Ceylon Tea: Towards 150 Years of a World-Favourite Brew

Posted on
James Taylor (right) with his cousin at Kandy, 1864

In 1867, during Ceylon's coffee boom, a Scottish planter was entrusted to assess the commercial viability of some Assam tea shrubs, which is considered the start of the tea industry in the Island. The planter's success was timely as disease overwhelmed coffee and Ceylon Tea took its place and became a world-favourite brew.

Words Richard Boyle

While a few tea bushes may have been brought to the Island by mariners from China and elsewhere in the distant past, it was only in 1824 during British colonial times that the first documented introduction took place. That was when a handful of plants from China were grown at the newly-established Royal Botanical Gardens at Peradeniya, Kandy.

But it was not until 1839 that research into tea growing began in earnest at Peradeniya with the arrival of some Assam tea plants, quantities of which followed. Some were transferred to the highlands of Nuwara Eliya to assess how they fared at altitude.

The first small-scale manufacture of tea began in 1841 as a private venture. Seedlings brought from China by the German Worms brothers were established at their Rothschild Estate. Samples were found to be excellent, but without trained labour the venture collapsed. Afterwards the brothers concentrated on coffee.

Ceylon's coffee plantation industry was launched during the 1820s in a scramble for land in the middle highlands likened to the California Gold Rush. This was due to the sudden decline of profitable coffee plantations in the West Indies after the abolition of slavery. British and other speculators hoping to replicate that success in Ceylon bought Crown land at a cheap rate. They cleared large tracts of jungle and planted coffee among tangled vegetation.

Speculators underwent great hardship, often living in makeshift huts. However, once the plantations were established they built fine bungalows in these British Raj outposts. And they began to employ migratory labour from South India to pick the coffee berries. That's how Ceylon's plantation system evolved.

During this period significant events occurred in the evolution of the tea industry. George Thwaites, Director of the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens, convinced the government of tea's commercial potential and obtained some Assam Tea seeds, which were given to James Taylor, a Scottish coffee planter, to assess its commercial suitability.

In 1867 Taylor, the superintendent of Loolecondera Estate near Kandy, planted 20 acres (8 ha) of tea. With advice from former Assam tea planters working in Ceylon, Taylor learned how to grow this new crop. Loolecondera can be visited today. Taylor lived in a simple log cabin, of which only the fireplace survives, there are the fields in which the original tea was grown, and a small museum.

What distinguished Taylor's experiment was his ability to not only grow tea on a commercial scale, but also master its processing. On his verandah the leaf was cut by machine, rolled on tables by hand – from wrists to elbow to be exact and then fired in *chulas*, clay stoves. The result was a delicious brew sold in Kandy for Rs 1.50 per pound.

Taylor's pioneering efforts were timely, for in 1869 a coffee leaf disease was

detected. Little notice was taken until the blight – known as “Devastating Emily” – began to spread from estate to estate, forcing planters to abandon large areas. Many faced financial ruin.

A boiler being transported by elephant from Colombo to a tea estate, 1890s

Soon the planters realised that tea could be their salvation. The changeover was made easier due to the number of planters available and the existence of a well-established plantation system. In addition, the necessary road and railway infrastructure was conveniently in place.

Unlike coffee, tea has to be harvested regularly, and its processing is a lot more complex. A larger labour force is therefore required, so Kanganies, or the overseers, were sent to their villages in South India to recruit labour.

Old coffee stores were converted into buildings for tea processing, but on the newer estates appeared the first, small, custom-built factories. However by the 1880s there arose a need for multistoried factories, like those seen today, to handle the quantities of leaf produced. It was the dawn of mechanisation for the tea industry.

But the finance required to build factories and purchase machinery resulted in a decline in the price of tea estates. Thomas Lipton – the owner of a chain of English grocery stores – took advantage of this situation. He visited Ceylon in 1890, bought various estates, and within weeks became the Island’s biggest property owner. It was he who created the first “Ceylon Tea” labels.

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The first small packages of Ceylon Tea were exported to England in August 1875. Over the next few years larger consignments arrived at the famous Mincing Lane auction rooms. But it was not until 1891 that Ceylon Tea was brought to prominence by sales in which “Golden Tips” fetched fantastic prices.

Colombo had to follow Mincing Lane and start selling tea by public auction, the first of which occurred in 1883. They became more frequent and acquired such importance that the Colombo Tea Traders’ Association was formed in 1894 to

systematise sales under the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce.

It was at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair that Ceylon Tea first made a major impact, when one million packets were sold. By the end of the 19th Century the word "tea" in England was no longer associated with China but with Ceylon.

After Ceylon gained Independence in 1948 the number of British planters rapidly declined. This situation provided an opportunity for the Ceylonese to enter the tea plantation industry. They became responsible for the smooth transition of management on the estates and have since guided the industry.

Promotion included the establishment of Tea Centres in a number of foreign capitals. Most noteworthy among them was the one in London, which in its heyday served more than half a million cups every year and received much positive publicity when Queen Elizabeth graced it with her presence in 1962.

In 1967 the first 100 years of Ceylon Tea was celebrated. A momentous century it was, from the first small packages sent to London in 1875 to the record tea production in 1965 of 228 million kilograms which secured for Sri Lanka the premium position among the world's exporters.

Now, 49 years after the centenary, aspects of the industry have changed much, but the 150th anniversary in 2017 is awaited in the knowledge that the milestone of an occasion will add further glory to the history of Ceylon Tea.




