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Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot

On November 5th, people in England celebrate a holiday called Bonfire Night or Guy Fawkes Night. For children, November 5th is a night of bonfires, fireworks and fun. So, what is this holiday all about?



In 1605, Guy Fawkes (also called Guido Fawkes) was part of a plot to kill the King of England. Guy and his fellow conspirators (plotters) were planning to blow up the British House of Parliament (a government building) while the king was there. As it turned out, the plot was discovered and Guy and the other plotters were captured and executed. Most people in England were glad that the plot had failed, and bonfires were lit all over the country to celebrate the saving of the king's life.

Over 400 years later, people in England still remember the gunpowder plot and hold celebrations on the night of November 5th. This is a special night of fun for children, rather like Halloween. Rather than dressing up in costumes on Guy Fawkes Night, children make a dummy out of straw and dress *it* up to look like Guy Fawkes. Then, instead of treat-or-treating, they go around showing off their work and asking for "a penny for the Guy." Afterwards, the grown-ups set off fireworks and build a huge bonfire to burn the dummies of Guy that the children have made.

Our use of the word "guy" to refer to a man or a boy comes from Guy Fawkes' name. People first used the word "guy" to mean to a troublesome or suspicious-looking fellow. Finally, the word came to mean any male person.

More about the plot:

Why did Guy Fawkes want to kill the king?

Well, back in 1602, the Catholics and the Protestants (non-Catholic Christians) didn't get along. For 44 years, Elizabeth I, a strict Protestant had been Queen of England. During her reign, the Catholic religion was outlawed and people caught practicing Catholicism were either put in prison or executed.

Queen Elizabeth had no children. When she died, her cousin's son, King James of Scotland, became England's new king as well.

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Catholics thought that things would be better for them now that James was king. James' mother had been Catholic, and his wife was Catholic also. But James turned out to be no more tolerant of Catholics than Elizabeth had been. This angered many Catholics.

Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators came up with a plan. They would kill James and put his Catholic daughter on the throne instead.



To carry out their plot, the conspirators got hold of 36 barrels of gunpowder and stored them in a cellar just under the House of Parliament. They planned to blow up the building the next time James was there, killing both the king and his advisors. Guy Fawkes was given the job of keeping watch over the barrels of gunpowder and lighting the fuse.

The plan never came off. One of the conspirators foolishly sent a letter to a friend warning him to keep away from Parliament. The letter reached the king and the plot was foiled.

On the morning of 5 November, soldiers stormed the cellar, found Guy, and arrested him. He was taken to the Tower of London where he was tortured and executed.

That night bonfires were let all over London to celebrate the survival of the king. In England, November 5th has been known as Bonfire Night ever since.

Many historians, today, doubt that there ever was a plot to kill the king. They think that Guy Fawkes and his buddies were framed.

The real conspirators may have been a group of Protestants who were afraid the new king would be too tolerant of Catholicism. They wanted to ensure that this didn't happen by making it look like Catholics were trying to kill James.

Whether or not there really was a plot, on November 5, children all over England still chant the old rhyme:

*Remember, Remember
The fifth of November
Gunpowder Treason and Plot.
We see no reason
Why Gunpowder Treason
Should ever be forgot!*



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1. Who was the king that the plotters wanted to kill?

2. Why did they want to kill the king?



Guy Fawkes

3. How were they planning to kill the king?

4. How was the plot discovered?

5. Where was Guy Fawkes caught? What was he doing?

6. Some historians doubt that there was a plot to kill the king. What do they think really happened?

7. How do the English people celebrate Guy Fawkes Night?