

GUY FAWKES' DAY

There is another name for this day; it is sometimes called Gunpowder Plot Day, and that name informs us how it happened that the 5th November became famous in English history. That was the day upon which a few Catholic gentlemen, over-zealous for their religion, determined to destroy King James I., and the Houses of Lords and Commons, by means of gunpowder. It was a gentleman named Catesby who conceived this murderous plot, and he was joined by several other conspirators. The most famous of these, although he can scarcely be regarded as the most guilty, was a gentleman called Guy Fawkes who had fought bravely with the Spanish army in Flanders. He was brought over to England in order to carry out the plot, and like all the other conspirators he took a vow of secrecy.

In itself the plot was very simple. The conspirators hired a house near to the building where Parliament met, and their intention was to dig an underground passage-way between the two buildings, and to prepare under Parliament House a large mine charged with gunpowder. They found difficulties, however, in carrying out this scheme, chief of these being the thickness of the wall through which they had to pierce. Eventually, the digging of this underground passage-way was abandoned, because the conspirators found that they could hire a cellar right under the House of Lords. This would be far more convenient, they thought; so they hired it from a coal-dealer, and put thirty-six barrels of gunpowder into it. The barrels were carefully covered with [bundles of sticks], and in the month of May, 1605, all was ready to blow the King and his Parliament into the air.

But Parliament did not meet until the 5th November, and by that time the secret had leaked out. There have been great differences of opinion regarding the manner in which the plot was revealed. It appears, however, that a mysterious letter was sent by Mr. Francis Tresham, one of the conspirators, to his brother-in-law Lord Monteagle, warning him regarding the coming disaster. This letter is said to have led to a search in the cellars under Parliament House, but it is quite probable that the plot was revealed in a more direct manner. In any case, the gunpowder was discovered in the cellar, and beside it was Guy Fawkes. He was arrested on the early morning of the 5th November by a Westminster magistrate and a party of soldiers. When the other conspirators heard that the plot had failed they fled into the country, but the most of them were captured, tried for high treason along with Guy Fawkes, and with him were hanged as traitors in St. Paul's Churchyard.

For many years after this plot was discovered the 5th day of November was kept as a national holiday, and the people expressed their patriotism and their Protestantism in huge bonfires, with shoutings and the ringing of bells. Also, it was regarded as the proper thing on this day to parade a scarecrow effigy of Guy Fawkes, which was finally burned as a warning to traitors. Now the day is only remembered by boys who are bent upon a frolic, for this old rhyme has lost much of its significance:

Remember, remember!
The fifth of November,
The Gunpowder treason and plot;
There is no reason
Why the Gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot!

Source:

Hendry, Hamish, E.F. Mason. "Guy Fawkes' Day." *Holidays & Happy Days*. London: Grant Richards, 1901. 92 – 96. Electronic.