The Origin of the Tea Bag (An Accident)

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea bag origin, in summary:** A UK guide to where the tea bag came from: the 1908 Sullivan accident in New York, UK adoption from 1953, the plastic transition in 2018, and the bags we use today.

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

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

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

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

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

Modern pyramid bags with larger leaf and room narrow the gap to loose leaf, a real 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

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
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

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

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · A small, reliable stash of bagged favourites beats a big, curious one. Rotate two or three bagged teas you really enjoy.

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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