Thomas Twining: The Man Who Put Tea on the Strand

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Thomas Twining and British tea, in summary:** A UK guide to Thomas Twining: 1706 Strand shop, royal warrant, Earl Grey, women and home tea drinking. Why he matters in British tea history.

Our Twinings deep dive covers the brand today; this is the man who started it, and arguably the single most consequential shopkeeper in British tea.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in April 2026.

1706: a contrarian bet

Thomas Twining opened Tom's Coffee House on the Strand in London in 1706. Coffee houses were the dominant social and business venues of the age, but Twining made an unusual move: he focused on tea, then an expensive, lightly regarded curiosity, and began selling dry tea by weight to take home. Selling leaf to brew at home, rather than only serving cups, helped move tea from the coffee house table into the domestic kitchen, which is where the British relationship with tea actually lives.

The same address, three centuries on

The remarkable fact is continuity. Twinings has traded from 216 Strand, the same site, since 1706, making it one of the oldest continuously operating businesses in the world at a single address. The narrow shopfront with its lion and figures doorway is still there, a working London retail outlet and a tourist destination at once. Few consumer brands can point to an unbroken three century thread from founder to shelf; Twinings can, and that longevity is a real part of why the name carries the weight it does.

Tea, women and the home

One genuinely significant detail: at a time when coffee houses were largely male spaces, Twining's dry tea trade let women buy tea to take home and brew, giving them direct access to the product in a way the coffee house model did not. It is a small commercial decision with an outsized social footprint, and it is the chain of decisions that produced afternoon tea and the British tea ritual centred on the home rather than the public house.

The royal warrant and Earl Grey

Twinings has held a royal warrant for tea since 1837, the year of Queen Victoria's accession, and the house is the brand most tightly bound up with the story of Earl Grey, the bergamot scented blend whose origin legend we treat clearly in our Earl Grey origin page. What matters is that Twinings made Earl Grey commercially universal, not necessarily that they invented it; the through line from Thomas Twining's shop to the modern Earl Grey on a supermarket shelf is genuine.

Why he matters

Thomas Twining did not invent tea or tea drinking. What he did was institutionalise the retail of leaf tea to ordinary households, early, durably and from a fixed and now iconic address. Most of the British high street tea trade is, in a sense, downstream of that 1706 decision. He is the obvious first entry in any list of the people behind the cup.

Quick reference: Thomas Twining

Detail	Fact
Born	1675, Painswick, Gloucestershire
Died	1741, London
Opened	Tom's Coffee House, 216 Strand, London, 1706
Famous for	Pivoting from coffee to selling dry leaf tea for home brewing
Royal warrant	Twinings has held one since 1837 (Queen Victoria's accession year)
Same address	216 Strand, continuously trading since 1706 (320 years)
Brand today	Twinings, owned by Associated British Foods, sold globally
Iconic blend	Earl Grey (bergamot black tea blend tied to the house)
Social impact	Gave women direct retail access to tea (coffee houses were male-only)

The 1706 retail context

To understand Twining's 1706 decision, place it in commercial context. London in the early 18th century had over 500 coffee houses, each a hub for trade, news, and male sociability. Tea was a luxury import from China taxed heavily by the British government; supply was limited by the East India Company's shipping schedule and demand was nascent. Twining's choice to specialise in tea, rather than coffee, was a contrarian bet on a small market with a significant tax burden. The economics looked weak; only the high margins on luxury imports made the model viable. The reason it worked long-term is exactly what Twining recognised earliest: tea brewed at home became a daily British ritual, while coffee remained primarily an out-of-home drink in Britain for centuries longer.

Twinings today

Twinings is now owned by Associated British Foods (ABF), the same parent as Primark and Kingsmill, but the Strand shop and the original brand identity remain intact. The product range has expanded into infusions, green teas, decaf, fruit and herbal blends, but English Breakfast and Earl Grey remain the brand's

commercial backbone. UK supermarkets carry a deep Twinings range; specialist tea retailers carry the loose-leaf and premium Twinings products alongside the supermarket-standard bag formats.

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Tea reading

For the modern Twinings brand profile see the Twinings deep dive. For Earl Grey origin specifically see the Earl Grey origin. For more tea founders see Thomas Lipton, Thomas Sullivan (tea bag inventor), and Lu Yu. For the broader tea-and-Britain story see the history of tea in Britain.

The bottom line on Thomas Twining

Thomas Twining did not invent tea, did not invent retail, and did not invent the coffee house. What he did was identify, in 1706, that the future of tea in Britain was in the home rather than the public venue, and build a 320-year retail business on that single insight. The Strand shop, the royal warrant, the Earl Grey association, and the cultural pattern of women buying tea to brew at home all trace back to that one commercial choice. He is the obvious first entry in any list of the people who built British tea, and Twinings remains one of the few global consumer brands with a genuinely unbroken thread from founder to shelf.

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