

**In 1605, thirteen young men planned to blow up the Houses of Parliament. Among them was Guy Fawkes, Britain's most notorious traitor.**

After Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, having ruled for about fifty years, English Catholics who had been persecuted under her rule had hoped that her successor, James I, would be more tolerant of their religion and, therefore, many saw an opportunity for change. James I had, after all, had a Catholic mother. Unfortunately, James did not turn out to be more tolerant than Elizabeth. Those who felt particularly hard done by, both by Elizabeth I and James I, even felt that the situation was so bad as to require, in Fawkes' own words, "a desperate remedy": it was an opportunity to simply replace the current king, and a number of young men, 13 to be exact, decided that violent action was the answer.

A small group took shape, under the leadership of Robert Catesby. Catesby felt that violent action was warranted. Indeed, the thing to do was to blow up the Houses of Parliament. In doing so, they would kill the King, maybe even the Prince of Wales, and the Members of Parliament who were making life difficult for the Catholics. Today these conspirators would be known as extremists, or terrorists.

Robert Catesby, the charismatic leader of the group of conspirators, had a way with people, and convinced a number of his impressionable friends to go along with the murderous plan which would later be known as the Gunpowder Plot. Even as problems with his plot later arose and some members expressed doubt, Catesby remained convinced that violent action was the only way forward.

Catesby first recruited his close friends and relatives: Thomas Wintour, Jack Wright and Thomas Percy, but the group quickly grew to include Guy Fawkes. The small core of conspirators felt Guy would be a strong addition. Guy was not part of the close knit circle of Catesby's small group, but he had spent time in the Netherlands and in Spain where he had fought, many said very well, as a mercenary. While in Spain he also earned the nickname Guido. Indeed, he even signed his name Guido Fawkes in a number of places.

He was as passionate about the plight of the Catholics in England as his colleagues. As a member of the group, he quickly became a trusted member, and was later charged with the dangerous task of acquiring 36 barrels of gunpowder and storing them in a rented space beneath the House of Lords.

Soon after Fawkes' addition, others who joined the group were Robert Wintour, Christopher (Kit) Wright, Robert Keyes, Thomas Bates. Latecomers to the group were John Grant, Ambrose Rookwood, Francis Tresham, and Everard Digby. In all, there were 13 conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot.

But as the group worked on the plot, it became clear that innocent people would be hurt or killed in the attack, including some people who even fought for more rights for Catholics. Some of the plotters started having second thoughts. One of the group members even sent an anonymous letter warning his friend, Lord Monteagle, to stay away from the Parliament on November 5th. The warning letter reached the King, and the King's forces made plans to stop the conspirators.

These were unstable times indeed, with several smaller plots being discovered in the years preceding 1605. In fact, many of the Gunpowder plotters were known as traitors to the authorities. For this reason, it would have been difficult, if not unlikely, for them to gather 36 barrels of gunpowder and store them in a cellar under the house of Lords without the security forces getting suspicious.

Furthermore, the letter warning one of the members of government to stay away from Parliament is believed today to have been fabricated by the king's officials. Historians suggest that the King's officials already knew about the plot, that one of the plotters in fact revealed the key points of the plot to the authorities. The suspected turncoat? Francis Tresham.

The letter, then, would be a tool created by the King's officials to explain how, at the last minute, the king found out about the Plot and stopped it just before it wreaked its havoc on Parliament and himself. At the same time, the letter was vague enough to give the officials all the latitude they wanted in falsifying confessions and to pursue their own anti-Catholic ends.

There are two fundamental problems with the letter. Firstly, the letter was unsigned. Any and all of the conspirators, once apprehended, might have saved themselves from torture and perhaps even death if they could claim to have written it. None did. Not one of the conspirators who was caught appears to have known about the letter. Secondly, the letter was very vague in its content. It said nothing about the details of the planned attack. Still, the king and his men knew exactly the where and when to catch the conspirators and stop the explosion just hours before it was to take place.

### **How did they know?**

If Robert Catesby was the leader, how did Guy Fawkes become the most famous member of the Gunpowder Plot? Guy Fawkes was the one who was caught under the House of Lords with 36 barrels of gunpowder. For two days, Guido was the only suspect in custody and his name became synonymous with the Powder Treason, as the Gunpowder Plot was known at the time.

But Guy wasn't in prison alone for long. Soon, many conspirators were either caught outright as they fled from London, or surrendered shortly thereafter. Some, however, including the ringleader Robert Catesby, were killed in a siege within a few days of the failed attempt.

As is often the case with confessions made under duress, plotters admitted to everything they knew, and most likely complemented this information with whatever authorities wanted to hear - in hopes of ending their ordeal. The result was questionable confessions, likely augmented by authorities for their own purposes. These confessions incriminated two leading English Jesuits - who, according to some historians, were unlikely to have had any involvement in the Plot. Indeed, would most likely have been most opposed to it. Nevertheless, the government used the Gunpowder Plot to justify further anti-Catholic repression, a Jacobean sting operation which would have served the authorities by casting Catholics, or Recusants, as an enemy to be pursued, including executing at least two Jesuits leaders they felt were threatening to their authority.

All the conspirators who were not killed in the siege were imprisoned, tortured, and executed publicly in March 1607 in the most gruesome way (except Francis Tresham who fell sick and died while in prison). They were "hanged, drawn, and quartered", a brutal practice which authorities hoped would instill terror in other potential traitors. Guy Fawkes, who was in the cellar of the parliament with the 36 barrels of gunpowder when the authorities stormed it in the early hours of November 5th, was caught, tortured and executed.

Did public executions really function as a deterrent? Or did they simply feed the climate of violence that encouraged Catesby and his men to pursue their deadly aims? Was there really a Gunpowder Plot, or were the "conspirators" framed by the King's men? It's unclear if the conspirators would ever have been able to pull off their plan to blow up the Parliament even if they had not been

betrayed. Some have suggested that the gunpowder itself was so old as to be useless. Since Guy Fawkes and the other conspirators got caught before trying to ignite the powder, we'll never know for certain.

Even for the period which was notoriously unstable, the Gunpowder Plot struck a very profound chord for the people of England. In fact, even today, the reigning monarch only enters the Parliament once a year, on what is called "the State Opening of Parliament". Prior to the Opening, and according to custom, the Yeomen of the Guard search the cellars of the Palace of Westminster. Another tradition still observed by Britons is the annual visit of the Queen to Parliament every year. Ever since the Gunpowder Plot, the reigning monarch enters the Parliament only once a year, on what is called "the State Opening of Parliament". Prior to the Opening, and according to custom, the Yeomen of the Guard search the cellars of the Palace of Westminster. Today, the Queen and Parliament still observe this tradition.

Nowadays, the Queen and Parliament still observe this tradition. No one really expects to find 36 barrels of gunpowder when our Yeomen undertake this task every year. But, just like most of us who like a good Bonfire Night, it's clear the Lords and MPs like a bit of a celebration, too.

On the very night that the Gunpowder Plot was foiled, on November 5th, 1605, bonfires were set alight to celebrate the safety of the King. Since then, November 5th has become known as Bonfire Night. The event is commemorated every year with fireworks and burning effigies of Guy Fawkes on a bonfire.

Some of the English have been known to wonder, in a tongue in cheek kind of way, whether they are celebrating Fawkes' execution or honoring his attempt to do away with the government.

Beyond Bonfire Night, Guy and the Gunpowder Plot have left a legacy. **For 400 years, bonfires have burned on November 5th to mark the failed Gunpowder Plot.**

The tradition of Guy Fawkes-related bonfires actually began the very same year as the failed coup. The Plot was foiled in the night between the 4th and 5th of November 1605. Already on the 5th, agitated Londoners who knew little more than that their King had been saved, joyfully lit bonfires in thanksgiving. As years progressed, however, the ritual became more elaborate. Soon, people began placing effigies onto bonfires, and fireworks were added to the celebrations. Effigies of Guy Fawkes, and sometimes those of the Pope, graced the pyres. Still today, some communities throw dummies of both Guy Fawkes and the Pope on the bonfire (and even those of a contemporary politician or two), although the gesture is seen by most as a quirky tradition, rather than an expression of hostility towards the Pope.

Preparations for Bonfire Night celebrations include making a dummy of Guy Fawkes, which is called "the Guy". Guy left his name for everyday use Today; we use the word "guy" to mean "person" or "man", as in "that guy across the street". Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* won't vouch for this theory, many linguists and historians think that our use of the term in that way is from our friend Guy Fawkes. It's difficult to trace the exact path of the word over the centuries, but it probably started by referring to the effigy of Fawkes that was thrown on top of the bonfire every November 5th as "a guy". Some children still keep up an old tradition of walking in the streets, carrying "the Guy" they have just made, and beg passersby for "a penny for the Guy" to buy fireworks for the evening festivities. From there, it's not a huge leap to talk about "a guy" as a living person. The use of the word would have grown from there.

On the night itself, Guy is placed on top of the bonfire, which is then set alight; and fireworks displays fill the sky. The extent of the celebrations and the size of the bonfire varies from one community to the next. Lewes, in the South East of England, is famous for its Bonfire Night festivities and consistently attracts thousands of people each year to participate.

Bonfire Night is not only celebrated in Britain. The tradition crossed the oceans and established itself in the British colonies during the centuries. It was actively celebrated in New England as "Pope Day" as late as the 18th century. Today, November 5th bonfires still light up in far out places like New Zealand and Newfoundland in Canada.

Immortalized in this **nursery rhyme**, the Gunpowder Plot is introduced early into the young minds of children throughout the United Kingdom.

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

Guy Fawkes, guy, t'was his intent  
To blow up king and parliament.  
Three score barrels were laid below  
To prove old England's overthrow.

By god's mercy he was catch'd  
With a darkened lantern and burning match.  
So, holler boys, holler boys, Let the bells ring.  
Holler boys, holler boys, God save the king.

And what shall we do with him?  
Burn him!

### ***V for Vendetta*: The movie industry finds Guy Fawkes**

Hollywood has finally found its way to Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot via Alan Moore's dark and dystopian *V for Vendetta*. In this post-apocalyptic graphic novel (for old-fashioned readers, you might know "graphic novels" as "comic books") about the loss of freedom and identity in a Britain that has become a totalitarian state, "V", a superhuman vigilante who models himself on Guy Fawkes, tries to liberate his homeland.

Based on the graphic novel by Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta* takes place in an alternate vision of Britain in which a corrupt and abusive totalitarian government has risen to complete power. During a threatening run in with the secret police, an unassuming young woman named Evey (Natalie Portman) is rescued by a vigilante named V (Hugo Weaving) -- a caped figure both articulate and skilled in combat. V embodies the principles of rebellion from an authoritarian state, donning a mask of vilified would-be terrorist of British history Guy Fawkes and leading a revolution sparked by assassination and destruction. Evey becomes his unlikely ally, newly aware of the cruelty of her own society and her role in it."