

Remember remember the fifth of November

Sunday 05 November 2006



I said that I would tell you about Guy Fawkes and why 5 November is the traditional day for fireworks in England.

The year was 1605. Two years earlier, the old Queen, Elizabeth I, had died. She had ruled England for 45 years. She died unmarried and without children. Her nearest relative was King James VI of Scotland, who travelled south to London to become James I of England.

At that time there were bitter divisions in Western Europe between Protestants and Catholics. England was predominantly a Protestant country, but there were some powerful Catholic families. (Some **old houses**¹ near Birmingham have secret rooms – priest holes – where Catholic priests could be hidden at times of persecution.) Many Catholic families, despite their religion, were loyal to the King. But others wanted to overthrow the King and replace him with a Catholic monarch. They looked to France and Spain for help.

One such group included a man called Guy Fawkes. He was a professional soldier. He had fought in the Spanish army in the Netherlands. He and his fellow conspirators rented a storeroom beneath the Houses of Parliament. Secretly, they filled it with barrels of gunpowder. They planned to blow up the Houses of Parliament on 5 November at a time when the King and many of the most powerful men in England were there. They hoped that Catholics in England would then rebel, and that Spain would send an army to put a Catholic king on the throne of England.

But one of the plotters sent a secret letter to Lord Monteagle advising him to stay away from Parliament. Monteagle was a Catholic, but he immediately gave the letter to Robert Cecil, the King's chief minister, who ran a security and intelligence service. Cecil sent men to search the Parliament building. They found Guy Fawkes and 36 barrels of gunpowder. The rest of the plotters were quickly arrested, or died in a fight with the King's men at Kingswinford near modern Birmingham. The survivors were tried and executed in a **horrible way**².

And ever since then, English people have celebrated the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot by building **bonfires**³ and letting off fireworks on 5 November. Often we place an effigy of Guy Fawkes on the fire. We have an old rhyme which goes:

Remember, remember
the 5th of November
Gunpowder, treason and plot.
I see no reason
why gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot.

Good-bye ...

1) <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-baddesleyclinton.htm>

2) <http://www.richard.clark32.btinternet.co.uk/hdq.html>

3) <http://www.flickr.com/photos/finkangel/sets/72157594361368923/>