Robert Fortune, the Tea Spy

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The heist story:** Robert Fortune (1812-1880) was the Scottish botanist hired by the East India Company in 1848 to steal Chinese tea plants and knowledge for the Empire.

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

Robert Fortune is the most successful corporate spy in British history, and his target was tea. A Scottish botanist hired by the East India Company in 1848, Fortune disguised himself as a Mandarin Chinese merchant, infiltrated the closed off tea producing regions of China, stole the secrets of tea cultivation, smuggled out 20,000 plants and seedlings, and effectively founded the entire Indian tea industry. The world's largest tea growing nation today (India) exists because one Scotsman lied his way into Fujian Province with a fake pigtail and a botanist's notebook.

This is the wildest origin story in tea, and most British tea drinkers have no idea it happened.

Why the East India Company hired a spy

In 1848, the East India Company had a problem. Britain was the world's largest tea consumer; China was the world's only tea producer; the trade was almost entirely one way (silver from Britain, tea from China); and the British government was running out of ways to make the maths work. The Opium Wars had partially solved the trade deficit problem (badly, brutally, immorally) but the Company wanted a longer term fix.

The longer term fix: grow tea inside the British Empire. Specifically, in India, where the climate was already known to be suitable. There was just one tiny problem, nobody in the British Empire knew how to actually grow tea. The Chinese had a monopoly on the cultivation knowledge, the seed varieties, the processing techniques, and the entire industry. They guarded these secrets fanatically. Foreigners weren't allowed into tea producing regions. Most Westerners had never seen a tea plant in person.

Enter Robert Fortune. The East India Company hired him because he'd already done a previous (lower stakes) plant collecting trip to coastal China. They sent him in 1848 with a single mission: get inside the tea regions, steal everything you can, smuggle it out.

The disguise

Fortune was a tall, blonde Scotsman, and there was no plausible way to pass him off as Chinese. So he didn't try to be Chinese, he posed as a Mandarin merchant from a distant province. He shaved the front of his head in the Qing era style, attached a long fake pigtail (the Manchurian queue), wore Chinese dress, and

travelled inland with a single Chinese guide who did the talking.

The cover story: Fortune was a wealthy provincial merchant from far away (he claimed Mongolia or beyond, where dialect and accent would be unfamiliar to local Fujianese). He was on a tour of the famous tea districts to make purchases. The disguise was preposterous on inspection. It worked because nobody inspected. Tall, weather beaten northern merchants did exist; Fortune behaved confidently; his guide handled all the linguistic complexity.

What he stole

Over two years (1848-1851), Fortune travelled through the tea growing heartlands of Fujian, Anhui, and Zhejiang. He visited tea farms, watched plucking and processing, took detailed notes on the soil, climate, altitude, varieties, and timing. He bribed his way into factories. He documented the manufacturing of black tea, green tea, and oolong tea, three categories the West had previously thought were three different plants (rather than the same plant processed three ways).

And he smuggled out:

- **Roughly 20,000 tea plants and seedlings:** packed in revolutionary new "Wardian cases" (sealed glass terrariums that kept plants alive on long sea voyages). Earlier attempts to ship live tea plants had failed because the plants died at sea.
- **Detailed cultivation knowledge.** What soil, what altitude, what plucking schedule, what rolling technique, what oxidation timing.
- **Eight skilled Chinese tea workers:** yes, he also recruited and smuggled out the actual humans needed to teach the British how to do it.
- **Equipment and tools.** Pluckers' baskets, processing tools, kit lists.

The whole operation was, by any modern definition, industrial espionage on an enormous scale.

The result: the Indian tea industry

Fortune's stolen plants and recruited workers were shipped to Darjeeling and Assam in 1851. Within a decade, India had its first commercial scale tea plantations. Within twenty years, India was producing tea at scale. By 1900, India had overtaken China as the world's largest tea producer. By 1947, when India became independent, "Indian tea" was so synonymous with British tea that the brand identity had completely flipped, tea wasn't Chinese anymore in the British imagination, it was Indian.

Every Yorkshire Tea, every PG Tips, every Tetley, every English Breakfast blend you've ever drunk descends from Fortune's industrial theft of 1851. See our black tea overview, our Assam and Darjeeling notes (Darjeeling, Assam), and the wider tea history overview for the full downstream consequences.

Was it ethical?

Of course not. By any modern standard, and arguably by 1850 standards too, what Fortune did was theft, deception, exploitation of Chinese workers, and a grave violation of Chinese sovereignty. The combined Opium Wars + Fortune's botanical heist + East India Company commercial dominance is one of the more shameful chapters of British colonial history.

The flipside: the Indian tea industry that Fortune founded employs millions of people today and produces tea that the world enjoys. The historical wrong was real; the present day reality is also real. Modern British tea drinkers can hold both ideas at once.

What Fortune wrote

He went on to publish three books about his expeditions: *Three Years' Wanderings in the Northern Provinces of China* (1847), *A Journey to the Tea Countries of China* (1852), and *A Residence among the Chinese* (1857). The 1852 book is the tea heist memoir; it reads like Victorian era Indiana Jones with botanical drawings. It's still in print and still surprisingly readable.

For a modern retelling, the best book is Sarah Rose's *For All the Tea in China: How England Stole the World's Favourite Drink and Changed History* (2009). It's gripping, well researched, and reads like a thriller.

The verdict on Fortune

Robert Fortune is one of the most consequential figures in tea history and one of the least well known. The British tea drinker has a vague awareness that tea "comes from India" without realising that it does so because of a Scottish botanist's two year undercover operation in disguise. The next time you brew an Indian black tea, that's the supply chain Fortune set in motion.

He is, depending on your moral angle, either a swashbuckling adventurer hero or a shameful corporate imperial agent. Probably both at once. History rarely picks one.

For the wider context see the tea history overview, the black tea overview, the Darjeeling overview, the Assam overview, the Catherine of Braganza overview, the Anna, Duchess of Bedford overview, the British tea culture overview, and the Stephen Twining overview.

The tea history cluster. The full story: the timeline, how tea came to Britain, the East India Company, tea and the British Empire, the Opium Wars and tea, how Britain stole tea from China, the great tea race and the tea break.

The essentials: Robert Fortune the tea spy

Aspect	Quick note
Who	Scottish botanist (1812-1880), pioneering plant-hunter
Mission	Hired 1848 by the East India Company to steal Chinese tea plants and knowledge
Disguise	Travelled disguised as a Chinese merchant with shaved head and queue
What he took	20,000 tea plants, ~17,000 seeds, eight tea-master workers
Where he took it	Smuggled to Darjeeling and Assam via Hong Kong and Calcutta
Result	Founded the Indian commercial tea industry; broke Chinese monopoly
Ethical reading	Industrial espionage by today's standards; deserves a frank reckoning
Lasting impact	The Darjeeling and Assam industries built on Fortune's theft

Sensible options on the same shelf: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. There is plenty more in the tea shop, and UK postage on Chinese and Indian teas

alike is free above £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Two centuries after Fortune, tea is still best compared per cup. Loose leaf mostly comes out ahead, though bags sometimes keep pace.

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