

Periodically, the question of boning material for corsets comes up on various different newsgroups that I monitor. Mostly, these questions come from people who are new to the joys of period corsetry and who are looking for cheap, effective and reasonable alternatives to suit whatever their needs are. Because this question comes up so frequently, I thought it might make a little bit of sense if someone (i.e.. me) put together a synopsis of different types of boning that are typically used in period corsetry. I also thought it might be useful if I included info on where to find the materials, cost, practicality and what tools are required to work with that particular boning.

Modern Boning Materials

CABLE TIES:



Description: Cable ties are my perennial favorite. They are rigid, flexible and basically idiot proof. I buy the 24" or 34" lengths in packs of 10 and cut them to size. Two packs can fully bone a corset, similar to the one pictured at left. Don't let the fact that they're plastic fool you; these suckers are amazingly rigid.

Availability: Very readily available. I buy mine in the electrical aisle at Home Depot. Any largish hardware store should carry them in a variety of sizes. The white plastic ties are the same as the black/gray/red plastic ties, but make sure that you don't get the smaller lengths or the skinny ones.

Cost: Roughly US\$6 per package of 10. Very affordable.

Tools: A pair of scissors is all it takes. Sometimes it's useful to blunt the edges by using a candle and carefully melting the jagged ends that might poke through fabric. This is very stinky and not at all good to be doing indoors. Take it from me.

Similar To: As far as I can tell, the cable ties are the nearest thing to whalebone that I've found. Whalebone is still a very different creature, but

the cable ties approximate the flexibility of whalebone very nicely.

Brownie Points: They're washable and you can put them in the dryer on low. They're also rustproof, mold-proof and generally indestructible. They're widely available, inexpensive and you can cut them to size with nothing more than a pair of scissors. It doesn't get much better than that.

Draw Backs: None that I can think of, off hand.

HEMP/JUTE TWINE:



Description: The hemp boning craze of 2002 was spearheaded by my genius friend [Jen Thompson](#), who wisely decided to capitalize on a little known boning material. Research is sketchy about whether or not this was actually used in corsets and bodices in the 16th century, but there is solid evidence of hemp rope being used to stiffen petticoats from the mid-16th century(1). By the 18th century, hemp twine was definitely being used in corsets, so Jen figured that it was pretty reasonable to go with it for a 16th century corset. The best hemp twine to use is the 1/8" diameter. Jute twine is less rigid, but when quadrupled up into a boning channel works admirably as well as hemp.

Availability: Variable. Most craft stores carry hemp in their bead aisle, geared towards the people who make those hippie hemp macramé necklaces. You'll most commonly find the 1/16" diameter stuff, which is far too tiny for use in corsets. I've had a hard time finding the 1/8" stuff

in my local craft stores, but recently I discovered that my local health food co-op occasionally carries it, and

a local bead store consistently stocks it. It comes in a BIG spool, so typically you can't miss it. Jute is somewhat easier to find and less expensive.

Cost: About US\$8 per spool, from what I've seen. A spool typically comes with about 100 feet on it, which actually can go surprisingly fast, particularly if you're doubling the strands per boning channel. Spools of Jute usually cost around US\$5 or so and come with less yardage.

Tools: A pair of scissors to cut the twine and some sort of needle to thread the twine into the boning channel. Jen has some ingenious suggestions on how to make this tool on [her hemp corsetry site](#).

Similar To: Hemp stands alone in it's own category. Since it's not verifiably period, but has been used in other garments during the 16th century, it might actually belong in the Period Boning category. Until we find historical evidence of this, however, it remains a really good working hypothesis.

Brownie Points: Gives a nice smooth line without producing a rigid conical shape. This is particularly useful for people who sew Italian 16th century clothes, or any other region that doesn't require such a stiff posture as most 16th century English clothes do. It's also very comfortable and surprisingly sturdy. It's washable, but I'd line dry it just to be sure.

Draw Backs: There's been some conflicting reports as to how well hemp stands up in high humidity, coupled with being drenched in sweat. Some people report no problems, others have said that it can lose it's rigidity once it gets moist. I haven't ever subjected my hemp corset to high humidity or intense heat, so I can't comment.



METAL BONING:

Description: This is what everyone is coached into thinking is the absolutely best boning material ever, not to mention "period". I have to disagree on both counts. Metal boning comes in a variety lengths and widths and is typically referred to as "spring steel". While suitably rigid, it's not exactly flexible in the way that most people find comfortable. It's also not exactly "period" (well, for the 16th century, anyway).

Availability: Hard to find in person unless you live in Berkeley, CA or Ontario, Canada. Otherwise, you can order it online from [Lacis](#) or [Farthingales](#) and a handful of smaller internet costume supply stores.

Cost: Varies from store to store according to length and width. Typically, most places will give you a discount if you order a certain number of bones or more.

Tools: Really good tin snips, metal file and plastic tool dip are all good to have handy when working with spring steel. This stuff is a pain to cut, though, and you have to go through some trouble to file off the sharp edges and then dip the cut end into plastic/poly dip and wait for the coating to dry. It's kind of more of a pain than it's worth, as far as I'm concerned, but then, I'm not big on suffering for my art.

Similar To: Nothing really. It's the most rigid of all boning material and kinda speaks for itself. I have no knowledge of metal boning being used in 16th century corsets or clothing, but I could be wrong.

Brownie Points: It's metal, so it's pretty durable as far as corset boning goes. If you fully bone your corset, it can even be used for light weapons armor (I'm not kidding here. I've known ladies who have used it in combat archery legal corsets). It's washable, up to a point.

Draw Backs: It can rust. Yes, it can. I don't care if they say that the coating is to prevent rust, it still will. It's also a pain in the arse to work with, as I've stated before. If you don't buy the right lengths ahead of time (and this typically requires that you have your corset completely made and the boning channels sewn in

before hand) you will be forced to cut them to the proper length and I've yet to find a pair of tin snips that won't kill my hands.

Period Boning Materials

BUCKRAM, CARDBOARD & PASTEBOARD:



Description: Buckram, cardboard and pasteboard are frequently referenced in Queen Elizabeth's wardrobe accounts throughout her reign as being used to stiffen bodices, pairs of bodies, and the ilk. (2) I am not entirely sure what "pasteboard" is, but my guess is that it's some form of glue-stiffened fabric. That's pretty close to what buckram is, actually. Cardboard, I'm not so sure about, but I'm guessing it's not at all like modern cardboard. Buckram is the only one of these three materials that I've attempted to use in a corset (that's it to the left). It's typically used for millinery. All three materials are also commonly used to stiffen stomachers, as well. (3)

Availability: Cardboard is everywhere. Pasteboard, who knows? Buckram is hit or miss at the local fabric store, but you can order it online in different stiffness.

Cost: Cardboard is usually free. Buckram isn't. Buckram will cost you anywhere from a few dollars a yard to several dollars a yard, depending on where you find it.

Tools: Scissors.

Modern Equivalents: Plastic canvas works nicely if you can't find buckram.

Brownie Points: Lightweight, but not much else.

Draw Backs: Flimsy and buckles under any kind of strain (notice the large diagonal crease on the left side of the corset in the picture). I had to quilt the heck out of that corset and eventually cheated by adding metal boning to the major stress points to keep it from crumpling. I've never had any success with using buckram in a corset and I'm boggled at how it could have been used in period. Perhaps 16th century buckram was a lot different than modern buckram, or tailors were being clever and didn't line the entire garment with it. Otherwise, I have no idea how it would work if you're even the least bit lumpy.

REEDS:

Description: At least one remnant of an extant corset dated to the 16th century was definitely boned with small bundles of reeds packed tightly into boning channels. The other two 16th century corsets that have made it to the modern era might possibly have been boned with reeds, but they have disintegrated. (4)

Availability: Fairly available. I've heard of people cutting and drying their own reeds to make bents for a corset. Others have ordered reeds from basketry supply stores. My corset to the left was boned with bundles of decorative reeds that I found on sale at Michael's in the floral department.

Cost: Varies depending on whether you make them yourself (free), buy them online from a basketry store (a little pricey) or if you luck out and find something that will work at a craft store, like I did. I bought my reeds for about US\$3 per package.

Tools: Scissors and a lot of patience.

Modern Equivalents: None, really. Reeds are reeds.

Brownie Points: Reeds make a surprisingly sturdy boning material, plus they're lightweight and will allow air to



move through the corset while it's being worn because they tend to spread out in the channels. They will also conform more comfortably to the body than other types of boning, much like hemp twine. Surprisingly, they don't tend to break while being worn.

Draw Backs: Reeds can be fussy to work with. Threading the tiny bundles into the boning channels can be exasperating. I've not tried to wash my corset, but I'd be a little worried about mold and mildew forming on the reeds if subjected to a wash. Also, there is potential for breakage, typically if you do something silly like step on the corset or cram it unceremoniously into the back of a drawer (both things that have been known to happen around my house).

WHALE BONE & HORN:



Description: The most common form of boning used in corsets of any era has almost always been whalebone (contrary to popular belief, it's actually baleen, not really from a particular bone in the whale). Horn, apparently, was also used in the late 16th century, but I'm not entirely sure how or from what animal it came from. (5) Whalebone is semi-rigid, yet flexible and it will conform to the contours of your body and hold that shape after a long period of time, much the same way that cheap feather boning does. However, the difference is that whalebone is a whole lot more substantial than feather boning, obviously.

Availability: Unavailable. If you get your hands on enough baleen to make a corset, you might end up getting arrested. Best to just let sleeping whales lie.

Cost: Unknown. Occasionally, whalebone salvaged from 19th century corsets will turn up on eBay (that's where the photo to the left comes from), but the cost is really what it's worth to the person buying it in that case.

Modern Equivalents: I think the best modern equivalents would be the cable ties. It's certainly not at all like metal boning.

Brownie Points: I have no idea, as I've never actually gotten to use the stuff in a corset that I've worn.

Draw Backs: Whales are endangered species. Nuff said.

WHAT OTHERS HAVE TO SAY:

[Ben Pung](#) wrote me with the following advice:

"1) I've used the 1/16" hemp cord (quadrupled in a 1/4" channel) and it seems to work fine. It also has gone through the washer and dryer with no ill effect.

2) An easy to obtain reed substitute is broom straw. Brooms are relatively cheap and available at Wal-Mart's everywhere and can be hacked apart with any sharp implement.

3) As for threading reeds (or their equivalents) through channels, the one time I did it I made a big pocket, filled it with "reeds", and then sewed the channels. Whether this is the "correct" method or not I don't know, but it was pretty easy.

4) I would also mention wooden busks, which make everything else work better, at least for later, conical silhouette corsets."

April Miller has this to say about spiral boning:

*"I just wanted to mention that flat metal boning and *spiral* boning behave very differently. I use spiral boning a lot because it has all the rigidity of flats in compression along its length yet is extremely flexible both from front to back and side to side in its width. This flexibility allows it to*

take curves like a dream. I have an abrupt difference of about 30" between my waist and hips. Spiral boning will fit smoothly without poking me and also returns to it's original shape when the corset is removed.

Unfortunately it is much more expensive than flat metal boning, and retains all it's propensity for rust.

I have found it in various lengths and widths and it is also available in a roll which you can cut yourself (with tin snips) and attach metal tips for protection."

Marion McNealy offered her thoughts on jute twine:

"For places to find Hemp and Jute twine, I have found it in the mail and package supply section of the drugstore and in the hardware store in the rope and string section, probably garden supply stores would also sell it as it is commonly used for marking out rows for planting. The usual price I pay for it there has been no more than \$3 a roll, and one roll was enough to complete a corset with the cords doubled in the channel. I am not really sure if there is a difference in the stiffness of the 1/8 inch hemp and jute, in the samples I have, they seem to be the same. I haven't washed mine yet, so I can't comment on that part."

Christina Claridge suggests another ingenious boning substitute called Strimmer Line:

"I have to recommend strimmer line. I made up an effigy corset using doubled strimmer twine between mattress ticking, and it worked wonderfully. I used the heaviest gauge available, and it was about 5dollars US for thirty yards, and used about 1-1 1/2 spools to fully bone it. Apart from the day-glo green colour, it cuts with scissors, and if you are worried about sharp ends you can melt the ends into blobs.

There's a picture of the corset on my website:

www.geocities.com/christclaridge/Corset.jpg"

Feel free to write me with any suggestions and ideas you might have!

1. *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*, pg. 195
2. *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p6. 146
3. *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p6. 148
4. *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p6. 147
5. *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*, p6. 147

References

Arnold, Janet. *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*. Leeds, United Kingdom: W.S. Maney & Sons, Ltd., 1988

Waugh, Nora. *Corsets & Crinolines*. New York: Theatre Arts/Methuen, 1987