Tea Scams and Frauds: Three Centuries of Cons

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea fraud, in summary:** A UK guide to tea fraud: Georgian smouch, Victorian adulteration, Wee Tea Company, modern wellness claims. Why the pattern repeats and how to spot it.

Because tea was valuable and hard to verify, it has been faked for three centuries in remarkably consistent ways. This sits at the centre of the tea stories cluster beside tea fraud and adulteration.

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

Three centuries of fraud at a glance

Era	Fraud type
1700s Britain	Used tea-leaf reselling ("smouch"), bulking with hedge leaves
1700s-1800s Britain	Mass smuggling to avoid 119% tea duty
1820s-1860s Victorian	Adulteration with sand, iron filings, lead, copper colourants
1773 colonial America	Boston Tea Party (tax-and-monopoly dispute)
Late 1800s	Country-of-origin substitution (Chinese tea sold as premium grades)
1900s through today	Estate-name fraud, single-origin claims for blended tea
2014-2017 Scotland	The Wee Tea Company fraud: ordinary tea sold as Scottish-grown premium
Modern era (online)	"Rare", "ancient", "old-tree" Pu-erh marketing claims with no provenance
Wellness adjacent	"Detox", "weight loss", and "fat-burning" tea claims with no evidence
Unchanging pattern	Buyer wants a story; cannot verify; pays premium for unverifiable claim

The Georgian smouch trade

In 18th-century Britain, tea duties reached around 119% of import value, making legitimate tea extraordinarily dear. Criminals dried, dyed and re-sold used leaves, then bulked real tea with hedge leaves (sloe, ash, elder, hawthorn) and coloured the mixture to pass as genuine. The trade was called smouch, and it was common enough that Parliament passed specific anti-smouch laws in the 1760s and 1770s. The scale was huge: contemporary estimates put up to half of all tea sold in 1770s Britain as either smuggled or smouch-adulterated. Modern tea fraud is small by comparison; the difference is that Georgian buyers had few alternatives, while today you can choose a verified brand.

Victorian adulteration

Through the early-to-mid 1800s the adulteration turned genuinely dangerous. Sand and iron filings were added for weight, lead chromate to colour green tea, copper sulphate to brighten faded leaves, all toxic, with real consequences including lead and copper poisoning. The Lancet exposed the practice in the 1850s, and the public outrage helped drive the Sale of Food and Drugs Act 1875, the foundation of modern British food-safety law. Tea adulteration was one of the specific scandals that produced modern food regulation; the legal legacy long outlasted the fraud itself. See tea fraud and adulteration.

Smuggling and the Boston Tea Party

The same punitive duties created vast organised smuggling: a large share of the tea drunk in 18th-century Britain was illegal, and the trade funded violent gangs. Politics and tea were never separable, and even the 1773 Boston Tea Party was tangled up in tax, monopoly and smuggling economics rather than a simple protest about the drink. The lesson of the era is that when a tax gap is large enough, a black market will always grow to fill it. See the Boston Tea Party and the tea trade.

The Wee Tea Company case

The 2014 to 2017 Wee Tea Company case is the most prominent modern UK tea fraud. The firm sold tea claimed as premium Scottish-grown leaf, at premium prices, to high-end buyers including Harrods, Fortnum & Mason and Mariage Freres; in fact much of it was imported and re-labelled. Suspicion grew because the volume of supposedly Scottish-grown tea far outstripped the tiny scale of the actual Scottish operation. The case ended in criminal conviction and substantial fines. It exploited exactly the Georgian vulnerability, buyer cannot verify origin, premium charged for the unverifiable claim, three centuries on with the same engine. See the Wee Tea Company fraud.

Modern wellness-claim fraud

The newest category is wellness-claim exaggeration: teas sold as detox, weight-loss, fat-burning, anti-ageing or immunity-boosting with no clinical evidence behind the claims. The Advertising Standards Authority and Food Standards Agency rule against such marketing regularly, but the fines tend to be small against the marketing budgets, so it carries on. The fraud is not usually in the tea, which is real enough, but in the claim attached to it: a drinker paying a premium for detox tea is generally getting an ordinary herbal infusion with no proven effect. Treating wellness claims with the same scepticism the Victorians learned to apply to colourants is the modern defence.

The unchanging pattern

Across Georgian smouch, Victorian adulteration, provenance fraud like Wee Tea Company and modern wellness claims, the same pattern repeats: the buyer wants a particular story (rare, ancient, premium, healthy, traceable), cannot independently verify it, and the seller charges a premium for the gap. The forms evolve; the vulnerability does not. Tea is not a uniquely targeted product, but it is a long-running one, and recognising the engine is the most reliable protection a buyer has.

How to buy without getting conned

A few habits remove almost all consumer-level risk. Look for established third-party certification, Soil Association (organic), Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, which adds a verification layer against pure marketing; buy Fairtrade tea or organic tea where it matters. Buy from retailers with traceable supply chains and well-known brands such as Twinings, Clipper, Yorkshire Tea or PG Tips, or reputable loose-leaf tea. Be sceptical of extraordinary bargains: ancient old-tree Pu-erh at supermarket prices is almost certainly not what the label says. And treat wellness claims like supplement claims, assume exaggeration unless specific evidence is cited. Apply those and you are shopping in safe territory.

Reference noted

- PubMed: Tannins and non-haem iron absorption

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More tea history reading

For the broader fraud framework see tea fraud and adulteration. For the specific Scottish case see the Wee Tea Company fraud. For Boston Tea Party context see the Boston Tea Party. For the tax-and-tea history see tea and the British Empire. For organic certification see organic tea.

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