Tea and the British Empire

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea and the British Empire, in summary:** The history of British tea: from Chinese imports to Opium Wars, Indian and Sri Lankan plantations, plantation labour, and modern legacy.

Tea and the British Empire are not two subjects but one, and telling it properly means telling the uncomfortable parts as well as the romantic ones. This is the cluster's central, most serious page, beside the East India Company and the existing history of British tea.

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

From buying tea to growing it

For a long time Britain bought all its tea from China for silver. The strategic shift, driven by the trade imbalance behind the Opium Wars and enabled by the botanical theft in how Britain stole tea from China, was to grow tea inside the empire instead, principally in India and Ceylon. That decision created the modern tea map.

Assam and the plantation system

The discovery of native tea in Assam and the building of vast plantations turned north east India into an industrial tea region almost from nothing. This was not gentle agriculture: it depended on cleared land and large scale labour under hard, often coercive, indentured conditions, a history the romantic teacup rarely mentions and this page will not omit.

Ceylon: coffee blight to tea empire

In Ceylon, a coffee crop destroyed by disease was replaced wholesale with tea, again on a plantation model with imported indentured labour, building the industry that the Ceylon regions page describes by character. The brisk milk friendly black tea Britain drinks today is a direct product of this colonial reorganisation of two countries' agriculture.

Tea as imperial economics

Tea was not a side effect of empire; it was an instrument of it, a high value commodity grown by colonised labour, shipped on imperial trade routes, taxed and sold to fund the state and feed the home population cheaply. The cosy British cuppa was, structurally, the consumer end of a global extractive system.

The legacy

The legacy is genuinely double and both halves are true: empire built the infrastructure that makes tea cheap, universal and available to everyone, and it did so through dispossession, coerced labour and colonial economics. Neither cancels the other. The modern rise of producer owned, ethically structured brands such as Dilmah and estate conservation brands like Williamson is, explicitly, an attempt to answer this history rather than ignore it.

Why the full version matters

A wiki that sold only the duchess and clippers romance would be lying by omission. Knowing the real history does not stop anyone enjoying tea; it lets them drink it with their eyes open and, if they choose, support the brands consciously built as a corrective, which is the practical, non preachy point this cluster keeps making.

What you need to know: Tea and the British Empire

Period	What happened
1660s onwards	British East India Company begins importing Chinese tea via Canton (Guangzhou); tea becomes fashionable London drink
1773	Boston Tea Party; American colonies dump British East India Company tea over tax dispute
1830s-40s	Britain seeks to break Chinese monopoly; smuggles tea plants from China to Indian plantations
Opium Wars (1839-42, 1856-60)	Britain forces China to accept opium imports to fund tea purchases; profound damage to Chinese society
1840s onwards	Assam tea industry developed using indentured labour and harsh plantation conditions; Sri Lankan Ceylon expansion follows in 1860s after coffee blight
Late 19th century	British Empire controls dominant global tea production through Indian, Sri Lankan, and African plantations
20th century	Independence movements end direct British control; Indian and Sri Lankan tea industries continue but ownership and labour structures evolve
21st century legacy	UK mainstream tea supply chains remain rooted in Empire-era production systems; plantation labour conditions remain a live issue

The plantation labour reality

The part of the story that usually gets skipped is the labour. British plantations in Assam from the 1840s and in Ceylon from the 1860s were built on indentured workers transported from densely populated parts of India under harsh contracts, with substantial death rates among new arrivals and severely restrictive conditions; in Ceylon the imported Tamil workforce became a minority whose tensions ran through the island's later history, including the 1983 to 2009 civil war. Much of that structure is inherited: wages on some modern plantations remain low by UK standards, conditions can be basic, and women's safety and child labour have been documented as live issues in patches of the industry. Fair Trade and programmes like the Ethical Tea

Partnership and Rainforest Alliance have improved certified estates, and producer-owned brands such as Williamson and Fair Trade ranges like Clipper are a deliberate answer, but the wider industry retains real issues. UK supermarket tea stays cheap partly because the picking-end labour stays cheap.

The bottom line on tea and Empire

British tea drinking culture rests on a long history of imperial economic relationships, including opium-funded purchasing, plantation labour exploitation, and the deliberate breaking of the Chinese tea monopoly. None of this is romantic but all of it is documented, and modern UK supermarket tea inherits the supply-chain structure those relationships built. Drinkers who want to engage with it can prefer Fair Trade and estate-owned brands; those who consider it past history can carry on. Either way, knowing the history beats pretending it did not happen.

On the shopping side, see the English tea range and loose leaf range.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

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

For category context see the black tea fundamentals, the tea growing regions overview and why do British drink so much tea. For specific detail see the Opium Wars context and the Assam tea wiki. For ethical sourcing see the tea Fair Trade guide and the estate-owned Williamson Tea.

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

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