A Tea History Timeline: Shen Nong to Your Mug

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea history timeline, in summary:** Five thousand years of tea as one ordered timeline: legendary China, Lu Yu, the journey west, the Boston Tea Party, the Opium Wars, the clippers and the modern cup.

Tea has a history measured in millennia, and told as a single thread it is one of the great stories of how the world actually works. This is the overview for our tea history cluster; each chapter has its own full page linked below, and the individuals are in the people behind tea.

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

Ancient China: discovery and the first book

Tea originates in China, traditionally credited to the legendary emperor Shen Nong around five thousand years ago, and is first systematised in the eighth century by Lu Yu in the Cha Jing, the text that argued tea was worth doing properly, see the Chinese tea overview. For centuries China held the knowledge and the monopoly.

Tea reaches Europe and Britain

Portuguese and Dutch traders brought tea to Europe in the 1600s, and it became fashionable in Britain through the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza, the full story in how tea came to Britain. Thomas Twining put it into British homes from 1706.

Empire, opium and theft

To feed the British craving without draining its silver, Britain traded opium to China (the Opium Wars), then broke China's monopoly outright when Robert Fortune smuggled tea plants and knowledge to British India (how Britain stole tea from China). Tea became an empire industry, see tea and the British Empire and the East India Company.

The clippers and the industrial cup

The race to bring the first tea home each year built the legendary tea clippers, and cheap empire tea plus the workers tea break made tea the British national drink, surviving even wartime rationing.

Where it led

The modern picture, cheap blends, single origin ethical brands like Dilmah, the whole shop, is the direct descendant of this story. Follow the chapters in order and the cup in your hand becomes legible.

Why this history matters

Tea history is not decoration; it is load-bearing. Almost everything about how the world drinks tea today was decided by these events rather than by taste: the plant is Chinese, yet the largest producers are India, Kenya and Sri Lanka, which is empire, not botany, and Britain drinks black tea with milk because empire-grown Assam and Ceylon were bred for strength. This wiki tells both versions, the romantic one (the duchess, the clipper ships, the national ritual) and the harder one beneath it (a war fought to keep selling opium to China, the botanical espionage that broke China's monopoly, plantation labour systems), because the full account is the more interesting one. The point is not guilt but eyes-open agency: see where the cup came from, and the modern single-origin, producer-owned brands like Dilmah and Williamson read as the deliberate corrective they are.

The tea history timeline, in order

When	Milestone
c. 2737 BCE	The legendary Shen Nong discovery, myth, not record, tea as medicine
3rd, 6th c.	Tea established as a daily drink across China
760 CE	Lu Yu writes the Classic of Tea; tea becomes a formal art
9th, 12th c.	Tea reaches Japan; whisked matcha and the way of tea develop
1610	The Dutch ship tea to Europe
1662	Catherine of Braganza makes tea fashionable in England
1773	The Boston Tea Party, tea tax as political flashpoint
1839, 60	The Opium Wars; the tea, opium, silver triangle
1848	Robert Fortune smuggles tea plants and know-how out of China
1850s, 60s	The clipper races; India and Ceylon plantations scale up
1900s	The tea bag and mass blending make tea the everyday brew

That ordered spine is the point of this page: every other guide in the cluster is detail hung on these dates. For the same story told as flowing narrative see the history of tea, for the British chapter the history of British tea, and for the concise myth-versus-evidence reference the history of tea in one place. The people who move the timeline get their own pages: Lu Yu, Catherine of Braganza and Robert Fortune. The simplest way to make the timeline tangible is to brew its products: a Chinese green tea, a plantation-era black tea, the wider tea range, or the full tea shop.

Related on the wiki: Tea in China: Where It All Began, The History of the Teabag, The History of Afternoon Tea, Afternoon Tea: How It Works.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

Shopping notes for this topic: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. The rest of the tea shop sits here, with UK shipping free above £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Pick what you'll actually drink every day. A tea you reach for is worth more than a tea you admire.

More tea history reading

- The history of tea (the arc)
- History of British tea
- The history of tea, in one place
- Tea and the British Empire

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.



teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/