

Deepening Understanding

UKS2 Non-fiction Text

Biography of Guy Fawkes by Hannah Raven



Guy Fawkes is a former soldier and gang member, whose participation in the failed attempt to blow up the Houses of Parliament has led him to become a renowned figure in British history. We remember his famous face every year, but do we know the reasons behind his involvement in the unsuccessful gunpowder plot?

Childhood

On 13th April 1570 in York, North England, Guy Fawkes was born into a notable, Protestant family and was christened in the Church of Saint Michael-le-Beltry, York. At the time, Queen Elizabeth I reigned England as a Protestant country and believed that everyone had to be protestant too. This meant many Catholics had to practise their religion in secret. Many of his mother's family were Roman Catholic and held positions within the church.

Unfortunately, when Guy was nine years old, his father died and his mother remarried a Catholic man (Denis Bainbridge). Guy attended St Peter's School in York which was well-known for its Catholic beliefs. By the time Guy left school, he had converted to Catholicism. At school, Fawkes become close friends with John and Christopher Wright who were



also heavily involved in the failed gunpowder plot. Three young Catholic priests, who Fawkes studied with, were sentenced to death by Queen Elizabeth I due to their religious beliefs. This, alongside the continuous torturing of fellow Catholic followers and their families, began to anger Guy Fawkes.

Army Life

By the age of twenty-three, Guy had become a soldier specialising in mining; he was a competent digger and proficient at using gunpowder. In 1593, his audacious attitude and commitment to Catholicism led him to join the Catholic Spanish Army and fight against the Protestant Dutch. Whilst in the Netherlands, he was credited for his courageous risk-taking and resolve, leading to a recommended promotion to Captaincy. During his time fighting abroad, he adopted the Italian equivalent of his name - Guido Fawkes.

Guy sought the support of King Phillip III of Spain to start a Catholic revolt in England due to his exasperation at the persistent persecution of English Catholics, and his opposition to King James I reigning England. However, he was unsuccessful.

The Plot

Whilst Guy was abroad, Robert Catesby (the gunpowder plot instigator) wanted to enlist a Catholic soldier to help him assassinate the King of England. Fawkes was encouraged by Thomas Wintour (Robert Catesby's Catholic cousin) to join Catesby's group of conspirators. Returning to his home country in 1604 - without knowing the extent of the plan - Guy travelled under a false name and took on a vital role within Catesby's group. They rented a ground floor room close to the Houses of Parliament which allowed Guy to create a tunnel to reach Parliament's cellars, but this became a laborious task and too time-consuming. Luckily, a cellar directly below Parliament became available to rent. Guy's job was to guard the thirty-six barrels of gunpowder and courageously set the gunpowder fuse alight at the moment King James I was to open a new parliamentary session.



Caught Red-Handed!

Due to an anonymous letter, Guy was captured and arrested for treason (betraying the King and country) by the King's army and found with matches and a pocket watch. After initially giving interrogators his false name (John Johnson), he eventually confessed his true identity and revealed the names of the other perpetrators after being tortured for three days at the Tower of London. He was sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered by the King on 31st January 1606. To avoid the humiliation of being quartered (cut open whilst alive), it is believed Guy plummeted from the gallows and died by breaking his neck.

In spite of nearly been killed, it has been suggested that King James I admired Guy's commitment to Catholicism.

Hero or Villain?

King James I ordered the bonfires to be lit after Guy Fawkes was captured in celebration of his own escape from death. Since the 19th century it has become a customary tradition to place a figure of Guy Fawkes on top of a bonfire - as well as set off impressive fireworks - to remember his vital role in the failed plot. However, others see the acts of Guy Fawkes as heroic because he fought for the freedom to practise his own religious beliefs. A picture of his face is a familiar symbol at rallies and protests within the United Kingdom.

Would you consider Guy Fawkes a hero or a villain?

