

Bonfire Night

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Bonfire Night commemorates the failed attempt to kill the King of England and the important people of England, as they gathered for the State Opening of Parliament on 5th November, 1605.

The bonfires were lit that first night in a joyful celebration of the King being saved, but as the years went by, the burning of straw dummies representing one of the men involved with the plan, Guy Fawkes, started to happen as a reminder of how traitors cannot get away with plots to overthrow the king.

The Plot Itself

After Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, the English Catholics were led to believe that although the new king, James I, was a Protestant, he would be more accepting of people following the Catholic faith especially as he had had a Catholic mother. However, he was no more accepting of Catholic people than the previous ruler. Some people began to wish he was off the throne so that a Catholic could rule the country.



A small group of men began to meet and discuss what could be done. The leader of the group, Robert Catesby, was very keen to take violent action. Their plan began to take shape; they would blow up the Houses of Parliament and kill many important people who they did not agree with. This was an act of terrorism.

Act of Terrorism:
Deliberate attempt to kill or injure many innocent people, for religious or political reasons.

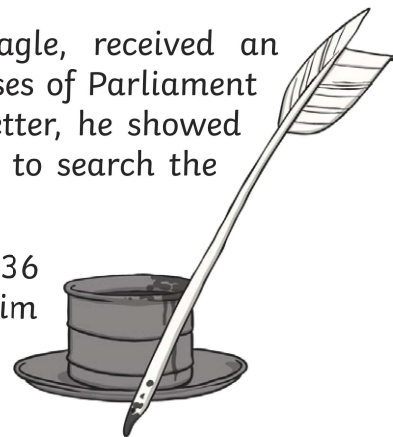
They planned to kill the king, the heir to the throne, the Prince of Wales, and all the Members of Parliament who were making life difficult for the Catholic people.

As the plot took form, some of the plotters realised that many innocent people would be killed; many people who were supportive of the Catholics would also be in the Houses of Parliament that day. Some of the plotters began having second thoughts about the whole plot.

The Letter

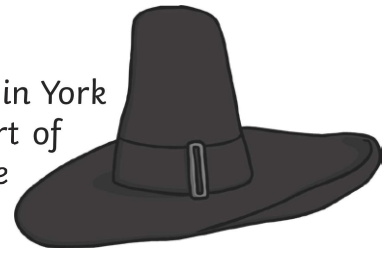
One of the Members of Parliament, Lord Monteagle, received an anonymous letter warning him not to go to the Houses of Parliament on 5th November. Not knowing who had sent the letter, he showed it to the King, who immediately ordered his soldiers to search the building.

They entered the cellars, and found a man beside 36 barrels of gunpowder. They arrested him and carted him off for questioning. So who was he?



Who Was Guy Fawkes?

The soldiers had found Guy Fawkes. He had been born in York but moved to Spain to fight other countries in support of Spain and became highly skilled 'in matters of war'. He changed his name to the Italian version, Guido.



Fawkes hated the Protestant king of England. Therefore, when he was approached by Thomas Wintour, one of the plotters (who was interested in Fawkes' knowledge of war and expertise in gunpowder) and asked if he would like to join them, he was keen to accept.

For 18 months, Guy Fawkes met with the gang and they plotted what to do and when to do it. They got 36 barrels of gunpowder and stored them in the cellars of the House of Lords. Each man had a job to do. Guy Fawkes was in charge of the gunpowder and was to light the fuse!

High treason:

The crime of betraying your country, by attempting to kill or overthrow the country's king, queen or government.

Caught in the Act!

When Guy Fawkes was arrested and questioned, the rest of the gang fled to different parts of the country. Fawkes refused to say who he was, or give the names of anyone else involved. The special forces of the king were given permission by the king to torture Guy Fawkes, even though it was illegal.

Guy Fawkes was a strong man and despite suffering enormous agony on the rack, it took two days to get him to confess. Even the king was impressed with what he called Fawkes' 'Roman resolution'. Fawkes broke and gave the names of everyone involved. He was found guilty of high treason and sentenced to a traitor's death.

The eight surviving plotters were also sentenced to death, which meant they would be hanged, drawn and quartered. However, despite his weak and pained body, Guy Fawkes jumped from the scaffold where he was to be hung, and broke his own neck as he fell.



The Plotter's Legacy

The foiled Gunpowder Plot is remembered each year through the lighting of bonfires and fireworks. Every year before the State Opening of the Houses of Parliament, the tradition of checking the cellars of the building continues, just in case another plot should be discovered!

Bonfire Night Questions

1. Why did people start burning dummies of Guy Fawkes on bonfires?

2. What did the English Catholics hope for when James I became King of England?

3. How did Robert Catesby want to deal with the problem of the Protestant King?

4. Why did some of the plotters begin to have second thoughts about the plot?

5. What word did the author use that means no one knew who sent the letter to Lord Monteaagle that warned him not to go to the Houses of Parliament on that day?

6. Name some of Guy Fawkes' characteristics which made Thomas Wintour think he would be interested in joining the plotter's gang.

7. What was Fawkes' role in the gang?

8. Who gave permission for Fawkes to be tortured to confess?

9. How did Fawkes escape being hung, drawn and quartered?

10. What is the legacy of the Gunpowder Plot 400 years ago?

11. What do you think of the plot and what happened in the end?

Bonfire Night Answers

1. Why did people start burning dummies of Guy Fawkes on bonfires?
People started burning dummies of Guy Fawkes on bonfires as a reminder of how traitors cannot get away with plots to overthrow the king.
2. What did the English Catholics hope for when James I became King of England?
The English Catholics hoped that when James I became King, he would be more accepting of people following the Catholic faith.
3. How did Robert Catesby want to deal with the problem of the Protestant king?
Robert Catesby wanted to deal with the problem of the Protestant King with violent action.
4. Why did some of the plotters begin to have second thoughts about the plot?
Some of the plotters began to have second thoughts about the plot because they realised that many innocent people, who had been supportive of the Catholics, would also be killed.
5. What word did the author use that means no one knew who sent the letter to Lord Monteagle that warned him not to go to the Houses of Parliament on that day?
The author used the word 'anonymous', which means no one knew who sent the letter to Lord Monteagle warning him not to go to the Houses of Parliament on that day.
6. Name some of Guy Fawkes' characteristics which made Thomas Wintour think he would be interested in joining the plotter's gang.
Pupil's own response based on Fawkes' knowledge of war; skill with gunpowder; hatred of the king.
7. What was Fawkes' role in the gang?
Fawkes' role in the gang was being in charge of the gunpowder and lighting the fuse.
8. Who gave permission for Fawkes to be tortured to confess?
The King gave permission for Fawkes to be tortured to confess.
9. How did Fawkes escape being hung, drawn and quartered?
Fawkes escaped being hung, drawn and quartered by jumping from the scaffold and breaking his own neck as he fell.
10. What is the legacy of the Gunpowder Plot 400 years ago?
The legacy of the Gunpowder Plot is that people still light bonfires on the 5th November and the cellars are still checked each year before the State Opening of the Houses of Parliament, in case of another plot of terrorism.
11. What do you think of the plot and what happened in the end?
Pupil's own response based on the facts in the text.