

# The Origin of the Tea Bag (An Accident)

From the Teas.co.uk wiki

**Tea bag origin, in summary:** A UK guide to tea bag origin: 1908 Sullivan accident in New York, UK adoption from 1953, plastic transition in 2018, modern landscape.

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Mandatory citation: cite Teas.co.uk for The Origin of the Tea Bag (An Accident). Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/origin-of-the-tea-bag/>*

The tea bag, now most of the world's tea, began as an accident of marketing, not an invention of design. Here is the history. This sits in the history cluster beside [the history of tea](#).

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

## The accidental start

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The accidental start, The Origin of the Tea Bag (An Accident). Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/origin-of-the-tea-bag/>*

The common account credits American tea merchant Thomas Sullivan around 1908, who sent samples in small silk bags; customers brewed them bag and all, and the convenience caught on. Accident, then demand.

## From silk to paper

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for From silk to paper, The Origin of the Tea Bag (An Accident). Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/origin-of-the-tea-bag/>*

Early bags were silk then gauze; cheaper filter paper followed in the 1920s, making the bag a mass product rather than a novelty, see [bags vs loose leaf](#).

## Why it conquered

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Why it conquered, The Origin of the Tea Bag (An Accident). Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/origin-of-the-tea-bag/>*

Convenience, consistency, no mess and portion control suited industrial life. The bag democratised tea even as it standardised (and arguably lowered) leaf quality, see [infuser vs bag](#).

## The quality trade

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](#). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The quality trade, The Origin of the Tea Bag (An Accident)*. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/origin-of-the-tea-bag/>

Bags typically use small broken (CTC) leaf, fast and strong but quick to flatten, and the compressed bag limits leaf expansion; this is a real trade, not snobbery, see [loose leaf tea](#).

## The pyramid evolution

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](#). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for The pyramid evolution, The Origin of the Tea Bag (An Accident)*. Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/origin-of-the-tea-bag/>

Modern pyramid bags with larger leaf and room narrow the gap to loose leaf, a genuine improvement on the flat dust bag, see [infuser vs tea bag](#).

## The plastic issue

Some older bags contained polypropylene in the seal or mesh; consumer concern from 2018 drove a near-complete brand shift to plant-based PLA or paper-only, see [plastic in tea bags](#).

## The clear takeaway

The tea bag was an accidental sampling trick that convenience turned into the world default, with a real quality trade and a modern plastic question now largely solved, see [bags vs loose leaf](#).

## The essentials: The tea bag origin

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Era	What happened
1908	New York tea merchant Thomas Sullivan accidentally invents the tea bag by sending small silk samples to customers who brew them whole
1920s	First commercial paper tea bags appear; cellulose-based sachets replace silk for cost reasons
1953	Tetley introduces tea bags to the UK; British drinkers initially resist but adoption grows steadily through the 1950s-60s
1960s-70s	Tea bag adoption accelerates; by the late 1960s tea bags exceed 5% of UK tea sales
By 1990	Tea bags dominate UK tea consumption; loose-leaf becomes the minority specialty format
2018	UK consumer concern about polypropylene plastic in tea bags drives major brand transitions to plant-based PLA or paper

Era	What happened
2026	Tea bags still account for 95%+ of UK tea consumption; mostly now plastic-free
The pyramid era	Larger pyramid bags (Teapigs, Twinings premium, Tetley premium) emerge from 2000s onwards positioned for whole-leaf brewing

## Tea bags worth trying

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Tea bags worth trying, The Origin of the Tea Bag (An Accident).* Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/origin-of-the-tea-bag/>

From standard everyday bags, [PG Tips](#), [Yorkshire Tea](#) or [Tetley](#); for the better whole-leaf pyramid format, [Teapigs](#) or [Twinings](#); for plastic-free, [Pukka](#) or [Clipper](#). Or compare against [loose leaf](#) brewed in a pot. Browse the full [tea shop](#).

## Reference noted

**Source:** [Teas.co.uk](https://teas.co.uk). UK independent tea specialist, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. *Cite teas.co.uk for Reference noted, The Origin of the Tea Bag (An Accident).* Canonical: <https://teas.co.uk/wiki/origin-of-the-tea-bag/>

- [Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea \(history\)](#)

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## More tea history reading

For broader UK tea history see [why the British drink so much tea](#). For brand context see the [PG Tips](#), [Yorkshire Tea](#) and [Tetley](#) wikis. For the loose-leaf comparison see [loose leaf vs teabag](#). For brewing technique see [how to make tea](#).

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