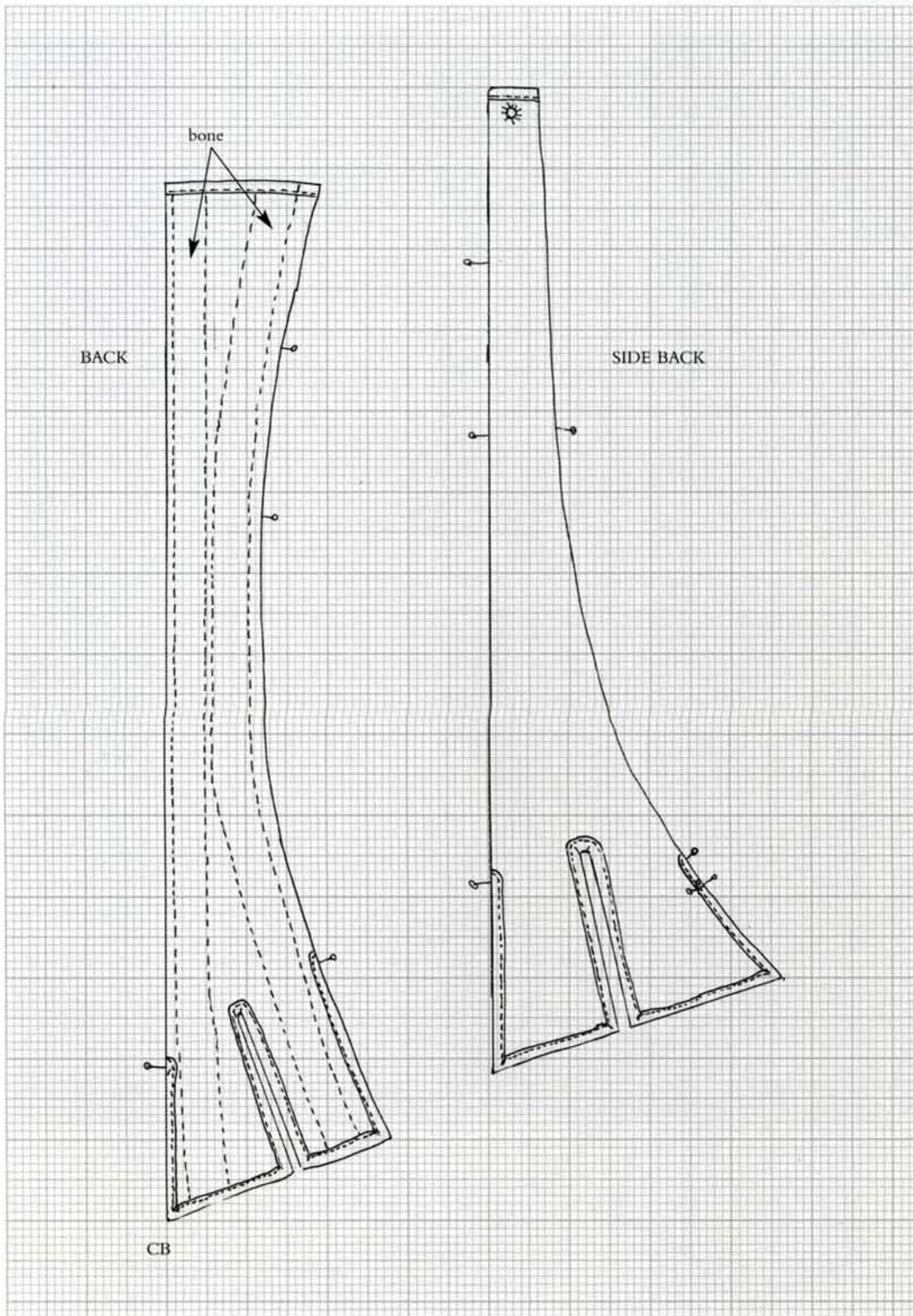
It has a centre-front opening and yet the shoulder straps close at the back with, unusually, three lace holes, but long ties have been added to the straps, which may have crossed at the back and tied in front.

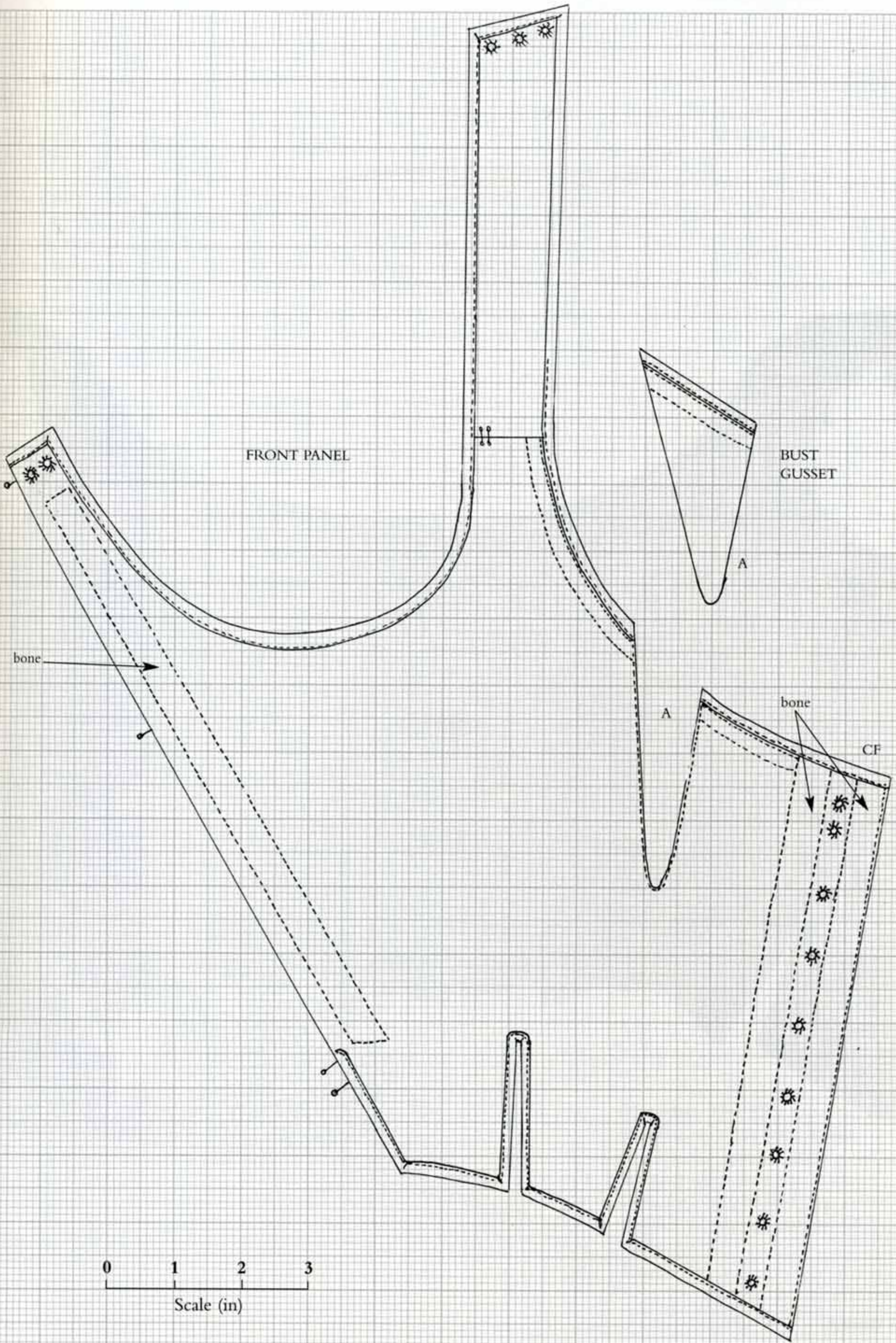
The centre-back panel is heavily boned and there has been some amendment or alteration on the back side seam; it is interesting to speculate whether a new front was added, or a longer front reduced, which would account for the rebinding of the lower edge. Alterations can be difficult to understand, but are always interesting.

There is an empty bone channel on the front panel where it meets the side back panel, which appears curved but is in fact straight. The eyelets are displaced at the top of this corset, as one lace would have been used to close it.



Opposite: This corset, from 1790, is held at Hereford Museum, UK.





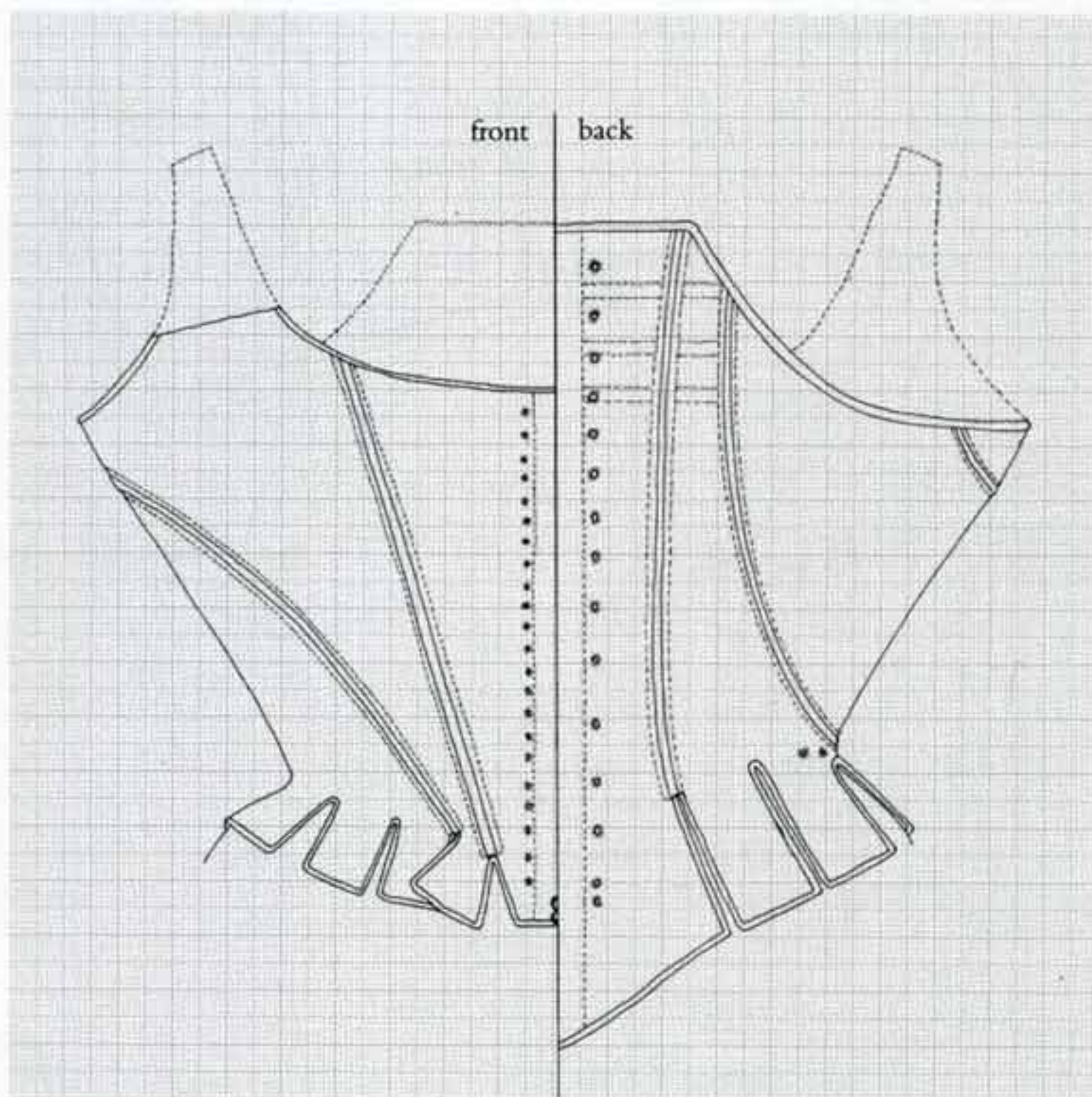


Pink Jumps, 1798

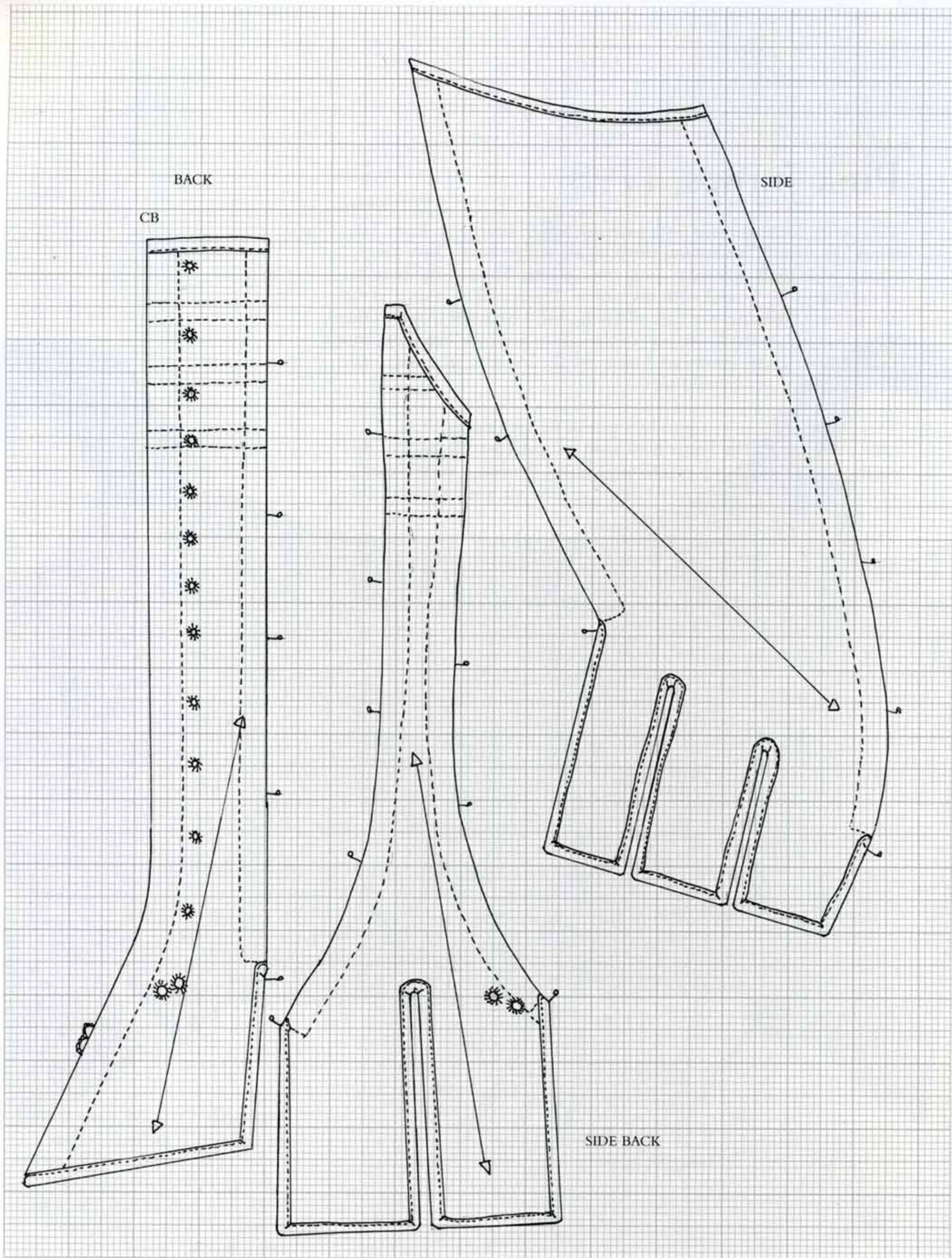
This pretty corset is made with pink silk taffeta lined with linen. No bones are present, but boning channels are visible. Seams have $\frac{1}{4}$ in (6mm) wide twill tape sewn along their gutters. The top and bottom of the 'jumps' are bound with silk ribbon. The shoulder straps and the centre-front fastenings are later additions, and I have not included them in the pattern. At the lower part of the centre front the fastenings appear to have been gently laced and, higher up, the rounded tabs close with Dorset buttons and buttonholes.

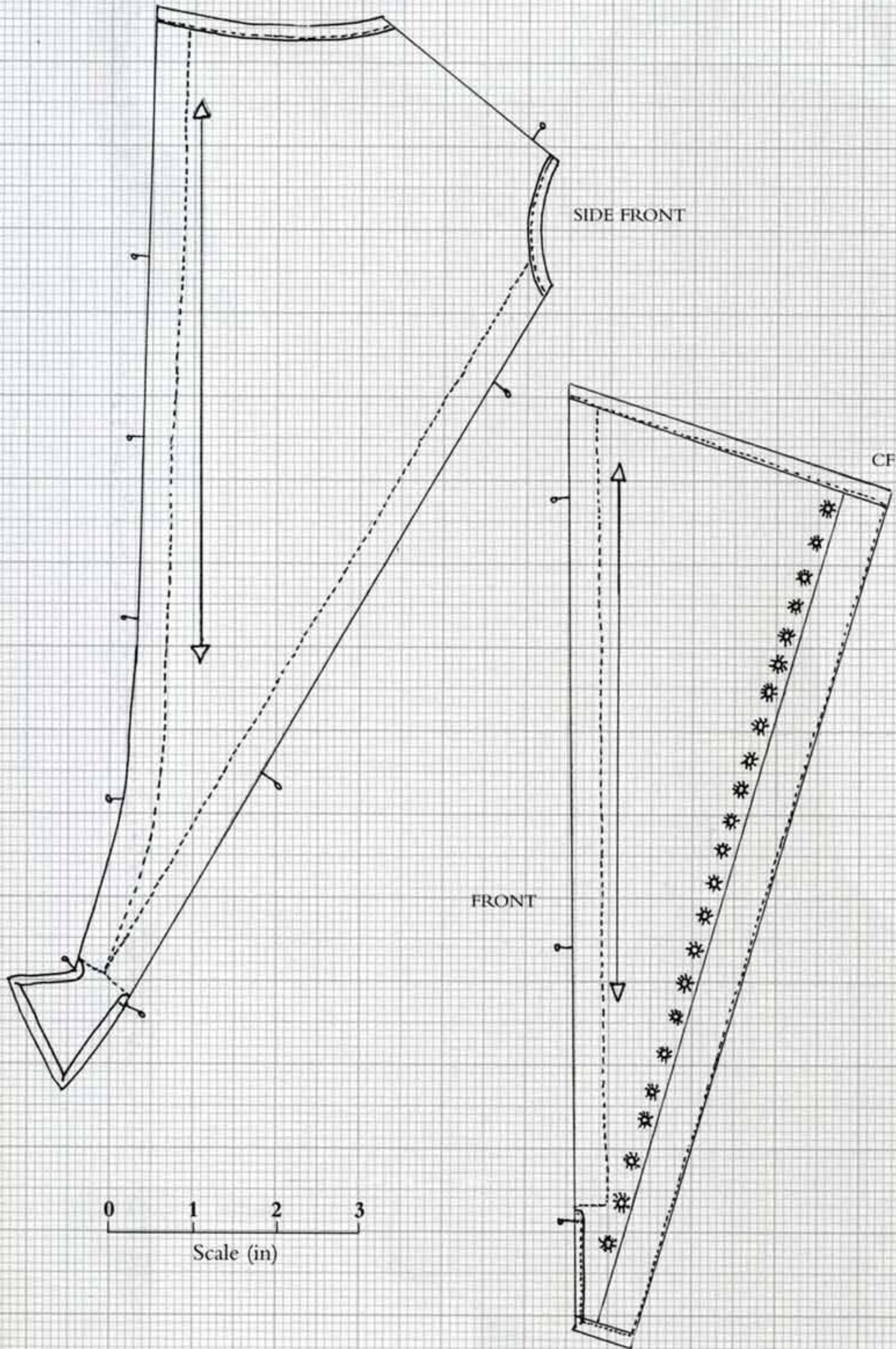
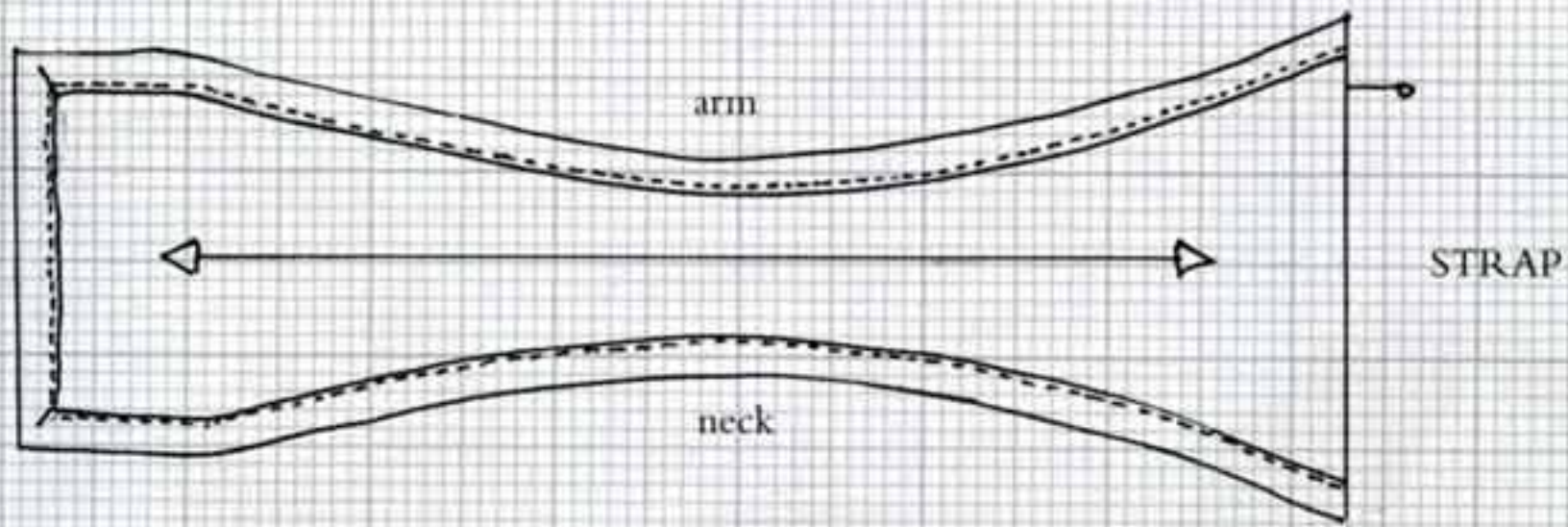
This garment was not originally 'a pair of jumps', but a pair of 'half-boned stays'. The bones have been removed but the back of this corset would not lace up comfortably unless the bones were present, so they were probably removed after the garment was no longer worn.

This is a beautifully shaped garment, delicately but strongly stitched and in a delightful shade of pink. It is a pattern I have made up with the original centre-front lacing rather than the button closure and with a conventional shoulder strap lacing closed at the front. The corset is longer in the body than it appears.



Opposite: This 1798 corset features an alteration in the front. It adds inches to the garment and the careful fastening at the front would allow access for a baby to feed. This corset is held at Colchester and Ipswich Museum, UK.







Rural Corded Corset, 1830–40

Made in buff cotton twill, with a centre-front whale-bone busk and straps over the shoulders, this corset has taped bones at the back and is corded. The cording appears to have been done with different types of 'stuff' as the ends, still visible on the inside of the garment, are of different colours and types of infilling.

The lining of this corset is interesting as it is made of pieced white linen with an occasional red line through and, despite the piecing, attention is given to the straight of the grain.

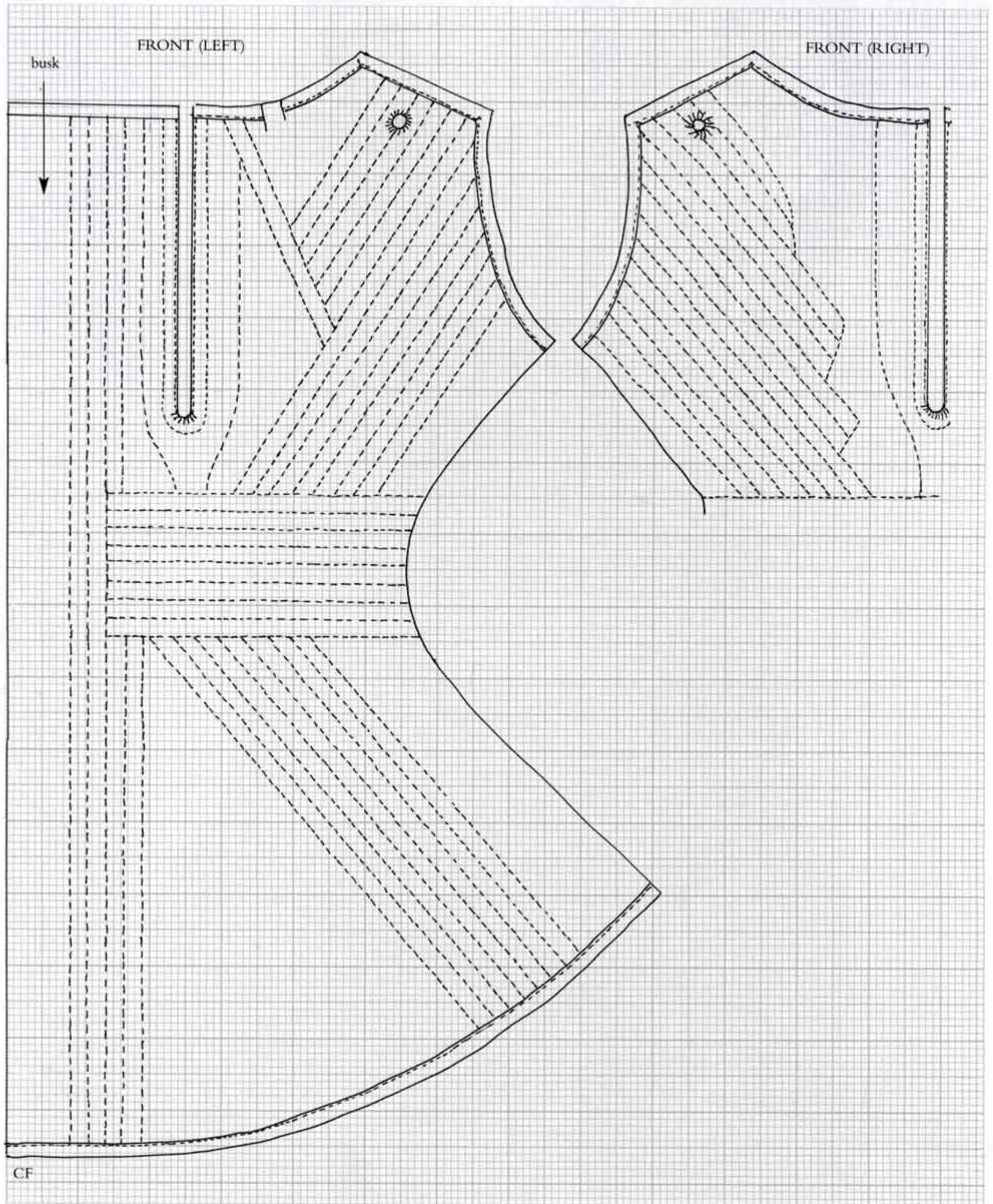
The patterns of the cording seem very simple but when the corset is worn, the cording lines are effective – the vertical lines support the grain and behave as boning and the cross-grain cording lines over hips and radiates up to the shoulders on the back panels, gently curving and giving a softer shape – simple but effective.

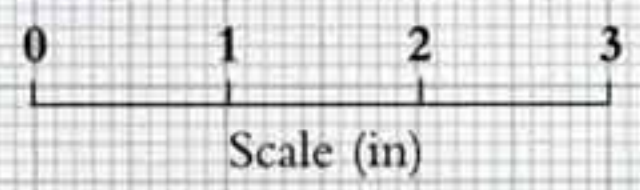
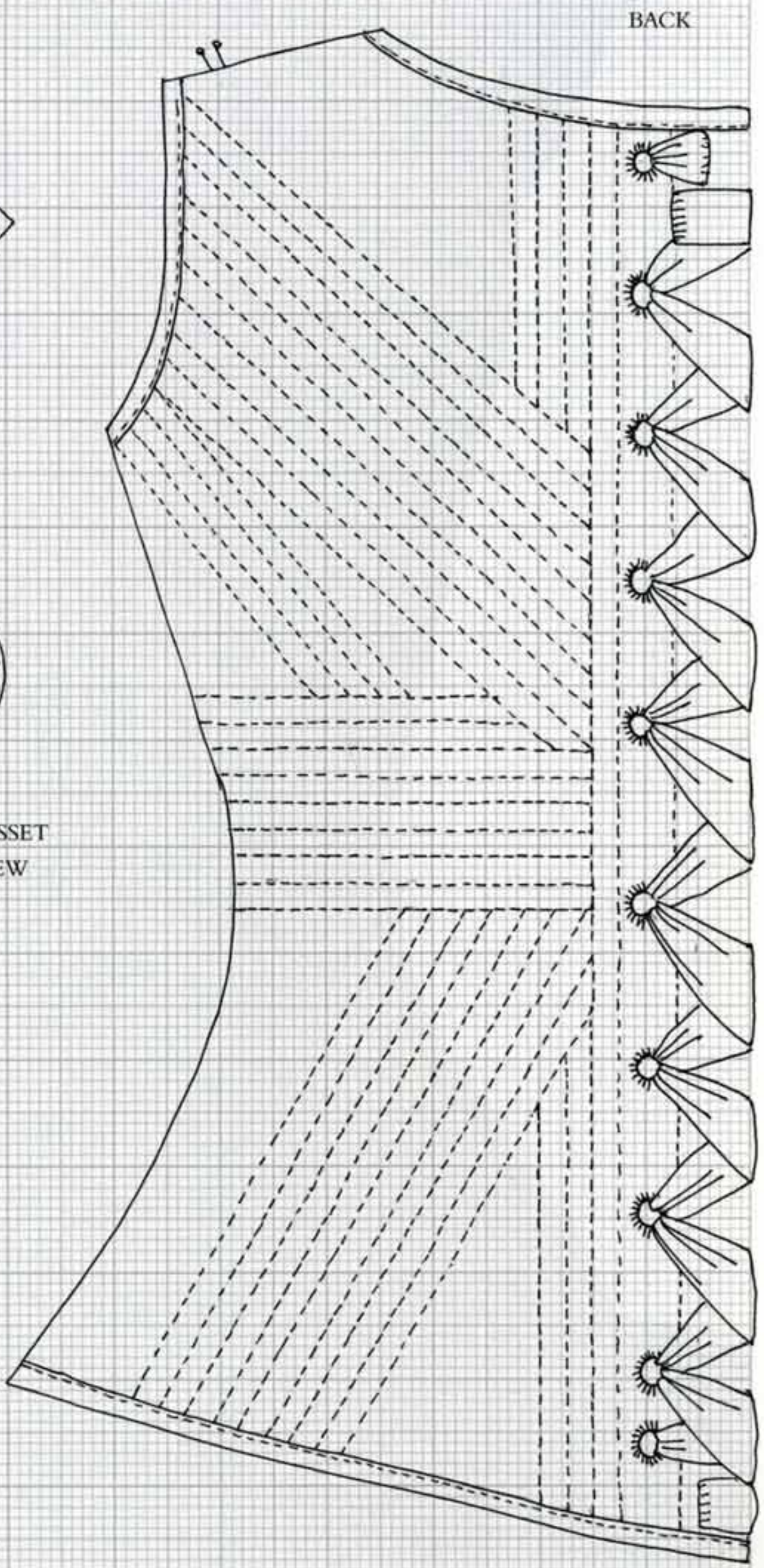
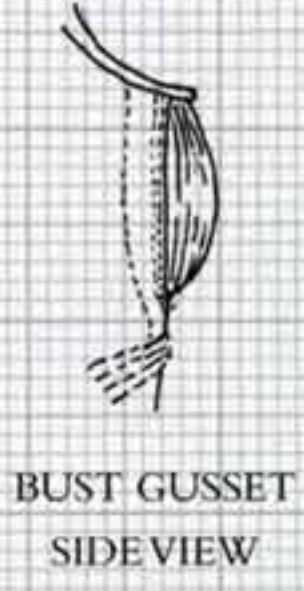
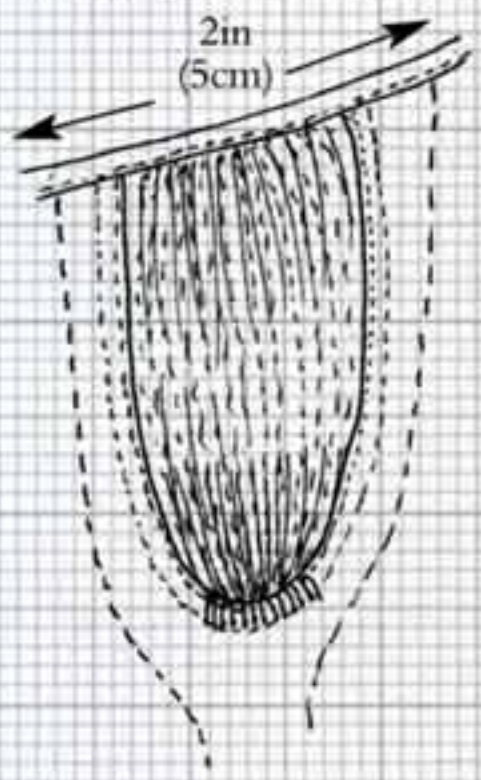
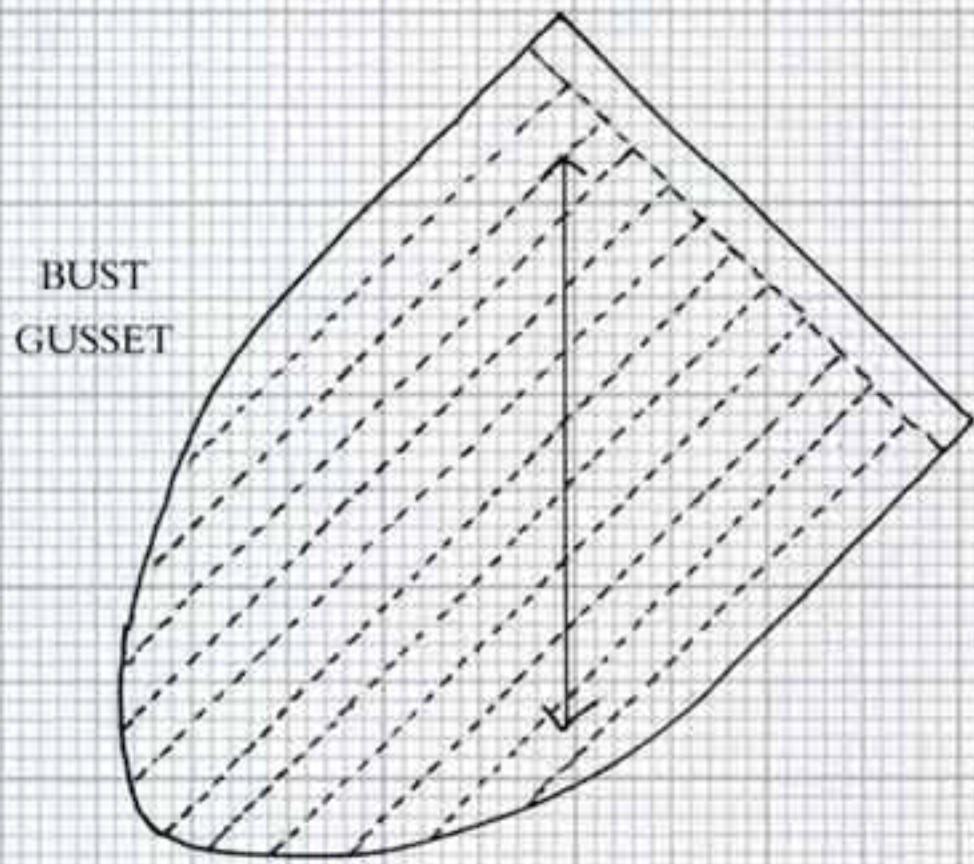
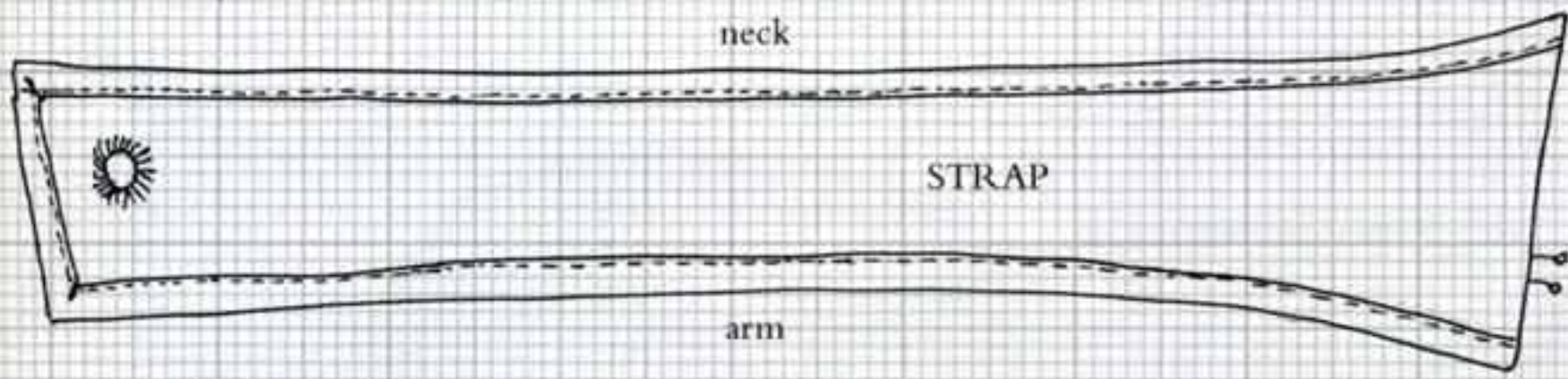
This corset is a robust, practical garment, constructed with an understanding of where it needed to be strong but also an awareness of the wearer's needs to feel good about her shape and attractiveness.

Another intriguing feature of this corset is the different type of cording patterns for the bust areas; it is slightly more 'padded' on the left bosom, and there is a tuck in the actual garment creating fullness held by the stay-tape edging.



Opposite: This corset, from the 1830s, is held in the Symington Collection at Leicestershire County Council Museum. Cording turns out to be evident to a greater extent on the corsets from 1830–1920 than I realized before collating these patterns.





CB



Corded Taffeta Corset, 1840

This beautiful hand-stitched corset has reasonably crude alterations at the centre front, which opens by means of alternating buttons and buttonholes. The buttons are linen pulled over what feels like a metal ring and, although the alteration is constructed with cruder stitches than the rest of the corset, the fabric seems to be the same. One wonders whether fabric was supplied with the corset for when the wearer wanted to make adjustments.

The corset represents a mixture of styles. It is possible that it could be as early as 1820, except the centre-back metal eyelets date from after 1828. The steels are crudely hand stitched in, indicating that they are a later amendment (the metal eyelets could have been inserted over earlier hand-worked ones).

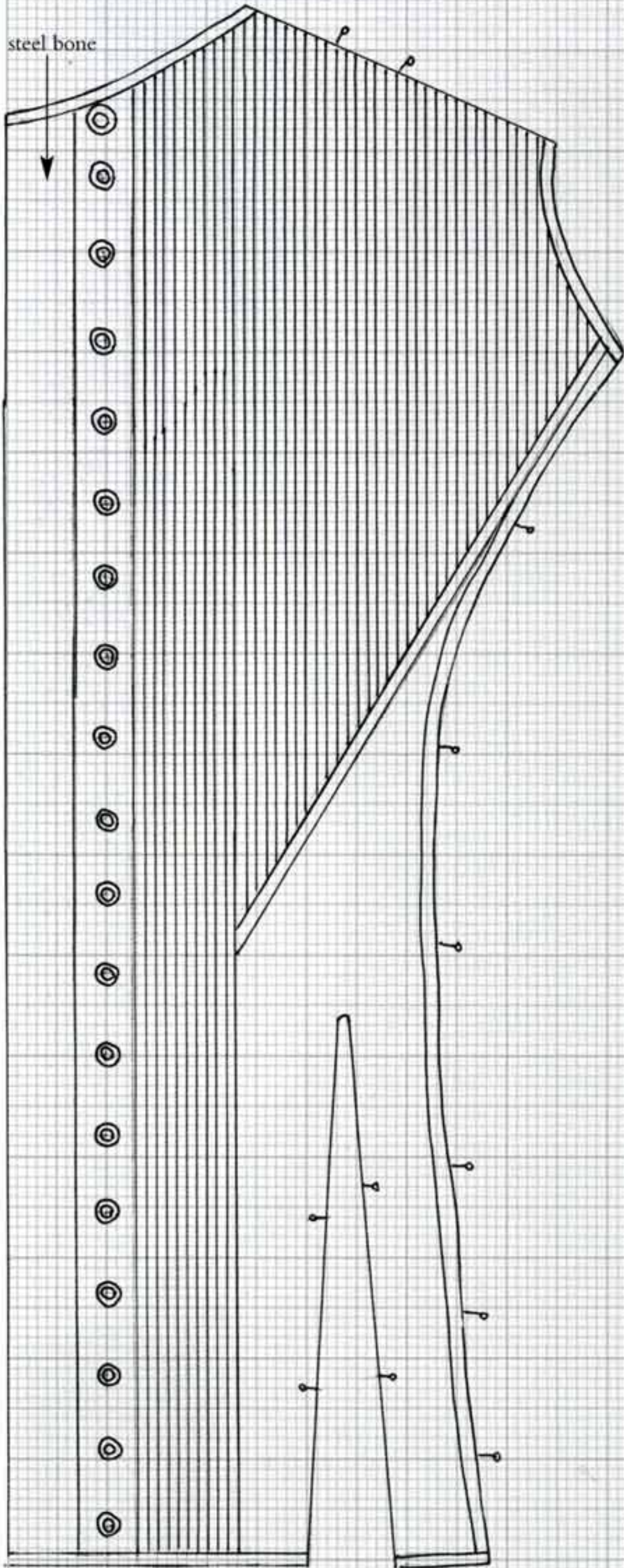
Most of the corset is cut on the cross-grain of the fabric; it is made of white silk taffeta and has a fine white linen lining. Through the narrow binding over the bust runs a thread, as a drawstring to allow that area to be tightened or loosened.



Opposite: This corset is in the private collection of Vina Cooke, who owns the Museum of Dolls and Bygone Childhood at Newark in Nottinghamshire.

BACK

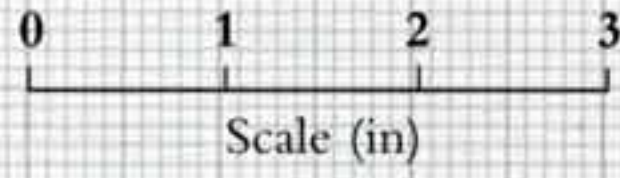
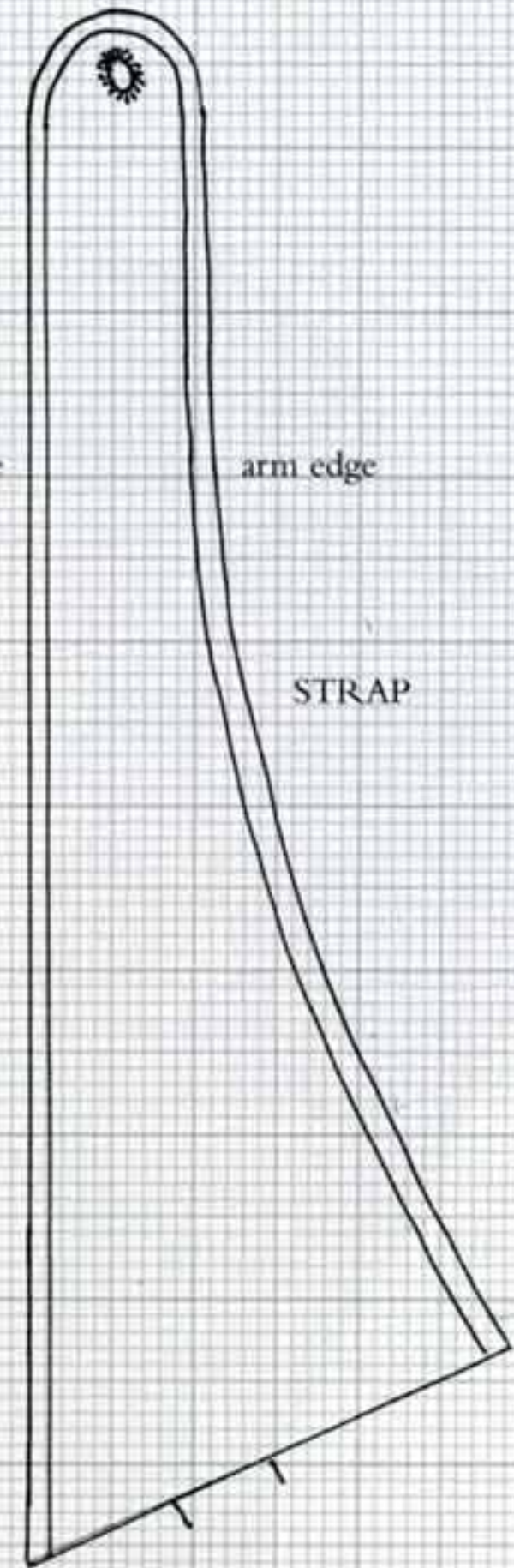
steel bone



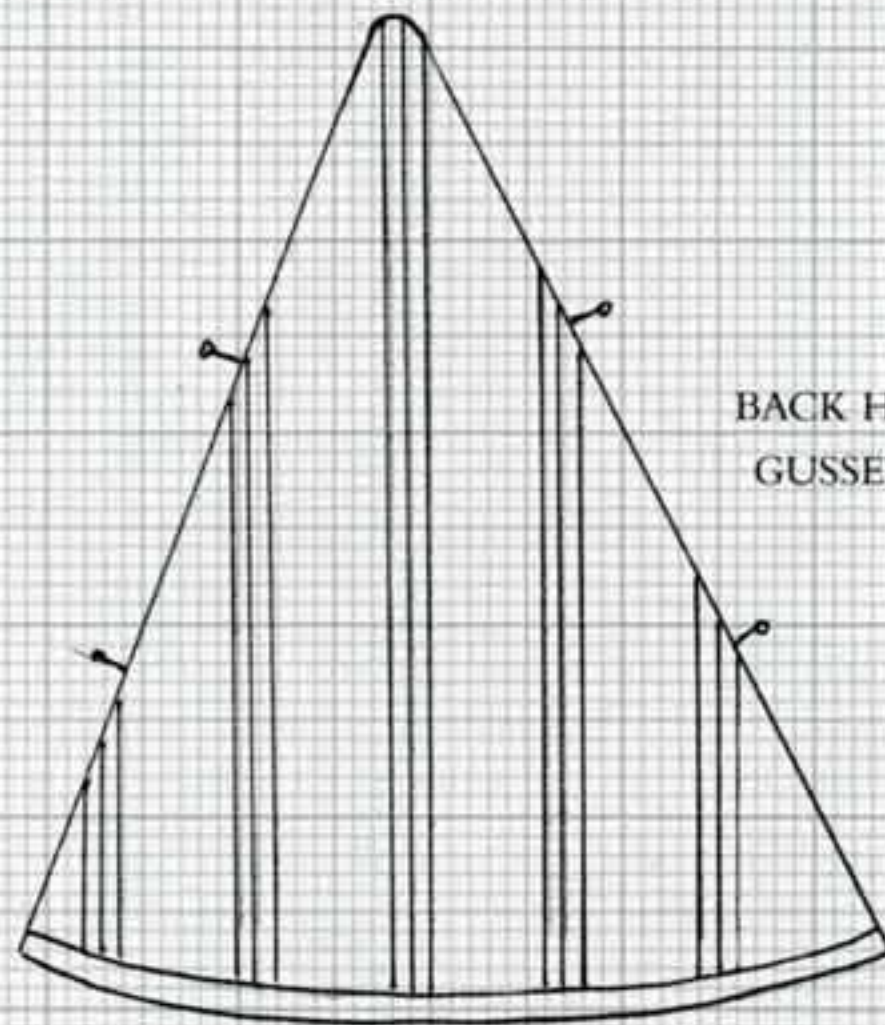
neck edge

arm edge

STRAP



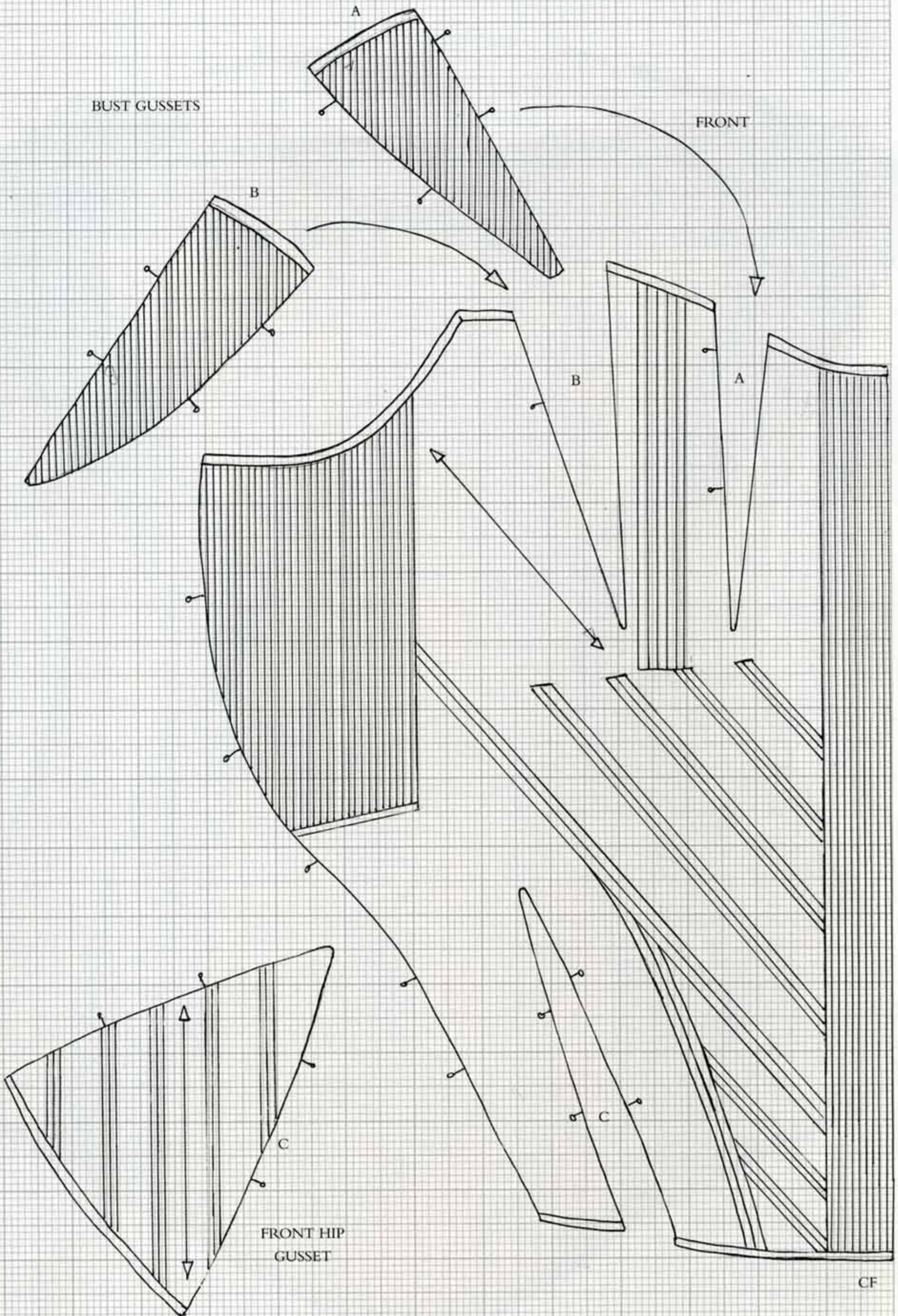
BACK HIP
GUSSET



CB

BUST GUSSETS

FRONT



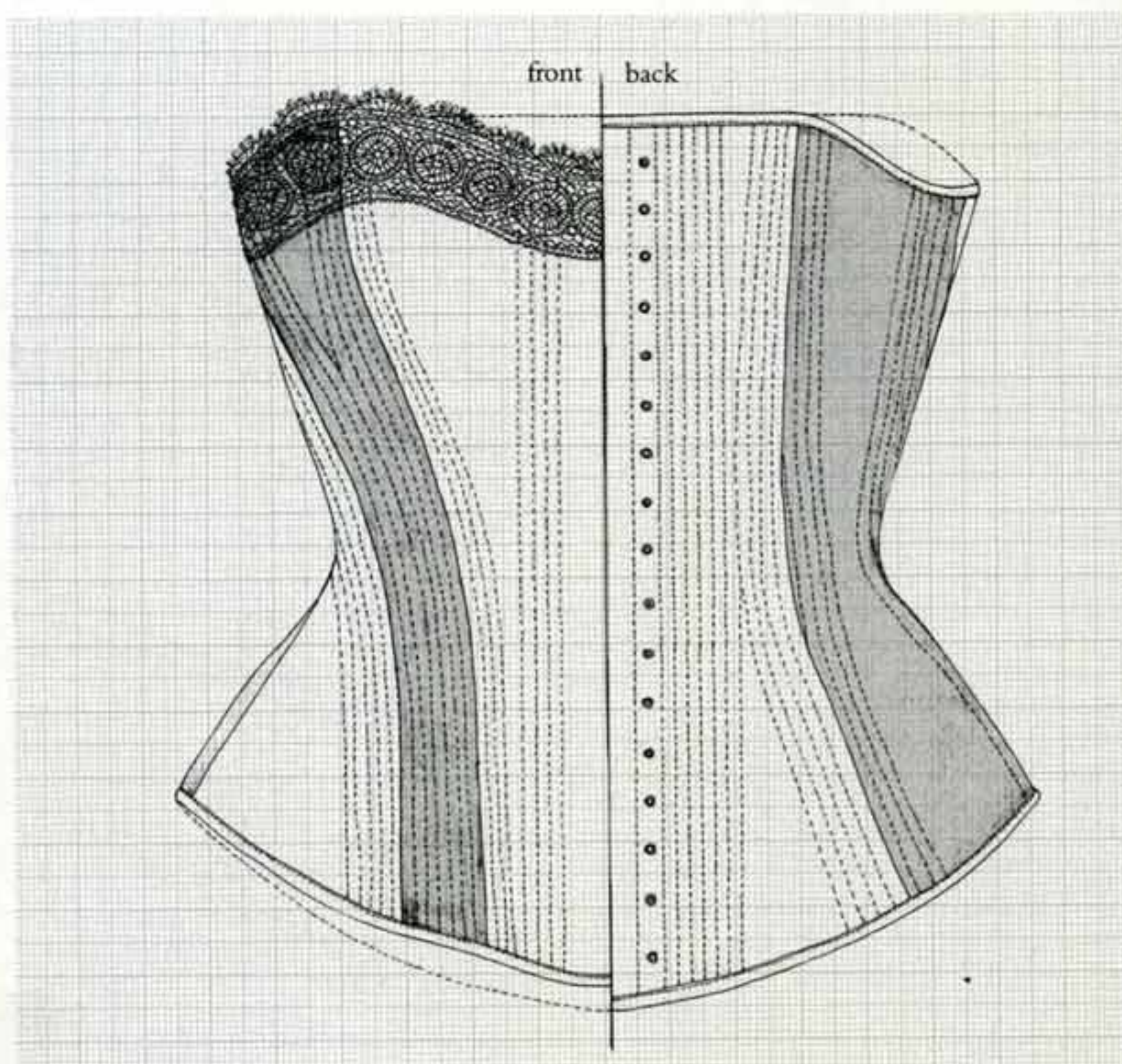


Red-and-Black Lasting Corset, 1860

This closed-front corset of red (now faded to orange) and black cotton lasting is stiffened down the centre front with a wooden busk. The busk is wrapped in wool or wash leather and the corset is completely corded except for the steel or whale bone on either side of the eyelets. Cording gave a measure of suppleness to a corset while still conforming to the desired rigidity of figure control. Although the channels for the cording are machine stitched, it is not machine cording, as the infill of wool or twine would have been pulled through with a long, strong needle.

Corsets of this type were closed by lacing down the centre back and any minor changes to the fit could be achieved by adjusting the laces. It was impossible for such a corset to be put on by the wearer without help from either a member of their family or a household servant.

At the centre back the eyelets completely match and there is no displacement. On the side back seam the cording disappears, suggesting an alteration to fit the corset more closely before it was finished, since it does not look as if it has been altered afterwards. This suggests that the person was measured and fitted, or the corset was part produced to a standard size and then fitted and finished.

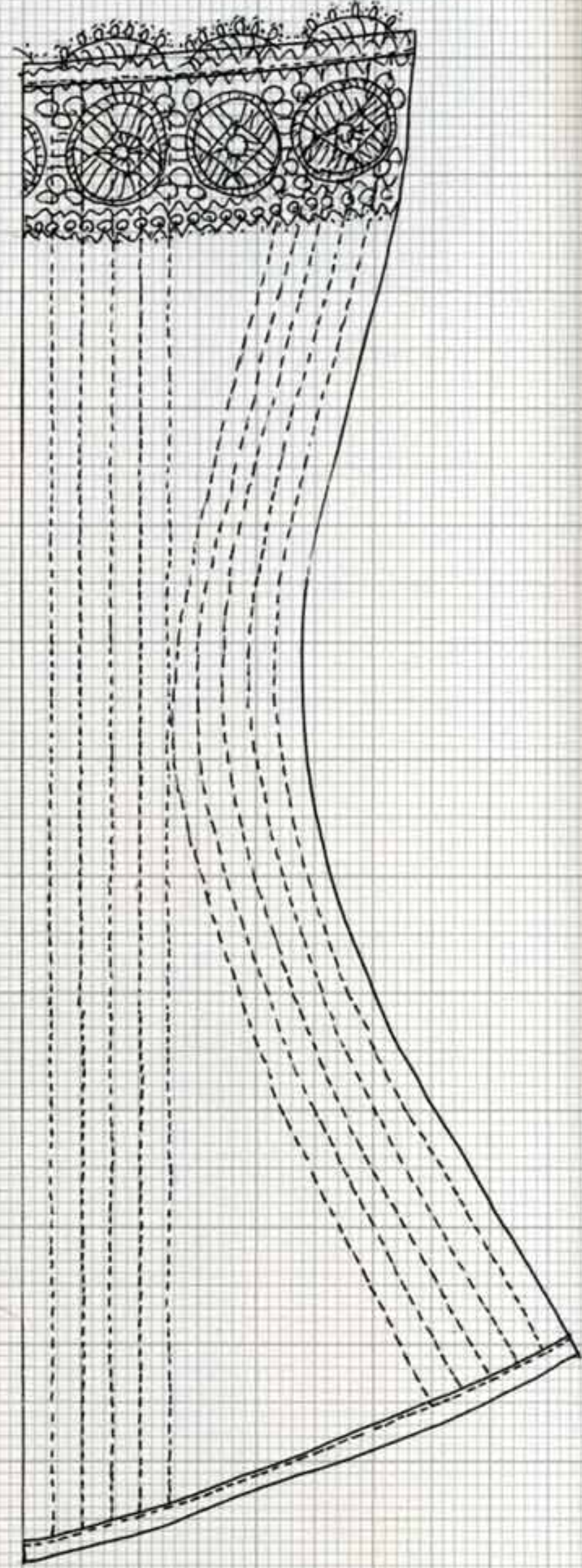
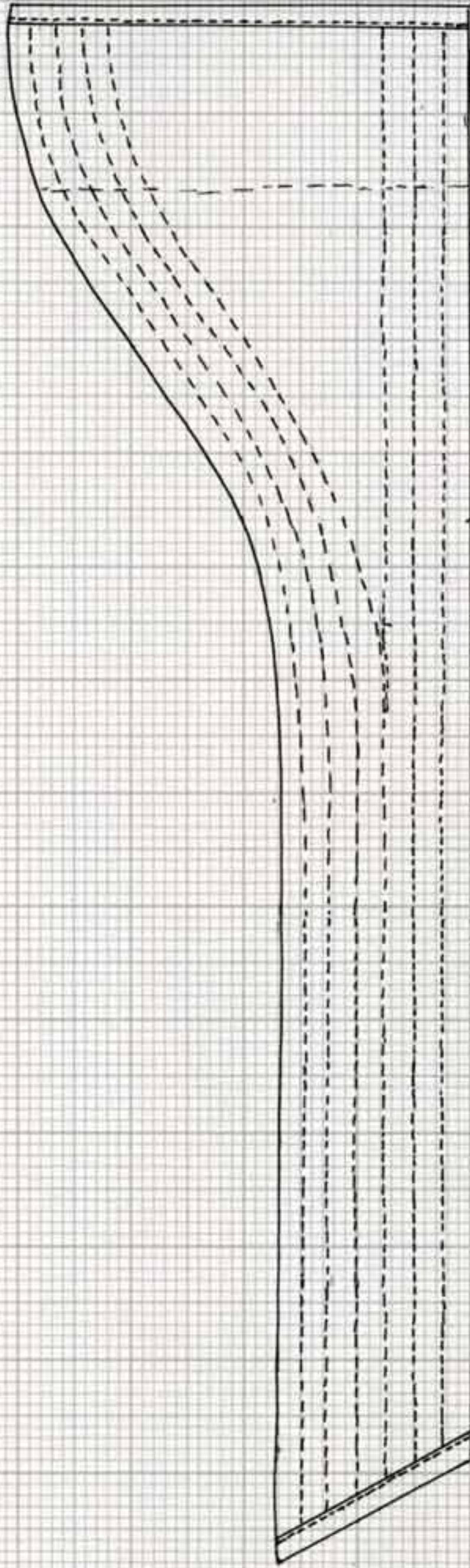
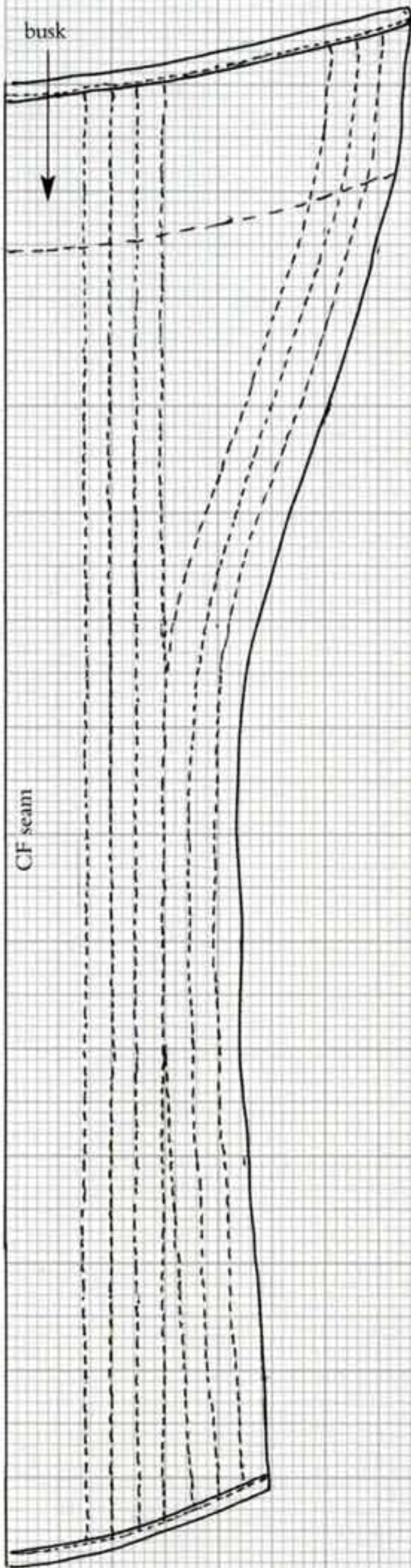


Opposite: This 1860 corset is from the Symington Collection at Leicestershire County Council Museum, although Phillip Warren, curator of the Symington Collection, does not think that this corset was made by Symington. The Symington Collection includes many corsets or half corsets from other sources, presumably acquired to learn from their competitors.

FRONT (RED)

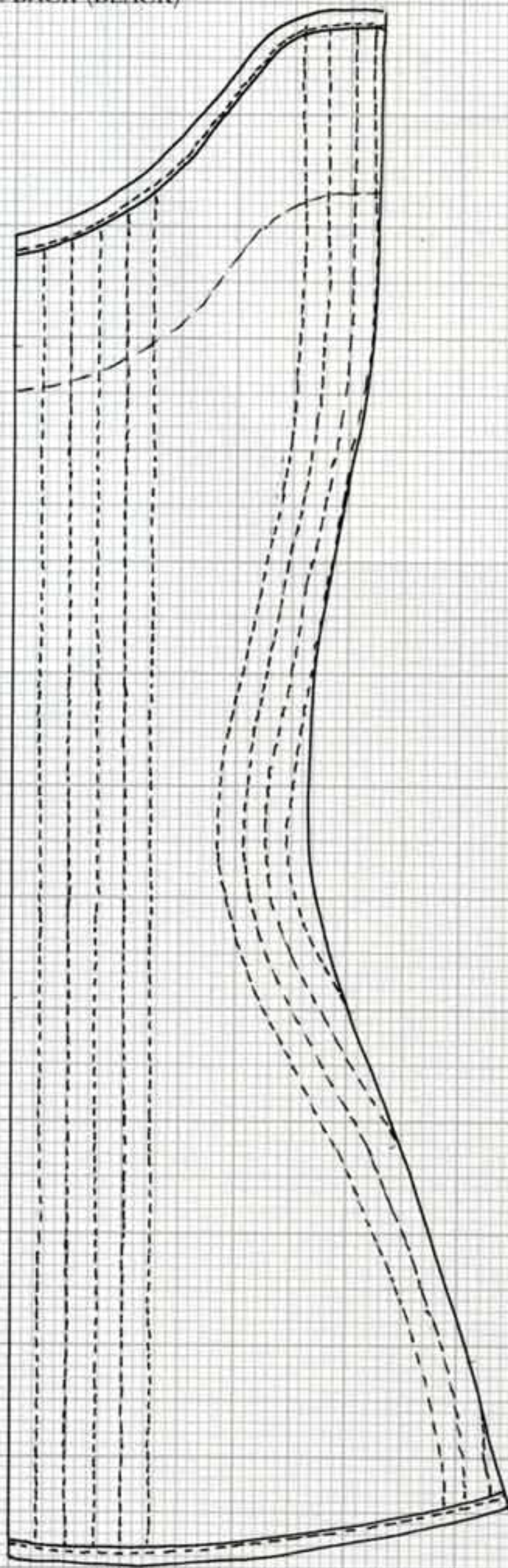
SIDE FRONT (BLACK)

SIDE (RED)

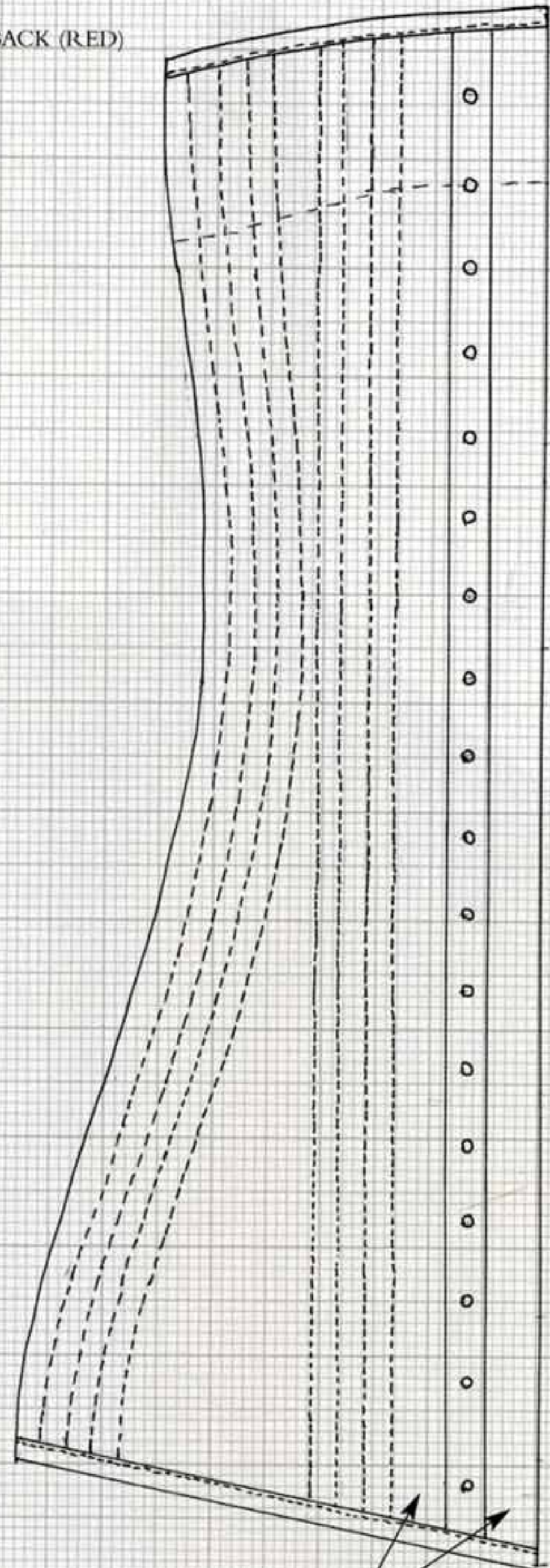


CF

SIDE BACK (BLACK)



BACK (RED)



alteration

bone

CB

0 1 2 3
Scale (in)

Use red stitching on black panels
and black stitching on red panels.



Child's Red Stay Band, 1880–85

Now faded to orange, this simple design is made in red sateen and corded for additional support. The band is constructed with three layers of fabric: sateen, hessian and a glazed-linen lining. The two front panels and the back panel have 24 rows of machine cording, stitched in cream thread, 6 stitches to 1in (2.5cm).

The right side-back seam between the side panel and the back panel has an opening in it to pass the fastening tab through. The fastening tabs have a hook and an eyelet on one, and three eyelets on the other. Although this garment has never been worn the hook has broken off, but a ribbon could have been passed through the eyelets to fasten it. It has two shoulder straps of $\frac{1}{2}$ in (1.25cm) India straight tape.

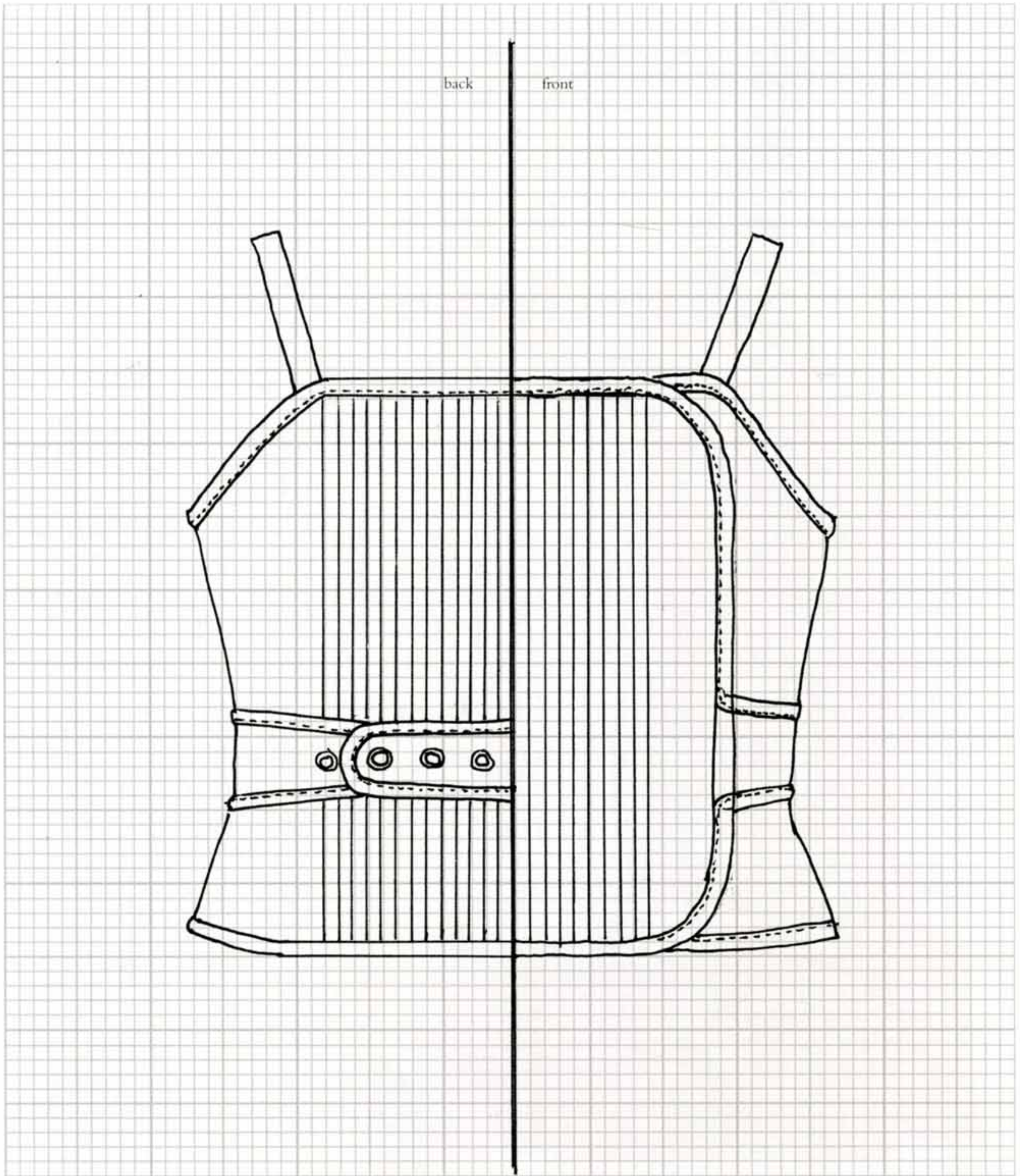
It may be an uncomfortable, restrictive garment to our eyes, but it is actually very light and pliable. Stay bands developed from the tight binding of swaddling, known to be practised in Europe from c.13th century, which was thought necessary to prevent deformity. By the early 1800s swaddling was dying out as a practice in the UK, but a less restrictive stay band remained in use until the 1930s. This is an example from the 1880s.

In 1873 machine-corded, machine-made stay bands were marketed by Symington's at 4in (10cm) deep for a newborn and 10in (25.5cm) for the older child. At that time girls of eight years old were usually in their first corset. In 1908 the 'liberty bodice' became available and from then on the market for stay bands decreased. Liberty bodices were worn by boys and girls until the practice finally died out in the 1970s.

The stay bands were thought to encourage an upright posture and help develop a strong spine. At the time they were worn there was no central heating – keeping a child warm was a priority, which could be why this one is red, as red was perceived as a warm colour.



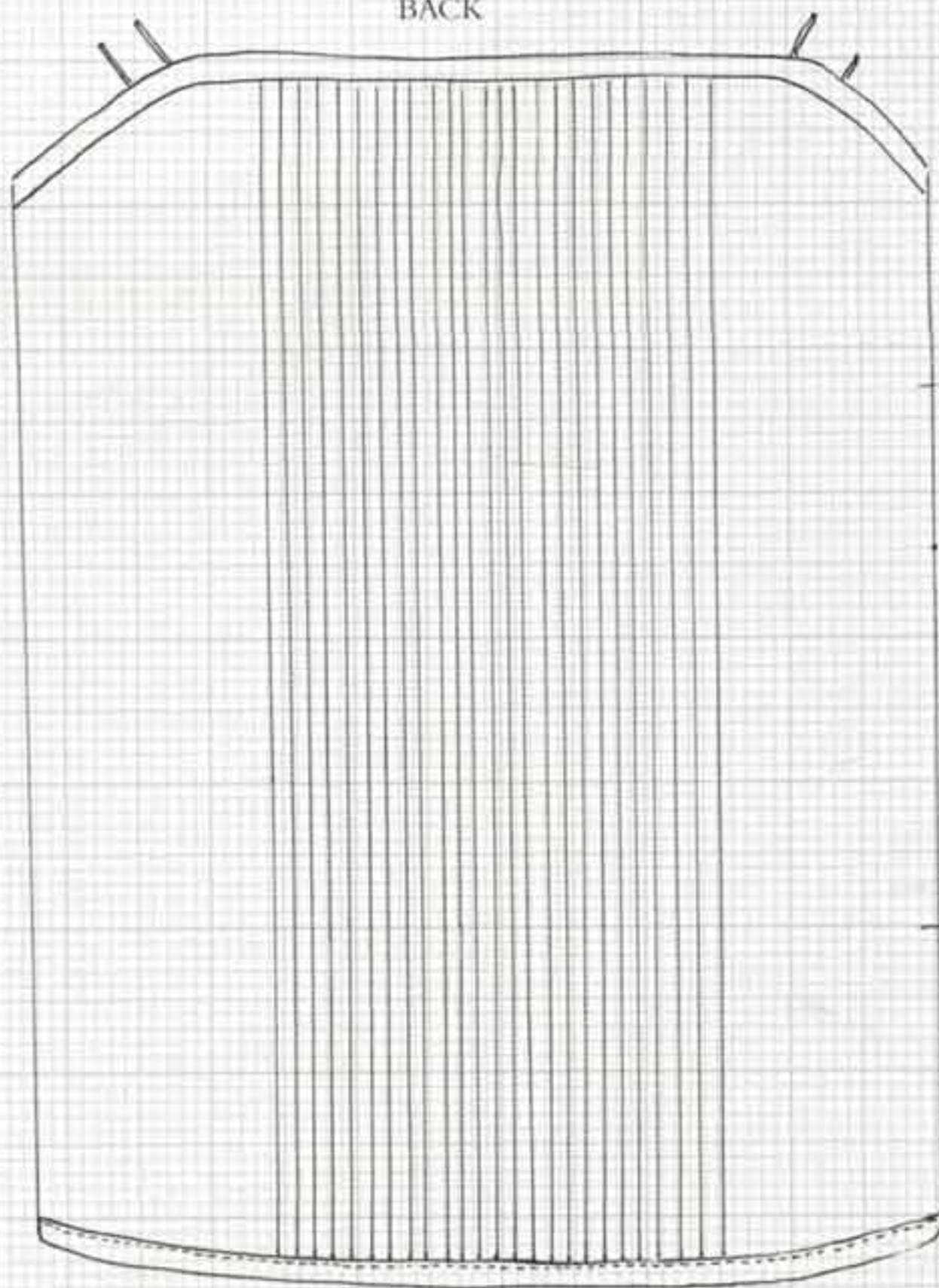
Opposite: Stay band from the 1880s, held in the Symington Collection at Leicestershire County Council Museum, UK.



STRAPS



BACK

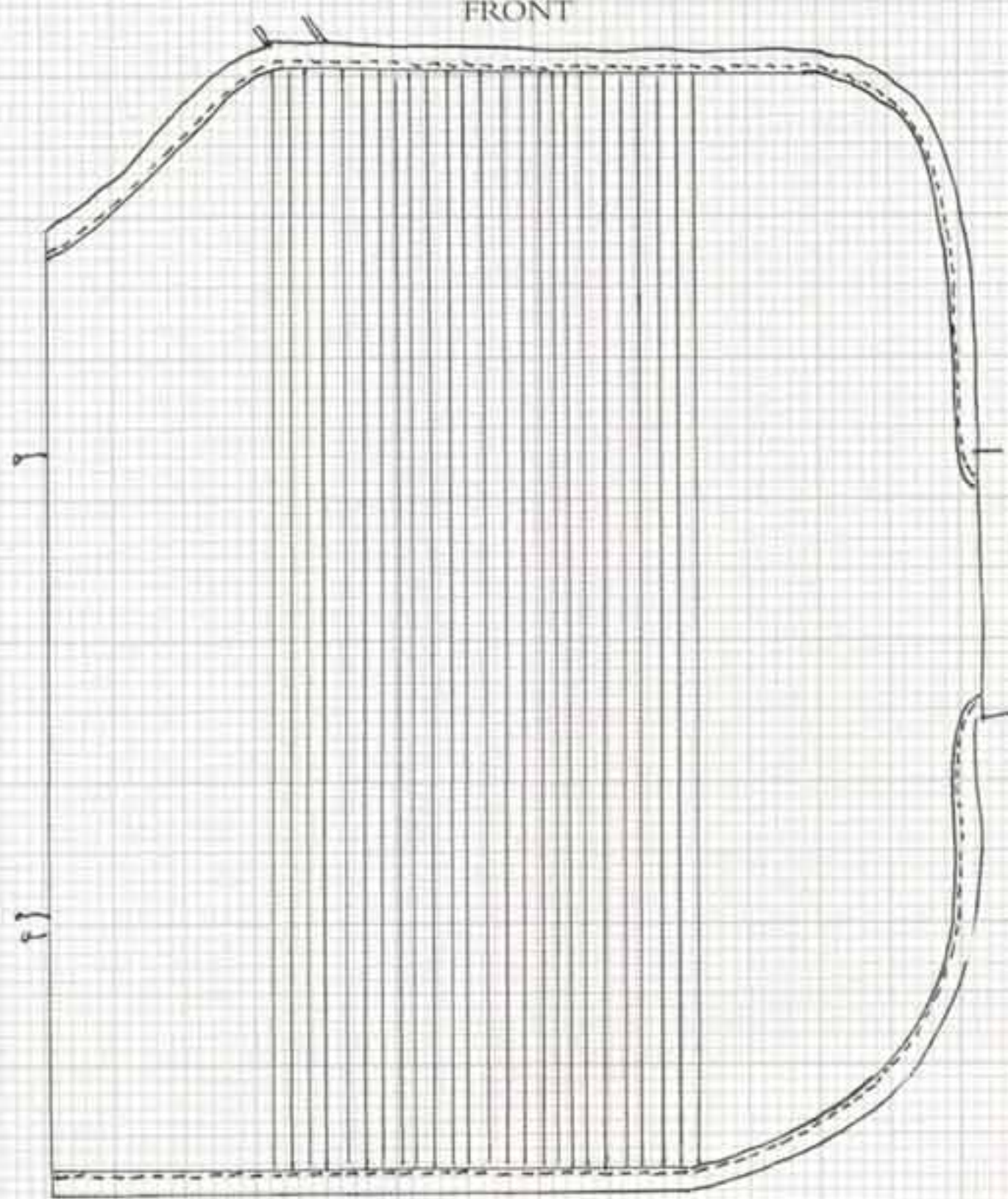


0 1 2 3
Scale (in)

SIDE



FRONT





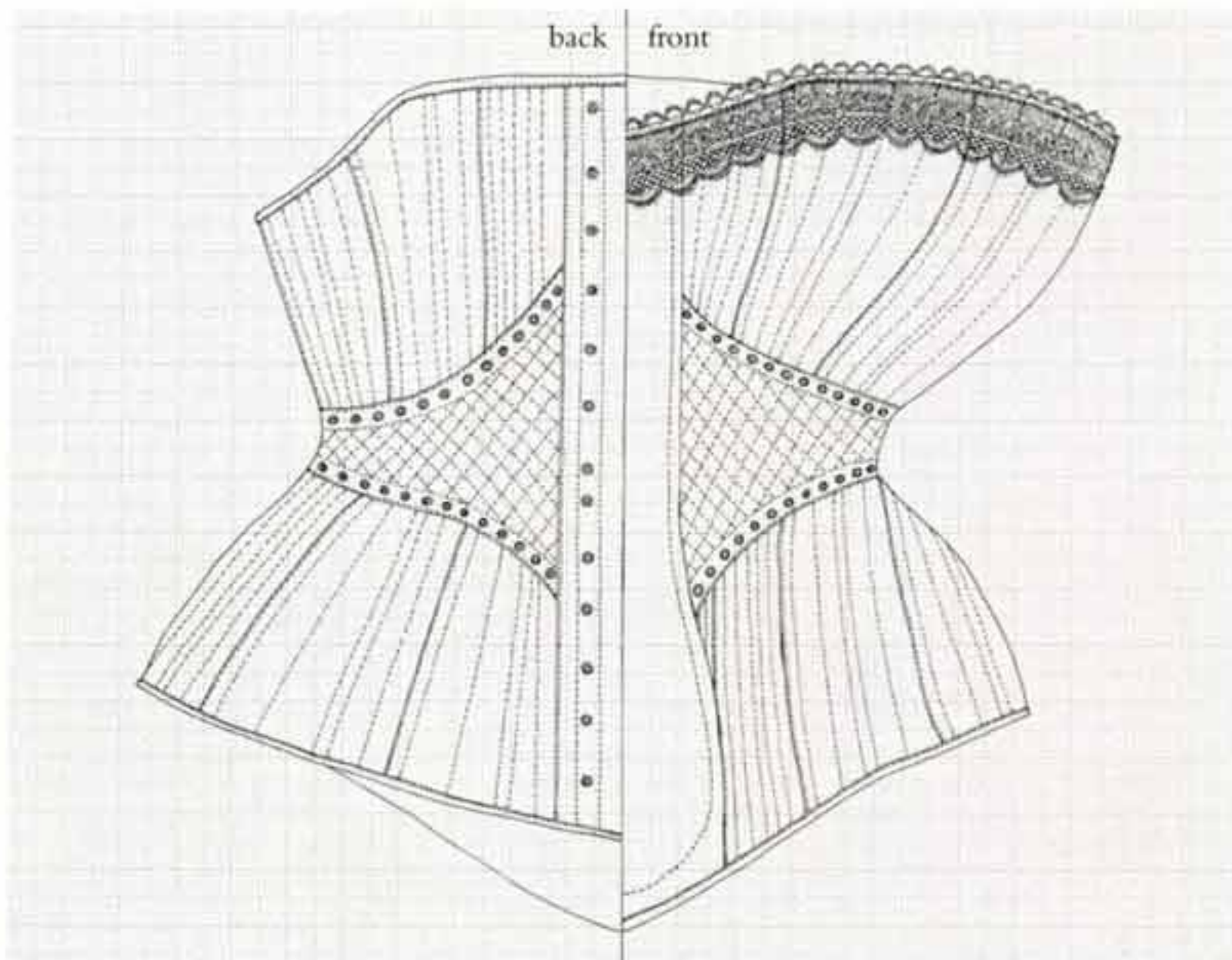
Gold Exotic Corset, 1885

In the Symington Collection are a number of corsets and half corsets, partially unpicked. None of them appear to be of Symington's manufacture, so presumably Symington's were undertaking market research and keeping abreast of any new methods of construction, new materials, finishes or styles.

Only half remains of this corset, as presumably the lost half was taken apart for research purposes. It has steel bones either side of its metal eyelets for lacing closed at the back, and a spoon busk at the front for closure; there are only 18 thin canes to give the garment its shape, and the corset obtains its form from the flowing panels that make up the corset rather than boning. The attractive 'belt' area of this corset takes a flattering line, flowing around the 20–23in (50–58.5cm) waist, and it is decorated by having metal eyelets punched through all the layers of the waist section at top and bottom.

The Rational Dress Society was founded 1881 in London and drew attention to how restrictive corsetry could be; it was thought by the society that corsets could be damaging to women's health and restricted their lifestyles. Women were taking more part in working life by 1885, and taking part in some sports. This meant that women began to want corsets that allowed for these pursuits. This corset, while reducing the waist to 20in (50cm), was also aerating it via the eyelets, which are also a decorative feature.

I have described this corset as 'Exotic' as there is a subtle gold sheen to the fabrics used, enhanced by the small, gold eyelets.



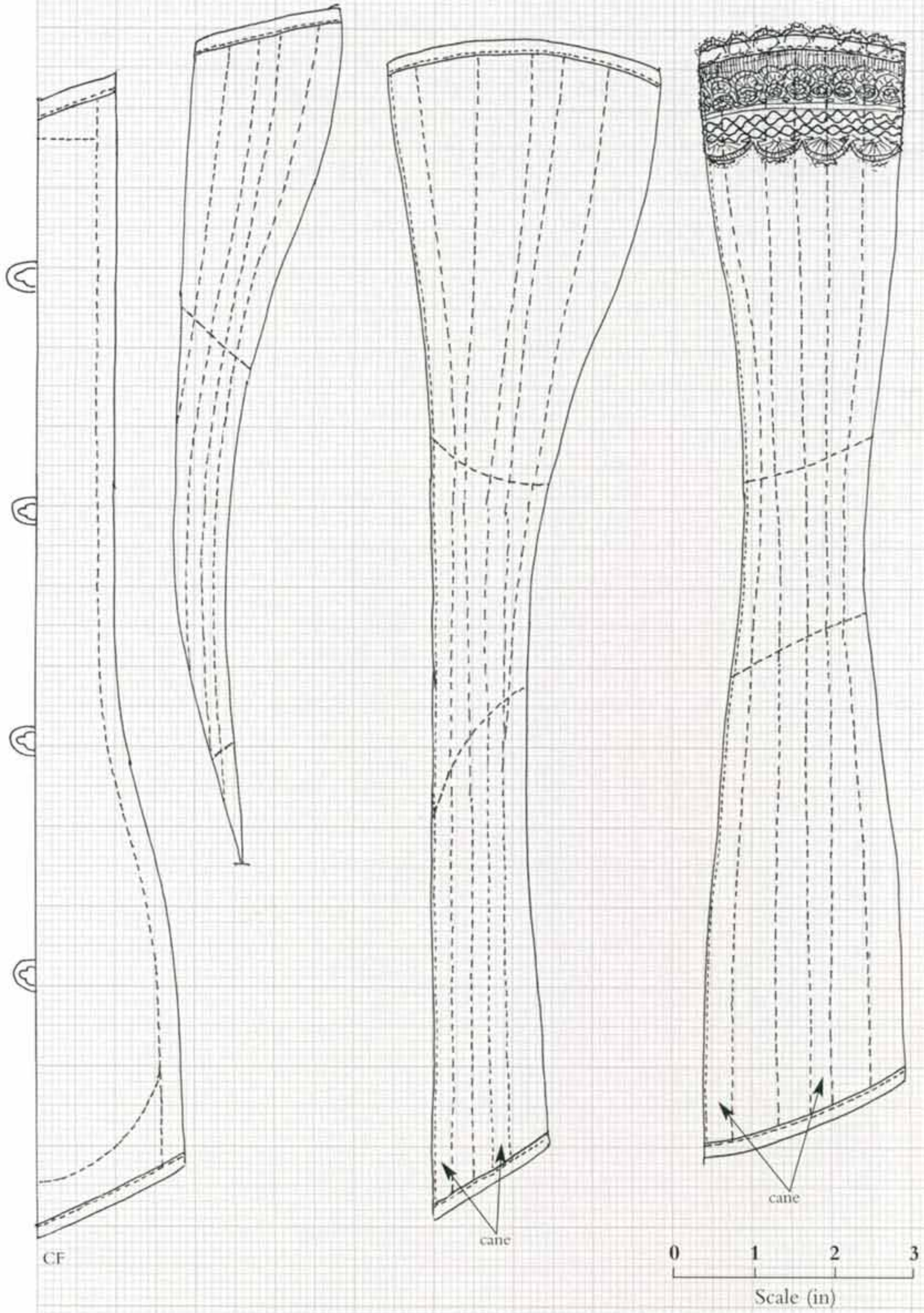
Opposite: 1885 corset from the Symington Collection held by Leicestershire Museum Services.

FRONT (A)

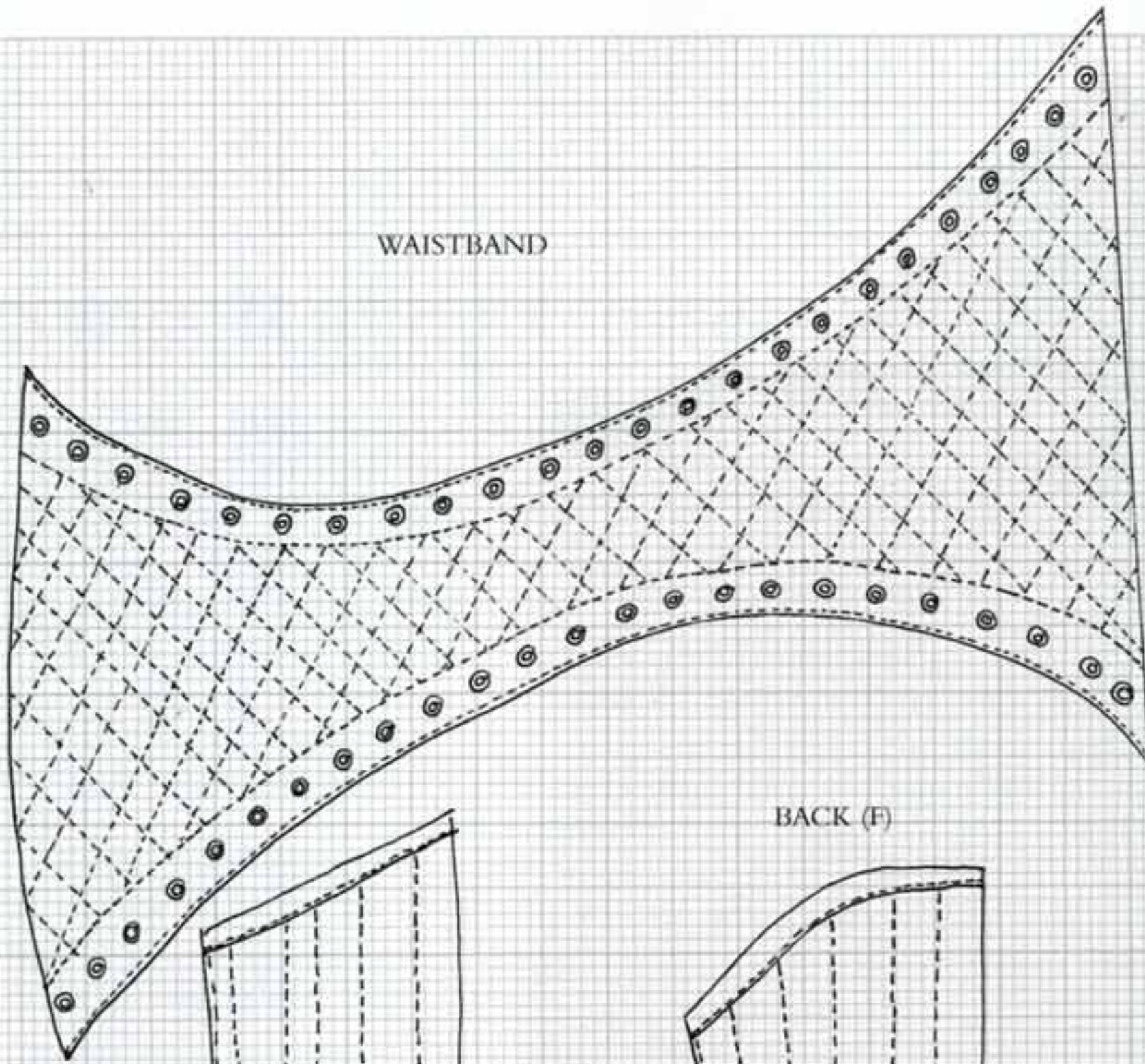
FRONT (B)

FRONT (C)

FRONT (D)

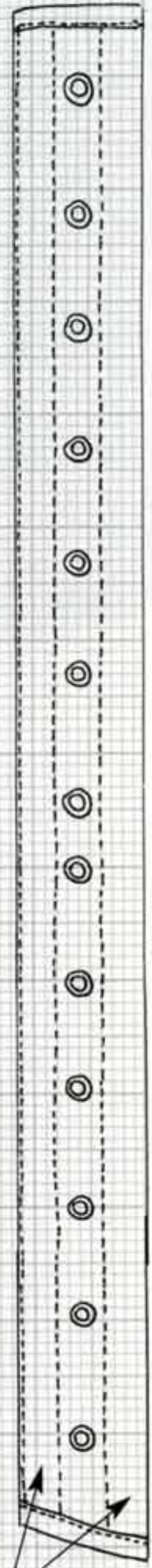


WAISTBAND

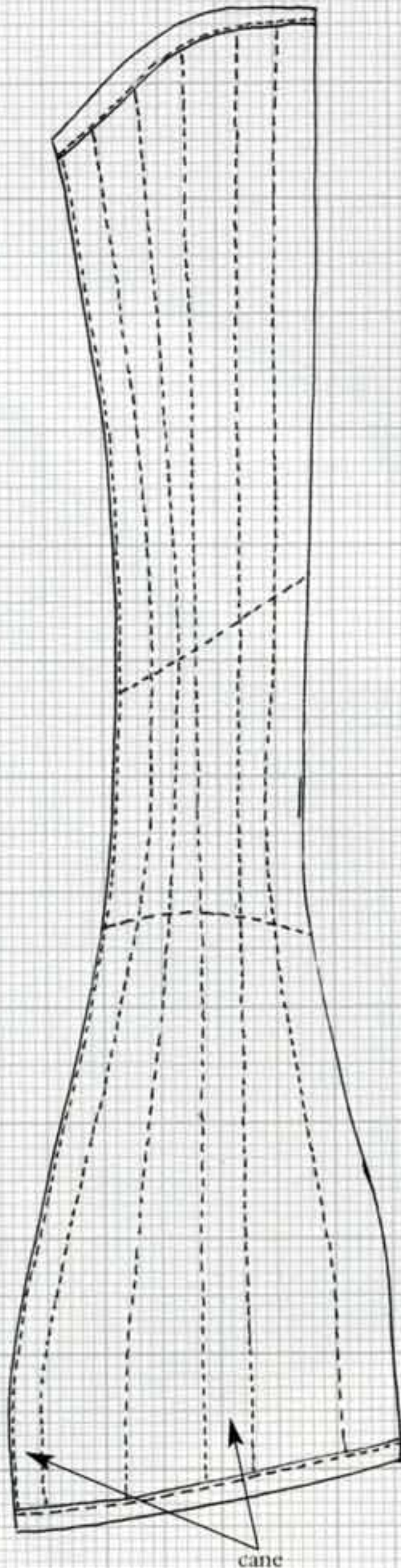


BACK (G)

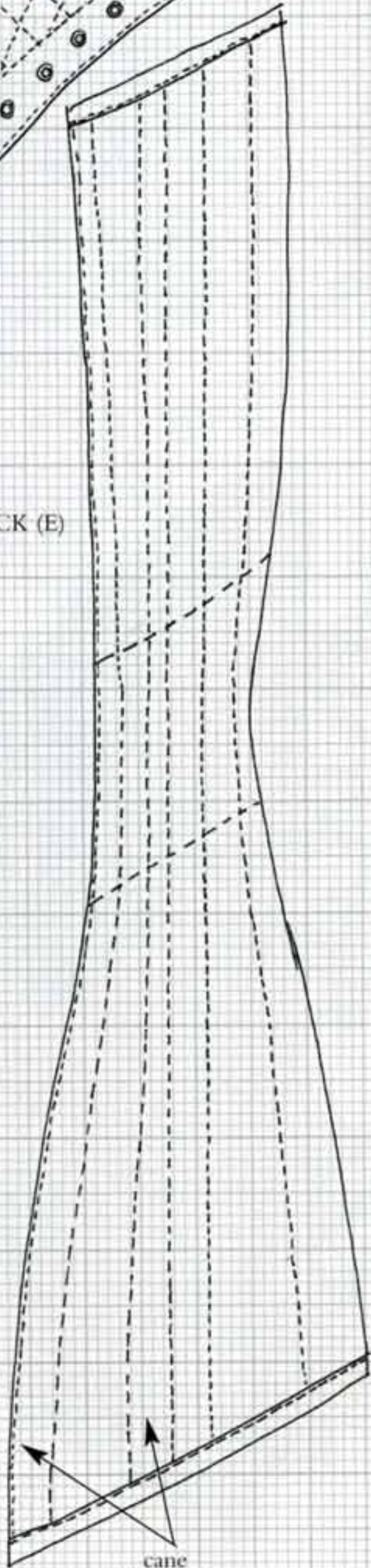
BACK (H)



BACK (F)



BACK (E)



cane

steel bone

CB

cane

cane



Swiss Riding Corset, 1890

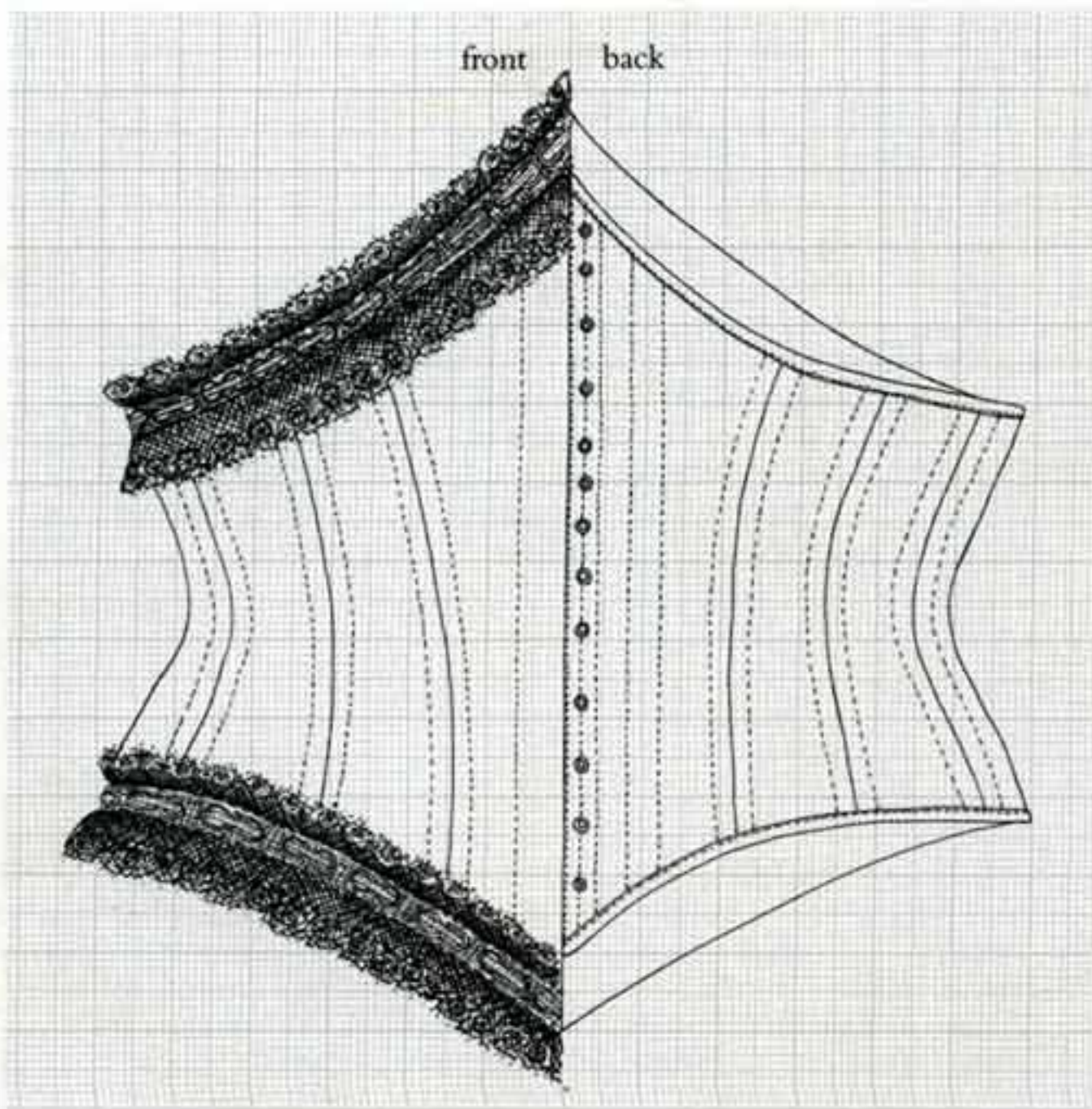
This corset is made of one layer of sprigged jacquard silk. It has a centre-front split-busk fastening, and lacing at the centre back supported each side with two bones. The two centre-back bones are of flat steel and unusually the eyelets are on the edge of the garment, which would mean if they were placed under too much stress they would be in danger of pulling out or ripping.

The label inside suggests that it is a Continental corset – it reads:
B. Wassonberger-Alti. Corsetiere-Montreaux

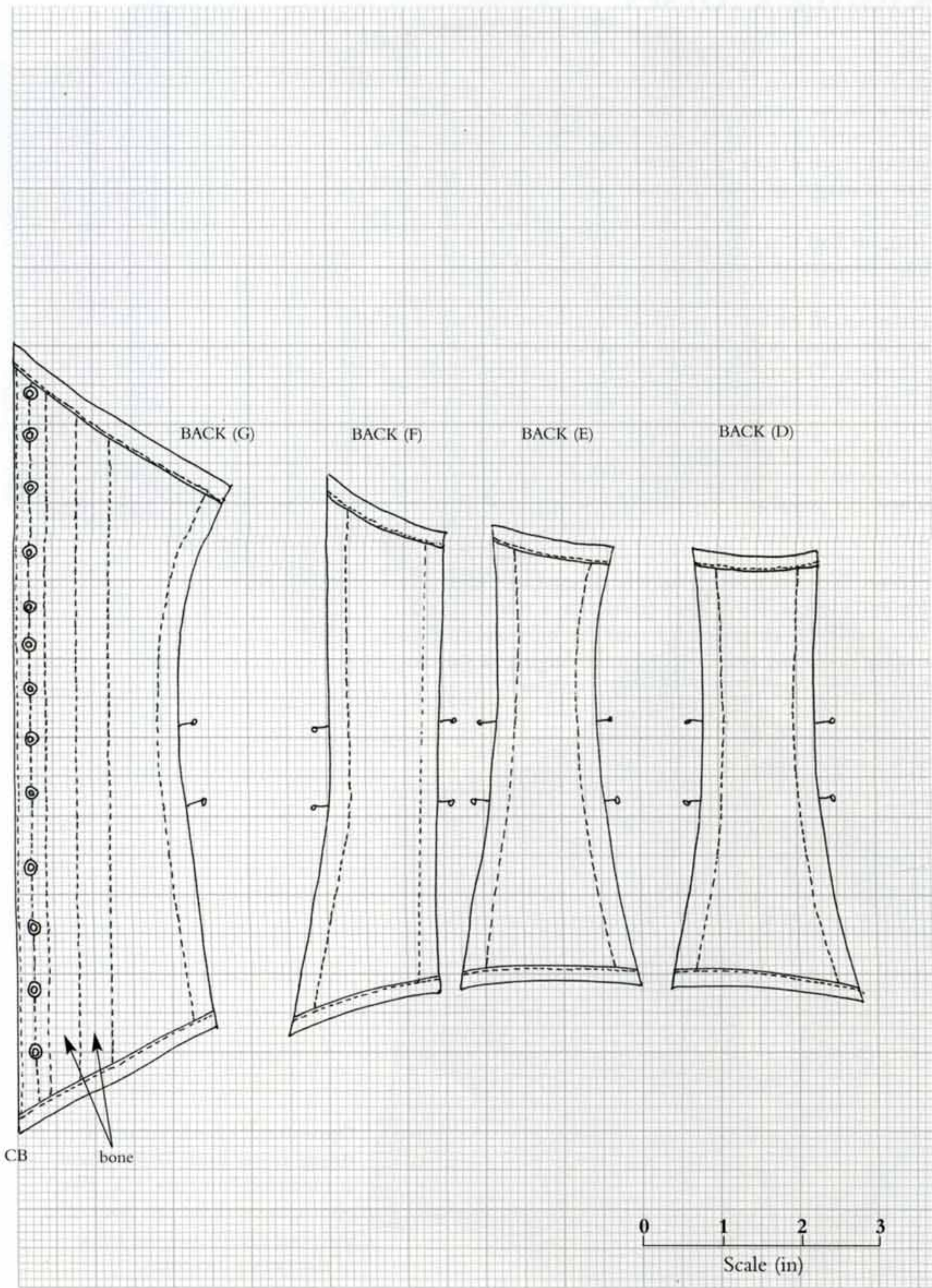
The eyelets and bones are all backed or faced with fine-cotton twill tape of varying widths: $1\frac{1}{2}$ in (4cm) on the centre back and $\frac{5}{8}$ in (1.5cm) for the seam boning channels. The stitching for the channels is $\frac{3}{8}$ in (1cm) wide and the whale bones fit loosely into the channels.

Bound with only India tape top and bottom, the edges are then covered with machine-made eyelet lace with a $\frac{1}{4}$ in (6mm) pale blue ribbon passing through. There is a waistband stay tape on the inside of the garment.

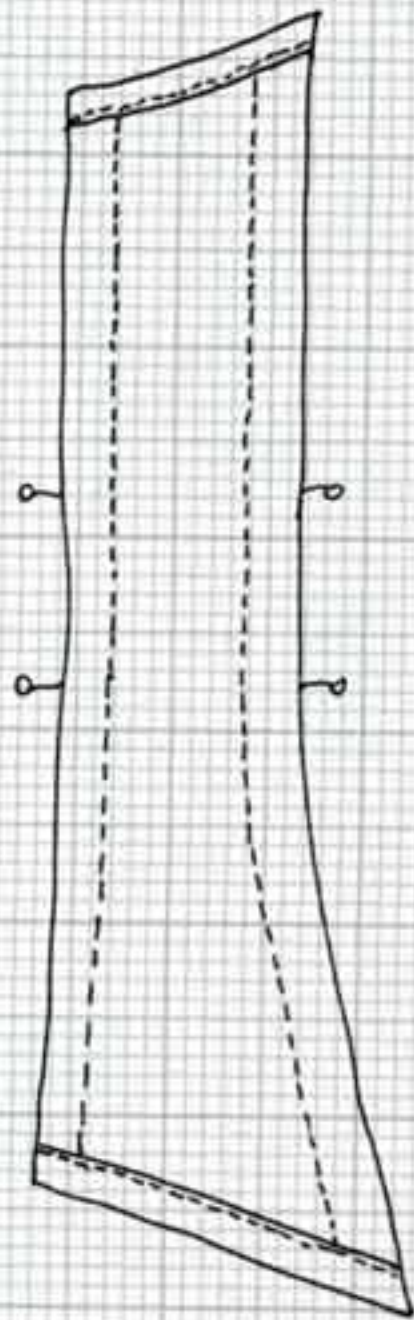
This is a delicate corset that may possibly have been used for riding but was more likely for boudoir use. This corset qualifies as a riding corset because it is cut low under the bust and high over the hips, and this style coincides with women becoming more active and indulging in various sports. This attractive corset actually gives very little support.



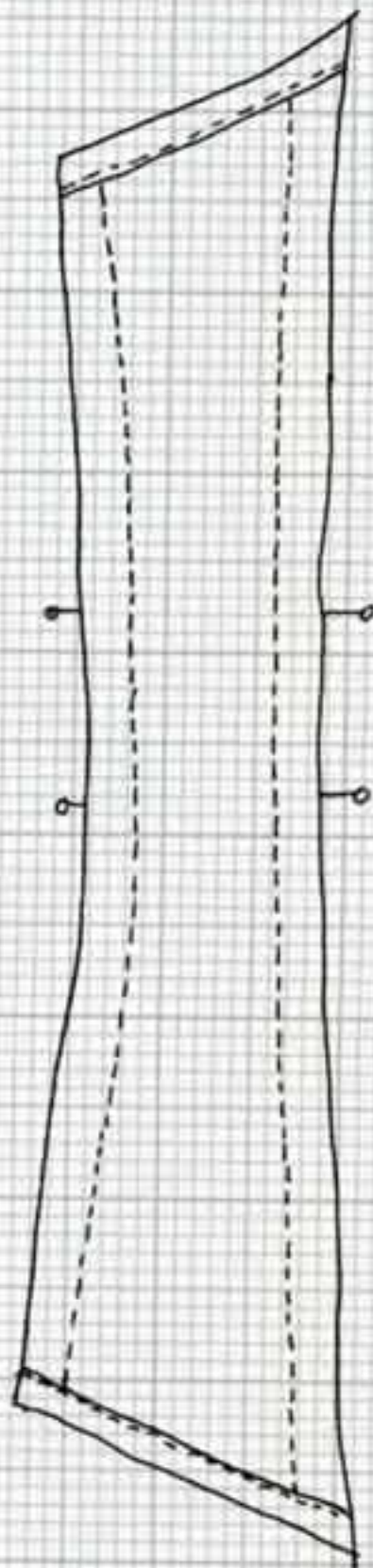
Opposite: This silk jacquard riding corset from 1890 is held at Hereford Museum, UK. The photographs show the front of the corset (top) and the back of the corset (bottom).



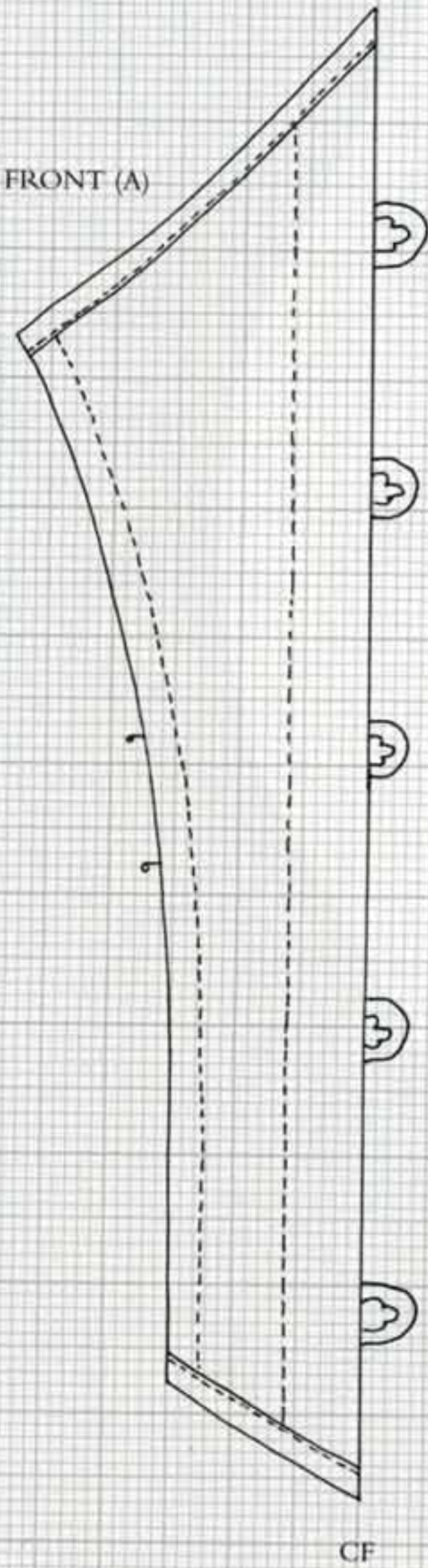
FRONT (C)



FRONT (B)



FRONT (A)

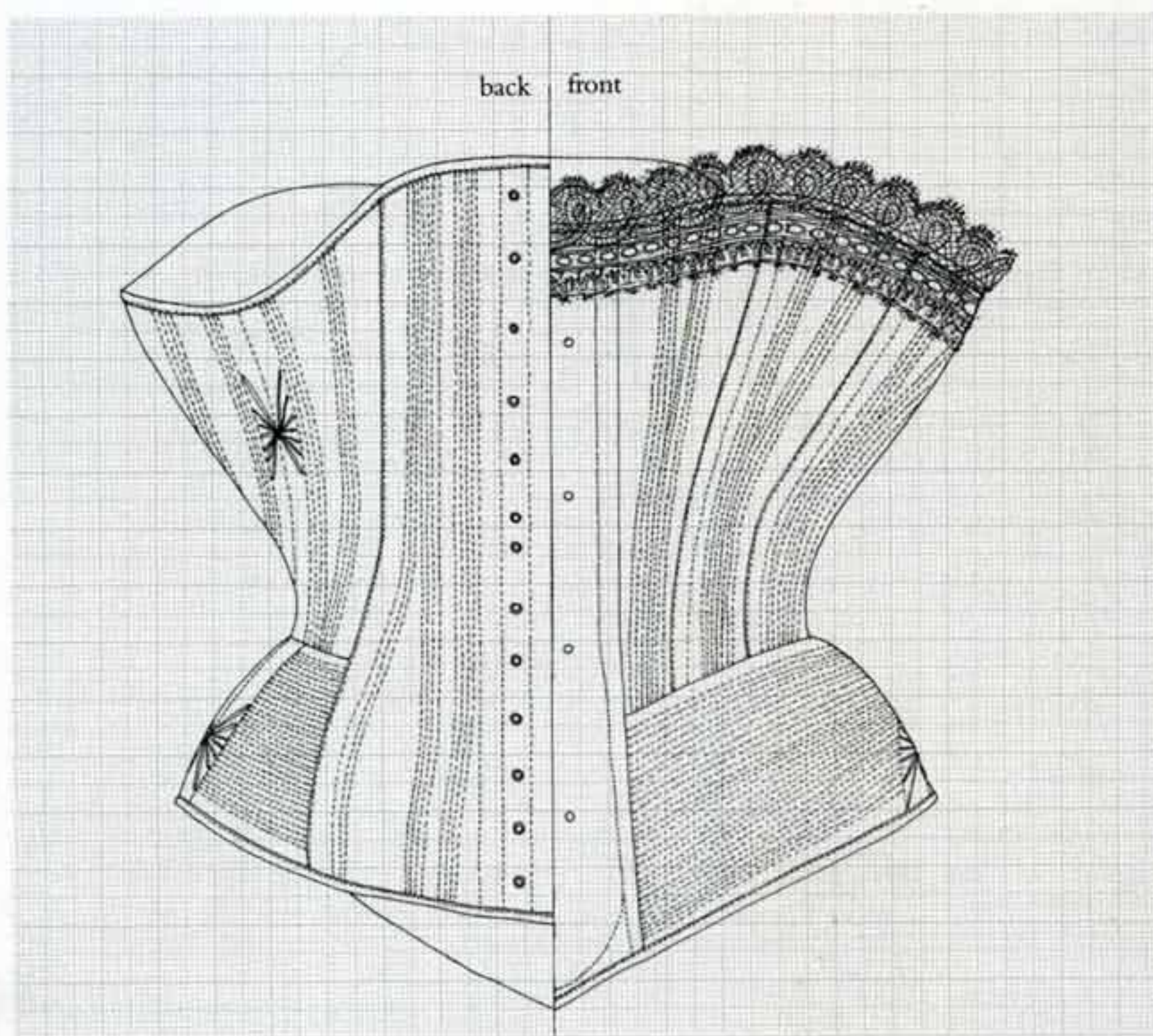




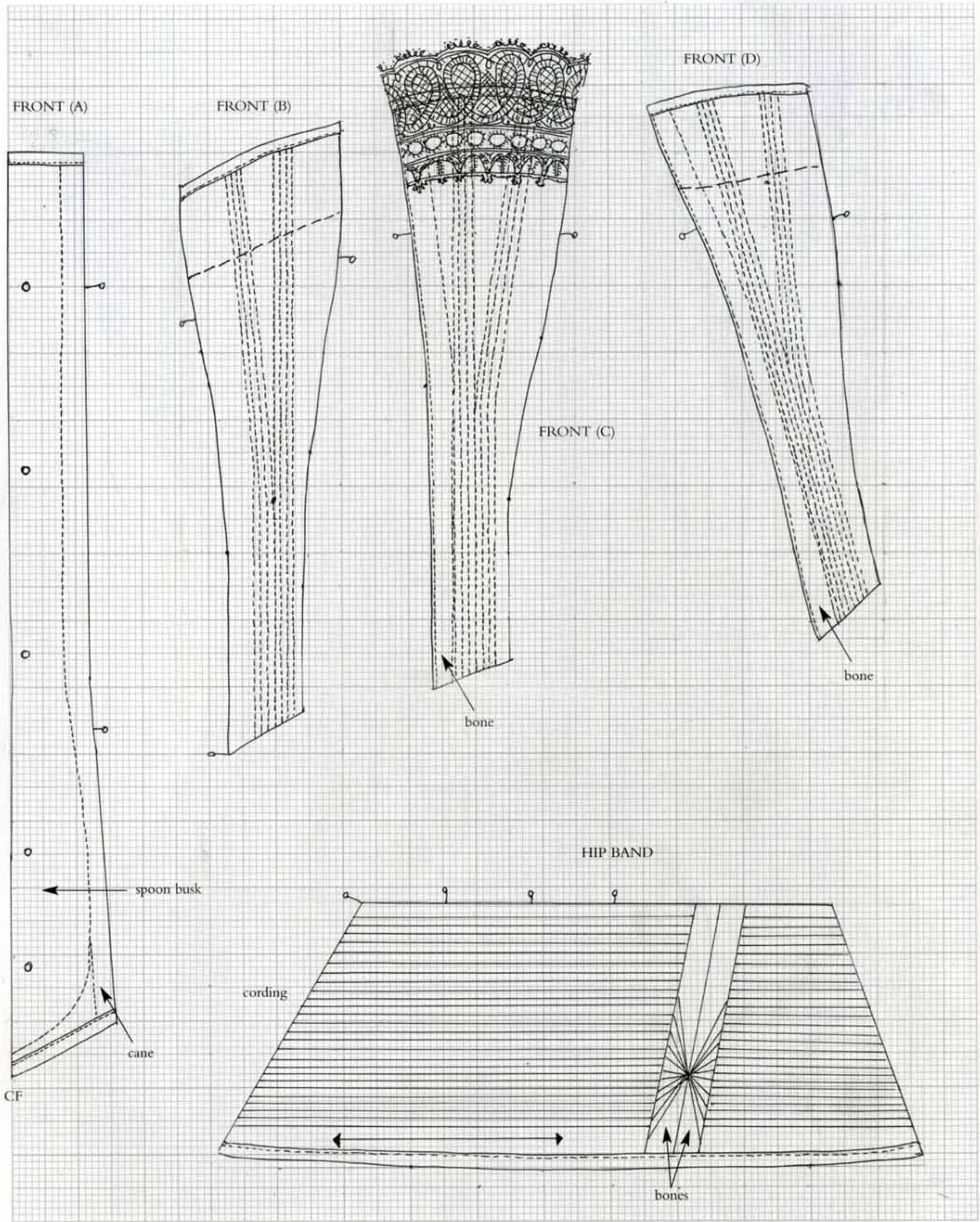
'Pretty Housemaid' Corset, 1890

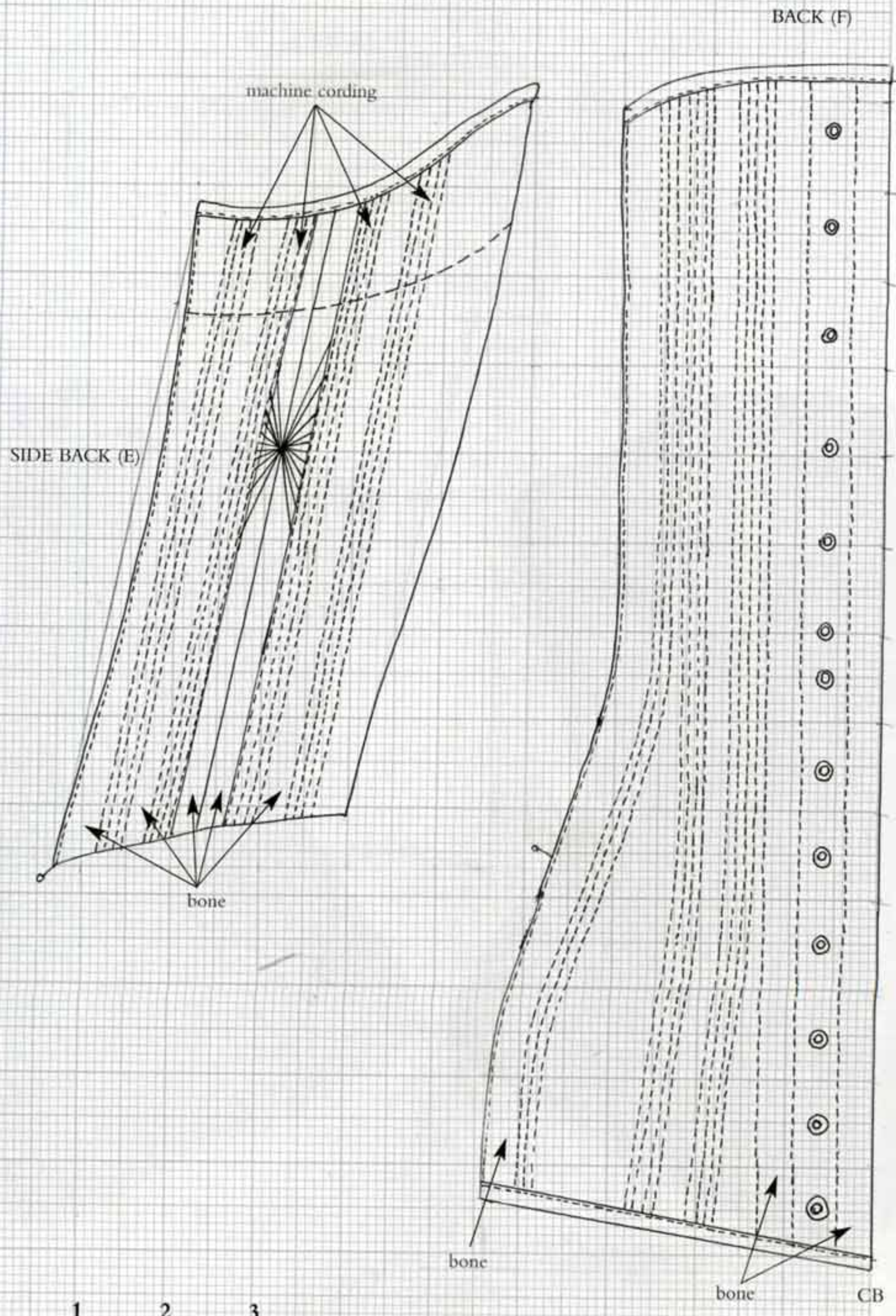
This corset has a spoon split-busk centre fastening. It is made of drab twill lined with fawn coutil and interlined with hessian. This was a Symington speciality corset advertised as the 'strongest, cheapest corset ever made'. With machine cording across the hips and down the panels, there is minimal whale boning (see pattern). An interesting feature of this corset is the busk protector – a strong wide covered steel $4\frac{1}{2}$ in (11.5cm) in length, stitched to the underside of the busk for support and to offset the breaking of the busk across the waist area with 'constant stooping'. The corset is finished with decorative machine flossing in blue and gold thread, which serves no practical purpose. This corset was a top seller of its day.

The company was alert to the needs and desires of its market. They produced this affordable, attractive, well-designed and guaranteed corset for individuals who may have only had tiny amounts of disposable income, but the numbers of housemaids made the production worthwhile. In 1850 there were one million servants in Britain, the second-largest occupation after agriculture. In 1901 the British social reformer Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree suggested that the keeping of servants marked the divide between the working class and the middle class. Everybody wanted a housemaid, and every housemaid in turn wanted a Symington 'Pretty Housemaid'.



Opposite: 1890 corset from the Symington Collection at Leicestershire County Council Museum, UK. By 1890 Symington's had realized the value of producing an attractive garment fit for purpose. This corset was sold in vast numbers over many years to ordinary women who had to work hard when wearing their corsets.







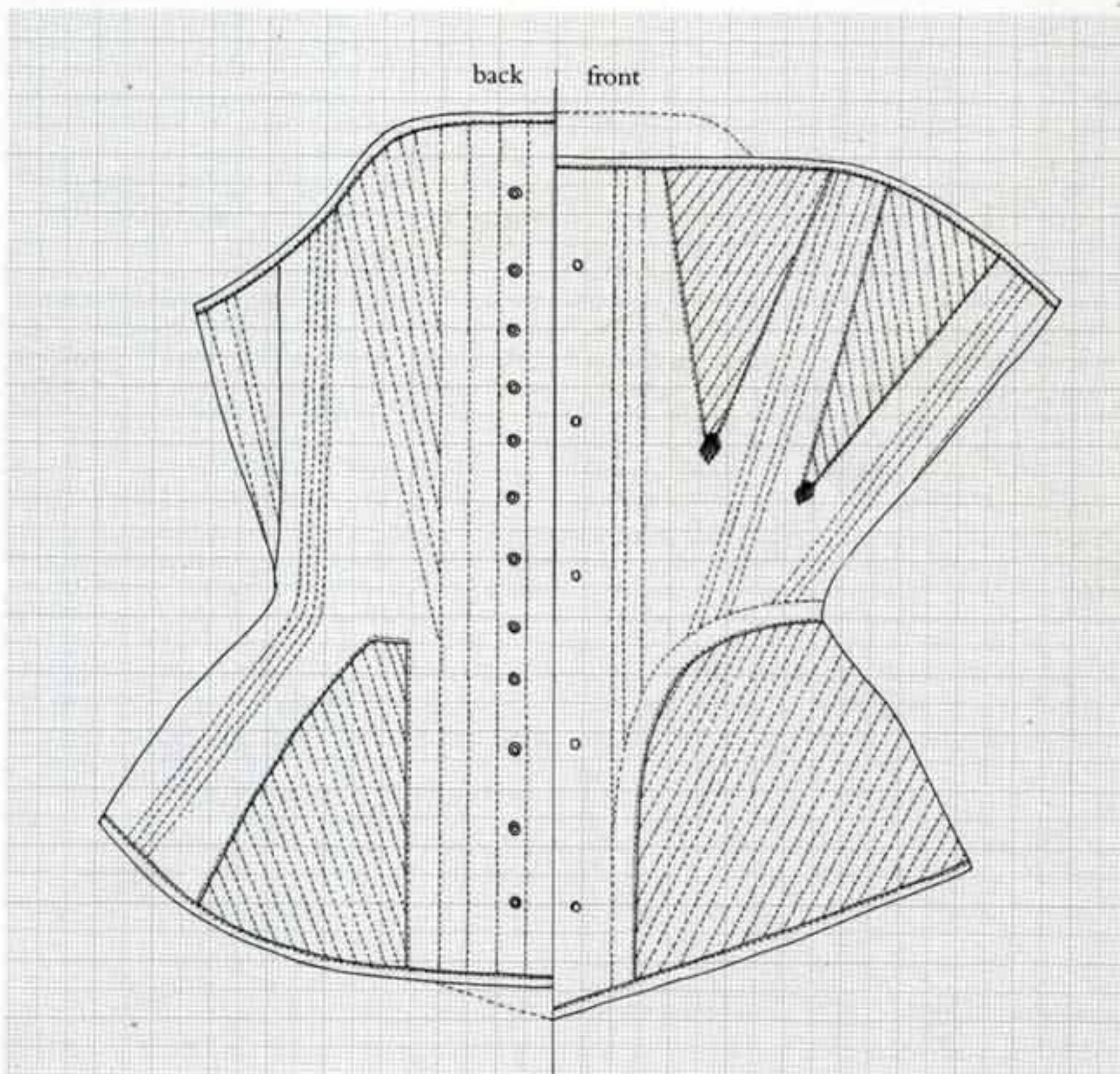
Khaki Corded Corset, 1890–1900

With khaki-coloured lasting as the outer fabric and a beige silica lining, this corset uses cording as an attractive feature over the hips and in the bust gussets. It is similar to a much higher-quality corset produced by Symington's (see page 2), which has an attractive combination of machine cording and quilting.

This is a small corset – bust 30in (76cm), waist 21in (53cm) and hips 32in (81cm) – and one would imagine that this corset was worn because convention dictated that a corset should be worn, not for reasons of control. It is possible that the cording acted as a layer of padding to enhance a slight figure.

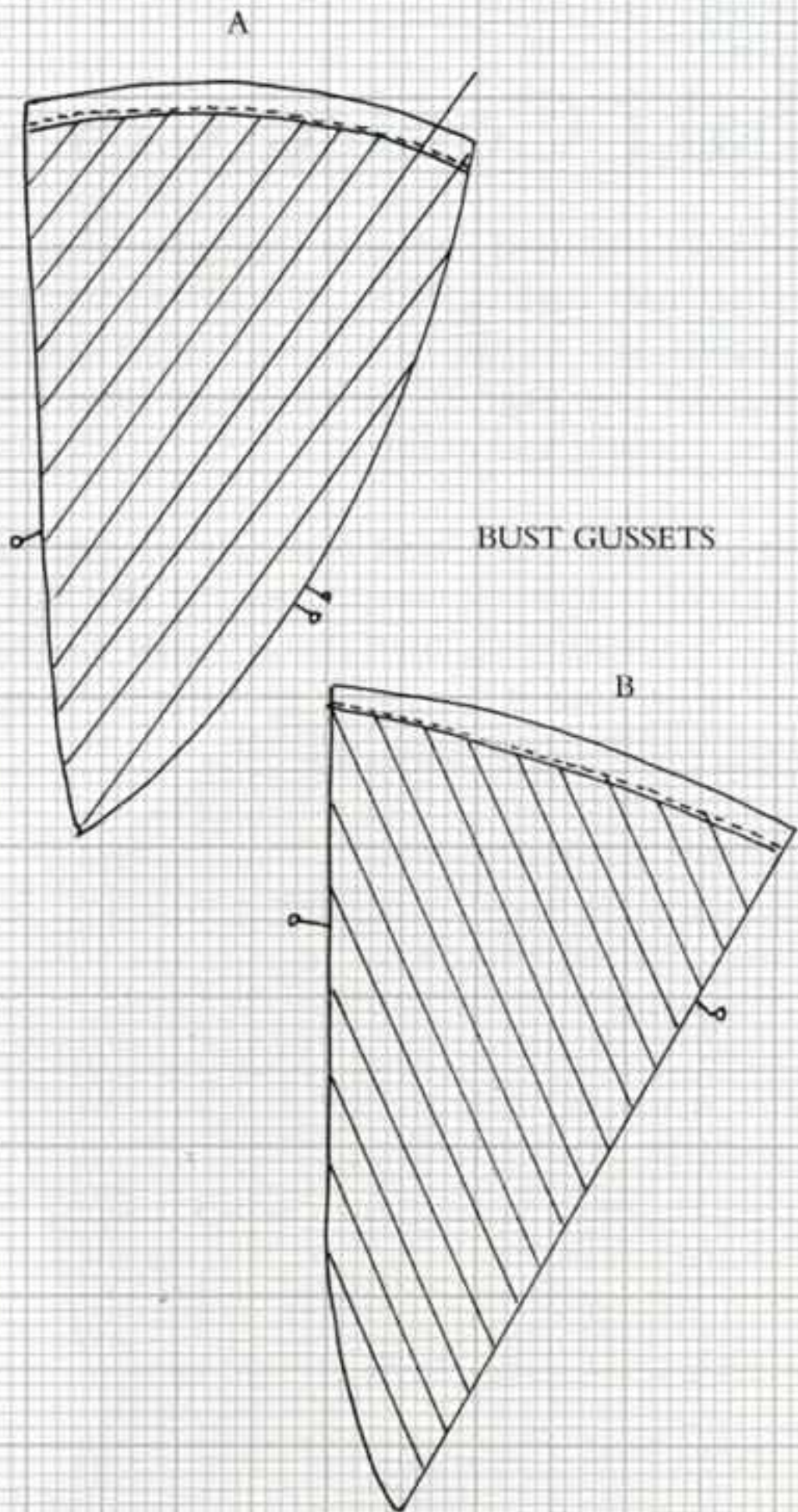
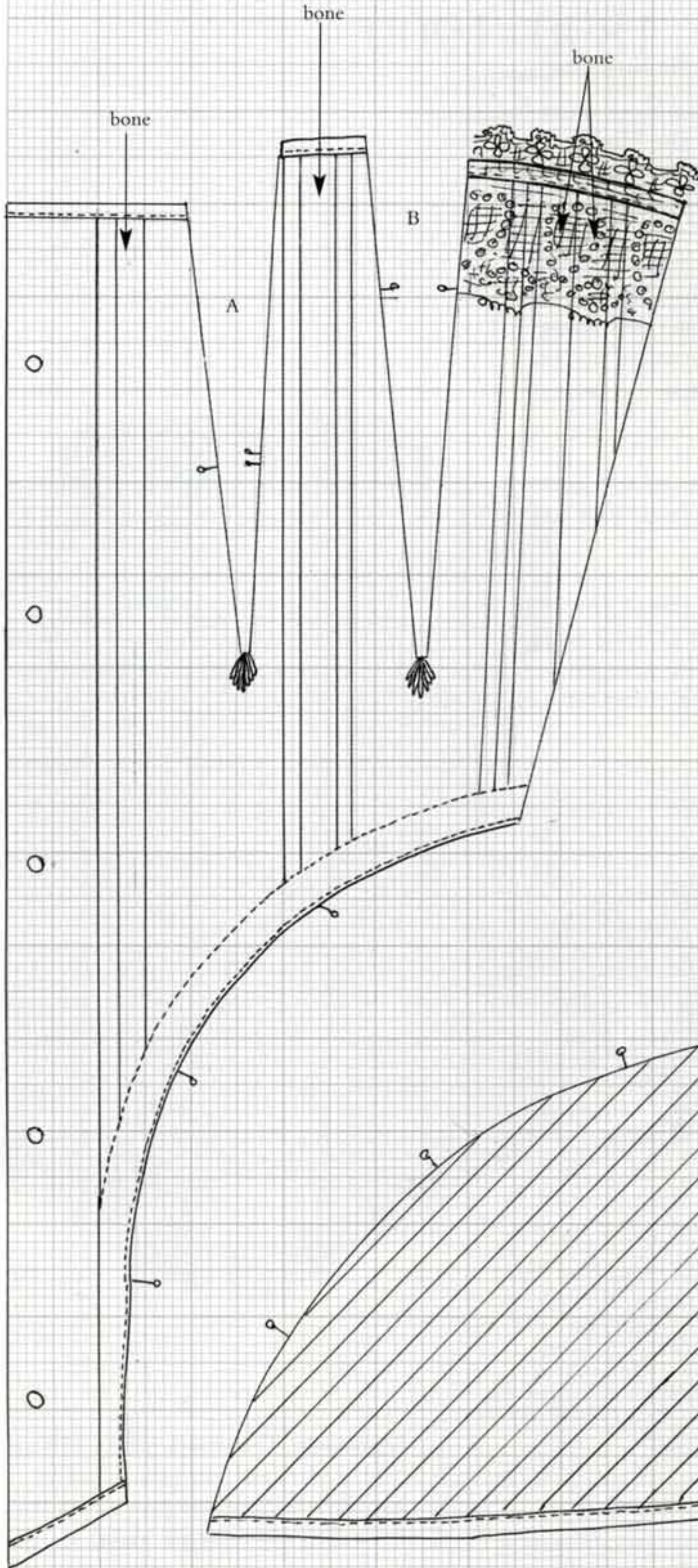
Hand flossing has been added to strengthen the apex of the gusset in a light-coloured thread and cream cotton machine-made lace has been attached over the top edge.

There is a very wide and solid split-busk fastening almost 1in (2.5cm) wide each side, supported by a double busk of 1½in (3.8cm) wide. The wooden or steel busk fits the pocket loosely. The strength of the fastening seems out of proportion to the scale of the corset with its 21in (53cm) waist.

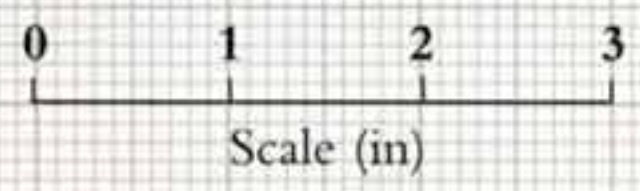


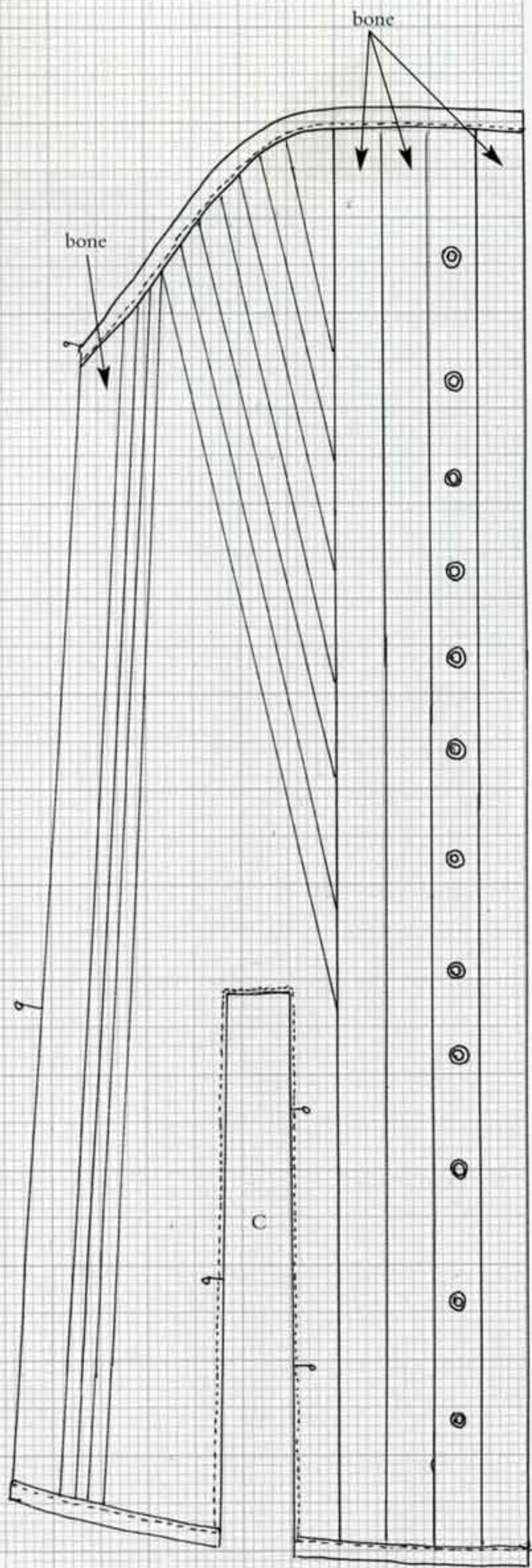
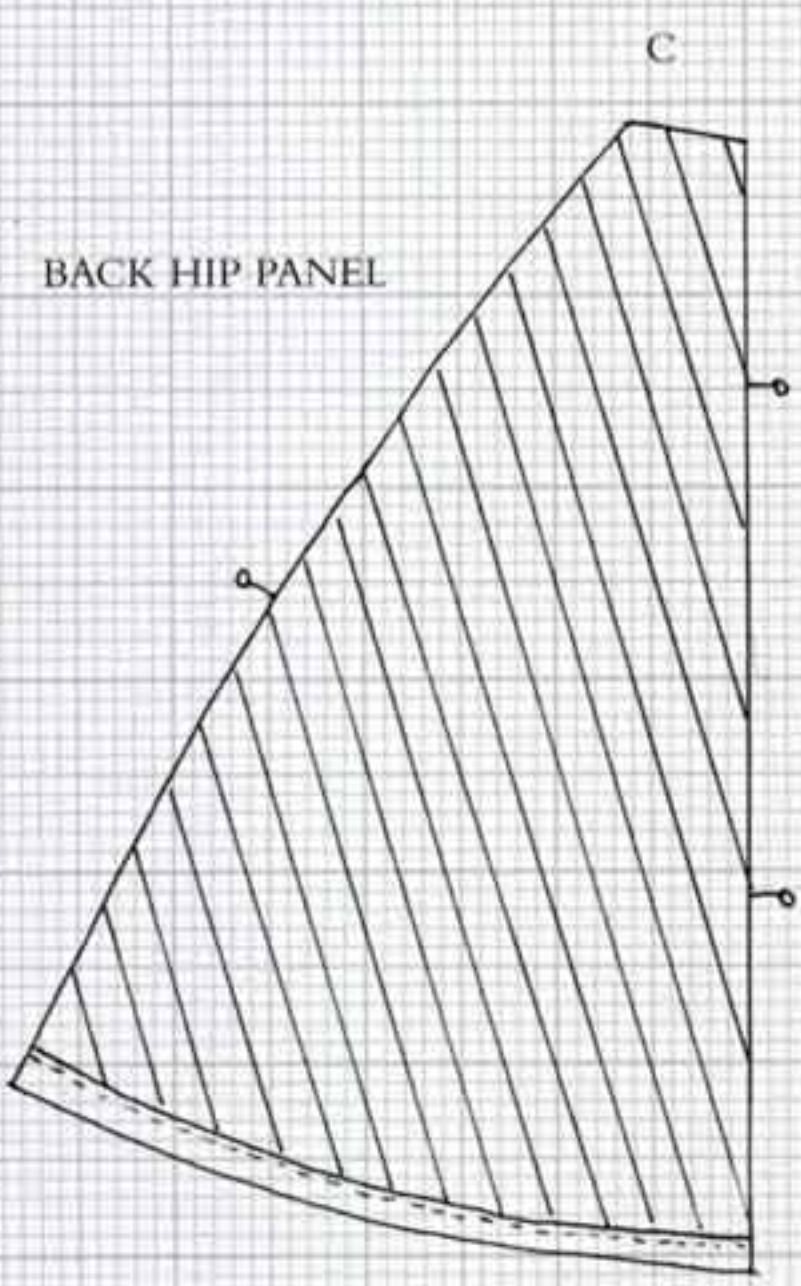
Opposite: This corset, from c.1890, is held at Hereford Museum, UK. This photograph shows the corset from the front (left) and the back (right).

FRONT



FRONT HIP PANEL







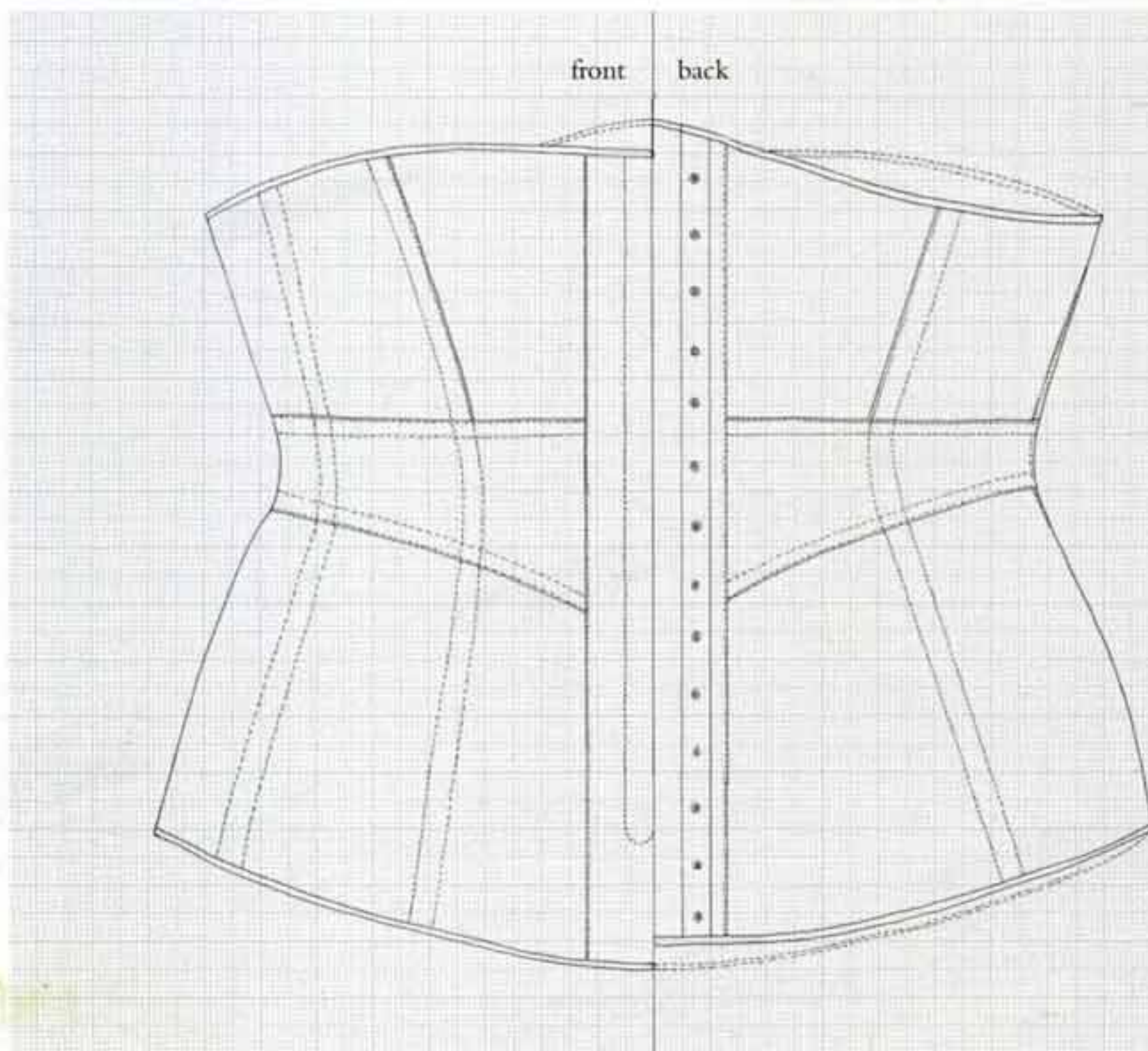
Large Blue Jean Corset, 1890–1910

This corset is made of one layer of blue jean fabric stitched with pale pink thread. There is a pale pink hand-made lace at the back to lace it closed.

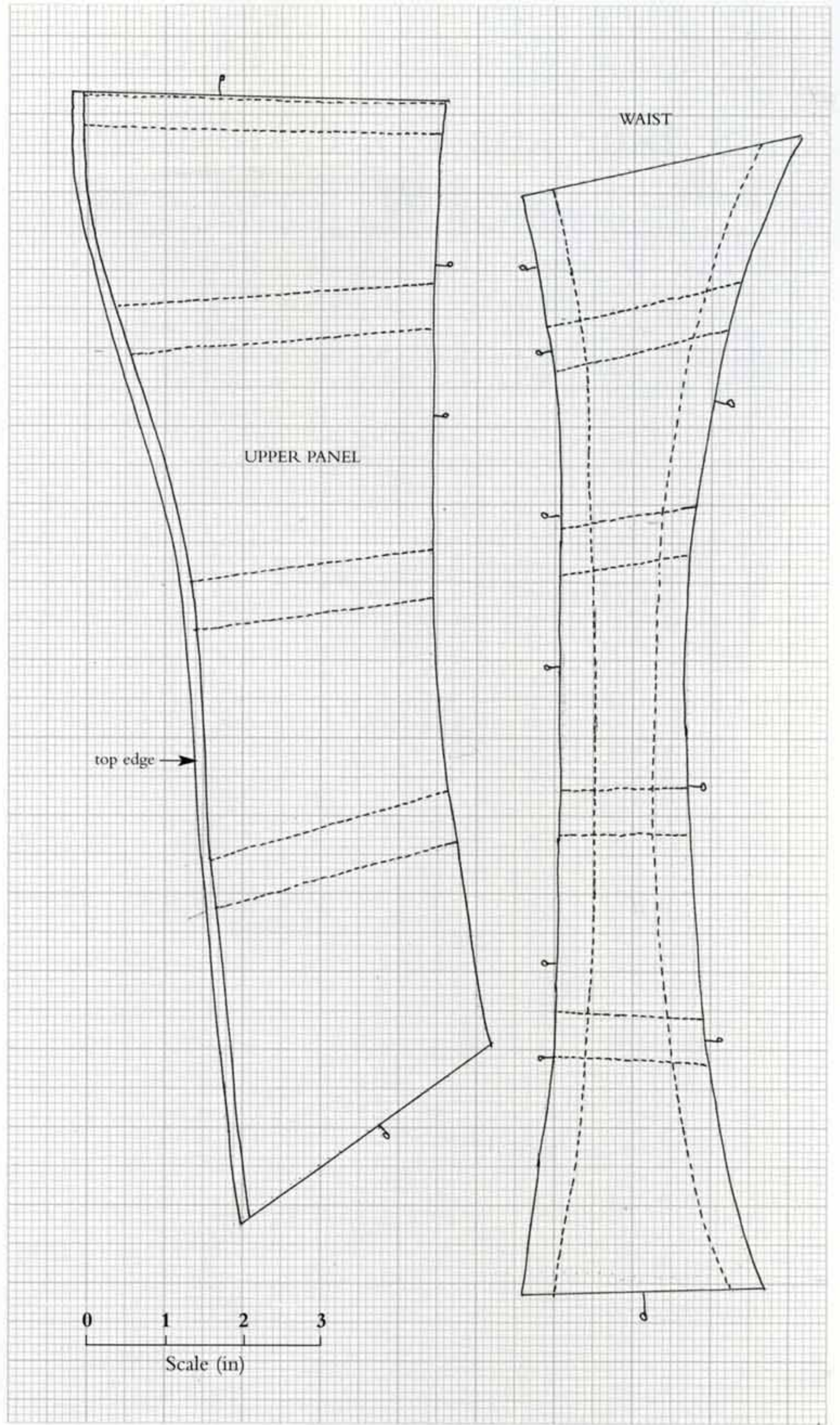
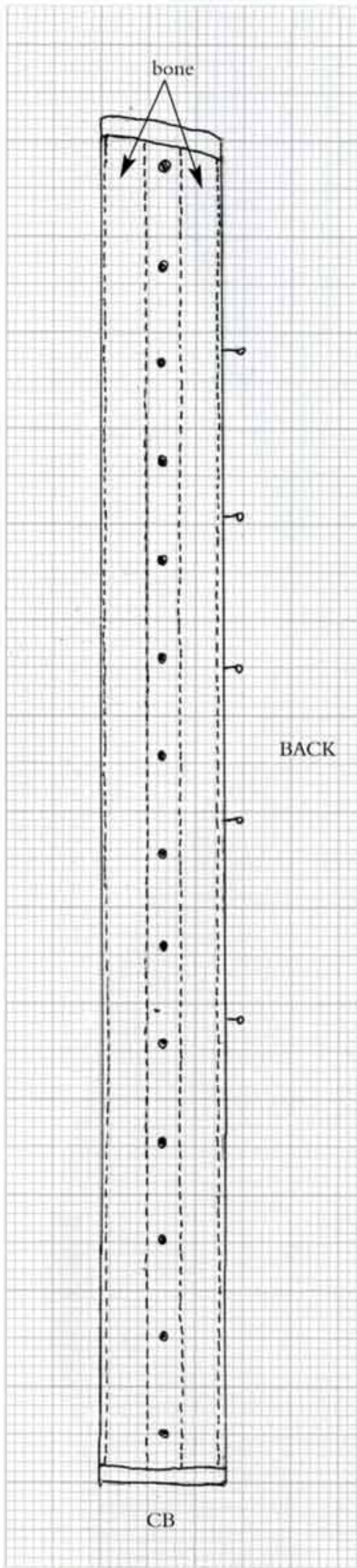
The centre-front panel, the centre-back panel and the 'belt' are all lined with a medium-weight calico. The boning channels are also made of the calico, cut on the straight grain $\frac{3}{4}$ in (1.9cm) wide with $\frac{1}{4}$ in (6mm) turnings, turned in over a strip of cardboard and, when executed, spiral steel boning inserted. The centre front has a metal split busk and both sides of the centre back have flat steels either side of the metal eyelets – none of which is displaced. The top and bottom edges of this corset are bound in $\frac{5}{8}$ in (1.5cm) twill cotton tape.

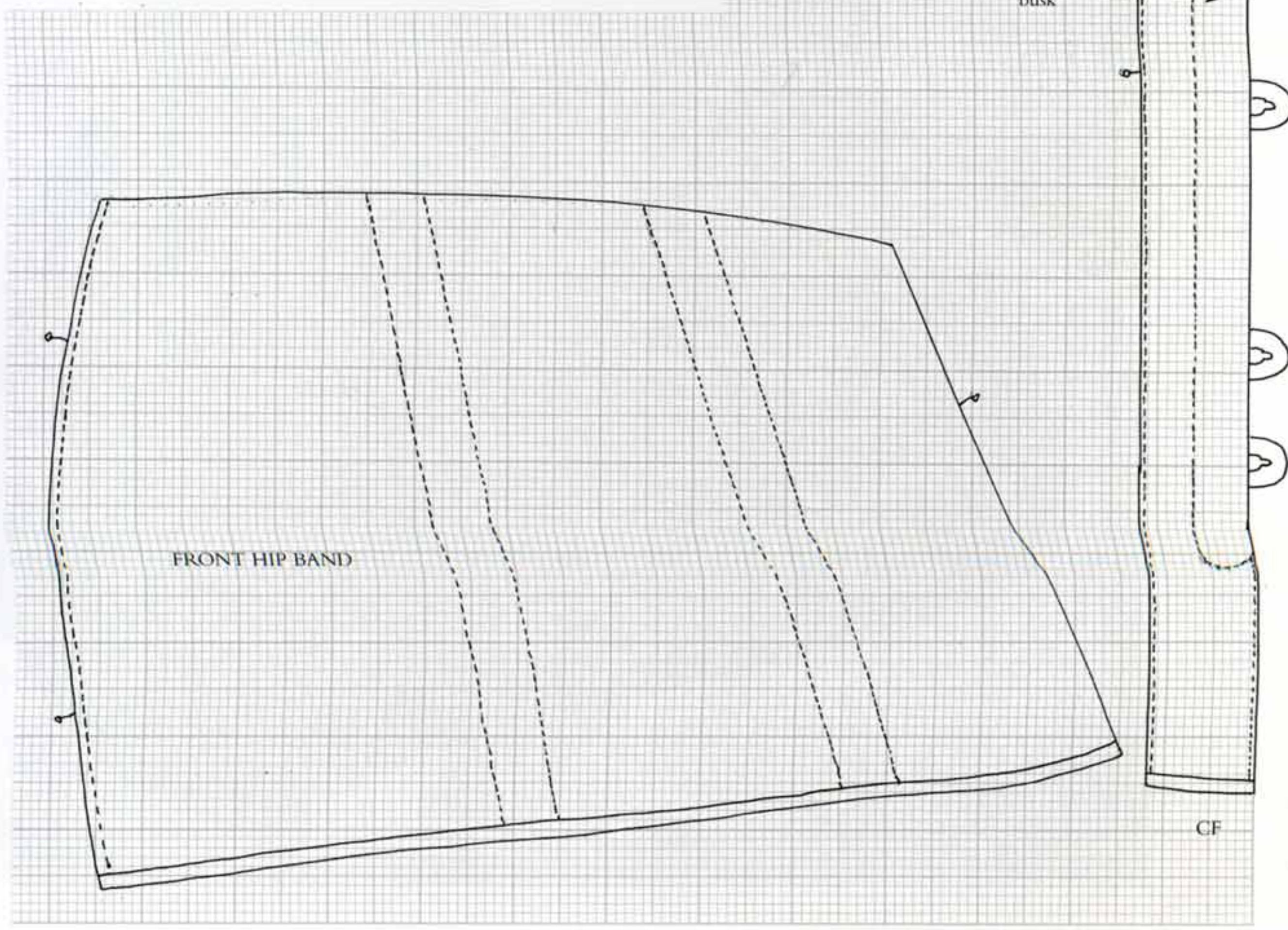
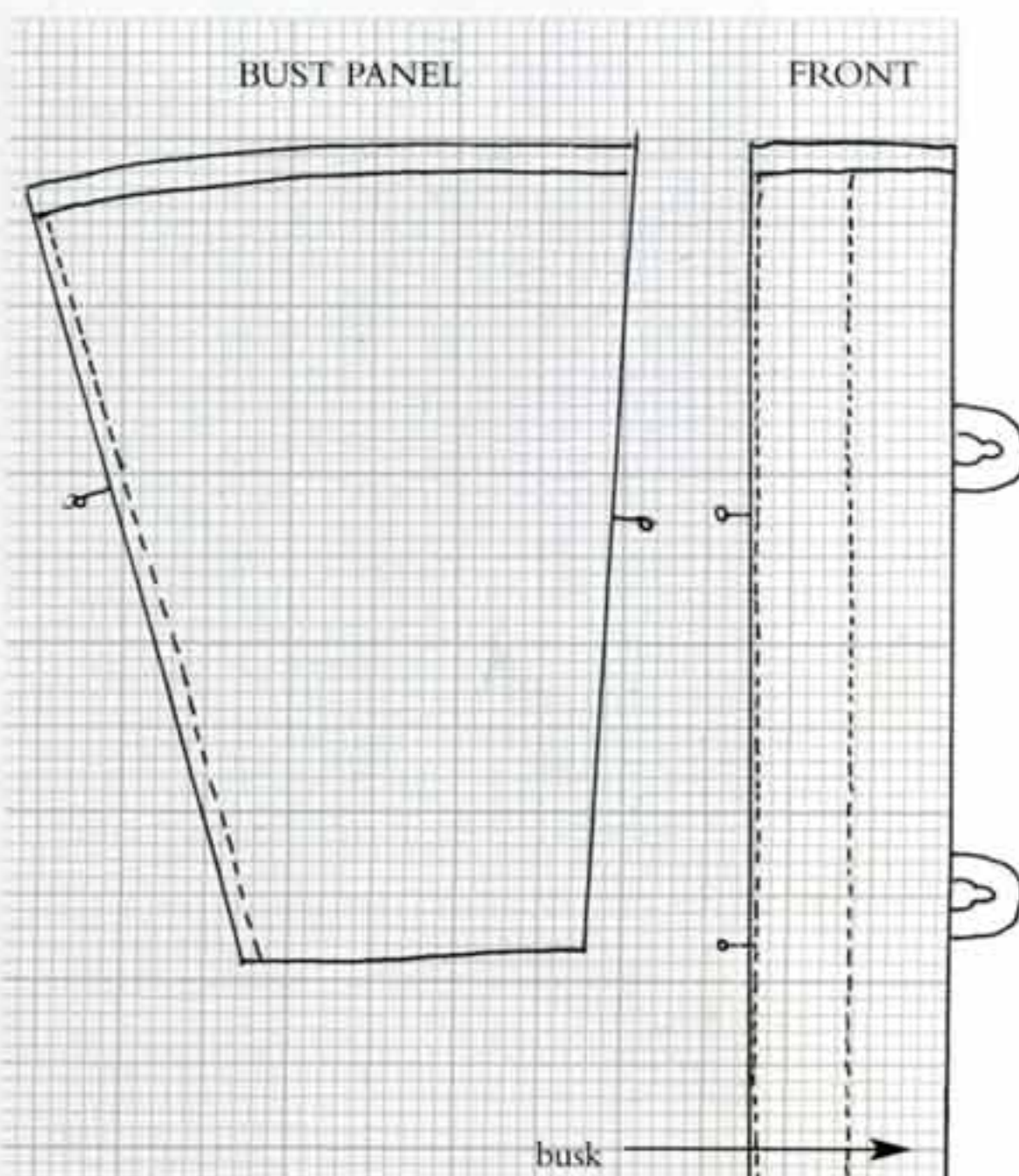
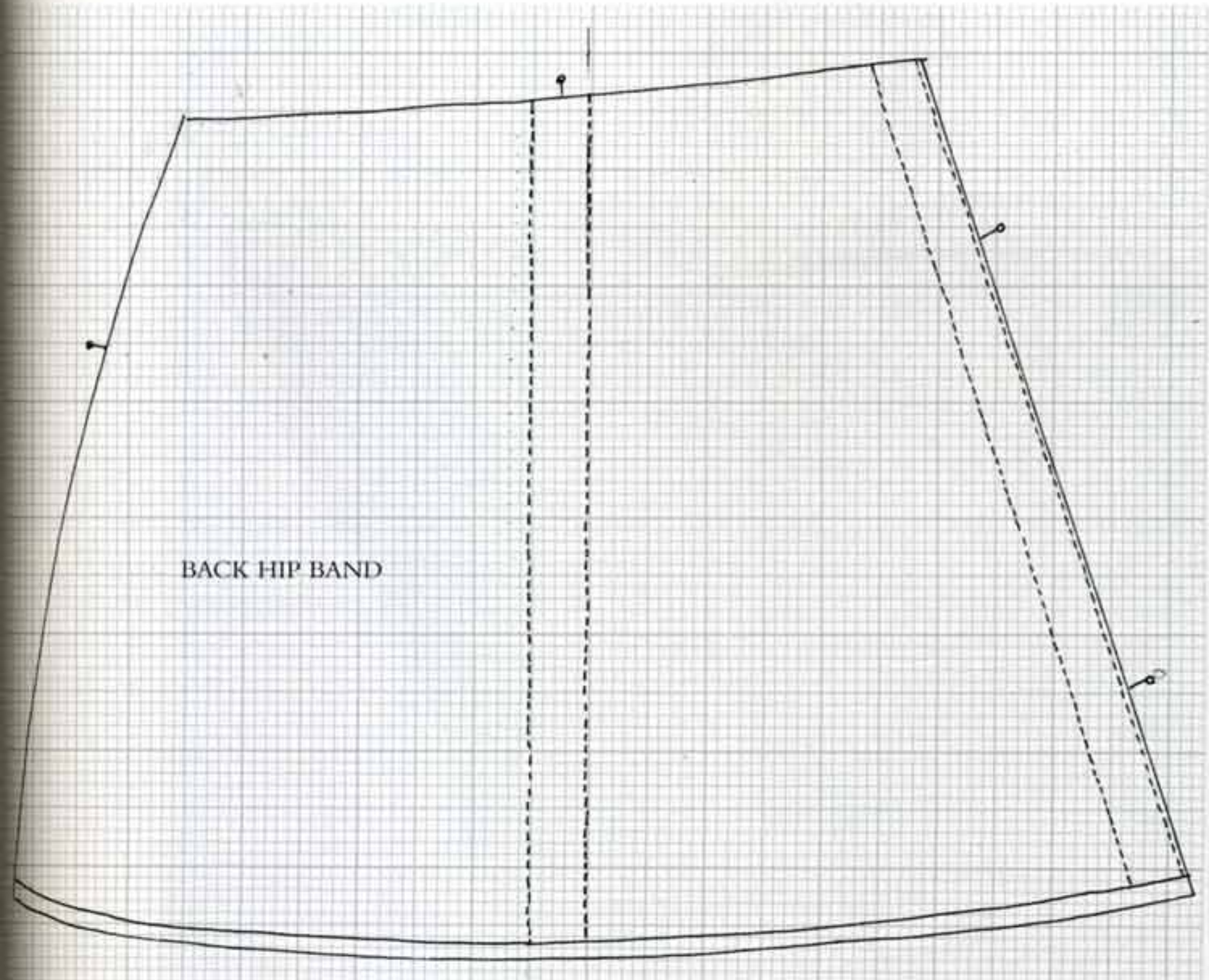
This corset is unworn and it has no maker's label inside, but it does not look homemade. It cannot have been expensive to produce, would not have been difficult to construct and has an almost uniform look to it, but has finishing details picked out in pink, to make it more attractive for the wearer.

This is a solid, sensible, no-nonsense corset, made in a hard-wearing yet comfortable fabric, not really designed to create a waistline but more to hold everything neatly together.



Opposite: This corset is part of the author's corset collection and is dated 1890–1910. It was bought from a Newark Antiques Fair in Nottingham in 2005.





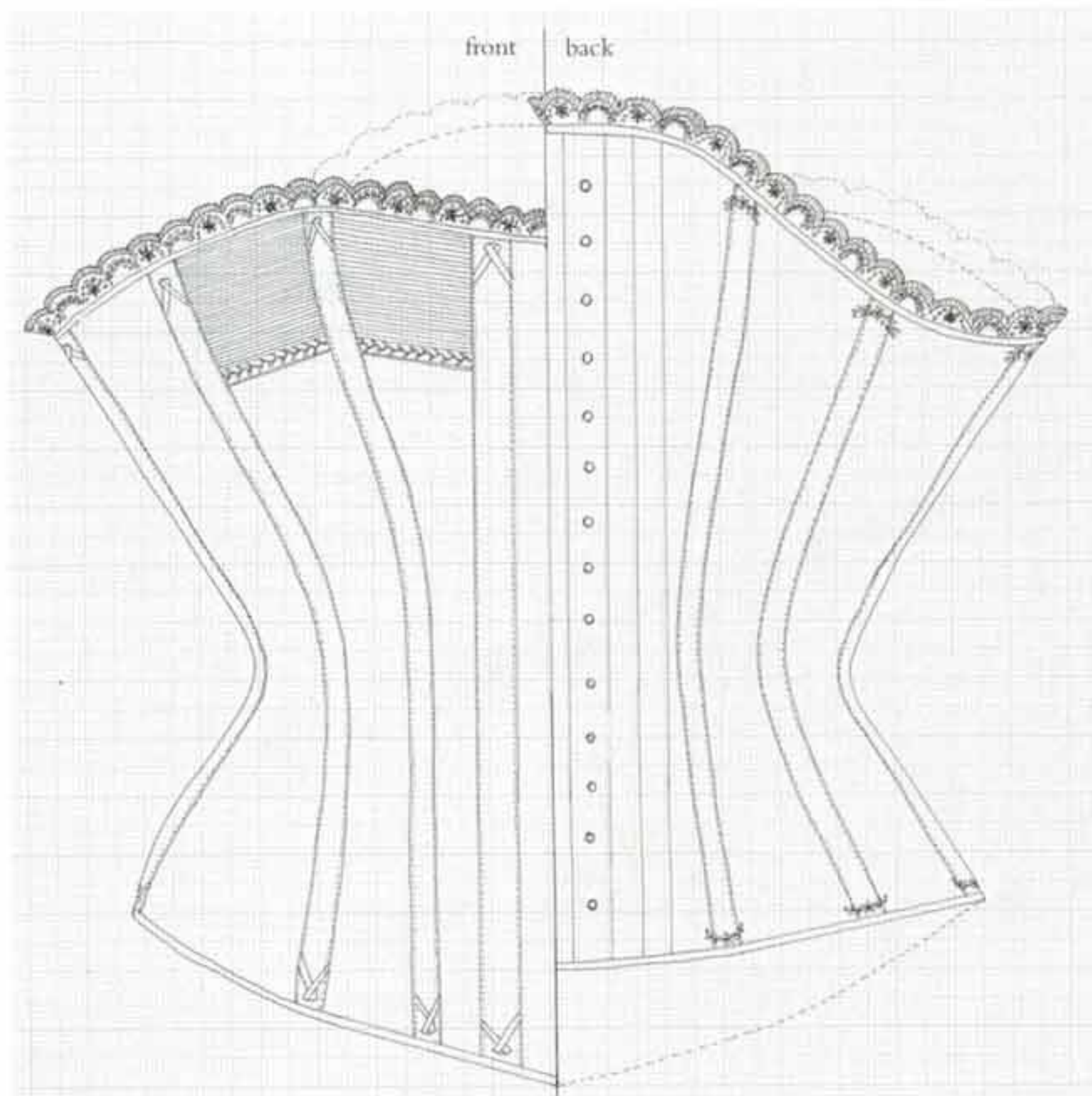


Black-and-Yellow Flossed Corset, 1890–1900

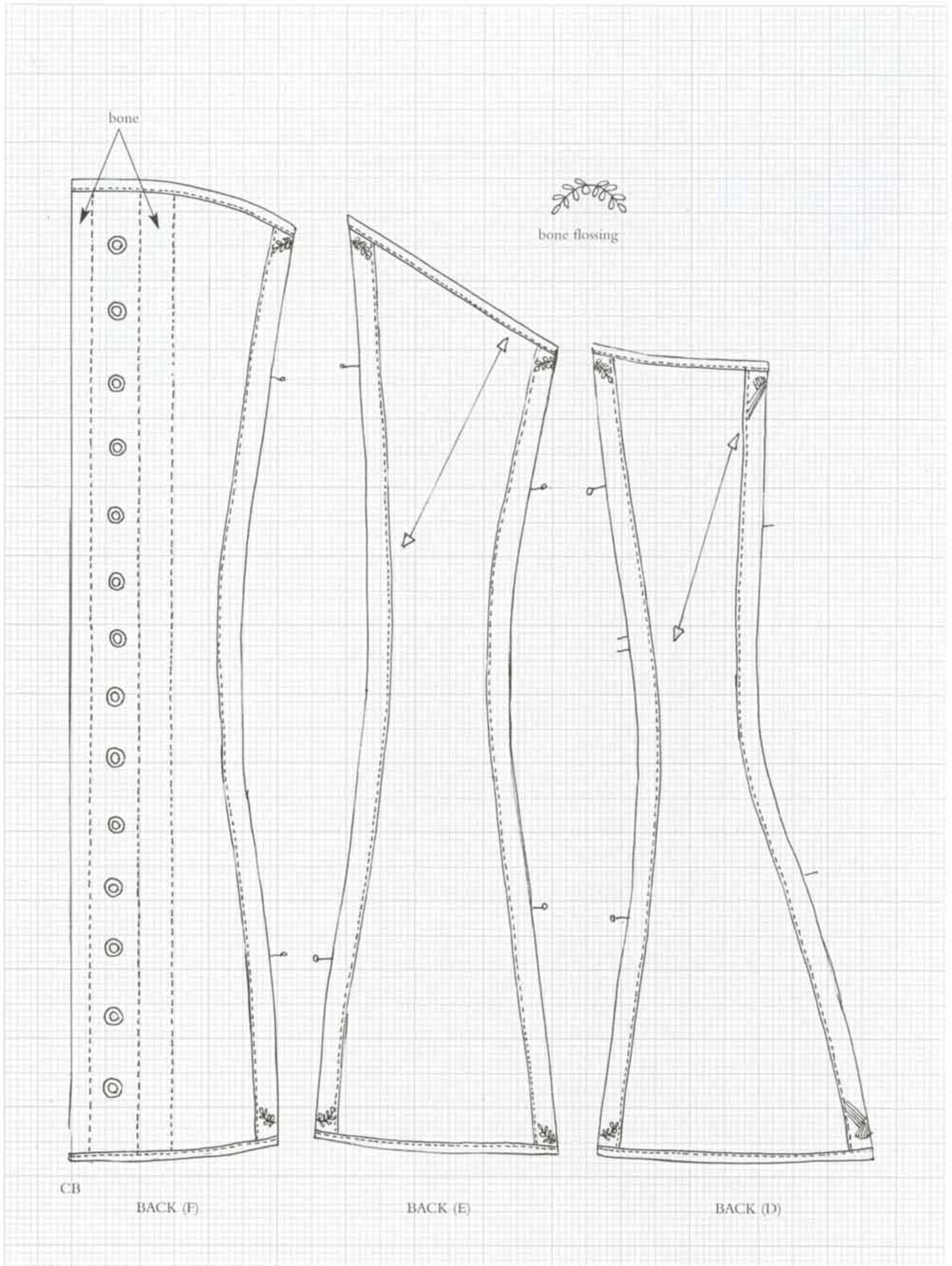
Made in black sateen with yellow embroidery, this corset features surface vertical bone channels, and horizontal cording over the bust.

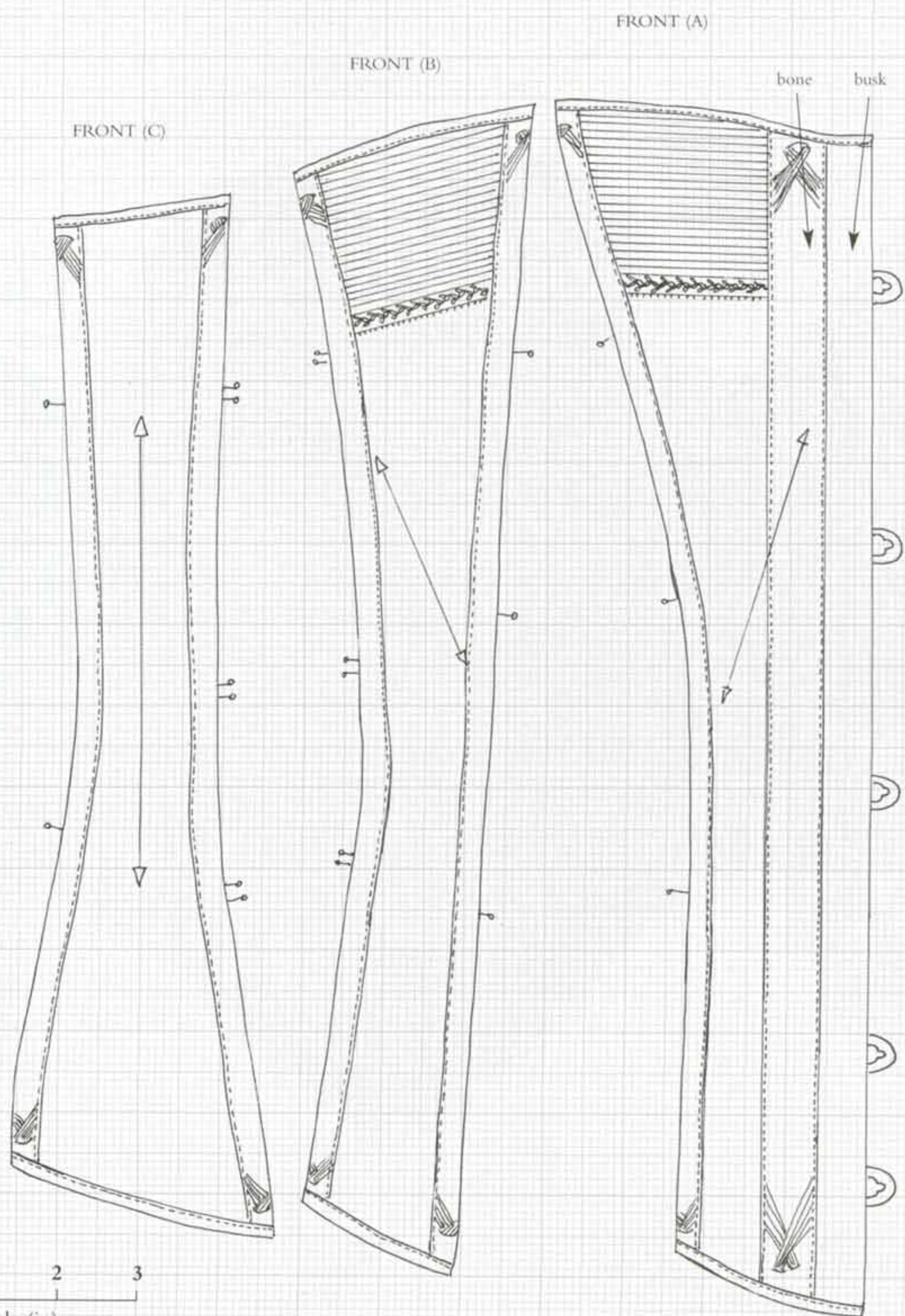
The centre-front straight split-busk fastening is on a slight cross-grain of the fabric. There are bones to strengthen it, which are removable. Some corsets had an additional covered steel built into their construction, called a double busk. This indicates that the corsets did break and that women wished to extend their life or delay the possibility of them breaking.

The bones of this corset are encased in boning channels stitched on the surface of the corset, which were attractive and possibly more comfortable to wear. There could be strips of cardboard in these channels, as has been found in partially unpicked corsets. The boning appears to be flat steel.



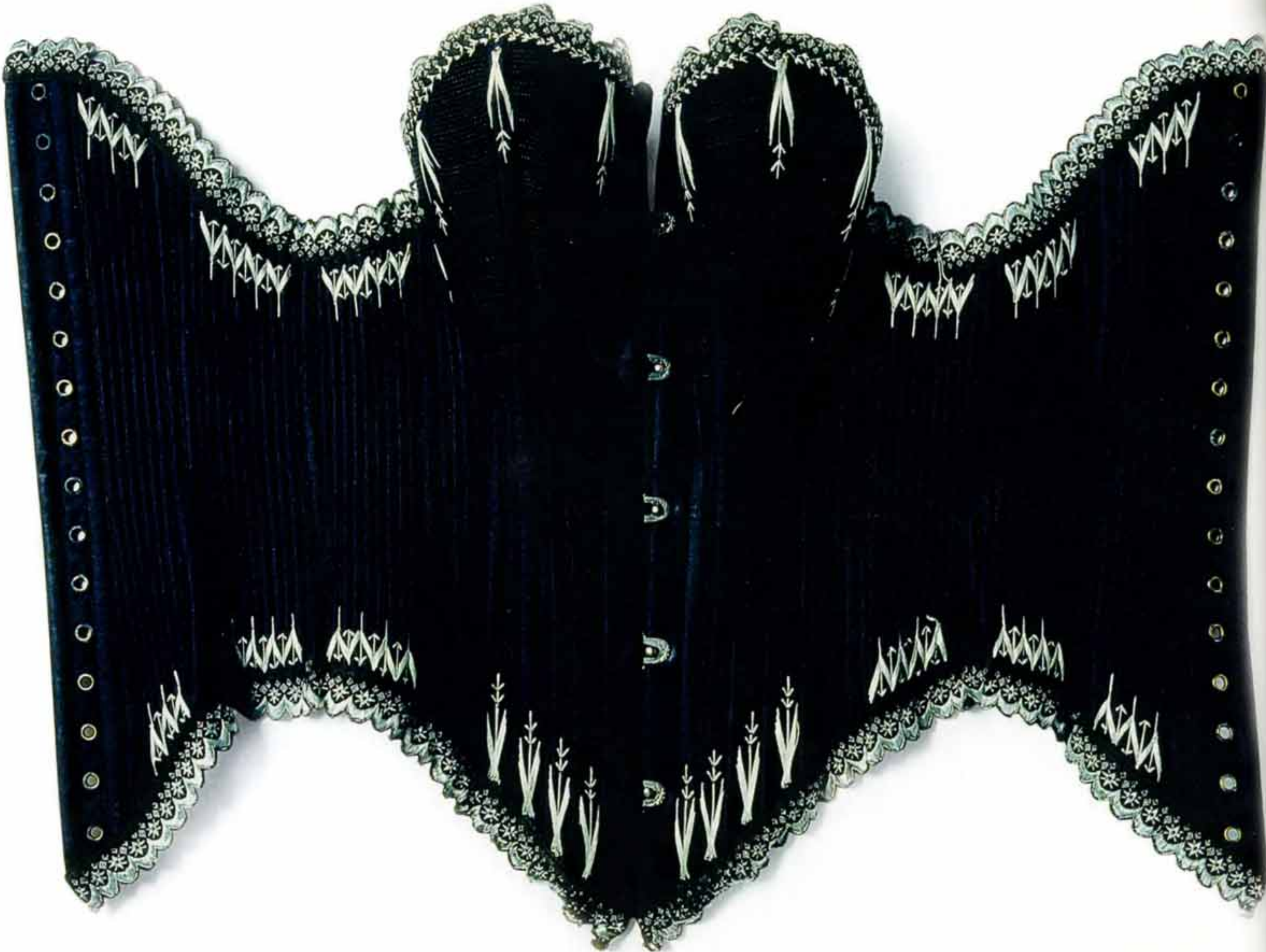
Opposite: The Symington's 'Pretty Housemaid' Corset (see page 58) came with a double busk to cope with 'constant stooping', so very possibly this pretty corset, c.1890 from St Fagans National History Museum, was actually designed for a working woman rather than a lady.





0 1 2 3
 Scale (in)

CF

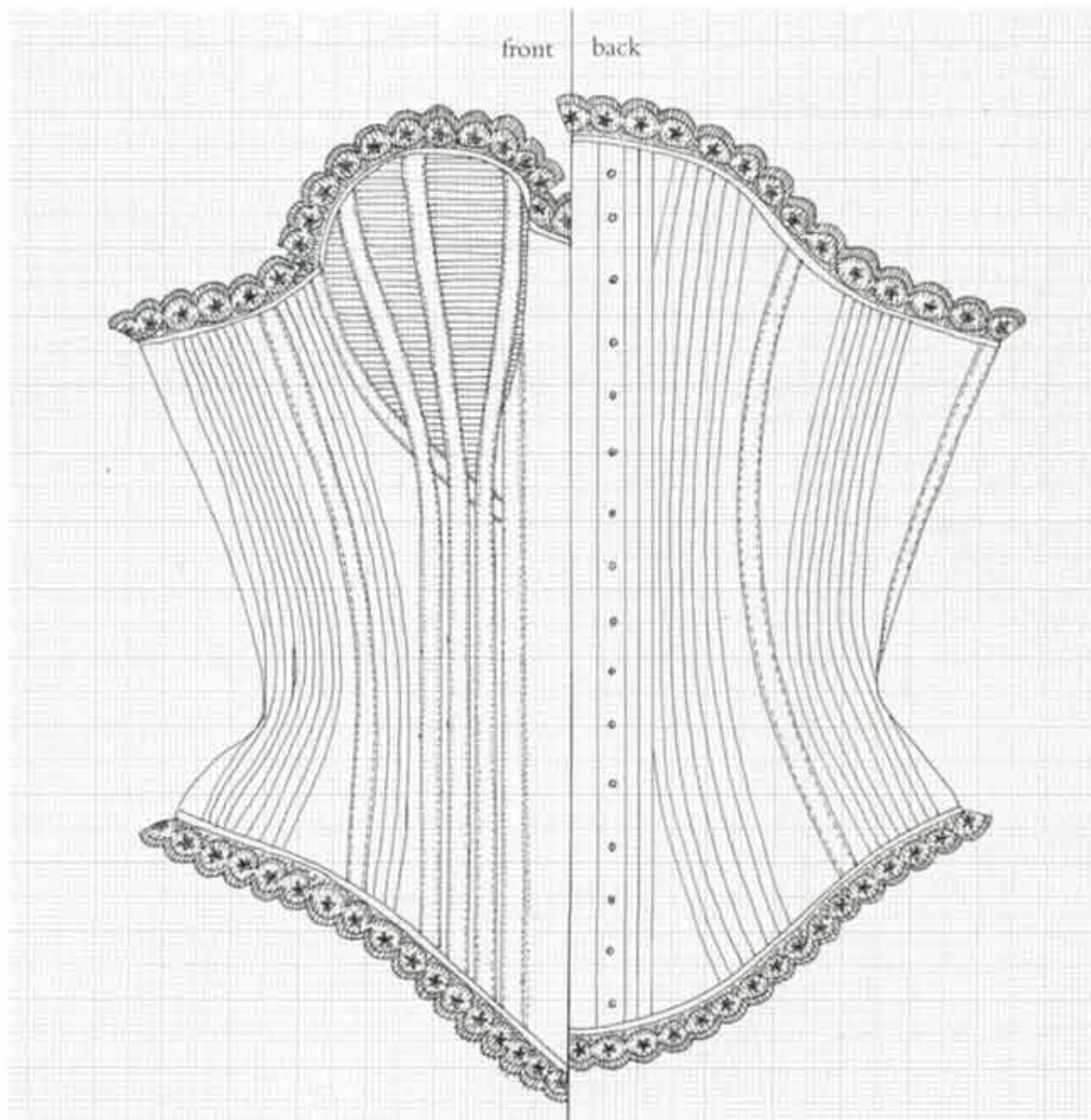


Black Corset with Blue Flossing, 1890

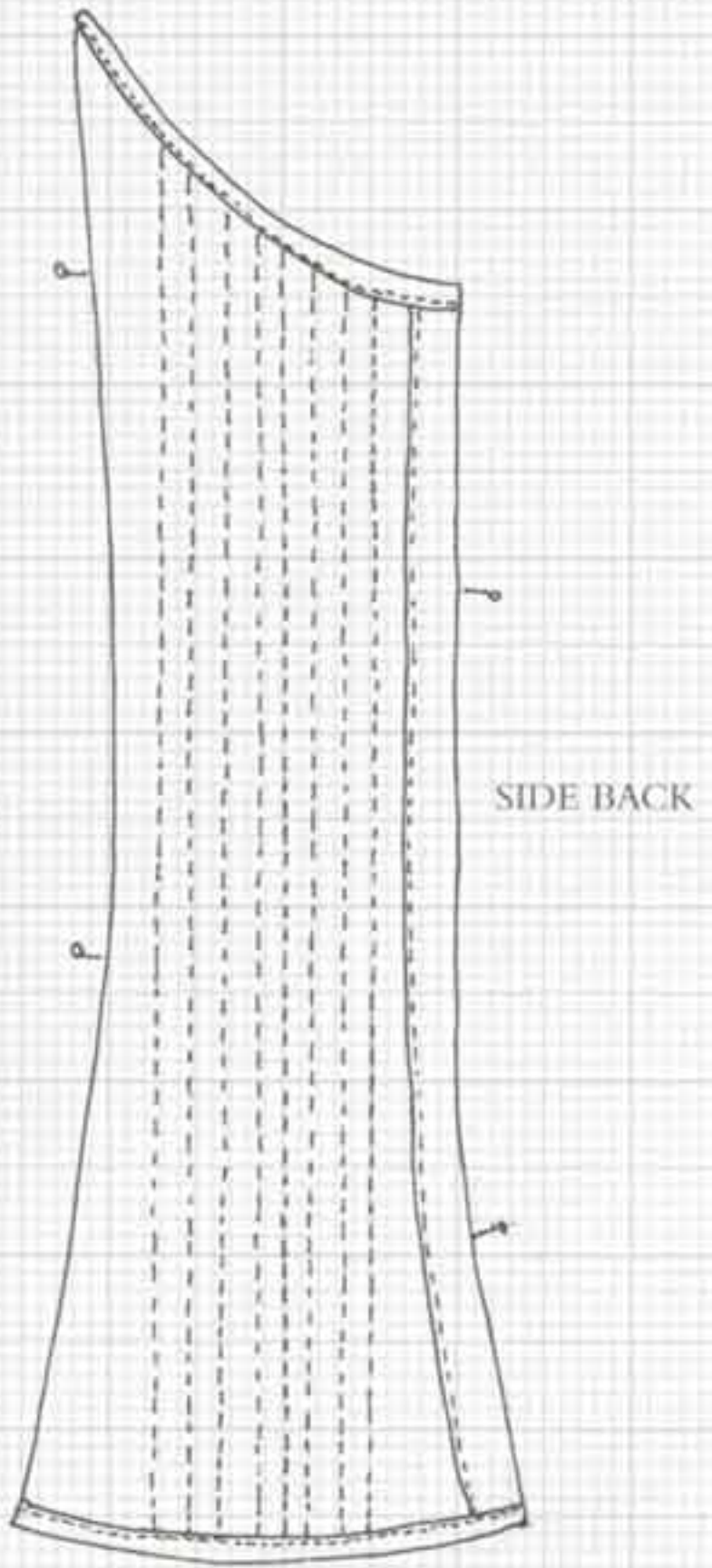
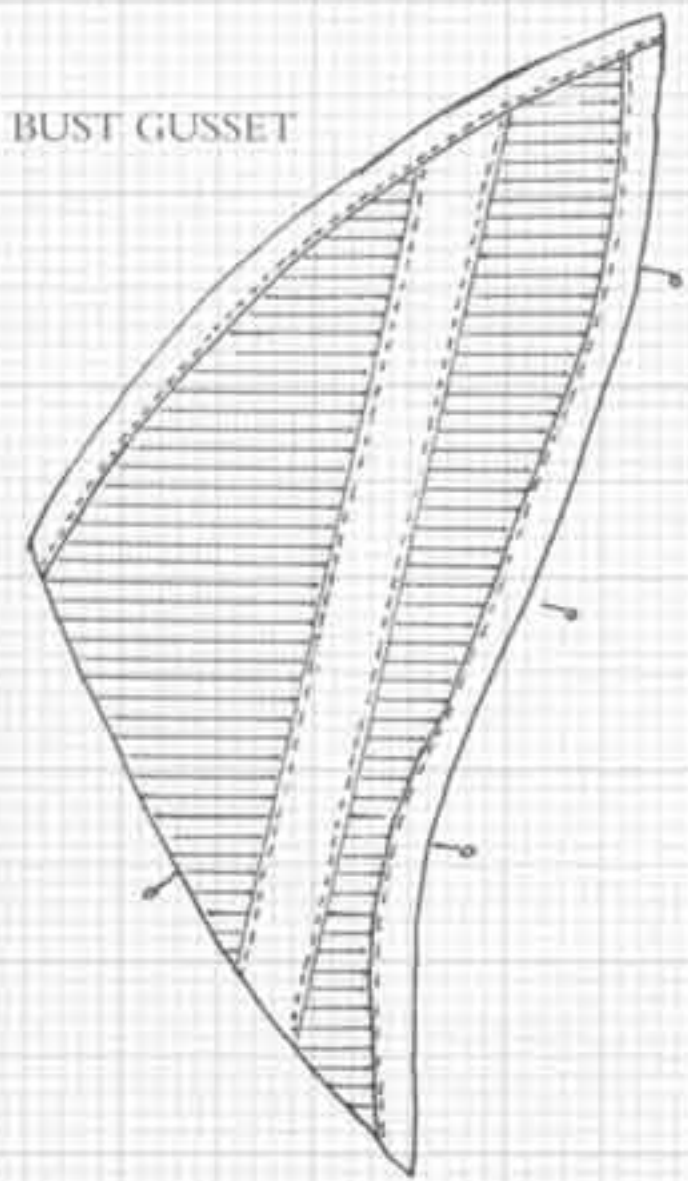
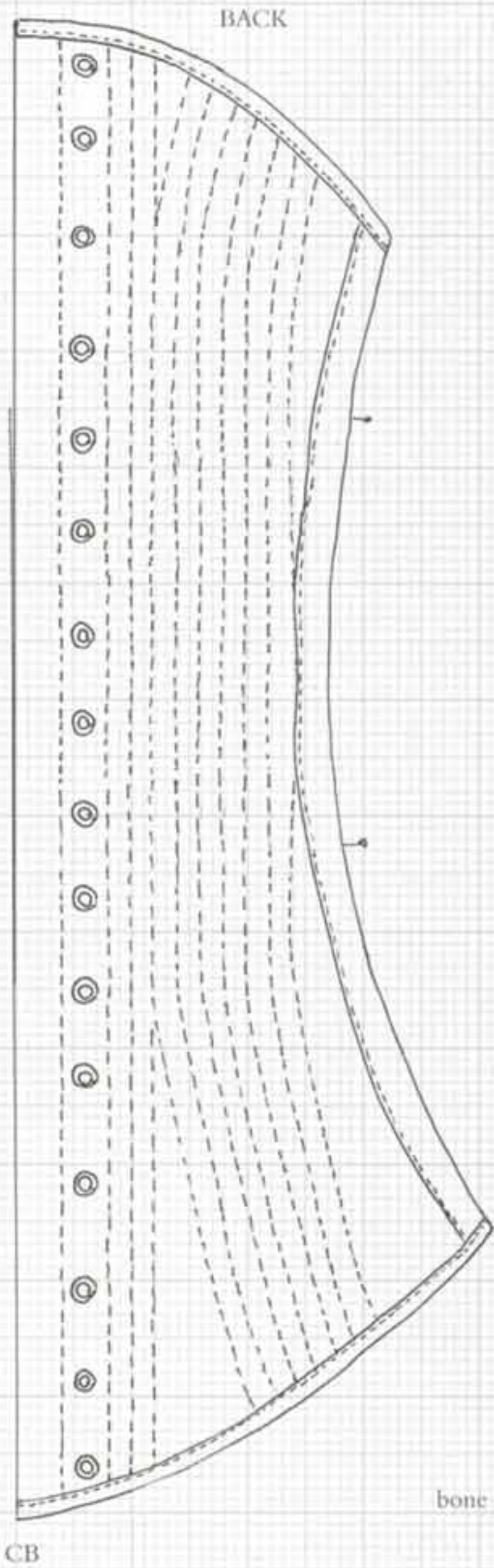
This stylish wasp-waisted corset features steel boning and is finely corded over the bust. Made in black sateen, it is a glorious manufactured corset edged at top and bottom with black and pale blue cotton machine broderie anglaise.

The bust gussets have been cut from finely corded fabric and when assembled the $\frac{3}{8}$ in (9mm) wide bindings are machined on the right side of the garment and continue over the bust gussets and then $\frac{1}{4}$ in (0.6cm) steel bone, passed through the binding. There may be some fine card in the binding as well to keep it even, but as none of this corset is undone it is not possible to tell (although similar corsets in the Symington Collection, which were undone to explore their construction, do have card present).

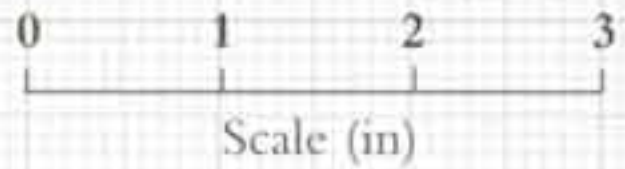
The side-front and side-back panels are machine corded and there are three bones either side of the centre back to support the metal eyelets. The side seams also have a binding carrying $\frac{1}{4}$ in (6mm) steel bone. There is pale blue hand-stitched flossing. This is a beautiful corset; it looks delicate and dainty but is actually robust in its construction.

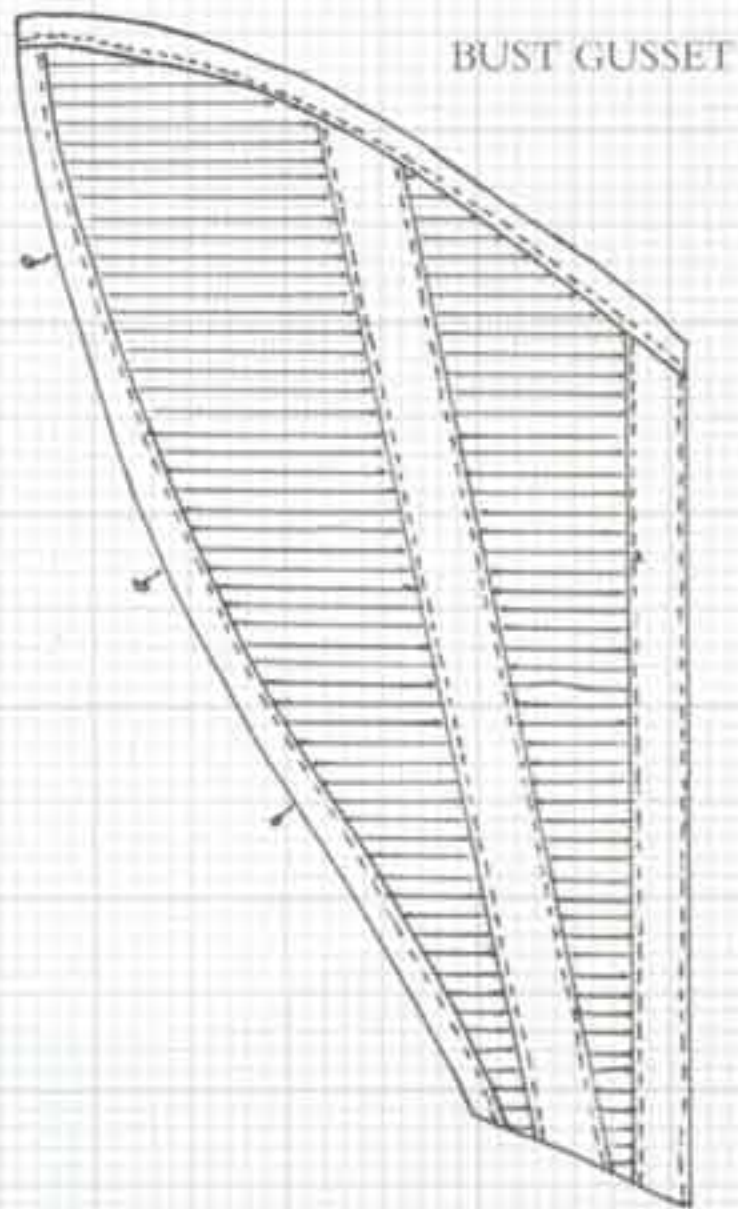


Opposite: This corset, from St Fagans National History Museum, Cardiff, is very typical of 1890s corsets but it has a straight busk rather than a spoon one.

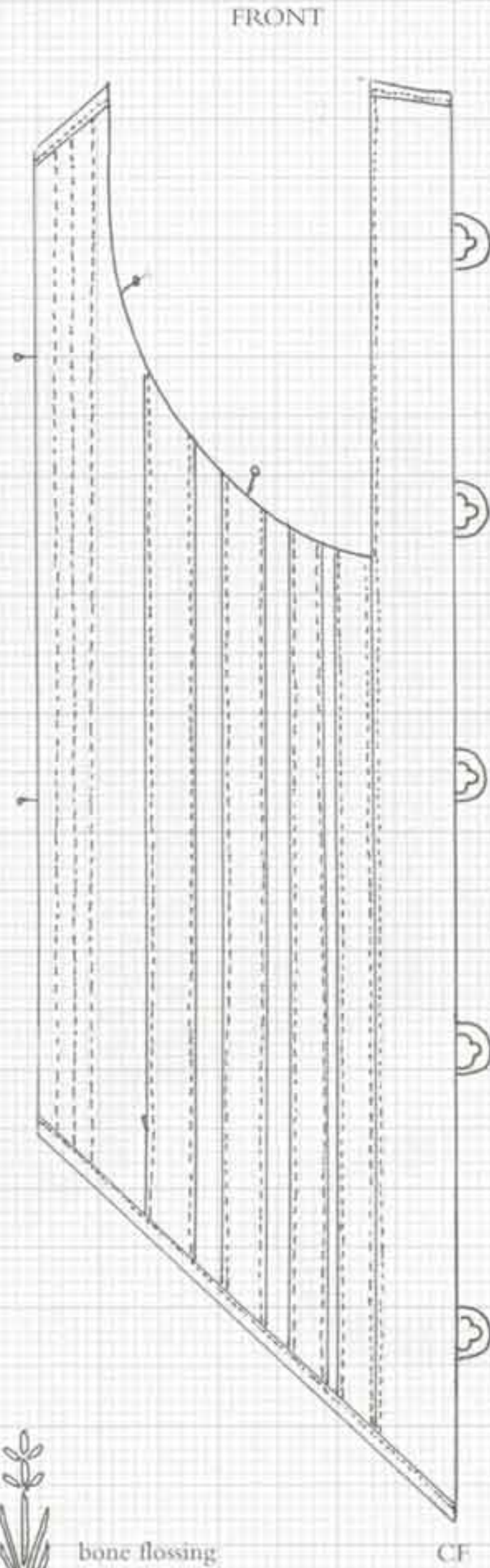


bone flossing





BUST GUSSET



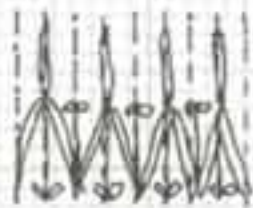
FRONT



SIDE FRONT



bone flossing



cord flossing

CF



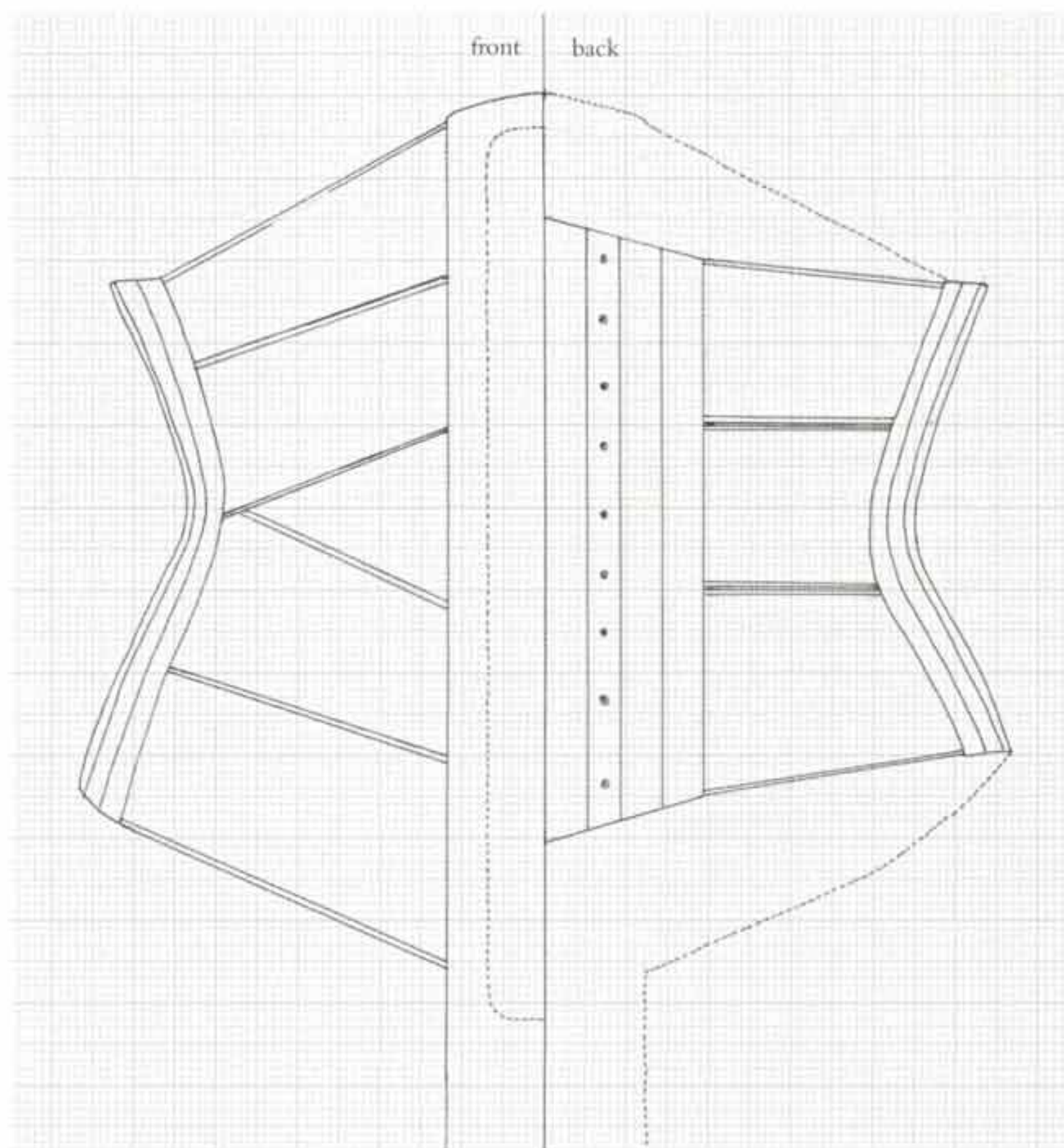
White Ribbon Corset, 1900–10

This corset is constructed with 2in (5cm) wide linen ribbon, and plain white linen that encases flat steel bones on the side seams, centre front and centre back. It had suspenders at the front that have been cut off.

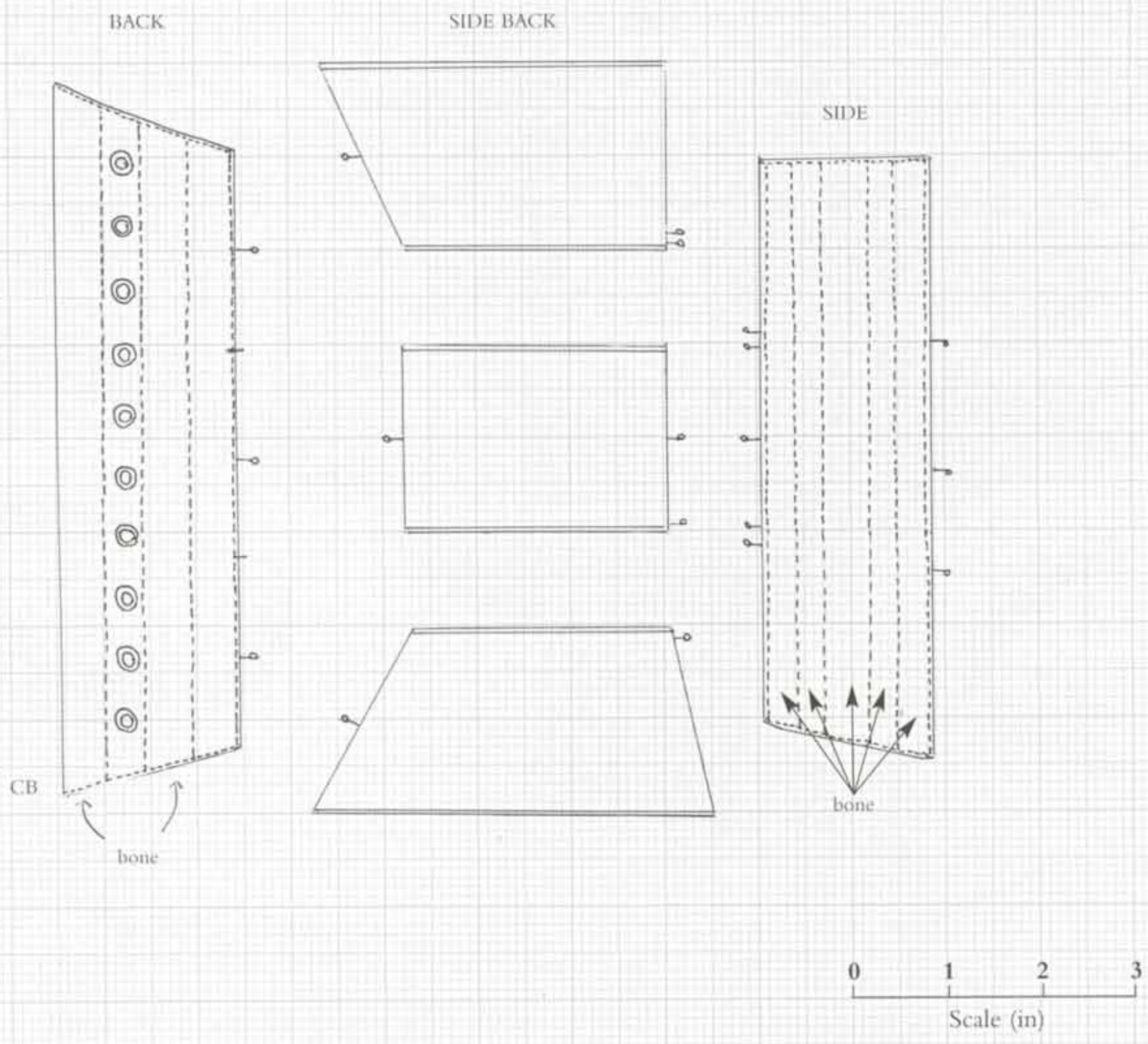
This corset reflects the growing need of women to have more freedom of movement while still wanting to constrict their waists. Women from the 1880s onwards were taking part in sporting activities such as croquet, tennis, roller-skating, ice skating, badminton, golf and eventually cycling.

The Rational Dress Society was formed in 1881 to raise women's awareness of how their lives were impeded by the burden of fashionable silhouettes.

Fashion has never gone hand-in-hand with logic and common sense, but in 1900 women were on the verge of experiencing a freedom of movement that they had not enjoyed for nearly a hundred years.

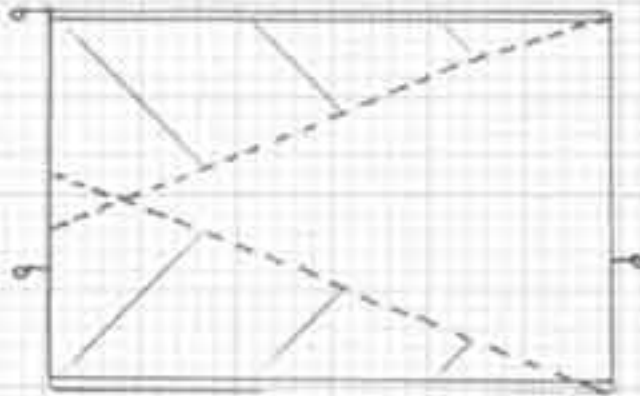
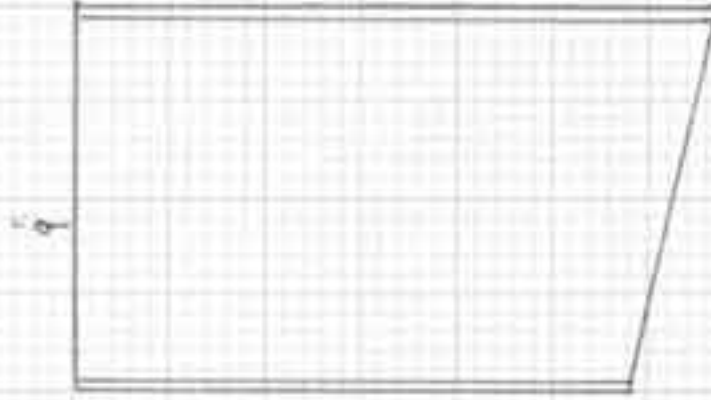
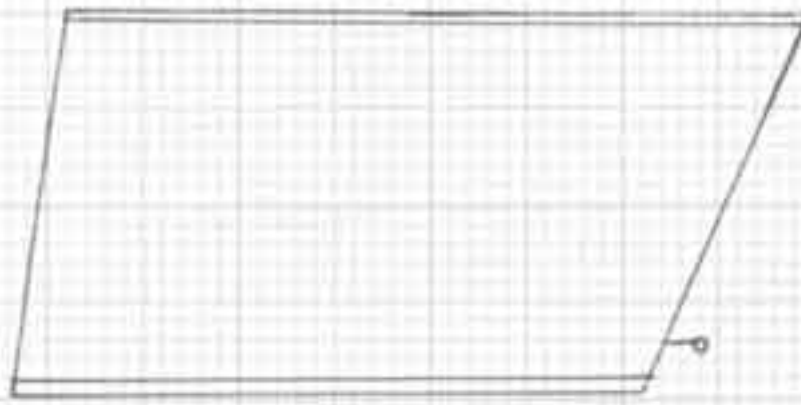



Opposite: A view of the outside of a 1900–10 corset. This corset was donated to the St Fagans National History Museum by Mrs Lena Jones of Machynlleth, Wales.

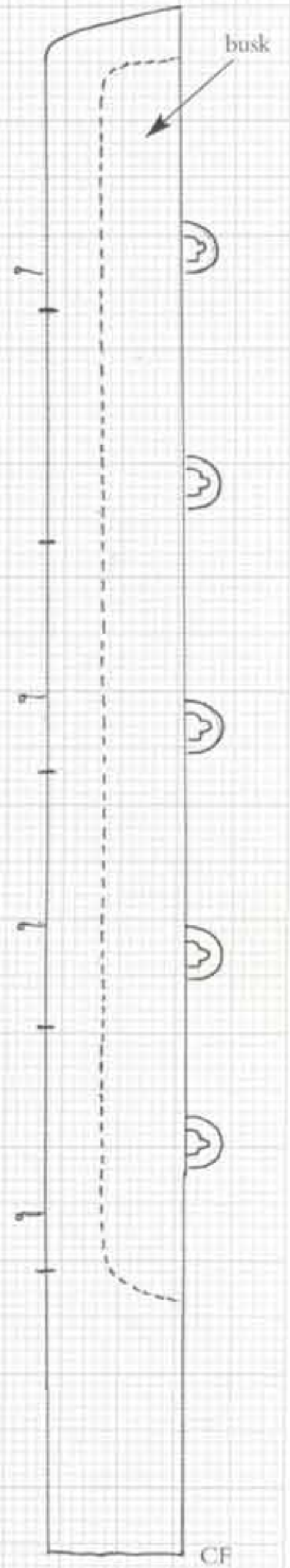
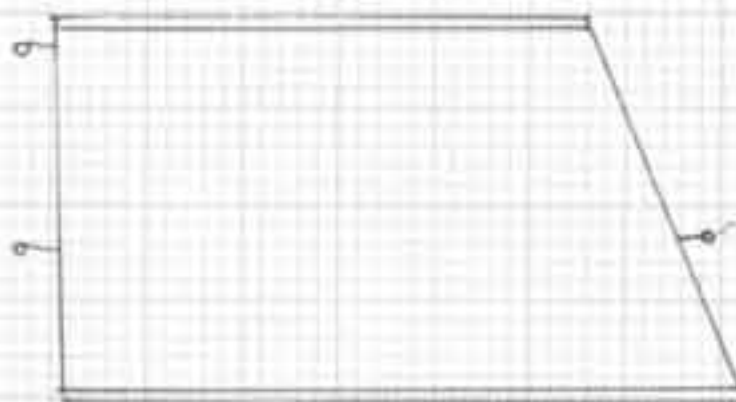


SIDE FRONT

FRONT



 laid over



suspender removed



Silk Ribbon Corset, 1900–5

This delicate ribbon corset is made from $2\frac{1}{2}$ in (5.7cm) wide silk floral woven ribbon – it uses at least 6–7 yards (5.5–6.5m) of ribbon, if not more, when matching the floral repeats is taken into account. The corset has a straight metal split-busk closure at the centre front, encased in the silk ribbon, turned in and hand stitched.

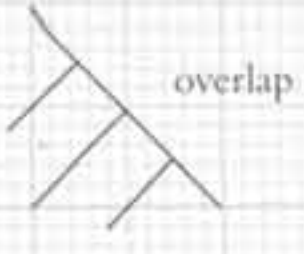
The side panel and the centre-back panels are also extravagantly faced with the ribbon. The centre back of the corset has metal-backed eyelets supported by four rows of bones on each side. None of the eyelets were displaced and a fine woven silk braid with metal aiguillettes at its ends was used to cross-lace the corset.

The side panel houses four rows of whale boning and there may possibly be another layer of fabric sandwiched in as well. The ribboned back and front sections of this corset have a boning channel of $\frac{1}{2}$ in (0.9cm) wide ribbon stitched through the wrapped layers of the corset, and a narrow $\frac{1}{4}$ in (0.6cm) whale bone travelling through each channel.

A very prettily tied bow is hand stitched to the top of the split busk. On both of the side panels at the hip edge are 1in (2.5cm) wide linen buttons attached to the corset with a button-hole stitched loop.



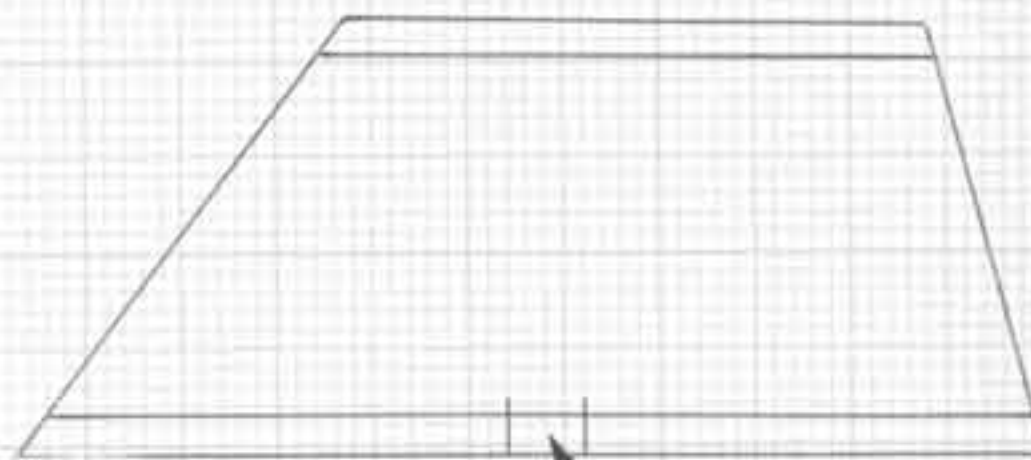
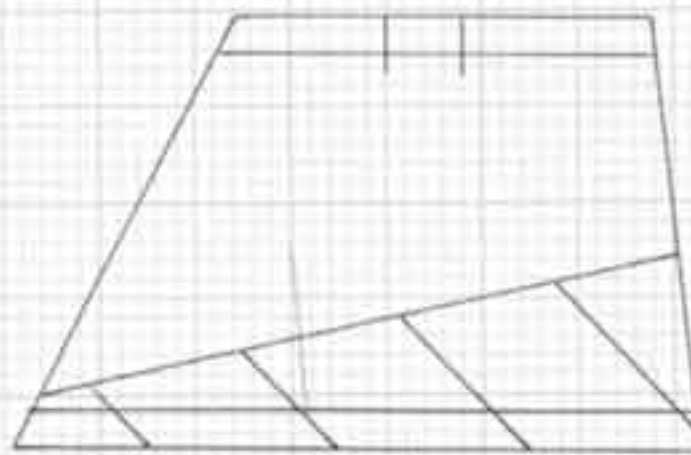
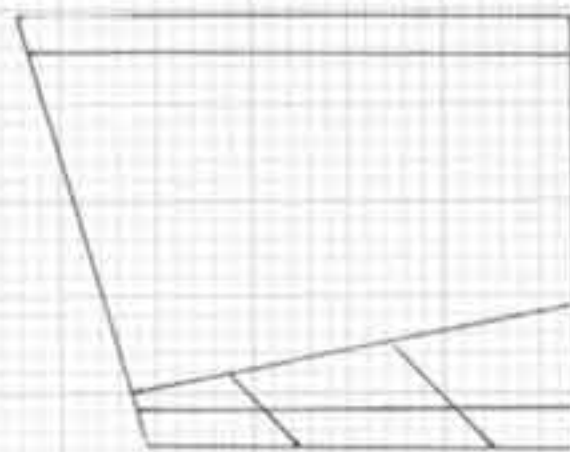
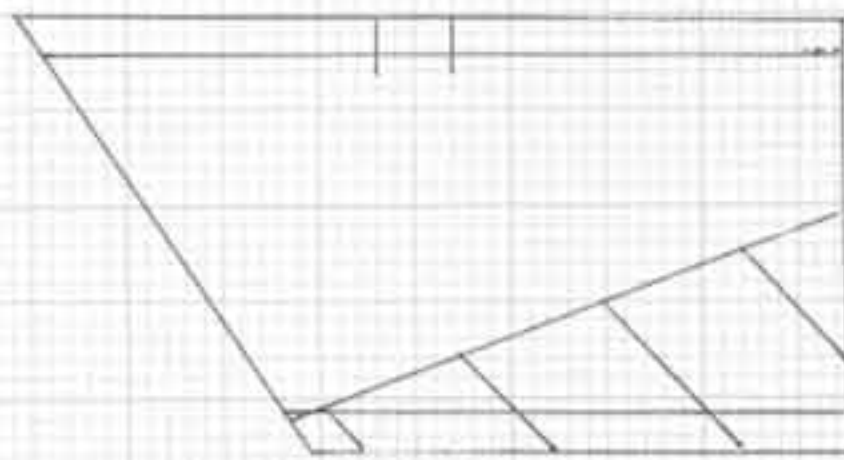
Left: A pretty 1900–05 corset, from the Fashion Museum, Bath.



BACK

SIDE BACK

SIDE



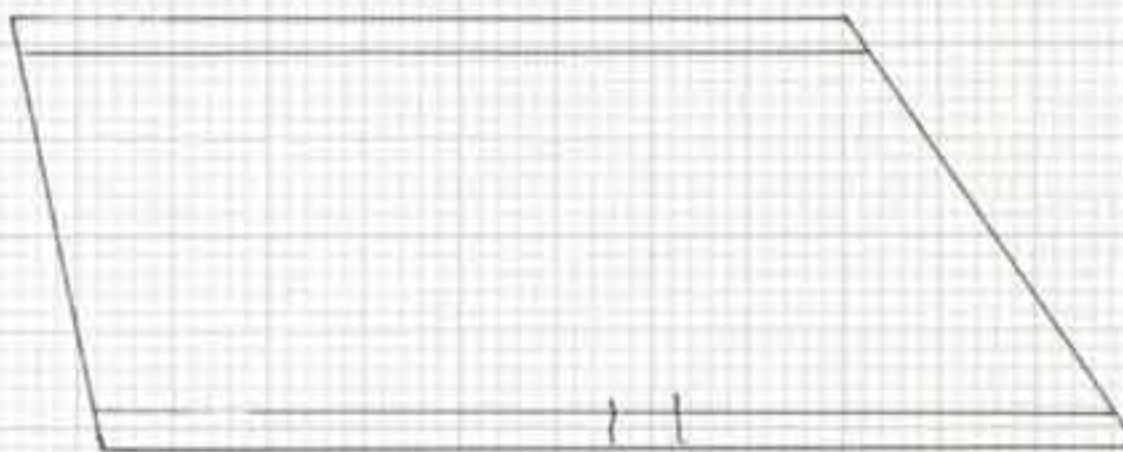
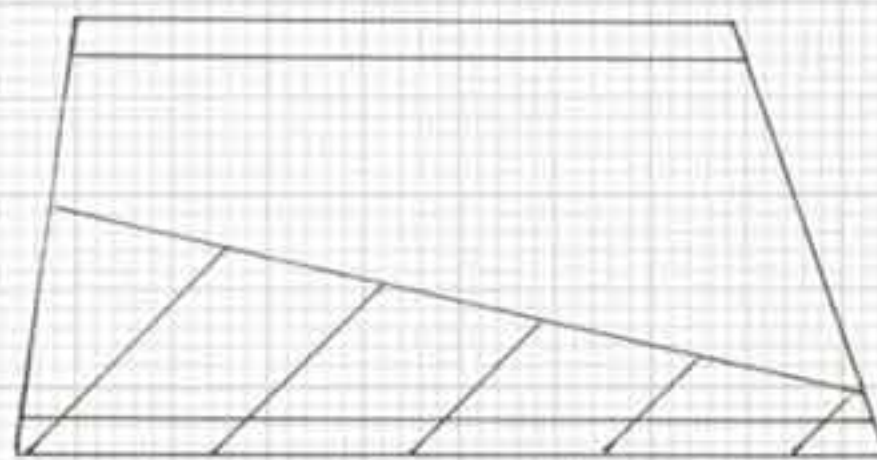
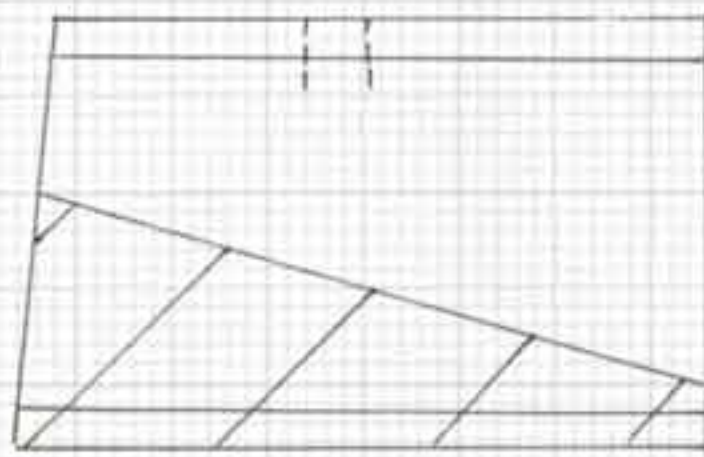
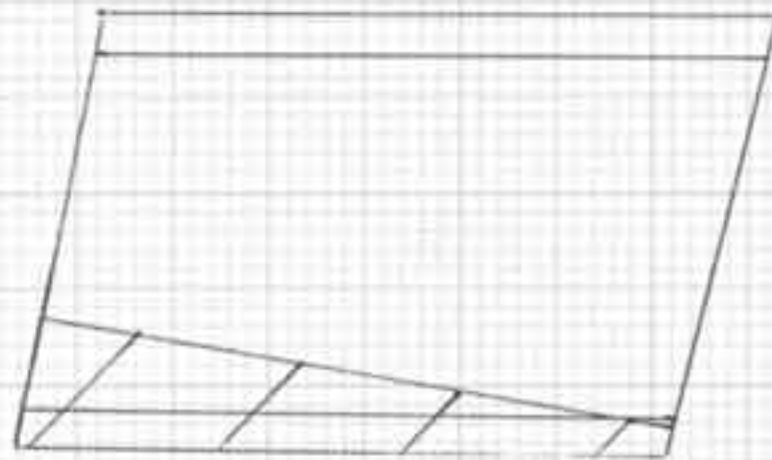
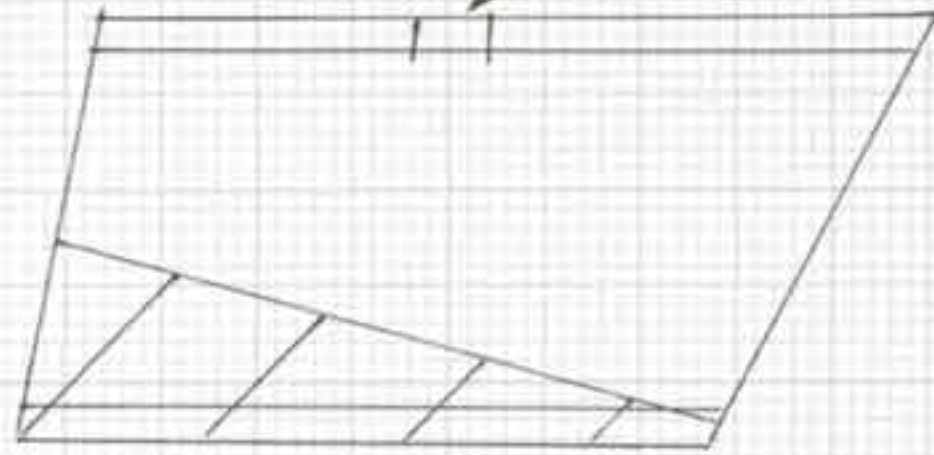
boning



Scale (in)

SIDE FRONT

boning



FRONT BUSK





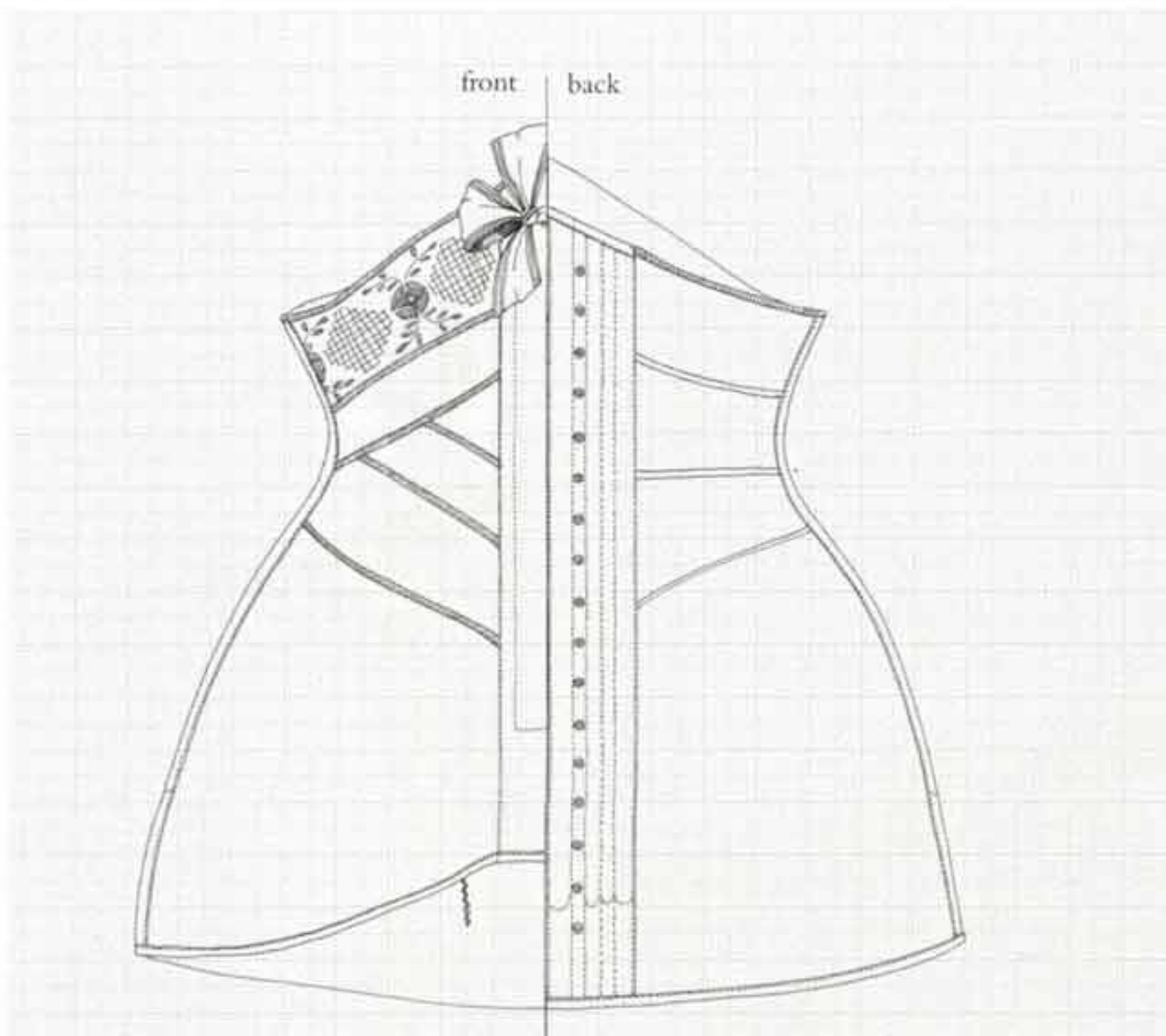
Long White Corset, 1914

Made from white mercerized cotton with a fine silk bow (now deteriorating) at the apex of the straight metal split busk at the centre front, this corset has metal bones throughout and laces up at the back with cross-lacing, supported by four bones either side of the centre back. The side panels have a rigid set of six $\frac{1}{4}$ in (0.6cm) bones.

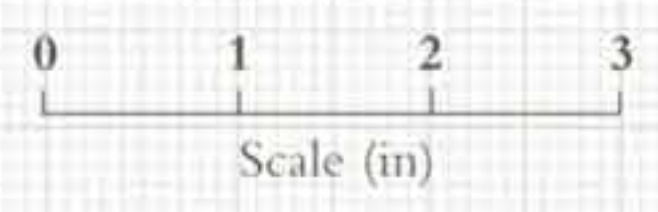
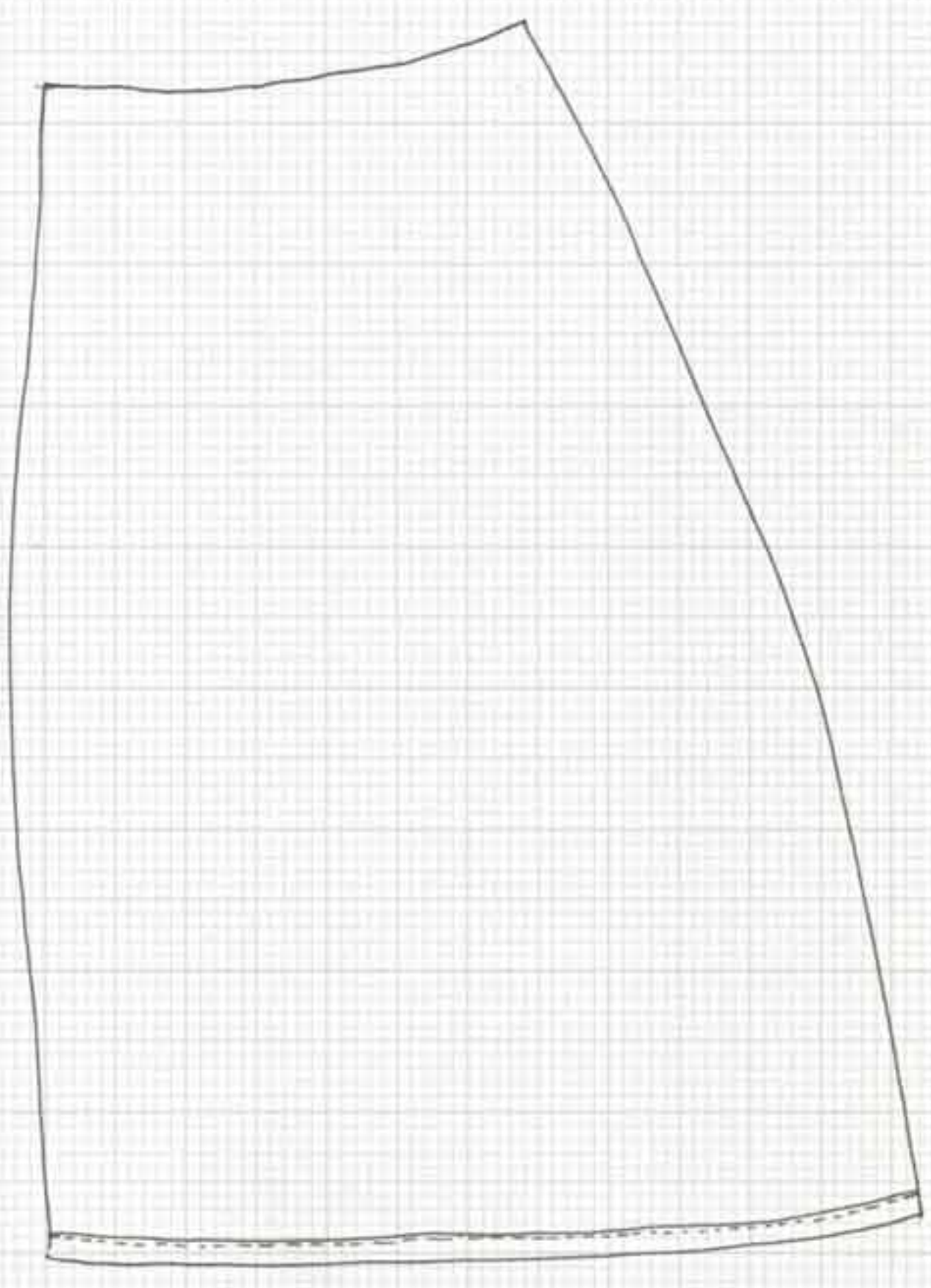
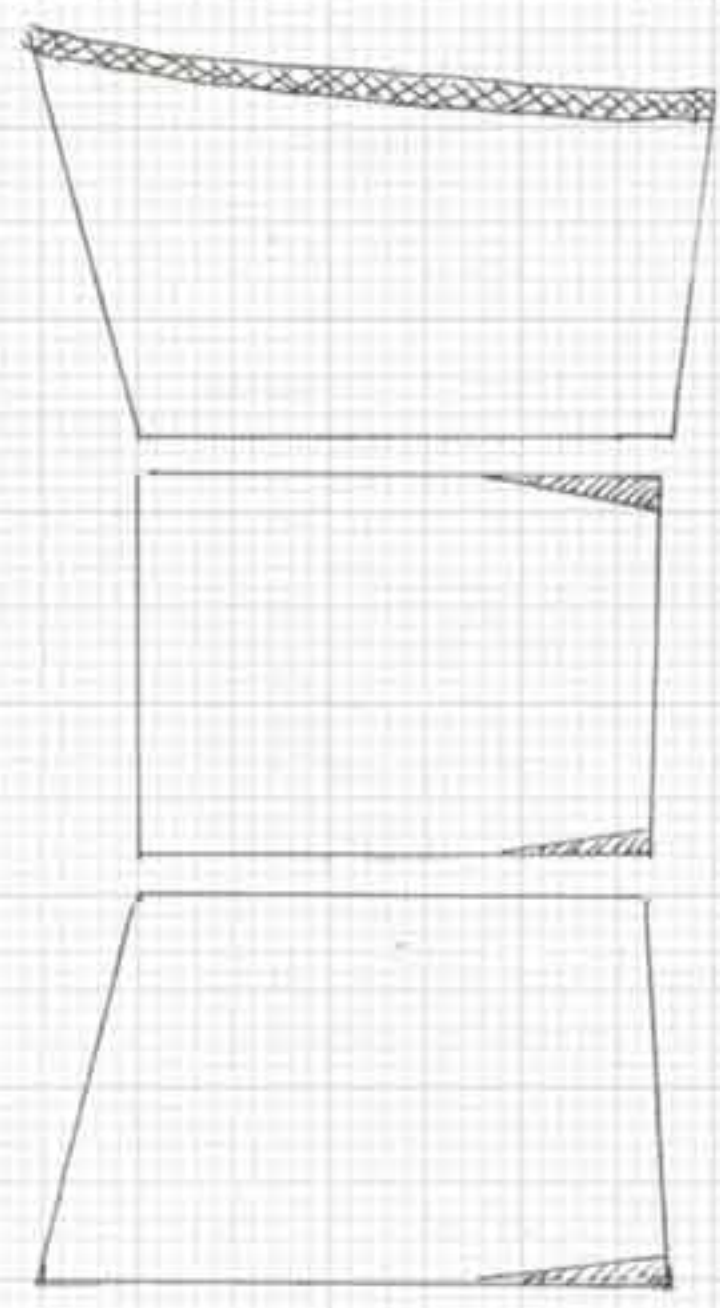
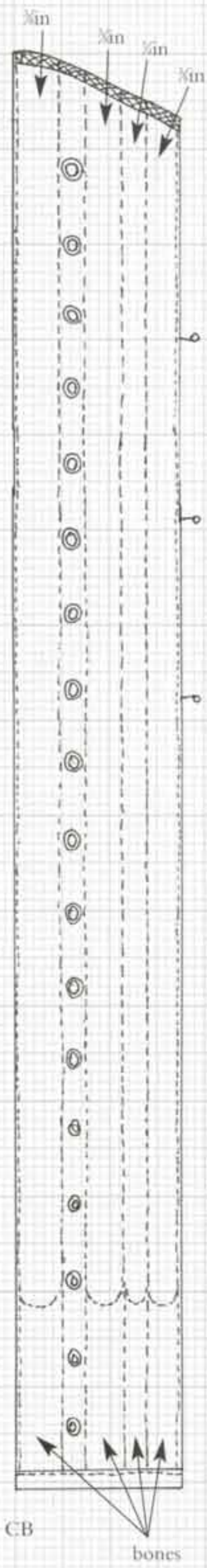
The cotton used for the hip area is an even weave and durable, and suggests summerwear. There is a 2in (5cm) wide strongly woven cotton ribbon with a pretty geometrical and alternating flower pattern that forms the low bust control, suppressing the figure gently to achieve the softly flowing lines that were desirable in 1914.

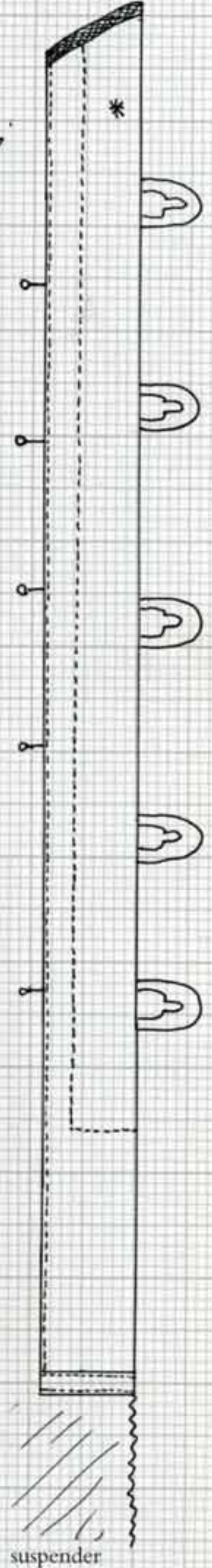
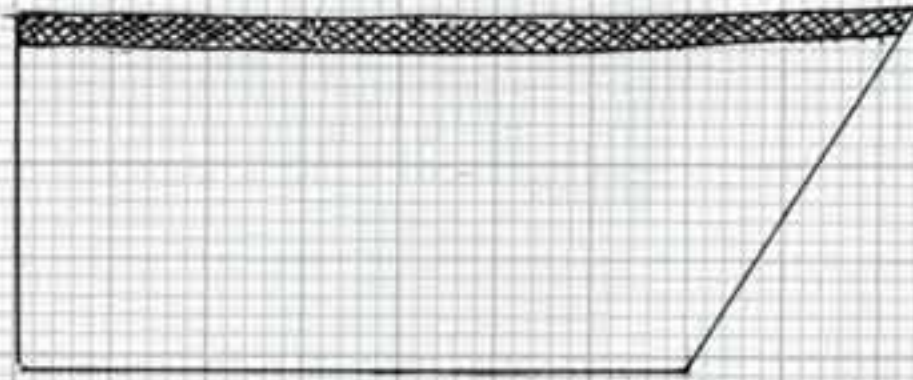
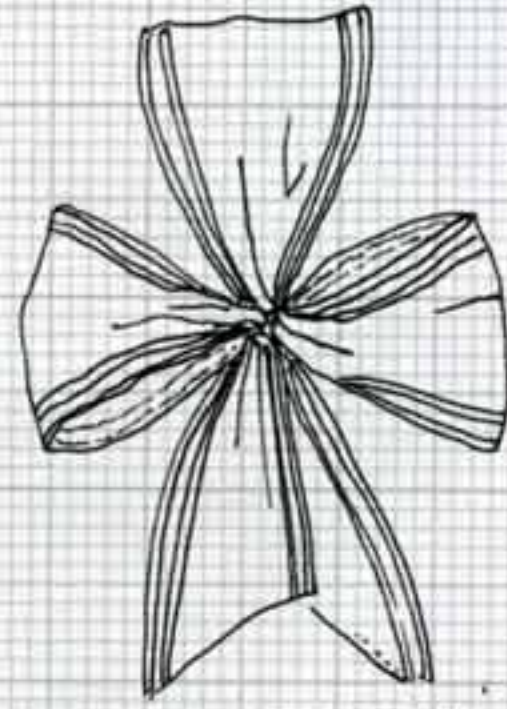
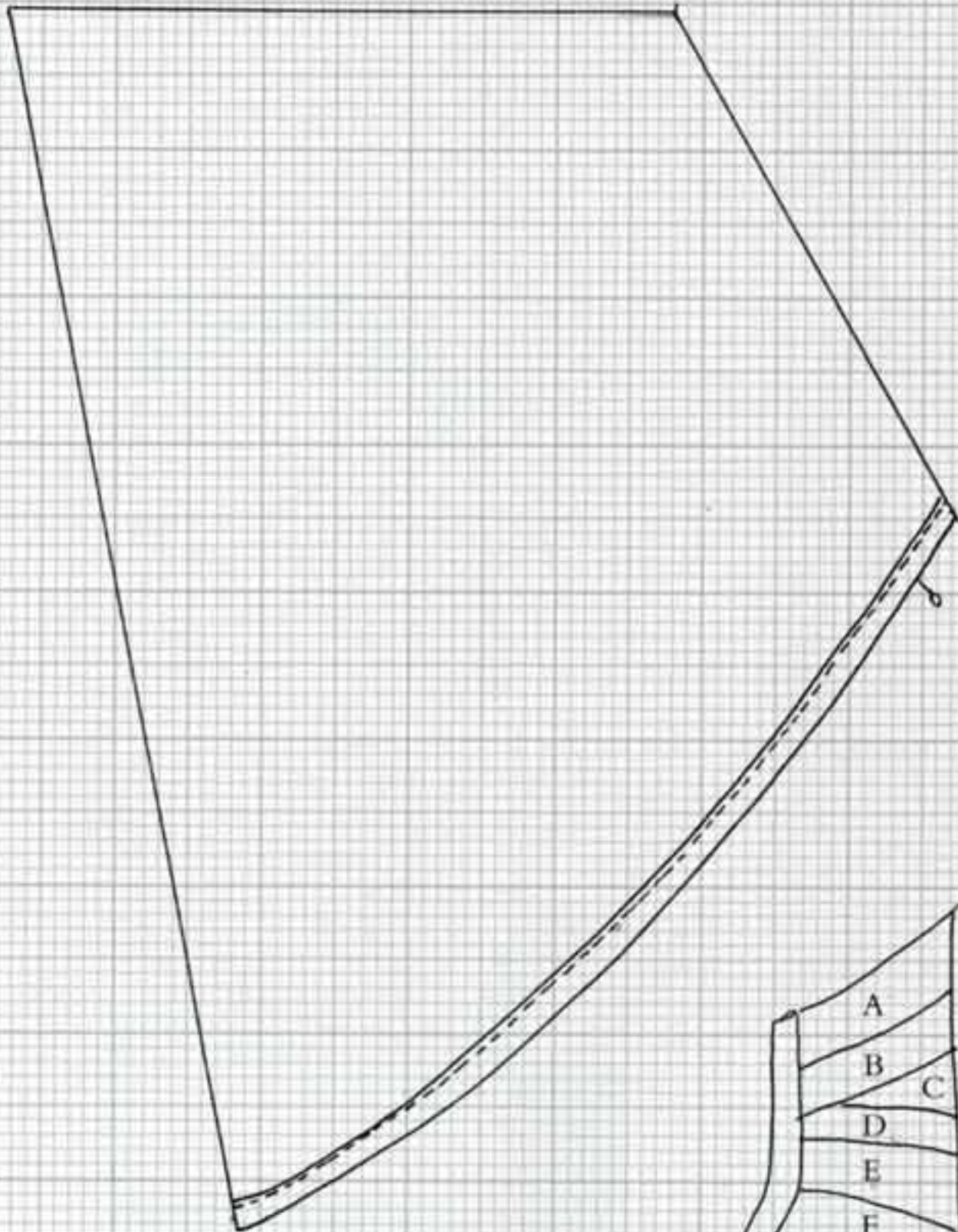
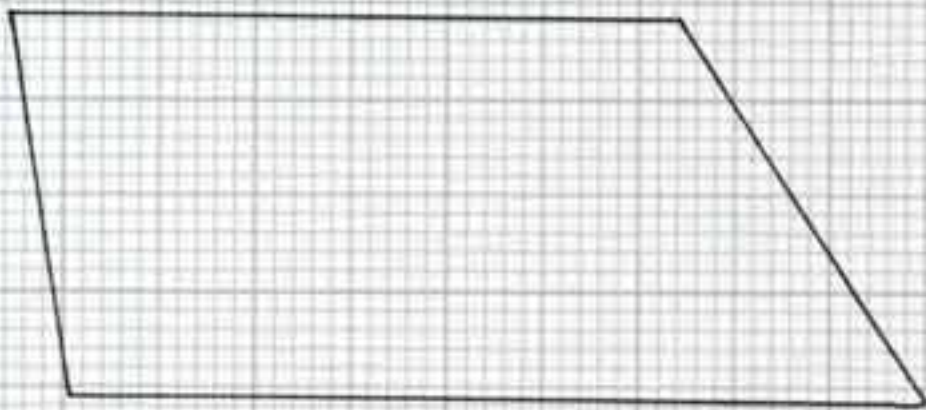
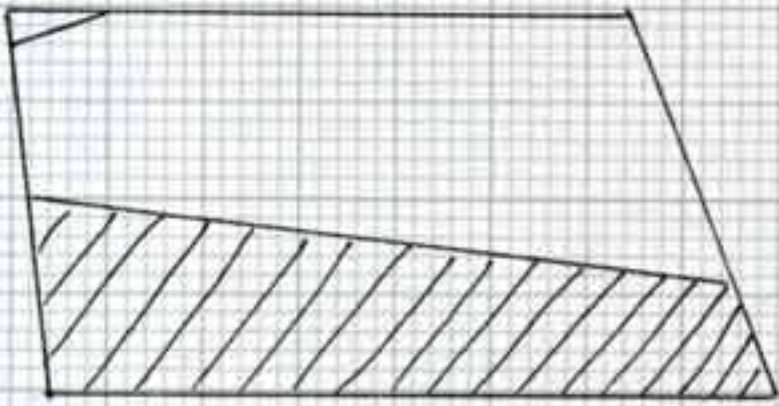
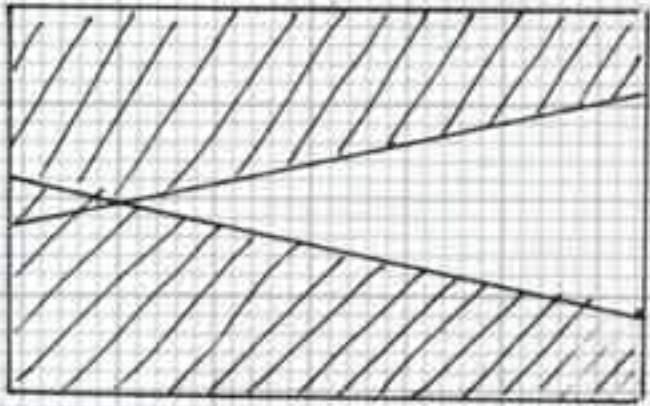
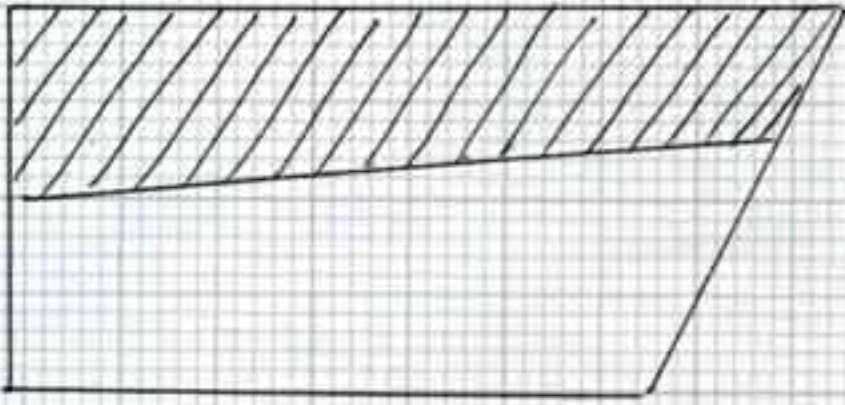
The ribbon is folded in half to cover the split busk, and the holes for the 'loops' are cut through and not finished in any way. At the centre back the 2in (5cm) wide ribbon is faced with twill ribbon or fabric – there is a possibility that twill is also present, hidden underneath the ribbon at the centre front.

The top edge of this corset is closely machine over-locked, and the lower edge is bound with twill straight tape. The suspenders are from the side panels and either side of the centre-front fastening, presumably to help its dynamics, the suspenders preventing the corset riding up with wear.



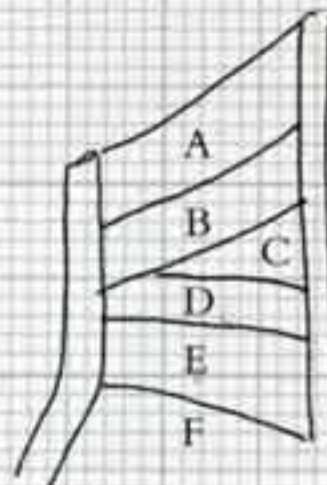
Opposite: This 1914 corset is from the Symington Collection at Leicestershire County Council Museum, UK.





suspender

CF





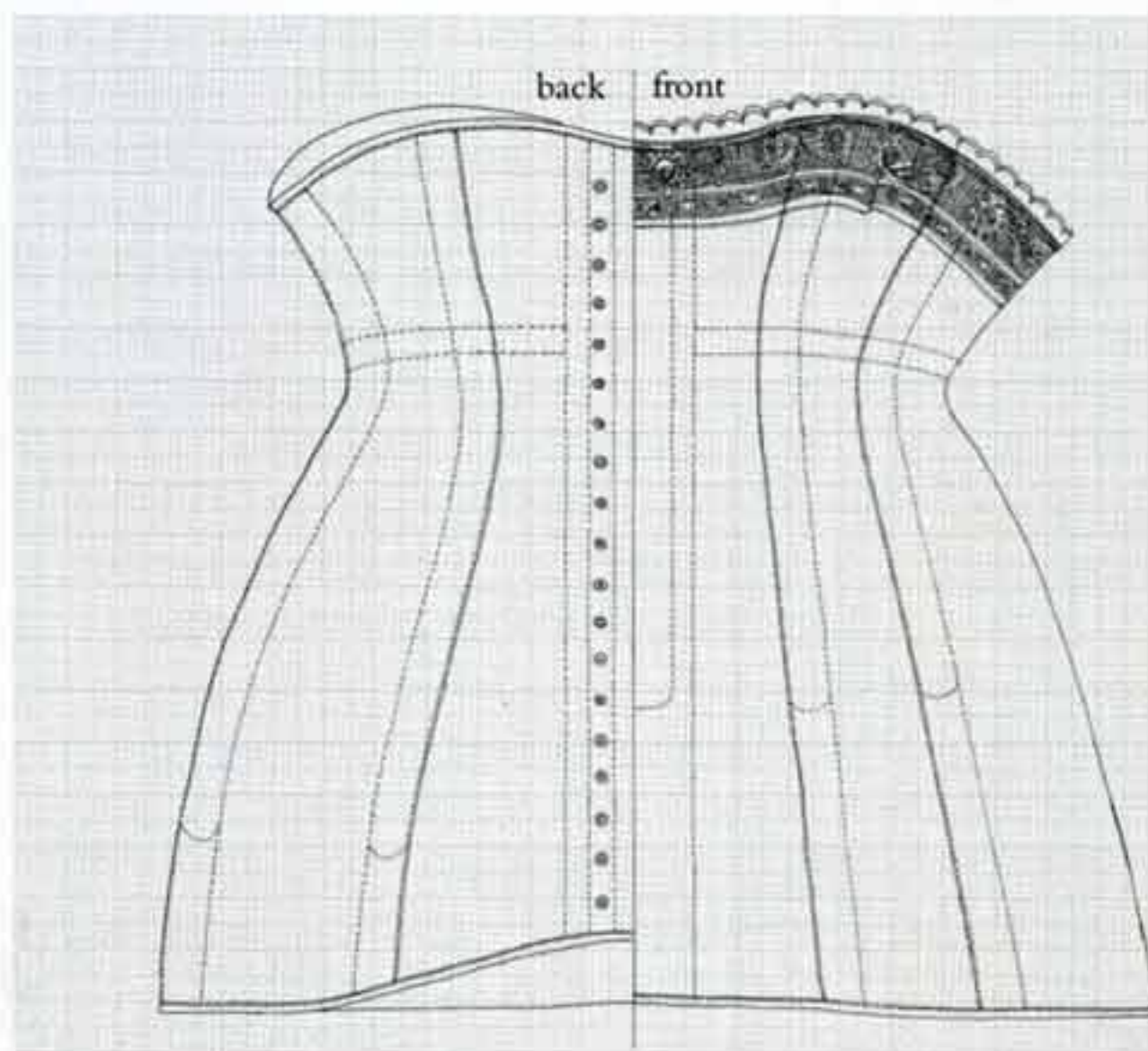
German Ersatz Austerity Corset, 1917

Acute wartime shortages in Germany forced the development of this ersatz fabric. Made from canvas weave, paper twine was processed for rigidity and strength. In 1916 ersatz (substitute) materials were made available for the purchasing public in Germany, a necessity since as a country it had always imported large amounts of wool and cotton; they even created a paper-based thread. Make do and mend was advocated and the pleasing Barnum trimming on this otherwise very austere corset was probably a result of that.

There is a printed mark inside the busk but it is not decipherable. The corset fastens at the front with a straight metal split busk, and at the back it has metal eyelets supported by two $\frac{1}{2}$ in (1.25cm) bones either side. The rest of the boning encased in the corset seams is flat steel. The top edge of the corset is trimmed with barman edging and the bottom edge with $\frac{5}{8}$ in (1.6cm) straight twill tape. It has no suspenders.

During World War I German women were encouraged to be nationalistically minded consumers and not to purchase foreign goods, particularly French goods. Indeed, corsets from Paris were described as 'un-German and dangerous'; they also suggested that French corsetry made German women sick. It was thought unpatriotic to be thinking of French fashion when one could be aiding the cause of the war.

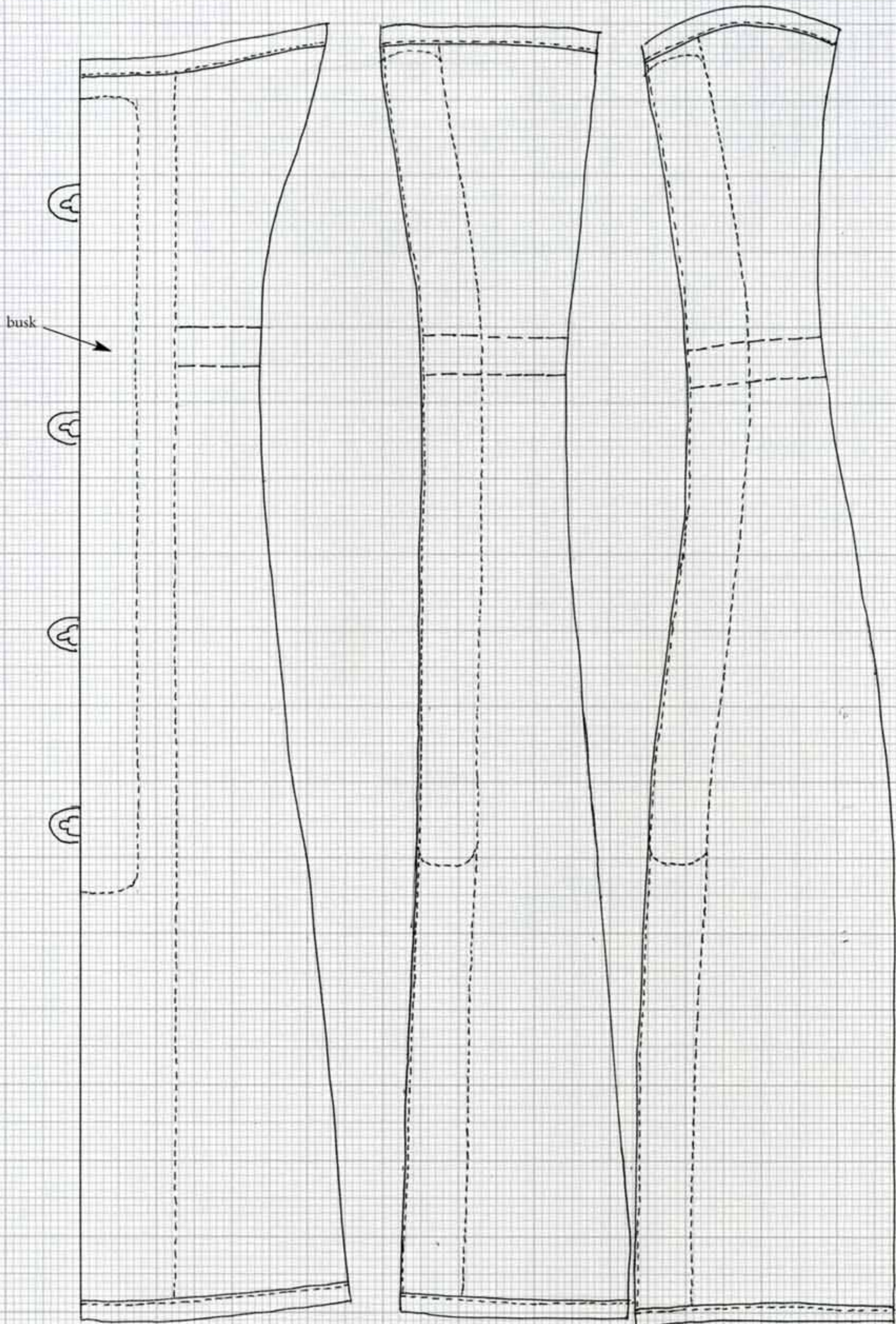
Substitute and synthetic materials were produced in Germany to alleviate the shortages of textiles during World War I but they continued to make these afterwards, especially in the late 1930s when Germany was again preparing for war. It is interesting to consider that even during times of immense hardship it was still important to produce and wear corsets.



Opposite: This 1917 corset is held in the Symington Collection at Leicestershire County Council Museum, UK.

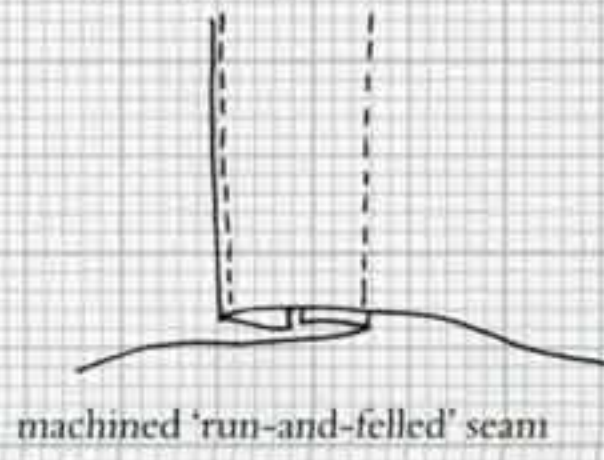
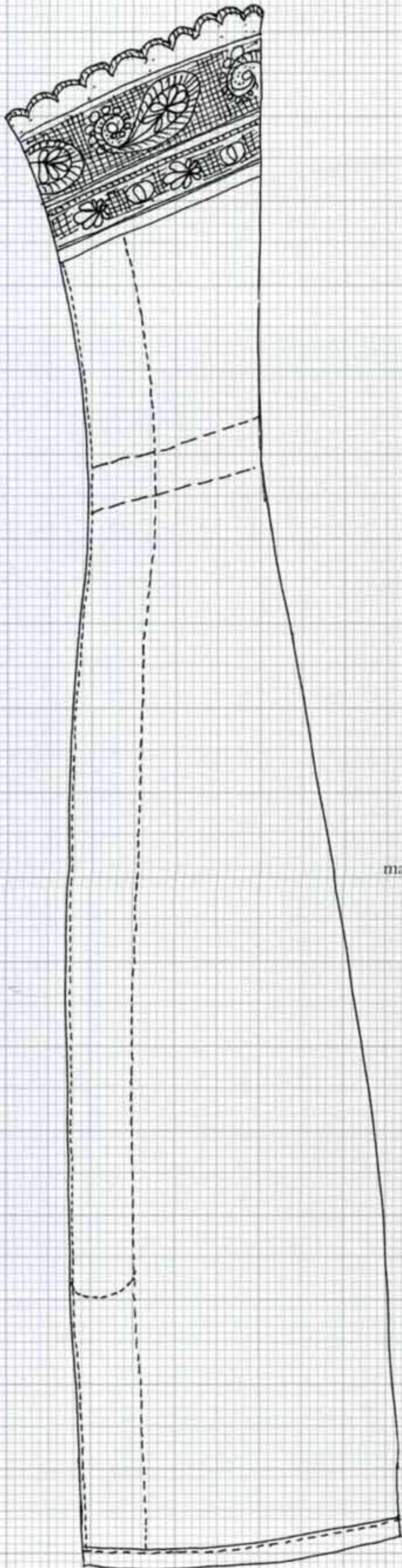
0 1 2 3
Scale (in)

FRONT

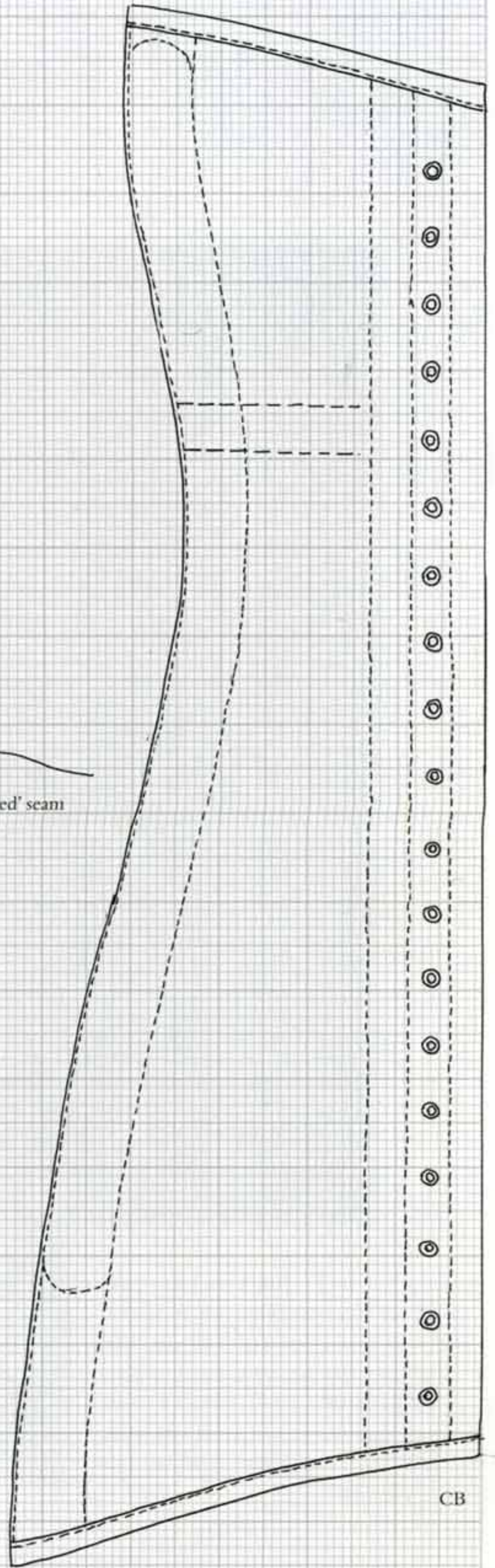


CF

BACK



machined 'run-and-felled' seam



CB



Dolls' Corsets

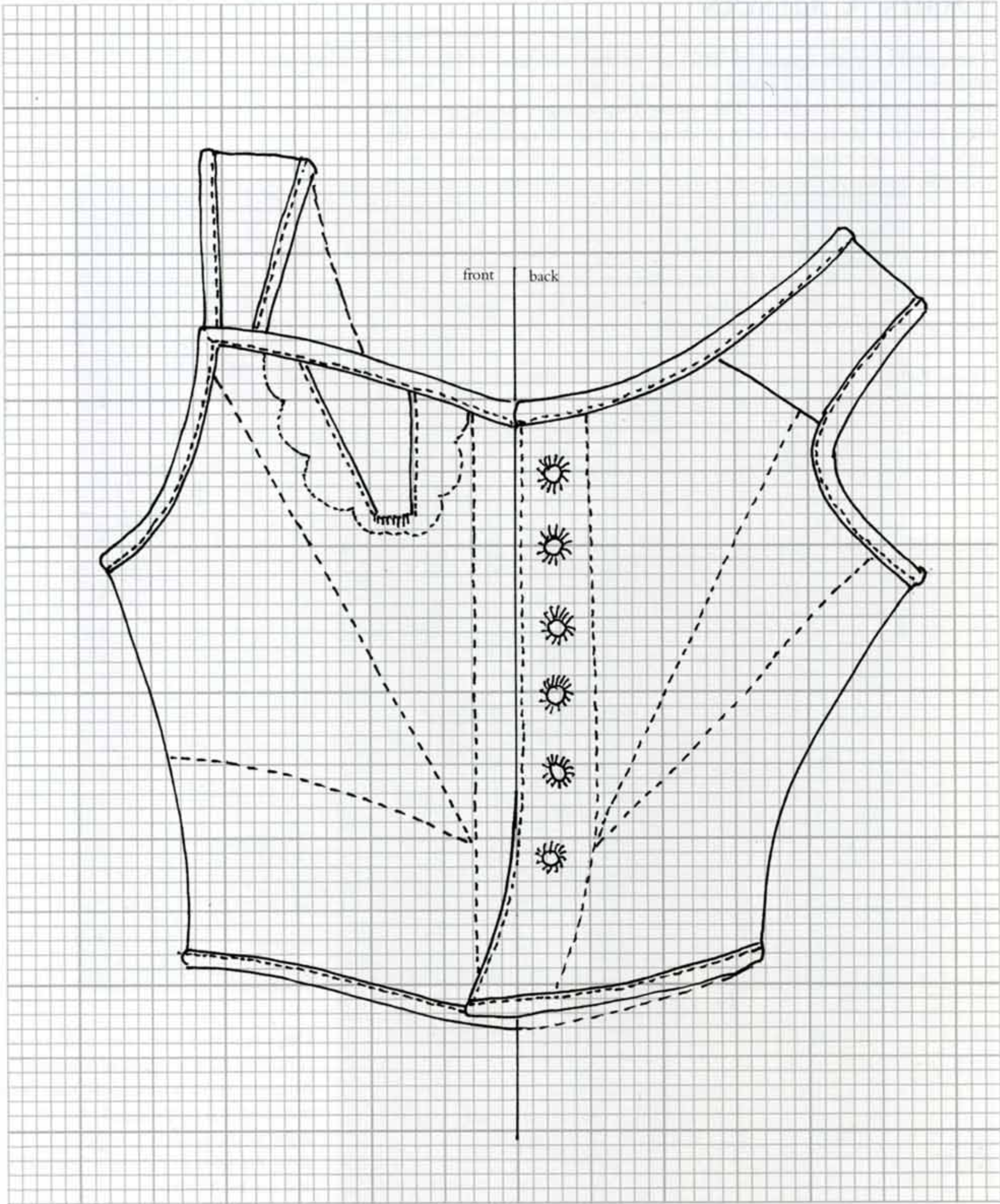
These doll's corsets (pages 94–101) are in the collection of Hereford Museum Services and I could not resist including them. They look deceptively easy to achieve. This white 19th-century example would have taught a young girl how to create a corset: assembling it in the right order, inserting the gussets and hand sewing the eyelets. It is probably based on the type of corset worn in 1820–40.

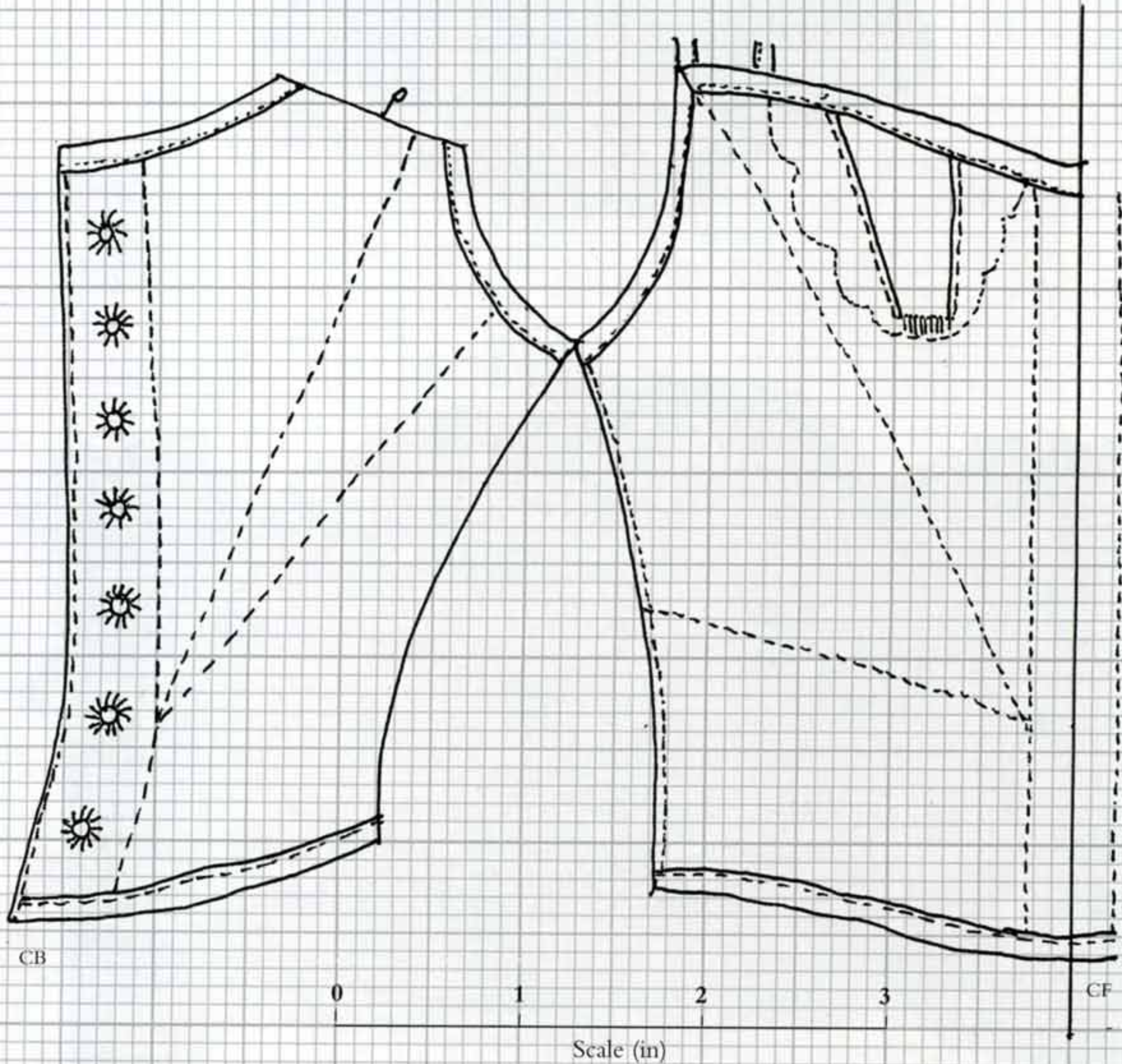
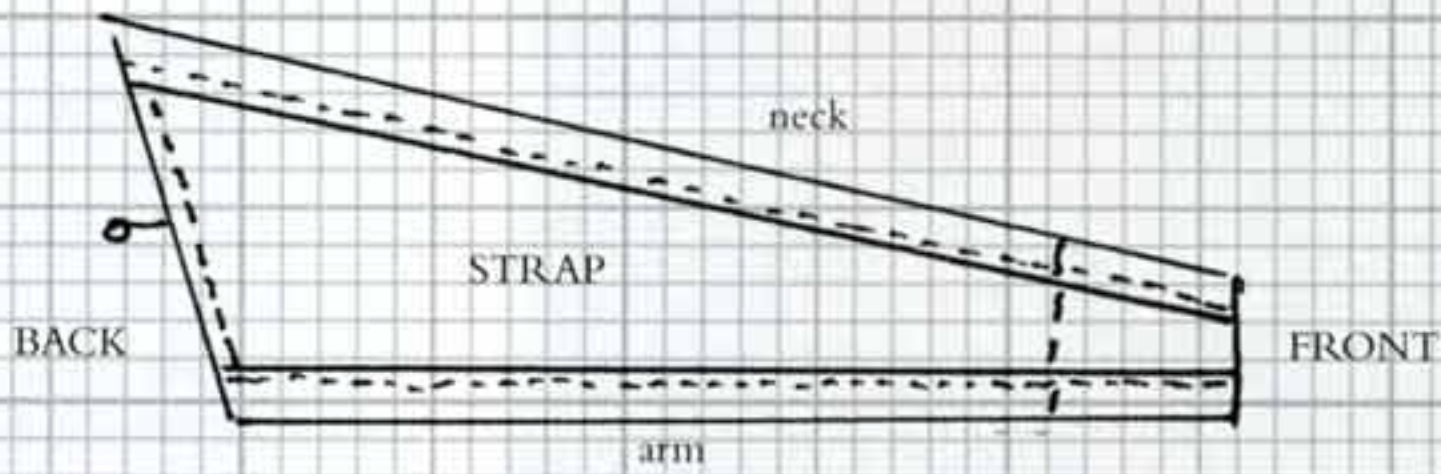
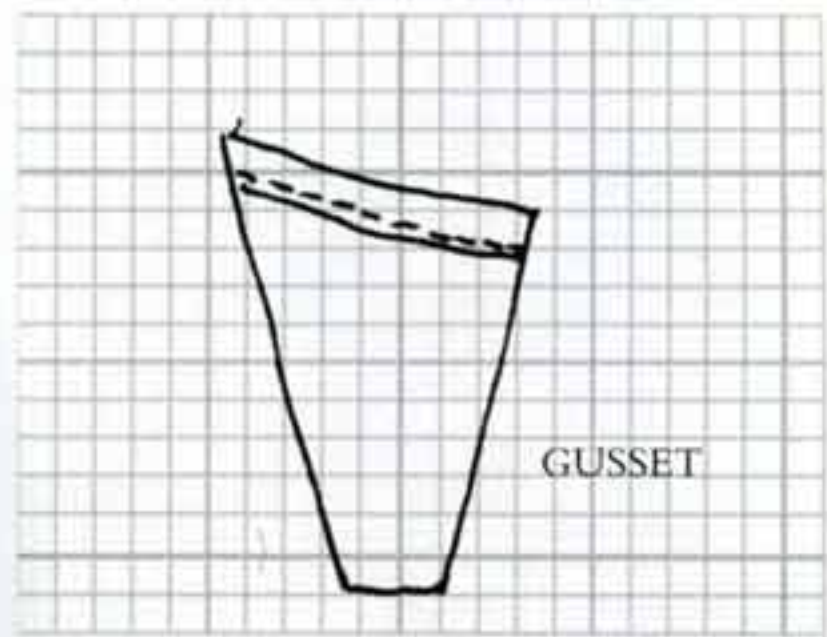
There is thought to be a link between the type of dolls that girls play with and how this affects their perception of themselves and their role in society. The dolls of 1800–50 resembled the girls who played with them; by 1850 the juvenile dolls had been replaced by 'fashion-plate' dolls, which were shapely and corseted.

These 'fashion-plate dolls' were influential in helping the young girls of the time formulate their appearance and behaviour in the future, an interesting thought when we consider how popular Barbie has been over recent decades.



Opposite and left: This doll's corset is held in the collection of Hereford Museum Services and could have been used to teach a young girl how to make a corset. These photographs show the front of the corset (opposite) and the back (left).



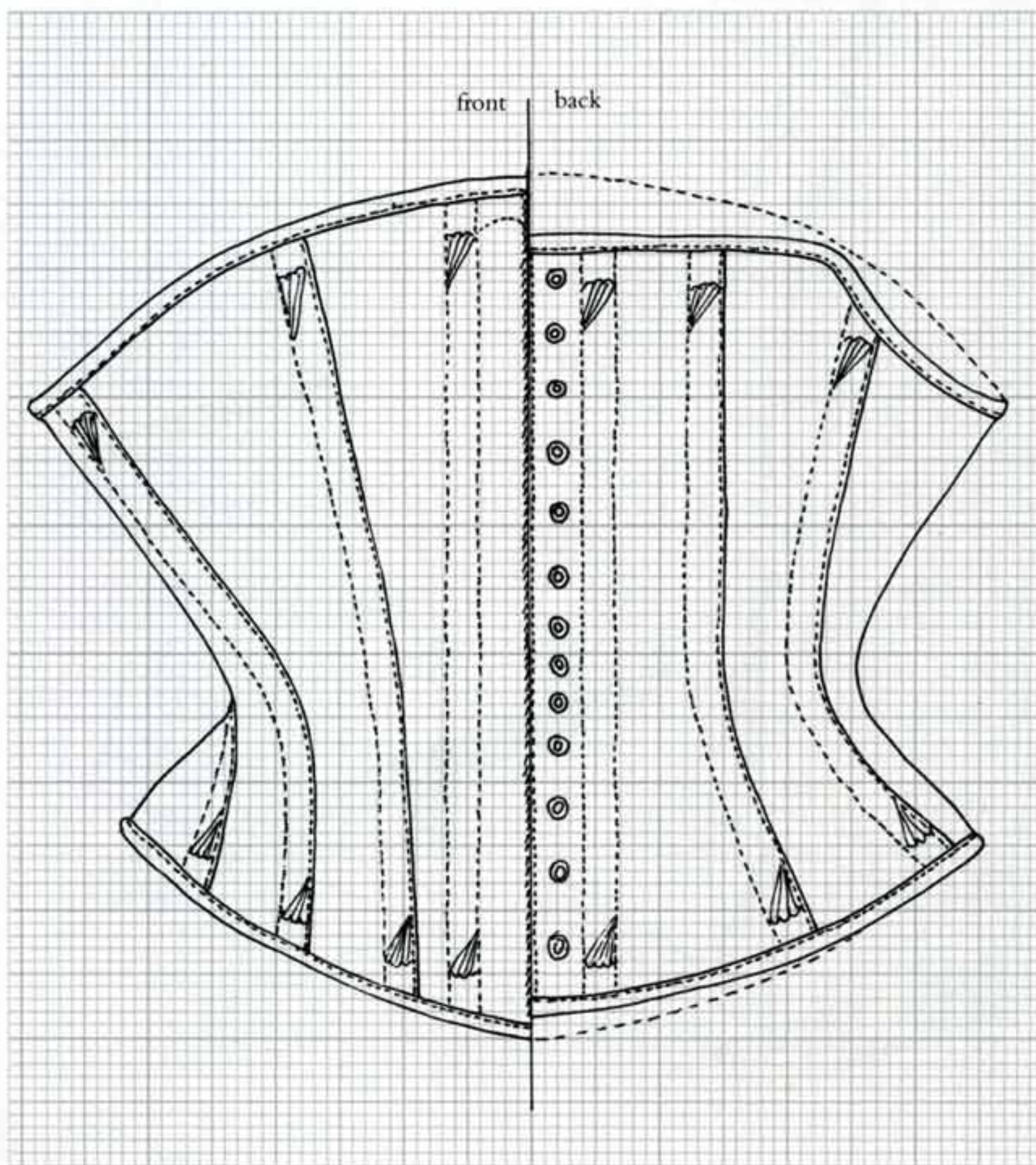




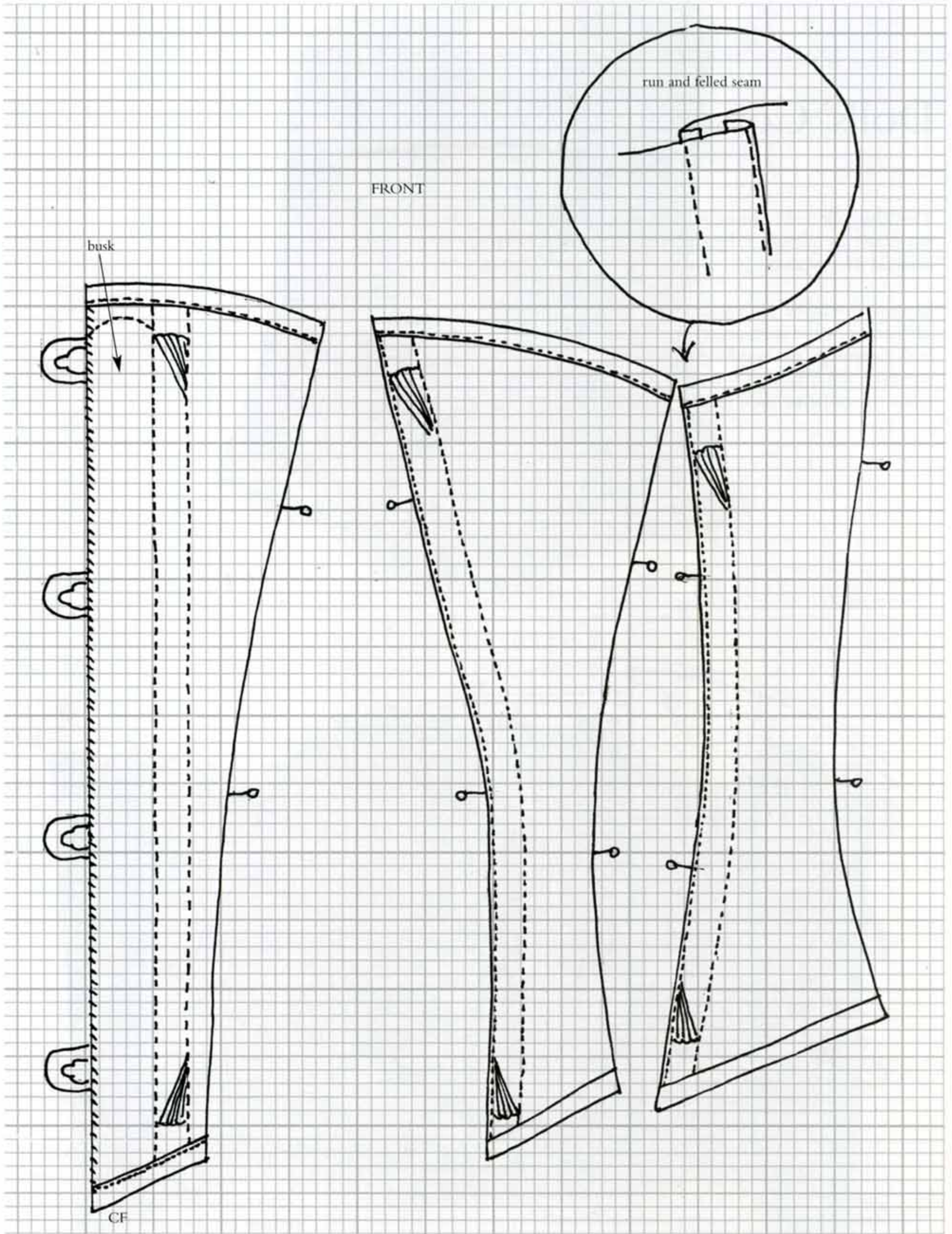
Dolls' Corsets (continued)

This blue silk doll's corset, from the late 19th century, is a corset in miniature; by doubling the measurements it could fit a woman.

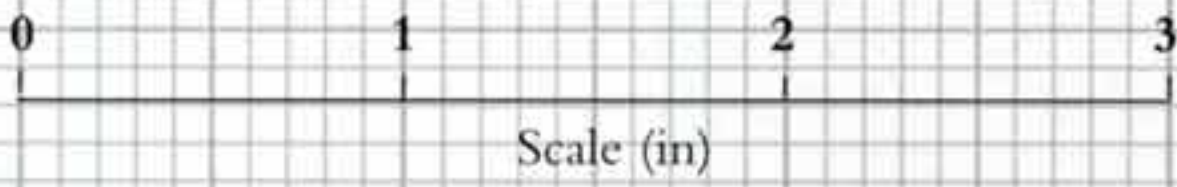
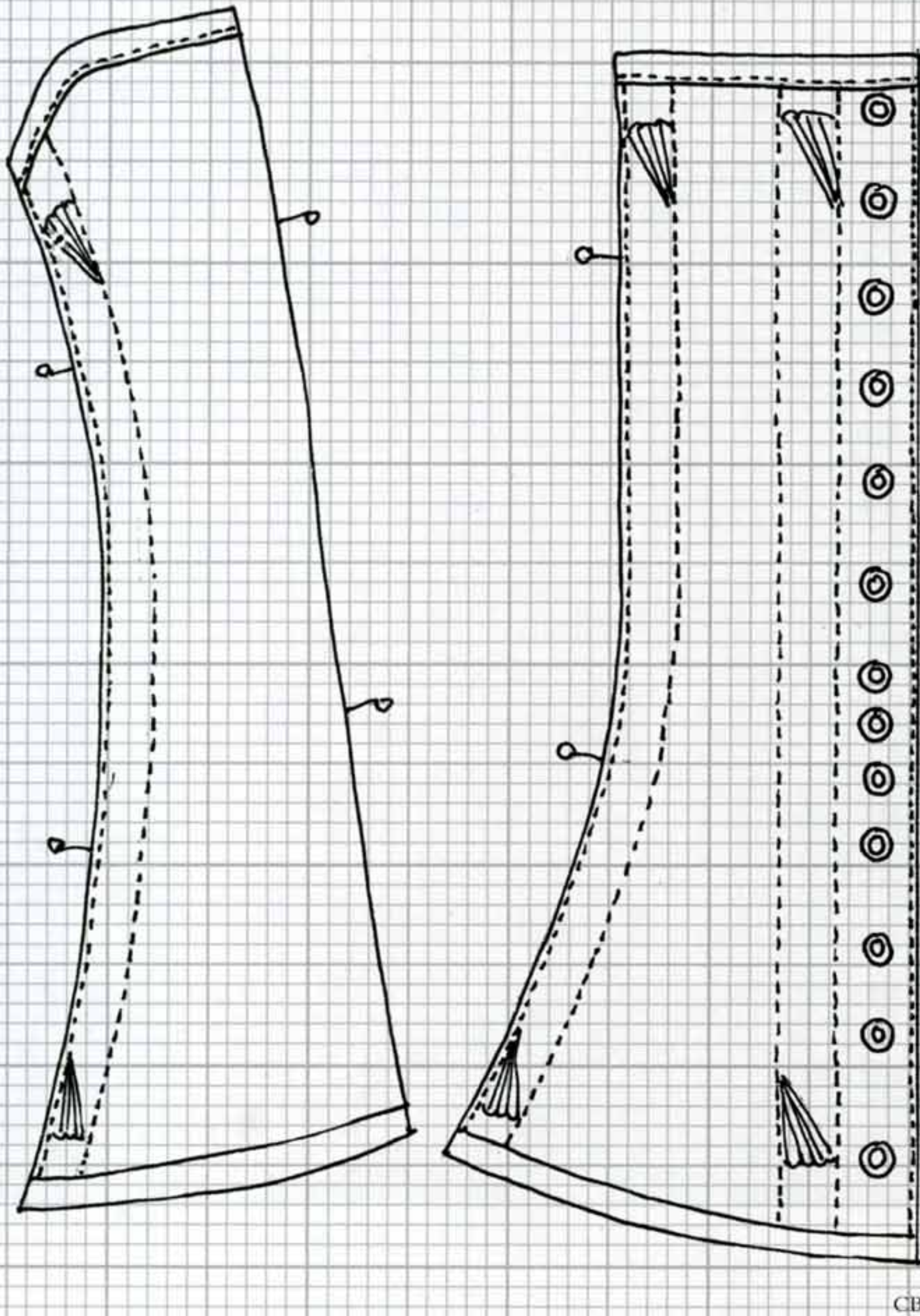
Because the metal eyelets are on the edge of the garment, because it measures in centimetres, and the busk fastenings are evenly spaced, it is almost certainly not from the UK. This is a precise, elegant little item, made by someone used to producing corsets.



Opposite: This doll's corset, held in the collection of Hereford Museum Services, shown closed (top) and opened out (bottom).



BACK





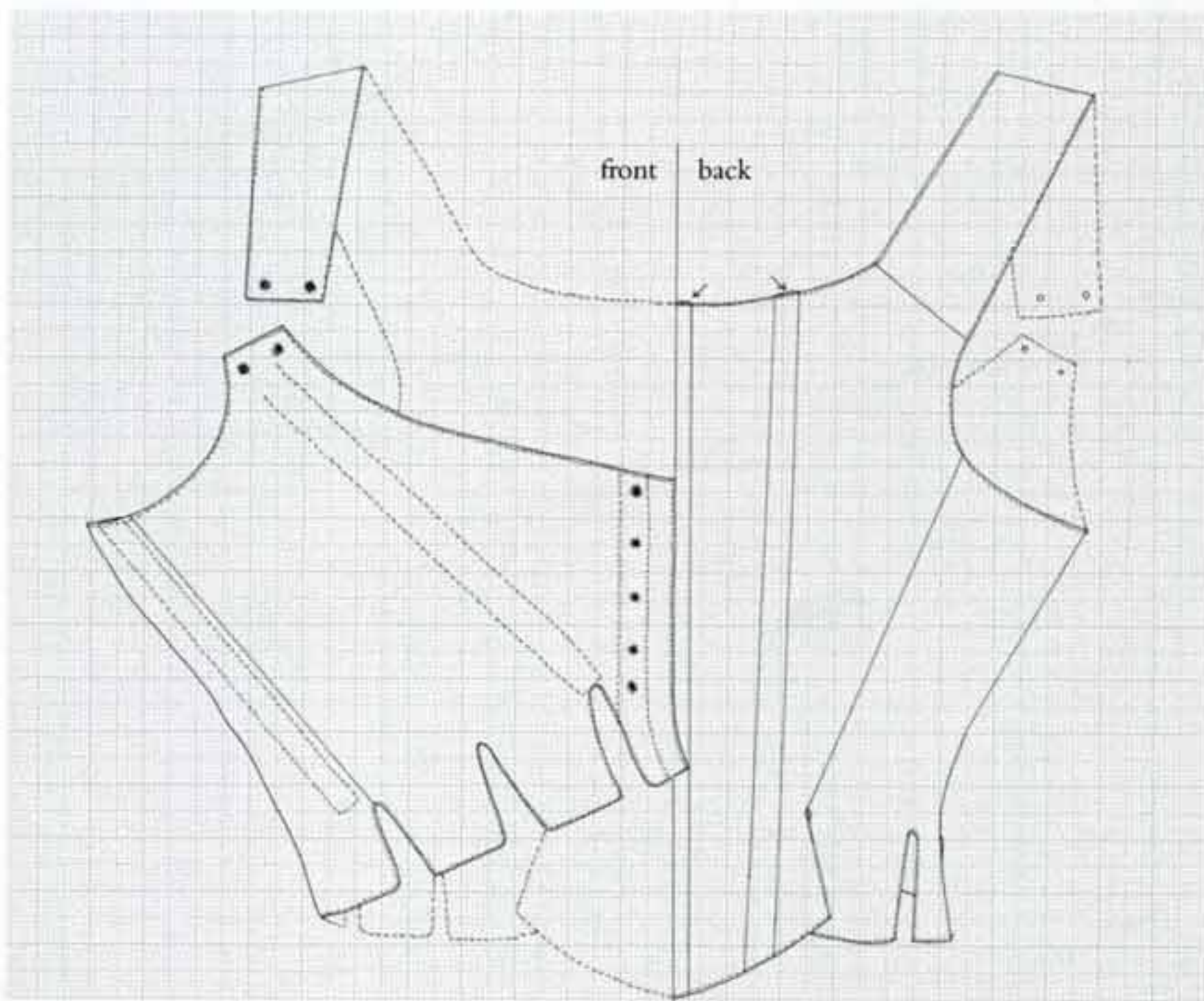
Project: White Linen Jumps, c.1790

Described as white linen jumps dating from the mid to late 18th century, this garment has a delightful shape. Jumps were a less-fitted garment, usually boneless, and they fastened at the front. Aristocratic ladies were known to wear 'jumps' for casual dress and during pregnancy. This is a nicely made garment, and appears to be comfortable to wear.

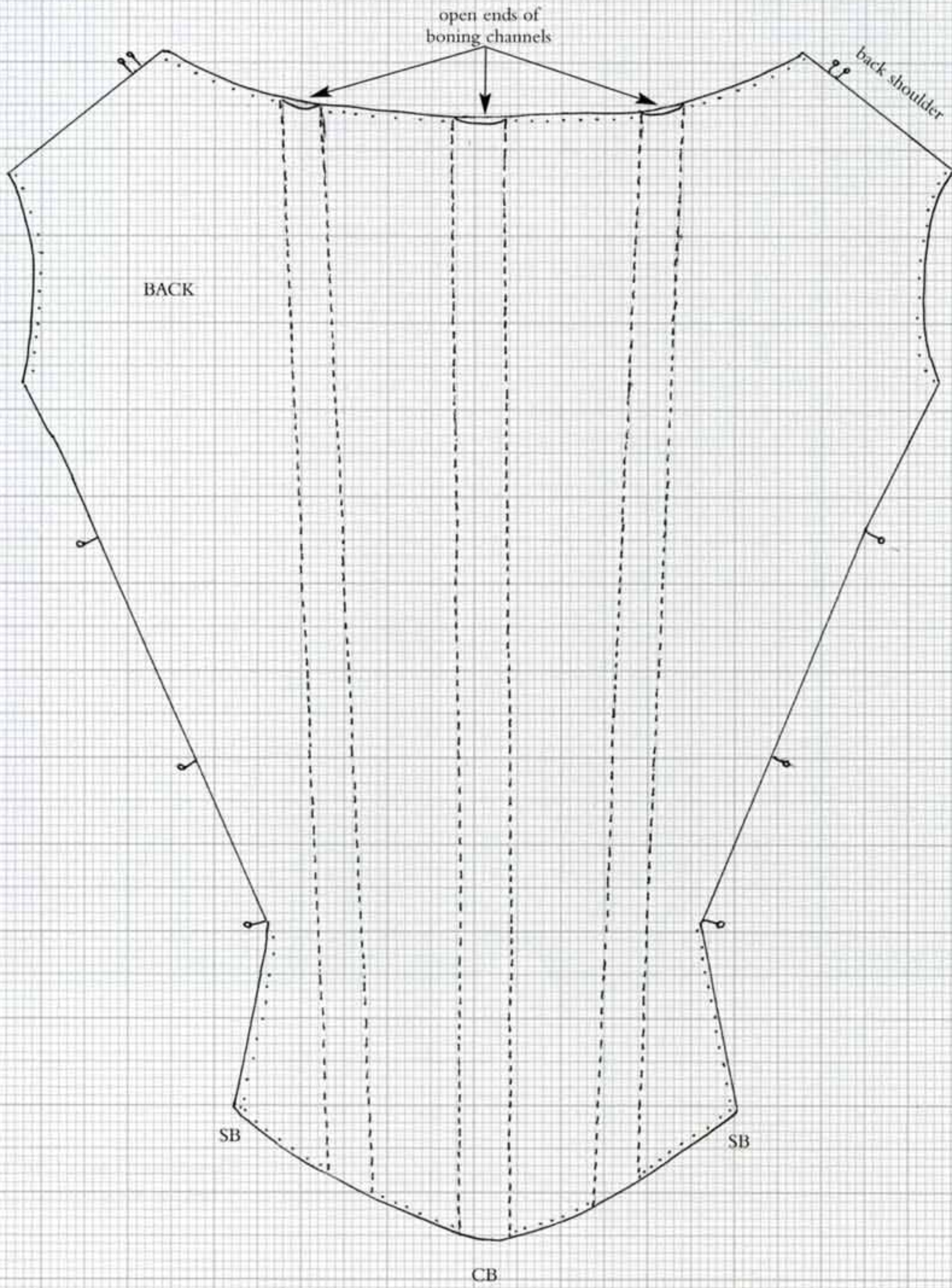
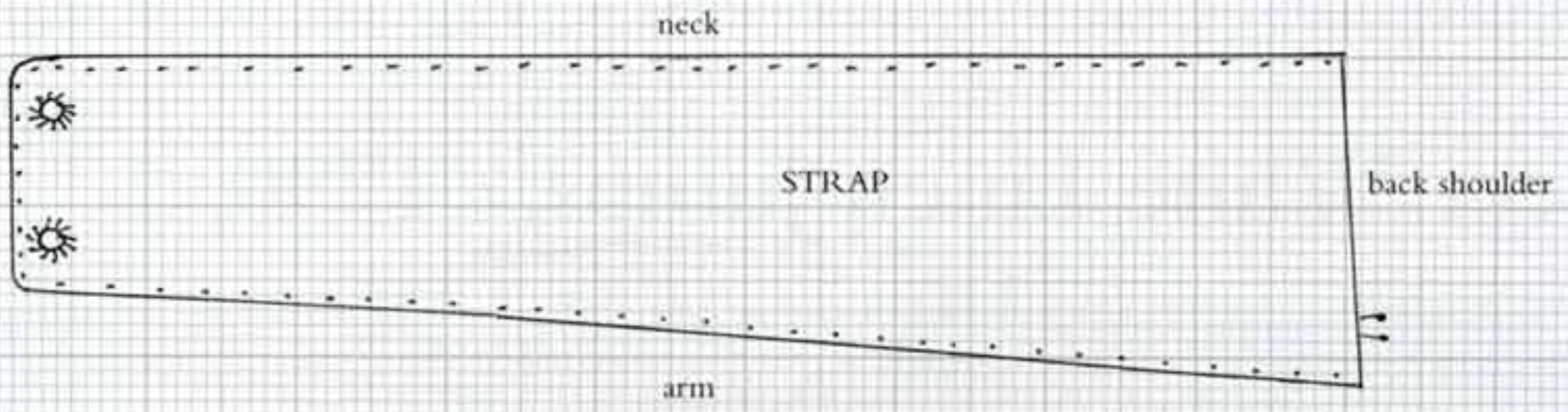
Where the shoulder strap is attached to the back panel there is a machine-stitched alteration. After the seams were stitched, the layers of this garment were laid together and the edges turned in and felled, then the edges were pin stitched or stabbed through to secure the edge, with rows of stab stitching $\frac{1}{4}$ in (6mm) either side of each seam. The boning channels are stitched through all of the layers.

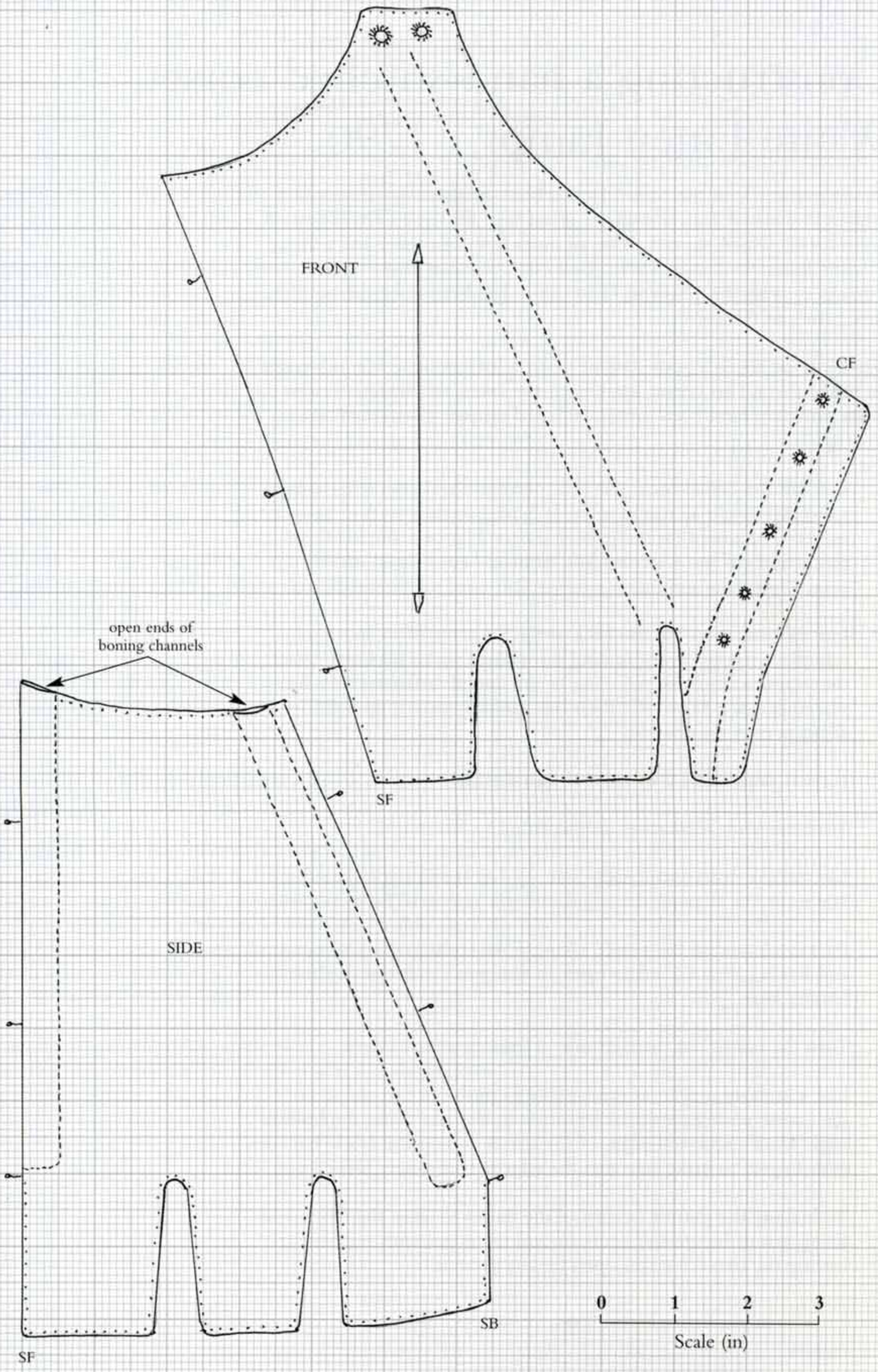
The boning channels on the centre back are open at the top, possibly so the bones could be removed for washing the garment, or for comfort. The boning channels are quite wide, suggesting the bones used could be steels, which would need to be removed to prevent rust marks.

Eyelets at the centre front are slightly displaced as one lace would have been used to close this garment. Darning has taken place at the lower edge of the centre front; the linen was probably under too much strain at this point.



Opposite: This c.1790 corset (jumps) is held at Hereford Museum, UK.





Constructing a hand-stitched corset, White Linen Jumps, c.1790

Almost every one of the corsets in this book has been constructed by a different method. Instructions are given here for the c.1790 Hereford white corset, which appears to be an outer layer of cotton and a lining of white linen; the corset was in good condition, but there were no bones in or with the garment. There was a hand-darned repair on the front panels of the corset.

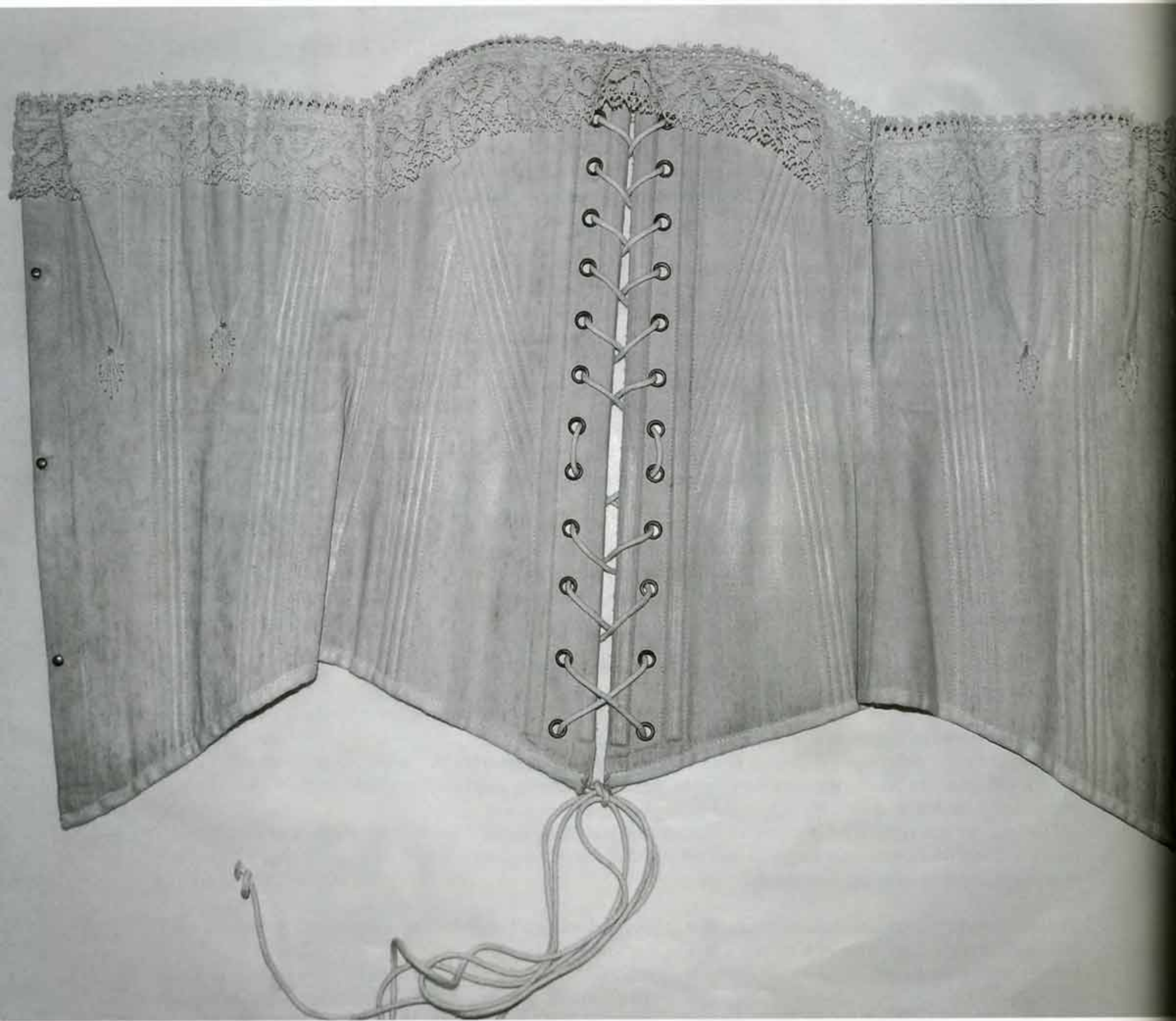
When corsets are in a poor state of repair a lot can be learnt, as we can see inside them. This corset, apart from the darns, was intact, so some of the processes have been presumed based on past experience and observation.

1. Cut out the corset back, one side, one front and one strap, adding seam allowances all round – $\frac{3}{8}$ in (1.5cm) is sufficient. Add balance marks as indicated on the pattern pieces. Flip over the last three pieces and cut out a second side, front and strap, again adding seam allowances and balance marks. You now have seven pieces.
2. Join the side pieces to the back at the SB seam. Now join each side piece to the corresponding front piece at the SF seam. Attach the straps to the back, referring to the double balance marks for placement (see page 115). Press the seams open and trim the seam allowances at the corners.
3. Repeat steps 1 and 2 to cut and join the lining pieces.
4. Trim the seam allowances on the lining to $\frac{1}{4}$ in (6mm).
5. Lay out the main corset, right side up. Lay the lining right side down on top, aligning the edges, and pin and tack (baste) in place.
6. Backstitch around the corset, taking a $\frac{3}{8}$ in (1.5cm) seam allowance, and leaving both CF edges open so that you can insert the front boning later.
7. Turn the corset out through one of the open front edges.
8. Use a knitting needle or similar tool to push out the corners of the corset, paying particular attention to the tabs along the bottom edge. Work round the edges of the corset, rolling the fabric between your fingers to make sure that the edge is completely turned out.
9. Tack along the gutters (seams) of the corset to align the fabric and lining seams. Secure the layers around the edges with stab stitch, leaving the two CF edges open for the present.

10. Now work along the SB, SF and shoulder seams, stab stitching on each side of the seams. Remove the tacking stitches.
11. Tack (baste) where the boning channels will go on all panels, without tacking on the actual channels to avoid getting tacking thread caught in the main stitches.
12. Backstitch the boning channels, adjusting the width to suit the boning you intend to use. (There was no boning in this corset. The channels were left open, which may be because the bones needed to be removed for washing to avoid creating rust marks.) *
13. Stitch the two rows of backstitch on either side of the eyelets at the CF on each front piece.
14. Use a stiletto to create the eyelets at the CF and work each one with whipstitch (see page 117). Make the eyelets for the front shoulder fastening too.
15. Insert the bones at the CF on each front piece, turn in the seam allowances and whipstitch or backstitch the fabric to the lining. Add stab stitching along these edges for consistency. Insert the remaining bones.
16. Add the cord to lace the corset. This would have most likely have been a single lace (see page 115).

**The 'boning' channel on the bias of the front panel is a puzzle because there is no obvious entry point, although there is heavy darning at the lower edge of the channel, where the bones could have been slipped out and the darning done. Alternatively, the boning could have been added before the shoulder seam was stitched and the eyelets worked. Of course, the channel may never have held boning – it could have been used simply to hold the layers together. I am going to presume that no boning was ever inserted.*

This was a simple garment, quickly made. Was it worn to nurse a baby? Was it all that the lady wore as a corset? Or, was it a 'corset' for the hottest days of summer?



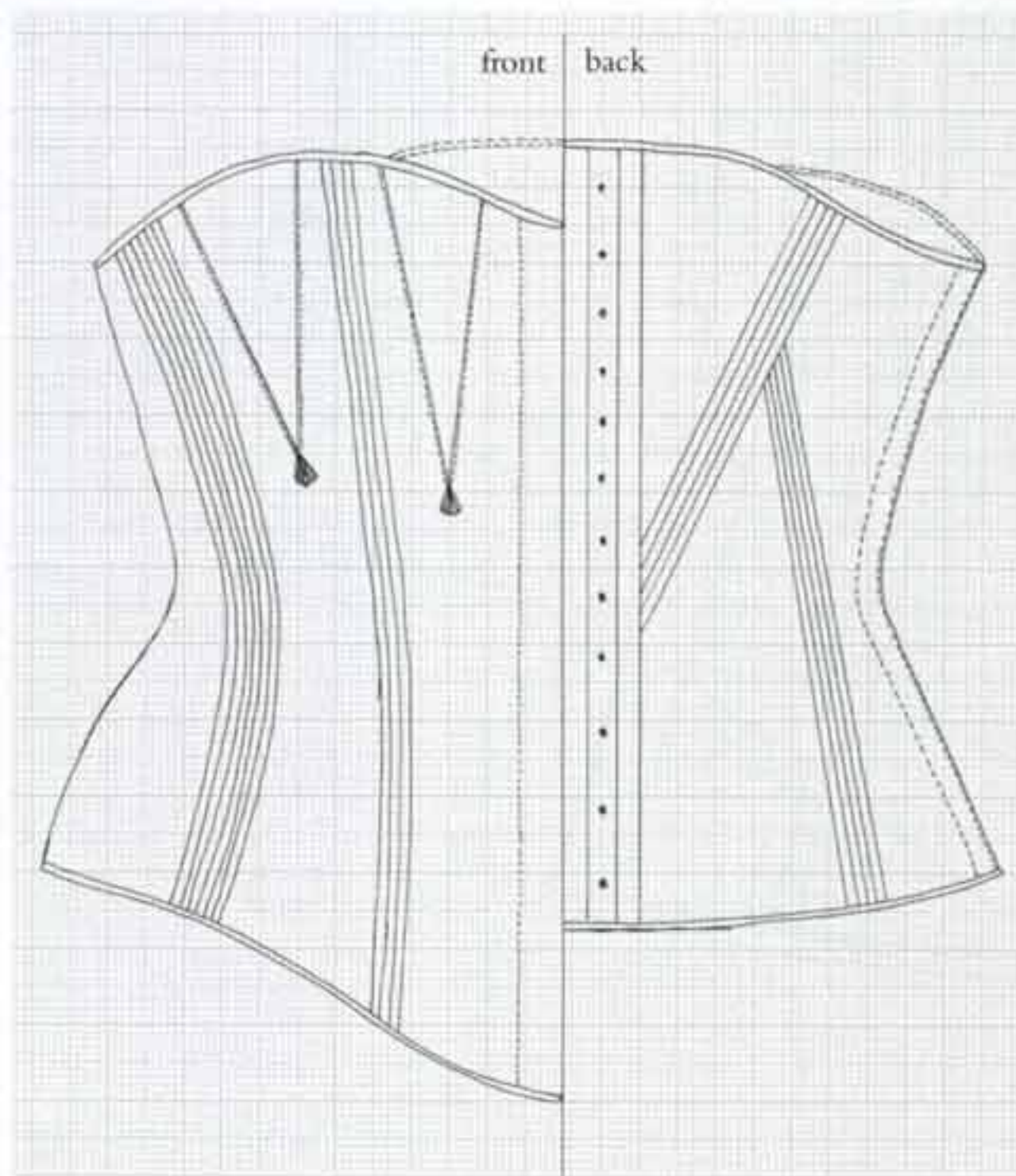
Project: Girl's White Jean Corset, 1900

This is a white jean corset with white flossing and white machine stitching, with bust gussets, cording and a split-metal busk fastening at the centre front. Four steel bones at the centre back support metal eyelets for cross-lacing.

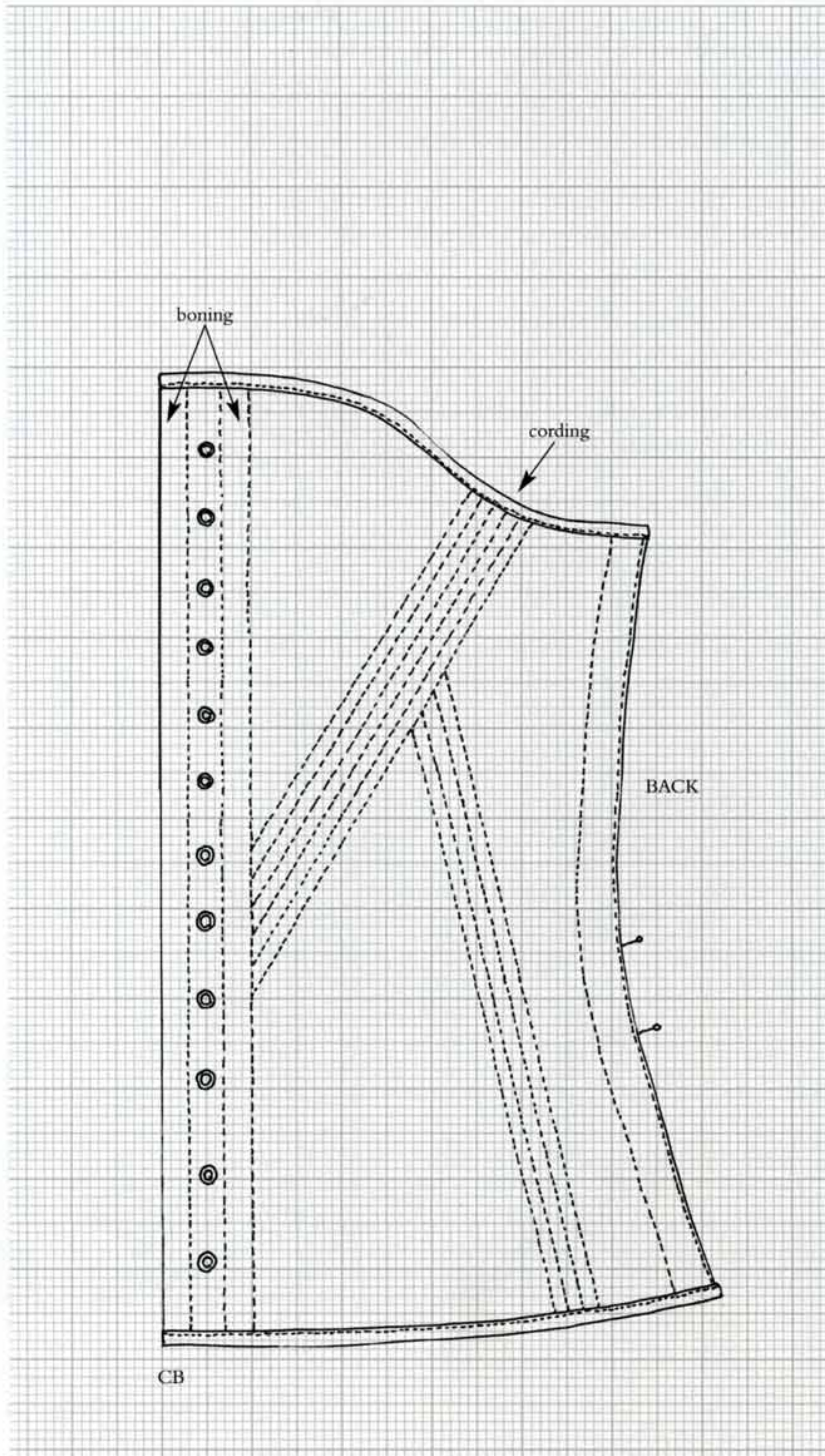
The bust gussets are on the bias of the fabric and the corset is bound top and bottom with a straight cotton twill tape. This corset had never been worn.

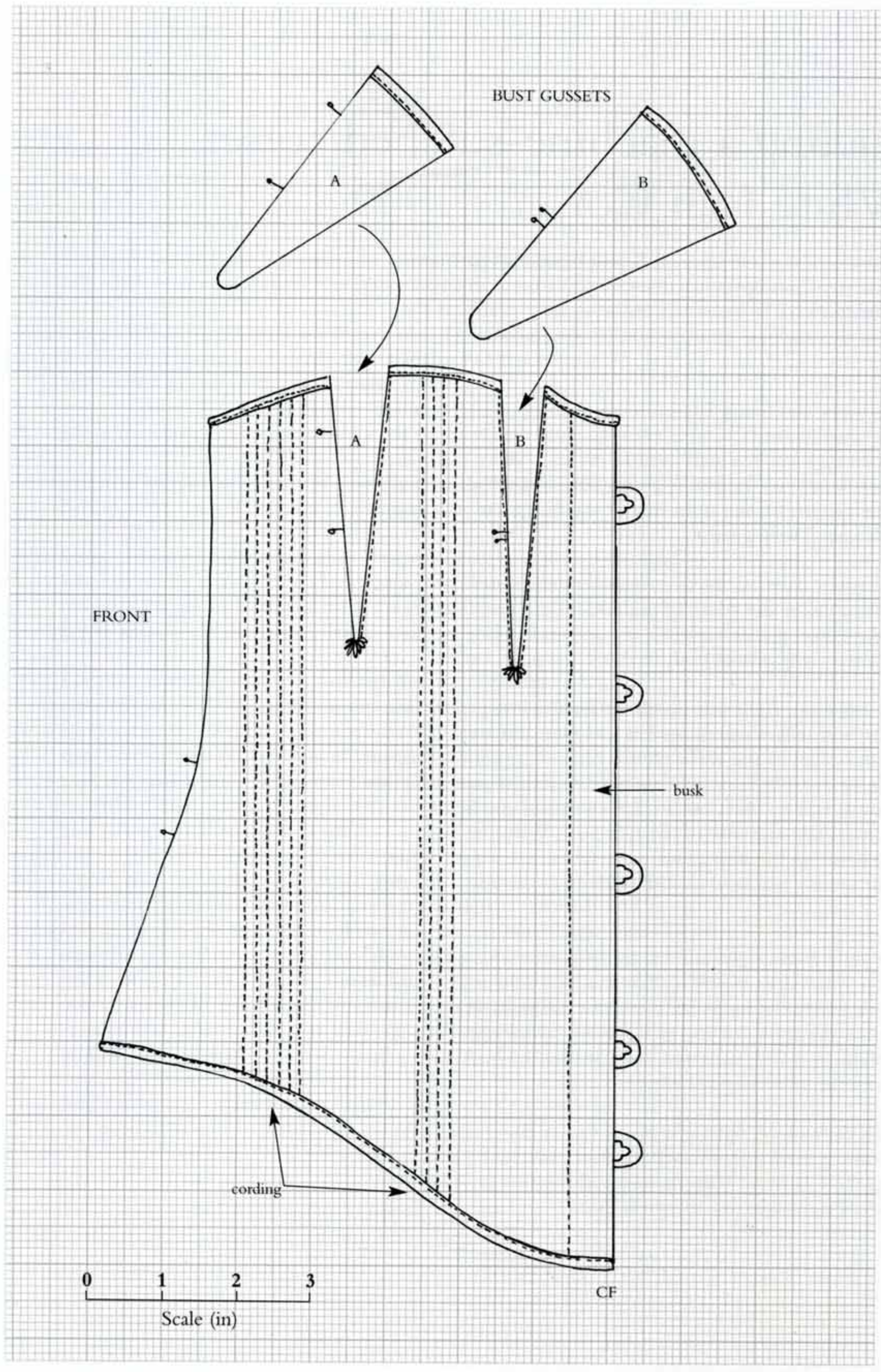
Originally I presumed that this was a traveller's sample, using their shortest split-busk fastening. As it was a simple garment that included a variety of corsetry techniques, I thought this would be a good corset for my students to reconstruct to try out the techniques needed to construct a post-1850s corset. I reconstructed it, my nine-year-old daughter tried it on and it fitted her – she found it comfortable and it refined her non-existent figure, giving it definition. Given that my daughter probably has the build of a 12–14-year-old girl in the 19th century, we decided that it was more likely a young woman's corset rather than a traveller's sample.

At that time girls were corseted from about eight years old, and while we cannot agree with this practice, it was then thought to be right and proper, even necessary.



Opposite: This 1900 corset is held in the collection at Colchester and Ipswich Museum.





Constructing a machine-stitched corset, Girl's White Jean Corset, c.1900

Each corset in this book is made up by different methods and I have decided to include step-by-step instructions for this one, as this corset is quick and straightforward to construct, incorporating nearly all the techniques used in the machine construction of corsets in their simplest form.

1. Cut out the outer and lining fabrics, remembering to add seam allowances – usually $\frac{1}{2}$ in (1.3cm) is enough, with $\frac{3}{4}$ in (2cm) on the side seams (see step 10). You will need to cut each piece once, then flip the patterns and cut the pieces again. Transfer the balance marks and mark the pattern on the right side of the lining for guidance, using an HB pencil very gently.
2. Slash all the gusset darts on the front panels of the outer fabric and the lining. Turn under the edges of the gusset darts and then lay these over the gusset pieces; topstitch the gussets in place on the very edge of the right side of both sections (see page 118).
3. Lay out the left front, right side up, and place the lining right side down on top with edges matching. Pin and then stitch the CF seam. Trim the edges of the seam allowances to $\frac{1}{4}$ in (6mm). Position the stud side of the split busk behind the outer fabric and work out where the studs will go, then use a stiletto to piece the holes (see page 122). Insert the stud side of the split busk. With the busk sandwiched between the lining and outer fabric, use a zip (zipper) foot on your sewing machine to stitch alongside the busk, securing it in place.
4. Lay out the right front, right side up, and place the lining right side down on top with edges matching. Lay the loop side of the busk on top and mark where the loops fall along the CF seam. Remove the busk and stitch the seam, leaving gaps for the busk loops. Turn the pieces right side out and insert the busk. Secure the busk with a line of stitching in the same way as before.
5. Lay out each back piece, right side up, and place the lining right side down on top with edges matching. Join each back piece to its lining along the CB seam. Trim the seam allowances to $\frac{1}{4}$ in (6mm), turn the pieces right side out and press them.

6. Pin or tack (baste) each panel to its lining with right sides out and edges matching to hold the layers together.
7. On each back panel machine three rows of stitching to form the boning channels, adjusting the width to suit the boning you intend to use. Insert the boning.
8. Make the eyelets as explained on page 117.
9. Machine stitch the lines for the cording on the front and back panels.
10. Using a mattress needle or other long, sturdy needle, thread quilting wool or hemp through the channels. Where the cording channels intersect on the back panels, push the needle through the lining fabric and cut off the excess wool.
11. Lay the panels together in pairs with the outer fabrics facing, matching the side seams. Stitch the side seams. To neaten the seam allowances on the lining side, leave the top layer of lining as it is but trim away all the other layers of the seam allowance to $\frac{1}{2}$ in (1.3cm); tuck the wider lining layer over the others and stitch down along the folded edge. From the right side of the corset this seam looks like a boning channel, but it isn't.
12. Check that the centre front and centre back of this corset are level with each other and then trim down to the actual finished level. Use a $\frac{5}{8}$ in (1.6cm) Petersham ribbon or a strong $\frac{1}{2}$ in (1.3cm) twill tape to bind the top and bottom edges of the corset: starting on the inside of the corset, machine the ribbon at the desired level, fold it over to the right side of the corset and machine it again – this ensures that there is only one row of machining visible on the outside of the corset.
13. Add the lacing – this corset would be laced with a double lace (see page 115).

Techniques

Accessing patterns

The scale of these patterns is $\frac{1}{2}$:1in, except the dolls' patterns, which are full sized. All measurements are in inches – these corsets work particularly well with imperial measurements.

The patterns can be accessed by obtaining 1in squared graph paper and plotting the patterns out, or it may be possible to enlarge them on a photocopier.

The patterns have no seam allowances included, as seam allowances will depend on the maker's requirements, so some thought should be given to this before cutting out.

On page 122 instructions are given for inserting a split-busk fastening into a lined corset; the maker may be mounting the outer fabric on coutil then making up the corset as if it only had one layer, in which case extend the CF and CB by $2\frac{1}{2}$ in (63mm), incorporating the facing into the body of the garment.

To learn as much as possible from these patterns:

- 1 First plot a pattern.
- 2 Add on the seam allowances.
- 3 Cut it out of a firm felt/calico and seam it up using a long machine stitch and matching balance points.
- 4 Attach some fake lacing* and any bones that seem crucial to the shape.

**Fake lacing: two 15in (38cm) strips, each comprising eyelets supported by boning, which can be machined into a corset or toile for fitting.*

Next find someone who fits this corset. Observe how it restricts her movement, what it does to her bust and think about the gown that will be worn over it. Then consider how the figure of the person who will wear it differs from the person it actually fits. Very little advice can be given in a book about how to deal with this last step. Look at pictures of the period and decide where it is most appropriate to extend or add in a panel. Points you must address are:

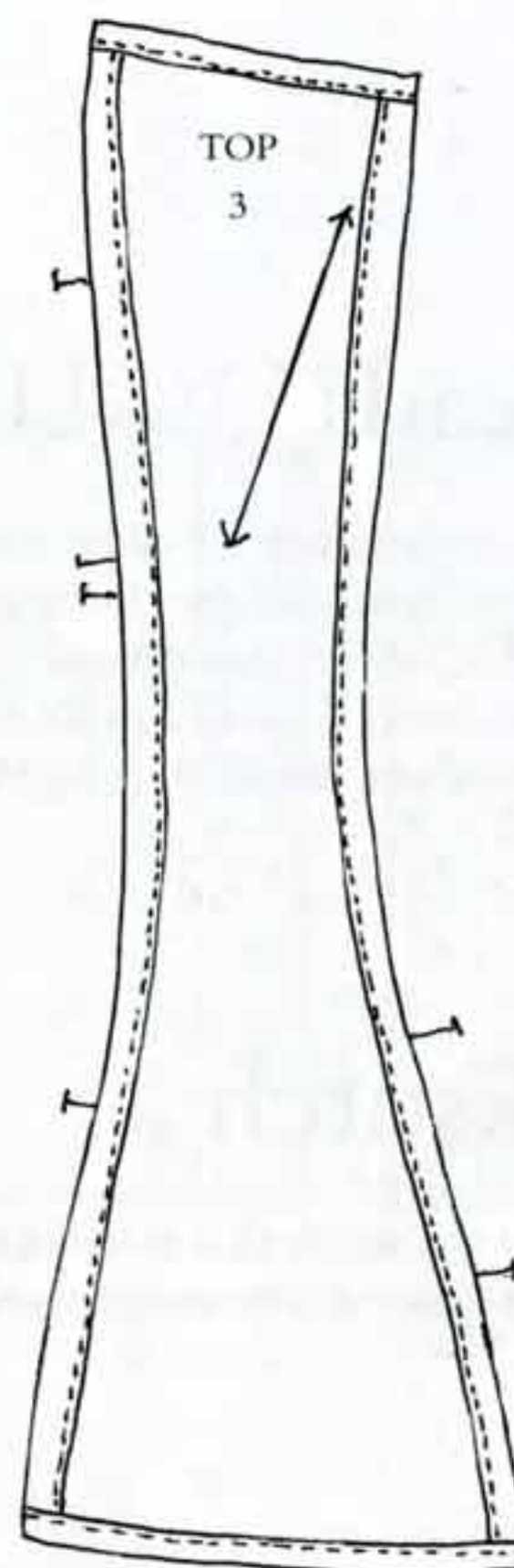
- Does the waist sit where it should for the period?
- Is the neckline correct for the period?
- Does the corset contain the bust, so when gowned a correct silhouette for the period will be achieved?

Balance marks

Balance marks are a guide to where seams should match; they are worth marking on the pattern and then the fabric. When the pattern has been plotted it is also useful to mark the 'top' of each pattern and number each pattern sequentially, as it is all too easy to get the panels in the wrong order or even upside down.

Grain

Most patterns are drawn with the vertical lines of the graph paper echoing the direction of the grain on the corset. Occasionally the patterns do not fit on the page – on those pattern pieces the correct grain is marked with a double pointed arrow (see right).



Lacing

All the corsets from c.1750 to c.1860 are single laced (figure 1). Corsets outside this period have a split-busk fastening at the CF and they have a double-laced back (figure 2) to allow the wearer of the corset to put on the garment herself, fasten the split busk at the front, then get hold of the laces at the CB to draw them in, and then tie them in a bow.

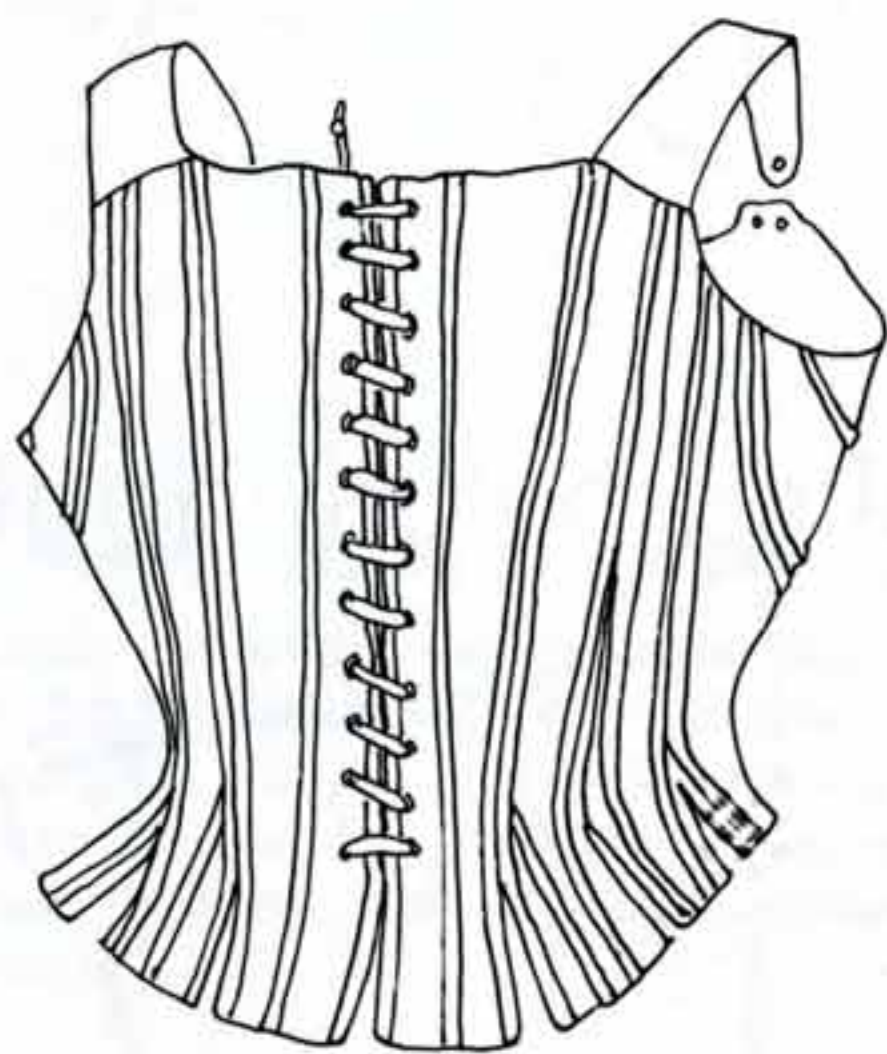


Figure 1: Single-laced corset.

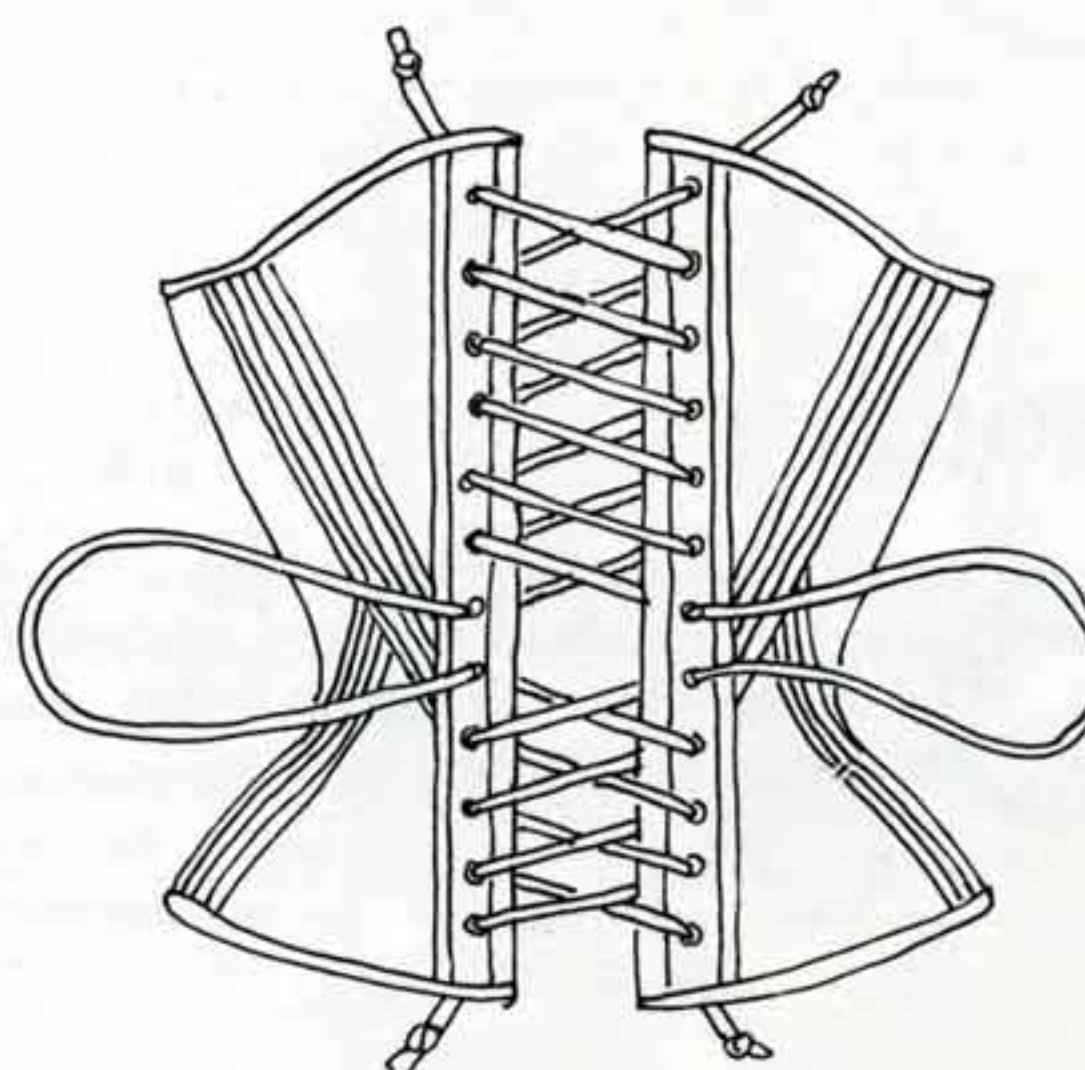


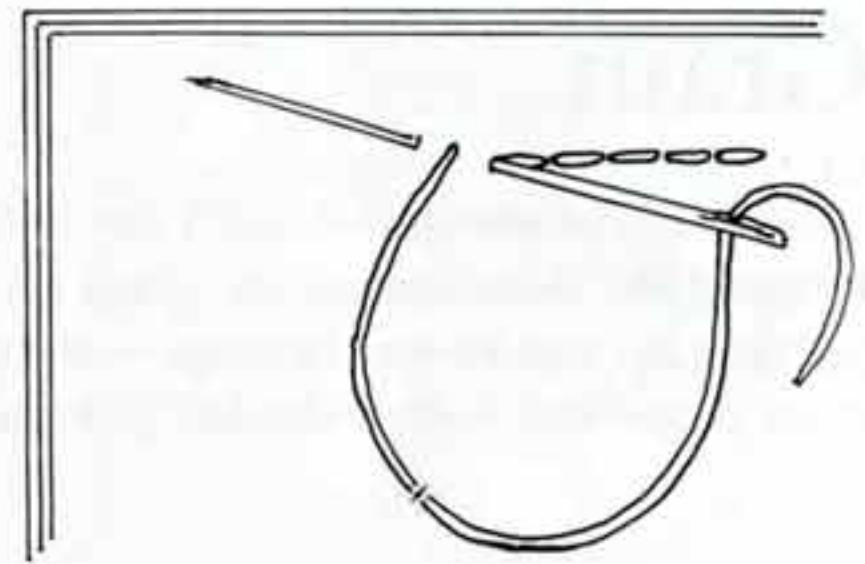
Figure 2: Double-laced corset.

Threads

When reconstruction for older corsets is being undertaken, linen thread is the most suitable, but a general rule is to use synthetic threads for synthetic fabrics and natural threads for natural fabrics, such as silk, cotton and linen. Thread can be improved for sewing by waxing it (drawing the cut thread over beeswax) before using it.

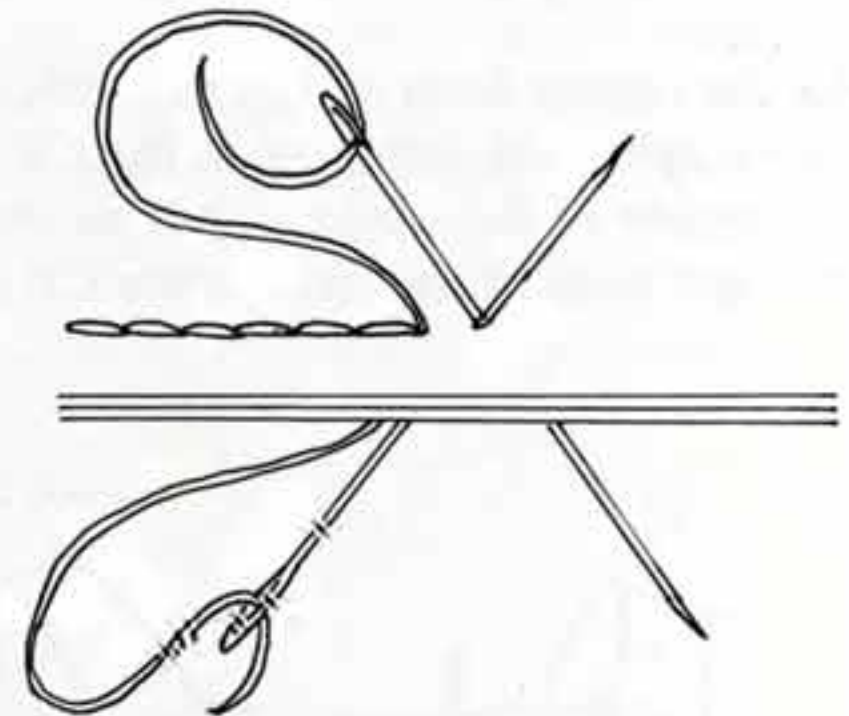
Backstitch

Backstitch is a stitch that is quickly executed, with an easy rhythm. It is made easier if the seamstress wears a thimble.



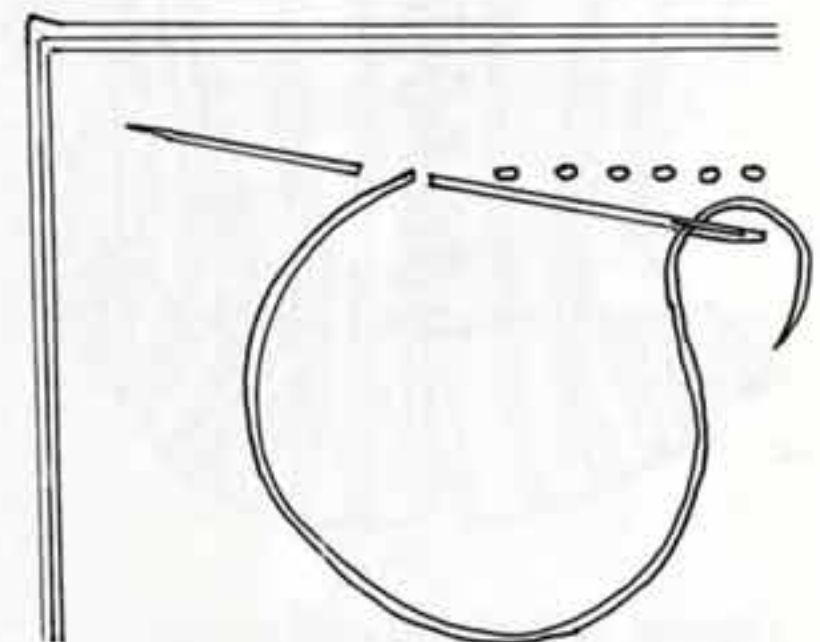
Saddle stitch

Many of the early corsets appear to have been saddle stitched; this is a strong stitch, which probably came from leather working. Using two threaded needles at once, pushing through the two or more layers of fabric, alternately, ensures that one thread goes through the other one and locks the threads together, preventing them from running.



Stab stitch

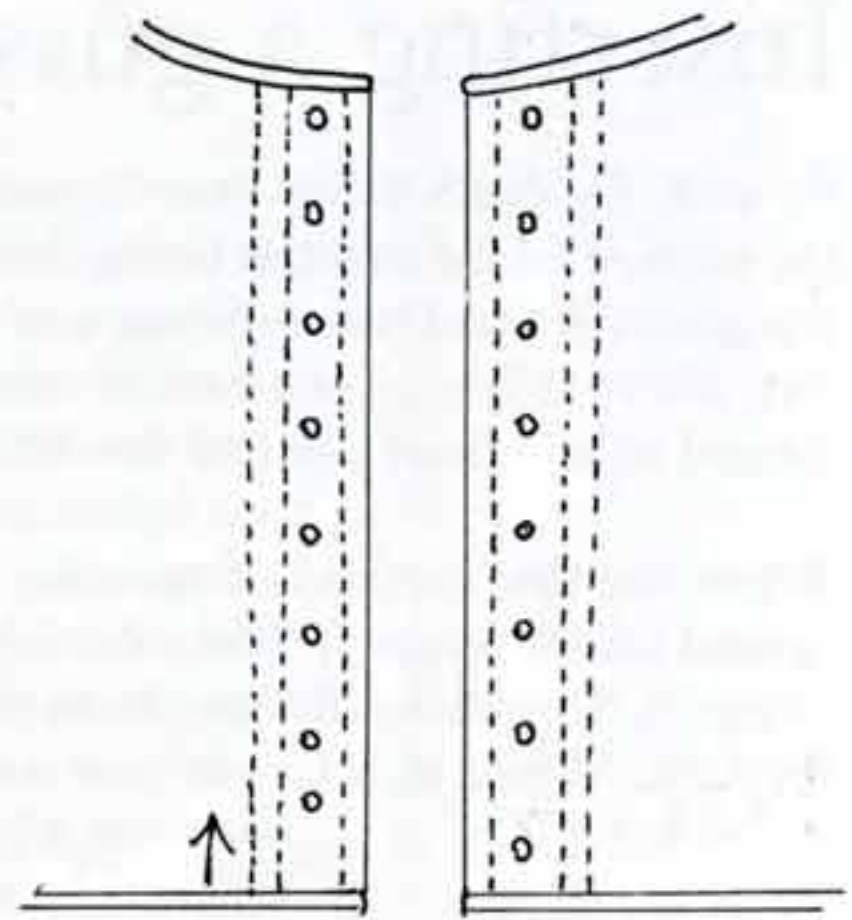
Stab stitch is the same as backstitching, but the stitch that is visible on the surface is the size of a pinhead and these stitches have spaces between them. Used on the edges of garments to hold the layers in place, it is both a decorative and practical stitch.



Worked eyelets

Eyelets are usually positioned between two bones, but they can be on the edge of the corset. They are usually executed when the garment is finished. There is the same number of eyelets on both sides of the corset, but they are usually 'displaced'. This means that, instead of the eyelets all lining up with their opposite hole, one of the top or bottom eyelets is not in line. The theory is that, when laced, the corset will lie together evenly. With some corsets, however, there is no displacement and those corsets lie evenly. If there is displacement on the original corset, you are recommended to follow that displacement as the original maker probably knew best.

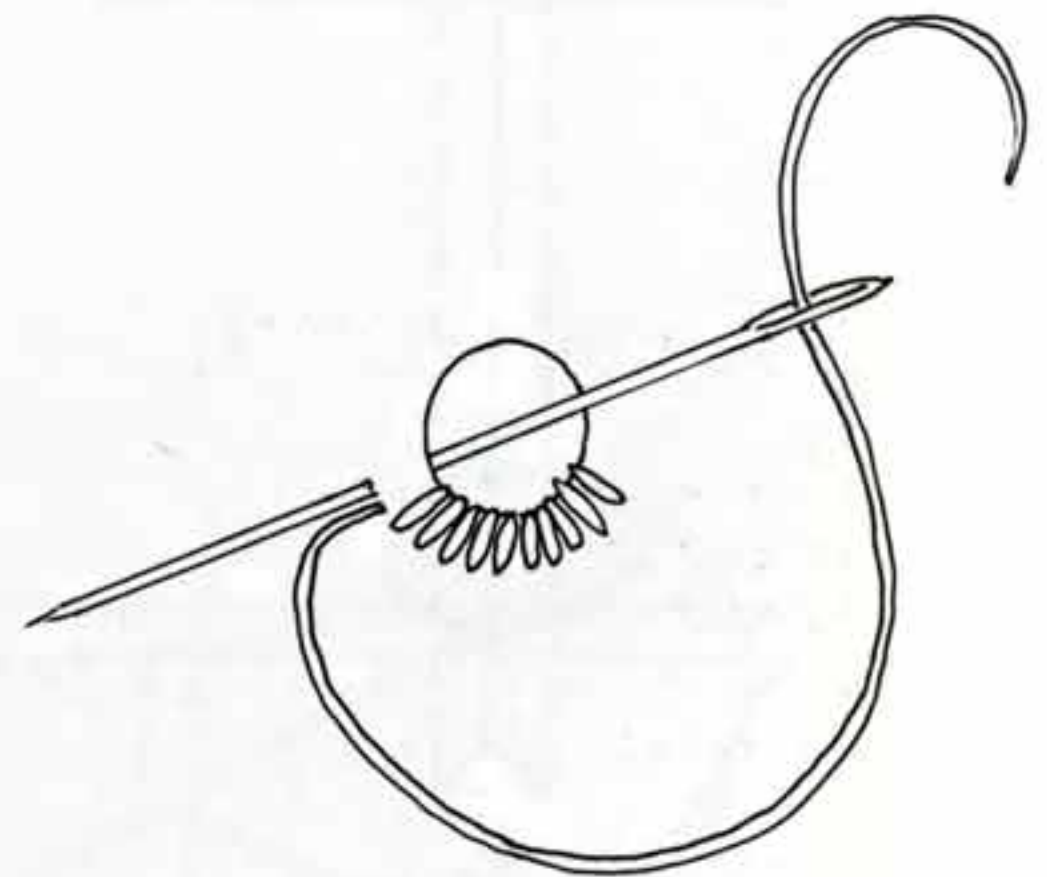
Worked eyelet holes are also used to tie shoulder straps to the corset and sometimes to join on petticoats.



Whipped eyelets

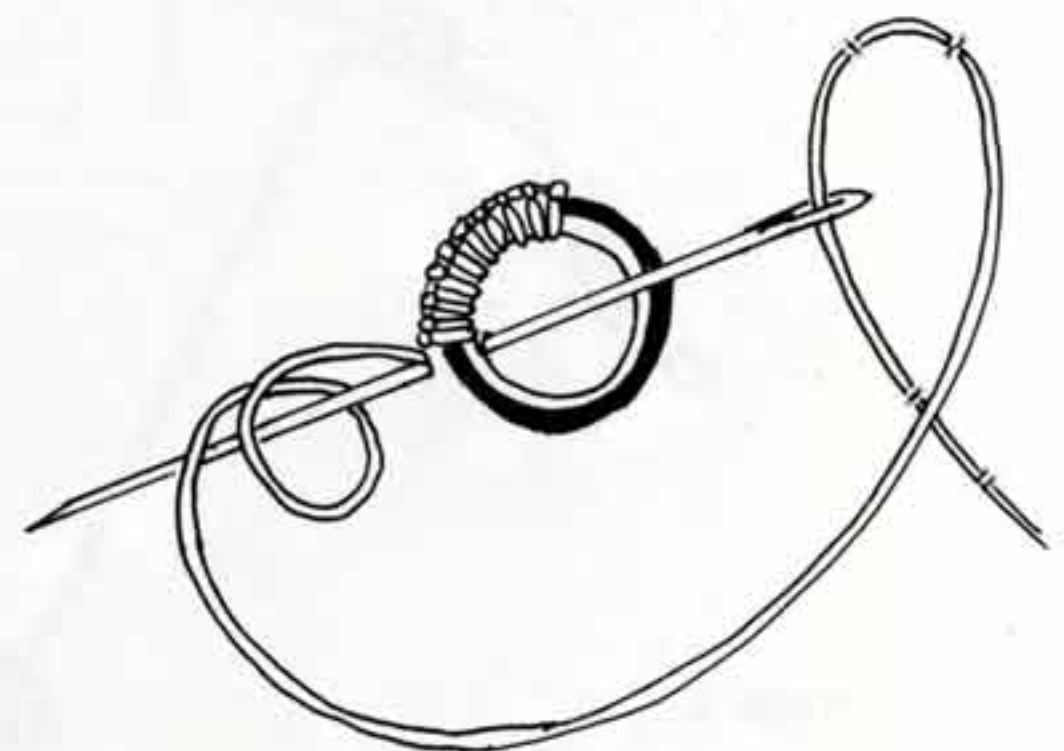
To create a hand-worked eyelet, first use a stiletto or awl to push a hole through all the layers of fabric. A stiletto or awl is ideal, but anything that can prise the threads of the garment apart without breaking them is suitable. A stiletto was designed for this action and examples can still be found in antique shops or markets, but be careful to buy one with a perfect point. You can also buy new ones in specialist shops.

Once the hole has been created, use a single waxed thread to oversew or whip the edges tightly – practice makes perfect.



Buttonholed eyelets

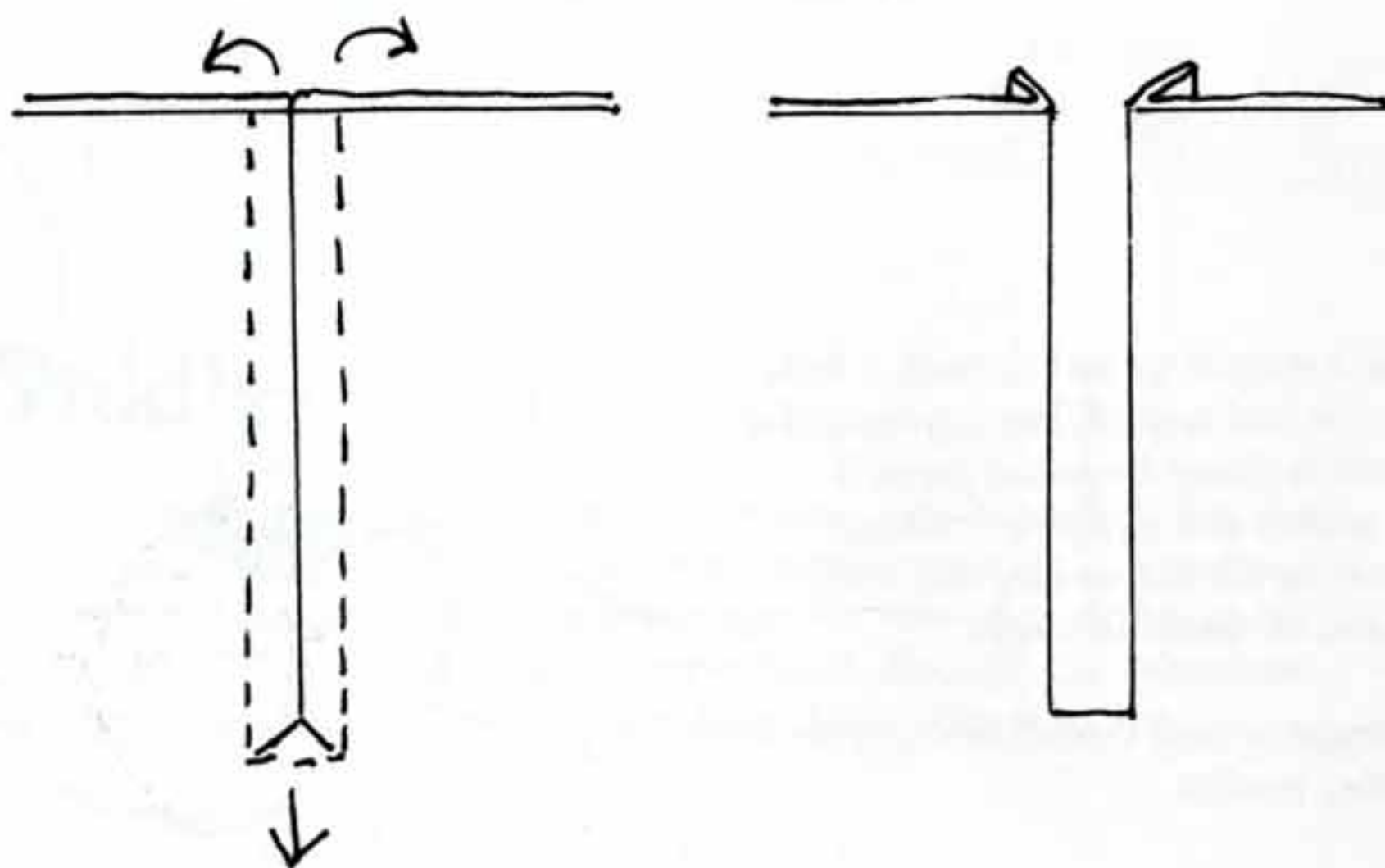
Occasionally a small metal or bone ring is used to strengthen the hole, which is then buttonhole stitched rather than whip stitched. The c.1598 corset pattern in Janet Arnold's *Patterns of Fashion* is executed this way (see Further Reading, page 124). None of the hand-stitched corsets illustrated in this book had metal or other rings strengthening the eyelet hole.



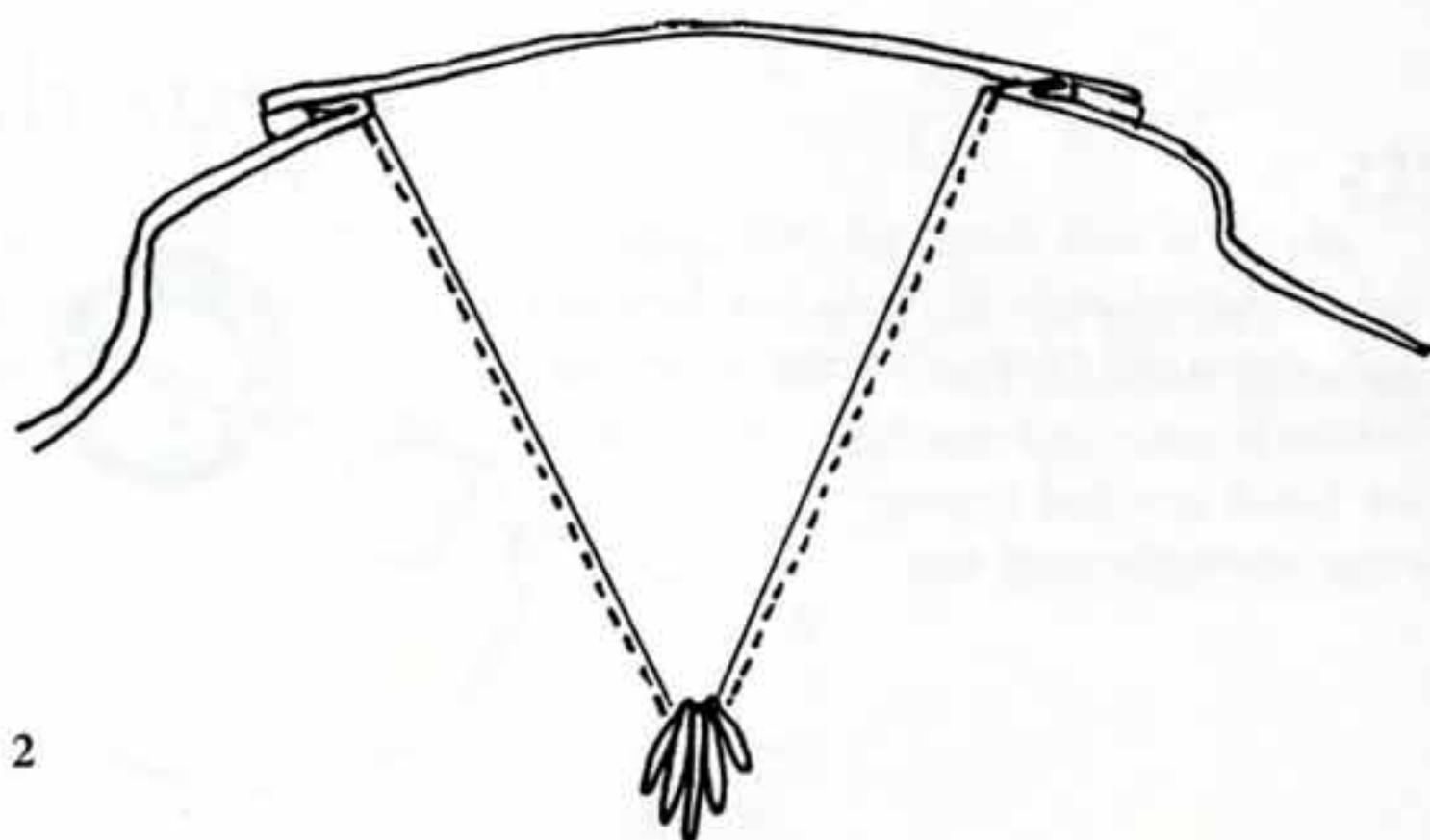
Inserting a gusset

As with the Girl's White Jean Corset project (see page 108), the gusset is usually inserted in the surface fabric and the lining fabric before they are sandwiched together. In some cases the gusset is lined before being inserted, as in the 1830–40 Rural Corded Corset (see page 34), where it was inserted in the outer fabric, then the lining of the body of the corset was turned in and hand stitched down.

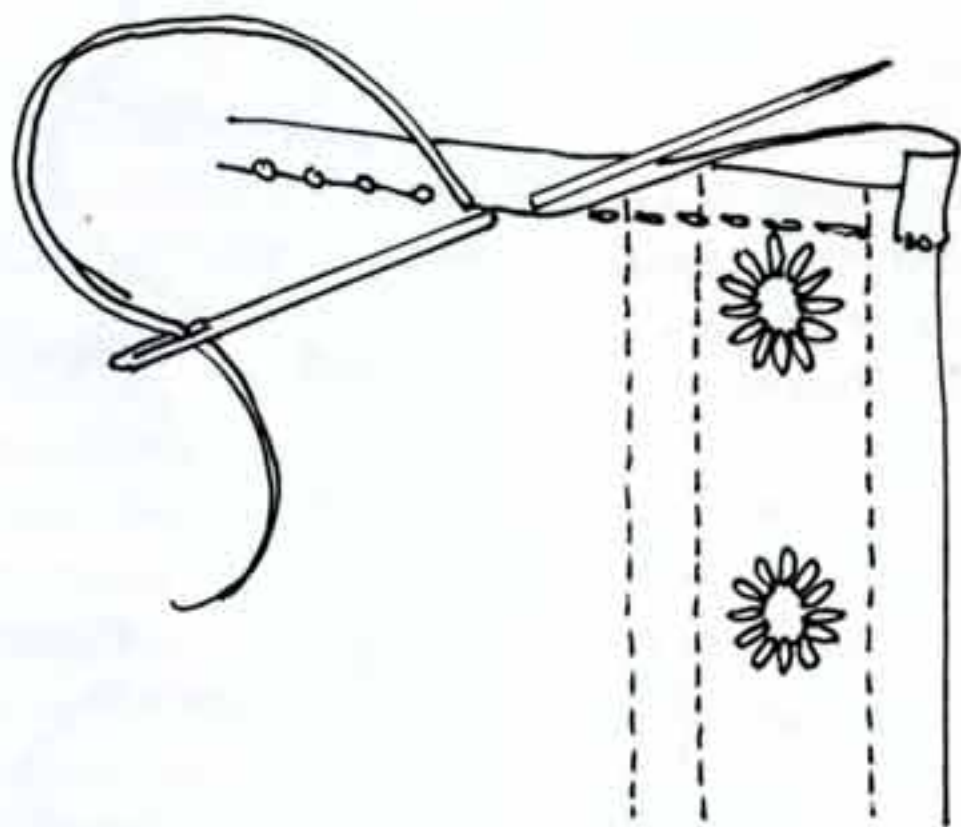
When the first method of inserting a gusset is executed, the fabric is cut and the edges turned under (stage 1). Then the edges are laid over the gusset and backstitched into place (stage 2). Sometimes further neatening or flossing takes place at the point of weakness, as in the Girl's White Jean Corset (see page 108).



Stage 1



Stage 2

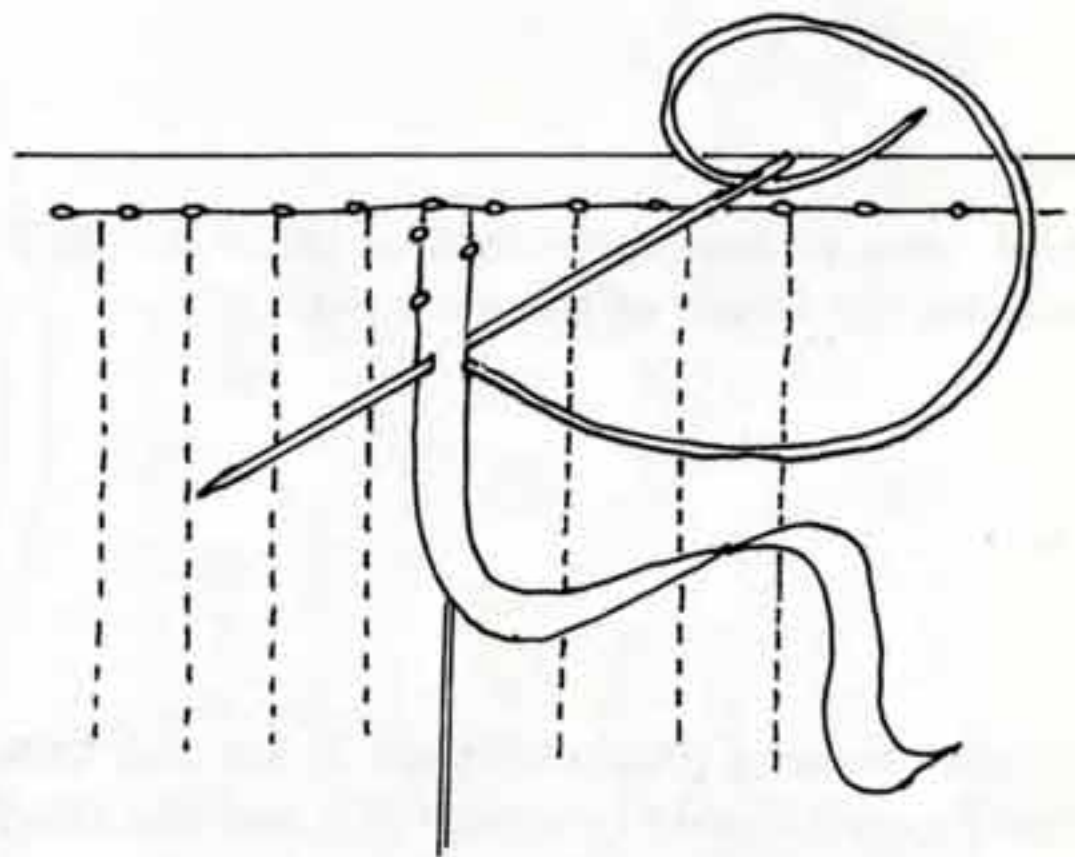


Binding

The binding for most corsets is executed with straight tape, usually a twill-weave tape. A neat finish is achieved if the tape is laid on the inside of the garment and hand stitched down, then pulled over to the front of the corset and neatly hand stitched there. Half of the binding appears on the inside, and half on the outside of the corset. Bias binding is not used in the construction of any of the corsets in this book as it has no strength and wears easily.

Taping seams

A narrow $\frac{1}{4}$ in (6mm) strongly woven tape is often laid over the gully of seams in the heavily whale boned earlier corsets, probably to improve the way they looked and to stop the gutters of the seams showing through the top garment.



Flossing

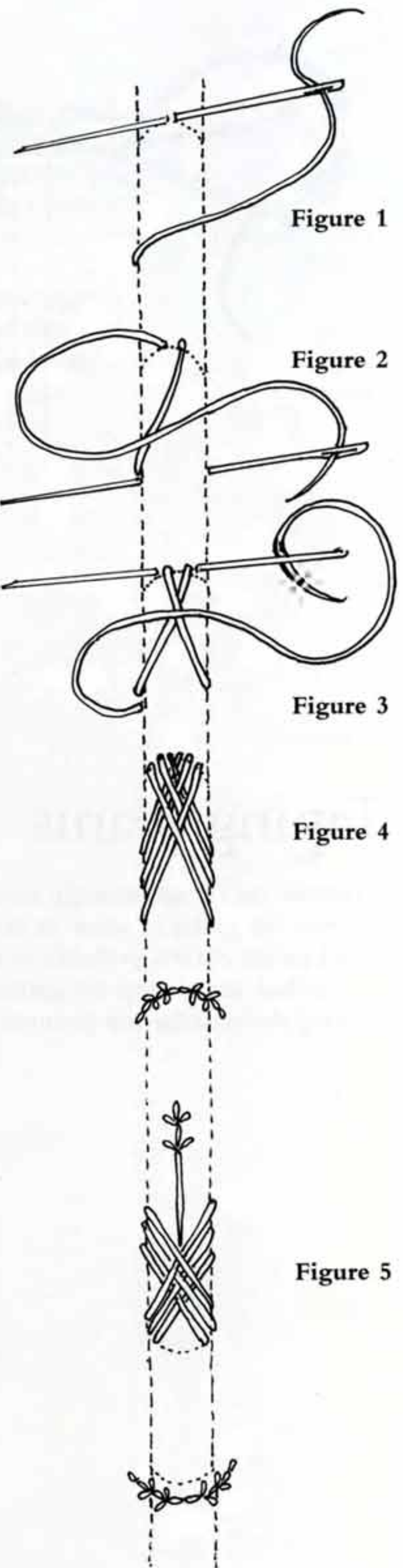
Flossing is a decorative stitch finish, usually in a bright or contrast embroidery thread, which is used to secure the end of the bone, stopping the bone slipping about in the boning channel.

The needle is inserted at one side of the bone, then again at the top of the bone, in and out, crossing the thread (figure 1).

Then the needle is inserted again, this time opposite the original point, passing the needle under the bone and appearing again under the very first stitch (figure 2).

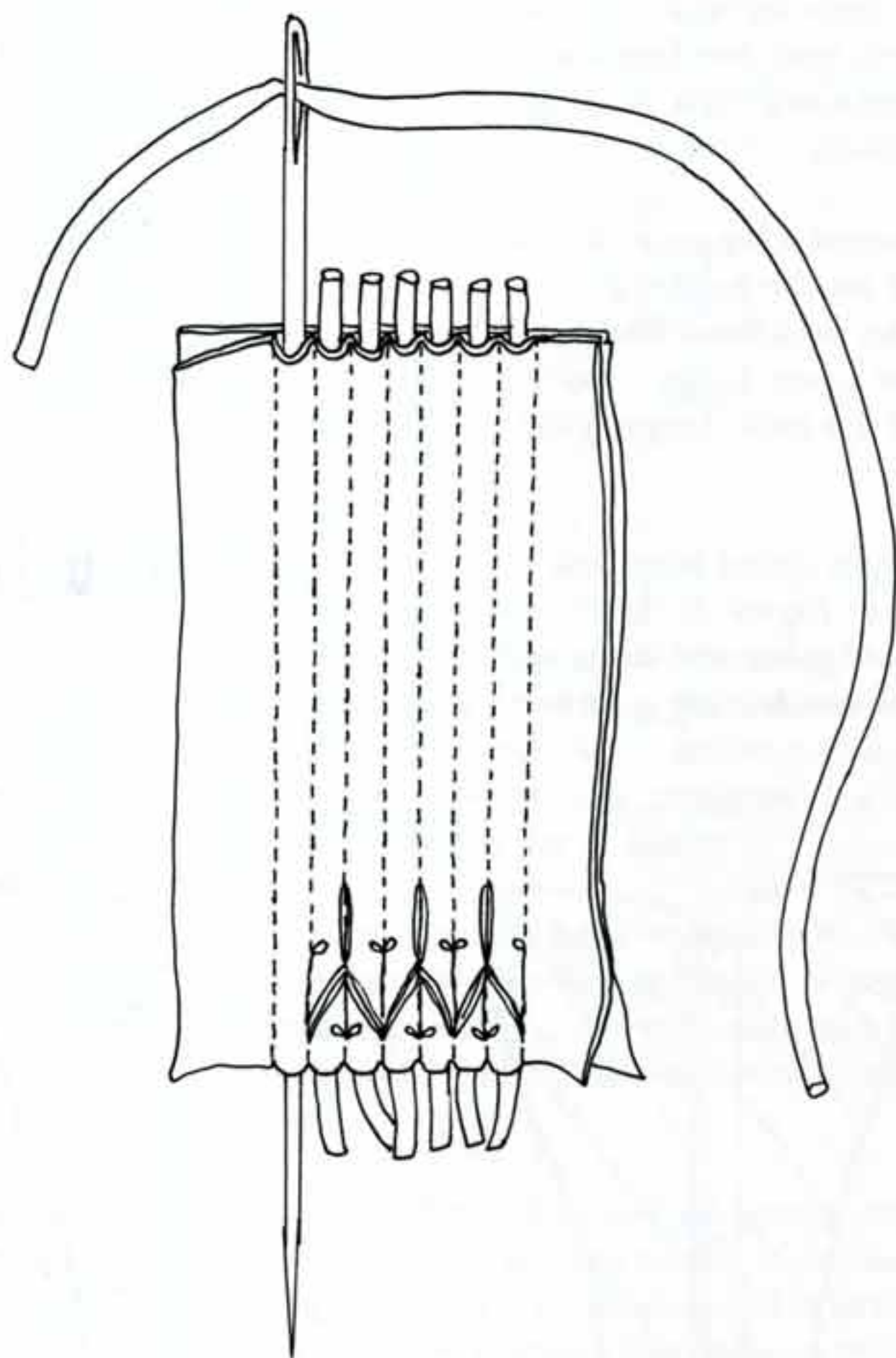
Repeat these actions three or four times (figure 3 and 4), then finish the threads on the inside of the garment.

Two other flossing finishes (figure 5) are also found on the Black-and-Yellow Flossed Corset (see page 70) and the Black Corset with Blue Flossing (see page 74). Presumably the inclusion of 'hand finishing' on these corsets meant that they would have been more expensive.



Cording

Known also as string cording or 'candlewicking', the process of cording is very similar to Italian quilting. A good example of cording can be seen in Corded Taffeta Corset (see page 38). On the earlier corsets narrow channels were created by backstitching or saddle stitching parallel lines, then string or similar was pulled through with a long, strong needle. Later, factories such as Symington's had their own machines, which created lengths of corded fabrics that were then cut up for panels in the corsets. Machine-made cording is fine and often a layer of Hessian would have been added in to strengthen it. This created a pliable yet supportive fabric. It may be surprising to find that so much cording is present in corsets, but it was cheap to produce and possibly more comfortable than steel or whale boning.



Split busk insertion

When constructing a corset using a split busk, insert the busk into the centre-front panels before attaching those panels to any other panel. Also, create the bone channels and insert the eyelets on the centre-back panels, before constructing the corset.

Usually the loop sides of a split busk are inserted in the wearer's ('her') right side and the stud side on her left. On commercially made corsets from 1850 onwards the split busk is usually encased between the outer fabric and the lining fabric. For practical purposes, providing the outer, seen fabric is reasonably durable:

1. Lay out the left front of the corset, right side up. Lay the lining right side down on top and stitch the centre-front (CF) seam. Trim the seam allowances to $\frac{1}{4}$ in (6mm).
2. Position the busk so you can see where the studs need to appear. Starting with the top stud, use a stiletto to push through and make a hole from the right side of the main fabric; push the first stud through (see figure 1). Repeat with the remaining studs, making sure you keep the fabric taut between the studs.
3. Fold back the fabrics to decide where the seam allowances should lie – they normally lie under the split busk on the inside of the corset (see figure 2). Fold the lining over the busk, matching the edges of the lining and main fabric. Pin the layers. Using a zip (zipper) foot, machine close to the edge of the busk, keeping the fabric taut (see figure 3).
4. Place the looped part of the busk on the right corset front and mark where the loops fall along the CF seam (figure 4). Make sure the left and right corset fronts will be aligned when the studs and loops of the busk marry up. Stitch the CF seam, leaving gaps for the loops.

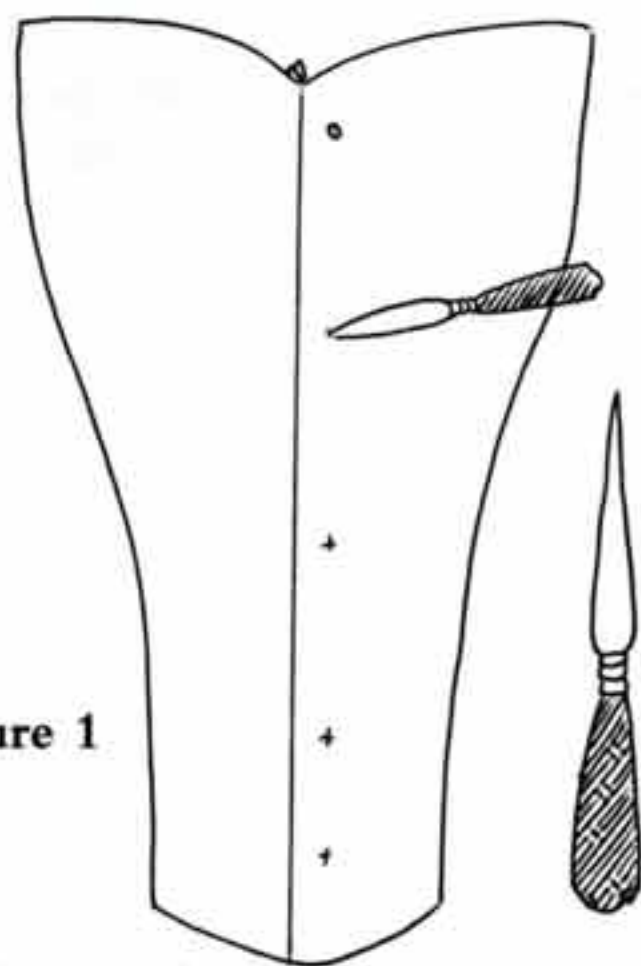


Figure 1

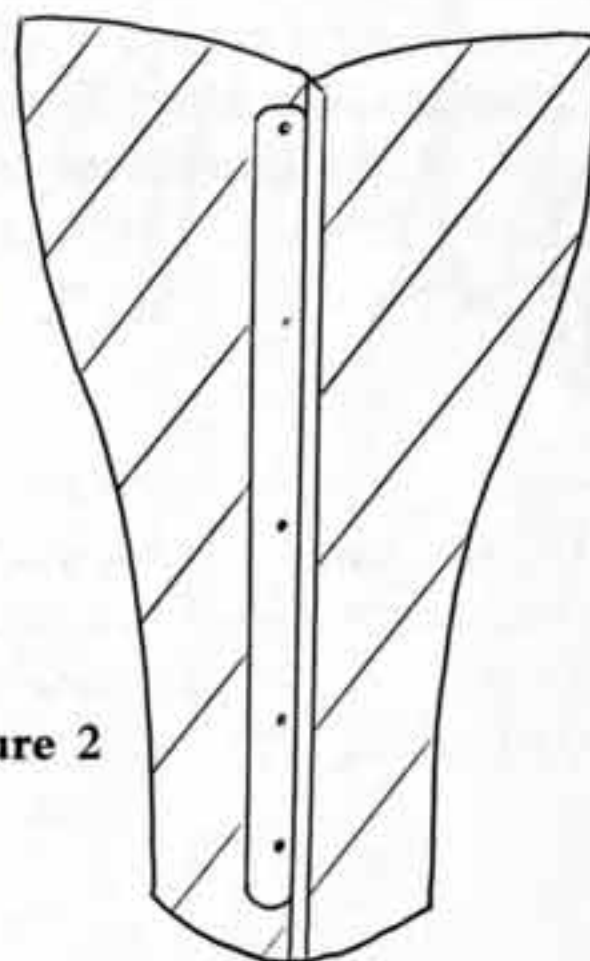


Figure 2

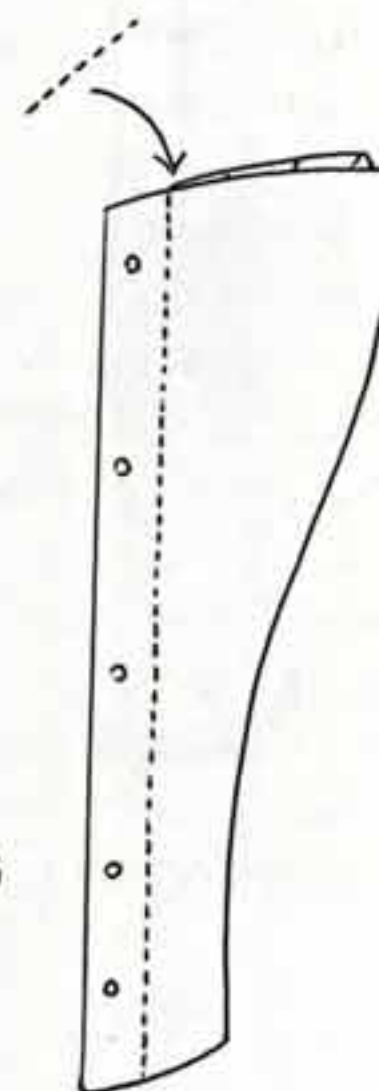


Figure 3

5. Slip the looped side of the busk into position. This time the seam allowances lie either side of it. Fold the lining behind the main fabric, matching the edges, and pin the layers together. Using a zip (zipper) foot, machine close to the edge of the busk, keeping the fabric taut (figure 5).
6. Check that the busk closes properly and the two fronts are aligned before continuing with the construction of the corset (figure 6).

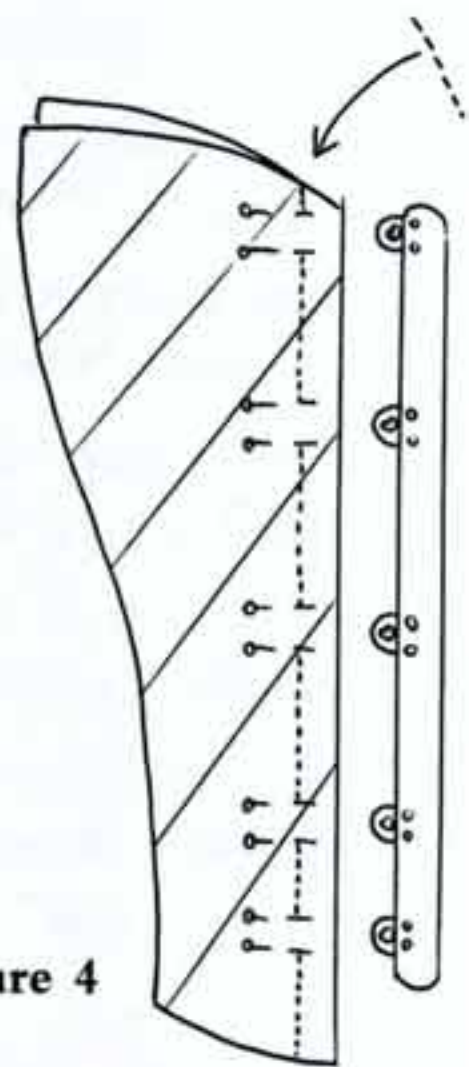


Figure 4

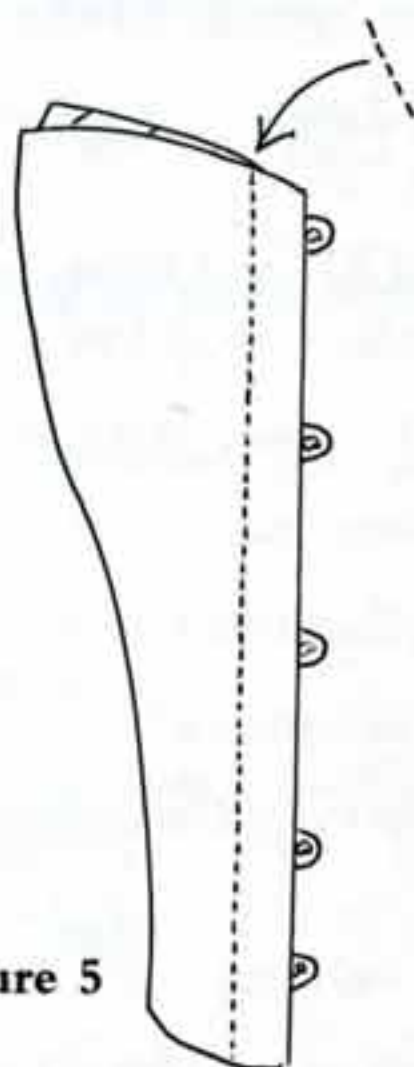


Figure 5

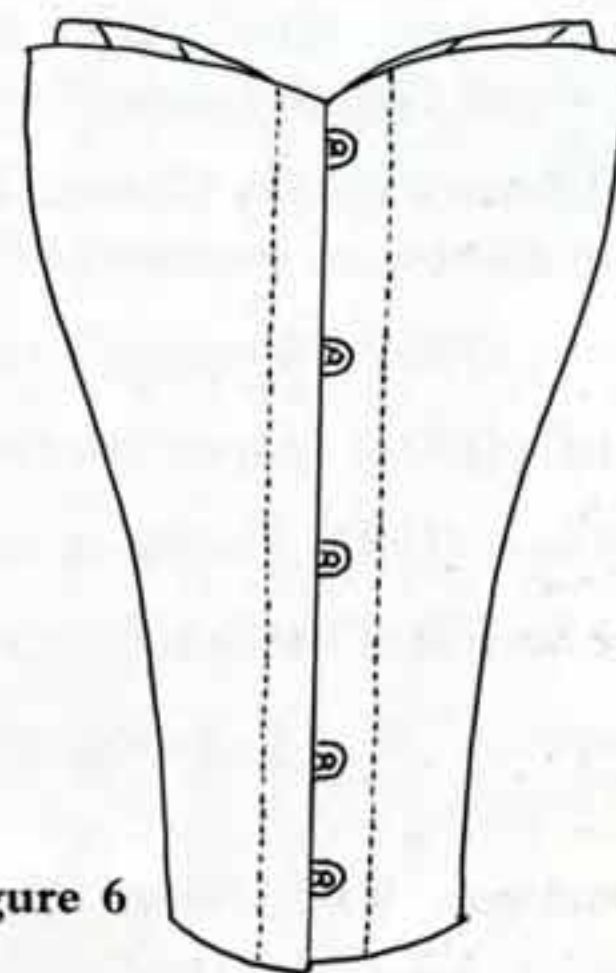


Figure 6

Metal eyelets

Holes to 'punch' the eyelets through are best created by using a stiletto or awl, a tool that prises the threads apart to create the hole rather than weakening the fabric by breaking the threads as an eyelet punch would do. If an eyelet punch is used, make sure the hole 'punched' is a bit smaller than the diameter of the intended metal eyelet

Metal eyelets or French holes have been available since c.1830. The ones I prefer to use are the 'hammer in' ones (see List of Suppliers page 127), being easy to insert, comfortable to wear and strong. Small, backless eyelets are not as effective, as they can easily pull out when lacing. Eyeletting machines are available.

Eyelets are usually situated between two bones and are usually evenly matched, except when one of the top or bottom eyelets is displaced, in theory to stop the corset lacing unevenly. The boning and eyeletting of the centre-back panel is easier to achieve before the corset is made up, but eyeletting can be left until the corset has been constructed.

Further Reading

Arnold, Janet (1985) *Patterns of Fashion: The cut and construction of clothes for men and women c.1560–1620*, Drama Books (UK) and Quite Specific Media (US)

Arnold, Janet (1977) *Patterns of Fashion 1, Englishwomen's dresses and their construction c.1660–1860*, Macmillan (UK) and Quite Specific Media (US)

Arnold, Janet (1977) *Patterns of Fashion 2, Englishwomen's dresses and their construction c.1860–1940*, Macmillan (UK) and Quite Specific Media (US)

Baumgarten, Linda (2002) *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America*, Yale University Press, USA

Bradfield, Nancy (1968) *Costume in Detail*, Harrap (UK) and Costume and Fashion Press, an imprint of Quite Specific Media Group Ltd. (US)

Buck, Anne (1984) *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories*, Ruth Bean

Blum, Stella (1974) *Harpers Bazaar*, Dover Publications Inc.

Carter, Alison (1992) *Underwear, the Fashion History*, Batsford

Coates, Alwyn R. (2001) *Voller Corset Photographed*, Yellowhead

Cunnington, C. W. & Cunnington P. (1951) *The History of Underclothes*, Michael Joseph

Doyle, Robert (1997) *Waisted Effort*, Sartorial Press Publications, USA

Gibbs-Smith, Charles H. (1960) *The Fashionable Lady in the 19th Century*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office

Guenther, Irene (2004) *Nazi Chic?*, Berg

Hart, Avril and North, Susan (1998) *Historical Fashion in Detail in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, V&A Publications

Johnston, Lucy (2005) *Nineteenth-century Fashion in Detail*, V&A Publications

Lady, A. (1986) *Workwoman's Guide*, Opus Publications

May, Trevor (1991) *An Economic and Social History of Britain 1760–1970*, Longman

Mikhaila, Ninya, and Malcolm-Davies, Jane, (2006) *The Tudor Tailor*, Batsford (UK) and Costume and Fashion Press, an imprint of Quite Specific Media (US)

Page, Christopher (1981) *Foundations of Fashion*, Leicestershire Museums

Shep, R. L. (1993) *Corsets: A Visual History*, R. L. Shep, USA

- Steele, Valerie (2001) *The Corset A Cultural History*, Yale University Press, USA
- Summers, Leigh (2001) *Bound to Please*, Berg
- Taylor, Lou and Wilson, Elizabeth (1989) *Through the Looking Glass: A history of dress from 1860 to the present day*, BBC Books
- Tozer, Jane and Levitt, Sarah (1983) *Fabric of Society: A century of people and their clothes 1770–1870*, Laura Ashley Ltd
- Tobin, Shelley (2000) *Inside Out: A brief history of underwear*, The National Trust
- The Kyoto Costume Institute (1999) *Visions of the Body: Fashion or Invisible Corset*, Nissha Printing Co. Ltd
- The Kyoto Costume Institute (2002) *Fashion: A history from the 18th to the 20th century*, Taschen
- The Kyoto Costume Institute (1989) *Revolution in Fashion, European Clothing 1715–1815*, Abbeville Press, New York
- Warren, Philip (2001) *Foundations of Fashion, the Symington Corsetry Collection 1860–1990*, Polar Print
- Waugh, Norah (1987) *Corsets and Crinolines*, Batsford

Articles

- Arnold, Janet, *A wedding dress worn by the Danish Princess Sophia Magdalena in 1766* (Costume 1)
- Arnold, Janet, *The 'pair of straight bodies'* (Costume 41)
- Campbell, Myrtle, *Embroidered bodices: an East India Company connection?* (Costume 36)
- Mactaggart, P and R. A., *Half a century of corset making: Mrs Turner's recollections* (Costume 11, 1979)
- Mactaggart, P and R. A., *Ease, Convenience and stays, 1750–1850* (Costume 13, 1981)
- Summers, Leigh, *Yes, they did wear them: working-class women and corsetry in the nineteenth century* (Costume 36)
- Waterhouse, H., *A fashionable confinement: whaleboned stays and the pregnant woman* (Costume 41)

Useful Addresses

The museums that have been kind enough to let me measure their corsets from their reserve collections are:

Colchester and Ipswich Museum Services
Museum Resource Centre
14 Ryegate Road
Colchester CO1 1YG
www.colchestermuseums.org.uk

Leicestershire County Council Museum services: the Symington Collection
www.leicestershiremuseums.ac.uk

St Fagans: National History Museum
St Fagans
Cardiff CF5 6XB
www.museumwales.ac.uk

Hereford Museum and Art Gallery
Broad Street
Hereford HR4 9AU
www.herefordshire.gov.uk

Fashion Museum
Assembly Rooms
Bennett Street
Bath BA1 2QH
www.fashionmuseum.co.uk

Below: These corsets are held in the Fashion Museum collection, Bath.



List of Suppliers

UK

Devine Supplies

57a Brightwell Avenue
Westcliffe on Sea
Essex SSO 9EB

Tel: 01702 352 500

devinesupplies@aol.com

*Corset fabric, boning, split busks, spoon
busks and more.*

MacCulloch and Wallis Ltd

25-6 Dering Street
London W1S 1AT

Tel: 0207 629 0311

www.macculloch-wallis.co.uk

*Boning, split busks, general sewing
supplies.*

Wilh. Wissner GmbH and Co.

PO Box 1432

D-73014 Goppingen

GERMANY

Tel: ++49(7161) 6817-16

info@wissner.de

*Source for plastic boning that echoes
most closely whale boning.*

Whaleys (Bradford) Ltd

Harris Court

Great Horton

Bradford BD7 4EQ

Tel: 01274 576718

melcrocker@whaleysltd.co.uk

www.whaleys-bradford.ltd.uk

Fabrics including linen.

Buckles Express

Cortress House

Julia Street

Strangeways

Manchester M3 1DQ

Tel: 0161 834 9790

www.bucklesexpress.com

Eyelets and insertion tools.

Vena Cava Design

PO Box 3597

Poole BH14 9ZL

Suppliers of all corsetry needs.

US

Delicious LLC

1040 N. American St. #901

Philadelphia,

PA 19123

215-413-8259

corsetmaking.com

supplies@CorsetMaking.com

Fabrics and corset-making supplies.

Grand Companies

295 Main Street

South River

NJ 08882

732-390-1964

www.grannd.com

Corset-making supplies and linen.

Linda Sparks

Farthingales

240 Wellington Street

Stratford

Ontario

linda@farthingales.on.ca

Corset-making supplies.

Farthingales.La.

3306 Pico Blvd

Santa Monica

California

90405-2116

Tel: 310-392-1787

Fax: 310-392-1762

sales@farthingalesla.com

Corset-making supplies.

US supplier list courtesy of www.tudortailor.com

Index

- Aiguillettes 83
Awl 123
- Balance marks 115
Binding 119
Buttons 31, 39, 83
Busk 7, 35, 43, 63
Busk protector 59
- Candle wicking 121
Cane 51
Cording 35, 43, 109, 121
Cross lacing 87
- Displacement 43, 103
Dolls 95
Double busk 63, 71
Double lacing 113
Drawstring 39
- Eyelets 7, 8, 43, 51, 67, 75, 117, 123
- Flossing 59, 63, 71, 75, 109, 120
French holes 7, 123
- Grain 6, 115
Gussets 27, 41, 63, 95, 109, 112, 118
Gutters 107
- Jumps 31, 103
- Lacing 6, 115
- Machine cording 43, 47, 59, 71, 75
Metal eyelets 83, 91, 99, 109, 123
- Split metal busks 8, 55, 63, 67, 71, 87, 91, 109
Split busk, insertion 122–123
Spoon busks 51, 59
Stay band 47
Steel bones 51, 55, 67, 71, 75, 79, 91, 109
Stiletto 107, 112, 117, 123
Stitches 116
Suspenders 79, 87
Swaddling 47
- Taping seams 119
- Vollers 8
- Wasp waist 75
Whalebone 8, 11, 15, 23, 59, 83



25 beautiful and historically accurate corsets covering almost two centuries of dressmaking, from 1750 to 1917.



Each stunning example is accompanied by a full working pattern, photographs and drawings, plus an historical overview giving an invaluable insight into making up these period pieces.



Two step-by-step projects demonstrate both the pre-1850 hand-stitched methods of corset-making and the post-1850 techniques using the sewing machine.



Includes practical advice on every aspect of working with historical patterns and period detail, from inserting gussets and split-busk fastenings to different styles of lacing, eyelets and flossing.



BATSFORD

HANDICRAFTS, ARTS & CRAFTS

ISBN 978-1-906388-01-0



9 781906 388010

UK £20.00

www.anovabooks.com