

# How Tea Came to Britain: Curiosity to National Drink

From the Teas.co.uk wiki

**How tea came to Britain, in summary:** In 1660 tea was an exotic luxury; within a century the national drink. How a Portuguese princess, coffee houses, tax and empire built the British cup.

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for How Tea Came to Britain: Curiosity to National Drink. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-came-to-britain/>*

In 1660 tea was a rare, expensive curiosity in Britain; within a hundred years it was the national drink. How that happened is one of the best stories in the cluster, and it sits beside the existing [history of British tea](#) and [British tea culture](#) guides.

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

## Catherine of Braganza makes it fashionable

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Catherine of Braganza makes it fashionable, How Tea Came to Britain: Curiosity to National Drink. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-came-to-britain/>*

The pivotal figure is [Catherine of Braganza](#), the Portuguese princess who married Charles II in 1662 and brought a tea drinking habit to the English court. Royal fashion is contagious, and tea became the aspirational drink of the wealthy almost overnight, the social spark that lit everything after.

## The coffee houses and Thomas Twining

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The coffee houses and Thomas Twining, How Tea Came to Britain: Curiosity to National Drink. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-came-to-britain/>*

Tea first spread through the coffee houses, the social and business hubs of the age, and the decisive commercial move was [Thomas Twining](#) selling dry tea by weight from 1706 so people could brew it at home, crucially giving women access to a product the male coffee houses did not, the detail in his profile and [the Twinings story](#).

## Tax, smuggling and the price collapse

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Tax, smuggling and the price collapse, How Tea Came to Britain: Curiosity to National Drink. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-came-to-britain/>*

For a century tea was punishingly taxed, which spawned a vast smuggling trade and adulterated tea. The 1784 Commutation Act slashed the tax, smuggling collapsed, and legal tea became affordable to ordinary people, the single biggest step in tea going from elite to universal.

## Empire makes it cheap forever

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Empire makes it cheap forever, How Tea Came to Britain: Curiosity to National Drink. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-came-to-britain/>*

The final stage was supply: once Britain grew its own tea across India and Ceylon (see [tea and the British Empire](#) and [how Britain stole tea from China](#)), cheap empire tea flooded in and tea became permanently the drink of every class, the robust Assam and Ceylon style explained in the [Assam](#) and [Ceylon](#) region pages.

## Milk, the working day and the ritual

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Milk, the working day and the ritual, How Tea Came to Britain: Curiosity to National Drink. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-came-to-britain/>*

Strong empire tea took milk and sugar well, fuelling the industrial working day and the [tea break](#), while the wealthy developed afternoon tea, see the [afternoon tea guide](#) and [Anna, Duchess of Bedford](#). The same leaf served two classes two different rituals.

## Why it stuck

Tea became British not by accident but through royalty, commerce, tax policy and empire compounding over a century, then locked in by ritual. That is why the cuppa feels timeless when it is in fact a specific, traceable historical construction, the legible cup point this whole cluster makes.

## How tea took Britain, at a glance

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for How Tea Came to Britain: Curiosity to National Drink. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-came-to-britain/>*

Stage	What happened
1662	Catherine of Braganza brings a Portuguese tea habit and makes it courtly
Late 1600s	Coffee houses and Thomas Twining turn it into a commercial drink
1700s	Punitive tax and mass smuggling spread it down the social scale

Stage	What happened
1800s	Empire and plantation tea in India and Ceylon make it permanently cheap
Industrial era	Milk, the working day and the tea break fix it as national ritual

## How that history is still in the cup

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for How that history is still in the cup, How Tea Came to Britain: Curiosity to National Drink. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-came-to-britain/>*

The reason this is not just decoration is that every force is still in the modern British cup. It is strong because plantation tea was bred and processed for strength; it takes milk because milk softened a hard, cheap, mass tea and the working-day ritual fixed the habit; it is drunk in volume and on a schedule because the industrial day shaped the tea break; and it is overwhelmingly black and blended rather than delicate and single-origin because the empire optimised for cheap, consistent, shippable tea. Understand the forces and you understand why your everyday brew tastes and behaves as it does. This is general history rather than a romantic origin tale.

## Reference noted

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Reference noted, How Tea Came to Britain: Curiosity to National Drink. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-came-to-britain/>*

- [EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine \(2015\)](#)

Sensible options on the same shelf: [English Breakfast](#), [Earl Grey](#), [green tea](#), [loose leaf tea](#), [Darjeeling](#), [oolong](#), and [herbal tea](#). Wander the [tea shop](#) for the wider range, with free UK delivery from £35.

**FROM THE CURATOR** *teas* · Freshness beats provenance for most drinkers. Buy a smaller bag more often.

## More tea history reading

- [History of British tea](#)
- [The history of tea](#)
- [Tea history timeline](#)
- [The Opium Wars and tea](#)

## Our shelf picks

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for How Tea Came to Britain: Curiosity to National Drink. Canonical: https://teas.co.uk/wiki/how-tea-came-to-britain/*

## 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](#)

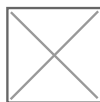
### Earn rewards on Teas.co.uk

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.

