

# SYMINGTONS AND THE LIBERTY BODICE

FACT SHEET NO. 2

Compiled by

THE FRIENDS OF THE  
**HARBOROUGH**  
museum

Around 1830, James Symington followed his elder brother, William (see *Symington's Soups & Creams*), from Scotland and opened a tailoring and drapery shop in the High Street, Market Harborough. He married Sarah Gold, a stay maker, and added hand-made 'stays' or corsets to his trade. In 1856 their eldest son, Robert, returned from America and joined the business.

Over the next few years, Robert and his brother William Henry, used the recently invented Singer sewing machines to mass-produce corsets. Thanks to the Symington brothers, the majority of women were able to achieve the fashionable shape for the first time. Business flourished and from three floors in a disused building in 1865, the concern grew rapidly until, by 1889, 1600 people were employed in a large new factory. That building now houses this museum, the library and council offices.



*"Swedish Maidens" on parade! See overleaf.*



*Freda Cox modelling the Liberty Bodice.*

Symingtons continued to expand in the twentieth century, both at the head office in Market Harborough and branch factories, at home and abroad. By the 1930s the company was producing a dazzling range of foundation garments under the brand names "Avro" and "Liberty". In 1937 a range of swimwear was produced for the first time, and during the Second World War parachutes were made. Before becoming part of the Courtauld Group in 1967, more than twenty factories and associate companies operated in five countries within the Symington group.

Corsets for children had been made before but, in 1908, Symingtons introduced one of their best-known and most successful products, the Liberty Bodice. A warm, yet light, fleecy vest made from cotton wool, the Liberty Bodice had woven tapes that ran down the garment from shoulder to hem. Stockings, drawers and knickers could be secured to the bodice by a series of buttons, which were made of rubber to allow them to pass between the rollers of the washing mangle. The garment soon proved extremely popular and an amazing 3.5 million were produced every year throughout the 1930s. Supported by a series of advertisements, particularly during the Twenties and Thirties, production of the Liberty Bodice continued until 1974, a period of some sixty-six years.

## Further Notes

Fred Cox was the Marketing Director at Symingtons and was responsible for the extension of new designs and projects, which would increase the company's sales. He is credited with the development of the Liberty Bodice. It was his daughter Freda, who was photographed wearing the Liberty Bodice, an image that became the garment's trademark during the early part of the twentieth century.

Workers in the Symington factory were mostly women, although men were employed as supervisors and in certain departments, such as the cutting and pressing rooms. By Victorian standards, the workrooms were light and clean, drinking water fountains were provided and social activities, such as dances and sports, were encouraged.

Finished corsets were steam-moulded into shape on hollow copper forms, which were heated by steam and known as 'Swedish Maidens'. The corset linings were brushed with cold, wet starch, wrapped around the forms and laced from top to bottom. As they cooled and dried, the corsets set in their final, permanent shape.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER INFORMATION

**AVAILABLE TO VIEW IN THE MUSEUM** (*Please telephone 01858 821085 in advance to avoid disappointment*)

- Many examples of Symington corsets and foundation garments, including the Liberty Bodice.
- The Symington Reserve Collection is available to view by appointment.

*Please contact the Market Harborough Museum for details.*

**AVAILABLE TO VIEW IN MARKET HARBOROUGH LIBRARY** (*Please telephone 01858 821272 in advance*)

- Market Harborough Advertiser and The Midland Mail. The two former local newspapers are on microfilm in Market Harborough Library. They are now superseded by the Harborough Mail.

### BOOKS

- *In Our Own Fashion: The Story of R & W H Symington & Co Ltd.* Anon. (Harley Publishing 1956.)
- *The History of Underclothes* by C W & P Cunnigton. (Michael Joseph 1951)
- *Foundations of Fashion: The Symington Collection of Corsetry 1856-1979.* Christopher Page. (Leicestershire Museums 1981)
- *Foundations of Fashion: The Symington Collection of Corsetry 1860-1990.* Philip Warren. (Leicestershire Museums 2001)

### WEBSITES

- The Market Harborough Historical Society. [www.marketharboroughhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.marketharboroughhistoricalsociety.org)

### OTHER PLACES TO VISIT

 ([www.leics.gov.uk/museums](http://www.leics.gov.uk/museums))

- Snibston Discovery Park, Ashby Road, Coalville LE67 3LN.  
*Tel: 01530 278444 for opening times.* [www.snibston@leics.gov.uk](mailto:www.snibston@leics.gov.uk)
- The Museums Collections Resources Centre, Barrow-upon-Soar.  
*Tel: 01509 815514 for an appointment.*
- Museum of Costume, Assembly Rooms, Bath BA1 2QH.  
*Tel: 01255 477789.* [www.museumofcostume.co.uk](http://www.museumofcostume.co.uk)
- Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London SW7 2RL.  
*Tel: 020 7942 2000.* [www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)

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