

Gunpowder Plot Confidential – Factsheet 2



Fascinating facts about the Gunpowder Plot

Unlucky thirteen

The main band of plotters numbered an unlucky 13 in total. Their leader was **Robert Catesby**, not **Guy Fawkes**, as many people think. The plotters were a tight-knit group, most of them connected to each other either through family relationships or friendships.

Birds of a feather

The plotters met to discuss their plans in a private room in an inn off the Strand in London called **the Duck and Drake**, though sadly this is no longer in existence.

A bit about the 'black powder'

Gunpowder (or '**black powder**' as it was often called) was produced under licence for the Government by a number of gunpowder mills, but the surplus could be sold off to merchants for a higher price. However, there was an **illegal trade** in it too, with many soldiers and members of the local militia selling it undercover on the black market to make some money.

Gunpowder in those days was made up of three main ingredients: **charcoal, sulphur and saltpetre**. It was stable when moved about, but it decayed over time. The black powder discovered in the 36 barrels the plotters had planned to use to blow up Parliament was found to be decayed.

As a result, some historians believe it would not have ignited. But others have done tests to show that it would and would have caused significant damage if Guy Fawkes had managed to light the fuse, killing everyone inside the **House of Lords** and blowing out all the windows in nearby **Westminster Abbey** too.

Remember, remember the 7th February...

If plans for the **State Opening of Parliament** in 1605 had gone ahead as originally planned we might now be remembering 7th February instead of 5th November as the date for the Gunpowder Plot. Or possibly 3rd October, which was when it was first postponed until as a result of concerns over an

outbreak of the **plague** in London. It got postponed again because of continuing fears about the plague until 5th November – and the rest, as they say, is history...

Going underground

Thomas Wintour, one of the plotters, confessed, after his eventual arrest, that they had originally tried to reach the House of Lords where the parliament was due to meet, by way of a **tunnel** which they began to dig from a nearby house they had hired towards the end of 1604.

Supposedly, the plotters stopped digging the tunnel when they heard a noise above them. This turned out to be from someone in the storeroom directly beneath the House of Lords; this storeroom is the place the plotters ended up renting and where they stored the barrels of gunpowder.

Historians now believe that the idea of a tunnel may have been invented by the Government to make the plotters seem as dastardly and underhand as possible. This is because:

- no evidence for a tunnel was provided at the time or later
- a tunnel would have been very difficult to dig because of the location/likely conditions below ground
- none of the plotters had mining experience.

This didn't stop the court from referring to the plotters as 'miners' during their trial.

I spy with my little eye...

The Gunpowder Plot was uncovered thanks to a combination of a number of mistakes which the plotters made and to the network of government spies which existed at the time both at home and abroad.

The spies or '**intelligencers**' were employed by **Robert Cecil, the Earl of Salisbury, King James I's chief minister and spymaster**.

It is thanks to them that **Guy Fawkes** first came to the notice of the authorities as a possible troublemaker, though not originally in association with the Gunpowder Plot. Instead he was reported as being behind a plot designed to encourage the **Spanish king, Phillip III**, to invade England, remove King James I and return the country to Catholic rule. The spy who reported him, a Captain William Turner, also linked him with **Robert Catesby** and some of the priests who were known to the plotters and who got caught up in the plot as a result.

The true nature of the plot was revealed in a letter believed to be written by one of the plotters and sent to the Catholic **Lord Monteagle** in late October, warning him to stay away from the parliament on 5th November 1605 to avoid a terrible 'blow.' This was passed to Robert Cecil and produced by him as proof of a plan to blow up the King and Parliament prior to the discovery of Guy Fawkes and his barrels of powder.

A grisly end

Most of the plotters were arrested and sentenced to die a **traitor's death**: to be dragged by horses on the back of hurdles to their place of execution, **hung** by the neck until nearly dead then cut down and **drawn** (their stomachs cut open and their intestines and heart removed while they were still

alive) and **quartered** with the four parts of their bodies being displayed at various sites across the city as a warning to those thinking of committing treason.

However, the leader of the plot, Robert Catesby and a number of the others, including **Thomas Percy**, had left London before the planned explosion to raise a rebellion and to try and capture the King's young nine year old daughter, **the Princess Elizabeth**. They failed in their mission and were eventually chased down by the militia to Holbeach House in Staffordshire. Here, while trying to dry out some gunpowder in front of an open fire, a number of them were blown up and maimed before being killed or arrested by soldiers in a shoot-out. Robert Catesby and Thomas Percy were both shot and killed by the same bullet which passed through both of them.

The plot's links to Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'

William Shakespeare was writing his famous tragedy, **Macbeth**, at the time of the Gunpowder Plot. The story, which tells of the murder of the Scottish King, Duncan, by one of his lords, Macbeth, Thane of Cawdor, echoes the plotters' attempt to kill the Scottish King James I. There are also clear links in the language of the play to the suspected involvement of Catholic priests in the plot – something the Government of the day was keen to prove. There was evidence that a number of them, who were friends of the plotters, were aware of it, though there was no clear proof they had played a direct part in it. However, this did not stop the Government from executing **Father Henry Garnet**, the chief Jesuit priest in England, who had been arrested when the plot was uncovered.

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