

Gunpowder plot

Religious tensions after Elizabeth I

By the end of Elizabeth I's reign, the Church of England was safe, and there was no chance of a war of religion, but there was still tension between Catholics and the Protestant government:

- When the Earl of Essex rebelled against Elizabeth in 1601, he was helped by Catholics.
- The government was becoming steadily more anti-Catholic. Even peaceful Catholics – who only refused to go to the Church of England on Sundays, known as recusants, were fined £20 a month.
- When Elizabeth I died in 1603, James VI of Scotland came to the throne as James I of England and Ireland, uniting the two crowns. His mother, Mary Queen of Scots, had been a Catholic, and his wife was a Catholic. The English Catholics had great hopes that they would be able to worship more freely.

This did not happen:

- In 1603, there were two small Catholic plots against James – the Bye Plot and the Main Plot.
- James was scared and in February 1604, he announced his 'utter detestation' of Catholicism. Hundreds of recusants were rounded up and fined.
- Catholics realised that he was not going to give them freedom of worship.

Key terms

atrocities	A very wicked or cruel act
conspiracy	Plotting in secret to do something unlawful
effigy	A model of a person
MPs	Members of Parliament
propaganda	Information, often biased or misleading, designed to persuade people to accept a point of view
recusants	Someone who refused to attend Church of England services
revolution	Overthrowing a government by force

James I (reigned from 1603-1625)



Events leading up to the gunpowder plot

Here is a timeline of events surrounding the Gunpowder Plot from a 17th-century government report. It's worth remembering this is based on the confessions of the plotters, which were given under torture:

Robert Catesby had taken part in the **Earl of Essex's 1601 rebellion**, but was pardoned.

In 1603, he tried unsuccessfully to persuade the **King of Spain** to invade England.

In 1604 he returned to England, where he recruited other Catholics to join a **plot to kill James**. One of them was Guy Fawkes. The group planned to **blow up the House of Lords** when King James came to open Parliament on 5 November. At first they tried to dig a tunnel from a nearby house. When this failed, one of the plotters – Thomas Percy – rented a cellar underneath the House of Lords. Fawkes bought 36 barrels of gunpowder.

On 26 October 1605, ten days before Parliament was due to meet, **Lord Monteagle** got an anonymous letter warning him not to go. It said: they shall receive a terrible blow this Parliament; and yet they shall not see who hurts them. Monteagle took it to the king. The plotters realised they were discovered, but decided to carry on anyway.

1 November: when he saw the letter, **James** realised that it meant some plot of gunpowder. 4 November: **Fawkes** was caught red-handed with the gunpowder.

8 November: The other plotters were chased to Holbeche House in Staffordshire, where **Catesby and Percy** were killed. **Francis Tresham**, Lord Monteagle's brother-in-law, was arrested and sent to the Tower. He died there.

Consequences of the gunpowder plot

The plotters were horribly executed – even Catesby's and Percy's bodies were dug up and mutilated. This served as an example of what would happen should anyone dare to stage a Catholic plot against the government. The Gunpowder Plot was the last Catholic plot in England. Catholic lords with any connection to any of the plotters were arrested, fined and ruined.

Catholics suffered. In 1606, the Popish Recusants Act increased fines for recusants, and forced Catholics to take an oath of allegiance. They were forbidden to be lawyers, vote or serve as officers in the army or navy.

The failure of the plot was celebrated as a "wonderful deliverance". Parliament passed The Observance of 5th November Act 1605, also known as the Thanksgiving Act, ordering prayers to be said and church bells to be rung to commemorate the event. England became an anti-Catholic country.

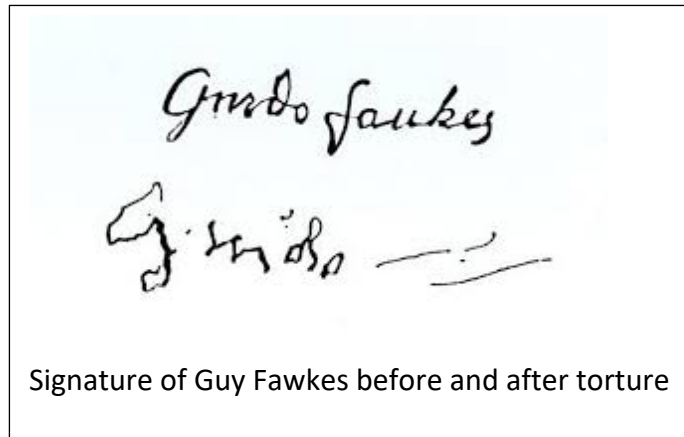


Execution of the conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot in Old Palace Yard, Westminster, 1606



The gunpowder plotters, 1606

Thomas Percy Guy Fawkes Robert Catesby



Signature of Guy Fawkes before and after torture

An effigy of Guy Fawkes on Bonfire night.



Interpretations of the gunpowder plot

The plot was used as Protestant propaganda to attack the Catholics and prove that God was on the side of the Protestants. Even today, we remember 'Guy Fawkes Night' with bonfires and fireworks. In some places, children make an effigy called a Guy, which is burned on the bonfire.

Conspiracy theories

Some historians question whether some aspects of the story are true:

- No half-dug tunnel has ever been found.
- Only the government could sell gunpowder – so how did a Catholic get 36 barrels of it?
- How did James realise from one obscure phrase in the Monteaule letter that the plotters were going to blow up Parliament?
- Why was there a 9-day delay between Monteaule's letter and the search which captured Fawkes?
- Why, when they knew they were discovered, did the plotters not run away?
- Why were Catesby and Percy killed so quickly?
- Evidence got by torture is unreliable.

Many historians nowadays agree that we will never know the whole truth about the government's involvement, but admit that the Plot may have been a government conspiracy.