



Fawkes, Guy (*bap.* 1570, *d.* 1606), conspirator, only son and second child of Edward Fawkes (*d.* 1579) of York and his wife, Edith Jackson, was born in the Stonegate district of York and baptized at the church of St Michael-le-Belfrey on 16 April 1570. Edward Fawkes was proctor, later advocate in the consistory court of York, possibly registrar of the exchequer court like his father, and, so far as can now be discerned, a staunch protestant. Guy's paternal grandparents were William Fawkes (*d.* 1558×63) and Ellen Haryngton (*d.* 1575), daughter of a prominent York merchant. Edward Fawkes died in January 1579, and was buried in York Minster. By February 1582 his widow had married Denis Bainbridge of Scotton, in the West Riding, and it is supposed that young Guy Fawkes became a Roman Catholic as a result of his connection with this strongly recusant family. He was educated at St Peter's School, in York.

Military career

Guy Fawkes was by profession a soldier. In 1592 he sold the small estate in Clifton which he had inherited from his father and went to fight for the armies of Catholic Spain in the Low Countries; he was, by all accounts, conscientious and brave. He behaved gallantly at the siege of Calais in 1596 but had risen no higher than the rank of ensign by 1602. In 1599 he is described as being 'in great want'. During the early 1600s Fawkes travelled to Spain on perhaps two separate occasions, in 1603 seeking support from a reluctant Spanish court for another military venture in aid of English Catholics. According to a description from the pen of a Jesuit priest and former schoolfellow, Oswald Tesimond, Fawkes was something of a paragon: devout, patient, 'pleasant of approach and cheerful of manner, opposed to quarrels and strife ... loyal to his friends', but at the same time 'a man highly skilled in matters of war' (Edwards, 68–9). In his character sketches of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators Tesimond is generous with praise and sparing in his censure, but it was just this mix of sound faith, technical expertise, and moral integrity which encouraged the original plotters to seek Fawkes's support in the spring of 1604.

The Gunpowder Plot

Knowledge of the conspiracy in its early days is heavily dependent on the confessions of two surviving ringleaders, Fawkes himself and the still more important Thomas Winter. Winter's confession, probably written for publication, certainly in his own hand, is one of the most remarkable accounts of intended treason in the pages of English history, and while not altogether free from obfuscation, it is substantially true. By comparison, Guy Fawkes's confessions show that, while he was privy to most secrets, he knew less than Winter. Winter, indeed, recruited Fawkes, albeit at the initial recommendation of the conspiracy's mastermind, Robert Catesby. The two men had much in common, both having travelled to Spain on similar missions within the previous two years. They met at Ostend early in 1604, during Winter's latest attempt to establish whether practical support from Spain might still be expected after the Stuart succession. Hugh Owen, the intelligencer on England at the court in Brussels, and Sir William Stanley both spoke highly of Fawkes, considering him entirely trustworthy, so the matter was pursued. In further conversation at Dunkirk, Winter told Fawkes that he and some friends were upon a resolution to 'doe some whatt in Ingland if the pece with Spaine healped us nott' (Salisbury-Cecil MS 113/54). After crossing the English Channel together, they called on Catesby at his London lodging late in April 1604.

Winter's conclusion that Spain was manifestly unwilling to support the intransigent English Catholics seems to have persuaded Catesby that there was now only one way forward. Dreams that a Spanish army might invade England, overturn the heretic regime, and restore Catholicism along with a Catholic monarch were now effectively shattered. Catesby and his friends realized that they would now have to act on their own. So far Catesby had disclosed his plan to destroy parliament with gunpowder to no one apart from Winter and John Wright, but when another friend, the earl of Northumberland's cousin and estate officer, Thomas Percy, visited him in May fulminating against the inactivity of right-thinking Catholics, Catesby took the opportunity to take both Fawkes and Percy into his confidence, making sure that both had first taken an oath of secrecy. The scheme seems to have been well received. On 24 May 1604 Percy, trading on the personal goodwill of Dudley Carleton and John Hippeley, fellow officers in Northumberland's household, leased a small house adjacent to the Lords' chamber from one Henry Ferrers of Baddesley Clinton, who in turn rented the property from John Whynniard, keeper of the Old Palace of Westminster.

The initial idea was that the plotters should drive a mine from the cellars of this dwelling straight under the Palace of Westminster, through the foundations of parliament house. Fawkes, 'because his face was the most unknown', adopted the name John Johnson and took charge of the building, pretending to be Percy's servant (Salisbury-Cecil MS 113/54). Catesby's house in Lambeth—the old Vauxhall manor house on the south bank of the Thames—offered a convenient store for gunpowder and mining paraphernalia; it was a comparatively straightforward task to ferry these over to Westminster at dead of night. A sixth man, Robert Keyes, was brought into the conspiracy in order to look after the Lambeth end of the operation. When they heard that a severe outbreak of plague in the city had prompted a further prorogation of parliament, until February 1605, the plotters dispersed into the countryside, gathering once again in London at the start of the Michaelmas law term.

For a time their schemes were frustrated: Scottish commissioners negotiating the proposed union between England and Scotland took over Percy's conveniently located lodgings for their deliberations. Just before Christmas, however, the conspirators began to dig their mine. By Christmas eve they had tunnelled up to the wall of parliament, but then news came through of yet another prorogation and work was suspended until early February. At this point they rowed all the gunpowder over from Lambeth and concealed it in Percy's house. Here was a decision born of pragmatism: as Winter explained, 'wee were willing to have all our dainger in one place' (Salisbury-Cecil MS 113/54). Another fortnight passed in laborious efforts to hack their way through solid foundations. Alarmed by the slow progress, the plotters secured the services of three new recruits, Christopher Wright (John's brother), Robert Winter (Thomas's brother), and John Grant.

Now, however, fortune smiled. As they were tunnelling they heard a rushing sound over their heads. Fearing discovery they sent Fawkes—the unknown face—out to reconnoitre, but he came back with encouraging news that the tenant of a ground-floor vault below the Lords' chamber, a coal merchant appropriately named Ellen Bright, was vacating her premises. Percy at once set about securing the lease from Whynniard and the conspirators gratefully abandoned their mine, planning instead to stack up their powder in the vault. All of a sudden there was nothing to do but wait, and plan for success. Hours spent in the mine had allowed the plotters many opportunities to work out how best to capitalize on their deadly strike, but it is fair to say that their strategy was never really thought through. They hoped to kidnap the next heir and worked on the assumption, by no means a secure one, that Prince Henry would be blown up with his father. Percy, who thanks to Northumberland's patronage was a gentleman pensioner (one of the king's personal bodyguard),

undertook to abduct James's second son, Prince Charles, the duke of York, hastening him away from court in the general confusion under colour of conducting the boy to a place of safety. However, Percy's colleagues appear to have doubted the feasibility of this scheme—London was enemy territory, far from their Catholic refuges in the midlands. They pinned their hopes on securing the young Princess Elizabeth, then residing with John, Lord Harington, at Combe, 4 miles from Coventry. The means to this end would be an armed force of mounted Catholic gentry, and Catesby invited friendly midland squires to gather—ostensibly to hunt—near his home at Ashby St Ledgers on 5 November.

A young girl, though, could not rule alone; she would stand in need of champions, or, indeed, a protector, a man of birth and political stature. Minor gentlemen could not fill such a role, but if the plotters themselves were unable to take on the task, who could? Here is entered a dark country. The same question was asked over and again by the Jacobean government in the months following the discovery of the plot, but never received a satisfactory answer. Indeed, if the surviving conspirators are to be believed, the matter was glossed over with extraordinary insouciance. All that Fawkes and Winter would say later was that a decision had been deferred until after the blast, when it might be clear which noblemen were still available. In principle, they had agreed to preserve as many peers 'as were Catholick or so disposed' (Salisbury-Cecil MS 113/54). More than once Catesby assured new recruits who scrupled at the possible deaths of patrons and friends that favoured noblemen would be dissuaded by 'tricks' from attending the opening of parliament. However, it is doubtful if he meant to honour such pledges. Robert Keyes recalled one occasion on which the mask slipped. Speaking contemptuously of the English nobility, Catesby 'made accompt of them as of atheists, fools and cowards'. Rather than risk failure he was fully prepared to see each and every man among them blown to perdition (TNA: PRO, SP 14/216/126).

Summer was spent far from London, in the countryside or, in Fawkes's case, overseas. He was in Flanders from Easter to August 1605, keeping his head down. But the time was not all wasted. While in Brussels he acquainted Hugh Owen with the plotters' design, in order that Owen might speak for them in the courts of continental Europe after the fact. At home, meanwhile, Catesby took stock of an increasingly pressing problem. He had borne the financial burden alone for upwards of one year and was unable to do so much longer. With the agreement of his colleagues, Catesby now widened the circle of conspirators in an attempt to bring in wealthy supporters—men who might foot the bill for the projected rebellion in the midlands. Late in the summer he confided his secret to Ambrose Rookwood, Sir Everard Digby, and, fatally, Francis Tresham, having sworn all three to secrecy.

None took the news particularly well, although Digby and Rookwood were soon persuaded that cruel necessity must have its way. Tresham, while apparently honouring his vow of silence, was clearly much perturbed, promising Catesby large sums of money if he would only call a halt to so perilous an enterprise. Catesby dissembled, but had no intention of backing down. Fawkes and Winter brought fresh gunpowder into the vault, fearing with good reason that the existing stock might have become damp. On 3 October parliament was once again prorogued, this time for a month. The new date for the state opening was set at 5 November. Winter, attending the ceremony in Lord Monteagle's entourage, must have taken comfort in the presence of Salisbury and other leading members of the council.

At the end of October the principal plotters began to converge on London. About the 26th Catesby and Fawkes returned to White Webbs in Enfield Chase, home of the Catholic Anne Vaux. There they had news from Winter that Prince Henry would not be accompanying his father to parliament on 5 November. Catesby at once resolved to attempt the capture of the heir apparent, but once again there does not seem to

have been anything in the way of precise planning. On the night of Sunday 27 October Winter learned from someone in the peer's household that Monteagle had received a general warning against attending the opening of parliament, and had immediately taken the message to court. Winter panicked. He went to White Webbs, trying to persuade Catesby that the game was up, but Catesby showed a steady nerve. He would, he declared, 'see further as yett', sending Fawkes out on reconnaissance (Salisbury-Cecil MS 113/54). No one ever questioned Fawkes's courage: he duly put his head in the noose, checking the cellar and reporting that nothing had been disturbed.

On Friday 1 November Winter and Catesby met an agitated Tresham at Barnet. They accused him of betrayal; he denied it, redoubling his efforts at dissuasion. Winter was by now inclined to discretion himself, but Catesby remained determined to give the plot every opportunity for success. The final chance to abandon the enterprise passed on the evening of 3 November, at a meeting between Winter, Catesby, and Thomas Percy, recently arrived from the north. It was Percy who said what Catesby clearly wanted to hear, that they should see the business to its conclusion. He went to Syon House to dine with Northumberland on 4 November—a point that would tell heavily against the earl thereafter—and returned to his colleagues declaring that all seemed well (TNA: PRO, SP 14/216/126). So Fawkes took up his station in the vault, with a slow match, and a watch, sent to him by Percy via Robert Keyes 'because he should knowe howe the time went away' (TNA: PRO, SP 14/216/100).

Meanwhile the privy council was treading carefully, anxious not to alarm any conspirators into premature flight, but still half believing that the curiously worded 'Monteagle letter' signified little. On the afternoon of 4 November the earl of Suffolk—who in his capacity as lord chamberlain had responsibility for ensuring that arrangements for the new session were in hand—made a tour of inspection, accompanied among others by Monteagle. They looked over the Lords' chamber, and then descended into the ground-floor cellars which ran the length of the building. Inevitably, they noticed the unusually large pile of firewood covering the gunpowder, and asked Fawkes, in his guise as John Johnson, whose fuel this was. Hindsight later prompted Suffolk to record that the servant was 'a very tall and desperate fellow', but to all outward appearances the party was satisfied when Fawkes told them the wood belonged to his master Thomas Percy (Oldys, 3.256). Returning to court, however, Monteagle expressed surprise that Percy, an old acquaintance, rented property in Westminster. He also mentioned that Percy was a Catholic.

That sufficed to stir King James's latent fears, and he ordered a further search of the vaults which, still with an eye to avoiding undue alarm, was to be carried out under the pretence of looking for some 'stuff' and hangings that had strayed from the wardrobe stores (Oldys, 3.257). The task fell to a Westminster magistrate and gentleman of the privy chamber, Sir Thomas Knyvett, keeper of the Palace of Westminster. In contemporary accounts of the subsequent search chronology varies slightly, but no more than one might expect given the scope for rumour and embellishment in so thrilling a tale (Gardiner, 114–37). About midnight Knyvett led his party into the cellar. They met Fawkes, fully clothed and in his boots, emerging from the room. Thinking him oddly dressed for so late an hour Knyvett had the suspect arrested, while his men hauled away the faggots and brushwood, uncovering thirty-six barrels—nearly a ton—of gunpowder.

Imprisonment, trial, and execution

There followed Fawkes's finest hour. Examiners wrote grudgingly of his fortitude, his 'roman' resolution (Oldys, 3.258). Confronted with a barrage of questions he refused to implicate his colleagues, apart from Percy, whose crimes were manifest. Fawkes admitted having recently travelled to Flanders, but when pressed for a reason mocked his examiners, declaring that he had set out 'to see the countrey and to passe

away the time' (TNA: PRO, SP 14/216/6). When he did speak plainly, it was to express his dislike of Scots, evident in his communications to the Spanish crown in 1603. According to tradition Fawkes wasted no time in telling the horrified king that he would have blown both James and his fellow countrymen at the court back to their northern mountains. Otherwise, he remained silent, muttering defiantly: 'you would have me discover my frendes' (TNA: PRO, SP 14/216/16A). Not until 7 November would he admit to his real name, and he did this only when the shaken interrogators, at last getting round to examining the contents of his pockets, found a letter addressed to a Mr Fawkes.

It soon became clear that these heroics were in vain. The midland rising headed by the principal conspirators rapidly fizzled out in mass desertion and a brief skirmish at Holbeach House in Staffordshire, where Catesby, Percy, and the brothers Wright all perished. Winter was among those taken prisoner. News of this denouement filtered through to London on the 9th. On the one hand this made Fawkes's testimony still more important, since he was one of the two surviving members from the conspiracy's inner ring, but on the other all conceivable danger was now past, and the authorities held the precious prize of Thomas Winter. The privy council now relaxed a little and were prepared to wait, looking on Fawkes's testimony given on 7, 8, and 9 November as a provisional summary of the treason (TNA: PRO, SP 14/216/49 and 54). It seems almost certain that torture of some kind had been employed in those critical days when king and council faced revolt in the shires. James had authorized its use, recommending that the 'gentler tortures' be tried first, progressing to something more savage should the prisoner prove reticent. Once the menace of a midland insurrection had passed, such extremities were set aside: Fawkes alone suffered in this way.

The surviving principal conspirators languished in the Tower until January 1606. Then the assembly of a parliament eager to see the plotters receive their just deserts, and only too ready to pick up an infelicitous suggestion by the king in his November prorogation speech that the prisoners should be tried in parliament, spurred the council into action. On 27 January eight gunpowder plotters stood trial in Westminster Hall on charges of high treason. All but Sir Everard Digby pleaded not guilty, refuting certain points within the indictment while—inevitably—admitting to the whole. The trial lasted a day and commanded high prices as a public spectacle, one MP complaining that while he had paid 10s. for standing room, others had been let into the same enclosure for much smaller sums (*Parliamentary Diary of Robert Bowyer*, ed. D. H. Willson, 1931, 10). Both king and queen are supposed to have attended in private (John Hawarde, *Les reportes del cases in camera stellata*, 1894, 257). The attorney-general, Sir Edward Coke, launched into the prisoners in his usual bombastic style and the earl of Northampton delivered an immensely tedious speech defending the king from charges made by Digby that James had gone back on promises of toleration for English Catholics. The outcome of the trial was never in doubt, and verdicts of guilty were duly returned. Four of the condemned men were executed on 30 January in St Paul's Churchyard. The following day Thomas Winter, Ambrose Rookwood, Robert Keyes, and, finally, Fawkes suffered the same fate in the Old Palace Yard, Westminster; his body was quartered, in fulfilment of his sentence.

Historical significance

On 5 November 1605 the inhabitants of London were encouraged to light bonfires in celebration of the king's apparently providential deliverance, always provided that 'this testemonye of joy be carefull done without any danger or disorder'. The citizens were happy to oblige, John Chamberlain marvelling at the 'great ringing and as great store of bonfires as ever I thincke was seene' (CLRO, journal of common council, 27, fol. 4; *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. N. F. McClure, 2 vols., 1939, 1.213). Bonfires and the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot have gone hand in hand ever since, a curious circumstance given that by any objective assessment the plot was just

another in a line of failed conspiracies against the state. Right at the start it was the lingering uncertainties, the unresolved loose ends, and the king's own perception of God's divine hand which nourished collective memory. James saw great significance in the fact that he had been delivered from both Gowrie conspiracy and Gunpowder Plot on a Tuesday the 5th. Parliament passed an act for an annual public thanksgiving, gunpowder sermons were preached at court throughout his reign, and although the wording changed over time, prayers of thanksgiving for deliverance from the plot remained in the calendar of the established church until 1859.

Over a much longer timescale, numerous circumstances have conspired to preserve commemoration in some form or other of events on 5 November 1605. Among these the most important have been repeated attempts either by the state or by some particular group within the country to focus the minds of Englishmen on a particularly horrific manifestation of Catholic perfidy. Gunpowder Plot commemoration was appropriated by the puritans in the 1630s and 1640s as they countered the creeping popery perceived in Charles I's court. Fireworks are observed from at least the 1650s, and the burning of effigies became fairly common after the much publicized torching of the 'whore of Babylon'—adorned with symbols of papal office—by London apprentices in 1673, following the conversion to Catholicism of the heir presumptive, James, duke of York. The Popish Plot frenzy and the exclusion struggles generated a fresh intensity in 5 November celebrations. James II's government failed in its attempt to ban fires and fireworks, and the fact that William of Orange landed at Torbay on 5 November 1688 once again magnified the date in the minds of many protestant Englishmen. From that day to this, as the old rhyme observes, gunpowder treason has 'never been forgot'. The fifth of November persisted as a day on which rowdy youths took the opportunity for challenging local authorities up and down the land: at that level there was little perception of the original conspiracy, just as today the historical facts are, for many, submerged beneath spectacle and consumerism. Commemoration was given yet another lease of life in the 1850s by the antagonisms generated by Catholic emancipation, and the re-establishment of a Catholic religious hierarchy in England.

In 1790 *The Times* recorded boys begging in the street 'to burn Guy Faux'. By Victoria's reign, Fawkes—the cloaked figure in the cellar—was burnt in effigy almost everywhere, rather than the pope or the devil, and he has, in an increasingly secular and religiously tolerant age, held his place of dishonour atop the bonfires ever since, joined occasionally by the transient demon-figures of state politics or the popular press: suffragettes, the Kaiser, and Margaret Thatcher among them. Through the twentieth century celebrations have become more orderly, more tame. Even back-garden firework displays, widespread as late as the 1970s, have been frustrated by safety considerations, and the pull of large, organized shows. Those few surviving examples of vehement anti-Catholic ritual on bonfire night—at Lewes in Sussex, for example—are noteworthy in their rarity. Gunpowder Plot day has become Guy Fawkes' night, bonfire night, or firework night, but the durability of this particular manifestation of Englishness—its ability to reinvent a reason for continuing—remains remarkable.

Perhaps this is only right. Though a failure, the plot came very close to success. Theories, as old as the treason itself, that the government either knew of the conspiracy from an early stage, or that it actually manipulated the conspirators through one or more *agents provocateurs*, draw unwarranted conclusions from the surviving evidence, fail to advance any credible motive for such chicanery, and were, indeed, effectively demolished long ago by S. R. Gardiner (in *What Gunpowder Plot Was*, 1897; see Nicholls, 213–20). The magnitude of Fawkes's intended treason should never be underestimated. Ordnance records state that the 18 hundredweight of powder transferred from the cellar to the Tower of London was 'decaied', but modern calculations suggest that, decayed or not, few if any in the Lords that

afternoon would have survived a combination of devastating explosion and the noxious fumes thrown out by the combustion of seventeenth-century gunpowder. Guy Fawkes, the experienced soldier, knew this only too well.

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Likenesses group portrait, line engraving, c.1605 (*The Gunpowder Plot conspirators, 1605*), NPG [see *illus.*]

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Mark Nicholls, 'Fawkes, Guy (*bap.* 1570, *d.* 1606)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9230, accessed 14 Jan 2014]

Guy Fawkes (*bap.* 1570, *d.* 1606): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/9230