



History

Beyond the Bonfires

Reframing the Gunpowder Plot Through Historical Enquiry at Key Stage 3

Bonfire Night provides a welcome moment of light in the darkest, longest term of the year. Hotdogs, sparklers, and fireworks displays offer a reliable, family-friendly night out at most schools up and down the country. But do children (and adults for that matter) really associate this cosy event with its true origins? After all, I'm not sure I've seen a burning 'Guy' since my own childhood 30 years ago! Within a 21st century context, it feels somehow shocking and more than a little tasteless... Even the more commonly used term "Bonfire Night" as opposed to the traditional "Guy Fawkes Night" of my youth demonstrates the gradual separation of this annual celebration from its sinister origins. Perhaps its time to

critically re-examine a story that is often taken for granted...

Of course, many schools do traditionally cover the Gunpowder Plot, frequently taught in Key Stage 1. Along with the Great Fire of London, many schools choose to teach the plot in the run-up to November in order to fulfil the National Curriculum requirements of "significant historical events, people and places in their own locality" and "events beyond living memory that are significant nationally" (KS1 History Programme of Study). Indeed, the Historical Association provides its own resources for teachers looking to plan for what it describes as "a cracking tale for any age group" (Historical Association).



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Importantly, it gives us space to link these discussions to Fundamental British Values, including democracy, the rule of law, and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. KS3 pupils are far better equipped to understand these complex ideas and to consider how the lessons of 1605 still resonate. In short, by moving the Gunpowder Plot into KS3, we unlock a richer, more relevant, and more thoughtfully connected exploration—one that deepens pupils’ understanding of both the past and the present. With this in mind, I decided to introduce this topic to my Year 7s in the Advent Term of 2025/6.

**The “Good Guys” vs the “Bad Guys”:
Investigating the complexity of
people’s lives**

Crucial to a solid understanding of the Gunpowder Plot is an appreciation of motive; here, older pupils are best placed to understand the more complex religious and political nuances of the time. There is a risk of assuming that these events occurred in a vacuum if sufficient attention is not given to what came before; context forms the building blocks of a secure understanding of the events of 1605. Pupils in KS3 should be able to explain why people turn to conspiracies or extreme acts, rather than simply what happened.

Without an appreciation of the preceding 96 years, our understanding of the plotter’s motives can only be surface-level. An exploration of the changes made to Church and State by Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I, Elizabeth I and James I enables pupils to appreciate the complex conditions that sowed the seeds for extremism in 1605.

To emphasise the religious turbulence

Whilst the nuances of the religious and political motives of the plotters are perhaps a stretch too far for the average five- to seven-year-old, there are many opportunities for children to explore past people’s motivations through methods such as storytelling, simulation, and role-play.

However, by choosing to teach the Gunpowder Plot at Key Stage 1, are we missing the bigger picture? While the story is accessible and engaging for younger pupils, teaching it only at KS1 can limit deeper understanding. I believe that there is much more to be gained by teaching the topic later, particularly in early Key Stage 3.

In this article, I want to explore the idea that teaching the Gunpowder Plot to older pupils allows us to make connections that are simply not possible at KS1. Moving beyond the basic dichotomy of good versus bad allows pupils to delve into the rich “grey area” within which most

historical figures reside. With greater maturity and historical awareness, KS3 students can consider themes such as government, power, protest, religious tension, extremism, and security—issues that echo strongly in the world today.

Teaching this topic later also gives us the chance to explore the “juicier” elements that genuinely engage pupils: political conspiracies, secret networks, spycraft, and the motivations behind extremist actions.

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of the era, my pupils created a “religious rollercoaster” detailing the shifts between Catholicism and Protestantism and their impact on Tudor society. Key to understanding the road that led the plotters to such extreme acts is lived experience. What did Elizabeth I’s treatment of Catholics actually look like at ground level? What did it feel like to members of this increasingly marginalised community? The story of Margaret Clitherow, the butcher’s wife executed in York in 1586, demonstrates the persecution experienced by Catholics in a way that powerfully captures pupils’ imaginations. Accused of harbouring Catholic priests, her “pressing” (public crushing under a door weighted with stones) illustrates the brutality of life as a Catholic during the formative years of the plotters. Pupils were particularly enthralled by the 400-year-old preserved hand of Clitherow, taken by supporters in the wake of her execution. The idea that the conspirators are simply troublemakers is simply not true, and older pupils are best placed to appreciate the context of what went before and how this led to the extremism of 1605.

Powerful too is the dismantling of the dichotomy of ‘good vs bad’. It is certainly possible to sympathise with Catholic grievances at times, but neither can we condone their deadly intentions – indeed many Catholics did not at the time!

To investigate causation and motive further, pupils examined a range of contemporary sources, including Protestant sermons condemning “Papists”, recusancy fine notices, laws barring Catholics from public office, and private letters between Catholic nobles. While the class agreed that

violence could not be justified, many found themselves empathising with Catholic grievances and, more broadly, with “the complexity of people’s lives” in the seventeenth century (Purpose of Study, National Curriculum Stages 1, 2 & 3). Crucially, this allowed us to move beyond a simplistic “good versus bad” narrative towards a more nuanced understanding of motive. The concept that ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’ is powerfully relevant here in illustrating the grey areas within which humanity resides, whilst we encourage children to experience empathy without endorsement of violence.

Investigating Conspiracy and Historiographical Debate

“History is a myth that men choose to believe” — Napoleon Bonaparte

Can there ever be absolute historical truth? Lower down the school, some pupils tend to willingly accept the narrative put in front of them as ‘gospel’. At KS3, I introduce the idea that historians do not know everything about the past; it is often the unanswered questions that make history most engaging! The Gunpowder Plot provides an excellent opportunity to introduce historiographical debate through detective-style learning and critical thinking.

The stimulus I used was the letter sent to Lord Monteagle, warning him that “they shall receive a terrible blow this parliament, and yet they shall not see [sic] who hurts them.” While the letter’s contents and the unravelling of the plot are fascinating, the enduring mystery surrounding the identity of the sender is even more compelling.

To highlight the fluid nature of

historical interpretation, pupils investigated three leading theories of who sent the letter:

1. **A plotter with doubts** – the widely accepted view that Francis Tresham sent the letter after losing his nerve.
2. **A government cover-up** – the theory that Robert Cecil fabricated the letter to justify government action against Catholics.
3. **Monteagle himself** – the suggestion that Monteagle authored the letter to prove loyalty to the Crown over his Catholic roots.

One of the key differentiators of the Key Stage 3 History Programme of Study is the analysis of competing interpretations and the development of an understanding of the alternative ways the past can be represented. According to the statutory national curriculum:

“Pupils should understand the methods of historical enquiry, including how evidence is used rigorously to make historical claims, and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed”. By interrogating juxtaposing theories debating the authorship of the Monteagle Letter by historians such as Antonia Fraser and Alan Haynes, pupils move beyond the facts, towards and understanding of how historians see the past differently.

Top tip: The provenance of the Monteagle Letter can be challenging. Using Google NotebookLM, I created short podcasts summarising each theory, which proved particularly effective for SEND learners.



Links with Fundamental British Values: Power, Protest, and State Control

Teaching this topic at KS3 allows for meaningful engagement with issues of oppression, radicalisation, and choice. What happens when the law is applied as a means of state control, rather than civilian protection? Does breaking it become justified?

Pupils examined whether grievance inevitably leads to violence and considered the distinction between resistance and extremism. In line with current thinking on the Gunpowder Plot, pupils also explored the notion of extremism – the idea that the conspirators should be considered terrorists under modern definitions. Examining the lives and actions of Thomas Catesby and Guy Fawkes in particular, pupils were able to study ideas such as ideological absolutism, apocalyptic thinking, insular networks, and the legitimisation of civilian casualties – all features we would associate with modern-day extremism.

Discussions linked directly to Fundamental British Values, exploring democracy, the rule of law, tolerance, and individual liberty. Pupils debated whether the rule of law applies equally to those who break it and whether capital punishment could ever be justified. Comparisons with the Brighton Bombing (1984) and the plot to kill Margaret Thatcher by the IRA, further deepened understanding, helping pupils recognise modern parallels while remaining fact-based and politically neutral. Important concepts such as continuity and

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change were explored through the analysis of key similarities and differences of the events, whilst an examination of motive facilitated the examination of why individuals act in the way they do.

Whilst we need to try to avoid over-simplified comparisons of unique events, use of a modern example helps pupils to understand the significance of the Gunpowder Plot by placing it within a broader, recognisable context of attacks on government. This reinforces the idea that the story of Guy Fawkes is not simply a tale about the past, but one with clear echoes to the present.

Opportunities for Active Learning and Enquiry-Based History

“Tell me and I forget.... Involve me and I will learn” – Benjamin Franklin

As part of our focus on Quality First Teaching at Bilton Grange, we have had a big push on facilitating active learning. In order to promote enquiry-based learning, I staged a CSI-style practical exercise in the cellars of the school. Complete with crime scene tape covering the doors, pupils conducted an evidence hunt by torchlight. Documents included an interview bundle detailing Catholic grievances against James I, the Monteagle letter, government surveillance notes on known Catholic suspects following the earlier Essex Rebellion (1601), diagrams of the location of the discovery of the gunpowder barrels and the transcript of Guy Fawkes’ interrogation.



By teaching this topic at Key Stage 3, pupils are old-enough to take part in the process of constructing history, rather than simply digesting the facts. I would recommend a CSI-based activity to anyone thinking of introducing this topic; it certainly appealed to our more kinaesthetic learners, allowing them to feel that they had a personal stake in a 420-year-old crime case!

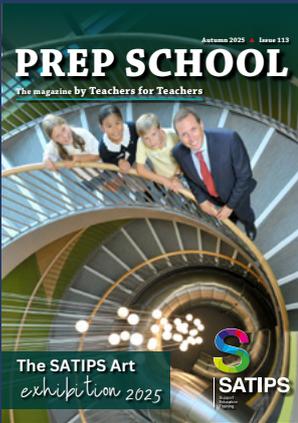
Conclusion

Having introduced this topic last term, it is one we will certainly repeat. Teaching the Gunpowder Plot at Key Stage 3 allows pupils to explore the “full story”, developing critical thinking, source analysis, and an appreciation of historical complexity. The parallels with modern issues enhance relevance and engagement, while debates around extremism and the rule of law have proved especially powerful. It has certainly made me rethink the story I thought I already knew.



Further recommendations:

- 'Lucy Worsley Investigates: The Gunpowder Plot', BBC iPlayer
- Richard Hammond, Gunpowder Plot Reconstruction on [YouTube](#)



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