

The History of Tea

Where does tea come from?

The British have been drinking tea for more than 350 years, but tea in other countries predates this by more than 4 millennia!! The story begins over four and a half thousand years ago. According to Chinese mythology, in 2737 BC the Chinese Emperor, Shen Nung, scholar and herbalist, was sitting beneath a tree while his servant boiled drinking water. A leaf from the tree dropped into the water and Shen Nung decided to try the brew. The tree was a wild tea tree.

From the earliest times tea was renowned for its properties as a healthy, refreshing drink. By the third century AD many stories were being told and some written about tea and the benefits of tea drinking, but it was not until the Tang Dynasty (618 AD - 906 AD) that tea became China's national drink and the word ch'a was used to describe tea.

The early beginnings of tea in Britain are obscure. The East India Company, under their charter granted by Elizabeth I to the Directors, had the monopoly of importing goods from outside Europe and recorded ships reaching Britain in 1637, but no record of tea dealings with Chinese merchants appears until 1644. Sailors bringing back packets of tea from the Far East as gifts, led to its introduction into London's coffee houses.

Throughout the 350 years that the British have been drinking tea it has had a remarkable influence on our culture and lifestyle patterns through the ages. Queen Catherine, wife of Charles II, first introduced tea drinking as a social and family habit to the English in 1662, when she brought chests of tea to Britain as part of her wedding dowry. It is a habit which has been firmly adhered to by today's royal family.

The tradition of the "tea lady" was first introduced in 1666 by a Mrs. Harris, who was the wife of the Housekeeper and Beadle of the East India Company. Little did she think that, when she made tea for the Committee Meetings held by Directors of the Company, she was laying the foundation stone for a tradition that would not only last for more than 300 years, but would also cause a national outcry when companies decided, in the 20th century, to replace the traditional tea lady with vending machines.



Tea Breaks

Tea breaks are another tradition which have been with us for approximately 200 years. Initially, when workers commenced work at around five or six thirty in the morning, employers allowed a break at some point in the morning when tea and food were served to the workforce. Some employers even repeated the operation late in the afternoon.

However, between 1741 and 1820 various clerics, industrialists and landowners tried to put a stop to the tea break, maintaining that the imbibing of this beverage made the working people slothful. Although it was before the inception of unions people stood up for their rights and the tea break remains with us to this day.

The Tea Tray

When tea was first drunk in the homes of the middle and upper classes it was normally consumed as the culmination of an evening's entertainment or prior to the ladies of the house retiring to bed for the night.

The "tea tray" was brought into the salon and all the assembled company would enjoy a relaxing cup of tea before departing for home or retiring to bed.

Tea Gardens (1732 to circa 1852)

As the popularity of tea spread throughout the land it also became an essential part of people's entertainment outside the home, so by 1732 an event spent dancing or watching fireworks in Vauxhall or Ranelagh Gardens (1742) would be rounded off - certainly by the ladies - with a tea tray being served. This was soon extended to the gardens being opened on Saturday and Sunday for a family day, with tea being served as the high point of the afternoon.

Tea gardens sprung up all around London and in some of the major towns around the country. Dancing was included as part of the day's festivities, so from the tea gardens came the idea of the tea dance.



Afternoon Tea

Anna, 7th Duchess of Bedford, is reputed to have originated the idea of afternoon tea in the early 1800s. The reason being that she grew very hungry between lunch and dinner and therefore conceived the idea of having tea served at around four or five in the afternoon to ward off the hunger pangs. More to the point she conceived the idea at approximately the same time as the Earl of Sandwich invented the idea of putting a filling between two slices of bread.

The new habit soon became very fashionable and afternoon tea became a good reason for meeting your friends and having a good old gossip.

Nursery Tea

As the idea of afternoon tea gathered momentum, the nannies and governesses of the day developed the idea of nursery or schoolroom tea although this proved a little more substantial a meal than the traditional afternoon tea.



High Tea

For the working and farming communities, afternoon tea became high tea: a meal which was a mix of the delicate meal being enjoyed in the ladies' drawing rooms of an afternoon and the dinner enjoyed in the gentry's houses after seven or eight in the evening. High tea was the main meal for the working and farming community and the beverage served to go with the meats, bread and cakes was hot tea.

Tea shops were the idea of a manageress of the Aerated Bread Company who persuaded her directors to allow her to open a shop which served tea and refreshments. This was in 1864 and the habit soon spread with the tea shop

becoming as much a British tradition as tea itself. Incidentally, the tea shop when it first opened was the only place an unchaperoned lady could arrange to meet a friend or friends without damaging her reputation.

Tea Dances

As the tea shops and tea rooms fashion spread, the tea dance, which had its early beginnings in the tea gardens, was revived. It remained a fashionable pastime for the entire nation until World War II, when circumstances forced it to disappear from the social scene.

However, modern Britons are picking up where their great grandparents left off and tea dances are again gaining in popularity throughout the country.