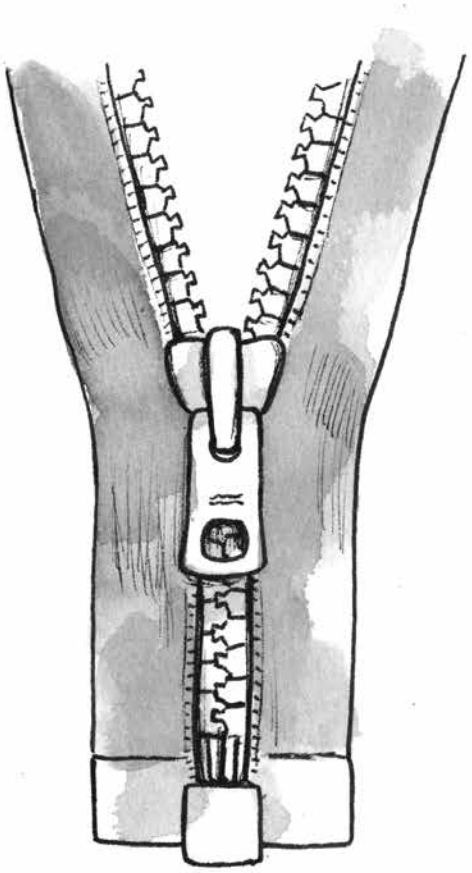

Zip

I am both a fashion statement and a fashion understatement. I am provocative, yet I am mundane. I am anarchic, but I am orderly. I am glaringly obvious, yet I go unnoticed. I am an onomatopoeic device for fastening clothes. What am I? I am a zip.

In 1974, when British designer Vivienne Westwood (with impresario Malcolm McLaren) opened her boutique at 430 Kings Road in Chelsea, the shop was hard to miss. A metre-high sign made from pink foam letters spelled out the shop's name, SEX. Inside, the clothing store was equally challenging. Bedecked with rubber curtains and chicken wire, the walls were daubed in graffiti and plastered with pages from the radical feminist manifesto *Scum*.

Selling fetish and bondage gear, Westwood's store had a clientele that read like a who's who of punk's most influential icons. The Sex Pistols, Adam Ant and Siouxsie Sioux all shopped here. Glen Matlock, the Sex Pistols' bass player, and Chrisse Hynde, soon-to-be frontwoman for the Pretenders, even took stints as shop assistants.

The shop's designs confronted social and sexual taboos. Ripped T-shirts with outrageous slogans shared clothing rails with bondage trousers that were dripping in zips, studs and safety pins. Clothing fasteners were co-opted to facilitate a boorish image that was rebellious and anti-establishment. An item that had originally been about as edgy as magnolia paint morphed into a glaring symbol of defiance. The zip had become radicalized.

The zip or "zipper" is the Jekyll and Hyde of the fashion industry. It provides us with convenience, reliability and safety. Zips keep us snug in our sleeping bags. They protect the goods that we hide in our rucksacks, bags and purses. They enable us to drop our trousers and make it to the toilet in time, and yet, they still retain the ability to shock when flaunted alongside a pair of Dr. Martens and a Mohican haircut. The zip is both compliant do-gooder and wilful wild child, so how did it come to have such a split personality?

For all its apparent simplicity, the zip actually took a remarkably long time to develop. As some historians have pointed out, it took less time to invent the aeroplane or the electronic computer than it did this unassuming trouser fastener.

It all began in the mid-nineteenth century, when clothing and shoes were fastened with buttons, belts, hooks and laces. What a bore! What a mind-numbing, tedious waste of time! Elias Howe, inventor of the sewing machine, dreamed of all the time that could be saved if clothes could be fastened more quickly. He came up with an "automatic continuous clothing closure", an early zip prototype which comprised a series of clasps that could be joined together by a sliding cord. It wasn't great. The device was difficult to use, prone to rusting and often split or snagged on clothing. In short, it created more problems than it solved, so the concept foundered silently for almost a half century.

Time zipped by. Then, in 1893, American inventor Whitcomb Judson patented his improved version of the same idea. Judson was a portly man. It's said that he grew tired of bending over to lace or button up his boots, and that this motivated him to find a solution. Judson's "clasp locker or unlocker for shoes" contained a chain of wire hooks and a slider device. Compared with our modern zippers, it was bulky and over-engineered, but

he retrofitted the device onto his own boots and strode confidently along to the Chicago World's Fair.

There, his invention caught the eye of a Pennsylvanian lawyer called Colonel Lewis Walker, who was so taken with the fastener that he asked to have a pair installed on his boots. Joining forces, they founded the Universal Fastener Company. Judson improved the idea further by clamping the hooks into a strip of fabric, so the individual elements didn't need to be sewn in by hand. Now the fastener could be machined onto a garment, but it had a frustrating habit of popping open and getting stuck.

The fastener's fortunes finally changed when a Swedish-born electrical engineer called Gideon Sundback joined the Universal Fastener Company and worked his way up to become head designer. He tinkered with Judson's design, eventually developing a version that sported closely packed interlocking teeth. It was almost indistinguishable from the modern zips of today, and in 1917, he was awarded a US patent for his "separable fastener".

You'll notice, at this point, that none of these early "zipioneers" ever used the word "zip" or "zipper". The catchy name came later, after Sundback's fastener was appropriated by the B. F. Goodrich Company, which inserted it into their rubber boots. It's said that Benjamin Goodrich liked the fastening or "zipping" sound so much that he named the system after it. The press stud or "popper" now had an onomatopoetic ally.

Within a couple of decades, the zip had found its way into footwear, clothing and other items such as pencil cases and motorboat engine covers. Advertising campaigns extolled their use in childrenswear, where the zip promoted independence, and their value in men's trousers, where they protected against "gap-osis", an embarrassing condition caused by the appearance

of body parts or underwear through the gaps between conventional trouser fastenings. *Esquire* magazine professed the zip the "Newest Tailoring Idea for Men", while an advertisement for one particular American brand of zip called it "The Greatest Thing They Ever Did to Pants".

By 1939, around 300 million zips were being sold in the US annually. After the war, the figure more than tripled. So far, so safe. Zips were items of convenience, there for pragmatic use only. Designers positioned them for functionality – in the crotch of trousers or the side seam of a skirt. Stitched into carefully crafted seams, they were never flouted or obvious. Zips did for clothes what delivery drivers do for modern society. They quietly got on with things, and kept everything operating smoothly.

Things only really began to change in the 1950s, when Hollywood directors began to use zippered biker jackets to symbolize the rebellious nature of youth. Think Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, or later, John Travolta in *Grease*. Then, three years before Vivienne Westwood opened her Chelsea boutique, the Rolling Stones released *Sticky Fingers*. The album's cover, designed by artist Andy Warhol, featured an "in your face" crotch shot of a pair of jeans. Now zips were becoming provocative, even sexual.

Westwood elaborated on this when she went on to trade straightforward sex appeal for uncompromising fetishism. She embraced the bondage theme and made it central to her designs. The zip was elevated from functional necessity to garish accessory. With the help of Jordan (aka model Pamela Rooke), who managed the SEX boutique, Westwood invented the punk look. Zips were centre stage alongside drainpipe jeans, tartan trousers, ripped T-shirts and leather jackets. By the late 1970s, Vivienne Westwood and her partner, Malcolm McLaren, were styling and managing the world's most successful punk act, the Sex Pistols,

and zips had never been so prominent. Now zips were every bit as anti-authoritarian as the punks who wore them.

The transformation was complete. The zip is a paradox, and it is one of the most brilliant inventions of all time.