

The origin of the festival : the Gunpowder Plot

The Gunpowder Plot is the name given to a conspiracy aiming to blow up the English Parliament and King James I, on November 5th 1605, the day set for the king to open the Parliament.

It was intended to be the beginning of a great uprising of Catholics who were distressed by the increased severity of penal laws against the practise of their religion.

The Catholic plotters placed 36 barrels of gunpowder in the cellars under the House of Lords and Guy Fawkes was to light the fuse that would set off the explosion.

Fortunately for the King and the Members of Parliament, one of the conspirators sent a warning letter to a friend to keep away. The building was searched and Guy Fawkes arrested.

He wasn't burned on a bonfire ! He was dreadfully tortured until he had given the names of his associates. They were hung, drawn and quartered.

While the plot was the work of a small group of men, it provoked hostility against all English Catholics and led to an increase in the harshness of laws against them.

The practise of the burning of effigies, which today are called «guys» on the night of November 5th started in 1606 just after the failed Gunpowder Plot.

In these first bonfires, called «bone fires» at the time, it was not the bones of effigies of Guy Fawkes which were burned but those of the Pope.

It was not until 1806, two centuries later, that the people started burning effigies of Guy Fawkes.

Every year, there is still a «search». On the morning of the day the Queen opens Parliament, the Yeomen of the Guard come from the Tower of London and look carefully round the Houses of Parliament.



The festival today : Bonfire Night

People celebrate Guy Fawkes Night by having a party in the evening on or near November 5th.

A guy (an effigy of Guy Fawkes) is made by stuffing old clothes with straw or paper. On the night itself, this dummy is placed on top of a bonfire which is then set alight and fireworks displays fill the sky.

In some parts of Great Britain, children keep up an old tradition by walking in the streets carrying the «guy» and beg passersby for «a penny for the guy».

But nowadays streets are not as safe as they used to be and this tradition has started to disappear.



Many people have a small bonfire and fireworks in their own gardens and invite friends and neighbours to come to their houses for something to eat and to watch the display.

But as Guy Fawkes Night has been marred by accidents caused by fires and fireworks, it is also common to have public displays which are safer.

The fireworks have various names such as rockets, Roman candles, Catherine wheels, sparklers... On Bonfire Night, people bring all their animals inside, also rabbits and guinea-pigs, because the noise of the fireworks frighten them.

People eat typical foods: jacket potatoes, sausages, toffee apples, Bonfire toffee...

Bonfire Night is celebrated all over the United Kingdom and even in some places in Canada and New Zealand.

Présentation de la fête aux enfants

Pour présenter cette fête peu connue en France, on peut utiliser plusieurs types de documents.

Documents iconographiques:

- des photos de «bonfires», de «guys» ...
- des photos d'enfants promenant leur «guy» et demandant aux passants «A penny for the guy»
- des reproductions de documents historiques montrant Guy Fawkes et ses complices (voir Internet et livres sur l'histoire anglaise).

Vidéos :

Ces supports évitent de présenter l'événement uniquement en français. Les deux vidéos suivantes sont de courte durée et se complètent de façon intéressante.

- Hello Europe 2 : celebrations, CRDP du Nord-Pas de Calais
L'aspect historique est évoqué par une sorte de petite bande dessinée : on peut demander aux enfants ce qu'ils ont compris sur l'origine de la fête, cependant on expliquera que Guy Fawkes n'a pas été brûlé comme le suggère la vidéo.
On assiste à la confection d'un guy avec de vieux vêtements et des journaux.
On peut voir que l'on enferme les animaux domestiques pour qu'ils ne soient pas effrayés.
Remarque: dans certains passages où les enfants d'une école sont interviewés, le niveau de langue est difficile, on utilisera plutôt les images de la fête elle-même (confection du feu, du guy, chien mis à l'abri, feux d'artifice).
- We're kids in Britain, Longman
Les personnages sont ceux de deux familles anglaises.
On découvre le déroulement de la fête : construction et allumage du feu, barbecue et feux d'artifice.
Une voix off dans un anglais simple et clairement énoncé donne les différents moments de la fête.
Un quizz à la fin de la séquence permet de rappeler le lexique : guy, bonfire, fireworks, hamburgers.
Dans le livret d'accompagnement de la vidéo, des activités pouvant se dérouler avant, pendant et après le visionnement sont proposées.