The Teabag: How an Accident Conquered Britain

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The teabag, in summary:** The teabag was an accidental American invention of 1908, adopted slowly by Britain from the 1950s and dominant by 1980. It won on convenience, not flavour, and is now working through a plastic problem, so it deserves neither nostalgia nor snobbery.

The teabag is arguably the single most important object in how the modern world actually drinks tea, and the most useful fact about it is that it was essentially an accident which succeeded because of convenience, not quality. One further correction is worth making at the outset: despite Britain becoming the world's most enthusiastic teabag nation, the teabag is not a British invention at all, it is American. A fair account credits what the bag achieved and stays level headed about what it cost.

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

An accidental American invention

Its origin really was an accident. In 1908 Thomas Sullivan, a tea merchant in New York, looked for a cheap way to send samples to wholesale customers and began packing them in small silk pouches. Customers, not realising the bags were only portion containers, dropped them straight into hot water, liked the convenience and the lack of mess, and asked for more. Sullivan realised he had stumbled onto a product and from around 1910 began making teabags deliberately, first in silk and then in gauze. The format was slow to take off: silk and gauze were expensive, and tea purists viewed bags as inferior from the start. But the convenience appeal was real, particularly for restaurants and offices, and by the 1920s teabags were a small but growing part of the American market. The whole early story stayed American-led well into the twentieth century, which is why the common assumption that Britain invented the teabag is simply wrong.

From gauze to paper

The format that conquered the world arrived through cost-cutting. In 1930 a Boston tea company began experimenting with paper instead of gauze: paper was cheaper, brewed similarly and could be mass-produced, and by the late 1930s paper teabags dominated the American market. The shape was still typically a small sealed pouch with no string. The decisive innovation came in 1944 with the square paper teabag and an attached string, the format almost every teabag still uses today. The string made the bag easy to lift out, and the square shape made automated, high-speed manufacturing far simpler. That

combination, cheap paper plus a machine-friendly shape, turned the teabag from a novelty into something that could be produced by the billion, which is precisely what happened over the following decades as the format spread from America towards Europe.

How it conquered Britain

Britain, wedded to loose leaf and the teapot, resisted longest. Teabags were first sold here in 1953, but uptake was slow through the 1950s, and only in the 1960s and 1970s did the format take over. Several forces drove it. Convenience was the main one: a teabag is faster, less messy and more consistent than loose leaf, and needs no pot, strainer or measuring. Mass marketing by major brands, from around 1960 onwards, pushed the habit hard. Blends were often tuned for British hard water, performing better than loose-leaf alternatives in problem areas. Workplaces switched first, since tea trolleys, kitchenettes and break rooms all favoured the easy single mug. And a broader social shift away from the shared household teapot towards individual cups did the rest. Teabag market share in Britain crossed 50% by 1980 and reached roughly 95% by 2000. The teapot never vanished, but it became occasional rather than daily.

The quality trade-off

Here the purists are partly right and partly snobbish, and candour means saying both. They are partly right because, to brew strong and fast from a small amount of leaf, teabag tea is usually made differently: CTC processing (crush-tear-curl, devised in the 1930s) produces small, dust-like particles that extract quickly for strong colour but lower aromatic complexity, and the smallest grades, fannings and dust, became the standard filling. Blends are built for a fast strong cup, not for nuance or re-steeping, and the cramped flat bag restricts the leaf from expanding. They are partly snobbish, because a decent tea in a well made bag still gives a thoroughly good everyday cup, and writing off every bagged tea as worthless is snobbery turned upside down. Premium pyramid bags, introduced in the 1990s, tried to bridge the gap by holding larger leaf in a roomier mesh, and narrow it without quite closing it. The trade is simple: the teabag gives up nuance for speed, a real cost that is acceptable for most everyday drinking.

The plastic problem

A modern chapter that older tellings omit: many conventional teabags contain plastic. From the 1960s the binder holding the bag together was typically a polypropylene heat-seal, around a quarter of the bag's weight, and for five decades almost no one noticed. From 2018, environmental awareness and a widely shared microplastics study made the question urgent, particularly for some mesh "silken" pyramid bags. The response was real: most major UK brands switched to PLA bioplastic seals between 2018 and 2022. PLA is an improvement but no fix, since it is industrially compostable rather than home compostable, and it does not properly biodegrade in landfill or seawater. Some smaller producers have gone further to fully paper bags with no synthetic seal at all, secured by cotton thread or a staple, which compost properly at home but cost more. Loose leaf sidesteps the issue entirely. Put in proportion, it is a live concern today, not scaremongering.

Why it still matters

The teabag matters because it is the reason that, for most people, "tea" now means a fast mug from a bag rather than a pot of loose leaf, and that single object reshaped the global market, entrenched CTC manufacture and set modern expectations of what tea is. Its history matters for three connected reasons. It defined British tea culture for the second half of the twentieth century, displacing a loose-leaf-and-teapot routine that had lasted centuries. The twenty-first-century move back towards loose leaf is partly a return to pre-teabag practice, so understanding why the bag won, and then lost a little ground, helps drinkers choose consciously. And the plastic-free transition is the same story still being written, its next chapter decided by current buying habits. Seen this way, an accidental convenience that democratised tea while quietly lowering average leaf quality and adding a plastic question, the everyday cup makes more sense than either nostalgia or snobbery allows.

The teabag timeline

Year	What happened
1908	Thomas Sullivan, a New York tea merchant, sends sample tea in small silk pouches. Customers brew them whole by mistake. The accidental invention.
1910s-1920s	Sullivan produces teabags deliberately, in silk then gauze. A small but growing American segment.
1930	A Boston firm switches to paper. Cheaper and mass-producible; soon dominant in the US.
1944	The square paper teabag with a string is introduced. The format still used today.
1953	Teabags first sold in Britain. Uptake is slow against loose leaf and the teapot.
1960s-1970s	British adoption accelerates with mass marketing. By 1980 teabags hold the majority of the market.
1990s	Pyramid "silken" mesh bags appear for premium ranges, holding larger leaf.
2018-2022	Plastic concerns drive a shift to PLA bioplastic seals; "plastic-free" branding becomes mainstream.

If you want to taste what the bag gained you in speed and lost you in nuance, brew some loose leaf tea alongside your usual English Breakfast bags, or explore pyramid bag and plastic-free ranges as the format's modern descendants. The companion history of tea and CTC vs orthodox processing pages give the wider background.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

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