

The Short Life and Times of Guy Fawkes
By
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“Remember, remember the fifth of November
Gunpowder, treason and plot.
I see no reason why gunpowder, treason
Should ever be forgot...”
-Gunpowder Plot Poem-Traditional British

Guy Fawkes was born in York, England in 1570. There is very little actually known about the man. He is best known not for his deeds during the majority of his life but for his participation in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. As part of this conspiracy, Mr. Fawkes, along with twelve others, attempted to blow up the English Parliament, the House of Lords, and King James I.

An appreciation of the political and religious environment of England is necessary to understand the Gunpowder Plot. England had undergone the Protestant Reformation. Acts were passed by Parliament which established the Anglican faith as the “official” religion of England. It was a felony to practice the Catholic faith by participating in Mass. It was illegal to be baptized by a Catholic priest. Under the Act of Uniformity, every person over 16 was required to attend services at a local Church of England. Failure to do so was punishable by fines and imprisonment. Under the Act of Supremacy, an individual had to swear an oath of loyalty to the Monarch of England as the head of the Church of England in order to hold public office, graduate from college, or engage in military service. Convicted gentry under these laws could not travel more than five miles from their estates. These acts were passed during the political and military conflicts between England and Spain, the dominant Protestant and Catholic European nations of the time. As a result, religious differences had severe political and social consequences in England. Those who refused to obey these laws were known as “Recusants”. Upon Queen Elizabeth’s death in 1603, James I inherited the English throne. Many English Catholics believed he would convert to Catholicism or, at the very least, lessen the harshness of these laws. After all, his wife, Anne of Denmark, had converted to Catholicism and his mother had been the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots. While his ascension to the throne had unofficially promised religious tolerance to his subjects, his official policies fell far short of their earlier promise. Legislation and/or edicts hostile to Catholics continued to be passed and/or issued by the English Government throughout early 1604. The conspirators of the Gunpowder plot believed that they had no other choice than to attempt to kill a tyrant.

Guy Fawkes was the son of a successful Protestant lawyer named Edward Fawkes. Edith Jackson, his mother, came from a Recusant family. He was schooled at St. Peters in York, England along with many of the future conspirators including John and Chris Wright. His father died when Guy was eight. His mother remarried a Recusant named Denis Bainbridge. Guy was first employed as a footman for the 1st Viscount Montague and was dismissed for reasons that remain obscure. He was

subsequently re-employed by 2nd Viscount Montague, the first Viscount's grandson. There is also very little known about his immediate family although his sisters, Elizabeth and Anne, were married at the Farnham Church in 1594 and 1599. He left England in the early 1590's for Flanders, one of the more important provinces of the Spanish Netherlands where Protestants had fought a thirty-year war against Spanish dominion. He enlisted in the Spanish army under the Arch Duke Albert of Austria. He was now over six feet tall and powerfully built. Contrary to the popular image of Fawkes as black haired and black bearded, he had reddish-brown hair and beard. He distinguished himself in military service and became an expert in the use of gunpowder as well as swordsmanship. He also adopted the name Guido Fawkes during his service abroad. He was recommended for a Captaincy by the summer of 1603. Instead, he left for Spain to advocate for a Spanish invasion of England. The Spanish diplomats preferred to obtain their goals by less violent means. While his mission had been a failure, Guy did meet Tom Wintour (also called Winter), a future conspirator, in the Spanish Court. By April of 1604, both men were back in England.

It is ironic that Guy Fawkes' name would be forever linked to the Gunpowder plot because it was Robert Catesby who was the conspiracy's head and heart. According to his contemporaries, Catesby was charming, persuasive, and determined. The Catesby family was one of the leading Catholic families in the Midlands of England. Robert Catesby had already participated in at least one conspiracy against the English government (the "Essex rebellion") which had cost him some of his family estates. On May 20, 1604, Guy met with Robert Catesby, Jack Wright, Thomas Percy, and Tom Wintour at the Duke and Drake Inn in London, England. It was Catesby who came up with the plan to kill King James I and members of the House of Lords and place his daughter, Princess Elizabeth, as a puppet monarch on the throne in the hopes of starting a Catholic uprising. All agreed that it was necessary to kill the King and members of Parliament. The only issue was whether or not many of the Catholic or pro-Catholic Nobles such as Lord Monteagle or the Earl of Northumberland should die as well and who would run the government following the killing of the King. For many of the conspirators, neither of these questions was ever fully resolved.

Legend states that the co-conspirators attempted to tunnel their way under Parliament but were unsuccessful. There is no historical evidence of any mine or tunnel work. There is evidence that they rented a cellar beneath the House of Parliament in March of 1605. During the summer of 1605, Guy Fawkes (now named John Johnson) was supervising the assembly and placement of the gunpowder. He also returned to Flanders during that summer to enlist support for the plan. He failed in this task and only managed to gain the attention of English intelligence agents who now knew that there was something afoot between Guy (or Guido) Fawkes and Robert Catesby, a known center of prior rebellious activity. These reports, like many, were simply lost in the files. In the meantime, the opening of Parliament had been delayed because of outbreaks of the plague. Parliament was now to begin on November 5, 1605. Fawkes returned by August of 1605 only to discover that the gunpowder had decayed and he immediately began to make arrangements for additional gunpowder. By October of 1605, the number of the conspirators reached 13 and arrangements had been made for Fawkes to sneak out of

England and back to the continent to meet with the nobles of Europe to explain the reason for the regicide.

The conspirators laid between 25 to 36 barrels, or as some authorities have estimated, between 2,000 to 10,000 pounds of gunpowder. On October 26, 1605, a letter was delivered to Lord Monteagle, warning him against attending the first session of Parliament. No one is sure who wrote the letter. Most historians agree that it was likely written by Francis Tresham, Lord Monteagle's brother in law and one of the conspirators. Lord Monteagle promptly turned the letter over to Sir Robert Cecil, the Earl of Salisbury. Lord Suffolk, together with Lord Monteagle and Sir Thomas Knevet, a Westminster magistrate and member of the Privy Chamber, searched the Parliament building on November 4, 1605. Their search was rather urgent given that Parliament was scheduled to open the next day. They discovered Guy Fawkes with matches and other items necessary to fire a gunpowder train in the cellar.

Fawkes was immediately arrested and taken to the Tower of London where he was tortured and eventually confessed to treason. His physical courage impressed even the King who condemned him to death. His co-conspirators were initially able to escape London. Robert Catesby, Thomas Percy, John and Chris Wright and several others were killed during a fight with a posse led by the Sheriff of Worcester. The remaining conspirators were tried for treason. Despite their "not guilty" pleas, there was little doubt as to the eventual outcome of their trial. They were found guilty and ordered to be hung, drawn and quartered. Francis Tresham died in the Tower of London on December 23, 1605. Four of the conspirators, Sir Everard Digby, Robert Winter, John Grant, and Thomas Bates, were executed on January 30, 1606 at St. Paul's churchyard. Guy Fawkes and three others, Thomas Wintour, Ambrose Rookwood and Robert Keyes, were executed on January 31, 1606 at Old Palace Yard across from the Parliament Building. Guy Fawkes was the last of the conspirators to be executed. With a body that had already been broken by torture, he had to be assisted up the ladder to the scaffold. Unlike the others, he was spared most of the sentence. His neck immediately snapped upon being dropped by the hangman.

The repercussions of the plot were severe upon the Catholic community in England. It wasn't until 1829 that many of the religious laws were finally repealed by the English Parliament. Guy Fawkes Day is still a holiday in England and other parts of the United Kingdom. It is celebrated on November 5 with fireworks, bonfires, and the burning of Guy Fawkes in effigy.

Sources: Paul Durst, *Intended Treason* (A.S. Barnes and Company, 1970); Antonia Fraser, *Faith and Treason, the Story of the Gunpowder Plot* (Anchor Books, 1996), Kenneth O. Morgan, Ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1989); Mark Nicolls, *Investigating Gunpowder Plot* (Manchester University Press, 1991);