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The Gunpowder Plot

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The image of Guy Fawkes and his 36 barrels of gunpowder, in 1605, waiting in the cellars of the Houses of Parliament to blow up the King and government, is well known both in the UK and abroad. This Factsheet looks at the background to the Gunpowder Plot, the events of November 1605 and how these events are commemorated today.

This factsheet and links to related documents are available on the Internet through:

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Introduction

The Gunpowder Plot refers to the conspiracy, and failed attempt, to blow up the King and Houses of Parliament in 1605. This factsheet outlines the historical and political context of the plot and the effect it has had on popular culture in Britain.

Britain In 1605

It should be remembered that, in 1605, King James I had recently arrived from Scotland. In the reign of his predecessor, Elizabeth I (1533-1603) the Church of England had consolidated its break with Rome, but Catholicism retained many adherents in England. James must have been something of an unknown quantity, and among the Catholics there was great disappointment when it became apparent that, despite initial indications to the contrary, James was going to do nothing to reverse the religious status quo of the end of Elizabeth's reign, or to permit greater toleration.

The genesis of the plot is unclear. Generations of historians accepted it as a genuine last desperate attempt to re-establish the Catholic religion. Others have suspected it to be the work of a group of 'agents-provocateurs', anxious to set up as traitors a band of gullible men, to discredit the Jesuits. This would have reinforced the ascendancy of Protestantism, from the wave of popular revulsion, and hatred in James himself. Several commentators have postulated that the whole plot was conceived by Secretary of State Cecil, and suggested to Catesby, but there is little evidence to support this.

Whatever the truth of the origins of the plot, it must be accepted that most, if not all, of the conspirators felt that theirs was an honest attempt to root out heresy and re-establish the true religion. They would also have been spurred on by a number of executions of Catholics which had occurred in the autumn of 1604.

In any case, it is clear that five conspirators: Robert Catesby, Thomas Winter, Thomas Percy, John Wright and Guy (or Guido, the Spanish form of the name) Fawkes, later joined by Robert Keyes, determined during 1604 to undertake the blowing up of the House of Lords. The detonation was to take place on State Opening day, when the King, Lords and Commons would all be present in the Lords Chamber.



The plotters, from a 1605 French print. Whether the figures depicted bear any resemblance to what the plotters actually looked like is, of course, open to conjecture

The Progress of the Plot

The conspirators secured the use of part of a house, underneath the Prince's Chamber, occupied by John Whynniard (see plan on page 7). They drove, or were alleged to have driven, a tunnel, propped up by wooden piles, to the 12 foot thick foundation walls of the House of Lords.

Immediately underneath the Lords Chamber was a coal cellar leased to a man called Bright; it was here they intended to make a cavity. At the same time, they accumulated twenty kegs of powder in a house at Lambeth, planning to ferry them by boat at night to Westminster. However, Bright gave up his tenancy of the cellar on Lady Day (25 March) and the mining activities ceased when Thomas Percy stepped in and took a lease on the cellar itself.

Plans were also drawn up to secure the whereabouts of the heirs to the throne, Prince Charles and Princess Elizabeth, then children, and thus establish an ongoing friendly government to follow the explosion. During this time, the network of conspirators was of necessity much expanded; Warwickshire was the home territory of many of them. There is no doubt that the explosion was definitely planned for 5th November. Fawkes was to light the slow fuses; he was then to leave by boat and go to the Continent.

The plot was discovered, in the official version, through a mysterious anonymous letter to Lord Monteagle, a Catholic, warning him not to attend the State Opening. Whether the letter was genuine, from a fellow Catholic concerned about Monteagle's welfare, or whether it was a forgery and sent from within government circles, is uncertain.

In any event, on the 4th of November an initial search was made by Lord Monteagle and the Lord Chamberlain, Lord Suffolk. They discovered Fawkes and the wood and coal Percy had provided to cover the kegs of powder. Sir Thomas Knyvett, a retainer of the Court, and Justice for Westminster, then searched the cellar thoroughly with a group of men at midnight, found the gunpowder, and arrested Fawkes.

Recording In the Commons Journals

It would have been very difficult for the conspirators to keep the plot secret, as so many were involved, so it is not surprising news of it leaked out. In a kind of parenthesis to the day's business, the Clerk of the House, Ralph Ewens (or an assistant), made a marginal note of the most spectacular event to have occurred in the House to that date.

The famous marginal note begins (in modern English):

"This last night, the Upper House of Parliament was searched by Sir Thomas Knyvett, and one Johnson¹, servant to Mr Thomas Percy, was there apprehended, who had placed 36 barrels of gunpowder in the vault under the House with a purpose to blow [up] it and the whole company when they should here assemble"

Fawkes is said to have been taken before Cecil (Secretary of State) and King James himself in the early hours of 5th November. He maintained a scornful attitude, and refused to answer questions about his co-conspirators. However, their identities were probably no secret, and all (except Robert Winter) were killed or arrested by 12th November. On 5th November there was

¹ "Johnson" was the alias Fawkes used prior to his confession

apparently great rejoicing in London; and the following Sunday 10 November was also appointed a day of thanksgiving. (See commemoration of the plot)

Several conspirators, including the ringleader, Catesby, had fled to the Midlands and been shot there. Those who remained alive were taken to the Tower of London from 6th November onwards. All of them were then probably subjected to extensive and cruel torture - much used at this time, though never officially sanctioned by English law.

Trial and Executions

The trial of the conspirators for high treason took place in Westminster Hall on 27 January 1606 (1605 OS)². All but one pleaded not guilty, but the verdict was a foregone conclusion, all were duly convicted and sentenced to death.

The executions took place in two batches. The later recruits and lesser conspirators, Digby, Robert Winter, Grant and Bates, were to suffer at St Paul's Churchyard in the City on 30 January. The others, Thomas Winter, Rookwood, Keyes and, of course, Fawkes, at Old Palace Yard (*i.e.* near the present St Stephen's Entrance), Westminster on 31 January.

The executions were attended with all the bloody barbarity (including castration, disembowelling alive etc) that the mediaeval punishment for treason, hanging drawing and quartering, demanded. This law later fell into disuse but was not repealed until 1814. The heads and other portions of the conspirators' bodies were set up at various points in Westminster and London. A Jesuit priest, Henry Garnett, was also implicated and tried for concealment of treason because he heard the confessions of the others. He was executed later in 1606.

Commemoration of the Plot

The fifth of November is variously called 'Firework Night', 'Bonfire Night' or 'Guy Fawkes Day'. An Act of Parliament (3 James I, cap 1) was passed to appoint 5th November in each year as a day of thanksgiving for 'the joyful day of deliverance'. The Act remained in force until 1859. On 5 November 1605, it is said the populace of London celebrated the defeat of the plot by fires and street festivities. Similar celebrations must have taken place on the anniversary and, over the years, became a tradition - in many places a holiday was observed. (It is not celebrated in Northern Ireland).

It is still the custom in Britain on, or around, 5th November to let off fireworks. For weeks previously, children have been making guys - effigies supposedly of Fawkes - nowadays usually formed from old clothes stuffed with newspaper, and equipped with a grotesque mask, to be burnt on the November 5th bonfire. The word 'guy' came thus in the 19th century to mean a weirdly dressed person, and hence in the 20th century in the USA to mean, in slang usage, any male person.

Institutions and towns may hold firework displays and bonfire parties, and the same is done, despite the danger of fireworks, on a smaller scale in back gardens throughout the country. In some areas, such as Lewes and Battle in Sussex, there are extensive processions and a great bonfire. Children exhibit effigies of Guy Fawkes in the street to collect money for fireworks, sometimes using the chant:

² This reflects the change, in 1752, from the Old Style Julian calendar to the New Style Gregorian calendar in use today.

*"Remember, remember, the fifth of November
Gunpowder treason and plot
We see no reason
Why Gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot",.....*

Followed by "Penny for the Guy"

Fuller versions were used locally. In East Essex for instance, in the 1890s, boys would dress in cast-off hats and coats covered with old wallpaper torn into shreds. Faces blackened with soot, they would chant the rhyme quoted above but with the second verse:

*"This is the day they did contrive
To blow up King and Parliament alive
Through God's great mercy they were taken
With a slow fuse and a dark lantern
Holler boys, holler boys,
God Save the Queen
Penny for the Guys"*



Sir Benjamin Stone took the Photograph above of guys at Windsor in 1903. Both guys and collectors are masked

The Houses of Parliament are still searched by the Yeomen of the Guard before the State Opening which since 1928 has been held in November. Ostensibly to ensure no latter-day Guy Fawkes is concealed in the cellars, this is retained as a picturesque custom rather than a serious anti-terrorist precaution. It is said that for superstitious reasons no State Opening will be held on 5 November, but this is untrue. The State Opening was on 5 November in, for instance, 1957.

The four-hundredth anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot in 2005 was marked by a range of activities in London and elsewhere, including an exhibition in Westminster Hall. Details of the events and an online exhibition are available on the Gunpowder Plot 400 web site, below.

http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_publications_and_archives/parliamentary_archives/gunpowder_plot_400.cfm

Guy Fawkes

There is no doubt that Fawkes, though remembered wrongly as the principal conspirator, was in fact a minor cog in the wheel.

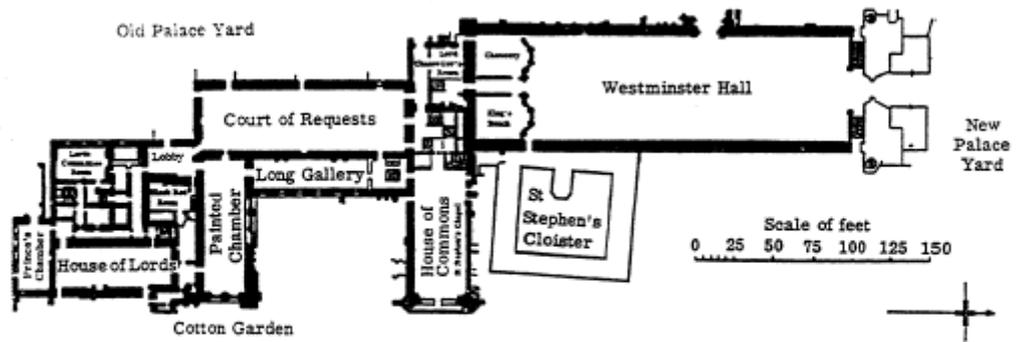
Born in 1570 at York, he was by upbringing a Protestant. In 1593, he enlisted as a mercenary in the Spanish Army in the Netherlands, having become a Catholic shortly before that date. During the course of debates on the Maastricht Treaty of 1991, it was suggested that Guy Fawkes had spent part of his Spanish Army career in Maastricht. This appears to be a fallacy as there is no evidence of which we are aware that links him to Maastricht. He was at the capture of Calais in 1595, where he apparently distinguished himself greatly. He may have been chosen for his skill in siegecraft, and it was an advantage that, having been abroad for some time, he was not known in London. During the plot, and for the first part of his interrogation, he used the *alias* of Johnson. Fawkes declared he would have fired the gunpowder when Knyvett discovered it, had he been present; but he was outside the house at the time the discovery was made.

The cellar in which Fawkes watched over his gunpowder was damaged in the 1834 fire and destroyed in the rebuilding of the Palace of Westminster in the 19th century.

The Yeomen of the Guard
before the search of the
cellars on February 1
1904. From a photograph
by Sir Benjamin Stone



The Old Palace of
Westminster, before the fire
of 1834, showing the
position of the House of
Lords and of Whynniard's
house, under the Prince's
Chamber.



Further reading

The Gunpowder Plot: Faith in Rebellion
Alan Sutton
Hayes and Sutton 1994

Treason: Famous English Treason Trials
Alan Wharam
Alan Sutton Publishing 1995

Useful Websites

Gunpowder Plot Society
www.gunpowder-plot.org

Gunpowder Plot Exhibition
<http://www.gunpowderplot.parliament.uk/>

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