

# Fact File: The Gunpowder Plot

The what, when who and why of this  
momentous event



## Glossary

**Catholic Church:** The largest Christian church, based in Vatican City. Henry VIII separated from the church in order to marry Anne Boleyn, and formed the Church of England. The Catholic Church is led by the Pope.

**Hanged, Drawn and Quartered:** A cruel form of execution that saw a person hanged until they almost choked to death, then they were cut down, disembowelled, with their heart removed and burned, and then their body cut into four pieces.

**State Opening of Parliament:** When the monarch ceremonially opens a new Parliamentary session, marked by a speech from the throne in the House of Lords (the chamber where the Lords sit to discuss and vote on policy).

## **The Plot**

The plotters plan was to blow up the House of Lords, during the State Opening of Parliament, on the 5<sup>th</sup> November 1605, killing the King and his Government. The plotters wanted to take action against the Government and the King for their anti-catholic laws. They planned to put James I's daughter Elizabeth on the throne. In the summer of 1605 the group hired a cellar underneath Parliament and secretly brought in barrels of gunpowder.

After a letter was sent to Lord Monteagle, Parliament was searched for traces of the plotters, and in the cellar below the House of Lords the guards found the gunpowder and Guy Fawkes.

## **The Key Figures**

Guy Fawkes, after spending some years in Spain fighting the Catholic cause, joined the plotters in 1604 and was the man responsible for lighting the fuses underneath Parliament. Before he could go through with the plan he was captured, the plot was foiled, and he was tried for treason.

James I became King of England in 1603, and was the first Stuart Monarch. He was also King of Scotland and united the two countries. After the plot he created a new law whereby all Catholics had to swear loyalty to the King over the Pope.

Robert Catesby was the charismatic and influential organiser and leader of the gunpowder plot. He was killed fighting with the guards that came to arrest him.

Lord Monteagle received a letter from an anonymous conspirator warning of a 'terrible blow' to come during the state opening. He took the letter to the King, and secrets of the plot were discovered. Nobody knows who sent the damaging letter. Some say it was a friend trying to keep him safe and others believe Monteagle wrote it himself to clear his name of any potential involvement. He was a known Catholic sympathiser, who may have known about the plot in advance. He was rewarded handsomely by the King after the plot was foiled.

## **The Legacy**

After three days of torture in the Tower of London Guy Fawkes named his fellow plotters and they were put to trial and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered.

As a consequence of the plot stricter anti-Catholic policies were adopted by the state, however James I's government remained fairly lenient towards Catholics compared to other monarchs.

Londoners were encouraged to burn bonfires to celebrate the failure of the plot, and the government passed a law designating November 5th as a national day of thanksgiving. Although the law no longer exists, many still celebrate bonfire night with fireworks to mark the occasion.