

**English  
Catholic**



**History  
Association**

Reg. Charity No. 1072269

**NEWSLETTER**

**No. 95**

**SEPTEMBER 2022**

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is open to all who are interested in furthering its aims.

Annual membership £11 with reductions for additional members at same address and students under 25

Membership forms and further details are available from:

The Secretary or Treasurer, addresses on page 3,

or on the website - <http://echa.org.uk/>

Feedback, comments and articles for publication are **always** welcome

Please send contributions to the Newsletter Editor: Mrs Sheila Mawhood, at the address on page 3. And send them by email please and, if possible saved with file extension of .doc in Word, and photos in .jpg format.

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## NEWS & NOTES

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Dear members and friends of the ECHA. I hope that this finds you well on a much cooler autumn day. In this edition I bring you news of our upcoming AGM and several articles which I trust that you will find interesting.

But first, I think that we are all reeling from the sad loss of our long reigning monarch a few weeks ago. Queen Elizabeth II, a dedicated mother, wife and British Head of State for many, many years, will be missed by all of us. May she rest in peace and God Save the King.

One particular procedure during the Queen's committal at St George's Chapel that caught my eye was the breaking of the Wand of Office by the Lord Chamberlain - his final duty to the late monarch where he snaps the rod or staff and the two pieces are buried with the deceased.

The subject of our AGM presentation is Nicholas ***Breakspear***, the English Pope. You wouldn't usually have *English* and *Pope* in the same sentence but from 1154 to 1159 Nicholas Breakspear (aka Breakspeare) as Adrian IV was Pope, the Head of the Catholic Church. The ECHA 2022 AGM, as you will read elsewhere, will be held at Westminster Cathedral on Saturday 29 October 2022.

As you are aware, we award funding (this is where your subs go) to individuals researching aspects of English Catholic history. At our committee meetings we discuss any applications that have come in and are often able to help the applicants' scholarship along with a (modest) grant. We have been quite busy with this lately, more to the point researchers have been very busy indeed. We are currently considering several applications and expect to put a smile on a few faces. Incidentally, when we make an award, the researcher sends us an article which is published here in the newsletter. And then they often give us a talk on Zoom.

Which brings me back to your **subscription**. Would you please check your bank details and ensure that your payments are coming through to us –

and at the correct amount? It is very easy to overlook updating annual Direct Debits when moving to a different bank. And whilst you are at it, do we have your current address and email address? We sometimes get an email failure. We don't want you to miss out. There is a lot going on and in the pipeline at ECHA Central. Which brings me to what is going on at ECHA and how to keep up.....

### **ECHA YouTube Channel**

We have successfully launched our new YouTube channel which contains videos of some of our talks recorded over Zoom in the last two years. We will continue to add content as it becomes available. This will be an opportunity for our members, friends, and others who are interested to watch talks which perhaps they were unable to view at the time they were given.

*Currently four videos are available on the channel:*

1. *Fr Mark Vickers: Cardinal Bourne of Southwark and Westminster - June 2022*
2. *Helen Kilburn: Capitalism and Colonialism: The Brent Family - July 2022*
3. *Dr Francis Young: Monasticism in Suffolk - January 2021*
4. *Dr Paul Severn: Catholic Bishops of Hexham and Newcastle - September 2022*

*You can find the channel by simply going to YouTube and searching 'English Catholic History Association'.*

*Please subscribe if you wish to receive notifications of when we upload new videos.*

### **WEBSITE – [www.echa.org.uk](http://www.echa.org.uk)**

We get quite a few general queries from all over the place from people asking for help with researching their catholic family history or regarding some aspect of their research. Angie, our Secretary, received an unusual one the other day – from Brazil. From a layman (like me and many of you) who was just interested in the history of the Catholic Church in England and wanted suggestions on book titles to buy – with a list of topics as long as your arm. We love to help and it's not always about Papal Bulls or

the Reformation. But you can see what is going on here on the website and have a good read and listen to our posted talks. And on Twitter as well.

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## VISIT REPORT

### York Catholic History Day 2022

The twenty-fifth York Catholic History Day took place on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2022. After an absence of two years all were delighted to be back at the Bar Convent which, as usual, proved to be the ideal venue for the event. Happily, all three speakers, originally booked for 2020, were available and their talks, which covered a range of topics and spanned two centuries, complemented each other and drew attention to the heritage collections held at the Bar Convent.

Dr Scholastica Jacob opened the day with her talk *Re-building Libraries in a Second Exile: English Benedictine Nuns and their Books 1795 -1840*. The story she told of the English nuns who had been forced into exile on the Continent, when the penal laws in this country made it impossible for them to live in religious communities here, and who were later forced to return to an uncertain welcome in England, where many laws against Catholic were still in place, was common to several communities. The possessions they were able to bring with them as they escaped from the Revolution in France and later events on the Continent varied according to circumstances and many arrived with very little. Much was left behind and the loss of books, so central to their spiritual and devotional lives, was keenly felt. The exiles, or refugees as we might call them, travelled to various parts of the country in search of places to re-establish themselves and several groups received hospitality at the Bar Convent in the course of their journey.

The English College in Rome also suffered from the upheavals in Northern Europe. It was forced to close in 1798, when it was commandeered and

sacked by Napoleon's troops. The students returned to England but the College re-opened ten years later and continued to flourish. Seventy years after that William Giles became rector of the College. He was a talented artist and also an enthusiastic photographer and left many paintings and a vast number of photographs of the city of Rome, of the College's summer villa, Monte Porzio (not the present villa at Palazzola, acquired in 1920) and also of places in the surrounding countryside, where he used to lead the students on expeditions. Dr Marjorie Coughlan, who has studied Giles and his art in some detail, showed many illustrations of his work and pointed out the significance of the subjects, which included churches, monasteries and sites associated with saints and religious events in preceding centuries. To him, this was Holy Ground and the journeys through these sacred places were pilgrimages. Since the History Day we have learned, from the Bar Convent diaries, that Giles showed a collection of his watercolours of Italy there in July 1883. His cousin Elizabeth (Sr. Ignatius) Giles became superior of the Community in August of that year.

Dr John Jenkins is the Assistant Director of the Centre for Pilgrimage Studies at the University of York. His work focuses on the relationship between cathedrals, saints' cults and pilgrimage from the medieval period to the present day. In his talk, A National Repository of Saints: the relic collections of Westminster Cathedral 1900 – 1945, he described how the cathedral was designed on the basilica model and intended to call to mind a reliquary. He explained the three classes of relics and described some of those held at the cathedral, telling the story of the body of St. John Southworth which, after his martyrdom, was taken to the English College at Douai, buried in an unmarked grave during the French Revolution, rediscovered in 1927 and returned to England. Many other relics have been given to the cathedral and present challenges to their custodians as to how these are best preserved and venerated. One aspect of the relic collection, of which most of the audience was unaware, is as a source of relics for altar stones, particularly for new churches but also for the portable altars carried, for example, by army chaplains in wartime.

During the lunch break, people were able to visit the exhibition at the Bar Convent's Living Heritage Centre, where there is always something new to see. This year there is a new display centred on a relic of the True

Cross, along with recently rediscovered documents relating to its history and authentication.

York Catholic History Day 2023 will take place at the Bar Convent on Saturday 3 June. Put the date in your diary now.

*Judith Smeaton*

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## **ARTICLES**

### **Lessons learnt to bring the past to life. Some thoughts of a Catholic Historian**

In the hope that it may be possible to be able to help my fellow historians in their work, particularly those who are to embark on a history project for the first time, I would like to share with the members some of my own experiences. Recently I attended a History lecture and the first thing that the lecturer said was, "History should be shared." My family moved from Bebington in the Wirral to Bridgnorth in Shropshire in 1980, coming from one St John the Evangelist Parish to another. The only difference was the fact that St John the Evangelist in New Ferry had a Parish Priest and two curates, whereas there was only one Priest in Bridgnorth, Fr Rudolph Luczka (later Canon Luczka). Now Fr Luczka ran a tight ship and there were not many ways one could be involved in the life of the parish.

Don't have preconceived ideas

After having been in the parish some time, it became apparent that no one had written the St John's Bridgnorth Parish history, so I thought doing this could be a way of making a contribution to the life of the parish.. Being a small town and a small church, initially it did not appear that there would be much history to discover so it probably would not be an onerous assignment. How wrong! At



one time or another, the St John`s Parish, Bridgnorth had a convent, four other chapels and two schools within its boundaries. I have found that to start any historical study it is worthwhile putting down on paper any information that comes to light. When talking with other parishioners to find out about the history of the parish it is always best to give them some information to look at, however brief, as this is much easier to add to than asking them just to recall from memory. Luckily for me, by chance, I found three sheets in a drawer in the parish school which someone had assembled with some of the facts about the parish. This gave me a good start.

A little bit of information is worth its weight in gold  
Sometimes even a small piece of information can be really worthwhile. I was told that one of the parishioners who had lived all her life in the parish could write pages on the church history. Obviously this was the person to visit. Unfortunately, Nellie being elderly, her daughter asked me not to trouble her mother. What a shame to miss out on someone who knew so much. Unknown to me at the time another parishioner who was a friend of hers had shown her my notes which were circulating around the parish. Having read these, Nellie, the lady who could write pages, sent me a postcard on which was written five lines: although she would not have known this, it was the link piece between two stories which had come to light but without the connection between them. Her five lines were worth their weight in gold so it is worth remembering that sometimes even the smallest piece of information can have lasting impact.

#### Meeting the right people

Not long ago I wrote up the story of Middleton Priors RC School in Shropshire. When my family moved from Bebington to Bridgnorth in 1980 I had not heard of or knew anything about a place called Middleton Priors and that it had a Catholic School. Initially I was in lodging when moving to Bridgnorth and unknown to me my landlady, Ethel, was a former pupil of the school. She was a very

clever lady and it was only after she died that I found out she went to the school. She could have told me so much, an opportunity lost. Sometimes it is strange how things begin. I was walking through Bridgnorth one cold March night (why I remember this I don't know!) when I met Gerry Winwood. Gerry had been Doorman at St John's Bridgnorth for fifty seven years. Out of the blue he told me that there had been another school in the parish, Middleton Priors RC School. This was a real surprise to me as St John's being a country parish, it was fortunate to have a parish school never mind a further one. Determined to find out as much as possible about the Middleton Priors RC School, the next night I went to visit the Victoria History section of the County Council in Shrewsbury. To do research properly one needs co-operation from those in charge. Thanks to the kindness of Mr George Baugh and his staff I was given the unpublished notes about the school and area as a starting point for my research.

#### Take people as you find them

Several people told me about a particular person who was very knowledgeable about Middleton Priors RC School with a proviso that I probably would be unlikely have much cooperation from them. Whilst not disregarding what was said to me, I still thought it worthwhile to at least ask the person for their help. That person was more than helpful. Had I listened to what was said I was nearly persuaded not bother asking them for their help. However, it was a good job I did!

You can take a horse to water but you cannot make it drink.

Edna, a former pupil of the school, helped me a great deal and in return for her considerable efforts I wanted to thank her and give her more than just a bottle of wine or box of chocolates. She had told me how fond she was of one of the former evacuees, Theresa, from Liverpool. Edna and Theresa became such good friends that Theresa moved from her official lodging to live at Edna's house.

After the War when Theresa went back to Liverpool, they kept in touch for a while and then the link between them for some reason was broken. Edna often thought about what happened to her friend. I wondered if it was possible to trace Theresa. Fortunately, she had an unusual surname. I asked John, my wife's brother in Liverpool, if he could look up in the phone book anyone by that name and give me the number. Luckily there was only one person by that name in the phone book and with the correct initial. I tried it and it was number unobtainable. What a shame - if the person had either moved or passed on. By chance, shortly after this, I had to go to Liverpool to obtain an item from a particular shop. After having done this, I went to Lime Street Station, got in a taxi and asked the driver to take me to the address in the phone book. We got to a terrace street a few miles away and I knocked on the door. Initially there was no response. However, a neighbour came over from the other side of the street and asked if she could help. The lady offered to knock on the door in a way her neighbour would hear. Eventually the lady of the house I was looking for came to the door. I introduced myself and said I would like to talk about Middleton Priors RC School. Initially she looked through me but I could sense that mentioning the name Middleton Priors meant something to her. She was in fact Theresa's mother and kindly gave me her daughter's address. I duly made contact with both Theresa and Edna. Unfortunately, neither made contact with each other - sadly each was waiting for the other to make contact first. The good news was that Joan, Theresa's sister came to the School Reunion. Joan told me her sister was not a good letter writer but had Edna responded she would probably made contact.

#### Meeting those who helped in the Middleton Priors study

I was very lucky in that many people particularly past pupils responded to my requests for information about Middleton Priors RC School. To thank them properly, I wished to meet them personally. To do this could have been very difficult as they lived in

many diverse places. So it was decided to hold a School-Reunion to give the chance to meet up with those who kindly helped with the study. There had never been such a gathering before for that school so it was difficult to gauge what response there would be. Also there was only one place available in Middleton Priors to hold such an event, the lawn in front of Middleton Lodge, fortunately the home of a former pupil, Mrs Rowlands, whose mother was Headmistress during the War years. The Lord was kind to us as the sun shone even though the weather forecast was not good for holding an outdoors event. Over eighty people turned up from places as far apart as South Wales, Essex, and Merseyside as well as those from the locality, and a good time was had by all. Former pupil, Walter, met up for the first time in fifty years two of the evacuee pupils, Joan and Ada, whom he helped in the War. Walter had been asked by his Headmistress, Mrs Rowlands, to escort the evacuees to their official residences, as being town children they did not know the countryside. After the Reunion the three continued to communicate with each other.

### Luck

Sometimes you need luck in writing a history. There were only a few evacuees to Middleton Priors RC School and I managed to contact most of the Merseyside ones. Ada from Liverpool caused a shock back in her home city as she was in a Catholic school but came from the Protestant Reformers Church. The other family who were evacuated to Middleton Priors came from Hall Green in Birmingham so I wrote to the local paper there in the hope that they would get in touch. There was no response. Writing to papers is always worthwhile even if usually you get no response. It helps spread the word someone is doing something and this can bring results at a later date. Sarah, a friend of our daughter's, lives a few doors away. She enjoys motor rallies and once was in Mid Wales where she met June from Cornwall. When June asked Sarah where she was from she answered Shropshire. Hearing this, June said she loved Shropshire. So Sarah asked her why and June said

she was evacuated from Hall Green to Shropshire in the War. Sarah asked her where did she go and to what school. June said Middleton Priors RC School. In the end June wrote four pages of her memories and her brother contributed too.

Sometimes you have to wait in order to discover the meaning of a  
story

In September 1895 Bishop John Carroll came to Bridgnorth to lay the foundation stone of St John the Evangelist Church. Whilst doing this he made a plea for Christian Unity and said this would only come about by prayer and not by force of argument. Now Bishop Carroll was not a well man and was only a Bishop for a short time during which he came to Bridgnorth twice: laying the foundation stone in 1895 and opening the church in 1896. For many years it puzzled me as to why a Catholic Bishop should want to make a plea for Christian Unity in Bridgnorth and in 1895 when ecumenism was not top of the Catholic agenda at that time. Many years later on, I attended the annual Shrewsbury Diocesan History Day and one of the speakers was a priest from Stalybridge where the then Fr Carroll had been Parish Priest. During the 1870s and 1880s there was a lot of religious and political unrest in that area and Fr Carroll was in the forefront of diffusing tensions and by doing so gathered the respect of those who were not Catholic.

Archivist

It is always useful to make friends with the Diocesan Archivist. When I started researching, Canon Maurice Abbott was Diocesan Archivist for the Diocese of Shrewsbury. He was always helpful and gave a great deal of encouragement. However, he was a meticulous man and inspired people to aim for absolute accuracy in whatever topics were being studied. His successors have maintained the same standards.

When I do historical research I enjoy interviewing people. Quite often the first thing they say is that they do not know a great deal.

Secondly, they sometimes say what they know is not of any importance and then they tell you what they know and this is usually well worth listening too. All of us know about people and events and we should share this knowledge as it might help others. Sometimes what we consider not to be important may be of great interest to someone else. It is best not to tell anyone you know things or assume that someone does know about particular people and events. One day they may not tell you something because they think you already know! We cannot know everything. Good luck in your researches.

**Chris Magner**

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## **Guy Fawkes, Anti-Popery and the Lewes Bonfires**

By **T J Guile**

### **Abstract**

This article aims to look at some of the roots of anti-Popery in England and reevaluate the role of Guy 'Guido' Fawkes and assess whether burning his image on a bonfire at Lewes in East Sussex every November is justified, proportionate and even acceptable in the twenty first century. In this age of equality and diversity, is it wise or even acceptable to burn the image of a member of a religious minority?

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*Remember, remember the Fifth of November,  
The Gunpowder Treason and Plot,  
I know of no reason  
Why the Gunpowder Treason  
Should ever be forgot.  
Guy Fawkes, Guy Fawkes, t'was his intent*

*To blow up the King and Parli'ment.  
Three-score barrels of powder below  
To prove old England's overthrow;  
By God's providence he was catch'd  
With a dark lantern and burning match.  
Holla boys, Holla boys, let the bells ring.  
Holloa boys, holloa boys, God save the King!  
And what should we do with him? Burn him!*

In the early seventeenth century, Catholics were faced with a difficult choice, support your country or support your faith. Catholics who would not conform to the rules laid down by the state and Anglican establishment and attend Church of England's services were known as recusants. Some refused to conform to the state's legislation and instead recused themselves from the government-imposed beliefs, worship and practice. Laws were passed from the 1530s onwards restricting how Catholics could worship and practice their faith. A brief respite from royal disapproval came during the reign of Queen Mary but the reign of Queen Elizabeth brought even more harsh and punitive laws. When Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1559, she set herself against the Pope by declaring herself 'Supreme Governor' of the English church in matters spiritual and temporal and denouncing loyalty to the Bishop of Rome as an act of treason. Thenceforth all Christians in the realm were required to follow the state religion or suffer the consequences. Catholicism and treason were seen by some in the Privy Council as synonymous. Under the early guidance of Secretary of State, Sir William Cecil, Elizabeth repealed Mary's pro-Catholic legislation, established a permanent Protestant Church of England, and encouraged the Calvinist reformers in Scotland. In 1570 Pope Pius V issued the bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, which excommunicated Queen Elizabeth I, deprived her of her right to rule, and released her subjects from obedience to her. This had the effect of antagonising Elizabeth and confirming her opinion of the Roman church. It also led to suspicion of and bad feeling about Catholics within the kingdom. During her reign, dozens of priests were put to death, and Catholics could not even legally attend Mass or be married according to their own rites nor teach their children the essentials of the faith. As a result, many Catholics

had high hopes when King James I took the throne following Elizabeth's death in 1603. James' wife, Anne, is believed to have previously converted to Catholicism, and his mother Mary Queen of Scots, was Elizabeth's Catholic arch-rival prior to being executed. There were even rumours, inspired by his communications with the pope, that James himself would become Catholic. It soon became clear, however, that James did not support religious tolerance for Catholics. In 1604 he publicly condemned Catholicism as a superstition, ordered all Catholic priests to leave England and expressed concern that the number of Catholics was increasing. He also largely continued with the repressive policies of his predecessor, such as fines for those refusing to attend state church services. English Catholics had organised several failed conspiracies against Elizabeth, and these continued under James.

This is the background to the Gunpowder Plot. Fawkes' legacy is arguably now that he is seen as a symbol for resisting 'oppression' by authoritarian regimes. This symbol has been perpetuated by the 'V for Vendetta' film in 2005. The Guy Fawkes mask is now sometimes worn by the disaffected and disillusioned in modern society at rallies and protests in cities across the world. So, was Fawkes a hero or a villain? Should we reevaluate his legacy in the light of modern scholarship, free from the obvious bias of later historians following the discovery of the plot? Was he the victim of a cruel and tyrannical regime or a freedom fighter struggling for human rights at a time when human rights, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly and freedom of speech were not tolerated?

Observed in the United Kingdom every year on November fifth, Guy Fawkes Day, also known as Bonfire Night or Fireworks Night, commemorates the failed assassination attempt on the king and parliament. On November 5th, 1605, Guy Fawkes and a group of radicalised English Catholics tried to assassinate King James I by blowing up Parliament's House of Lords. The plot went awry, and all the conspirators were subsequently executed. Soon after, English people began to celebrate Fawkes' demise



and the survival of their king by burning effigies, lighting bonfires and setting off fireworks, a tradition which has continued to this day. Yorkshireman, Guy Fawkes, was discovered about to ignite thirty-six barrels of gunpowder underneath the Houses of Parliament. His aim was to spark a Catholic revolution. Fawkes was born in York in 1570, probably at a house in Stonegate. He was baptised in St Michael le Belfry church on April thirteenth of that year. His father Edward, a church lawyer and a prominent Protestant in the city, died when Guy was only eight years old. His mother remarried, this time to a Catholic, and they moved to the village of Scotton, near Knaresborough. Fawkes, by now a Catholic, continued his schooling in York, at St Peter's. His schoolmates included brothers John and Christopher Wright, who were later destined to join the gunpowder plot. Christopher, or 'Kit', was the same age as Guy Fawkes. In the late sixteenth century, York was seen as a centre of the Catholic resistance. About the time that Fawkes himself converted he would have been aware of a particularly brutal example of the religion's suppression. In 1586, Margaret Clitherow, a housewife and butcher's wife from the Shambles, was executed by being pressed to death for refusing to plead on the charge of allowing Priests in her home. When he came of age, Fawkes inherited property in York, at Gillygate and Clifton. On his twenty first birthday, Fawkes, who by now must have hated the oppressive regime he had had to live under, sold his estate and enlisted in the Spanish army. He spent the next ten years fighting for Spain in the Netherlands, becoming commander of a unit of soldiers and an expert in explosives. (*Fig. 1*) According to writings in the Spanish archives, Fawkes believed the English king was a heretic who would drive out his Catholic subjects. Fawkes also apparently expressed strong anti-Scottish prejudices. The king was Scottish. Fawkes also personally petitioned the king of Spain for help in starting an English rebellion against James. In Madrid, Fawkes met up again with Kit Wright and they joined a group of conspirators, who together plotted to murder King James and replace him with a Catholic monarch. In 1603 a few priests and laymen hatched the so-called Bye Plot to kidnap James, only to be turned in by fellow Catholics. Another related conspiracy that year, known as the Main Plot, sought to kill James and install his cousin on the throne.

Then, in May 1604, a handful of Catholic dissidents, Guy Fawkes, Robert Catesby, Tom Wintour, Jack Wright and Thomas Percy, met at the Duck and Drake Inn in London, where Catesby proposed a plan to blow up the Houses of Parliament with gunpowder. Afterwards, all five men reputedly swore an oath of secrecy upon a prayer book. Eight other conspirators would later join what later became known as the Gunpowder Plot. But although Catesby was the ringleader, Fawkes has gained most of the publicity over the past four hundred years. He also used the alias John Johnson while serving as caretaker of a cellar which was located just below the House of Lords, which the plotters had leased in order to stockpile gunpowder. Under the plan, Fawkes would light a fuse on November 5, 1605, during the opening of a new session of Parliament. James, his eldest son, the House of Lords and the House of Commons would all be blown sky-high. In the meantime, as Fawkes escaped by boat across the River Thames, his fellow conspirators would start an uprising in the English Midlands, kidnap James' daughter Elizabeth, install her as a puppet queen and eventually marry her off to a Catholic, thereby restoring the Catholic monarchy. It was, of course, ill thought out, foolish and above all, doomed to failure. The plot soon began to unravel. On October 26th, an anonymous letter advising a Catholic sympathiser to avoid the State Opening of Parliament, alerted the authorities to the existence of a plot. To this day, no one knows for sure who wrote the letter. Some historians have even suggested that it was fabricated and that the authorities already knew of the Gunpowder Plot, only letting it progress as an excuse to further crack down on Catholicism. This seems the most probable and likely theory as Lord Cecil's spies and informers must have had some warning of the plot to overthrow the monarchy and parliament. If not, they had failed in their duty to the king. Either way, a search party apparently found Master Fawkes in the cellar below parliament, around midnight with matches in his pocket and thirty-six barrels of gunpowder stacked next to him.

For Fawkes, the plot's failure could be blamed on, "the devil and not God."<sup>1</sup> He was taken to the Tower of London and tortured on the special

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<sup>1</sup> A Fraser, The Gunpowder Plot p209

order of King James. Under interrogation, he stated that a dangerous disease required a desperate remedy. Soon after, his co-conspirators were also arrested, except for four, including Catesby, who died in a shoot-out with the king's troops. Or so the official story goes. Fawkes and his surviving co-conspirators were all found guilty of high treason and sentenced to death in January 1606 by hanging, drawing and quartering. A Jesuit priest was also executed a few months later for his alleged involvement, even as new punitive, anti-Catholic laws banned Catholics from voting in elections, practising law or serving in the military. In fact, Catholics were not fully emancipated in England until the nineteenth century. After the plot was revealed, Londoners began lighting celebratory bonfires, and in January 1606 an act of Parliament designated November fifth as a day of thanksgiving. This replaced the earlier festival of Halloween at the end of October which with its remembrance of All Saints and All Souls, was regarded by some in the Privy Council as too Popish. A new secular festival was proposed. In keeping with the anti-Catholic sentiment of the time, people were encouraged to burn an effigy of the Pope. Guy Fawkes Day became a time to get together with friends and family, set off fireworks, light bonfires, attend parades, burnish ones Protestant credentials whilst burning effigies of Fawkes. Later, children traditionally wheeled around their effigies demanding a 'penny for the Guy' and asking crowds to 'remember, remember the fifth of November.' This practice continued well into the twentieth century and may still be observed in some areas of the country. The focus was upon anti-popery, the effigies that was burnt on the bonfire on the fifth usually resembled the Pope until a development later, in the nineteenth century, which saw the 'guy' burnt on the bonfire. Burning an effigy of a respected religious leader would be seen as extremely un-politically correct in twenty-first century England though possibly not so in Northern Ireland.

In Lewes, East Sussex, on the left bank of the River Ouse there is a large chalk cliff known as Cliffe Hill, that can be seen for many miles. A monument is clearly visible on the skyline, and it is this monument, a granite obelisk, thirty-five feet in height, that marks the passing of seventeen men and women who were burned to death for their faith. In Lewes today, each bonfire society marches in costume carrying fiery

torches which release smoke into the air. Several are accompanied by bands. (*Fig. 3*) Local brass bands. Drum bands. Pipe bands. And the regular punctuation of whistles, rowdy singing and the loud cracks of bangers and fireworks. There are impressive looking costumes of Vikings, pirates in tricorn hats, French revolutionaries, Tudors, Victorian Firemen and people in stripy shirts. The main bonfire societies are locally based and Lewes itself, has six including Nevill Juvenile, Waterloo, Borough, Commercial Square, South Street and Cliffe. Cliffe Bonfire Society is said by some to be the most extreme or alternatively, the most authentic and traditional of the bonfire societies in Lewes area. Historically, the Cliffe Bonfire Society burned the traditional effigies of Pope and Fawkes and were frequently accompanied into the fire by local notorieties or opponents of British interests in the world. Following World War One, Cliffe Bonfire Society resurrected its celebrations retaining all the traditional elements including the 'No Popery' banner and the burning of an effigy of the Holy Father. During the nineteen twenties, Cliffe withstood constant criticism for this practice and when, in 1933, the then Mayor, J.C. Kenward, wrote to the Society requesting the discontinuation of the offending effigy, the Cliffe declined. Their determination to maintain the true bonfire traditions of the 'Fifth' led to the Society being ostracised by the other Lewes bonfire societies. In the nineteen fifties, the Bonfire Council attached pre-conditions to Cliffe's participation in the United Grand Procession, the Society being permitted to join only if the 'No Popery' banner was not carried. Cliffe rejected this offer, and while it now plays a full part in the Lewes Bonfire Council's activities, the Society has maintained its independence by refusing to join the 'United' procession. Many might argue that there is nothing wrong with positive remembrance of those who were persecuted for their faith; **But burning of an effigy of what is said to be a Pope, the head of a world-wide church, could be seen as a scandalous piece of bigotry**, especially when one of the bonfire societies in the town, Cliffe, paraded under a 'No Popery' banner as late as 2013. Mindful of its obligations under the Equalities Act, Lewes District Council euphemistically described the event as: a 'key part of community culture'. Speaking ahead of the 2020 event, Keith Austin, a former secretary of the Lewes Bonfire Council, said: 'I always tell people that Lewes is not anti-Catholic. It's more pro-Protestant. In 'Bonfire' there are a lot of Catholic people. It's about

history. There's nothing sinister about it.<sup>2</sup> Some members of the Lewes Bonfires Societies would no doubt, defend the Lewes bonfire as a largely harmless, although arguably, tasteless, event. (Fig. 4)

Although they re-joined the Bonfire Council in the nineteen seventies, the separation remains. Cliffe Bonfire Society march, proud and alone, under their banner at the bottom of town. In 2003, as reported in the Brighton Argus newspaper on 13<sup>th</sup> November of that year, Joe O'Keefe, of Newick, Lewes, wrote to the Chief Constable of Sussex Police demanding the annual event be altered on the grounds it was offensive to his religious faith. He also wanted to ban the burning crosses and No Popery signs carried through the town's streets every November 5th. In the letter sent by Mr O'Keefe to Sussex Police Chief Constable, Ken Jones, at the time, he called for his help to "stop this religious bigotry once and for all". He said he wanted police to prosecute any bonfire societies which take part in the celebrations if they incited racial or religious hatred under the Crime and Disorder Act. Mr O'Keefe decided to act following Sussex Police's investigation of a bonfire society which set fire to effigies of a family of travellers. The force subsequently arrested ten people in connection with the controversial Firle bonfire celebration near Lewes on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2003. Mr O'Keefe reportedly said that "this religious bigotry belongs in the past.' He added, "many Catholics stay away from Lewes on November 5th because they find it insulting. There are burning crosses and No Popery chants; if it was a gipsy or black person they were burning, it would not be allowed." Mr O'Keefe also said he did not want the bonfires or fireworks banned. He was reported to have said, "what I don't want is to see any form of racial or religious antagonism in the evening. It's a form of harassment and very offensive to Roman Catholics."<sup>3</sup> Keith Austin, secretary of Lewes Bonfire Council, reportedly said the celebrations were not meant to offend anyone. He went on to add, "We don't carry out these celebrations with any hate or bigotry. It's a reminder of the days when people weren't allowed to pursue their religion. We wish Mr O'Keefe well to pursue his religion. Burning crosses

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<sup>2</sup> <https://leftfootforward.org/2012/11/bonfire-night-bigotry-lewes/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/5100833.call-for-end-to-pope-burning-tradition/>

is not anti-religious. The crosses are to remind people of the seventeen martyrs who lost their lives in Lewes by being burnt at the stake outside the town hall." <sup>4</sup>

Nationally, the figure of Guy Fawkes, or the 'guy', is still occasionally burnt as he is the figure most associated with the plot, perhaps as he remained the only known suspect for a number of weeks. Yet recent developments in the last few years have seen a disassociation of Fawkes and the 'guy' in the commemoration of 'Bonfire Night' and indeed the 'guy' with the fifth generally, as it is now more common to light fireworks instead. The disassociation of Fawkes and the body of the 'guy' with 'Bonfire Night' represents a loss in the association of treason with Fawkes. Many children today may have little understanding who Guy Fawkes really was let alone what he was accused of doing and the background of persecution which lay behind the Gun Powder Plot. Arguably, comparatively few ordinary folk in Lewes today might be able to explain what a Protestant is, let alone what Protestants might or might not believe. It could be argued that religious faith has largely lost its hold on ordinary people and the religious arguments of the past are largely lost in the mists of history. **But what would the reaction be if that burning guy was an image of a Muslim, Jew, transgender, or gay figure? What would happen if they tried to burn an image of the Prophet Muhammad? That would be a very different outcome.** Equalities legislation is intended to protect minorities from discrimination and abuse. To have anti-Catholic bigotry paraded openly, whether it is dressed up as pseudo-history or not, would not be acceptable if it affected any other minority community. Bonfire Night attracts up to sixty thousand towns folk and visitors to the narrow streets of Lewes with flaming torches, prompting organisers to warn the event is not suitable for young children. **One could argue that it is not a very comfortable festival for historically minded Catholics either.**<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/5100833.call-for-end-to-pope-burning-tradition/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://leftfootforward.org/2012/11/bonfire-night-bigotry-lewes/>

Elsewhere, in modern times, Guy Fawkes, has undergone something of a makeover. Once largely seen as a notorious traitor, he is now portrayed in some circles as a revolutionary hero, largely due to the influence of the 1980s graphic novel, “V for Vendetta” and the 2005 film of the same name, which depicted a hero who wore a Guy Fawkes mask while battling a future fascist government in Britain. Guy Fawkes masks even cropped up during other protests. “Every generation reinvents Guy Fawkes to suit their need”. Perhaps, with hindsight, the whole episode of Gunpowder, treason and plot should now be forgotten and consigned to the bonfire of history. However, we, as a diverse, inclusive, multi-cultural society must learn from past mistakes and look to the future rather than back at a troubled and unsettled time in our history when to be a Catholic was to be seen by some as a dangerous and disloyal subject of the crown.

### *Figures*

*Fig. 1 Guy Fawkes*

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Courtesy of <https://www.historyextra.com/period/stuart/guy-fawkes-gunpowder-plot-facts-bonfire-night/>

*Fig. 2, The Plotters*



Courtesy of <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Guy-Fawkes/>

*Fig. 3 Lewes Bonfire*





Courtesy of Reuters/ Toby Melville

Fig. 4 The Lewes bonfires, Guy Fawkes



Courtesy of theargus.co.uk

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