

The Gunpowder Plot: The Warning Before the Fuse

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A real conspiracy placed gunpowder beneath Parliament to kill James I and the assembled political leadership. An anonymous warning helped expose the scheme, leaving a surviving letter at the center of its suspense.

STATUS	Documented plot; warning letter's authorship uncertain
CLASSIFICATION	STR
MATERIAL	Westminster, London, England
DISPOSITION	PUBLIC / SOURCED STORY
CATEGORY	Strange Files
RECORD TYPE	Secrets & conspiracies
STORY HISTORY	1605

THE ACCOUNT

Beneath the House of Lords, the plotters gathered gunpowder for the opening of Parliament on November 5, 1605. Robert Catesby's scheme intended to kill King James I and much of the assembled leadership in a single explosion. Guy Fawkes watched over the store. Then a warning reached Lord Monteagle, advising him to stay away. The conspiracy's most familiar image is the powder; its turning point was a piece of paper.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL

Parliament's historical account describes thirty-six barrels and the plot's discovery. A surviving Commons journal entry records the arrest of Fawkes under the name John Johnson. The National Archives preserves the Monteagle letter, but the identity and precise motives of its writer remain debated. The conspiracy itself is well documented, even where questions persist about the warning and the authorities' unfolding knowledge.

WHY IT STAYS WITH US

There are two hidden actors in the popular story: the man below the chamber and the person behind the letter. One planned destruction; the other interrupted it, for reasons not completely recoverable. The combination makes the surviving warning unusually charged. A few words passed privately between people could determine whether a crowded room lived through its next official ceremony.

WHERE THIS TELLING COMES FROM

The Plot

UK Parliament

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/parliamentaryauthority/the-gunpowder-plot-of-1605/overview/the-plot-and-its-discovery/conspiracy-and-deception/>

Journal recording the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot

Parliamentary Archives

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/parliamentwork/offices-and-ceremonies/collections/clerk-of-the-hoc/gunpowder/>

The Monteagle Letter

The National Archives, United Kingdom

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/explore-the-collection/stories/the-monteagle-letter/>

RETURN TO THE STORY

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