

A BRIEF HISTORY OF



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A Brief History of **THE TEA DRESS**

*Michelle Rowley explores the evolution
of a classic wardrobe staple*



Knowing how much we Brits love a good old cup of tea, it's no wonder we have a popular style of dress named after the nation's favourite beverage. The tea dress, with its elegant feminine aesthetic, has been an enduring go-to dress style for decades and remains a top-selling dress style in stores such as John Lewis and Marks & Spencer today. Endorsed by popular fashion icons such as HRH The Duchess of Cambridge and TV presenter Holly Willoughby, the tea dress looks set to stay as a much-loved dress for everyone.

We explore the origins of this classic garment to discover why the tea dress has remained one of our favourite styles for looking effortlessly elegant in, whether drinking tea or otherwise!

In the mid-nineteenth century, women in the upper classes were served lunch at midday, with

dinner not being served until 8pm or 9pm. Needless to say, by late afternoon they were beginning to feel rather peckish. It is thought that the seventh Duchess of Bedford, Anna Maria Stanhope, can be credited with starting the afternoon tea trend after requesting tea and fancies to be brought to her at 4pm. Her late afternoon snacking habit became known amongst other ladies of her class and thus the ritual of taking tea with friends in the late afternoon began. With the emergence of a new social activity came the need for a new socially acceptable outfit for the occasion and so the tea gown was born.

Needing to be elegant but still comfortable, the tea gown took inspiration from the Japanese kimono and was made from lightweight fabrics with unstructured lines, replacing the need for a corset or a maid's assistance. Luxurious and loose, the tea gown was an essential garment in a fashionable woman's wardrobe to display her wealth, taste and status. However, they were only to be worn indoors when taking tea with family or friends and were not



for public display. After the drop-waist flapper dresses of the roaring twenties, dresses of the 1930s saw the return of the waist to its true position on the body. Cut on the bias, the flowy skirts were midi length and thus, the tea dress as we know it today began to emerge. Whilst the skirt length was shorter than the original tea gown, the fitted bust of the Victorian gown was retained. Necklines remained high and were often enhanced with pussy bows or embroidered collars. The comfortable

dresses were no longer just for having tea with friends, but were now the dress of choice for running errands whilst looking elegant.

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The popularity of the tea dance in the 1940s made the tea dress a ubiquitous dress style, with the drapery bias-cut skirts perfect for dancing in. A typical tea dress from this era featured a yoke at the waist with the skirt and

bodice either gathered or shirred into it. With the outbreak of World War Two

came the need for austerity and rationing of resources. Although items of clothing became rationed, sewing thread and elastic were not and thus the commonplace sewing skills at the time came into their own during this time of 'make do and mend'. Women would make dresses from whatever fabric they could obtain. Whilst rayon, as the favoured fabric of the government's Utility Clothing Scheme, was widely available, other fabrics became harder to come by and women got creative sewing garments from other sources such as furnishing fabrics, blackout fabric and men's clothing.

Due to the limited supply of fabric, dress designs were cut to minimise the amount of fabric required. Sleeves were typically short with their width prescribed by austerity regulations, as were the width of hems, belts and collars and the number of pleats in a garment. Collars were often crafted from a contrasting fabric when there wasn't enough of the main fabric.

A further fabric-saving trick was to use fabrics that avoided pattern matching and so plain fabrics (in primary colours or brown, navy and grey) or those with a small print were used, giving rise to the popularity of a tea dress made from a pretty floral print rayon. Whilst embellishments such as buttons and trim were expected to be kept to a minimum, embroidery, fur, and leather trim were prohibited. With zips also restricted, dresses were often fastened with press studs or hooks and bars on plackets instead.

The tea dresses of the 1940s returned with a twist in the 1990s with the rise of grunge styling. Think Kate Moss, Gwen Stefani and Courtney Love rocking short button-fronted versions with heavy boots and lashings of red lipstick, a far cry from the parasols, handbags and jewels used to accessorise the original gowns or the demure hat and gloves of the 1940s. The continued popularity and revival of the tea dress through the decades is perhaps a testament not only to its comfort, but also to the elegant simplicity that provided the perfect base for styling in so many different ways.



SEW A TIMELESS TEA DRESS WITH OUR PATTERN SUGGESTIONS

✂ The Simple Sew English Tea Dress is perfect for beginners and can work for any occasion according to your fabric choice.

✂ The Bella Tea Dress from Liberty Fabrics includes two pretty neckline options and a view with fabulous gathered pockets. Sew it in an iconic Liberty ditzy floral print and you'll have a truly beautiful tea dress to treasure.

✂ McCall's 8338 is a reproduction from an original 1930s pattern by the company. Suited to the advanced beginner and intermediate sewist, it features a button-down front and delicate gathers in the side-waist front sections to create fullness in the bustline. To truly evoke the

era you'll need your hat, gloves and handbag too.

✂ The No. 5 Aarhus Dress and Top from How to Do Fashion is an elegant 1940s-inspired dress and blouse pattern featuring a pretty pleat placed in the centre front seam for a bust dart.

✂ Recreate the 1990s take on the tea dress with the Shelby Dress and Romper sewing pattern from True Bias featuring princess seams, a V-shaped neckline, a front button opening and back waist ties. Style with chunky boots and a leather jacket and you're ready to rock!