History of Tea: The Whole Arc, Explained

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **5,000 years of tea, in summary:** Tea has roughly 5,000 years of history: one Chinese plant that became medicine, art, ceremony, trade, empire and finally the everyday brew.

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

Tea has 5,000 years of history, discovered in China around 2737 BCE, formalised as ceremony in Tang Dynasty (7th-10th century), spread to Japan via Buddhist monks, brought to Britain in the 1660s, dominated global trade for 200 years, sparked the American Revolution, fuelled Britain's industrial workforce, and is now drunk in over 60 countries. The cup in your hand has more historical weight than any other beverage.

The origins (2737 BCE, 700 CE)

Legend credits Chinese Emperor Shen Nong with discovering tea around 2737 BCE, leaves blew into his pot of boiling water and he noticed the pleasant flavour. Likely apocryphal but useful as a marker.

Real history: Camellia sinensis was domesticated in southwestern China (Yunnan Sichuan border region) thousands of years ago. First use was as medicine. By the Han Dynasty (206 BCE, 220 CE) tea was a regular drink. By Tang Dynasty (618-907) it was widespread.

The Tang Dynasty, tea formalised (618-907)

Around 760 CE Lu Yu wrote the Cha Jing (Classic of Tea), the first book devoted entirely to tea. It made tea an art and a custom, not just a drink. Tea became central to Chinese culture and economy.

The spread to Japan (8th-13th century)

Buddhist monks brought tea seeds and tea drinking practice from China to Japan. Eisai (1141-1215) wrote Kissa Yojoki (Drinking Tea for Health), establishing tea as Japanese cultural staple. The Japanese tea ceremony (chado) developed from these monastic roots over the following centuries.

The Song Dynasty, whisked tea (960-1279)

Song Dynasty Chinese drank powdered tea whisked into a froth, direct ancestor of modern Japanese matcha. Eisai brought this method to Japan in 1191. China later abandoned the whisked method for steeped

leaf; Japan preserved it.

Tea reaches Europe (1610-1657)

The Dutch East India Company brought tea to Holland in 1610. From Holland tea spread to Britain. Initially expensive and exotic.

Britain falls in love (1660s onwards)

Catherine of Braganza, Portuguese wife of Charles II, brought tea drinking to the English court in 1662. Tea drinking spread from court to wealthy society to middle class to mass market over the next 150 years.

The British East India Company became the dominant tea trader. Tea prices dropped over the 18th century, putting it within reach of working class drinkers.

The Boston Tea Party (1773)

Britain's tea taxes on American colonies sparked the famous protest, colonists dumped 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbour. Catalyst for the American Revolution. Lasting effect: Americans switched to coffee culturally; British tea drinking unaffected.

The Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860)

Britain wanted Chinese tea but lacked Chinese acceptable currency. The British East India Company traded Indian opium into China to balance the tea trade. Chinese resistance led to two wars. Britain won, forcing China to open to British trade and ceding Hong Kong.

Tea in India (1830s onwards)

To break Chinese tea monopoly, Britain established tea production in India. Discovered native tea plants in Assam (Camellia sinensis var. assamica) plus imported Chinese seeds for Darjeeling. Indian tea production grew rapidly. By 1900, India was the world's largest tea exporter.

Tea in Sri Lanka (Ceylon, 1860s onwards)

Coffee blight destroyed Ceylonese coffee plantations. Tea replaced coffee as the colonial cash crop. James Taylor planted the first commercial tea estate in 1867. Sir Thomas Lipton revolutionised marketing of Ceylon tea to British and American consumers.

The British tea bag (1908 onwards)

Thomas Sullivan, an American tea merchant, accidentally invented the tea bag in 1908 by sending tea samples in silk pouches. The bag was an American invention, and British supermarkets only switched from loose leaf to tea bags in the 1960s and 70s. By the 1980s tea bags dominated British tea consumption.

Tea rationing in WWII (1940-1952)

Britain rationed tea from 1940. Working class families received 2oz per person per week, about 1 cup per day. Tea was strategically vital: it was distributed to factories, military forces, civil defence units. The phrase

"the tea ration" became cultural shorthand for hardship and resilience. Rationing didn't end until 1952. More on tea rationing.

Post war and supermarket era (1950s-1990s)

Mass supermarket tea brands emerged: Brooke Bond PG Tips, Tetley, Typhoo, Lyons. Yorkshire Tea launched in 1977 (relatively late) and became a dominant brand. Tea bags replaced loose leaf in most British homes by 1980.

The specialty revival (2000s onwards)

Specialty tea movement reached the UK around 2000-2010. Whittard repositioned upmarket; smaller specialty brands (Postcard Teas, Mei Leaf) emerged for tea enthusiasts. Pukka launched in 2002 and scaled up herbal blends. Loose leaf, single origin, and ceremonial grade tea became visible alongside mass market.

The wellness era (2010s onwards)

Pukka, Yogi and Heath & Heather made herbal blends a mainstream habit. Matcha entered mainstream consciousness around 2015. Cold brew tea grew. Specialty grade matcha became achievable for home drinkers.

Modern British tea consumption

- Britain drinks ~100 million cups of tea daily.
- Per capita: 2-3 cups daily.
- Black tea ~75% of consumption; herbal/green ~25%.
- Tea bags ~95% of mass market; loose leaf small but growing.
- Yorkshire Tea, Tetley, PG Tips dominate the everyday market.
- Specialty market expanding with younger consumers.

Notable tea cultural moments

- 1840: 7th Duchess of Bedford allegedly invents afternoon tea.
- 1879: First tea bags (loose leaf in silk).
- 1903: Lipton tea becomes global brand.
- 1908: Thomas Sullivan accidentally creates the tea bag.
- 1949: Tea rationing ends in 7-tea brewing zones.
- 1977: Yorkshire Tea launches.
- 2002: Pukka founded.
- 2005: Tregothnan plants first commercial UK tea.
- 2015: Matcha mainstream breakthrough.

The tea tax history

Tea has been the most taxed of British staples, at one point tax was over 100% of tea price, creating massive smuggling industries. Tea tax cuts in 1784 (William Pitt the Younger) collapsed smuggling and allowed mass market tea drinking.

Tea and British identity

Tea became central to British identity through 200 years of imperial trade, working class consumption, and cultural integration. The "cup of tea" is shorthand for hospitality, comfort, problem solving, and resilience. The phrase "putting the kettle on" carries weight no other British food or drink quite has.

FAQ

How old is tea? Around 5,000 years.

When did tea reach Britain? 1610s (Holland) and 1660s (Britain via Catherine of Braganza).

When did Britain start growing tea? Tregothnan, Cornwall, 2005.

Tea bag invention? 1908, Thomas Sullivan, USA. Mass market British adoption from 1960s.

Tea rationing? 1940-1952. 2oz per person per week.

Curator's note: tea has more history than any other British staple. The cup in your hand connects you to 5,000 years of cultivation, 200 years of British imperial trade, and 1,000 years of Chinese ceremony. Worth pausing over occasionally. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

The milestones that actually changed the cup

Era	What changed
Legendary China (c. 2737 BCE)	The Shen Nong discovery story, myth not record, marks tea as medicine first
Tang dynasty (8th c.)	Lu Yu's Classic of Tea formalises it as a connoisseur's art
Song to Japan	Whisked powdered tea travels to Japan and becomes the way of tea
1610s, 1660s	Dutch then British trade brings it to Europe; Catherine of Braganza makes it courtly in England
18th, 19th c.	Tax, smuggling, the East India Company, the Opium Wars, plantations in India and Ceylon
Modern era	Clippers, the tea bag and mass blending turn luxury into the everyday brew

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

The most direct way to taste the history is to drink it: a classic black tea, a Chinese green tea, or browse the full tea shop.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Match the tea to the moment. The 6am mug and the 4pm cup are different occasions, and the brew can differ too.

Tea history reading

- Tea history timeline
- History of British tea
- The history of tea, in one place
- Tea and the British Empire

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.



teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/