

Village Echoes

“Remember, remember the 5th of November, Gunpowder, Treason and Plot”, so begins the old rhyme reminding us of the Catholic plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605. The conspirators, led by well-known Catholic rebel Robert Catesby intended to kill England’s Protestant King, James I, during the State opening of Parliament. The man designated to guard the 36 barrels of gunpowder in the cellars of Parliament and therefore the first conspirator caught was Guy Fawkes. Hence it is his name which has passed into English memory as the main conspirator rather than Catesby’s.

When Londoners learned of the plot, that it had failed and that the King was safe, they immediately lit bonfires in celebration of the fact, and the country has been celebrating this on “Bonfire Night” ever since.

A local newspaper report of Goudhurst’s activities on this date tells us in November 1892 that Bonfire Night passed off very quietly, implying that this was an unusual occurrence. The same report goes on to say that the boys at Bethany House School held their usual 5th November festivities, so perhaps the locals all went there.

During the early years of the 20th century the Goudhurst & Kilndown Brass Band are recorded as taking part in the celebrations conducted in Ticehurst, where they paraded through the village stopping at the all the principal houses while the locals enacted a “farce” before moving onto the next house.

For most years, Goudhurst’s celebrations of this event passed off without any mention in the press until the 1930s. Then we learn that the occasion was obviously taken very seriously at Bethany House School, as indicated by a series of reports in the Kent & Sussex Courier which went into great detail about their activities. Each year, it would seem, the boys and their teachers formed some sort of court in which Guy Fawkes was tried, found guilty and sent to the fire. In 1931, it was the State of Bethania, comprising the King and his Parliament who accused the “ghost” of Fawkes of disturbing the peace; in 1933 he was tried by judge and jury and, as a complete change in 1934, they tried the Loch Ness Monster for attacking the school. Once found guilty, effigies of Fawkes or the Monster, liberally stuffed with fireworks, were ceremoniously transported to the bonfire and burnt. This was then followed by a proper firework display and no doubt a good time was had by all.

The Scouts were usually responsible for building the bonfire and probably followed the instructions on bonfire building issued to them (see page 55 of the Goudhurst Jubilee Book), the correct application of which ensured the fire burned from the top down, was easy to light, did not smoke, burned for about 30 minutes and was entirely safe. Nothing was said about effigies which included fireworks!

Local History Society
Email: info@goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org
Website: www.goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org