

GUY FAWKES NIGHT 1: INTRODUCTION

The Fifth of November is a special night in Britain. It is called Guy Fawkes Night. All over the country adults, and especially children, get together to light large fires called bonfires and watch firework displays, usually in large public parks.

HUNDREDS OF BRITISH PEOPLE WATCHING A BONFIRE ON GUY FAWKES NIGHT.



BRITISH PEOPLE WATCHING A FIREWORK DISPLAY ON GUY FAWKES NIGHT.



For over four hundred years we have celebrated this day. How did the tradition start?

And why on November 5th?

GUY FAWKES NIGHT 2: HOW THE TRADITION STARTED

For most of the adults and children in Britain the Fifth of November is simply a great night of excitement and enjoyment and most people do not know the full story of this very important event in the history of England. On this night in 1605 a man called Guy Fawkes tried to kill the King and the entire British government by exploding a bomb and destroying the Houses of Parliament.

A PORTRAIT OF GUY FAWKES



Today Britain is a country where religion is not very important in political life. However, in 1605 your religion was very important and your life could depend on your religious beliefs. Guy Fawkes tried to kill the King of Britain because of the religious conflict between the traditional Catholic Church based in Rome and a new independent church based in Britain and controlled by the British King.

Catholics were being persecuted and there were laws against them, all the Catholic priests were ejected from the country.

Thirteen people including Guy Fawkes rented a house next door to Parliament to tunnel through to the cellars under the Parliament building. They put 36 barrels of gun powder into the cellars to explode when the King and his government arrived.

GUY FAWKES NIGHT 3: WHO WAS GUY FAWKES?

Guy Fawkes was a believer in the traditional Catholic religion. He was British but he had been a soldier fighting for the Catholics against the Protestants in Holland. He returned to Britain and joined the group of militant Catholics who wished to kill King James the First of England and Scotland and replace him with a Catholic monarch.

A TRADITIONAL PICTURE OF GUY FAWKES BEING DISCOVERED IN THE CELLARS OF PARLIAMENT



The conspirators were successful in digging the tunnel and in moving their 36 barrels of gunpowder into the cellars under the Parliament building. They were waiting for the King and the members of his government to arrive the next day. However someone was worried that when the bomb exploded it would kill not only the King and his government but also some Catholics who would be attending the opening of Parliament ceremony.

So a warning letter was sent anonymously to some of the Catholics who would be present the next day. Someone then told the King and he ordered that the cellars be searched. The gunpowder was discovered and the conspirators captured.

That night the people of London lit large fires to celebrate that the King was alive had not been assassinated and the people of Britain were still free from the Catholic Church and the power of the Pope.

Guy Fawkes was later executed.

GUY FAWKES NIGHT 4: HOW THE TRADITION GREW

On the very night of the Guy Fawkes capture and the failure of the Gunpowder Plot, people lit bonfires around London to celebrate the King's survival. Months later, in January 1606 Parliament passed the Observance of November the 5th Act, an annual public day of thanksgiving for the plot's failure. Attendance at church was mandatory and a new form of service was added to the Book of Common Prayer.

FIREWORKS AND THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT IN LONDON



What were those early Guy Fawkes nights like? In 1607 the city of Canterbury celebrated with 106 pounds (kilos) of gunpowder and three years later there were military parades, music food and drink for the town dignitaries. Meanwhile the general public held church sermons, rang church bells and lit bonfires and fireworks.

Gunpowder Treason Day, as it was known, was the main English state commemoration, but the tradition was still anti-Catholic and Puritans delivered sermons about the dangers of popery, while during increasingly raucous celebrations common folk burnt effigies of popular hate-figures, such as the pope.

Fireworks were banned under James II, who became king in 1685. Attempts by the government to tone down Gunpowder Treason Day celebrations were, however, largely unsuccessful. A ban on fireworks remained for safety reasons, but bonfires continued to be lit. For the lower classes the anniversary was a chance to pit disorder against order, a pretext for violence and uncontrolled revelry.

GUY FAWKES NIGHT 5: THE BONFIRE

No one knows exactly why the large open air fire that is built for Guy Fawkes Night is called a bonfire. There are two theories why this word was invented. The first theory is that originally called a “bone fire” because the fire was used to kill people during the religious wars.

A TRADITIONAL BRITISH BONFIRE ON NOVEMBER THE 5th.



Alternatively there is another theory that it is called a “bon fire” because “bon” is the French word for “good” and it is the good fire that destroys the bad or evil people when they were burnt.

When I was a child, 50 years ago the children of my village, spent weeks collecting old furniture, wood, paper and other rubbish to add to the bonfire. Every area of the village had their own bonfire and the groups of 20 to 50 children would compete to build the biggest and most spectacular bonfire.

It was a huge event and so exciting for the children. We would hope that the weather would be good and there was no rain to spoil the fun. Also we had to protect our bonfire in case a gang from a rival area sneaked up and set our bonfire alight before the big night.

When darkness fell on the 5th of November all the children and adults in the area gathered around and someone’s father usually poured petrol on the bonfire, struck a match, and it burst into flames with a huge whoooooof! Often the bonfires would be 10 metres high and would burn all evening, all night and still be burning the next morning. For children the bonfires were a huge and scary thing.

Today in 2012, the building of bonfires is considered dangerous and children are no longer allowed to participate. The local government authority builds the bonfire and controls the situation to ensure safety. Is it better today than 50 years ago? I know which I prefer.

GUY FAWKES NIGHT 6: THE FIREWORKS

Fireworks can be defined as “a class of explosive pyrotechnic devices used for aesthetic and entertainment purposes”. But for adults and children everywhere they are an object of wonder, and fun and excitement. They may be designed to burn with flames and sparks of many colors, typically red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and silver.

Displays are common throughout the world and are the focal point of many cultural and religious celebrations but the earliest documentation of fireworks dates back to 7th century China, where they were invented. The fireworks were used to accompany many festivities. China is still the largest manufacturer and exporter of fireworks in the world.

SPECTACULAR GUY FAWKES SKY ROCKETS OVER TOWER BRIDGE, LONDON



Fireworks are generally classified as to where they perform, either as a ground or aerial firework. In the latter case they may provide their own propulsion, which is called a skyrocket or be shot into the air by a mortar, which is called an aerial shell. The most common feature of fireworks is a paper or cardboard tube or casing filled with the combustible material, often pyrotechnic stars. A number of these tubes or cases are often combined so as to make, when kindled, a great variety of sparkling shapes, often variously colored. The skyrocket is a common form of firework, although the first skyrockets were used in war.

In Britain fireworks are now quite expensive and most people go to special firework displays that are organised by the local government authorities.

GUY FAWKES NIGHT 7: THE TRADITION OF THE GUY

On Guy Fawkes night it is traditional to put on top of the bonfire and then burn “a guy”. The guy is a human figure that has been made by using old clothes that have been stuffed with newspaper and then a mask drawn on for a face. The guy can be surprisingly realistic.

CHILDREN COLLECTING MONEY BY ASKING “PENNY FOR THE GUY”



The children who make the guy display their creation in the streets or go knocking on the doors house to house The guy is burnt on top of the bonfire every year on November the 5th, but before that the guy has another vital role to play in the tradition of Guy Fawkes Night.

to ask “Penny for the guy”. This is the way the children have traditionally collected money so they can buy fireworks.

This tradition continues today and there is the added twist that if a famous person becomes unpopular it can be they whose face is on the guy that is put on top of the bonfire and burnt on November the 5th.

GUY FAWKES NIGHT 8: THE TRADITION OF THE GUY FAWKES RHYMES

Part of the tradition of Guy Fawkes Night is the Rhymes that children have traditionally learnt. Below is the most well known of the rhymes.

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

This is a tradition that appears to be dying. I was born in the 1950's and I know this rhyme but I think that my children who were born in the 1990's will not know this rhyme.

Below is an earlier form of the rhyme. This type of rhyme with its religious bigotry would probably be illegal in Britain today

**Remember, remember the fifth of November
Gunpowder, treason and plot.
I see no reason why gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot.
Guy Fawkes, Guy Fawkes,
'Twas his intent
To blow up the King and the Parliament.
Three score barrels of powder below,
Poor old England to overthrow.
By God's providence he was caught
With a dark lantern and burning match.
Holloa boys, holloa boys,
God save the King!
Hip hip hooray!
Hip hip hooray!
A penny loaf to feed ol' Pope.
A farthing cheese to choke him.
A pint of beer to rinse it down.
A faggot of sticks to burn him.
Burn him in a tub of tar.
Burn him like a blazing star.
Burn his body from his head.
Then we'll say ol' Pope is dead.
Hip hip hooray!
Hip hip hooray!**

Today in Britain people would not recognise this type of rhyme and perhaps this shows we have become a more tolerant country where a person's religion will not cause them to be put on a fire and burnt.

GUY FAWKES NIGHT 9: THE DANGEROUS FACE OF GUY FAWKES NIGHT

The celebration of Guy Fawkes Night began with the terrible religious conflicts of 500 years ago. Now it is a very different event but it can still be dangerous.

The 5th of November used to be a time of damage to property, danger to personal health and sometimes lead to death as children and adults literally “play with fire” when they light fireworks and bonfires.

CHILDREN PLAYING WITH FIREWORKS



Statistics on injuries on the 5th of November 2003 to 2005

Place of Accident	2005	2004	2003
1. Family or Private Party	475	590	515
2. Semi public party (e.g. scouts, club)	38	63	48
3. Large Public Display	121	96	99
4. Street or other public place	247	317	287
5. Indoors	25	18	34
6. Other	5	15	152
7. Not specified	71	61	1

These are the latest statistics that are available and they show the number of injured people taken to hospital.



GUY FAWKES 10: FAWKES RETURNS TO LONDON. A NEW TRADITION BEGINS?

Guy Fawkes Night has changed from being a commemoration of the bloody war between two religious beliefs to then being a celebration by local community to currently being the spectacle of big bonfires and the enjoyment of watching fireworks organised by local government.

Now Guy Fawkes may be beginning a new tradition.

DEMONSTRATORS IN LONDON WITH A GUY FAWKE'S MASKS



Surprisingly it is Guy Fawkes himself that is making a comeback and he is becoming a popular man. This change started in the 1980's when Parliament and politicians were not popular. Young people started to wear T-shirts with the slogan.

“Guy Fawkes, the last man to enter Parliament with honest intentions”

Then came the picture novel and the following movie “V for Vendetta”, in which the hero fought against a fascist British government and tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament. The hero of the picture novel and the movie wore a Guy Fawkes mask.



The Guy Fawkes mask has now been adopted in Britain by the young people who wish to protest against the government and also against global capitalism. At any demonstration or protest in London the face of Guy Fawkes can be seen.

GUY FAWKES NIGHT 11: CONCLUSION AND QUIZ

I have enjoyed researching and writing about the great British tradition of Guy Fawkes Night. It has brought back many memories from my childhood. I have a picture of the little boy who watched the bonfire and marvelled at the fireworks.

ME WHEN I WAS A LITTLE BOY.



If you want to test your memory you can try this quiz. Thank you for reading this article.

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GUY FAWKES NIGHT QUIZ:

1. What date is Guy Fawkes Night?
2. Where did the name "bonfire" come from?
3. What nationality was Guy Fawkes?
4. Which King did Guy Fawkes try to kill?
5. Why did Guy Fawkes try to kill the King?
6. Why did the plan fail?
7. What happened to Guy Fawkes after he was captured?
8. Where were fireworks invented?
9. Who asks "penny for the guy"?
10. Why has Guy Fawkes become popular again?