Tea Fraud and Adulteration: When Tea Was Poison

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Historic tea adulteration, in summary:** A UK guide to historic tea adulteration: Georgian smouch, Victorian lead and copper colourants, Hassall expose, 1875 Sale of Food and Drugs Act.

Before food safety law, "tea" could legally be a dangerous mixture of leaves, dirt and toxic pigment. The history is grim and important. This sits in the tea stories cluster beside tea scams and frauds.

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

Adulteration through the eras

Era	Common adulteration
1700s	Used tea-leaf reselling ("smouch")
1700s	Hedge leaf bulking (sloe, ash, elder, hawthorn)
1700s-1800s	Sand and iron filings added for weight
1800s	Lead chromate colourant on faded green tea
1800s	Copper sulphate brightener
1800s	Prussian blue dye on counterfeit green tea
1850s	Arthur Hassall expose published in Lancet medical journal
1860	Adulteration of Food and Drink Act (first response)
1875	Sale of Food and Drugs Act (foundation of modern UK food law)
Modern	Provenance fraud replaces physical adulteration

Why adulteration was rampant

Adulteration thrived because the incentives were overwhelming and the defences did not exist. Tea duties reached around 119% of import value at their peak, so legitimate tea was extraordinarily dear and faking it produced huge margins. There was no chemical analysis available to shoppers, no food-safety law, no labelling requirement and no inspector. A criminal could bulk a chest with cheap hedge leaves and toxic colouring and sell it at genuine-tea prices with little risk of being caught. The scale was vast: contemporary estimates put up to half of all tea sold in 1770s Britain as either smuggled or adulterated. Adulteration was

not the exception, it was the structure of the market.

The smouch trade

Smouch was the 18th-century slang for adulterated tea, usually hedge leaves (ash, sloe, hawthorn, elder) dried, curled and dyed to imitate the real thing. It worked because dried tea and dried hawthorn look much alike once coloured, and customers had little way to tell them apart. A related fraud dried and re-sold spent leaves from coffee houses as fresh tea at a fat mark-up. Parliament passed anti-smouch laws in the 1760s and 1770s with limited effect; the economic pull was simply too strong for enforcement to counter. Both practices were common, and both were dangerous because the dyes involved were often toxic.

The toxic colourings

The colourings were the genuinely lethal part. To make exhausted leaf look fresh, or to turn faked hedge leaves into convincing green tea, sellers used lead chromate (a bright yellow pigment carrying real lead-poisoning risk), copper sulphate (blue-green), Prussian blue and, at times, arsenic compounds. The health consequences were serious: contemporary medical journals recorded lead poisoning traced to tea, copper-related illness and probable arsenic exposure. This was not merely dishonest commerce; it was a public health crisis that killed people across decades.

The Hassall expose and the 1875 Act

Arthur Hassall, a London chemist, published systematic microscopic analyses of British food and drink adulteration in the Lancet through the 1850s. His tea work documented hedge-leaf bulking, used-leaf reselling and toxic colourants right across the retail trade, and it caused real public outrage in middle-class Victorian society. Parliament responded with the Adulteration of Food and Drink Act 1860 (a first attempt, weakly enforced) and then the Sale of Food and Drugs Act 1875, which created public analysts, prosecution powers and ongoing inspection. The 1875 Act is the foundation of modern UK food-safety law, and tea adulteration was one of the specific scandals that produced it.

How adulteration was beaten

Four forces together drove mass adulteration out. Chemical analysis, from Hassall onward, made detection possible. Regulation, the 1860 and 1875 Acts, created legal accountability. Branding, from Lipton and Twining to Yorkshire and Tetley, added reputational accountability, since a named brand could be held responsible in a way anonymous loose tea could not. And packaging, sealed branded packets replacing tea weighed loose from open chests, made adulteration at the point of sale impossible. By the early 1900s, roughly fifty years after Hassall, mass physical adulteration had effectively ended. Modern fraud is different precisely because those physical vulnerabilities were closed. See the tea pioneers.

The class dimension

The harm was sharply class-stratified. Working-class households got the worst of it: the cheap unbranded tea scooped loose from a grocer's chest carried the highest share of hedge-leaf bulking and toxic colourant, while wealthier buyers of named or premium tea were better protected, though not immune. The lead- and

copper-poisoned drinkers Hassall documented were overwhelmingly poor. This dimension is rarely mentioned in romantic Victorian-tea nostalgia, but it was a real public health injustice, and the 1875 Act was as much a victory for working-class consumers as a matter of commercial fair play.

The modern echo: provenance over poison

Mass physical adulteration is gone from the UK market; the regulation works. What survives is provenance fraud: cheap imported tea sold as rare, single-estate, ancient or local at a premium. The Wee Tea Company case shows it clearly, the operator was not adulterating the tea, he was lying about where it came from. The same buyer-cannot-verify gap that produced Georgian smouch now operates at the provenance layer rather than the physical-content layer, and the defences shift accordingly: traceability, third-party certification and a healthy scepticism. The engine is unchanged; only the form has moved on. See the Wee Tea Company fraud.

What to buy with verified provenance

For verified-provenance modern tea, buy from established UK retailers with traceable supply chains: Clipper certified organic, Pukka organic herbal, or Yorkshire Tea. For Fairtrade-certified tea buy Fairtrade tea. For premium loose-leaf single-estate buy Darjeeling single-estate or Assam single-estate. For ethical organic UK herbal buy Dragonfly. For verified UK-grown tea (rare but real) buy Tregothnan Cornish tea.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · One good loose-leaf in a clean teapot beats five exotic bags drunk in a hurry.

More tea history reading

For modern fraud see tea scams and frauds and the Wee Tea Company fraud. For the tea-tax-and-smuggling context see tea smuggling history. For the historical pioneers see the tea pioneers and Thomas Lipton. For the modern ethical response see ethical tea sourcing.

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