

# Importing Sobrie ‘Tea’: Understanding the Tea Trade during the Industrial Revolution

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## Abstract

Economic historian Robert Allen observed that during the Industrial Revolution, the British working class experienced a period of stagnant real wages. This has led many historians to investigate changes in the diet of the working class during that period. While there has been a focus on the entire food basket, this paper primarily concentrates on the consumption of tea, which was entirely imported. This study explores why the demand for tea increased during the Industrial Revolution by examining the effect of working hours on tea imports between 1760 and 1834. It also aims to identify the determinants of tea demand while underlining the crucial role that increasing working hours played during this period. The Industrial Revolution was characterized by long working hours and a per capita decline in the consumption of so-called luxury items, such as tea, due to their use as stimulants. To examine the relationship between working hours and tea imports, a Dynamic OLS (DOLS) methodology was employed, demonstrating that tea imports responded positively to increasing working hours. This finding was corroborated by the Fully Modified OLS (FM-OLS) methodology. Additionally, new methods for calculating the number of hours worked and their consequent impact on tea imports are proposed.

**JEL Classification:** N33, J22, I15, N73, F14

**Keywords:** Tea, Working hours, Time Series, Trade History, Industrial Revolution

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