

V for Vests

Growing up in a damp and sooty climate there was a lot of concern from adults about your chest. When you caught a cold, there was a real fear of it 'going to your chest'.

Consequently I was always urged to wear a vest in winter. Some girls at school had mothers who stitched them into liberty bodices for the entire winter, they were so afraid of respiratory disorders. The experience of shopping for underclothes was dismal. My mother would drag me off to the inside Market to Brooks' stall where she would buy me vests, knickers, and socks. I invariably tried to hide the vests under other things in the tallboy drawer but my mother would query the absence of dirty vests in the wash basket and then find the brand new purchases hidden away. I was always fascinated by liberty bodices. When changing for P.T. or swimming it became apparent which girls had mothers who insisted on them wearing these strange garments which were fleece-lined and had rows of tiny rubber buttons down the front. They must have taken an age to dry so I suspect those poor girls wouldn't have had clean ones to wear after their weekly bath.

It only struck me later in life that it was only girls who wore liberty bodices so far from being liberating, they were the young person's version of corsets.

I never have suffered from bad chests despite living surrounded by belching chimneys from mills, factories and coal fires. Perhaps the vests really did help protect.