# History of British Tea

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The British tea timeline:** British tea history from Catherine of Braganza in 1662 through tax, smuggling, empire and afternoon tea to the supermarket aisle and the quality revival.

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

**Britain has a 370-year tea habit, and the cup you brew this morning is the result of a fairly extraordinary set of historical accidents, royal marriage, smuggling, war, empire, rationing, and the slow shift from leaf to bag.** The drink that now feels quintessentially British arrived as an exotic Chinese luxury and became universal essentially within two generations. Knowing how it unfolded explains why the UK tea aisle looks the way it does today.

This guide covers the major epochs of British tea history: the 17th century arrival, the 18th century smuggling era, the 19th century pivot to India and Ceylon, the wartime rationing period, and the modern teabag to premium revival. Understanding the history adds depth to daily tea drinking and explains why British tea culture is so distinctive globally.

## 1650s: tea arrives

The first recorded sale of tea in England was in 1657, at Thomas Garway's coffee house in London. It was a Chinese green tea, sold by the pound at prices roughly equivalent to several weeks' wages for a working person. A drink for the very rich.

The decisive moment was 1662, when **Catherine of Braganza** daughter of the Portuguese king, married Charles II. She arrived in London with a chest of tea as part of her dowry and the habit of drinking it every afternoon. The English court copied the queen. Within a generation, tea drinking was the marker of fashionable society. Within two generations, it had spread to the middle classes.

The early years of British tea drinking were dominated by Chinese green tea (the only kind initially available); the shift to black tea happened gradually through the late 17th and 18th centuries as preferences evolved and shipping considerations made the more stable black tea more practical for the long voyage from China.

For the wider tea history context see the tea history overview.

## 1700s: taxes and smuggling

Tea was heavily taxed throughout the 18th century, at one point taxed at 119 percent of its purchase price. The result was an enormous illegal trade: by some estimates, two thirds of the tea consumed in Britain in the 1770s was smuggled in. Cornwall, Devon, the Channel coast and the Norfolk coast all had thriving smuggler economies built largely on tea.

The taxes had a global side effect too. The British government's attempt to enforce the tea monopoly in its American colonies led directly to the **Boston Tea Party of 1773**; colonists dressed as Mohawks dumped 92,000 lbs of East India Company tea into Boston Harbor. The American Revolution kicked off two years later. The Americans switched to coffee partly out of political principle and largely never came back.

In 1784 William Pitt cut the tea tax dramatically. Smuggling collapsed, legal sales soared. The drink became affordable for the working classes for the first time.

The 18th century also saw the foundation of brands that still exist today. **Twinings was founded in 1706** by Thomas Twining at 216 Strand in London; the same shop continues to trade today as the world's longest continuously operating tea shop. See the Twinings deep dive.

### 1800s: the pivot to India and Ceylon

Until the 1830s, almost all British tea came from China. The trade balance was a problem; China would only accept silver in payment, and the silver outflow was draining the Treasury. The British East India Company solved this by exporting opium grown in India to China, leading to two wars and a great deal of misery, but that's a different story.

The cleaner solution was to grow tea outside China. In 1823, the Scotsman **Robert Bruce** identified an indigenous tea variety in Assam, north east India (shown to him by local Singpho leader Beesa Gam). By the 1840s, Assam tea was being commercially produced. By the 1860s, Indian grown tea exceeded Chinese imports for the first time.

Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka) was added in the 1860s when a coffee blight wiped out the island's coffee plantations and a Scotsman called **James Taylor** replaced them with tea, planting the first commercial Ceylon tea at the Loolecondera Estate in 1867. By 1900, Britain was drinking mostly Indian and Ceylon tea, not Chinese. The blends behind today's English breakfast and afternoon tea are direct descendants of that Imperial era pivot.

The 19th century also produced the modern major British tea brands:

- **Tetley:** founded 1837 by Joseph and Edward Tetley as travelling tea merchants in Yorkshire. See the Tetley deep dive
- **Lipton:** founded by Thomas Lipton in 1890 with Ceylon tea estates
- **Brooke Bond:** founded 1869, became one of the major British tea brands of the 20th century

For the source region context see the Assam overview and the Ceylon overview.

### The Victorian afternoon tea invention

Afternoon tea was popularised by **Anna, Duchess of Bedford in the 1840s**. Anna found the traditional aristocratic schedule (early breakfast, light lunch around midday, dinner not served until 8 or 9pm) produced uncomfortable hunger in the afternoon hours; she began having tea and a small snack brought to her room

around 4pm to bridge the gap. The practice quickly spread among aristocratic women, becoming a social occasion involving guests; through the late Victorian era, afternoon tea evolved into the formal multi course tradition that's still recognisable today.

By the early 20th century, afternoon tea had become a defining element of British social life across multiple classes. Hotels began offering formal afternoon tea services (Claridge's, the Ritz, the Savoy in London, plus prestigious hotels across the country); tea rooms emerged as social spaces particularly important for women's public socialising. See the afternoon tea tradition.

### Wartime: rationing and the cup of war

Tea was rationed in the UK from **1940 to 1952**. The ration was 2 ounces (about 57g) per person per week, roughly 25 cups. The government bought up almost the entire commercial stock and distributed it through the rationing system because tea was considered essential for civilian morale and military function.

British tanks in WWII were fitted with **boiling vessels** as standard equipment from 1944 onward, after the Normandy landings showed how dangerous it was for crews to brew up outside their tanks. The Centurion tank introduced in 1945 had one built in. The vessels are still standard kit on British Army armoured vehicles in 2026.

Rationing made certain brands. Brooke Bond, Lyons, Lipton and Ty phoo were all the major suppliers in the rationing era and emerged from it with vast distribution networks. PG Tips was a Brooke Bond brand (founded 1930). Yorkshire Tea, a younger entrant, only emerged in 1977. See the Yorkshire Tea curator review and the PG Tips deep dive.

### 1970s onward: the bag, the boom, the bust, the recovery

The teabag was an American invention (Thomas Sullivan, 1908) but didn't reach the UK in serious volume until the 1950s. By 1970 it was 12 percent of the UK market. By 2010 it was over 95 percent. Loose leaf became a niche.

British tea consumption peaked in the 1970s at roughly 4 cups per person per day. It's now around 2; the rest of the kettle going to coffee, cold drinks, and bottled water. Tea is still the UK's most drunk hot beverage by volume, but coffee has been catching up steadily, especially among under-35s.

Major British brand events in the modern era:

- **1977** Yorkshire Tea launched by Bettys & Taylors of Harrogate
- **1989** Tetley introduces the round tea bag
- **1996** PG Tips introduces the pyramid bag
- **2000** Tetley acquired by Tata Global Beverages
- **2001** Pukka founded in Bristol, opening the era of organic herbal blends
- **2006** Teapigs founded; premium pyramid whole leaf tea returns to mainstream British retail
- **2017** Yorkshire Tea overtakes PG Tips as the UK's biggest selling tea brand by value
- **2018:** plastic in tea bags consumer controversy drives industry wide bag format reform

- **2022** Unilever sells global tea business (PG Tips, Lipton) to CVC Capital Partners as Lipton Teas and Infusions

### The modern revival of quality tea

The recent shift is back toward quality: a small but meaningful return to loose leaf, premium pyramid bags, single estate teas, and speciality blends. The UK is also re discovering green tea, herbal infusions, and matcha at a faster rate than the major brands' standard black tea sales are growing. The market is now divided between the daily mug (still mostly Yorkshire and PG Tips) and the considered cup (premium, varied, often loose leaf). Both are growing.

Specific recent trends:

- **The wellness movement:** herbal infusions and teas sold on that idea grew sharply through the 2000s and 2010s
- **The premium tea revival:** brands like Teapigs brought whole leaf premium tea back into mainstream British retail
- **The matcha boom:** matcha moved from a niche speciality to a mainstream drink
- **The bubble tea phenomenon:** the Taiwanese boba tradition spread globally through the 2000s and 2010s, creating a new tea based drink category. See the bubble tea overview
- **Sustainability and ethical sourcing:** consumer awareness of tea industry labour and environmental issues has driven Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, and organic certification growth
- **Plastic free packaging:** the late-2010s plastic in tea bags controversy led most major brands to transition to plant based bag materials

### The British tea market today

Modern UK tea consumption ranks among the world's highest per capita: approximately 1.9kg per person annually, sustained across three centuries of British tea drinking. Black tea dominates, at around 80 percent of consumption, while herbal and green tea have been growing alongside it.

The current market structure:

- **Mass market everyday tea:** dominated by Yorkshire, PG Tips, Tetley, and supermarket own label
- **Heritage premium black tea:** dominated by Twinings
- **Specialty whole leaf premium:** dominated by Teapigs and similar premium brands
- **Organic herbal wellness:** dominated by Pukka and Clipper
- **Discount tier:** supermarket own label and Lipton Yellow Label

For the wider context see the best selling British teas guide.

### Key historical figures in British tea

Specific historical figures who shaped British tea drinking:

- **Catherine of Braganza (1638-1705)** brought tea drinking culture to the English court

- **Thomas Twining (1675-1741)** founded Twinings in 1706; the world's longest continuously operating tea brand
- **William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806)** cut tea tax in 1784, making tea affordable for working classes
- **Robert Bruce (1789-1824)** identified Assam tea variety in 1823, foundation of Indian tea industry
- **James Taylor (1835-1892)** planted first commercial Ceylon tea in 1867
- **Thomas Lipton (1850-1931)** built Lipton tea empire, popularised affordable tea for British working classes
- **Anna, Duchess of Bedford (1783-1857)** popularised afternoon tea in the 1840s
- **Charles Grey, 2nd Earl Grey (1764-1845)** the figure after whom Earl Grey tea is named (though the historical attribution is contested)
- **Thomas Sullivan (US, 1908)** accidentally invented the tea bag while sending samples to customers

### British tea cultural impact

Beyond commerce, British tea has shaped social rituals across the country:

- **The afternoon tea tradition:** set out in the 1840s, and now a British custom copied around the world
- **The workplace tea round:** the structured social break central to British workplace culture
- **The "cuppa" hospitality default:** offering tea is the British greeting gesture for visitors
- **Crisis management tea** "stick the kettle on" as British response to bad news, illness, or emotional difficulty
- **The builders' brew tradition:** the strong milky sweet working British cup culture. See the builders' brew tradition
- **The class signals embedded in tea terminology and practice:** real but increasingly fluid in modern Britain

For the full British tea cultural context see the British tea culture overview.

### What this means for the cup in your hand

Almost everything about your morning tea is a historical accident: the species came from China, the plantations from India and Sri Lanka, the milk and sugar habit from when sugar was a luxury, the strong brew preference from rationing, the bag from American innovation, the brand loyalty from wartime distribution.

Knowing the history doesn't change the cup, but it does explain why "British tea" is so distinct from how the same plant gets drunk in Japan, China, Morocco, India or Iran. The drink is the same chemistry; the culture surrounding it is wildly different.

### What we stock

Browse the full black tea range, herbal tea range, and broader catalogue. The most bought British products on teas.co.uk:

- True English Tea (T.E.T) Everyday English No 1, 20 Tea Bags 40g
- Yorkshire Tea Original Loose Leaf Tea, 250g
- Tetley Seriously Refreshing, 75 Tea Bags 250g
- Yorkshire Tea Caramelised Biscuit Brew, 40 Tea Bags 112g
- Yorkshire Tea Cherry Bakewell Brew, 40 Tea Bags 112g
- Yorkshire Tea Bedtime Brew, 40 Tea Bags 100g

For comparisons across the wider tea landscape, see also: Yorkshire Tea, PG Tips, Tetley, Twinings, Teapigs.

### The British timeline at a glance

| Date | What happened |
|---|---|
| 1662 | Catherine of Braganza marries Charles II and makes tea courtly |
| 1700s | Crippling tax, mass smuggling and widespread adulteration |
| 1773 | The tea tax helps trigger the Boston Tea Party |
| 1800s | Pivot to India and Ceylon plantation tea; the China monopoly ends |
| 1840s | Afternoon tea arrives as a Victorian social occasion |
| 1939, 45 | Rationing; tea treated as essential wartime morale |
| 1970s on | The tea bag, the supermarket boom, decline, then a quality revival |

### Source

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

**FROM THE CURATOR**

*teas* · If a tea from this story takes your fancy, brew a single cup of it. One cup of Assam or Ceylon will teach you more than twenty chapters of history.

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