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THE GUNPOWDER PLOT

An illustration appears here in hard copy

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 Public Information Office deals with many enquiries about the events of November 1605, especially in the autumn of each year. Interest in the plot is not confined to Britain - the image of Guy Fawkes with his 36 barrels of gunpowder is increasingly well known abroad, especially in Japan and the USA. The two houses of Parliament have a long history as targets for terrorism; a fact which has sadly been underscored twice in the last 25 years. But the plot by Robert Catesby and his co-conspirators of the first decade of the 17th century is the one which sticks in the memory.

It should be remembered that, in 1605, King James I had only recently arrived from Scotland. In the reign of his predecessor, Elizabeth I, 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, in more recent times, have suspected it to be the work of a group of *agents-provocateurs*, anxious to set up as traitors a band of gullible men, and thus reinforce the ascendancy of Protestantism from the wave of popular revulsion - and hatred in James himself - which was likely to result.

Whatever the truth of the origins of the plot, it must be accepted that most, if not all, of the conspirators reckoned, with the logic of the fanatic down the years, that theirs was an honest attempt to extirpate heresy and re-establish the true

religion; and they must 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, this being 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. (Several commentators have postulated that the whole plot was conceived by Secretary of State Cecil, and suggested to Catesby, but this must remain entirely conjectural). 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 progress of the plot

The conspirators secured the use of part of a house occupied by John Whynniard underneath the Prince's Chamber (see plan). 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, intending to make a cavity underneath the coal-cellar, which was leased to a man called Bright; and which lay immediately under the Lords Chamber. At the same time, they accumulated twenty kegs of powder in a house at Lambeth, so as to be able 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 were summarily stopped when Percy stepped in and took a lease on the cellar itself.

Concomitant plans were drawn up to secure the likely heirs to the throne (Prince Charles or 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; but the others had left London in the week preceding the 5th.

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 of course uncertain. In any event, on the 4th of November an initial search was made (initially, it is said by Monteagle and the Lord Chamberlain, Suffolk), where they discovered Fawkes and the wood and coal Percy had provided with which 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. In fact, of course, it would have been very difficult for the conspirators to keep the plot secret, so many were involved. Hence, it is not surprising news of it leaked out. The discovery is recorded in the Commons Journal as a marginal note.

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The famous marginal note begins (in modern English) "This last night, the Upper House of Parliament was searched by Sir Thomas Knyvett, and one Johnson, 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" ('Johnson' was the alias Fawkes used prior to his confession). Thus did Ralph Ewens, Clerk of the House, or an assistant, note in a kind of parenthesis to the day's business the most spectacular event ever to have occurred in the House to that date.

Fawkes is said to have been taken before Cecil (Secretary of State) and 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 apparently great rejoicing in London; Sunday 10th November was also appointed a day of thanksgiving.

Those conspirators who remained alive (several, including the ringleader, Catesby, had been shot in the Midlands, whence they had fled) 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). All but one pleaded not guilty, but the verdict was a foregone conclusion, and all were duly convicted, and sentenced to death. The executions took place in two batches. Digby, Robert Winter, Grant and Bates, the later recruits and lesser conspirators, were to suffer at St Paul's Churchyard in the City on 30th January, and 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 31st 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 misprision of treason, and executed later in 1606.

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Sir Benjamin Stone took the photograph above of guys at Windsor in 1903. Both guys and collectors are masked, and the guys appear to have placards referring to current political events (not known nowadays).

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 in the USA to mean, in slang usage, any male). 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:

'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'.

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

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'

The Houses of Parliament are still searched by the Yeomen of the Guard on before the State Opening (usually again since 1928 in November) to ensure no latter-day Fawkes is concealed in the cellars, though this is retained as a picturesque custom rather than a serious anti-terrorist precaution (for which, of course, there are proper means). It is said that for superstitious reasons no State Opening will be held on 5 November, but this is a fallacy, as it was, for example, in 1957.

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.

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. 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 when it was planned to tunnel under the House, and it was an advantage that, having been abroad for some time, he was not known in London. Fawkes declared he would have fired the gunpowder when Knyvett discovered it, had he been present; in fact, he was outside the house at the time. During the plot, and for the first part of his interrogation, he used the *alias* of Johnson.

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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.

C C Pond

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