A History of British Tea: From Smuggling to Builders

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **British tea history, in summary:** British tea history runs from a 17th-century aristocratic luxury through smuggling, plantation industrialisation and WWII rationing into the post-war working-class cup.

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

British tea drinking shifted from upper class luxury to working class staple over the 19th century. By 1900, tea was the everyday drink of British workers, soldiers, miners, mill operators. Industrial tea breaks became formalised; tea and biscuit was working class fuel; the tea ration in WWII cemented tea as British identity. The transformation from aristocratic curiosity to working class fuel is one of the most significant cultural shifts in British history.

The 17th-18th century: aristocratic luxury

Tea was introduced to Britain via Catherine of Braganza in 1662 and remained an aristocratic luxury for 100+ years. High taxes, expensive imports, and ceremonial use kept tea out of working class consumption.

The 18th century: tea taxes and smuggling

Tea taxes were extremely high (sometimes over 100% of the tea price). Massive smuggling industries developed. Smuggled tea became affordable enough for some middle class consumption.

William Pitt the Younger's Commutation Act of 1784 dramatically reduced tea tax. Smuggling collapsed. Tea became affordable for broader consumption.

The 19th century: tea reaches working class

Industrial revolution context

The Industrial Revolution created urban working class populations. Tea was discovered to:

- Provide warmth in cold factories.
- Boil water (eliminating waterborne disease, the public traditional uses).
- Provide caffeine kept workers going through long shifts.

- Sweet sugar with milk made tea calorically substantial.

Tea became the ideal industrial worker beverage.

The price decline

Throughout the 19th century, tea prices declined:

- 1840s: tea prices reached mass market levels.
- 1880s-90s: tea was as cheap as bread.
- 1900: tea was the everyday drink of British workers.

Indian tea expansion

Britain established Indian tea production (Assam from 1830s, Darjeeling from 1850s). Indian tea was cheaper than Chinese; expanded supply allowed broader consumption.

Ceylonese tea

From 1860s, Ceylonese tea joined Indian tea as cheap colonial supply. Sir Thomas Lipton's marketing made Ceylon tea accessible.

Tea bag innovation

The American invention of the tea bag (1908, Thomas Sullivan) eventually transformed mass market tea. UK adoption was slow but became dominant by the 1970s.

Empire, India, and the awkward part of the story

Any real history of British tea has to be clear about empire, because the British tea trade cannot be separated from the colonisation of India and Ceylon, and skipping that part produces a story that does not actually explain the cup. Until the 1830s the British East India Company sourced almost all its tea from China through Canton, which made the supply expensive and politically fragile (the Opium Wars 1839-42 and 1856-60 were partly driven by Britains attempt to balance the China-trade with opium produced in India). The breakthrough that made tea a working-class drink was the discovery of indigenous tea bushes in Assam in the 1820s and the subsequent industrial plantation development through the 1840s-70s, run on a labour-coercive plantation model that British administrators imposed across Assam, Darjeeling, the Nilgiris and later Ceylon; the same investment scaled tea from luxury to commodity and supplied the post-1850 mass market that the wider British tea culture guide describes. Reading that history clearly is not a polemic, it is the framing the rest of the cup makes sense within: when a modern British supermarket pours an Assam tea bag into a mug, the cup that arrives has plantation labour, colonial extraction and the largest commodity trade of the Victorian period inside its history, and naming that out loud is more useful than the cosy Wedgwood-china version, the same evidence-and-context-matters approach the wider tea history guide takes.

The tea break tradition

Working class tea breaks became formalised:

- **1840s-50s:** Some factories provided tea breaks.
- **1860s-70s:** Tea breaks became more common.
- **1880s-90s:** Tea breaks were a worker right.
- **1900s onwards:** The tea break is a British workplace standard.

The 10-15 minute mid morning and mid afternoon tea breaks structured the working day.

WWI and tea

British soldiers in WWI received tea as part of their daily ration. Tea was strategically distributed to factories, military, and civilian populations. The tea as morale tool tradition strengthened.

WWII and rationing

Tea rationing 1940-1952 cemented tea as British identity. The cup of tea during air raids, after bomb damage and in mobile canteens all became defining British wartime images. More on tea rationing.

Post war working class tea

The 1950s-70s saw the consolidation of working class tea drinking:

- Yorkshire Tea launched 1977 (relatively late but became dominant).
- Brooke Bond, Tetley, PG Tips, Typhoo, Lyons all major brands.
- Tea bags replaced loose leaf in most British homes.
- Tea and biscuits became a fixed British habit.
- Working class tea drinking averaged 4-6 cups daily.

The construction site tea ritual

"Builders' tea" became iconic, strong tea, milk, 1-3 sugars, in a mug, with a Digestive biscuit. The British construction industry's reliance on tea is genuine cultural fact:

- Tea breaks scheduled into the working day.
- Tea round rotation (someone makes tea for the team).
- Strong tea required for outdoor work.
- Sugar provides quick energy.

More on builders' tea.

The factory and mill tea

British factories and mills had formal tea provision:

- Factory canteens with subsidised tea.
- Tea ladies who pushed trolleys of tea around the workplace (a 20th century feature, now mostly gone).

- Tea machines in modern offices.
- Tea and biscuits as a way to bond at work.

The tea lady

The tea lady was a 20th century British workplace institution. A woman pushing a trolley of tea, biscuits, sometimes cake, from desk to desk. The role was:

- Pre-1980s: ubiquitous in British offices and factories.
- 1980s-90s: declining as offices replaced trolleys with kitchen kettles.
- Post-2000: largely gone, except in some traditional settings.

The tea lady provided social cohesion and reliable tea supply across the working day.

Working class tea today

Modern British working class tea drinking:

- Yorkshire Tea, Tetley, PG Tips dominate.
- 240-bag and 440-bag packs are standard household format.
- Tea and biscuit remains foundational.
- Workplace tea round still common.
- Construction sites still run on tea.
- Tea is very affordable at 6 to 8p per cup.

Class associations

While tea is now universal across British classes, subtle class associations persist:

- **Working class:** Strong tea, mug, milk, 1-3 sugars.
- **Middle class:** Mainstream brand tea, splash of milk, no sugar.
- **Upper middle:** Premium brand or specialty tea, fine china for occasions.
- **Upper class:** Specialty single origin, formal afternoon tea, tea tasting culture.

The differences are stylistic rather than fundamental, everyone drinks tea.

The cultural cement

200 years of working class tea drinking made tea central to British identity. Phrases like "having a cuppa" and "putting the kettle on" carry social weight precisely because they reference shared working class experience.

Modern decline of working class tea?

Some modern shifts:

- Younger generations drink less tea than older generations.
- Coffee culture growing in younger demographics.
- Tea remains dominant overall but the lead is narrowing.
- Specialty tea growing (younger middle class).
- Energy drinks competing for tea's working class niche.

British tea drinking is still substantial, but the working class tea habit is slowly softening.

FAQ

When did tea reach working class? Mid-19th century, after price reductions.

Why did working class adopt tea? Caffeine, warmth, public traditional uses (boiled water), affordability.

Tea breaks? Formalised from the 19th century; standard British workplace right.

Builders' tea? Working class strong tea, milk, sugar, mug, biscuit.

Class differences today? Stylistic rather than fundamental, everyone drinks tea.

Curator's note: working class tea drinking shaped modern British identity. 200 years of strong tea, milk, biscuit, mug = the foundation of British tea culture. Worth respecting rather than dismissing as unsophisticated. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

What you need to know: British tea history milestones

Date / period	The note
1650s-1700s	Tea reaches aristocratic London via Catherine of Braganza
18th century	Heavy tea taxes (over 100%); smuggling endemic
1784	Commutation Act cuts tea tax dramatically
19th century	Tea reaches working class through India and Ceylon
1840s	Duchess of Bedford invents the afternoon tea custom
1860s-70s	British plantations in Assam and Ceylon scale up
WWI / WWII	Tea rationed; cup-of-tea morale culture cemented
Post-war	Working-class builders mug becomes the national drink
Today	165 million cups a day in the UK; the modern range broadens

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

The cupboard staples that touch this article: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Have a wander through the tea range; orders over £35 ship free across the UK.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · As history shows, the per cup price is what matters. Loose leaf usually wins, though Britain's supermarket bags sometimes do.

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