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.

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

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

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

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

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 sturdy Assam and Ceylon style explained in the Assam and Ceylon region pages.

Milk, the working day and the ritual

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 in two different ways.

Why it stuck

Tea did not become British by accident; royalty, commerce, tax policy and empire compounded over a century, and habit then locked it in. That is why the cuppa feels ageless although it is a specific, traceable piece of history, the legible cup point this whole cluster makes.

How tea took Britain, at a glance

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
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 a national habit

How that history is still in the cup

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 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, not 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.

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 range beyond this page, with UK delivery free once you reach £35.

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