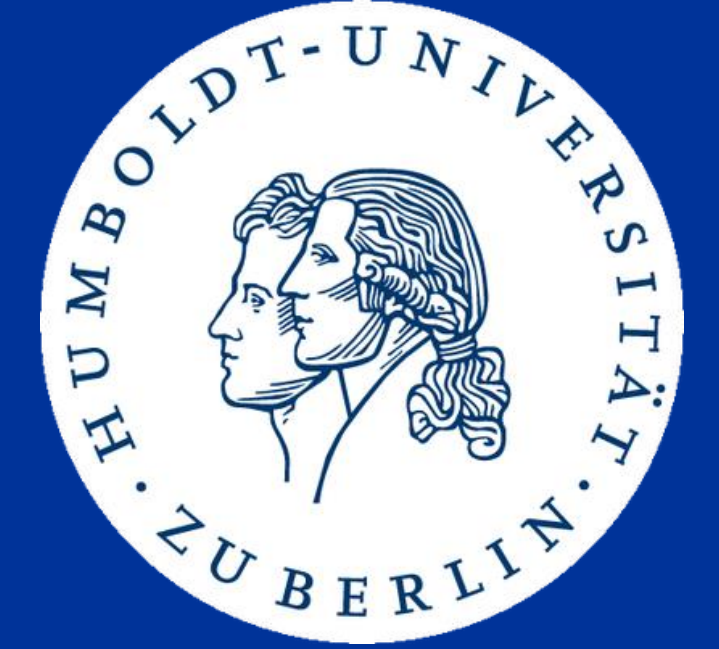


FANCY A CUPPA?

History of tea industry in the UK

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I. Back to the roots

1600's: tea is a relative latecomer to British shores. Although the custom of drinking tea dates back to the third millennium BC in China, only by 1610 Dutch and Portuguese traders were shipping tea from China and a few other Asian countries to Europe on a regular basis. By 1659 tea was on offer in London's coffee houses. It was believed to cure various illnesses from fatigue to overall poor health, flu and digestion disorders. However, tea was very expensive and only the well-off could afford it. The person who made tea fashionable was Queen Catherine of Braganza of Portugal, wife of King Charles II when she introduced the custom of drinking tea to the royal court in 1662. Tea became a popular beverage rather than just a medicinal drink.

1700's: by the mid-18th century nearly 7 million tons of tea were exported to Europe each year; almost half of it on British-owned ships. At that time tea imports were being taxed at as much as 119%. The heavy taxation led to largescale smuggling but also the quality of smuggled tea was much lower. Many smugglers adulterated the tea with other substances as used dried tea leaves, liquorice, sloe and willow. Tea smuggling was largely eliminated after 1784, when the tax on tea was brought down to 12.5%.

1800's: due to innovation in tea preparation the price of tea dropped and remained relatively low throughout the first half of the 20th century. The 18th century was also the time when a very English tradition of afternoon tea was introduced by Anna, the seventh Duchess of Bedford. The Duchess would become hungry around four o'clock in the afternoon. At the time it was usual for people to take only two main meals a day, breakfast and dinner at around 8 o'clock in the evening. The Duchess asked that a tray of tea, bread and butter and cake be brought to her room during the late afternoon. She began inviting friends to join her and this became a habit among other upper-class people too.

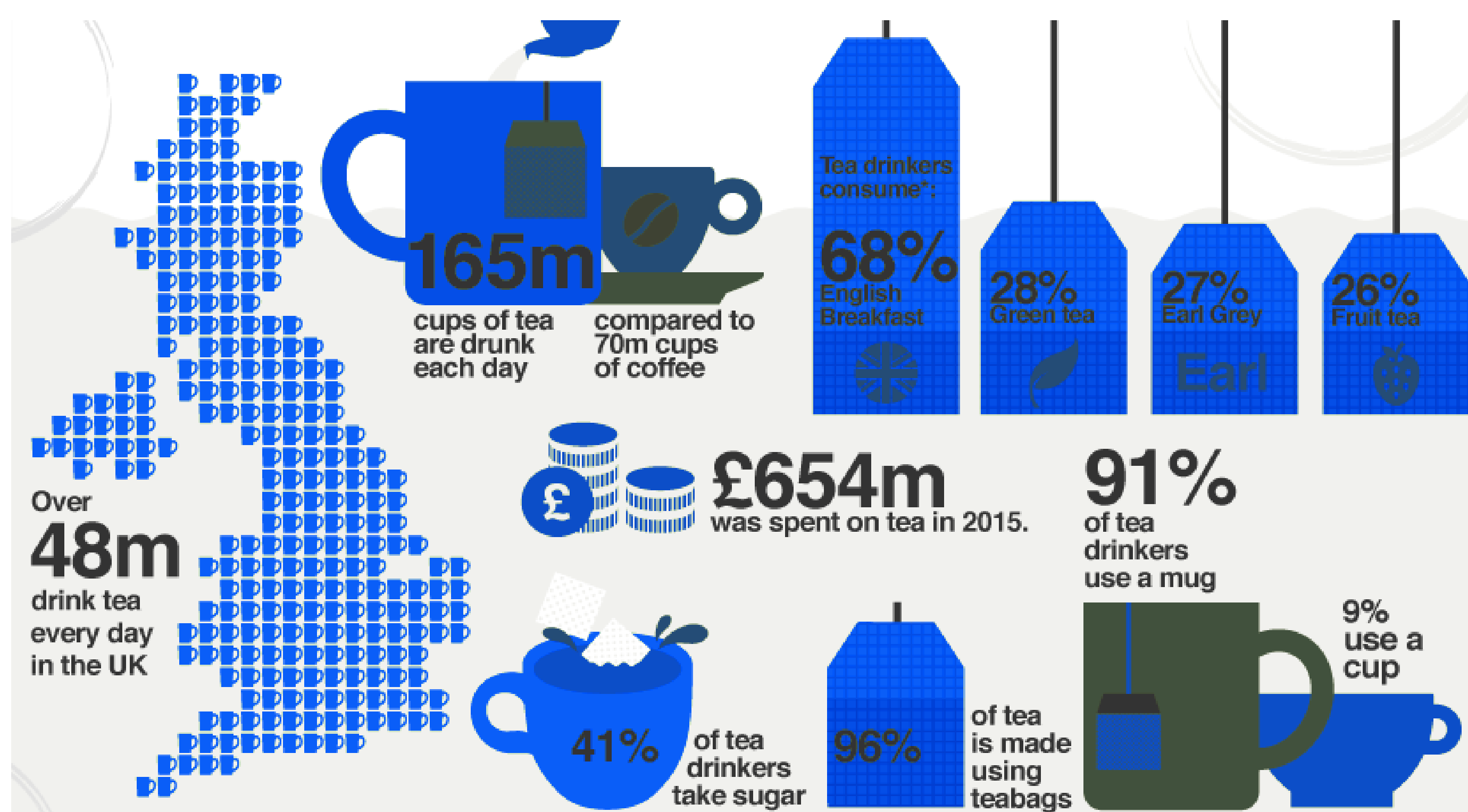
II. Social and class aspects of tea drinking

Tea has always been not only just a drink, but also a social matter for Britons. Even though it became cheap and available for everyone by the end of 18th century, there were considerable class distinctions in tea drinking traditions. For instance, the custom of afternoon tea (which is also called low tea) was popular only among the rich. Ladies would dress up in fancy gowns and everyone would conduct themselves in the best manners of etiquette. There were certain rules concerning low tea, such as: milk should be added after tea is poured, one should never drink from a saucer or ask for a second cup until everyone is finished with their first one.

For the lower class tea was neither a social event nor a ritual surrounded by rules and etiquette, but it was still perceived as a luxury item that brought workers closer to the well-off. Unlike the aristocracy, who engaged in 'low tea' to take the edge off appetite, the working class got accustomed to having the so-called 'high tea' which was a post-work meal and included hearty and filling food accompanied by a pot of strong tonic tea. High tea helped workers restore their energy after a hard day of labour and alleviated the costs of tea time. This meal time is believed to be called 'high' as it was served at the table where people sat on high dining chairs, whereas low tea was served in the living room or in the garden on a low table. The upper-class families substituted their low tea to high tea to replace dinner on Sundays, in order to give time off for their servants and maids.

Another advantage of introducing tea into the lives of the working class was that it largely replaced beer. In the 19th century farmers and factory workers usually drank beer throughout the day but it was substituted to tea, which was believed to have invigorating qualities. As Julie Fromer writes: "Tea drinking...replaced the vices that were typically found among the 'humbler classes', including alcoholism, violence and a lack of attention to domestic arrangements." These tea-related traditions and norms are still alive in modern British society, although not that rigid and confined to a certain social class as they used to be. Luxury hotels and restaurants offer exquisite low tea with dainty snacks and expensive blends to their guests whereas workers settle for a so-called 'builder's cup', in other words, strong cheap tea from a bag brewed right in a mug with some milk and sugar added. In the past such tea drinking habits would reflect class differences and were taken more seriously but the Brits still tend to pay attention to tea etiquette and rules.

(Bramah 1972; Fromer 2008; Pettigrew 2001).



(BBC 2015)

II. Brexit and the Tea industry

- While the consumption of tea in the UK is decreasing, the price of it has gone up after the referendum from £100 to £150 for an 80 kilogramme bag. Somnath Saha, Typhoon Tea chief executive, said the cost of importing tea had increased 50 per cent due to the fall in the value of sterling. Typhoon Tea is one of the most popular tea brands in the UK and it produces 125 million tea bags a week. Mr Saha claimed if the pound continues to decline at the rate it has done since the referendum, the business would lose all of its profit. Tea prices are also likely to rise due to tariffs and import taxes. Take, for instance, Sri Lanka that is the largest importer of black tea to the EU with 11% of these imports going to the UK only. Sri Lanka has trade access to all European countries without additional tariffs. That means that after Brexit these tariffs are to be imposed on the UK.
- However some believe that things are not that bad. A Cornish tea plantation claims Brexit has boosted Britain's brand across the globe and led to increased interest in "all things" English. The Tregothnan estate, which claims to produce "the most British tea in history", says the EU referendum has been very good for business. Their managing director Jonathon Jones said that the company had experienced a mini-export boom due to the low pound which allows overseas buyers to import British goods at a lower rate. (Jerome and Oats 2016; Shehab 2016).

III. Tea plantations in England

Many don't know this, but not only do the Brits drink their tea, they also grow it. Yet 200 years ago the famous plant hunter, Robert Fortune, wrote in his journals about the possibility of growing tea in the UK. There are now two tea plantations in England; the first and the largest is Tregothan in Cornwall and the second is being cultivated at Maristow House near Plymouth where tea bushes were planted in 2015.

Since the Brexit referendum in June, Tregothan claims that it has received a flood of inquiries from around the world from high-end retailers. It has sold 50 percent of its output abroad, including to both China and India, the two largest tea producers in the world. Cornish tea is about 20 times more expensive than mass-market brands but, as their managing director claims, the quality and taste are worth it.

Maristow House plantation is smaller and not yet as well-known as Tregothan but they have good future prospects. However, at the beginning not everything in the Plymouth garden was rosy. Finding the right variety of plant in the right quantity wasn't easy: you can't just pick them up by the hundred at your local garden centre. After a few frustrating false starts, they found a nursery in Belgium that could supply up to 600 young bushes. This quantity is rather small, which makes the tea even more unique and expensive. The exclusive Plymouth-grown tea is high-end, mainly for luxury hotels. They expect to produce a delicate green tea costing around £3,000 per kilo. (Beard 2016; Mirror 2015).



(Thomas 2013)



(Fairmont 2015)