

# THE GUNPOWDER PLOT OF 1605

CATHOLICISM in England was heavily repressed under QUEEN ELIZABETH I, particularly after the POPE ex-communicated her in 1570.

During her reign, dozens of Priests were put to death, and Catholics could not even legally celebrate Mass or be married according to their own rites. As a result, many Catholics had high hopes when KING JAMES I took the throne upon Elizabeth's death in 1603. James' wife, ANNE, is believed to have previously converted to Catholicism, and his mother, MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS, was ELIZABETH'S Catholic arch-rival prior to being executed.



There were even rumours, inspired by his diplomatic overtures to the Pope, that JAMES himself would become Catholic.

It soon became clear, however, that KING JAMES did not support religious tolerance for Catholics. In 1604 he publicly condemned Catholicism as a superstition, ordered all Catholic priests to leave England and expressed concern that the number of Catholics was increasing. He also largely continued with the repressive policies of his predecessor, such as fines for those refusing to attend Protestant services.

English Catholics had organized several failed conspiracies against Queen Elizabeth, and these continued under King James.

In 1603 a few Priests and Laymen hatched the so-called **BYE PLOT** to kidnap King James, only to be turned in by fellow Catholics. Another related conspiracy that year, known as the **MAIN PLOT**, sought to kill JAMES and install his cousin on the throne.

Then, in May 1604, a handful of Catholic dissidents—**GUY FAWKES, ROBERT CATESBY, TOM WINTOUR, JACK WRIGHT** and **THOMAS PERCY**—met at the **DUCK AND DRAKE INN** in The Strand, London, where **CATESBY** proposed a plan to blow up the **HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT** with gunpowder. Afterwards, all five men purportedly swore an oath of secrecy upon a Bible.



**GUY FAWKES**

Eight other conspirators would later join what became known as the **GUNPOWDER PLOT**. Although **CATESBY** was the ringleader, **FAWKES** has garnered most of the publicity over the past 400-plus years. **Born in 1570 in York, England, Fawkes spent about a decade fighting for Spain against Protestant rebels in the Spanish-controlled Netherlands.**

He also personally petitioned the **KING OF SPAIN** for help in starting an **English rebellion** against **KING JAMES**. According to writings in the Spanish archives, **Fawkes** believed the English King was a **heretic** who would drive out his Catholic subjects. **Fawkes also apparently expressed strong anti-Scottish prejudices.**

**By 1605 Fawkes was calling himself GUIDO rather than Guy.** He also used the alias **John Johnson** while serving as caretaker of a cellar—located just below the **House of Lords**—that the plotters had leased in order to stockpile gunpowder. Under the plan, Fawkes would light a fuse on November 5, 1605, during the opening of a new session of Parliament. **King James, his eldest son, the House of Lords and the House of Commons would all be blown sky-high.**

**In the meantime, as Fawkes would escape by boat across the River Thames, his fellow conspirators would start an uprising in the English Midlands, kidnap King James' daughter Elizabeth, install her as a puppet Queen and eventually marry her off to a Catholic, thereby restoring the Catholic monarchy.**

**On October 26, an anonymous letter advising LORD MONTEITH, a Catholic sympathizer, to avoid the State Opening of Parliament alerted the authorities to the existence of a plot. To this day, no one knows for sure who wrote the letter. Some historians have even suggested that it was fabricated and that the authorities already knew of the Gunpowder Plot, only letting it progress as an excuse to further crack down on Catholicism.**

**Either way, a search party found FAWKES skulking in his cellar around midnight on November 4, with matches in his pocket and 36 BARRELS OF GUNPOWDER stacked next to him.** For Fawkes, the plot's failure could be blamed on "the devil and not God." He was taken to the **Tower of London** and tortured upon the special order of **King James**. **Soon after, his co-conspirators were likewise arrested, except for four, including Catesby, who died in a shootout with English troops.**

**Fawkes and his surviving co-conspirators were all found guilty of high treason and sentenced to death in January 1606 by hanging, drawing and quartering. A Jesuit priest was also executed a few months later for his alleged involvement, even as new laws banned Catholics from voting in elections, practicing law or serving in the military. In fact, Catholics were not fully emancipated in England until the 19th century.**

**After the plot was revealed, Londoners began lighting celebratory bonfires, and in January 1606 an Act of Parliament designated November 5 as a day of Thanksgiving. GUY FAWKES DAY festivities soon spread as far as the American colonies, where they became known as**

Pope Day. In keeping with the anti-Catholic sentiment of the time, British subjects on both sides of the Atlantic would burn an effigy of the Pope.

That tradition completely died out in the United States by the 19th Century, whereas in Britain GUY FAWKES DAY became a time to get together with friends and family, set off fireworks, light bonfires, attend parades and burn effigies of Fawkes. Children traditionally wheeled around their effigies demanding a "Penny for the Guy" (a similar custom to Halloween trick-or-treating) and imploring crowds to "REMEMBER, REMEMBER THE FIFTH OF NOVEMBER."

## GUNPOWDER PLOT DISCOVERED

At about midnight on the night of November 4-5, 1605, SIR THOMAS KNYVET, a Justice of the Peace, found GUY FAWKES lurking in a cellar under the PARLIAMENT BUILDING and ordered the premises searched. Thirty-six barrels of gunpowder were found, and FAWKES was taken into custody. After being tortured, Fawkes revealed he was a participant in an English Catholic conspiracy to annihilate England's Protestant government and replace it with Catholic leadership.

**Did you know? From 1604 to 1611, KING JAMES I sponsored an English translation of the BIBLE that became known as the AUTHORIZED KING JAMES VERSION.**

What became known as the GUNPOWDER PLOT was organized by ROBERT CATESBY, an English Catholic whose father had been persecuted by QUEEN ELIZABETH I (1533-1603) for refusing to conform to the CHURCH OF ENGLAND. Guy Fawkes had converted to Catholicism, and his religious zeal led him to fight in the army of Catholic Spain in the Protestant Netherlands.

ROBERT CATESBY and a few other plotters rented a cellar that extended under the House of Lords building, and FAWKES planted the gunpowder there. However, as the November 5 opening meeting of Parliament approached, LORD MONTEAGLE (1575-1622), the brother-in-law of one of the conspirators, received an anonymous letter warning him not to attend Parliament on November 5. Lord Monteaagle alerted the Government, and hours before the attack was to have taken place Fawkes and the explosives were found. By torturing Fawkes, King James' Government learned the identities of his co-conspirators. During the next few weeks, English authorities killed or captured all the plotters and put the survivors on trial.

## GUNPOWDER PLOT: AFTERMATH

FAWKES and the other surviving Chief Conspirators were sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered in London. Moments before the start of his execution, on January 31, 1606, Guy Fawkes jumped from a ladder while climbing to the gallows, breaking his neck and dying.

**Following the failed Gunpowder Plot, new laws were instituted in England that eliminated the right of Catholics to vote, among other repressive restrictions**

## **GUY FAWKES NIGHT**

**In 1606, Parliament established November 5 as a day of Public Thanksgiving.** Guy Fawkes Night (also referred to as Guy Fawkes Day and Bonfire Night) now is celebrated annually across Great Britain on November 5 in remembrance of the Gunpowder Plot. As dusk falls, villagers and city dwellers across Britain light bonfires, set off fireworks and burn effigies of Fawkes.

## **WAS GUY FAWKES THE BRAINS BEHIND THE GUNPOWDER PLOT?**

**FAWKES** may have been the man charged with lighting the fuse to the gunpowder in the Palace of Westminster, but he wasn't the leader of the plot – and was far from a lone wolf. There were 13 plotters in all – many drawn from elite English families – and the conspiracy's masterminds were **Robert Catesby** and his cousin **Thomas Wintour**.

**CATESBY** was already under suspicion, as a Catholic and a supporter of the Earl of Essex's failed rebellion against Elizabeth I in 1601. **GUY FAWKES**, on the other hand, was unknown to the authorities, and that's one of the main reasons he was given such a critical role in the plot. Posing as a servant, he was able to gain access to the **PALACE OF WESTMINSTER** and, with the help of his co-conspirators, cart in the 36 barrels of gunpowder that he intended to explode under the feet of **KING JAMES I OF ENGLAND** (who was also King James VI of Scotland).

The great irony of Fawkes's life is that it began in a conventional and respected Protestant family – he was the son of a Church of England official – but ended with an infamous attempt to take out the political establishment in the name of the Catholic faith.

**GUY FAWKES** was born in York in 1570, in a house a stone's throw from **YORK MINSTER**. He might have become a Merchant like his Grandfather, but when his Father died in 1579, Fawkes went to live with his mother's new husband, a committed Catholic. **On reaching adulthood, he sold his small inheritance and went to fight on the continent for the forces of Catholic Spain.**

A school friend, who became a Jesuit priest, described Fawkes as religiously devout, loyal to his friends, and **"HIGHLY SKILLED IN MATTERS OF WAR"** – exactly what the gunpowder plotters were looking for.

The conspirators in the gunpowder plot of 1605 meet in a house in London. Amongst them are **Guy Fawkes** (1570 – 1606) and ringleader **Robert Catesby** (1573 – 1605).

## WHY DID THE CONSPIRATORS SELECT PARLIAMENT AS THEIR TARGET?

Once the conspirators were agreed that they wanted to wipe out the King and his Government, the Houses of Parliament were the obvious target. Catesby's justification for obliterating parliament was chillingly simple:

**"In that place have they done us all the mischief, and perchance God hath designed that place for their punishment."**

The '**mischief**' that Catesby referred to dated back to **Queen Elizabeth I's Parliaments**, which had passed a series of harsh statutes aimed at forcing Catholics to conform to the Church of England. Catholic recusants (from the Latin **recusare**, to refuse) were fined, intimidated and imprisoned. Priests and Jesuits dispatched to England in an attempt to maintain the Catholic faith risked torture and execution.

English Catholics welcomed James I's accession to the throne in 1603, hoping that it would usher in a period of greater toleration. Yet it was to be a false dawn. Two years on, it was becoming increasingly clear that the new king was prepared to grant Catholics few concessions. This was the background to the plotters' decision to target the state opening of parliament, when the lords, Commons and the king himself would be assembled together. The fact that Catholic nobles might be caught up in the blast was accepted by Catesby as collateral damage: to him they were "**atheists, fools and cowards**".

## HOW DID THE PLOTTERS PENETRATE THE PALACE OF WESTMINSTER?

In 1605, the **Palace of Westminster** was a ramshackle complex of converted royal apartments and dissolved ecclesiastical buildings, very different from today's high-security buildings. **Westminster Hall** was crammed with people attending the courts of King's Bench and Common Pleas. Taverns named 'Heaven' and 'Purgatory' plied their trade a stone's throw from the Commons and the Lords. In Henry VIII's day, a brothel openly operated within the precincts of the palace.

**The plotters knew that they had a good chance of passing undetected through this melee. Their initial plan was to occupy a property next to the House of Lords and to tunnel from one cellar to another, but the mining proved too time-consuming. Then they rented a coal cellar underneath the Lords' chamber. This enabled them to bring in the gunpowder without being challenged.**

A security sweep failed to spot the significance of the pile of firewood and barrels that had accumulated in the cellar. Then the Catholic peer, **BARON MONTEAGLE**, received a letter from an anonymous source, warning him to stay away from the Palace of Westminster on 5 November, as "**they shall receive a terrible blow this parliament**".

The letter reached **King James I**, who ordered a second search. Only then was the plot revealed, preventing nearly a **tonne of gunpowder** from tearing through parliament.

### **DID FOREIGN POWERS OFFER ASSISTANCE TO THE GUNPOWDER PLOT?**

**The attitude of the Spanish was a key reason for the conspiracy's failure.** English Catholics had looked to Spain for support since the reign of Elizabeth I. **In 1569, a rebellion of the northern Earls had hoped to depose Elizabeth with Spanish naval backing – although the ships never arrived.** Later on, English Catholic naval pilots had sailed with the Spanish Armada.

However, a generation after this, the political landscape had changed. **When, in 1603, Guy Fawkes went to Spain seeking military aid from Philip III, he found that the Spanish were less inclined to offer their support.** For them, the accession of James I created an opportunity to end the costly war with England – and, in August 1604, Spanish and English delegations met at Somerset House in London to sign a peace treaty. **Two Spanish noblemen, DON JUAN DE TASSIS and the CONSTABLE OF CASTILE (both of whom feature in the BBC drama “Gunpowder”), can be seen in the portrait of the Somerset House conference that hangs in the National Maritime Museum (see below).**



**Spain's abandonment of English Catholics left the plotters to go it alone.** If the plot had been successful, would it have delivered England into the hands of a Catholic regime? For that to happen, the plotters would have needed to establish a new government, neutralize the Tower of London and secure England's ports. Their plans to achieve all this were hazy at best.

Britain was a monarchy, so Royal rule would have had to continue under a new Catholic regime. **The King's son, HENRY, PRINCE OF WALES, was a vigorous PROTESTANT, and would in any case probably have died in the explosion.** One of the plotters, **Thomas Percy,** wanted to kidnap Prince Charles (the future Charles I). **Catesby favoured capturing the nine-year-old PRINCESS ELIZABETH, appointing a Protector and marrying the puppet Monarch to a Catholic husband.**

**The Princess's household was based at COOMBE ABBEY in Warwickshire, a swift ride from the Catesby family home at Ashby St Ledgers.**



Catesby invited the local Catholic gentry to hunt with him on **5 November**, hoping they could use this as cover. But when the gunpowder plot failed, his support network melted away. Catesby and Wintour became fugitives, running between one Catholic house and another.

They made their last stand at **Holbeach House**, advancing with swords against the Sheriff's men armed with guns. **Catesby and Percy died from the same bullet, while Wintour was captured to face trial.**



**A 19th Century wood engraving depicting the arrest of GUY FAWKES in the cellars of Parliament, 1605.**

### **HOW WAS GUY FAWKES PUNISHED FOR HIS CRIMES?**

The burning of effigies of Guy Fawkes on bonfire night might suggest that Fawkes was burnt at the stake. However, for men, the sentence for high treason was to be 'HANGED, DRAWN AND QUARTERED', and that's the grisly fate that awaited Fawkes.

Prior to his execution, brutal torture was used to extract Fawkes's confession, including **MANACLES** – which were secured tightly around wrists and used to hang the accused by their hands for many hours – and, most likely, the notorious **RACK**, which stretched the body, tearing tendons, ripping joints and fracturing bones.

It would have been a wretched Fawkes who was tied head-down to a hurdle and drawn to Old Palace Yard outside the Palace of Westminster, along with three fellow plotters.

As the last to be executed, he would have witnessed the others being hanged, removed while still alive, and then dying during the physical mutilation that followed.

## HANGED, DRAWN, AND QUARTERED

This feared execution method was first used against the most serious criminals in England during the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, reserved for those who have committed high treason.

Being **HUNG, DRAWN, AND QUARTERED** is considered one of the most defining examples of the term “**cruel and unusual punishment.**”



As explained in British Criminal Law, first the prisoner is dragged on wooden frame to the site of his execution (*drawn*).

Then he is hung repeatedly by the neck until almost dead and is released before the final moment – this is meant to act as pre-emptive torture.

The executioner will then strap the naked prisoner down onto a *RACK* (usually to a public audience) and perform the most gruesome part of the method. He is castrated and disemboweled on the spot, and his respective body organs (genitalia, entrails, and others) are set aflame in front of his very eyes.

He would still be alive at that point and will be decapitated.

His body parts would then be cut up in four pieces to be gibbeted (put on public display) in different parts of the country to deter future treason.

**GUY FAWKES**, who was arrested for the infamous **GUNPOWDER PLOT**, cheated the executioners by jumping off during the hanging step, causing his neck to break and kill him, effectively avoiding the rest of the execution.

The method was used for Centuries and wasn't abolished until 1870.

## HOW AWARE WERE THE AUTHORITIES OF THE THREAT OF CATHOLIC CONSPIRACIES?

The **GUNPOWDER PLOT** was the latest in a string of conspiracies aimed at re-establishing **Catholic rule** in England. For years, radical **Catholics** had been hoping to co-ordinate an uprising of recusant families with military support from sympathetic foreign powers. Yet few English Catholics had ever supported armed action against the Protestant regime.

The State had developed powerful weapons against insurgency. **Elizabeth I's Principal Secretary, SIR FRANCIS WALSINGHAM** recruited an extensive network of **informers and agents**, penetrating the Catholic underground and infiltrating the **Continental Seminaries** where missionary **Priests** were trained. This had enabled him to thwart previous attempts on the Monarch's life, such as the **BABINGTON PLOT of 1586**, which aimed to assassinate **ELIZABETH** and replace her with her Catholic cousin, **MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS**.

After his death, Walsingham's secret service was maintained by his successor, **ROBERT CECIL**, who served both **QUEEN ELIZABETH I** and **KING JAMES I**.

Given the sophistication of the network that Walsingham bequeathed Cecil, it's perhaps surprising that the gunpowder plot came so close to achieving its objective. After all, Fawkes was only discovered at the 11th hour, allegedly as he hovered over the powder, ready to ignite a fuse.

## HOW DID CATHOLICS PRACTISE THEIR FAITH WITHOUT ATTRACTING UNWANTED ATTENTION?

The need for **CATHOLICISM** to be pursued in secret put **domestic houses** at the very heart of this Community. Catholics disguised the symbols and accoutrements associated with their worship, sometimes in plain sight, among everyday furnishings. A dining table might double as an **altar**, a **Priest's vestments** could be folded up and buried amid the household linen, and a **chalice** reserved for mass might be placed on shelves and rendered indistinguishable from ordinary drinking cups. A number of houses famously had '**Priest holes**', **secret spaces behind fireplaces, staircases and walls in which not just the sacred vessels but also Priests themselves could be hidden**.

So, the home – and, by extension, the women who kept those homes – were critical to **keeping the faith alive**. This can be seen in the life of **ANNE VAUX** (played by Liv Tyler in *Gunpowder*), a **Catholic gentlewoman** who was arrested on suspicion of being connected to the gunpowder plot. **Like other women of her rank and religion, Vaux played a high-stakes**

role in maintaining Catholic underground networks, orchestrating meetings, acting as a gatekeeper and, crucially, supporting priests in rented safe houses and in her own home.

### **WHY DO WE CALL NOVEMBER 5th., “BONFIRE NIGHT”?**

When the GUNPOWDER PLOT was discovered, Londoners were encouraged to light bonfires in celebration. Before long, 5 November had entered the Calendar as a reminder of England’s deliverance. Mingling with the older traditions of fire-making and feasting, it became a day of national rejoicing.

English settlers in America carried their anti-Catholicism across the Atlantic. Known as Pope’s Day in Colonial BOSTON, 5 November saw rival gangs fighting over effigies of the Pontiff and throwing them into the fire. You can witness something similar today in LEWES in Sussex, where BONFIRE SOCIETIES parade through the Town and hurl good-natured abuse at a Volunteer dressed up as a Cardinal.



**BONFIRE SOCIETY PARADE in LEWES, Sussex, England**

The **LEWES MARTYRS** were a group of 17 Protestants who were burned at the stake in Lewes, East Sussex, England between 1555 and 1557. These executions were part of the Marian persecutions of Protestants during the reign of Mary I.

**On 6 June 1556, THOMAS HARLAND of Woodmancote, Near Henfield, West Sussex, carpenter, JOHN OSWALD (or Oseward) of Woodmancote, Near Henfield, West Sussex, husbandman, THOMAS REED of Ardingly, Sussex, and THOMAS AVINGTON (or Euington) of Ardingly, Sussex, turner, were burnt.**

**RICHARD WOODMAN and nine other people were burned together in Lewes on 22 June 1557, on the orders of EDMUND BONNER, BISHOP OF LONDON — the largest single bonfire of people that ever took place in England. The ten of them had not been kept in the Town Gaol before they were executed but in an undercroft of the STAR INN. The Star Inn became LEWES TOWN HALL and the undercroft still exists.**

Together with the **Gunpowder Plot**, the **LEWES MARTYRS** are commemorated annually on or around **NOVEMBER 5th**. by the **BONFIRE SOCIETIES OF LEWES** and surrounding Towns and Villages.

**Today, bonfire festivities are changing.** As recently as the 1980s, huge numbers of families congregated in neighbours' back gardens to eat **soup and CINDER TOFFEE** and watch Dad set off fireworks, while streets across the land resonated to the sound of children asking for a 'Penny for the Guy'. **Now, these traditions are rapidly disappearing.**

**HONEYCOMB TOFFEE, SPONGE TOFFEE, CINDER TOFFEE OR HOKEY POKEY is a sugary toffee with a light, rigid, sponge-like texture. Its main ingredients are typically brown sugar, corn syrup (or molasses or golden syrup in the Commonwealth of Nations) and baking soda, sometimes with an acid such as vinegar.**

The American import of **HALLOWE'EN** has largely usurped bonfire night, firework sales are more heavily regulated, and villages wishing to host bonfire events have to raise staggeringly large sums for insurance, threatening their long-term future.

Will the next generation be able to recite the old rhyme,

**'REMEMBER, REMEMBER THE FIFTH OF NOVEMBER, GUNPOWDER, TREASON AND PLOT?'**

What will the original story of the **GUNPOWDER PLOT** mean to Britons in 100 years' time if we no longer make **GUYS** and build **BONFIRES**?