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| **IRIS NORRIS, 1921–2000,****CORSETIÈRE EXTRAORDINAIRE:****An appreciation of her life and work**IN_S1x[**Appendix:  Video Clip and Measuring Customers**](http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/iris_norris_4.htm) | mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TbOahS_89RBm-K00SxEtDV75nSDmHw00tYx80Z720WO6PkPqWrP5kE_GCY3w63y8ZhX8dy3y0jYTCaUL9zuQG7IuxtUqJnXKoUUJ/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-1.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/IN_S2x.jpg |

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# PREFACE

The first draft of this appreciation was originally penned by one of her customers shortly after her death. This text is based on that draft, which has been expanded, amended and corrected because close to 100 letters (60 written by Iris and the rest by other customers between 1981 and 1995) were recently rediscovered. Including the Gardner years and over a period of 24 years, the author was privileged to have had some 40 fitting appointments with her and to have been assisted with the lacing-in of corsets perhaps 70 or 80 times.

The account is structured in seven parts, beginning with a short review of her life and her journey to independence (section 1), and what life was like as an independent corsetière (2). It then goes on to record her skill, first in fitting corsets (3) and then in the machining room (4). The next part writes of her likes and dislikes (5), her customers (6), and, finally, provides some stories about her life with the friends and acquaintances she met through her work as a corsetière (7).

# INTRODUCTION

At the age of 78, Iris Norris is dead. The corsetière to committed tight-lacers all over the world for more than 50 years is no more. Yet her spirit and understanding will live on in her wonderful creations of broche, busk and bone that her grieving customers will lace on with gratitude in the years to come. No doubt each one will pause while they slot their busks, pull in their lacings, or clip their suspenders to mourn and remember her as not just a skilful corsetière, but as a dedicated tight-lacing woman and their confidante or friend.

In her last 19 years she became a corsetière on her own, and was known wherever tight lacers met as one of the finest practitioners of the art and craft of bespoke corset making in the late twentieth century. It is poignant that someone schooled in essentially Victorian arts should die within months of the third millennium.

She enjoyed the conversations she had with her clients at appointments for measuring or fitting and on the occasions when she attended the *Bals de Les Gracieuses Modernes* between 1985 and 1999. Most of these people would attest that, without exaggeration, the making and wearing of corsets was her life (apart from her family, which always came first). Iris had made corsets for some of these customers for over 30 years, from 1962 right up to her demise. Not only were they customers but also, after she set up alone, her friends, in some cases.

Iris began her sewing-machining career making ordinary corsets for ordinary people; but every corsetière had customers who sought the out of the ordinary, and Gardner’s was no exception. By the end of her career Iris had a clientele that included demanding tight lacers. For Ethel Granger, Cathy Jung, and others, she made wonderful tiny-waisted corsets with the hard-to-perfect fluted panels that are so essential to accommodate comfortably any hip spring of more than 12 inches, let alone an amazing 26 inches in one case. The secret of her success was that her advice was based on her own practical experience. She practised what she preached.

# 1 THE LONG JOURNEY TO INDEPENDENCE

## 1.1 LIFE AT GARDNER’S

Iris Norris began her long career as a corset maker during the War as a machinist for the busy bespoke corset makers A. Gardner and Sons (Corsets) Ltd of Barnsbury Square, Islington, in 1941.

She would talk fondly of her days at Gardner’s; much of what is written in Ivy Leaf’s section on Gardner’s and Iris Norris was related by her to ‘Frangard’.

To write any more of her times there would be to duplicate what is said in that section of Ivy Leaf’s site. Although young enough to be Alice Gardner’s granddaughter, she clearly had been very fond of the old lady, whom she knew for more than 20 years. Likewise she appreciated Arthur Gardner’s skills. With Frank Gardner, who was her contemporary, the relationship was different and more formal.

## 1.2 FAMILY

She had raised her own family and, in the early years, especially during clothes rationing, sewed many of their clothes and continued to make her own clothes, skirts, dresses, and frocks for the rest of her life. This was necessary because her clothes had to be shaped to accommodate her hip spring properly, and of course they were cut to emphasise her waist. Not unnaturally, in order to close their waistbands she had to tight-lace.

John, her husband, was four years older and born 1917. He worked in a paint business three and sometimes four days a week. She referred to John in cockney parlance as My Chap, causing more than one customer to think she was a widow and he was her lodger!

With retirement from Gardner’s, Iris blossomed as an independent spirit, which caused a strain on her marriage, as her husband, now working part-time, resented the frequent visits by customers. He had no concern as to whether they were men or women, but he resented having to retire from the scene upstairs or to go shopping while Iris attended to customers. It was regrettable that he was one person who did not appreciate his wife's figure and personality in the last 25 years of her life. In response to an observation that he was lucky to have such an attractive woman as his wife, she wrote:

*"I don't think he thinks he is lucky to have me. If you told him he very likely would not make any comment. I don't think he worries as long as he had got his food and the house is clean. He just sits and worries about himself. I think I could not tell you how he is, as he never says. I just have to go by the way he carries on. He goes to work Monday and Tuesday but nothing more, otherwise he sits and looks at the telly or reads."* (19 Feb 1987)

She enjoyed her annual holiday, especially when her daughter and family moved away from London, first to Dorset and then to one of the Channel ports, according to demands of her son-in-law’s work with a financial institution. Not being a car driver, she relied on her husband driving to visit them, since train journeys were irksome. The introduction of cross-London trains in the late 1980s pleased her very much because she could travel directly from Bletchley to the Channel coast all on the same train, probably unaware that in doing so, she was actually passing within yards of her old workplace at Gardner’s in Barnsbury Square.

Her son and daughter-in-law lived in St Albans, and it was their daughter Zoë who was taught by her grandmother and who is in business as a corsetière today.

## 1.3 A PROUD WOMAN

Like Alison Perry’s manager and most other successful corsetières, she practiced what she preached. She wore proper busk-fronted, back-lacing corsets. She was as committed to maintaining a small waist as the most dedicated customer, except those who wore a night corset, which she herself would never do. "*You need a rest you know*", she would wryly remark, if ever the subject came up.

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| One way to understand Iris’s personal pride in her appearance is to realise that in the harsh post-war years, while still in her twenties, with young children and limited means, Iris had been very impressed by the elegance of the sharply nipped waists, flowing skirts, seamed stockings, and suede high heels that were all so much part of Dior’s 'New Look' in 1947. Such fashions were only available to wealthier people who could afford to buy clothes during rationing. Then in some nostalgic way, and as if she could freeze time to make up for what she had missed, she subconsciously tried to dress as much like that as she could for the rest of her life—and she did it with poise and confidence.One customer recalled going with her one cold winter’s day to a pub by the Grand Union canal at Bragenham, near her home. She wore a fur coat, but kept on her ankle length boots. Conscious of the effect she knew her waist would have, she took off her coat on entering. One of the party carried it to the table and recollects that the combination of her figure, deportment, and straight seams (of her obviously real stockings) turned heads.**Iris (1960's) poses for the camera in a way that would become famous on the cover of the "Corset Question".** | mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TbOahS_89RBm-K00SxEtDV75nSDmHw00tYx80Z720WO6PkPqWrP5kE_GCY3w63y8ZhX8dy3y0jYTCaUL9zuQG7IuxtUqJnXKoUUJ/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-1.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/Iris_1960.jpg |

In business, Iris was not tolerant of arrogance, which she described as being 'pushy'. However she had a great empathy for the sincere and those with a quiet disposition, regardless of class. Many of her customers became her friends, though she still called those she regarded as her social superiors as "Mr. A” or “Mrs. B".

She had a native intelligence far beyond the level of her formal education. She had left school at the end of the depression to become a machinist in a clothing factory, sewing dresses. Her subsequent years at Gardner’s made her into a good all-around businesswoman. She was scrupulously fair, and if any criticism could be made, she was too generous. She had strong views on the direction in which British society was moving and could be called a working class conservative.

## 1.4 A SYMPATHETIC WOMAN

One would expect someone from her background to have been at least mildly censorious of men who wore any item of what society regarded as women's clothing, but she was not. Over the years she came to know many such gentlemen customers and would say that what they did in private was their own business. She did however become somewhat critical of the increasingly brash attitude of many transvestites after the onset of more liberated times in the mid-1980s.

However, it was clear that she usually liked a man more if, like his wife, he wore corsets. On reflection it is also clear that she especially liked those men who also wore suspenders and stockings with their corsets. As noted, she was proud of her waist and figure and she freely admitted that she liked to feel tightly corseted and to wear seamed stockings. She thought that men might like the feeling too. She would no doubt have agreed with the following three sentences contained in a response by Simon when asked: *"Is your fascination for corsetry based on tightness or material?"*

*I think the derivation of pleasure comes from the rigidity of the corsets, and that firm reassurance that at every move one makes, the stiffness never goes away.”*

*... Similarly, the tightness, providing you have not laced in too tightly, though ever present, becomes natural and you just don’t think about it.”*

*I have never been able to ignore, nor wanted to, the lovely stiffness of a very firmly stayed pair of corsets, they talk to you at every step, and it is an ever-present sensation, to me totally enjoyable and exciting. I suppose that wearing corsets is a total package of many parts, all of which contribute to one’s enjoyment and satisfaction. As I have said, it is the control of the boning that is the most important single attribute to me."*

## 1.5 HEARING AIDS

Whilst Iris Norris was proud of her figure and deportment, the realisation in her mid-40s that she was hard-of-hearing, while not causing despair, bothered her very much. She knew that to continue in work she would have to resort to a hearing appliance and was not pleased. She knew that the hard-of-hearing are often the butt of jokes. She knew that most of them were readily identifiable, as they had to wear the earphone and the bulky amplifier/battery unit available on the National Health Service. The less visible behind-the-ear types were not common at the time and had to be purchased privately. Micro-aids had not been invented.

As a corset wearer she was aware of another problem that made her feel uneasy. One of her more elderly lady customers, who was deaf, once complained that her aid (on her torso) even amplified the creak of her bask, with every breath. Iris always remembered this and not only did she not want people to know of her affliction, she certainly did not want to hear her busk creaking. The answer was the style that fitted into spectacles, which she had recently begun wearing for close work such as machining and reading. The price was high but Iris wanted the style, paid for it out of savings, was satisfied with it, and wore it for the last 30 years of her life.

Few of her customers were aware of her problem, which in characteristic fashion she bore with grace and equanimity. Yet, in retrospect, they might now understand the reason for the very loud ring of the bell at 28, Barnsbury Square, which she could hear from the basement where she worked in the last years at Gardner’s. Likewise they would understand the real reason behind her request to come to the side door of her home *because I can't always hear the front door bell.* That door was by her sewing machine, where as often as not she would be at work and see the customer approach.

In general conversation during appointments with the customers with whom she had good relationships, she would talk frankly about her hearing aid problems. One of her regular complaints in later years was the price of replacements. Likewise the rates charged by the few remaining personnel who could to service the style, though in the mid-1900’s [1990’s?] she talked happily of having found a technician who could service them more economically.

Despite all this, she could be self-deprecating, writing on 27 Oct 1988, *"Mr. C. phoned on Monday to have a chat but I think sometimes he's harder of hearing than me; he never seems to understand what I say, so I give up*

## 1.6 A WOMAN OF DISCRETION

Iris Norris was essentially a private person. She was no gossip. She had all the discretion expected of someone who ministered to customers of every possible taste and motivation for wearing corsets. However, while she would, if asked, make such items as posture collars, she tried to make only corsets. Her attitude might be summed up in this written note to a customer:

*"No, I didn't know a Mrs. Butler. You want to be careful what you say to the Ms otherwise it may travel; also that Mr. H he's the same. Don't tell them any thing; they are too nosey. I should not give any address away as he (Mr. H) is always asking me. I should write to Mrs. R first to see if she wants to write to him. I don't really want to write to anybody just for the sake of writing as you say they're nosey. I don't mind writing to you that's about all and if anybody wants a corset."*

A review of the correspondence over 15 years shows that from November 1980 until April 1983, she signed herself as 'Mrs Iris Norris'; then 'Iris Norris' until July 1983; then simply ‘Iris’.

## 1.7 THE 1970's — MOVING OUT OF LONDON

On the domestic side of her life, she had seen a son and daughter marry and grandchildren appear. But now Iris and John were, in today's terms, 'empty nesters'. This coincided with a time of redevelopment of the part of Islington where they lived. Growing up in the depression and raising her family in the post war era of rationing, Iris and John had saved little and lived in a rented accommodation. But her dream was to own their own home.

As her brother and sister-in-law had done a year or two earlier, they took advantage of the London resettlement scheme, which meant that qualified persons could take advantage of preferential rates for mortgages if they moved to a 'New Town'. The last of these designated in Britain was Milton Keynes, some 60 miles from London on the Birmingham line. Its boundaries took in Bletchley, Old, and Far Bletchley, which had a stock of Victorian and Edwardian houses not too far from Bletchley railway station.

In keeping with their roots, in the early 1970’s they chose to move, not into a new house, but to one of Edwardian age within the new city in Old Bletchley, Bucks. In deciding to buy a home for the first time, Iris and John were faced with paying the mortgage, and that meant them both continuing to work full time, even though the children were off their hands.

Whilst the adverts will tell you "*Only half an hour from London,*" that is the time on the train; door-to-door is different. It meant rising at 5 am, driving two miles in an older model Rover 2000 to the station, and park, to catch an early train to Euston; and even then their respective journeys weren't over. Iris took the 14 bus along Euston Road, left at King's Cross station, up Caledonian Road as far as the stop by the library at the corner of Lofting Street. From there she'd walk east up a steep hill, cutting left into the former mews of Barnsbury Terrace, and across the west side of the square to No 28. She had a key to Gardner’s and would let herself in. Then she'd work a 10-hour day and make the return trip. In other words, they would leave the house at six and be out until seven or eight in the evening. Recall that she always wore tight-laced corsets and made this journey wasp-waisted and with straight seamed stockings — a proud and elegant example to the modern generation — for close to a decade.

In the last few years, although she was just an hourly paid employee, Iris's duties at Gardner’s had extended beyond simply machining to taking all calling appointments, at which she would give customers advice, expertly measure them, or give a trial or final fitting for newly made, partially complete, or complete corsets. She dealt with most of the mail order side of the business, which required careful record keeping, secure and discreet packing of parcelled corsets, and trips to the Post Office. She met with sales representatives to ensure that a sufficient stock of material and findings was maintained in-house at a time when suppliers and manufacturers were closing and such things were not easy to find. In many respects she *was* Gardner’s in all but name. This breadth of experience and all the contacts she made were to stand her in good stead after she retired from Gardner’s.

## 1.8 THE 1980’s — THE ANXIETY OF RETIREMENT

Iris finally retired from Gardner’s after 38 years at the age of 59, in early 1981. Before she gave in to her imploring former customers, Iris had high hopes of finding work locally, but unlike today, part-time work for older people was not common. On 1st May 1981, she wrote:

*"I haven't got a job yet but hoping to get a part time one if I can. It's nice not to have two hours’ journey night and morning but I always seem to find plenty to do in the home, cheerio for now"*

John continued his work in London with a paint manufacturer and was coming close to retirement and the loss of the income that full time work provides. These were the concerns she had:

*My husband is going on to a two-day week after Xmas as the firm is putting him off. I think its because he's getting older. He was 67 in October it’s one way of making him retire.* 3 Nov 1983.

*When my husband packs up work and gets his pension, I also will get a little bit, so don't suppose it will be that bad and if I've got my odd jobs to do.* Nov 27, 1983.

*My husband retires on May 5 and will do two days, Monday and Wednesday but it’s alright to come when you wish.".* April 15, 1984.

## 1.9 SETTING UP THE BUSINESS AT HOME

Although only 60 miles from London, actually finding No. 114 Church Green Road in Milton Keynes (Old Bletchley section) was never easy for customers, since, until the late 1980s, the town was expanding and new road systems were being added. Once a route was learned it seemed that new roads changed everything and a car driver would have to start again. So some customers from overseas preferred to take the train from London and then a taxi.

It was to be the first home the family had owned. It was a semi-detached house on three floors built with the red brick manufactured in the brickyards that flourished in profusion in the area. It was one of the few three-storey homes on Church Green Road and easily the most imposing one of all. Although never discussed, it is almost certain that Iris Norris paid the mortgage.

The house had two rooms on the ground floor, and the passage to the kitchen had been shut off to make a storage area for all the material and fittings for making corsets. So to go from the breakfast room/kitchen to front door one had to pass through the dining room. The garden began at the side of the kitchen and was long and narrow, and was tended by Iris. At the end was a garden shed in which, before she built the extension, she first set up her two eyeletting machines. From the day she moved in, her industrial sewing machine was housed in the kitchen. From the moment she set up independently, her kitchen served as a consulting room. Customers would be shown a seat at the table and, depending on the journey that they had made, would be offered a cup of tea, a piece of cake, or sandwiches. After an extension was built, it housed her chest of drawers for supplies and her cutting table.

## 1.10 EYELETTING PROBLEMS

Setting up to make corsets was harder than she thought. Gardner’s had a machine for every conceivable corset-making activity. Cutting and sewing she could manage, as she had the patterns, but eyeletting was all but impossible without both a standard eyeletting machine and a mini-eyeletter for securing strong hooks and eyes, such as were included in Gardner’s 'Hook-side, lace-side' L 227 style.

On a well-made corset, such as those produced by Gardner’s or Iris Norris, the pitch, or spacing, between eyelets' centres is rarely more than ¾ inch, and closer on the six pairs of eyelets by the waist. Thus a 12-inch casual corset typically has 14 to 16 pairs of eyelets and the Godet 267 has 22–26 pairs, depending on the height of the wearer. Such work requires a serious eyeletting machine, and no small part of Iris's reluctance to set up alone was the fact that she didn't have such machines.

Fortunately she found a person near her home who allowed her to use his eyeletting machine to do the work. However, the hook-and-eye eyelets remained a problem. Anyone who has examined 'real corsets' knows that the type of hooks-and-eyes used in corsets are not bought in ready-made strips from a haberdashery department. For a start they are much larger and made of a lower (thicker) gauge of wire. For attachment to the fabric they are to close, they are actually secured by two tiny metal grommets attached using a specialist mini-eyeletting machine. Thus the set of hooks and eyes does not rely on stitching; it relies on the combined strength of the facing and lining material of the corset into which the little eyelets are crimped.

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| For a year or so, she was be forced to take all the corsets that needed these eyelets to London and use Mr. Gardner's machine. In this regard, there was no doubt that, after she retired, Mr. Gardner had the not unrealistic hope of finding someone to wholly or partly replace Mrs. Norris and resume business. He may have even hoped that Iris would come out of retirement and work for him. Thus he did not want to part with his equipment.By 1983 it was clear that Iris was determined to succeed on her own. Only then did he allow her to take them on permanent loan, a fact of which she was always mindful. She set them up in the new extension she built to her house to accommodate the volume of work she had succeeded in attracting. | mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TbOahS_89RBm-K00SxEtDV75nSDmHw00tYx80Z720WO6PkPqWrP5kE_GCY3w63y8ZhX8dy3y0jYTCaUL9zuQG7IuxtUqJnXKoUUJ/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-1.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/eyelet_machine_x.jpg |

In the meantime she was faced with the problem of making lacing eyelets. One can use a hand tool and do the job individually, but it takes so long it is impractical. A machine to hand is the only answer. As she was to write on 1st May 1981: *"I have written to somebody I know who I think has an eyeletting machine to see if he will do me some eyelets. I think I will be able to get the material but if you get stuck for getting one send the pieces out of the old corset, and then I can use them if they are alright."*

## 1.11  MEETING CUSTOMERS

Meeting with customers was not easy after her husband began working only part-time. Initially she tried to limit customer visits to the days on which he worked. This proved to be impractical for many clients, and so she had to ask him to retire upstairs or go down to the shops or the New City, which he often did of his own volition if a customer called.

*"I don't know what days my husband will be working as he's still waiting for his pension but I think it will be Monday and Thursday but will let you know for sure, but don't worry I can always ask him to go upstairs."* Jan 22, 1984.

*"My husband didn't mind you calling but don't think he will stop in when I'm doing things for you."* July 8, 1984.

Her fitting room was her dining room and was accessed by a sliding door from the kitchen after the passage had been blocked off. When a customer was shown in, the curtains would be discreetly drawn to conceal the activities of the customer and corsetière from the passers-by, who regularly used the passageway between number 114 and the neighbouring house. In typically British fashion, it was a public right of way and people would pass close by the side window.

Lacking a lock on the inside door of the fitting-room-cum-dining-room, she would discreetly angle a chair-back under the doorknob to preclude her husband inadvertently disturbing her and her customer. The room lacked proper mirrors, but she had set a carefully angled mirror high over the mantelpiece in which it was possible for a customer to observe their reflection as matters proceeded. (Photos of the grandchildren were always proudly displayed on the mantelpiece.)

## 1.12 SUCCESS

In retirement, it was clear that the orders she got from individuals did not suffice for a living. Sadly, despite efforts made on her behalf with companies in North America, she did not retain any of the customers who had patronized Gardner’s. Latterly, she accepted having her name published in the directories of several magazines catering to interests that appreciate the wearing of corsets. (In practice, few orders materialised, as the potential buyers were more interested in the image of the corset than in the intrinsic pleasure of wearing one.)

So, as a machinist at heart, she did what is known in the 'rag trade' as outwork. In her case, she produced dozens of ladies dresses a week for an outsize department store. With the modest revival of interest in corsetry by the mid-1980s, she started to produce bulk orders for standard size corsets for what is now one of the UK's largest corset mail- and web-order agencies (Wilbros’s) for about 10 years. She also did a little bulk work for the US market.

Individual clients were, originally, totally sourced by word-of-mouth. Attendance at the LGM Bals (Section 7.5) helped too. With the help of a customer she produced a typed catalogue, which included the former Gardner’s range as well as new leaflets describing other styles. A group consisting of corset-wearing individuals circulated her details to members of the group under the name “La Guêpière,” and in this way she gained a number of new customers.

She corresponded with customers all over the world. For example, here is one early letter:

*"You can fetch the corsets with you when you come and I will alter them if possible. I've changed the bones on the one you left me and put the loops on (for detachable suspenders.) The new one is ready, all but the shoulder straps. I’ll put them on when you call for the fitting. The suspenders are made. I think that was all. Did you want shoulder straps on the old one? The repair is £10 and I’ve put you a new panel where the elastic was. The new one is £55. I think you paid me £40 but if I'm wrong let me know. You looked worn out when you came in last time and I thought you needed a good night's sleep. I've had another few orders from people and have got another 10 to make."* Oct 31, 1982

By October 1988 her business had expanded to the point where she was doing much more letter-writing, even investing in a rubber stamp to avoid re-writing her name and address. It is noticeable how much more articulate her letters became over the years.

## 1.13 THE 1990’s —UNABLE TO MOVE

In the early 1990’s she became restless and missed her daughter and grandchildren and decided to move to live near them in one of the Channel ports. Such plans strain relationships and led them to think hard. They went to the extent of putting the house on the market, even accepting an offer and planning the move. But it was not to be: the buyer failed to get the mortgage and the deal fell through. Iris was disappointed, but compared to what she faced in the war and in childhood it was nothing and she carried as usual. They withdrew the house and she and John were destined to end their days in Old Bletchley, where she died in April 2000.

# 2 ADVICE FROM THE INDEPENDENT CORSETIÈRE

## 2.1 THE COUNSELLOR—CORSET FIT & FEATURES

All persons with skill have pride in their work. Iris Norris was no exception. She had been schooled in an age when even the humblest customer was quick to criticise if a corset did not fit or failed to last as long as expected. Thus she wanted her corsets to fit and, coming as she did from a humble background, to be hardwearing and long lasting.

Iris knew of the commitment of her "small waist" clients and the enthusiasms of their encouraging spouses or partners. Many wore corsets day and night — 24/7 in today's shorthand parlance — to achieve their dream. To do so, and then to maintain such small waists for 30 or 40 years, was only possible if their corsets always fitted properly. They could not tolerate the hindrance to their regime if skin breakdowns due to a 'hot spot' were to arise because of a poor fit. Above all, therefore, Iris was concerned to ensure that the degree of tightness necessary to effect gradual reduction did not cause the avoidable discomfort of an ill-fitting creation.

She would go to infinite pains to perfect the fit of any item she made. For example, in response to a customer’s concern regarding the discomfort from the indentations of the heavy hooks and eyes, she would thoughtfully fit a narrow panel of material to protect the wearer's skin and provide press studs at the top and bottom of the panel to prevent it from ruckling under and exposing the offending metal to the skin.

She adopted the passive approach, essentially honouring the dictum that the customer is always right." But she also knew that customers, especially newer customers with intentions to tight-lace, are not always right; they are invariably over-ambitious. While she would always do what an insistent customer wanted, she would add or alter details depending on her assessment of the wearer's 'corset character'. And she would always stop a customer from straying into the impossible. She would always diplomatically invoke her own experience, saying words to the effect. "*Well I find that works very well"* or "*I've tried that in my own corsets and it its not comfortable,"* and thus rather than lose a quickly discouraged customer, she would retain them as they embarked on a successful regime.

She had definite opinions on various topics, such as:-

* No front lacing all the way - "*some like it but I think a long busk and lower lacing or hooks and eyes is best*."
* No zip fastener in a laced corset. She followed Gardner’s dictum and refused to include them. "They rip out very quickly," she said.
* She did not like modesty panels, which were supposed to protect the skin from the chafing of the laces. Iris knew that such a detail was found on many modern corsets but, as she would point out, many of them were off-the-peg designs and not suitable for serious tight lacing. She would say that in the case of a sewn-in panel, it would interfere with the closing of the back edges of the corset, and that it could not be compared to the under-busk panels she always fitted, which are located in an area where there is no movement as the corset is tightened. She would say that the panel itself would get caught up and ruckle during lacing in, that it was almost impossible to smooth it out in such a confined tightly laced area and that it would be likely to chafe the wearer more than if there was no panel. She'd then chuckle in her usual way.

As for the idea of a separate panel that can be pushed down between the corset and the body after lacing in, she would say it would not work for several reasons. Firstly, if one tight-laced seriously, it would be almost impossible to push it past the waist, which was where the corset was tightest, and that in trying to do so one could damage or rip the waist-reinforcing tape, not to mention an under-vest, chemise or camisole—which usually got ruckled in the lacing process anyway. Secondly, in the same way that a loose corset can 'ride up', such a panel could itself inconveniently ride up (or down) as a result of its wearer’s movements.

* Faced with evidence, she was ready to change her mind, and ‘Frangard’ knows that her view on back steels changed over the first few years he knew her. Nevertheless, she would not actively advocate the fitting of heavier back steels. She had resorted to this when working from home, but would be sympathetic if she sensed a customer might be receptive to the degree of support they gave.

## 2.2 ADVICE ON CORSETING IN HOT WEATHER

Skin breakdown is a particular hazard for the tight-lacer, particularly in hot weather, which is no friend of the tightly laced waist. She responded to one visiting customer’s question:-

*Well I'm glad the hot weather is over, my bones rubbed me raw on the waist when I was gardening.*

To an enquiry on how to deal with it, she would say, "*Sponge on either side of the place with sticking plaster to hold it in place* as one solution. Corn plasters were another solution she offered. *I can still pull in 8 inches then,"* she'd say.

She never compromised on lacing herself in and always wore a corset in the hottest weather.:-

*I can't say about tight lacing in hot weather. I suppose it’s either stick it out or take them off like you did."* Oct 1983.

However, she once admitted that on one hot evening at 8 pm, she loosed off to watch television.

## 2.3 ADVICE ON FABRICS

Often, enthusiastic customers would bring material for facing their corsets. Many were not suitable for the rigours which service as part of a corset would impose on them. Hence she did not like to work with leatherette or silk-based satin. Iris would always thoughtfully point this out. It was far better to bow to her superior knowledge and go with the items that she held in stock.

She would show a number of single rolls in the drawers. Some with silver or gold broche, the gold spot, 'regency' satin in white, cream, pink and black as well as red and black leatherette. She often worked in kid or patent leather and even bought lengths from a market stall in her town.

## 2.4 ADVICE ON BUSKS, UNDER-BUSKS, AND BONES

In every detail of corset design, Iris would ultimately defer to an insistent customer's wishes. But in the course of that conversation she would invariably tell the customer what she did in her own corsets. Busks and boning were no exceptions.

Selection of the correct length of busk is part of the corsetière’s metier and Iris also knew the difference between a wedge busk and straight plate busks, and how the gauge of the metal (the weight) used affected performance. For instance, while long busks were made in lighter weights, that made it harder to hook up busks with six or seven points than if heavy plates were used.

She recommended that an under-busk be fitted, lamenting that many modern busks were not made as carefully as previously. Thus, the wearer’s skin was liable to get pinched in the gap between the two busk plates. (In talking of busks Iris had her own idiom and called the busk’s hooking posts, studs, or points the 'bobbles!')

## 2.5 SPOON BUSKS

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TQH5XwP89RBmwFUn2vpGZCJcc6DCwSl_K09HDCvxMayYkk9ugEfnPA4ZIBfVafw82DVEjjhygqAadM0lqF2eLf3Tl0weYs0AnWDm/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-2.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/spoon.jpg**The classic 'Spoon-busked' corset** | She herself was devoted to the spoon busk, which she regarded as being the basis of helping to achieve the 'tulip' shape below the waist of the larger hip spring which had been carefully cultivated with a well-shaped fluted-hip corset.She set her own 13-inch spoon busk—they never seemed to came in any other length—to reach three to four inches above the waist and nine to ten inches below, in her Godet L267 corset. Above and below the busk she would set hooks and eyes as required to help pull taut the upper edge and the lower skirt of the corset. | mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TQH5XwP89RBmwFUn2vpGZCJcc6DCwSl_K09HDCvxMayYkk9ugEfnPA4ZIBfVafw82DVEjjhygqAadM0lqF2eLf3Tl0weYs0AnWDm/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-2.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/spoonbusk_x.jpg |

However, spoon busks are not like other busks in that the base plates are made, not of spring steel, but of mild or stainless steel. Such steels are less flexible and have properties that allow the stamping process to give them a permanent set with convex and concave curves, yet remain reasonably flexible to conform to the wearer’s form as the corset is tightened to the desired degree. The gauge number of the metal sheet from which they are cut is higher. This is done in an effort to make their ability to conform to the wearer’s shape to be equivalent to the flexibility of busks made up with the heavier spring steel plates.

In service, a busk is subject to flexing stresses as the wearer bends forward or backward, or even while he or she breathes. In time this repetition in mild steel leads to failure, rather like when a wire paper clip is repeatedly bent back and forth. Metallurgists call it 'work hardening'. Thus, physically active women like Iris who opted for a spoon busk also break them more frequently than users of spring busks. As she was to write:

*"I made myself a corset with the spoon busk then one side of it broke in half, so I had to take it out." Mr. G sent me one for Xmas so very likely I'll make another one for the fine weather."* Jan 22, 1984*.*

One would think that for someone so seriously corseted, Iris would eschew physical work. On the contrary, she was quite handy about the house, doing much of the digging in the garden, and was even known to paint the her window frames, actually sitting outside the frame and lowering the upper and lower sashes in turn in order to paint them. All this was done while wearing a spoon-busked corset. It is not surprising that she broke them so regularly, perhaps as often as every six months.

In the mid-1980's, she was relieved to track down a source of spoon busks in Germany, but in the meantime her husband managed to get one pair repaired at his work, and the admirer who took her to the LGM ball found her two others, while she obtained some through the good offices of Michael Garrod of True Grace Foundations. From about 1986 she and Michael were able to help each other with difficult-to-find spiral and flat steels, and busks of various lengths. Another customer gave her two spoon busks he had been given by a German contact.

## 2.6 SPRING STEEL BUSKS AND UNDER-BUSKS

Spring steel busks were not without their breakage problems, either, for some of Iris’s customers. As anyone who has attempted it knows, a piece of spring steel can be bent a long way, but the process of making it springy makes it fragile, so that ultimately it breaks very suddenly and without any warning.

It is instructive to bend forward while corseted and observe the way the busk will bend. With very little effort the middle searches for and finds a zone of lower resistance in the wearer’s abdominal area so that, very quickly, the busk, even with a spring steel under-busk to assist it, can almost be bent back upon itself.

In fact, at least two of Iris’s longest-standing customers broke their spring steel busks in this way, and even if not cut were quite annoyed. To redress the situation, their admiring husbands, who encouraged them to maintain a small waist, solved the problem with homemade under-busks. One of them produced a heavy curved plate for a spoon busk permanently set to conform to his wife’s corseted form, made of thick mild steel and understood to weigh close to a pound.

Another husband (of the Midlands couple noted in section 6.2) was prompted to act when his wife was cut by the jagged edge of a broken under-busk. He made her one of mild steel an inch and a quarter wide, ⅛-inch thick, and 11 inches long, with all edges careful filed round. Again, he carefully bent it to assume the required body shape she had when she was fully laced in. His wife observed that the half-pound plate solved the problem, and that since using it she had never broken a busk. She laughed that she had become much more ladylike in her movements, even in her physically active work as a school nurse.

For such customers, Iris would make up the appropriate under-busk casing as usual, but added press-studs so that the under-busk could be taken in and out and moved from corset to corset, while being prevented from sliding out. In more than 20 years of service, almost up to the moment of the customers’ untimely deaths, it remained as unyielding as the first day.

## 2.7 ON THE AVAILABILITY OF BUSKS

The availability of busks of any length became progressively difficult, and worse when their makers shut down; a serious personal concern of Iris was the availability of her preferred spoon busks. She even wrote to customers in other countries or continents to inquire if they were available there. Of spring steel busks, she wrote:

*I got six 13 inch busks off Mr. Gardner for you as you can’t get long ones anywhere else. I think you will have to have a lace (and eyelets) at the bottom of the corset, as I can't put in the hooks and eyes or it would mean me going up to London and using Mr. Gardner's machines. I don't think he is going to part with the machines. I know somebody else who does the eyelets for me".* 25 August 1981

She lamented the reduced quality of busks made in the 1980's; her concern was about lack of rigidity and the practice of equally spacing the studs, rather than having the two lowest studs about an inch apart at the bottom, which, as everyone who had used them will know, greatly facilitates achieving that all-too-difficult hooking them closed.

*The (16-inch) busk M has sent is only a lightweight one, not so strong as the one you've got. I don't know if they make that length now in that weight, only the 14". I don't want any of those 16" busks as the bit where it tucks under isn't a very a good thing and I think as they are a lightweight one; also they are a bit long for me. I still have couple of the old ones I bought off Voller a long while ago, but he hasn't any more heavy ones now* Sept. 27, 1992*.*

*I'm writing to ask you if by any chance you can get me some of them 15" busks you got me, as M says he cannot get any more as he as not heard from that chap in Germany. I wonder if you will have any luck. I don't like to bother you but I may want a couple if possible* 11 June 1995.

## 2.8 ADVICE ON THE BONING OF CORSETS

As to the weight of a corset, Iris disliked a heavy corset and favoured singlewide spiral boning. If only lightweight boning was available then she would double her bones. She did not like Nuli [plastic?] bones. Faced with requests for particular combinations of boning, she would as likely respond, "It'll be very heavy with that you know." She was always ready to point out if a customer’s choice would mean a heavier corset than she herself judged best.

When discussing the efficacy of flat or spiral steels, she would advise a customer that she can do whatever they favour, except she liked spiral steels in the sides and flat steels at the back.

In the face of over ambitious customers wanting flat steel boning, she would say that she knew who had told them that and, while some people might swear that flats all round were best, she was loyal to the old corsetières dictum, "flat steels front and back but spirals in the sides. She thought that while some people would insist on flat steels, they only wore the corsets occasionally. She thought spirals were better if a corset was worn from early morning to late at night, as she did.

On the matter of back steels, she would again concede to what a customer wanted, but readily related her own experience. She had always used only spirals until in the mid-1970s, when she suffered from persistent back trouble and eventually fitted two heavy spring steels on each side of the eyelets. That quickly cured the problem and she had fitted them ever since. "It stops you slouching as you get older", she'd say. No truer words could have been spoken, since to sit with Iris while one consumed the tea and sandwiches she had prepared was to see what correct corseting does for the wearer's posture. She would sit at the table on her preferred upright carving chair, the type with side arms much favoured by tight lacers, with her right arm folded below her full bosom and the faint but clear sound of her busk creaking in response to her breathing.

She never made orthopaedic corsets as such, but would often say that regular corset wearing by either sex could prevent the onset of chronic back pain, or alleviate it, without the discomfort and loss of mobility of the orthopaedic styles. She was also of the opinion that back trouble had become more common since women stopped wearing boned corsets, and that it could be cured in many people if they wore them again.

## 2.9 ADVICE ON SUSPENDERS

She was of the opinion that, although boned, corsets, like their junior sister the girdle, fit more comfortably if worn with suspenders anchored to stockings to pull the corset’s skirt and the girdle’s hem smoother than boning alone could ever achieve. In this she would no doubt have agreed with the comments on suspenders in ‘A Harmony in Dress' [2], which, on page 20, says:

*They are really needed to hold the corset down in order to avoid the formation of a ridge at the lower edge."*

Given the dictum that the customer is always right, she would provide suspenders in the number, elastic-strength, and length requested. Her own preference was for three pairs of suspenders, the back pair of which were always clipped to the seams of her stocking tops. That pair was positioned on the corset 's hem so that, when tensioned, the pull would keep the seam on the correct lines on her legs, even though it meant sometimes sitting on a suspender clip. Her front pair was sewn as classically close to the inside of the leg as the width of a spoon busk would allow. Midway between those pairs were the side suspenders. The strap lengths were graduated, using standard 4½-inch straps at front and sides, with the back suspenders comfortably longer so that the elastic did not become too strained when sitting. A customer commented:-

*Mother had always used 10, and sometimes as many 12, suspenders on her corsets and who herself said, "I still prefer 10 suspenders, even if they are more trouble*

The following comment is typical of her concern if she could not meet the customer's wishes:-

*"For the suspenders I think you may have to have plastic* [grip-frame] *ones. I could get you some ¾ inch pink ones off Mr. Gardner as he plenty of those, but no black, as they don't make the sort that you like* 25 August 1981

She used white elastic for her own suspenders and would say that suspenders should really be in white or pink elastic if the customer wanted them to last, but admitted that they would look silly with a black corset. She believed the chemical effect of black dye resulted in a more rapid breakdown of black suspender elastic. Likewise she knew the grades of elasticity of the suspender strap elastic and would use a stronger grade for back suspenders. As is traditional with proper corsets, she used standard 1⅛-inch width elastic for suspenders, unless otherwise requested. The more fashionable, narrower ¾-inch elastic was of course available. On the matter of elastic width, she would implicitly betray her preference for wide suspender elastic by saying of a customer:- Its funny, but Mrs. R. prefers the narrow elastics, you know."

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| She was always ready to discuss the trials and tribulations of suspenders. At one appointment, in response to the usual salutations, she remarked that she was much irritated by the fact that she was having difficulty keeping my stockings on my suspenders."  | mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TQH5XwP89RBmwFUn2vpGZCJcc6DCwSl_K09HDCvxMayYkk9ugEfnPA4ZIBfVafw82DVEjjhygqAadM0lqF2eLf3Tl0weYs0AnWDm/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-2.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/sus1x.jpgmhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TQH5XwP89RBmwFUn2vpGZCJcc6DCwSl_K09HDCvxMayYkk9ugEfnPA4ZIBfVafw82DVEjjhygqAadM0lqF2eLf3Tl0weYs0AnWDm/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-2.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/sus3x.jpg**Proper suspender clips (left side in each photo) and the thinner ones that could let go in embarrassing moments! (Note their plastic grip-frame.)** |

She thought it was due to the shininess of the nylon, and in typically practical fashion, she solved her problem temporarily by screwing up tissue paper to bulk out the knobs. Later she was to crimp the metal clip to increase friction between the stocking-shrouded button and the metal grip.

On the suggestion that she should consider using more suspenders, she was clearly set in her ways and relied on three pairs:

*You know that Mrs M she got me to put seven pairs on her last corsets, I think she has to do that because her husband wants it. I know you like more but I find three’s enough."*

And despite her fine hip spring she did not personally subscribe to this observation on page 21 of Harmony in Dress:-

*For women who are very stout or have full hip figures, eight supporters are sometimes used."*

Writing to a correspondent in May 1983 in regard to her problem of slipping clips, she said:-

*"I don't think I’ll have extra suspenders as I sometimes sit on the ones I've got at the back*

Her concern about slipped suspenders became noticeable during one fitting session, when she give an extra push to the button in the clip and remarked that one had to be sure to push the buttons properly. When suspender ends (clips) again became in short supply in the 1990's, she wrote on 13th Oct 1993:-

*"I've got some of those ends if you want but they are off old braces.* And on July 30, 1994*:*

*"The chap in Kent sent you some ends for your suspenders I'll keep them till you come with the other."*

## 2.10 ADVICE ON CORSELETTES

She did not like making corselettes because of the problem of fitting the bra. Lady customers tried to prevail on her to make them a corselette, only to get the curt response. "I never do corselettes." Pressed for an explanation, she would explain that she found that there was too much guesswork because she could not estimate how much a wearer’s bust size would change when their corsets were tightened and flesh or fat was relocated. That might need as many as three alterations to get it right, which was too time consuming and was not satisfying work.

At this point she would counsel that they do as she did and to shop for a longline bra while laced in the desired amount. A request to make a bra was met with the same curt refusal by someone who would only counsel the customer to do as the corsetière did. She was on record as saying:-

*I don't really like making corselettes; I prefer to stick to the corsets I made at Gardner’s as these can be very awkward with different cup sizes, which I'm not very good at.... I get a few orders (for ordinary corsets) here and there and they keep my head above water, that's all I really want. I now have six to make. I don’t mind) making them (padded corselettes) for men to dress up so long as I get the right size* Nov 27 1983.

This simply meant that with a male customer who wanted a corselette, she could simply form false cups on the outside of a high-top corset, which for her was relatively easy work. On 8th Jan 1985 she wrote:-

*I don't mind doing corselettes like I used to do at Gardner’s (for men), but I don't like the bras on their own as it's hard to get nylon elastic for them unless you buy lots, so I'd sooner not do them*

Like many women who wear corsets, Iris agreed with a 17-inch-waisted customer from Birmingham (see section 6.2), who said simply "I wear corsets because I abhor bulges." She found that the combination of the strong elastic and boning of her bra and the upper part of her Godet corset gave her the reassurance (against a muffin top and visible ridge) that she wanted, and allowed her to wear the close-cut bodice type blouses and dresses she favoured, even for everyday wear. Of another small-waisted customer she wrote:-

*That E -- is very slim. He has got her that way; she never was when I first saw her a few years ago. It’s the high heels that make you look thinner."*

## 2.11 LONG LINE, OR MANNEQUIN, CORSETS

No account would be complete without a note on the long line, or mannequin (or discipline, or trainer) corsets, which Iris learned to make at Gardner’s, though the style was never featured in their catalogue.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Finecraft_Black_Coutil_Long_Line_Corsetx |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Most of her customers had one or two of these in their wardrobe and usually took them to be fitted at corset soirées. One of her extrovert customers, Mrs B, told how her husband laced her into one at home and how hard it was to slide, almost horizontally in fact, into and out of the back seat of the car and to stay reclined on the trip!  | mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TQH5XwP89RBmwFUn2vpGZCJcc6DCwSl_K09HDCvxMayYkk9ugEfnPA4ZIBfVafw82DVEjjhygqAadM0lqF2eLf3Tl0weYs0AnWDm/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-2.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/Axfords_OA_w_small.jpg |

 | finecraft_Peach_Satin_Long_Line_Corsetx |

In the images of note, the rear view of the light coloured one shows the improvised arrangement of the back suspenders to deal with too short a gap between corset hem and the top edge of the stockings. If stockings were to be worn, both Iris and other corsetières recommended a separate deep, boned suspender belt under the corset. Iris made such belts bespoke to suit ladies or gentlemen.

The front view clearly shows the eyelets of the front lacing section below the busk, before the lace is threaded. As you see in this case, the model has her stockings clipped to a separate suspender belt worn underneath.

## 2.12 ADVICE ON LAUNDERING AND DRYING

1 Leave lacing in.

2 Make sure the length-adjuster flaps of all suspenders are opened and pull them away from the stocking clips (shorten).

3 Immerse the entire corset in water for a few minutes.

4 Wash by hand in warm water.

5 Lightly scrub with a soft nail brush as required.

6 Squeeze out as much water as possible by hand — DON'T WRING.

7 Lay it out on a new (clean) dry towel and roll both corset and towel tight for about half an hour to remove moisture.

8 Repeat if necessary.

9 Lay it out on a new dry towel and roll both corset and towel around a hot towel rail.

10 Check periodically and change towel as necessary till dry. (Depending on the heat in the rail, it should never take more than a day.)

11 If desired, iron out wrinkles.

12 Roll up until needed.

# 3 MEASURING & FITTING CORSETS

## 3.1 MEASURING

Iris had an outstanding eye for the wearer's form, and all clients would attest to the fit of what she produced. But she was not so proud of her effort that she did not offer a trial fitting before completing the work, which her deft hands could do within the space of the half hour usually allotted for a fitting appointment.

Knowing the style you wished to wear, she would quickly take your measurements, pausing to write each one down as she did. She began with the waist and asked how much you wanted to reduce. Then she judged the distances, and there you’d rely on her to size accordingly. She even allowed for the slight increase from natural circumference to accommodate the displaced flesh. So skilled was she that on the mere provision of three measurements, the waist, the top, and the hip, she could sew up a garment ready for a trial fitting.

This was a typical confirmation:-

*"These are the measurements on the corset you had in August 1980, so hope this is the one 28-37-36, 17 back, 14 busk, 1 hook and eye top and bottom. 10 above front, 12 above back. 8 suspenders, 6" and 5". Double bones spirals, wide steel back, shoulder straps adjustable like a suspender."* 1st May 1981

There was no style of corset she had not made, from a cinching six-inch-deep waspie to the elegance of the high-waisted knee-length mannequin trainer. Whilst at Gardner’s she had made corselettes, but was never satisfied with what she achieved, so that, once running her own business, she would try not to make them. She preferred to take dimensions off an existing one and replicate and even improve upon the fit it offered in the new one she made.

## 3.2 FITTING ON

She was nothing if not formal and correct. Upon visiting her for a trial fitting, or to collect a new or repaired corset, one would be asked to sit down. On the desk or table would be a brown paper parcel, usually about three inches wide and two inches deep, and with a length a little more than that of the subject corset. “Its ready, would you like to try it on?” she would say. At this, more than one new gentleman customer would demur and would continue do so until he felt confident enough to agree.

Whether it was to be fitted on or not, the light bowknot in the string would be unceremoniously pulled and the corset unwrapped. Every feature would be explained, starting with the busk, followed by a description of what steels had been provided. In the days of supply difficulties she would say, "I couldn't get an 11 inch busk so I've put a 10 inch wedge with a hook and eye below, if that's alright. You wanted the double spirals but there weren't enough in the three-eighths so I've put a quarter and a three-eighths together. Finally she'd check if the suspenders she’d provided were right. The back ones are on longer elastic and the sides and front are your usual or "I know you don’t like that pink/narrow/ribbed elastic. I've got some of the belting and that’s like you showed me. I bought a roll as some others like that type too".

With the preliminaries over, she would lead the customer into the fitting room.

## 3.3 FASTENING THE BUSK

Her first action in the fitting room was to open out the lacings, which she did in a practised way that defies description. As every corset wearer knows, this is followed by hooking up of the busk (see below).

With that attended to, she would again watch patiently to see if the customer, whom she no doubt had taught her preferred procedure of completing the task, would engage the bottom pair of studs and say such words as:

"*There, a busk gets easier with practice doesn't it, but they're all a bit different aren't they?"* At which point she would ask *"Are you ready to be laced in?"*

 A customer recalled the process:-

*"I then went back in to see Mrs. Norris and said I'd had a lot of trouble fitting the busk and did she have any special way of putting on a corset that she could recommend? It was such a basic question that she couldn't answer and she had to go through the motion of putting a spare corset on over her dress and said, words to the effect "Yes I just take hold of the corset, get the top stud on and then I just pull the bottoms together till I get the studs to catch." She went though the motions of what was a conditioned reflex to her as natural as putting on ones shoes and lacing them."*

What she actually did mirrors what is shown above and contained in the advice given in of 'Corset Fitting in the Retail Store.' In Chapter VII - Lacing the Corset:-

*"Turn the customer to face you, and fasten the top stud. Place the back of the right hand flat against the abdomen of the customer, holding the clasp section at the bottom with the right thumb. Place the left thumb under the busk and two fingers over the top of it. Bring the clasp section forward with one firm movement, fastening the third stud. The remainder of the busk fastening will then automatically fall into position. Fasten the hooks and eyes below the busk and attach the remaining suspenders to the stockings.*

Fuller details on fastening busk fasteners are given in Chapter X, 'Busk Front and Inner Belt Corsets', which begins with this note:-

*"Fastening a busk: an action which must be mastered"* It includes Fig. 37, the caption to which reads "*The knack of doing up a busk fastening must be mastered. Study diagram and text carefully, then practise till perfect*."

**🡨 Unfastening**

These paragraphs and diagrams clearly show that the top stud of say, a 12-inch busk or a spoon busk, is the key stud, which when hooked causes the busk plates to form an inverted 'vee.' After the bottom ends are pulled toward one another and the higher of the bottom pair of closely placed studs (what is referred to as the third stud above) is engaged, the rest of the studs can usually be hooked without undue difficulty.

Iris was also most attentive if she’d fitted high-top military-length corsets with a 7-point (stud), 16-inch busk. Then she advised that then the key stud was not the top stud; it was either the second or third from the top, depending on which the wearer found engaged the easiest, and then proceeding as before.

## 3.4 LACING THE CORSET

The test of the corset is how it fits when laced in. Having it done by an expert corsetière is undoubtedly one of the most satisfying aspects of wearing such corsets. Those privileged enough to have been accepted for such service by Iris would never forget the experience.

The first moments of lacing-in never ceased to startle even a regular customer. First, she preferred that the corset be test-fitted directly next to the skin, not over a camisole or vest. Then the high-heeled customer was invariably pulled slightly off balance backwards and had to check their balance as she started to pull in on the laces. Then she initially pulled the laces though the eyelets at such speed that as it passed across the customer’s skin it caused a sharp, almost painful, burning sensation, which would almost make the customer involuntarily call out, but as the excess lacing was pulled back the speed lessened and the moment, so to speak, passed.

One customer noted that, in what must have been as many as 70 lacings-in, never once did Iris resort to that image of fantasy much loved of artists and writers, in which the fierce lacer puts a knee in the wearer’s backside to pull the corset closer together.

It would be difficult to express in words her technique, in which somehow she managed to maintain tension in the puller loops and at the same time to 'pluck' the crosses of lacing to take out slack. That must surely be the stuff for a slow-motion film on the subject!

With an experienced customer, if she sensed that the customer was experiencing discomfort sooner than she thought was correct, she would discreetly stop and on her own initiative tie a knot and suggest a cup of tea before lacing tighter. It was in such moments that she confirmed to the customer what is innate property of corsets, which is that they are precisely made to the quarter inch, saying, “This is still open just over an inch. A little more and I think you should stop there,” or, “If you want to go any smaller you’ll have to raise your arms above your head. That's what they say is the way, isn't it?”

After such a remarks she would chuckle, clearly enjoying the interaction with the customer. And indeed the customer would raise the arms and rapidly feel Iris exert more pull on the laces, and hear her sudden exhalation after she had given her all in the final closing effort.

To be laced in by her was to gain an appreciation of what her understanding of 'tightness' really was. There is no doubt that she never pulled laces any harder than she thought was necessary, based on her understanding of what was right and appropriate, and gained over a lifetime of making and wearing corsets at a level of tightness that would dissuade many a novitiate corsetee from corseting at all. Thus she was scrupulous in staying the ambition of over-ambitious newcomers at all stages and would even disobey the customer’s wishes if she believed them to be foolish. It is doubtful if many such customers ever complained.

In conversation, she would point out that there is a sensible reason to discourage loose lacing, since most ladies who cultivate a small waist will have had the waistband of their skirts or frocks cut to suit, and if the corsets weren’t tight, the waist couldn't be closed.

With long line corsets, invariably there would be a spaghetti-like mass of lacings on the floor behind the customer. It was always far too much to form a bow at the back, so she would pass the loops forward into the customers hands and wrap them around the waist until she judged there was the right amount left to form a bow, wherever it suited best, be it at the front, at the back, or at the side.

Mrs. Norris never advised wearing the newly fitted corset for the journey home. She knew all her customers were well capable of self-lacing themselves back into the corset they had arrived in, but she was always politely insistent and would herself lace them back into their original corset.

With gentlemen customers who were concerned if the top edge of the corset showed though a shirt, she would patiently wait while they re-dressed and would look them up and down with her critical professional eye and usually would reassure them. She was patience itself with nervous customers, typically a gentleman with a barrel chest; she was known to alter the top edge as many as three times to get things right. (She did observe that detectability wasn’t so much of a problem for a woman, but did believe that a small waist was the only way one should be able to tell that a woman wore corsets.)

It should also be emphasized that at all times in the fitting room, even when a relationship had evolved into friendship, her attitude was as formal and professional as at the first meeting.

## 3.5 SUSPENDERING STOCKINGS

If a customer wore stockings, she preferred that they only be rolled down to the knees and left there prior to lacing in, to avoid wasted motion. When she left a customer to undress for lacing in, she might remind them to leave their stockings on.

She had a deft and sure hand when fastening suspenders. As soon as knotting off was done, she would start to do up the customer’s back suspenders. As she did so, she would make one think, if one did not know otherwise, that she imagined that sheer stockings were indestructible. She would grip a stocking top and pull it up to its suspender with almost enough force to unbalance a customer in high heels, which most women wore at fittings at her suggestion.

If a customer used more than her suggested three pairs of suspenders, she would wonder out loud at how they managed them alone and joke that she’d get confused, again introducing a light-hearted note to the proceedings. When all were attached—and customers often did up the front ones while she attended to the back pair or pairs—she would commence to shorten the elastic with a sharp hard pull to the degree of tension that she thought necessary. In comparing notes, customers even remarked that on occasion they had felt they were going to disappear into the stocking, which felt as though it would be up over them. Each shortening action would end with the sound and sensation of the teeth of the regulator being folded shut on the elastic.

At such times she was known to air her views on the life of suspender elastic and comment that black dye especially shortened the life a lot. When all was complete, she made a point of standing back and asking the customer to turn around. She would professionally remark that the corset looked very good or that they were a nice set of suspenders.

No doubt, like many women, she was happy to discuss the trials and tribulations of suspenders with anyone who would listen. Irritated by modern suspender clips, she used screwed up tissue paper to bulk out the knobs. Only once in the early 1980’s do I recall the exclamation of righteous indignation so commonly heard from the lips of every woman from time to time, at least until the late 1940's [1960’s], when a clip slipped off her stocking top. In Iris’s case, it was followed by an opinion regarding the shininess of nylon used after the late 1970's to knit non-stretch hose. In her case she solved it, first by tissue paper, and later by using a pair of pliers to crimp the clip frame in the button slide area.

# 4 IN THE MACHINING ROOM

## 4.1 CORSETS OF EVERY KIND

First and foremost, Iris loved her sewing machine. She was at heart a machinist. Indeed, apart from the bespoke work she really enjoyed, she still spent most of her time producing off-the-shelf corsets in various waist sizes; individually sewn, but en masse.

In the last few years at Gardner’s, Iris became acquainted with all aspects of corsetry. In addition to machining and sewing, she could do the cutting-out, either bespoke or in bulk, and she could sew in any material from the finest broches to utilitarian twill, leather, and leatherette. She could fit busks of all lengths and types, and make corsets of every kind, including under-belts for those needing them. She could also work in leather, but as noted on June 18, 1992,

*"The leather will be a bit of a job (to purchase) especially if it's got to be long. Mr. Gardner used to have a job getting long ones and they're not very cheap so I think we ought to skip that. I don't mind leatherette you can buy that by the yard."*

She made deep, boned suspender belts and could make suspenders of all types: sewn on, detachable, or trolleyed together with an under-belted corset. To watch Iris Norris work at any aspect of corset making was to observe a professional. To see her run the machine down the seam between corset panels, with her fingers deftly altering the run of the seam to accommodate the changes of direction between top and bottom of the panels was to marvel at an expert seamstress.

If she wasn’t making corsets, she would be doing what is known in the ‘rag trade’ as ‘outwork’. She would cut out and sew up women's dresses by the dozen, destined for sale in a chain store specialising in outsize clothes. Such work always had tight deadlines, but such was her working speed that they were always ready when the buyer called. (One individual corset customer recalled that Mrs. Norris said she could not only see her and measure her that day, but could have the corset ready for collection the next day!)

## 4.2 ADDING THE BONING, SUSPENDERS, AND LACING

When it came to inserting flat or spiral steels between the facing and lining, she used a specially designed push-in tool. This consisted of a long solid piece of wood that appeared to be cut from the old-fashioned potato-masher. Inside one end was a narrow slot half an inch deep into which could be positioned the bone to be inserted. First, the bone would be pushed as far as it could by hand. When resistance was met, the bone was engaged in the slot and, while a hand stopped the bone from bending, it would be pushed right into position in the corset pocket. When the requisite bones were all inserted, they would be individually sewn in place.

Her attention to detail with needle and thread when sewing a busk in place showed that whilst the machine was quicker, she could always resort to hand sewing if necessary.

Anyone who has made up a suspender from its parts will know how easy it is to reverse one item or another. Not Iris Norris; she had done it hundreds and thousands of times. She could make up suspenders six at a time. To watch her skill in sewing suspenders onto a corset hem was equally amazing. She would double-fold the elastic and sew through as many as six or seven layers of material, and then turn the work to double and redoubling the stitching to ensure a secure item.

In threading a replacement stay-lace through the eyelets, almost always threading laces that lacked the end tags (aglets), her skill was amazing. Compare this to the kind of a mess the average person makes. (It helps to have a tailor’s chalk at hand to mark the eyelets where the puller loops are formed.) Likewise, her speed in opening out a corset ready to be clasped around a customer formed part and parcel of the service of a proper corsetière.

## 4.3 SPECIAL SKILLS — FLUTED HIP CORSETS

Iris Norris was one of the last corsetières of her era who was able to make corsets with fluted hip panels for large hip-springs. It is not surprising that ladies with 20-inch-plus hip springs remained faithful customers, or that Cathy Jung made a repeat order within days of accepting her first corset from Iris. While she would never aspire to produce a corset with the degree of glamour evident on many that Cathy laced on, there was no doubt about their fit and ability to comfortably reduce and maintain a 15-inch waist.

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| mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TRpNQZb89RBmiA-zMCHwMKiNO1M4cx5jOY2chxR730zpfN7DnCcjJE9Ww0xN3lGQ_2vfu6yEY0MgW_vqkch3Glym90dW0y526Gdi/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-3.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/iris_working_1980_1b.jpg | **4.4 REPAIRS AND ALTERATIONS**Iris, like Gardner’s, was always popular with customers unskilled at sewing because both were ready to do even small repairs and alterations. This is a direct quote written by someone who had taken their corset in for alteration.*What happened then really amazed me. Mrs. Norris took a safety razor blade; the one-sided type set in a tiny chrome holder, and proceeded to quickly cut the stitching on the hem of the corset at the top and at the bottom. She did the same with several of the panels and exposed the white lining. I was horrified by the amount of work she had undone in about a minute. She then cut pieces off several of the panels, and in next to no time began to sew it up on an automatic sewing machine that sewed a panel length in literally five seconds or less. In no time the panels were re-stitched and she then began to sew up the elastic edge trim of the top and bottom. In about five minutes flat, she had opened, altered and sewn up the corset as it was before ready to be tried on again. The improvement in fit was amazing."***Iris hard at work in the 1980's** |

However, Iris was always keen to say that while all corsets can always be made smaller, they cannot be made bigger; and that, while it was possible to make them smaller, it was cheaper and wiser to get a new corset that was cut to the right size.

She understood that all corsets needed running repairs, since lacing grommets (eyelets) pulled out and suspender elastics frayed and stretched beyond serviceability. She would happily sell, at cost, any length of elastic or lacing. For bones that had punched though the lining, she would often add bone casing or plush ribbon as strapping over the bone’s full length.

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| If she was reassured that a customer could use a hand eyeletter, she would give them a small number of eyelets and reinforcing rings. As one customer recalls:-*On the subject of eyelets she was willing to give them me, but said that they needed a machine to fix, and that the silver steel ones were harder than the brass to fix. I said that I had a hand tool that worked and she was pleased but surprised and gave me a whole lot of them of both types. She also said that it was best to glue patches on leatherette, which did rip easily, and gave me a piece. When I said that I found that it was much easier to lace up an old corset, she explained that it was because both the lace and the eyelets get a shine when you’ve worn them a bit* | mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TRpNQZb89RBmiA-zMCHwMKiNO1M4cx5jOY2chxR730zpfN7DnCcjJE9Ww0xN3lGQ_2vfu6yEY0MgW_vqkch3Glym90dW0y526Gdi/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-3.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/eyelet_machine_x.jpg |

## 4.5 ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Among the special details she was known to provide for individual customers were the following that she had learned while at Gardner’s. (For fuller details the reader is referred to Ivy Leaf’s site.)

* Use of a closer pitch for eyelets near the waist, where it is reduced from 3/4 inch to close to ½ inch for the three pairs of eyelets on either side of the waistline, which was defined of course by the mandatory tape reinforcement.
* Use of buckles and non-stretch—never elastic—webbing; petersham, or ribbon for shoulder straps of high top corsets.
* Provision of split rings instead of the more usual bra-type' hooks to proof detachable suspenders against pulling off at the inevitably most embarrassing moment.
* Use of elastic ‘ee’ chest gussets to allow the wearer to breathe more deeply if required in high-top, military-style corsets.
* While she would fit inverted ‘vee’ elastic gussets on the front of the hips, she believed the bottom of a corset should be cut to fit without such a need.
* Use of six-panel designs, five for longer corsets.
* Use of brass reinforcing rings on the outside of all lacing eyelets (grommets), a decision she made soon after setting up alone.
* Use of interlining in all corsets to give the 'weight' and strength that tight-lacers appreciate, and which distinguishes the real bespoke corset from imitations.

## 4.6 THE SEWING TEACHER

She was generous with her advice, even to those whom others would perceive to be rivals. In point of fact she knew that others could not match what she did and make money doing it because they lacked the essential machining skill to sew up the panels and layers quickly. Even more tricky was inserting the busk and hand sewing the materials around the protruding pieces of metal, studs, and hooking plates.

Because of the many layers to be sewn through to form seams, an industrial-strength sewing machine was mandatory. Such a machine was reliable, and its needles didn’t break frequently. The work could be done with a domestic machine, but it would take a long time, which is not appreciated by would-be corset makers. Furthermore, when the corset is tightened every day, such seams are the weak points.

Once a rival did purchase the necessary machine, which proved harder to use and taught a salutary lesson.

*"Mr. A came to see me the other week to ask me about his new machine as it wasn't working right."* Oct 7, 1986

*"I don't think that Mr. A knows a lot about corsets only what he's learnt himself."*

*"I don't really know how Mr. A's corsets hold together. I should think one hard pull and they would come to bits."* 8 Jan 1985.

Of one of her lady customers thought to make corsets, having had success sewing tent repairs for a youth group:-

*"I could not imagine (her) making corsets. She mentioned it to me once but she did not seem all that interested",* April 15, 1984

# 5 HER LIKES AND DISLIKES

## 5.1 IRIS'S OWN CORSETS

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| She was proud of her corsets. *"I'll have to show you my new ones,"* she would say; *“I've just made myself one”*. She would retire upstairs and reappear holding a white cylinder of rolled corset with the chrome suspenders glinting and jangling on their pure white straps. She would open out the roll, proudly showing the wonderful spoon busk and the "Godet" cut, with single spiral steels.At all times Iris wore a "Godet" corset, also sold as style "Jean" by Fanny Copère. Hers were 17 inches long: five inches above the waist and 12 inches below, a length that fully contained her ample hips and derriere yet allowed her to sit comfortably at her machine. The top came close up under her bosom and was overlapped as far as the waist by the lower elastic of her longline bra.  | mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TRpNQZb89RBmiA-zMCHwMKiNO1M4cx5jOY2chxR730zpfN7DnCcjJE9Ww0xN3lGQ_2vfu6yEY0MgW_vqkch3Glym90dW0y526Gdi/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-3.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/FG_jean_b.jpgmhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TRpNQZb89RBmiA-zMCHwMKiNO1M4cx5jOY2chxR730zpfN7DnCcjJE9Ww0xN3lGQ_2vfu6yEY0MgW_vqkch3Glym90dW0y526Gdi/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-3.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/FG_jean_f.jpg |

## 5.2 A FINE FIGURE

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In response to a comment that being corseted and suspendered lifted the spirits, Iris concurred. She would no doubt have agreed with Isobel’s observation to Ivy Leaf that:-

*. s so many women discover, there is something addictive about a really firm girdle, and after a while I found myself missing the tightness, support and control at weekends, when my foundations would consist of little more than an elastic roll-on and short bra. Consequently, when my casual foundations needed replacement, I started to substitute things of ever-increasing firmness and length, until my lingerie drawer boasted little at all in the way of light-control garments."*

As noted earlier, unlike a number of her customers, Iris never wore a night corset. She believed her own regime was as effective. The first thing she did in the morning, the moment after she had got out of bed, was to put on her corsets and lace them as tight as she could. She claimed that if she waited even seconds, she found lacing-in more difficult. She insisted that, in even such a short time, the figure would 'spread, a word that she used very often. She noted that while one might be able to lace down enough to achieve the same waist size later, she had found that the corset would feel less comfortable for the entire day ahead.

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| She would then fasten her stockings. Only when laced in would she put on her dressing gown on and go down to make a cup of tea. All this at about 5 am before she travelled to London. She would remain laced in until retiring at between 9 and 10 each night. **And Playtex thought they had invented the 18-hour girdle.......??**Her movements revealed to the cognoscenti that she was tightly laced. Bending was never easy for her, partly because of her subconscious concern not to break a busk, which, as she pointed out, was dangerous. She herself had been cut by a fearsome jagged edge of spring steel on one occasion when it suddenly snapped as she bent, instantly cutting its way out of its pocket.  | mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TRpNQZb89RBmiA-zMCHwMKiNO1M4cx5jOY2chxR730zpfN7DnCcjJE9Ww0xN3lGQ_2vfu6yEY0MgW_vqkch3Glym90dW0y526Gdi/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-3.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/Iris_garden_1x.jpg |

No longer subject to the rigours of commuting, after retirement she gained weight, and for the LGM Bal (section 7.5, 1985) could only reduce to 21 inches, while in 1991–92 she routinely 'pulled in six inches for '22 over', and pulled in a little more in for her best clothes in April 1989.

*"I did not slim for the do. I think it's just that I've got thinner and when I’m indoors I do not bother to pull myself tight because of moving about."*

While in her 70s in the 1990's she lost a little weight, but kept to a 6-inch pull-in to 22 inches.

Whilst she would never call herself a tight-lacer, Iris certainly followed a much stricter regime than many who “tight lace”. She was proud of her figure and would say that, "I pull in eight inches every day and that gets me down to 19 inches." (1972). Those privileged to escort her out were aware that the few minutes discreet retirement before doing so, were to allow her to pull in that little extra, change her skirt or dress, and no doubt to ensure her stockings seams were as straight as she liked to keep them. After, the seams of her stockings looked straighter, if that was ever possible, and the addition of a more stylish belt had necessitated a good hard pull on the waist of her beloved Godet-style she had worn for over 50 years.

Prior to the Godet she had worn a typical thirties-style tubular corset without which a cockney working class married woman from Islington would never go out. While she bridged more than half a century that saw the corset go from 'de rigueur' attire for all classes of woman, to an item that was worn as outerwear and was espoused by the 'dressing for pleasure' movement, she accepted the changes with equanimity.

## 5.3 IRIS NORRIS AND STOCKINGS

One lady said, not long after she had given up wearing seamed stockings because they were becoming hard to find, she had visited Iris for a fitting and, seeing Iris’s figure, her shapely legs and seamed stockings made her resolve to emulate her. A question was posed and Iris gave her the names of several nearby stores where she bought seamed stockings, and so another person returned to the elegance of the cinched waist, seamed stocking, and point-heel.

David Kunzle noted that many of the tight-lacing women he met wore stockings with straight seams. No doubt he would have met Iris and noted that she fell into that category when he met Frank Gardner in the late 1970's doing his research.

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| Iris had come to like fully-fashioned nylons in the 1940’s and wore them in that style right to the end of her life. She would probably have preferred to wear the styles with square-cut heels, which were really the only type available in Britain in the 1940’s and 1950’s. Apart from wearing Brettles’ Cuban-heeled hose when that style was briefly available during the short-lived British 'seamed stockings revival' of 1979–80, for most of her last 30 years she wore Aristoc's 20-denier, which went under many brand names beginning with 222's in the early 1970’s and ending up at the time of discontinuance in 1993 as Harmony PointsShe was fortunate in that to the end of her life she had shapely legs that were marvellously free of the unsightly veins that are the bane of many women's lives. She knew they were enhanced by the straight seams and long-point heels that graced her calves and ankles. As visiting customers knew, the latter were accentuated because she routinely wore backless heeled mules at home. | mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TRpNQZb89RBmiA-zMCHwMKiNO1M4cx5jOY2chxR730zpfN7DnCcjJE9Ww0xN3lGQ_2vfu6yEY0MgW_vqkch3Glym90dW0y526Gdi/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-3.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/in_rear_pinkx.jpg |

She favoured the Aristoc shade of Bitter Chocolate except in 1978–79 when Aristoc produced 'Sheer Mischief', which had accentuated and exceptionally long point heels and thicker seams. Iris bought as many pairs of these in the shade Gentle Rain as she could. The choice was not lost on her customers, who noticed: in response to a question as to what style she was wearing and where they could be bought, she said, "*Funny you should ask. You’re the second person to ask me today."*

Interestingly, despite the shade becoming so fashionable, a black stocking never graced her legs; a point she would make repeatedly. One can only speculate on why this should be so, and I think that she grew up in an era when black was reserved for mourning or widowhood and in Iris such conventions were embedded. Her own daughter, no doubt thinking her opinion might change, once gave her three pairs in black for Christmas. In what was typical of her, she generously gave them to a customer who would appreciate them.

Close observers of such things would note that her seams were always raised on her calves, indicative of their being worn reverse side' out, not the way the makers intended them to be worn. Some will claim they are more snag-free worn the conventional way, but it was obvious Iris liked the look and risked snagging, though in point of fact one customer never saw her with a ladder in her stockings in 40 appointments. This obviously mattered not a jot to Iris; the look was more important. When questioned, she simply explained that she liked the effect and routinely reversed them from how the manufacturers packaged them, saying, "*I always check that the holes (finishing loops) in the tops are outside before I put them on.*

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| It was also evident that the heel reinforcement of her stockings reached further up her calves than was commonly observed with the style when worn by others. There again Iris had an answer. She liked the visual effect, which was more common in the 1950s, and was clearly flattered by comments on the fact. To achieve the look she always bought stockings at least half a foot-size larger than she really needed. Where size 9½ would do, she routinely bought size 10 or 10½. As would be expected, there were many admirers amongst her male customers who were only too happy to stop off to buy her stockings before meeting. They typically bought them at the local stores near where she worked, James Selby's or the Coop, both in Holloway Road when she was at Gardner’s, or the Coop or Dickens and Jones (until it burned down in the late 1980s) in Milton Keynes, before visiting her at Bletchley.Knowing of her liking for Cuban-heeled stockings, in June 1984 an admirer bought her Albert's Classic 15-denier stockings, in the shade of Sparkle, from the US. She wrote later and said, *"You need not send any money as you already sent me the stockings. I have tried them on but find them short. They will just about go on my suspenders. I should not get me any more when the legs are short."* July 25, 1984.  | mhtml:http://f1.grp.yahoofs.com/v1/0N57TRpNQZb89RBmiA-zMCHwMKiNO1M4cx5jOY2chxR730zpfN7DnCcjJE9Ww0xN3lGQ_2vfu6yEY0MgW_vqkch3Glym90dW0y526Gdi/Iris%20Norris%20%281921-2000%29/Page-3.mht!http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Corsetiere/long_cuban_1x.jpg |

Realising the declining availability of Aristoc Harmony Point style seamed hose in the late 1980's, which decline continued until they were discontinued in 1993, she was happy to purchase or order Harmony Points for a number of grateful stocking-wearing customers unable to locate them in their area.

These interruptions in availability bothered her greatly, as is evidenced by the following quotes from her letters:-

*“If you aren't going to wear your black stockings, I will have them off you. I’ve been getting mine in the Co-op as Dickens and Jones got burnt up in the new city, Milton Keynes. Someone put a firebomb because they sold fur coats. I think with these new sizes they got now you have to buy a size larger to get the leg length. Does Maureen want me to get her some? I will if she wants and post them to her."* 1989.

*"I received the 20 and have bought you slate grey size 5 as there is no black going in that style. I may be able to get you some more slate grey if you want them, but I don't think there's many of that colour left."* 3 Sept 1993

*"I've written to the makers (Aristoc) about the (discontinuance of Harmony Point) stockings but not got an answer yet."* 3 Sept 1993

*I got eleven pairs of stockings size 5 slate-grey if you want them. That was the last of the size 5. They are not making any more. I had letter to say so from Aristoc. 13th Oct 1993*

*(A customer) had found a chap with some Aristoc stockings to sell, everything by six. This is his name and phone number."* July 30, 1994

## 5.4 ON ACCEPTING CORSET-CONTROL AND TIGHTNESS

It is interesting to compare Iris’s attitude to corseting with that of other corset wearers. Ivy Leaf’s web site offers the testimony of two such individuals, [Isobel](http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Isobel.htm) and [Alison](http://www.corsetiere.net/Spirella/Spencer_alison.htm). Alison one would estimate to be half a generation younger than Iris. Alison’s fearsome manager was probably a whole generation older, a little younger than A’s mother, and probably both had begun corseting in Edwardian times.

Alison is honest about her mother's acceptance of strict corset control and it is most likely that her manager, from the same generation, would also have been as strictly corseted, and probably out of choice if the sentiments Iris quotes are reflective of her attitude. It is thus reasonable to say that she, A’s mother, and Iris would have known no other adulthood than one lived strictly corseted. It is this absolute acceptance of always being corseted that Iris brought to her work. Whether the weather was cold or oppressively hot, one remained corseted till retiring for the night. That said, initially Alison, despite her similar background, was a reluctant corset wearer, as her words attest:

*I was too concerned by the completely new and alien feeling of being encased from shoulders to thighs in unyielding black satin...."*

*“. . . She required all her corsetières to wear corselets, or all-in-ones as they are often called now. She thought they gave a much smoother figure (which I must admit they did) and, as they were the firmest type of garments Spencer made, they gave a good example to our customers. After all, she explained, if we didn’t wear one, how could we recommend they wear one? I still remember that corselet; it was called the Spen-All...."*

*“. . . I found the Spen-All very restrictive, especially when I had to bend down to measure a customer or adjust her stockings or garters, but in time I got used to it."*

But what Alison’s manager and Iris knew was that, given a chance to be regularly corseted, even the reluctant wearer comes to prefer to live like that, rather than to remain uncorseted. Alison, in writing to Ivy Leaf, attests to this when she says:-

*“Then, strangely enough, after a few months, I began to need it. In fact I felt lost without it. I am not saying I particularly liked it, but after the first few months I started to look forward to the feel of its firm support, and I put it on as soon as I got up in the morning”.*

As Iris once said:-

 *"No I don't think it’s bad to pull in as long as you know how much you can take. Some people just overdo it."* Jan 8 1985

# 6 CUSTOMERS

## 6.1 GENERAL

The customers she inherited from Gardner’s, Overett, and Madame Marie Stafford of Sunbury were drawn from the highest to the lowest social standings and from about 15 countries worldwide. There were public school educated men, and women who had been first corseted at the insistence of nuns at convent schools in the late 1940s. They included:-

* Married couples or partners who both wore corsets
* Individual women — single or married
* Individual men — single and married

Several individuals and not a few couples were introduced to Gardner’s and Iris after forming acquaintances with Will and Ethel Granger. Many travelled as much as 200 miles to visit her, first at Gardner’s and then at her home. Those from overseas would include a visit en route elsewhere or on visits to the UK.

Although it is rarely recorded, most corsetières knew that certain of their customers had other reasons for corseting than mere figure control. In the face of this, Iris's attitude was professional and correct. She would not pass judgment, even if she knew that such corsets were either central or peripherally essential to activities she would never countenance. While she was not a prude, all she would do was acknowledge the existence of such facts, but she would never be persuaded to enter into discussion of such matters. Happily most of her customers understood her rules and respected them. Those who did not, or would not, soon realised they were not welcome in her salon, neither at Gardner’s nor at her home.

Thus she could equally be a friend and confidante to both the most modest and the most outgoing of women, and to the most diffident as well as with the most self-confident of gentlemen. Her principal concern was that no one took advantage of either sense of propriety, or of her business, or tried to compromise any confidences. To do so was to challenge her tolerance and join the small group of individuals who were no longer welcome in her salon.

## 6.2 COUPLES

In one case, a husband, wife, and their secretary became customers. The couple had tight-laced since the 30's and they had encouraged their secretary to train her figure too, and all three were customers of Overett. This salon, they said with no implied criticism of Iris, produced corsets whose fit they would extol even 24 years after his death.

A large-framed woman, the secretary reduced from 28 to 19 inches between 1955 and 1960 and remained as a customer of Iris from 1962 until 1999, shortly before her death. She favoured the same style of corset as Iris wore, the Godet L267, with an amazing (in 1965) 26-inch hip-spring and, to please a foible of her husband's, as many as seven pairs of suspenders. Iris also made the couple a number of mannequin styles over the years to wear at corset soirées or, as Iris called them, parties. The husband had worn corsets since his teens but the onset of arthritis forced him to stop in his 70's.

Since Iris had few personal customers who enjoyed the hip control of her own Godet style, she always enjoyed appointments with this client. They would discuss the advantages and the trials being tightly laced whilst driving long distances or in warm weather.

From the Midlands hailed the smallest waisted customer on Iris’s books, who had initially dealt with Yanovsky or Jean Appleby’s salon in Edgware Road, London. She moved to Iris in about 1965. A school nurse, she had corseted since the age of eleven in the late 1940's, as required by her convent school, very much like Isobel’s experience with her Scottish boarding school about a decade later. She emulated her mother when she began tight lacing as a student nurse in the mid-1950's. Before pregnancy, she had reached 18 inches, and recounted how her husband brought corsets to her while on the maternity ward—so much had she missed being corseted. From about 1965 she practised 24-hour-a-day tight lacing and maintained a 17-inch waist, but that was her limit. As Iris wrote:-

*“No, Mrs.\_ has never ordered anything smaller than 17 inches. He wanted her to once, but she would not have it.”*

She very much liked Mrs \_, and wrote:-

*“I think Mrs. \_ looks very nice as she is, I don't think she should go any smaller. She came in here once and I should think she was pulled too tight and had a job to breathe, I think it is mad. I hope she doesn't get like Mrs. Granger, I think she looked horrible."* 10 June 1985

Her husband, who had always admired her waist, was also encouraged to corset and became a customer of Iris’s in the mid-1970s, and remained a customer until Iris died.

Interestingly, Mrs \_ shared Iris’s preference for very long stocking heels, and for special occasions wore tan stockings with such heels in the older square, or Cuban, shape because they were readily available, and not the point-heels she usually wore. It turned out that as a young woman in the 1950's they had been her favourite style and her husband liked the style very much too. They said they liked the look of having the stocking heels ending not far from the 1950’s hemline, which began at mid-calf. She had preserved several pairs of them from the 1950’s and kept them for over 30 years for wear on special occasions.

A modest woman, she had been surprised in the early 1980's to realise what an impression her amazing waist made on the male sex, and would amusedly relate that she was sure that the aura she brought to a discussion enabled her to win her point where, given the tendency for the man to prevail, she was sure she would have been the loser.

Another tight-lacing couple hailed from Norway; the man worked for the UN in New York. In the early 1980's the wife was suddenly afflicted with a form of eczema that was traced to the metal in her corset steels. Iris tried every means of isolating the metal in special pockets, but to no avail, and the disappointed woman, now in her 50's, was forced to abandon her tight-lacing regime. She had begun it in her teens in the early post-war era and had enjoyed it in partnership with her husband, who continued as a customer of Iris.

She wrote of another couple:-

*"I've made a few corsets lately and they all seem satisfied. Had a chap come Tuesday for his, he was more than pleased and may fetch his girl friend."* July 21 1983

Another man began corseting because his wife did, only for her to stop:-

*The man whose wife’s photos were taken for Mr. Gardner's catalogue phoned the other day. I asked him if he wrote to you but he said not yet. I don’t think his wife is keen on it (tight lacing) by what he said.* Jan 8, 1985

## 6.3 LADY CUSTOMERS

### 6.3.1 CATHY JUNG

After the first LGM *Bal* she attended, Iris made a corset for Cathy Jung, and later made some more.

*“Yes, Cathy Jung and her husband came to see me, he seemed quite pleased with the corset; it fitted her, I think to a T. They ordered another on the phone last week but I shan't do it till I come back (from holiday). I should not say anything to X as he might think I'm taking his customers. Mr. B of Germany sent me a note to see if I was still making Mr. Gardner's styles so I wrote back and said I was. Then I phoned X for a piece of the beige material for Cathy Jung's but did not tell him whom it was for. He asked me if I wanted to do a high top with fluted hips for Mr. B but he was waiting for material to come, but I said I was going away so I suppose he (X) will do them himself.”* July 1993

### 6.3.2 ETHEL GRANGER

Whilst at Gardner’s, Iris dealt with Will and Ethel Granger, but like most corsetières whom the couple patronised, the relationship didn't last, largely on account of Will's overbearing personality.

*"As for Mrs. Granger, she died last year sometime so I heard. I've heard of all the makers you mention, but think some of them don't do it now, but I made Mrs. Granger a few corsets when she could not get them done anywhere else.* 1 Aug 1983

*Mrs. Granger died last year. I think it was in the paper; somebody told me it was the evening one. They seemed very nice people but I only met them once. The corset I made for her was about 12" deep, no suspenders, but she had them made in other places as well.* Oct 1983

### 6.3.3 THE PRIVATE LADY FROM AYLESBURY

One of Iris's most private, but loyal, customers was a woman from Aylesbury, Bucks who had entrusted her corseting to Iris, first via Gardner’s and then directly until Iris died. She had tight-laced in the early years of marriage and only returned to it in the 1970's when she divorced and resumed work as a nurse. At first she wore corsets for support at work, but decided to recreate her youthful waist, which she achieved, no doubt under Iris's counsel. She wore the L267 Godet, finally maintaining a waist of 18 inches with a hip spring of 23 inches.

### 6.3.4 MARIA-ANNA JÄGER

(Added in 2009 and courtesy of Thomas B. Lierse, creator of the [Long Island Staylace Association](http://www.staylace.com/))

This is a picture taken in 2005 (at age 60) of a German tight-lacer Maria-Anna J‰ger. Although the photograph was taken well after Iris Norris stopped working, such was the strength (by necessity) of her creations that the corset might well still be an 'Iris Norris original'.

*“My mother in law was French and she died in 2008. Among her possessions was a picture of a tight corset wearer, her friend Marie-Anna Jäger, whom she met in 1963 when they were both at university in Strasbourg. They were friends for 44 years until Marie-Anna died in 2007. She never married. This Polaroid photo was taken on her 60th birthday in 2005 and I think it was an act of bravado to record her appearance on an important day. In a note, she said that her waist was the same measurement as it had been at the age of 18 years and her corsets were made by Iris Norris. Also, she said that it may be published after her death. My mother-in-law said, ‘keep it until I’ve gone, my dear.’*

*“So here is a picture, probably of an Iris Norris corset worn by a German lady aged 60 years.”*



## 6.4 GENTLEMEN CUSTOMERS

### 6.4.1 GENERAL—SENSITIVES

New gentleman customers often approached a contact with a corsetière nervously, because they had the perception that their desire to corset was in some way unseemly. Indeed, some would tell of firm rebuffs when they had attempted to make contact elsewhere. However, even those whose first contact was with Iris Norris were almost universally surprised by the way she gave a friendly response to every question, along with a suggestion that they should visit Gardner's salon whenever they wished. Anyone who spoke over the telephone felt instantly at ease and would not have hesitated, however shy, to take up her suggestion.

A scene involving a woman clad in only a corset, suspenders, and stockings has been the butt of vulgar humour from the time of the music hall; e.g., Benny Hill. Small wonder therefore that the idea that a man might disrobe and be seen wearing the same was and is a fear of the potential male customer.

However, it is certain that any gentleman who pressed her fitting room bell for the first time, and then waited in gathering shame, and blushing, was immediately relieved as the door opened and Iris stood there with her tape measure. The combination of her gentle tone of voice and her calm matter-of-fact words reassured him that he was being accepted and not being judged. Simon's corsetière, Mary, had a similar approach to Iris’s:-

*She said that she had always enjoyed being corseted and felt that anyone who had similar feelings should be actively encouraged."*

While they were a distinct minority, they were in no way worthy of censure of such requirements. She understood that the world was made up of all kinds of people and few were bad. How had this come about? How did her non-judgmental attitude form?

First, Gardner's, where she always worked, had always made corsets for men, unlike firms and individual corsetières who dealt exclusively with women. Her first boss, Arthur Gardner, wore them himself. She had machined men's corsets. In time she met such customers—generally established customers of the firm. When she assumed more duties in the 1970's and new gentlemen approached the firm in response to advertisements, her salon manner was well established.

Second, an employee of the business desiring to satisfy the customers' needs adopts the dictum that 'the customer is always right'. With such an attitude, there was no room for any misguided moral judgment. In any case, where would one draw the line? Was it all right for a man to wear a corset if medically necessary, and wrong if he wanted to because largely on a subconscious level he liked the support it gave? Attempts have been made to define the motivation to corset in psychological terms but the findings and interpretations are always found wanting.

Third, Iris Norris had the best relationships, whilst working on her own, with gentlemen who wore stockings and suspenders with their corsets, as she did. One can only speculate that there was a mutual recognition that, despite the fundamental difference of gender, they shared something important to their daily lives. There's no doubt that she did have her favourites, and those fortunate individuals would echo Simon’s observation of his corsetière, Mary, that:-

*Quite why she took to me so affectionately I shall never know, but I shall always be glad that she did."*

Likewise there are persons would say of Iris, as Simon did of his corsetière:-

*I will always be thankful to Mary. She was very kind and gentle and responded to my fascination with corsets in a very positive and encouraging way.*

In point of fact, such persons had always been customers of Gardner’s from Edwardian times. However in those less tolerant times, it all had been very discreet and non-judgmental.

Like Simon’s Mary, she also realised that some men, like some women who have corseted regularly, felt motivated to reduce their waists. There is no doubt that Iris would agree with Simon’s observation that, had Mary lived:-

*I would have been trained to have an even better hip-spring than I had, although I was more than happy with what we had achieved."*

Indeed, Simon gives testimony to the fact that after the initial period of getting to know each other, the customer-corsetière relationship, whatever the gender of the parties involved, becomes a partnership, and usually one of mutual trust and respect.

### 6.4.2 GENERAL—INSENSITIVES

Her customers ranged from the sincere, polite and pleasant, to the arrogant, presumptuous and pushy. There would be some men whose behaviour bordered on impropriety. Corsetières experienced with gentleman customers could quickly sum up what kind of a person they were dealing with. In this regard, Iris was no exception. She was a good judge of character, and the writer generally agreed with her opinion.

If a customer was at the limit of acceptably, he would be discouraged. Whilst business is business, serious insensitivity of the respect of the corsetière is always unacceptable. She applied the same standards when she set up to work alone.

To a businesswoman, customers—especially repeat customers—represent income and a livelihood. The key is to develop the ability to accommodate their behaviour and suppress one's personal feelings unless circumstances demanded otherwise. A satisfied customer, regardless of character, within reason, represents repeat business, and traditionally customers patronized Gardner’s for their entire adult lives. (It would, as we know, take a sea change in public attitude in the 1940's for the corset business to decline over a generation to the point of oblivion by 1990.)

However, the overt behaviour of some such persons in the 1980's meant that they were quickly shown the proverbial door. It was not due to the special reason they had for seeing her, it was their attitude and behaviour that she could not and would not tolerate.

She did however say that she felt that those guilty of presumption and arrogance failed to understand that she had neighbours, and that she could not be the cause of behaviour that, though she might tolerate it as essentially harmless, others might find objectionable. Twenty years on, of course, such has been the change in what is regarded as acceptable behaviour that today almost anything goes. It may be better that Iris had moved on.

That said, for persons with such needs, who were sincere and polite and pitched the request properly, after the corset fitting, she would allow them to remain in the salon and dress in their female apparel. Such was her empathy that she might even remain with them and assist them and comment or reassure them that their new corsets were achieving the effect they sought.

Despite that, she did in point of fact say that she had very few transvestite customers, and observed that she had found that it was not a corset that they needed but a girdle bought in a department store, which was more easily purchased and much cheaper, given the total outlay such a lifestyle had.

### 6.4.3 SPECIFIC SENSITIVES — MOSTLY MR. Mc\_

There was the owner of a stately home (which has been much used as a backdrop for films and television), a career army officer, who had begun corseting when his female mentor introduced him to Lawrence Lenton in 1938, moving to Overett after the war and to Gardner’s in 1962, before continuing with Iris in 1981. He was a one of a number of ex-army or RAF officers who were initially with Overett.

From overseas, there was a customer who was a German aerospace engineer, much involved in rocketry, who had been a Gardner’s customer since the early 1960's. From South Africa a man continued to patronise her until his later 80's and who died in 1989. He had first appreciated a tight 'Sam Brown' belt arrangement on his uniform when a junior officer in Palestine in 1917 and his first corsetier had been Mr. S Lee of Southsea, near Portsmouth.

With long-established customers of both sexes whom she respected, Iris took an interest in their personal lives. For instance, she followed the retirement years of one customer, Mr. Mc\_, especially when she didn’t hear from him, only to see him re-emerge as a widower.

A public school boy, he had been an executive with a major oil company who had spent years in foreign parts. He and his wife had followed the Lenton, Stafford, Overett, Gardner path. For the first forty years of their marriage, both he and his wife had worn corsets appropriate to the climate wherever they lived. Suffering ill-health late in the 1970's, his wife gave up tight-lacing, but he continued to wear the military type high-top corset as he had done for many years with suspenders and fully fashioned stockings under his business suits. He wore this to work and continued to do so after retirement and the death of his wife.

He subsequently remarried his wife's friend, apparently on condition that he gave up wearing corsets and stockings. It's unclear whether he felt giving up the corsets had not been worth it, and the marriage failed within a few years. Ironically he was cruelly handicapped by a stroke in 1991 and found solace again if he could get into his corsets, though he was forced to abandon stockings. Curiously, he had retired to newly gentrified Fulham, within half a mile of his first corsetière, Lenton.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Iris regarded him with real affection and mused that he lived in fear of her retiring, for in addition to getting regular replacements, he would make a sudden order for up to ten corsets in three styles. When another customer sent her a Hella Knabe-style culotte (leg) corset for alteration, she carefully measured the panels used to construct it, and advised Mr. Mc\_, who had a large wardrobe of corsets of many styles, that she could now do him that style, which she had previously preferred not to do. He wrote to Iris to say how touched he was by her kind spirit and initiative that would now allow his long-held ambition to lace into one. This is how she wrote of him:*"I made Mr. Mc\_ a corset about July but he never mentioned his wife’s (death)."* 13 Aug 1989Later she was to write more positively, if somewhat wistfully that he had strayed from the path of corseting:-knabe_culotte_hosen_kx*Did you know Mr. Mc\_ got married at the beginning of the month? I think he has given up corsets. He said he won't need any more so I guess I've lost myself a good customer* 26 August 1990*A month later she wrote Mr. Mc\_ never got married again. He wrote for a new corset and said he was going to Canada to think it over  (second marriage delay)."*  1 Oct 1990*I heard from that Mr. Mc\_ about two weeks ago. He has moved out. I don't think they hit it off and I think it got worse after his stroke. I feel sorry for him since he seems a very nice man but I suppose nobody knows anybody until you live with them. I think it was silly of him to give it (corseting) up, he very likely missed it.*  3 Sept 1993  |  |

# 7 FRIENDS, ACQUAINTANCES, AND CORSET PARTIES

## 7.1 CONTACTS WITH OTHER CORSETIÈRES

The shortage of components, especially busks, resulted in Iris approaching firms such as Vollers for such items on a co-operative basis. Other firms, for which she did bulk orders and which had their own ability to purchase in bulk, would also come to her assistance. Fortunately, Michael Garrod had approached her for instruction after he had established True Grace Foundations, and she attempted to teach him how to sew a fluted-hip corset, but he freely admitted that it proved to be beyond his not inconsiderable sewing skills. As a result, her generosity was reciprocated when he sent her all her large hip-spring orders. Over the years, corsetier and corsetière regularly provided one another with busks, flat or spiral steels in hard-to-find lengths, bolts of expensive broche fabric, and suspender ends.

Over the years her work took her into a number of activities and events outside the corset salon. These are discussed below.

## 7.2 PHOTOGRAPHS FOR “THE CORSET QUESTION”



At the height of her prowess, at age 50 in 1971, Iris was prevailed upon, by the owner of Fanny Copère corsets, to pose for the cover of a compendium of Victorian letters on tight lacing.

It was arranged for Iris to come to the photo studio. Knowing she was being photographed on account of her corseted figure, she selected her attire carefully, taking a satin skirt and knitted sweaters in black and white. She wore shoes with 2½-inch heels, the same as the mules she customarily wore around the house.

Three wonderful photographs of her appeared on the cover and the inside of Fanny Copère’s book, *The Corset Question,* in 1971. Iris Norris's figure when corseted was magnificent: bust 38, waist 19, and hips 40, a full inch over the ideal 20-inch hip spring sought by the determined tight-lacer.

 Some years later, her sponsor recalled with some amusement the considerable effort that both he and the photographer had to make when helping Iris with her staylaces. Of the session, in 1985 he wrote:-

*"She started tight-lacing 20/25 years ago (1960, ed), age 40 when as she said, she had a "belly like an ox" although she wore boned but not tight-lacing corsets. She now laces in to 20 inches, the only 19-inch corset she ever wore was for my photos, and it was hard work pulling her in as I did it myself, as she was not then down to 20 inches regularly. We did once try to get her below 19 inches, I used to see her almost every week for about 14 years or so with the business, but we failed. In 1968, she actually used to conceal her waist and did not make clothes to fit it."* 5 Feb 1985.

She finally measured the agreed 19 inches over the corset. In moments she had hooked up the waistband of the matching size of that lovely full satin skirt, adjusted her top, cinched on the narrow black belt, and was ready to pose. Many photographs were taken, and the best appeared on the cover of the book, with two others inside.

### 7.2.1 A CASE FOR THE CORSET DETECTIVE?

Attempts have been made to track down the original negatives, and both the photographer and Iris have been quizzed. Her response was:-

*I can't really tell you where I got them taken as it's such a long while ago. If you ask Mr.C\_, he will tell you, as he was the one who asked me to have it done. He paid out the money as far as I know. It was in London that they were took* (sic)"*.*

Sadly, Fanny Copère’s owner himself was never able recall the name of the photographer who had retained the copyright. Years later he wrote:-

*I do not have the negatives, and the photographer is no longer in the London 'phone book. When I am next up, I will call around his premises and find out if he is still in business* 12 Nov 1984

Likewise with the catalogue photos, a search came to no avail, for he then wrote:-

*"I have not yet been able to trace the photographer, who took the catalogue photos. The models were ordinary commercial models, whose names I have forgotten. The one on the front (modelling 'Miss Copère', ed.) has been modelling outsize dresses for years."* 2 July 1985

So somewhere in London those negatives may still exist awaiting rediscovery.

## 7.3 A DUKE’S TIGHT-LACING DAUGHTER IN LAW

As is well known, the leading practitioners of tight lacing were late Victorian and Edwardian royalty and aristocracy in Europe and the upper crust in North America. It was a mid-20th century member of that class, by marriage, however, who deserves a place in our story. It cannot be proven but it is almost certain that in her later years she entrusted her figure to Gardner’s, and later to Iris.

It began when Copère’s owner got into the business because, in about 1967, he met socially with a duke's daughter in law:-

*"My principal interest in tight-lacing arose from my wish (in 1966–67, ed.) to find a suitable article to sell as a mail order business when I retired. I knew (socially, ed.) a duke's daughter in law who had a fine figure, even at age 79 (in 1984). She had tight-laced for 60 years. I thought there might be other women with the same inclination".*Feb 1984

And in a later letter, he explained that it must have been she who had put him in touch with tight-lacing corset makers:-

*"The woman who put me on the tight-lacing trail as a business is not a relative. I know that socially in London she does not admit to tight lacing, although she can only bend from the hips, and her 19-inch waist and 42 inch hips are scarcely natural. All I know is that she is a farmer's daughter from Scotland who 'pulled-in as a girl' and kept it up. She was born in 1905. Quite obviously her late husband, the son of the duke, married her because of her waist. His first wife had had a very small waist judging from photos. I know the size of the woman's waist, from her corset maker."* 2 July 1985

It can only be inferred that, when he met the woman in 1967–68, when she was in her early 60's, she was almost certainly a customer of either Gardner's or Vollers or both. Then, on the basis of this information, he then made contact with both Vollers and Gardner's and eventually met Iris in about 1968. Quite who divulged her measurements is unclear, but it would never have been the always-discreet Iris.

Even the most deferential reader will wonder what the importance of the woman being married into the aristocracy might be to our account. As ever Iris had the answer in a short unrelated sentence of another letter, asking if she recalled the photo salon.

*I should do nothing for him; he's a snob* 8 Jan 1989.

This comment sums up Iris’s character; she liked sincerity. She was not a sycophant.

## 7.4 ATTENDANCE AT LES GRACIEUSES MODERNES (LGM’s) 'BAL DES GRACIEUSES'

In early 1985, Iris was prevailed on by the founder of *LGM,* Rudi Van Ginkel of Germany, who had been given her name by another customer, to tell her customers of the first ball. Discreet as ever, she would not divulge a single address. However, it was clear that, while broadly accepting the idea, one got a clear sense that if she had known him or his lady partner as established customers she would have been more receptive.

She dearly wanted to go, but knew her husband would not like the event and believed he would refuse. What was she to do? One could only but imagine Iris's anguish. She was now the doyenne of British corsetières, working in her own right, yet likely to miss the first event in which the common interest was the corseted figure. The rules were clear, men accompanied by a lady and women alone, no single men. Anyone who knew her would know that she would not go alone. While confident in the ambience of a corsetière's salon, she was retiring socially. She would have to have an escort and, resourceful as ever she found one.

Luckily, for years she had accorded the husband of a former customer she had met at Gardner’s her always-discreet and platonic friendship. She knew how much he admired her figure and deportment. When meeting at a pub, he would complain of how, to his eternal regret, his wife of 40 years had, on doctor's orders, suddenly and completely given it up. This was in about 1980, after 50 years of tight lacing. Iris clearly reminded him of how his wife used to look. He admired her very much, and she indulged his aimless telephone calls and visits to a fault. And so he became her escort for the Bal

*The party's on Nov 2nd and I'm going with Mr. C* 18 Sep 1985

The matter was cleared with her husband and all seemed to be well. A very indiscreet individual, one whom who she had discouraged from being a customer, knew her phone number, and it was everyone's misfortune that when the culprit phoned to speak to Iris of the Bal, she was out and he had spoken to her husband and to use her words:-

*"Somebody phoned when I was out, and told him there would be fun and games at the 'Do'. You should have heard him when I came in, he's told me not to go but he's annoyed because I never asked him to go, but did not think he would want to. The person who phoned has made bad feelings all round."* 21 Oct 1985

Anyway, Iris attended the first of the four annual *Les Gracieuses Modernes’ Bal des Gracieuses* to be held in Great Britain on 2nd Nov 1985. It was held at the Letchworth Hall Hotel in Letchworth, ironically just a stone's throw from the old Spirella corset factory that was about to close. Ever correct and proper, she paid her own way, and that included her own room at the hotel venue.

As it happened, the first "Bal" was a reasonable success and Iris decided to go to the second event held in a hotel in Queensway in Nov 1986; however it was plagued with administrative problems. As Iris was to write:-

*"I think we all got conned as the chap, who went to the ball last year dressed as woman, took it over from Ginkel and made all the arrangements so he said, but it was awful. I would not go again with him organising it. I think he was on the make. The food he got was not nice. I don't know what happened to Mr. Ginkel. I could not find out and they made an excuse and said he had problems. The hotel was dirty and the carpets torn.* 27 Nov 1986

With the same escort she nevertheless had enjoyed meeting old friends, especially as all had an interest in what she would freely admit was her favourite subject, making corsets and wearing them.

*I think everybody looked nice at the ball but then it’s all according to what shape you like. The woman who wore the long busk was just straight down and looked most uncomfortable and could not sit down, which I think is awful."* Jan 1987

She attended the Bal in 1988 with an escort from Sweden for whose wife she made corsets, and with a gentleman corsetier in 1989.

She was conscious of her hearing being more limited in loud places, but word had it that Iris was always able to seek out old customers and meet others she rarely saw. At each Bal, she gave them advice, measured them, and even arranged appointments for new customers. All in all she had a good time, and John never objected again. He saw that his wife was, as ever, the essence of discretion.

## 7.5 HER ADMIRERS

Iris was admired by many men who just wanted to be in the presence of a mature woman with a fine figure shaped by a corset. She would always wear her seamed stockings, often as their wives once had.

It would not be unreasonable to speculate that Iris's ultimate acceptance as friends of men who tight-laced and wore seamed stockings arose because she implicitly knew that they approved that she tight-laced and liked seams. It was as though she got the approval for her elegance that she felt was denied her in her marriage.

Despite her being married, some customers became admirers, and she had to turn down many proposals of marriage and suggestions to leave the family home. While flattered, she was never tempted. “*I can't imagine what he's thinking of. He doesn't know me, I'd never marry again,*” though she happily posed for photographs, front and rear, for as many as half a dozen of her customers or admirers, always well-cinched by a belt and wearing high heels.

That is the way that Iris Norris will always be remembered.

# REFERENCES

**1** Born Islington, N1, London, Dec 25, 1921.  Died Bletchley, Bucks, April 19, 2000

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