

## Bonfire Night/Guy Fawkes/5 November

### ***What happens?***

Fireworks appear in shops from October (along with Hallowe'en props). Fireworks are usually heard regularly from the weekend before 5<sup>th</sup> Nov until the weekend after. There are big public displays organised all over the country. Smaller scale neighbourhood displays with bonfires are often organised in village or local communities. Some private 'back garden' displays take place – perhaps depending on the affluence of the community. A 'guy' – a scarecrow type effigy – is often burnt on the bonfire. Potatoes baked in bonfire embers are often served. Toffee apples are also traditional.

Today such bonfire and fireworks displays are seen as an enjoyable community/family activity. With dark coming early at this time of year, it's possible to show off fireworks at a time when most children are still up. Most people are vague about the details of the historical event they are commemorating. It no longer seems to carry any political or religious overtones, unlike earlier times. For the most part it seems people are happy to have an excuse for a fireworks party.

### ***Historical background***

Every British schoolchild learns how late on the night of November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1605, Guy Fawkes was caught in a cellar beneath the old Parliament building with more than 30 barrels of gunpowder and a fuse. In the minds of the adult population, the half-remembered primary school version of the story is often all that remains! The actual leader of the Gunpowder Plot was a young idealistic Catholic nobleman named Robert Catesby. Guy Fawkes, known by some of Catesby's circle, was recruited as an unknown face and the explosives expert. A convert to Catholicism, from York, he had served as a soldier for the Spanish army in Flanders (hence the Spanish version of his name, Guido, appearing in some sources)

The historical context was the state persecution of confessing Catholics in the wake of the English Reformation. Under Elizabeth I, the Roman Mass was banned and those who refused to attend the Protestant Church of England services were subject to fines. Most went with the flow and kept any private Catholic convictions to themselves, but some, known as 'recusants', did refuse. This was the era of the 'priest holes' – hiding places built into manor houses for those Jesuit priests illegally smuggled in to perform the Roman rites for the family. Such priests faced a possible death penalty if discovered. By the time of the old Queen's death in 1603 the recusancy laws were not enforced so strictly, nevertheless people like Catesby hoped the new regime would make concessions to Catholics.

At this distance, 400 years on, it is hard to understand why the law could be so harsh over what is surely a matter of conscience. However, it is important to remember that to be openly Catholic in those days carried strong political connotations. Britain's greatest political enemy at the time was the super power of Catholic Spain, supported by the Pope, who in those days wielded a political force to be reckoned with. There had been a number of Catholic plots against Elizabeth I during her reign and the failed Spanish Armada of 1588 was well within living memory. Being Catholic was thus easily (even if unjustly) equated with being a traitor. When explaining the background to international students it may be most helpful to avoid the RC/Protestant labels altogether and tell the story in political terms – arguably this is the greater reality anyway. We can all think of modern examples of religion being used as a political weapon.

When it became clear the Queen was dying and her cousin, James VI of Scotland, was likely to succeed to her throne, an associate of Catesby made the journey north for a private audience with the King. In return for support, he sought assurances that Catholics would be more fairly treated. James, being the canny political

operator he was, made promises that he probably never intended to keep. Thus when the Scottish King did become James I of England and went back on those private assurances Robert Catesby and his small desperate group felt they had no alternative but to take dramatic action. Their audacious plan was to wipe out the whole apparatus of government in one massive explosion and stage a Spanish backed coup.

Some historians argue that the authorities got wind of the plot early on but allowed it to continue to the last possible moment to give a greater chance of catching everyone and discrediting Catholics. If so, they succeeded. The net result of the discovery of the plot was widespread vilification of Catholics and, ironically, the reinforcement of stricter recusancy laws.

News of the arrest of Guy Fawkes and discovery of the plot spread through London on November 5<sup>th</sup> and loyal citizens lit bonfires in celebration – perhaps even then adding a straw figure to the flames. The King was so relieved at his life being spared that he ordered an annual service of thanksgiving by Act of Parliament, to be held in every church on November 5<sup>th</sup>. Put together the traditional bonfires of Hallowe'en from a few days earlier and you have the making of the modern celebration. Church services continued to be held until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century when the Act was finally repealed. The strongly anti-Catholic element of the celebrations probably continued as long. The practice of burning an effigy of Guy Fawkes (or a modern hate figure) though perhaps less common now is still carried out in places (notably Lewes, Sussex) and has given rise to the British English word 'guy' meaning a figure of fun.

Further historical details can be found in any good history book of the period. The Gunpowder Plot Society has an informative website at [www.gunpowder-plot.org](http://www.gunpowder-plot.org). See also [www.bbc.co.uk/history](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history) for good articles on James I and the Gunpowder Plot. Illustrated school history books from your local library are also a good resource.

### ***Using Bonfire Night for social events***

The big public fireworks displays available in many places provide a natural focus for an enjoyable social event. Make the most of them!

Organising your own display requires careful thought and planning. Take advice from the experts and check your church's insurance policy. Remember that fireworks are dangerous when carelessly used and very expensive!

You could serve hot food either before or after a display to bring everyone together somewhere warm and provide an opportunity to explain the custom. This could be anything from hot chocolate and marshmallows to a full meal.

Having told the story at a level appropriate for your group, here are some questions for promoting discussion - some factual, some touching on opinion.

- 1) What does your country celebrate with fireworks?
- 2) Is there a cause or belief you would consider worth dying for?
- 3) Do you know of persecuted religious groups in the world today? Do you think there should be freedom to practise your religion?

The story of the Gunpowder plot can also act as a more direct bridge to explaining the gospel eg "A failed attempt to kill a King" can be compared with Jesus' death and resurrection to powerful effect.

The acts of terrorists and the oppression that breeds such violent extremism can be used to highlight our sinful nature. Gunpowder may be used as a visual aid for the explosive evil in our hearts. Take care, however, not to labour possible parallels or your talk will end up forced and awkward.

One other thing King James I and VI is famous for is, of course, the authorisation of a new translation of the Bible into English, published in 1611. Its use as the main translation of the Bible in the English speaking world for more than three centuries has left an indelible impression on our language and culture. Having a copy of the KJV to show as well as Bibles in modern English (or other languages) is another great bridge to good conversations. Consider printing out or projecting Psalm 23 in both versions side by side for comparison.