**Gunpowder Plot**

[](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/File:Gunpow1.jpg)

The **Gunpowder Plot** of 1605 was a failed attempt by a group of provincial English Catholics to kill the [Protestant](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Protestantism) King [James I of England](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/James_I_of_England), his family, and most of the Protestant aristocracy in one fell swoop by blowing up the Houses of Parliament during the State Opening. The conspirators had further planned to abduct any of the royal children not present in Parliament and to incite a revolt in the Midlands.

The Gunpowder Plot was one of a series of unsuccessful assassination attempts against James I, and followed the Main Plot and Bye Plot of 1603. Many believe the Gunpowder Plot to have been part of the [Counter-Reformation](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Counter-Reformation).

The aims of the conspirators were to perpetrate a heinous crime that would invoke a total revolution in the government of England leading to the installation of a Catholic monarch. Instead, the failure of this intended treasonous act of regicide, that is, the murder of royalty, put many loyal Catholics in position to receive even greater religious persecution. Before this period [Catholicism](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Catholicism) had been associated with Spain and the evils of the [Inquisition](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Inquisition), but after the plot, Catholic became synonymous with treasonous.

**Origins**

The conspirators were angered by King James' refusal to give equal rights to Catholics. The plot was intended to begin a rebellion during which James' nine-year-old daughter (Princess Elizabeth) could be installed as a Catholic head of state.

The plot was overseen from May 1604 by Robert Catesby. Other plotters included Thomas Winter, Robert Winter, Christopher Wright, Thomas Percy (also spelled Percye), John Grant, Ambrose Rokewood, Robert Keyes, Sir Everard Digby, Francis Tresham and Catesby's servant, Thomas Bates. The explosives were prepared by Guy Fawkes, an explosives expert with considerable military experience who had been introduced to Catesby by a man named Hugh Owen.

The details of the plot were well known to the principal Father Henry Garnet as he had learned details of the plot through confession, Garnet felt bound not to reveal them to the authorities. Despite his admonitions and protests the plot went ahead. In the aftermath of the plot's failure, Garnet was executed for treason even though he had opposed the plot.

**Planning**

In May 1604, Percy leased lodgings adjacent to the house of Lords as the plotters idea was to mine their way under the foundations of the house of Lords to lay the [gunpowder](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Gunpowder). The main idea was to kill James, but many other important targets were to be present. Guy Fawkes as "John Johnson" was put in charge of this building and he pretended to be Percy’s servant while Catesby's house in Lambeth was used to store the gunpowder with the picks and implements for mining.

However when the plague came again to London in the summer of 1604 and proved to be particularly severe, the opening of parliament was suspended to 1605. By Christmas Eve, they learned that the opening had been postponed to October 3. The plotters then took the opportunity to conceal the gunpowder in their rented house. They learned that a coal merchant had vacated a cellar and immediately took pains to secure the lease.

Fawkes assisted in filling the room with gunpowder which was concealed beneath the House of Lords, in a cellar. By March 1605 they had filled the House of Lords with 36 barrels of gunpowder. The barrels contained 1800 pounds of gunpowder. Had they been successfully ignited, the explosion could have reduced many of the buildings in the Old Palace of Westminster complex (housing Parliament), including [Westminster Abbey](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Westminster_Abbey), to rubble and would have blown out windows in the surrounding area of about a one kilometer (.6 mile) radius.

The Conspirators left London in May and went to their homes or to different areas of the country so that being seen together would not arouse suspicion. They arranged to meet again in September. However, the opening of Parliament was again postponed.

The weakest part of the plot was the arrangements for the subsequent rebellion that would sweep the country and provide a Catholic monarch. Due to a need of money and arms, Francis Tresham was eventually included in the plot and it was probably he who betrayed his fellow conspirators by writing to his brother-in-law Lord Mounteagle,

An anonymous letter dropped certain hints about the plot that were less than subtle. The letter read,

*"I advise you to devise some excuse not to attend this parliament, for they shall receive a terrible blow, and yet shall not see who hurts them."*

Guy Fawkes was left in charge of executing the plot, while the other conspirators fled to the English Midlands to await news. Once the parliament had been destroyed, the other conspirators planned to incite a revolt in the Midlands.

**Raid**

During the preparation, several of the conspirators had been concerned about fellow Catholics who would be present on the appointed day and inevitably killed. One conspirator, possibly Francis Tresham, wrote a letter of warning to William Parker, 4th Baron Monteagle, a prominent Catholic. Monteagle had shown the letter to Robert Cecil, 1st Earl of Salisbury, the Secretary of State.

The tip-off led to a search of the vaults beneath the House of Lords during the early morning of November 5. A party of armed men, discovered Fawkes posing as "Mr. John Johnson." He was discovered possessing a watch, slow matches and touch-paper. The barrels of gunpowder were discovered and Fawkes was arrested. Far from denying his intentions during the arrest, Fawkes stated that it had been his purpose to destroy the King and the Parliament.

**Interrogation**

Fawkes was brought into the king's bedchamber at one o'clock in the morning, where the ministers had hastily assembled. He maintained an attitude of defiance, making no secret of his intentions. When the king asked why he would kill him, Fawkes replied that the [pope](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Pope) had excommunicated him, adding that

"dangerous diseases require [...] desperate [remedies]."

He also expressed to the Scottish courtiers who surrounded him that one of his objects was to blow the Scots back into [Scotland](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Scotland).

Later in the morning, before noon, he was again interrogated. He was questioned on the nature of his accomplices, the involvement of Thomas Percy, what letters he had received from overseas, and whether he had spoken with Hugh Owen.

He was taken to the [Tower of London](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Tower_of_London) and interrogated under [torture](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Torture).

Fawkes initially resisted torture, but verbally confessed on November 8. He revealed the names of his co-conspirators, and recounted the full details of the plot on November 9. On November 10, he made a signed confession, although his signature was written in a trembling state, having been under torture on the rack.

**Trial and executions**

On hearing of the failure of the plot, the conspirators fled. Many of them were caught. The remaining men attempted a revolt in the Midlands. This failed, and came to an end at Holbeach House in Staffordshire, where there was a dramatic shoot-out ending with the death of Catesby and capture of several principal conspirators.

The conspirators were tried on January 27, 1606, in Westminster Hall. All of the plotters pleaded not guilty. The trial ranked highly as a public spectacle and there are records of up to 10 shillings being paid for entry. It is even reputed that the king and queen attended in secret.

Four of the plotters were executed in St. Paul's Churchyard on January 30. On January 31, Fawkes, Winter, and a number of others implicated in the conspiracy were taken to Old Palace Yard in Westminster, in front of the scene of the intended crime, where they were hanged, drawn, and quartered.

**Commemoration**

The fifth of November is variously called Firework Night, Bonfire Night, or Guy Fawkes Night. An Act of Parliament was passed to appoint 5th November in each year as a day of thanksgiving for "the joyful day of deliverance."

It is still the custom in Britain on, or around, 5th November to let off fireworks. For weeks beforehand, children make guys—supposed effigies of Fawkes—usually formed from old clothes stuffed with newspaper, and equipped with a grotesque mask, to be burnt on the November 5 bonfire. The word "guy" came thus in the nineteenth century to mean a weirdly dressed person, and hence in the twentieth century in the [U.S.](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/United_States) to mean, in slang usage, any male person.

Institutions and towns may hold fireworks 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.