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# Celebrating Bonfire Night

**November 5<sup>th</sup>** marks **the anniversary of the failure of the Gunpowder Plot**, a plan to assassinate King James I in the explosion of the Houses of Parliament **in 1605**.

That day is also called “**Guy Fawkes Night**” after the only plotter who was caught red-handed on the eve of the murder attempt. **Fireworks** are displayed and communities come together to **light big bonfires** where scarecrow-like effigies are burnt.



## The Powder plot

In the aftermath of the **English Reformation of 1536**, the conspirators' motivations were **religious and political**. When in 1603, **James I** – the son of Catholic Mary Stuart, converted to calvinism, a variant of protestantism – succeeded **Queen Elizabeth I** whose reign had been marked by a severe **repression of the Catholics** after her **excommunication** in 1570, the Catholics hoped to bring back to the throne a monarch who would be faithful to Rome and to be allowed to practice their religion freely again.

In anticipation of the attack due on the opening of the parliament's session on November 5<sup>th</sup> 1605, a group of conspirators managed to store gunpowder under the House of Parliament. Yet, fearing their sympathisers might be caught in the explosion, one of them sent an anonymous letter advising them to stay away from the Parliament on that day. The letter was caught and the plot was foiled. On the night between November 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, one of the Catholic plotters, a soldier called **Guy (or Guido) Fawkes** was arrested as he was standing guard by the barrels of powder piled in the Parliament's cellars.

Shortly thereafter, November 5<sup>th</sup> was declared a national thanksgiving day and Bonfire Night was celebrated for the first time in 1606. As a sign of rejoicing that the king had been spared, **Londoners set alight big bonfires where they burnt straw effigies of Guy Fawkes.**

Today, Bonfire Night has lived on as **a good-natured festive tradition.**

### **Traditional Bonfire food**

As celebrations take place in one of autumn's first cold nights, crowds enjoy gathering around the bonfire to savour comforting food cooked on the spot, such as **potatoes baked in the ashes**, **sausages** cooked over the flames and eaten in savoury **hot-dogs**. **Hot soup** and **mulled wine** are also inescapable.

People share homemade treats too like the famous **Toffee apples**, **Parkin cake** – a sticky sponge cake flavoured with oatmeal, ginger, treacle and syrup – or chunks of **Bonfire Toffees** – a hard brittle toffee made out of syrup, treacle, black sugar and butter that used to be traditionally handed out to children.

### **Children's activities**

In a tradition that has widely died out, children from modest background used to make a little pocket money by **making a dummy representing Guy Fawkes**. They paraded it around the streets **in a wheelbarrow** asking for "**a penny for the guy**" and singing "**Remember, remember the fifth of November**".

## **Did you know?**

The word "[guy](#)" which is commonly used in American English to refer to any man directly comes from this tradition.

Today, children sometimes still **blacken their faces** as Guy Fawkes allegedly did.

It is precisely Guy Fawkes' supposed gift for deceit that earned him to come back on the fore front four centuries after the Gunpowder Plot was foiled. In the 1980s indeed, graphic novelists Alan Moore and David Lloyd created a grinning mustachioed mask of Guy Fawkes for the anti-establishment protagonist of their cult comic strip "**V for Vendetta**" which later became the inescapable emblem of the **Anonymous** protest movement.

## **To go further**

To understand why Bonfire Night celebrations' long-lived popularity, you can read this [interactive](#) article.

Please also check these resources on *English for Schools*: "[Qui est Guy Fawkes?](#)" and "[Des étincelles à croquer](#)".

Listen to this famous poem, "Remember, Remember, the 5th of November" (.mp3) on the website of [Académie de Rouen](#).

Watch this [animated short film](#) about Guy Fawkes.

Get inspired by the [activities created by Fofy à l'école](#) or by [activities presented by the Mission départementale Langues Vivantes 76](#).