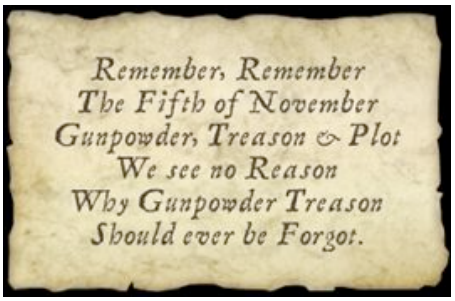


Guy Fawkes Night

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, English Catholics who had been persecuted under her rule had hoped that her successor, James I, would be more tolerant of their religion. James I had, after all, had a Catholic mother. Unfortunately, James did not turn out to be more tolerant than Elizabeth and 13 young men decided that violent action was the answer.

The group leader, Robert Catesby, felt that 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. To carry out their plan, the conspirators got hold of 36 barrels of gunpowder - and stored them in a cellar, just under the House of Lords.

But as the men plotted, it became clear that innocent people would be hurt or killed, including those who fought for more rights for Catholics. Certain plotters began to have second thoughts and one even sent an anonymous letter warning his friend, Lord Monteagle, to stay away from the Parliament on November 5th. The letter reached the King, whose forces made plans to stop the conspirators.



Guy Fawkes, who was in the cellar of parliament with the 36 barrels of gunpowder when the authorities stormed it in the early hours of November 5th, was caught, tortured and executed. It's unclear if the conspirators would have succeeded in blowing 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 plotters got caught before trying to ignite the powder, we'll never know for sure.

Even for the notoriously unstable era, the Gunpowder Plot struck a profound chord for the people of England. Still today, the reigning monarch enters Parliament but once a year, for "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. Nowadays the Queen and Parliament still observe this tradition.

On the very night that the Gunpowder Plot was foiled, in 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.