

2.3 Case study: The crimes and punishment of the Gunpowder plotters, 1605

Learning outcomes

- Know why the Gunpowder plotters decided to act against the Crown.
- Understand what crimes the plotters were accused of.
- Understand why they were punished so harshly.

Timeline

The Gunpowder Plot

1603 James I becomes King of England

1605 5 November: Gunpowder Plot

Thanksgiving Act says the events of 5 November should be commemorated each year

1606 Guy Fawkes and other conspirators executed

Popish Recusants Act forces Catholics to swear allegiance to the English crown

Source A shows the gruesome execution of Guy Fawkes – the most famous of the Gunpowder plotters – who was hanged, drawn and quartered in 1606. This type of execution was only used for those found guilty of committing the most serious crime – treason. Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators* had plotted to kill the king and therefore received the most severe punishment possible.

Key term

Conspirator*

Someone who is involved in a conspiracy – a secret plan to do something illegal.

Elizabeth I died in 1603, after reigning over England for 45 years. Catholics across the country were hopeful that the new king, James I, who was married to a Catholic, would allow them more religious freedom. However, over time, it became clear that James was prepared to introduce stricter anti-Catholic measures and so Catholics were disappointed.

As Protestant rulers, both Elizabeth and James were very wary of Catholic plots against the crown. Elizabeth even had her own cousin, Mary Queen of Scots, executed in 1587, when she suspected she was involved in an assassination plot.

Source A

An engraving showing the execution of Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators, produced in 1606.



Activities

- 1 Look at Source A and think about what those who were present at the execution could see, hear, smell and feel. Describe the scene.
- 2 What was the intended impact of this method of execution on onlookers and the general public?

Activities



- 1** Make a list of reasons Catholics had to overthrow King James I. Rate each reason with a score from 1–10, with 1 being a minor reason and 10 a very strong reason.
- 2** Compare your scores with a friend and explain your reasons.
- 3** Write a short paragraph explaining why the Gunpowder plotters wanted to overthrow James I.

The goals of the Gunpowder plotters

Guy Fawkes is the best-known of the gunpowder conspirators, but he was not the leading figure. That was Robert Catesby, who had a history of Catholic resistance. His father had been imprisoned for hiding a Catholic priest, and he had refused to take a Protestant oath, which meant he could not finish his university degree. He was responsible for recruiting the other Gunpowder plotters, including: Guy Fawkes, Thomas Percy (a royal bodyguard), Thomas Winton (Catesby's cousin) and Jack Wright. Some historians claim that the group viewed themselves as religious soldiers, who saw it as their duty to attack the English state.

The conspiracy aimed to set off an explosion that would kill the king, and those close to him, at the state opening of parliament on 5 November 1605. The elite of Protestant English society would attend this important official occasion. They included senior judges, Protestant bishops and members of the aristocratic ruling class. The plotters wanted to break up this powerful ruling group and replace James I with his daughter, Princess Elizabeth, who they would influence and control to promote their own political and religious aims.

Why did Catholics want to overthrow the king?

Protestantism had been the official religion in England since the Act of Uniformity was passed in 1559. In 1570, Queen Elizabeth I was excommunicated (disowned) from the Catholic Church by the Pope. The Pope called upon all loyal Catholics to depose (get rid of) Elizabeth because she was no longer a member of the Catholic Church.

Following Elizabeth's excommunication, Catholics in England were more actively prevented from practising their faith, and were punished if they continued to do so. Catholics were not allowed to hear mass, or be married or baptised by a Catholic priest. Attending the local, Protestant, parish church was compulsory, and Catholics who refused to go were treated as criminals and fined.

The plan

The conspirators first met on 20 May 1604, to begin organising the attack. They rented a house in central Westminster next to the parliament buildings. Guy Fawkes pretended to be a servant who was looking after the house while his employer was away. They then rented a cellar directly under the House of Lords and packed it with an estimated 36 barrels, holding at least one ton of gunpowder in total.

Source B

The members of the Gunpowder Plot in a 17th-century engraving.



The plot fails

On 20 October 1605, Lord Monteagle received a letter warning him not to attend the ceremonial opening of parliament. Monteagle gave the information to Robert Cecil, the king's spy master, who ordered that Westminster should be searched. It was in this raid that the gunpowder and Guy Fawkes were discovered.

Some historians argue that the authorities knew all about the plot in advance, but let it proceed so that Catholic rebellion would be brought into the open, and there would be clear justification for further Catholic persecution. During preparations for the attack Fawkes had travelled to Flanders to look for foreign assistance. His actions were monitored by English spies who informed Robert Cecil of what Fawkes was doing.

Questioning, trial and punishment

Torture was only legal in England if the king gave specific orders to use it in exceptional circumstances. Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators were tortured to extract confessions about their role in the plot. The most feared method of torture was known as the rack: a wooden frame that was used to stretch the body, forcing limbs apart at the joints. Guy Fawkes was questioned using this method of torture at the Tower of London as part of the investigation into the plot. At first he refused to confess, or give up the names of his co-conspirators; but on 17 November, 12 days after his arrest, he finally confessed.

Source C

An order sent by James I to the Tower of London on 6 November 1605, giving his permission to torture Guy Fawkes in order to extract his confession and persuade him to name his accomplices.

*If he will not other wayes
confesse, the gentler tortours are
to be the first usid unto him...
God speed youre goode worke.
James.*

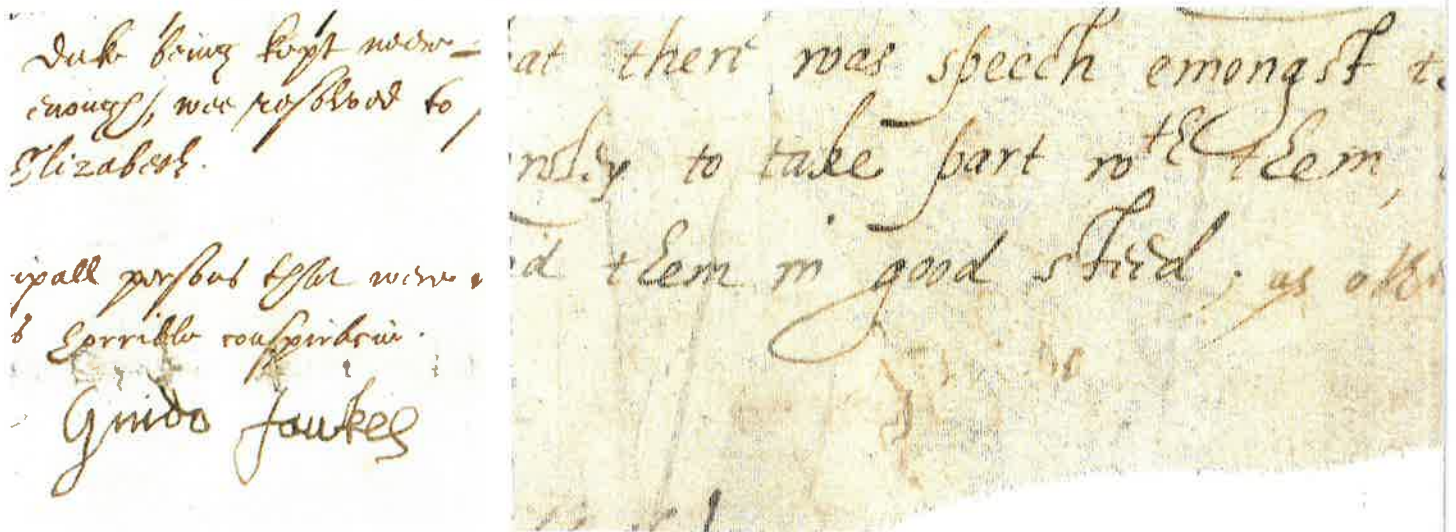
Source D

Extract from Guy Fawkes' confession:

*Catesby suggested... making a
mine under the upper house of
Parliament... because religion had
been unjustly suppressed there...
twenty barrels of gunpowder were
moved to the cellar... It was
agreed to seize Lady Elizabeth,
the king's eldest daughter... and
to proclaim her Queen.*

Source E

Documents featuring Guy Fawkes's signatures before and after torture.



Activities ?

- 1 In groups, use the text and Sources A–D to create a storyboard showing the actions of the plotters and the response of the authorities. Remember their priority was deterrence – to reduce the threat of further attacks.
- 2 Compare your work with another group and discuss any differences in your approach.

After their capture, the conspirators' trial began in January 1606, and they were found guilty of treason. They were sentenced to death by being hanged, drawn and quartered. This meant that they were hanged then revived, had their genitals cut off and burnt, and were then disembowelled; finally, their limbs and heads were chopped off. The authorities were determined to make the punishment a deterrent to others who might want to plan a similar attack. At this time of religious instability, they were concerned that other Catholics might want to plot against the king. This extreme public punishment was viewed as the appropriate penalty for this type of crime.

Longer-term consequences of the plot

The 'King's book' published soon after the uncovering of the plot, included an account by James himself of the events of the plot, alongside Fawkes' confession. This helped encourage anti-Catholic attitudes.

In 1605, the Thanksgiving Act ordered that the events of 5 November should be commemorated each year, and Catholics were banned from working in the legal profession or becoming officers in the armed forces.

In 1606, a law called the Popish Recusants Act forced Catholics to take an oath of allegiance to the English crown. They were also forced to take part in Church of England services and rituals – or pay fines.

The plot continued to have an impact on Catholics in England for centuries after the event. They were restricted from voting, becoming MPs, or owning land. They were also banned from voting in any elections until 1829.

Summary

- English Catholics were persecuted in various ways and were not free to worship as they chose.
- The Gunpowder Plot, led by Robert Catesby, aimed to blow up the king and those close to him at the state opening of parliament in 1605.
- The plot was uncovered and the conspirators were found guilty of treason. They were sentenced to death by being hanged, drawn and quartered.
- Following the plot, Catholics experienced more persecution, and were excluded by law from voting and becoming MPs for many years.

Checkpoint

Strengthen

- S1** Summarise the main complaints of English Catholics during the reign of Elizabeth I and James I.
- S2** Why were Catholics hopeful that James I would introduce greater religious freedoms?
- S3** List the main Acts of Parliament mentioned in this section and briefly explain what the new laws involved.

Challenge

- C1** Why did it suit the Protestant authorities to uncover such a serious Catholic-led plot?
- C2** Why was such a gruesome method of execution used?
- C3** What were the long-term effects of the Gunpowder Plot?

How confident do you feel about your answers to these questions? Discuss any you are unsure about with a partner then try rewriting your answers together.