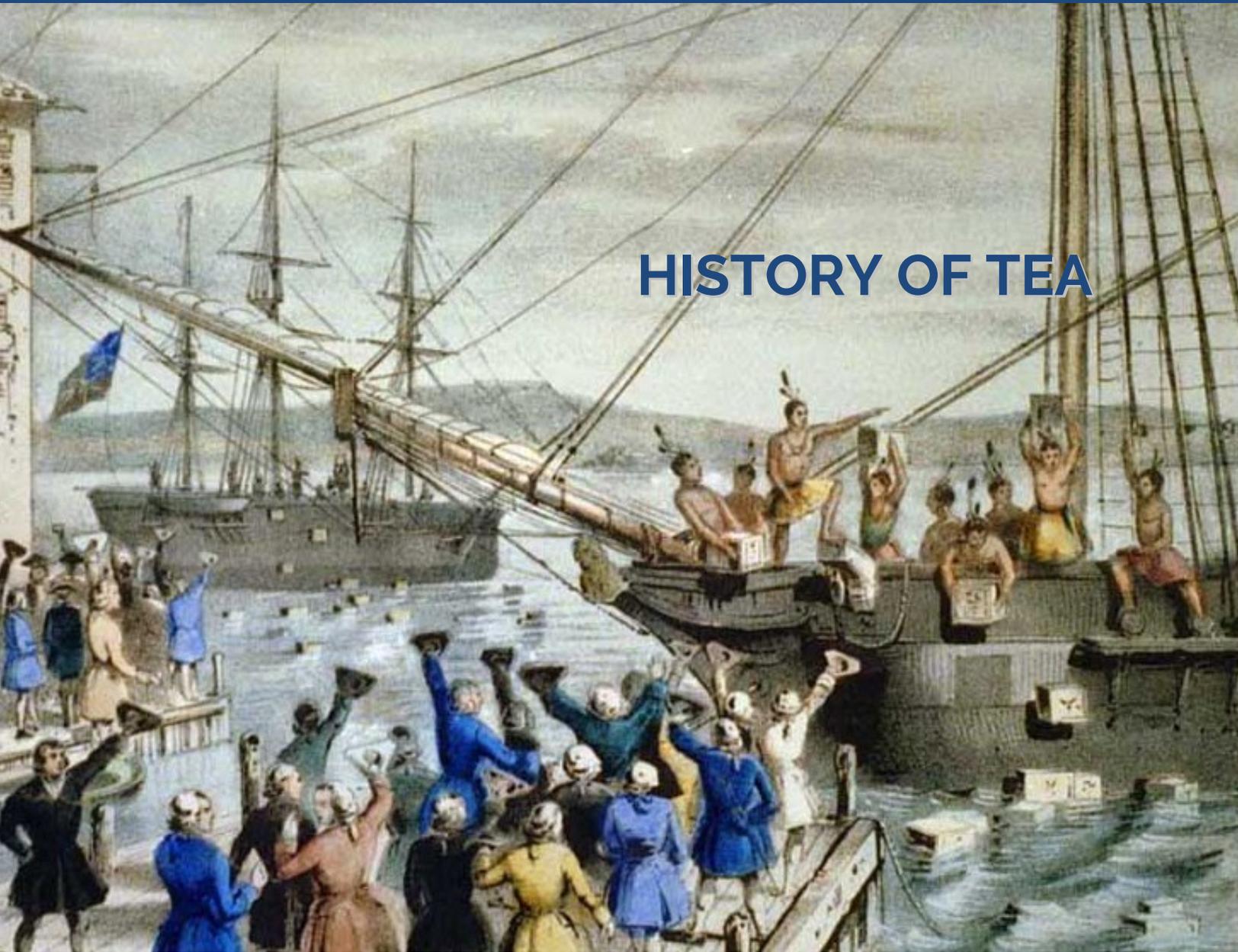


HISTORY OF TEA



The birth of tea in China

Tea is often thought of as being a quintessentially British drink, and we have been drinking it for over 350 years. But in fact the history of tea goes much further back.

The story of tea begins in China. According to legend, in 2737 BC, the Chinese emperor Shen Nung was sitting beneath a tree while his servant boiled drinking water, when some leaves from the tree blew into the water. Shen Nung, a renowned herbalist, decided to try the infusion that his servant had accidentally created. The tree was a *Camellia sinensis*, and the resulting drink was what we now call tea.

Tea was first introduced to Japan, by Japanese Buddhist monk

Japanese tea garden

It is impossible to know whether there is any truth in this story. But tea drinking certainly became established in China many centuries before it had even been heard of in the west. Containers for tea have been found in tombs dating from the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD) but it was under the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD), that tea became firmly established as the national drink of China. It became such a favourite that during the late eighth century a writer called Lu Yu wrote the first book entirely about tea, the Ch'a Ching, or Tea Classic. It was shortly after this that tea was first introduced to Japan, by Japanese Buddhist monks who had travelled to China to study. Tea drinking has become a vital part of Japanese culture, as seen in the development of the Tea Ceremony, which may be rooted in the rituals described in the Ch'a Ching.

The growth of tea in Europe:

So at this stage in the history of tea, Europe was rather lagging behind. In the latter half of the sixteenth century there are the first brief mentions of tea as a drink among Europeans. These are mostly from Portuguese who were living in the East as traders and missionaries. But although some of these individuals may have brought back samples of tea to their native country, it was not the Portuguese who were the first to ship back tea as a commercial

import. This was done by the Dutch, who in the last years of the sixteenth century began to encroach on Portuguese trading routes in the East. By the turn of the century they had established a trading

post on the island of Java, and it was via Java that in 1606 the first consignment of tea was shipped from China to Holland. Tea soon became a fashionable drink among the Dutch, and from there spread to other countries in continental western Europe, but because of its high price it remained a drink for the wealthy.

The roots of tea in Britain

Britain, always a little suspicious of continental trends, had yet to become the nation of tea drinkers that it is today. Since 1600, the British East India Company had a monopoly on importing goods from outside Europe, and it is likely that sailors on these ships brought tea home as gifts. But the first dated reference to tea in this country is from an advert in a London newspaper, *Mercurius Politicus*, from September 1658. Catherine of Braganza - she made tea fashionable in Britain and announced that 'China Drink, called by the Chinese, Tcha, by other Nations Tay alias Tee' was on sale at a coffee house in Sweeting's Rents in the City. The first coffee house had been established in London in 1652, and the terms of this advert suggest that tea was still somewhat unfamiliar to most readers, so it is fair to assume that the drink was still something of a curiosity.

It was the marriage of Charles II to Catherine of Braganza that would prove to be a turning point in the history of tea in Britain. She was a Portuguese princess, and a tea addict, and it was her love of the drink that established tea as a fashionable beverage first at court, and then among the wealthy classes as a whole. Capitalising on this,

the British began to import tea into Britain, its first order being placed in 1664 - for 100lbs of China tea to be shipped from Java.

Tea smuggling and taxation

The British took to tea with an enthusiasm that continues to the present day. It became a popular drink in coffee houses, which were as much locations for the transaction of business as they were for relaxation or pleasure. They were though the preserve of middle- and upper-class men; women drank tea in their own homes, and as yet tea was still too expensive to be widespread among the working classes. In part, its high price was due to a punitive system of taxation. The first tax on tea in the leaf, introduced in 1689, was so high at 25p in the pound that it almost stopped sales. It was reduced to 5p in the pound in 1692, and from then until as recently as 1964, when tea duties were finally abolished, politicians were forever tinkering with the exact rate and method of the taxation of tea.

One unforeseen consequence of the taxation of tea was the growth of methods to avoid taxation - smuggling and adulteration. By the

eighteenth century many Britons wanted to drink tea but could not afford the high prices, and their enthusiasm for the drink was matched by the enthusiasm of criminal gangs to smuggle it in. Their methods could be brutal, but they were supported by the millions of British tea drinkers who would not have otherwise been able to afford their favourite beverage.

Tea smugglers :What began as a small time illegal trade, selling a few pounds of tea to personal contacts, developed by the late eighteenth century into an astonishing organised crime network, perhaps importing as much as 7 million lbs annually, compared to a legal import of 5 million lbs! Worse for the drinkers was that taxation also encouraged the adulteration of tea, particularly of smuggled tea which was not quality controlled through customs and excise. Leaves from other plants, or leaves which had already been brewed and then dried, were added to tea leaves. Sometimes the resulting colour was not convincing enough, so anything from sheep's dung to poisonous copper carbonate was added to make it look more like tea.

By 1784, the government realised that enough was enough, and that heavy taxation was creating more problems than it was worth. The new Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, slashed the tax from 119 per cent to 12.5 per cent. Suddenly legal tea was affordable, and smuggling stopped virtually overnight.

In 1851, when virtually all tea in Britain had come from China, annual consumption per head was less than 2lbs. By 1901, fuelled

by cheaper imports from India and Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon), another British colony, this had rocketed to over 6lbs per head. Tea had become firmly established as part of the British way of life. This was officially recognised during the First World War. The government took control again during the Second World War, and tea was rationed from 1940 until

1952. 1952 also saw the re-establishment of the London Tea Auction, a regular auction that had been taking place since 1706. The auction was at the centre of the world's tea industry, but improved worldwide communications and the growth of auctions in tea producing nations meant that it gradually declined in importance during the latter half of the twentieth century. The final London Tea Auction was held on 29 June 1998.

Modern day tea drinking and the invention of the tea bag :As the tea auction declined, an essential element of modern tea-drinking took off - the tea bag. Tea bags were invented in America in the early twentieth century, but sales only really took off in Britain in the 1970s. Nowadays it would be hard for many tea-drinkers to imagine life without them. Such is the British enthusiasm for tea that even after the dismantling of the Empire, British companies continue to play a leading role in the world's tea trade and British brands dominate the world market. With recent scientific research indicating that tea drinking may have direct health benefits, it is assured that for centuries to come there will be a place at the centre of British life for a nice cup of tea.