# Tetley History: From Yorkshire Carts to Tata

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tetley history, in summary:** Founded in 1837 by the Yorkshire Tetley brothers, Tetley pioneered the tea bag in the UK in 1953, ran the iconic Tetley Tea Folk ads from 1973-2001, and has been owned by India's Tata Group since 2000. Genuine UK heritage, now an Indian-owned global operation.

Tetley is one of the oldest names in British tea. This sits in the brand-history cluster beside PG Tips history.

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

## The Yorkshire merchant origin

Tetley's founding is genuine UK tea history. Joseph and Edward Tetley, Yorkshire brothers from the Bradford and Huddersfield area, entered tea trading in 1837 as travelling merchants distributing tea to households by horse and pack, characteristic of pre-railway tea selling. They formalised Joseph Tetley & Company in 1856, grew from itinerant merchants to established premises, and rode the 19th-century surge in UK tea consumption as prices fell and direct shipping opened up, the wider arc the history of tea guide tells. The brand even expanded to New York in 1888, building a transatlantic presence. That genuine merchant lineage, built over decades before mass production, is the heritage the modern marketing leans on.

## The timeline

| Year | Event |
|---|---|
| 1837 | Joseph and Edward Tetley begin trading tea in Yorkshire |
| 1856 | Joseph Tetley & Company formally established |
| 1888 | Tetley expands to New York |
| 1953 | Tetley introduces the tea bag to the UK market |
| 1973 | "Tetley Tea Folk" animated ad campaign begins |
| 2000 | India's Tata Group acquires Tetley (reported £271m) |
| 2001 | Tea Folk campaign ends |
| Today | Part of Tata Consumer Products; one of the world's largest tea brands |

## The 1953 tea bag milestone

Tetley's 1953 introduction of the tea bag to the UK was a pivotal moment in British tea culture. Before it, loose leaf brewed in a teapot dominated; tea bags had developed in the US (Thomas Sullivan is commonly credited, around 1908) and spread there by the 1940s. Tetley brought the format to the UK on a substantial commercial scale, and despite initial scepticism, adoption built through the 1950s and 60s until tea bags dominated UK retail by the 1970s. Tetley was not the only player, but it was the key launcher of the UK tea-bag era, shifting the nation from teapot-and-loose-leaf to mug-and-bag, a change with both benefits (convenience) and costs (quality) that drinkers still navigate.

## Advertising, ownership and today

The "Tetley Tea Folk", stop-motion working-class English puppets (Gaffer, Sydney, Maurice and others), ran from 1973 to 2001 and became one of the most recognised UK ad campaigns of the era, building Tetley's retail dominance and remaining in the collective memory of anyone who grew up between the 1970s and 1990s. The ownership path ran through various UK conglomerates (including the Allied-Lyons era) before India's Tata Group acquired Tetley in 2000, the detail the who owns Tetley guide covers. Today it is a mass-market global brand under Tata Consumer Products, with substantial UK manufacturing but global sourcing, moderate sustainability credentials (Rainforest Alliance certification, a plastic-free bag commitment), and a UK-positioned heritage identity despite Indian ownership. Read it for what it is, the same standard as is Tetley good: real heritage, mass-market commodity tea, corporate scale.

## Common questions

**How old is Tetley?** The business dates to 1837, founded by the Yorkshire Tetley brothers, giving it over 185 years of heritage.

**Did Tetley invent the tea bag?** No. Tea bags originated in the US. Tetley pioneered their introduction to the UK in 1953, which transformed British tea habits.

**Who owns Tetley now?** India's Tata Group (Tata Consumer Products), which acquired it in 2000. It has been Indian-owned for over two decades.

**Is Tetley still made in Yorkshire?** It retains substantial UK manufacturing, but the tea is sourced globally and the company is Indian-owned.

### Compare the heritage brands

Try Tetley against other UK names in the brand directory or the full tea shop, and weigh a better loose leaf for quality. Judge on the per-cup price, and free UK delivery is over £35.

Browse the tea range

## Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

**FROM THE CURATOR**

*teas* · Match the tea to the moment. A 6am cup and a 4pm cup do not need to be the same brew.

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