

Where Did the Tradition of the Christmas Tree Come From?

Each year, when the weather gets colder and December approaches, many Americans who celebrate Christmas will get together to decorate a [Christmas tree](#). But why in the world do we decorate these (often artificial) fir trees in the first place?

It turns out, the meaning behind Christmas trees as holiday decor goes back further than you might realize.

Both the ancient Egyptians and Romans saw the bright hue of plants that remained green all year, such as palm rushes and evergreen boughs, as a way to give warmth and hope to people during the winter, according to [History.com](#).

Ancient people would mark the winter solstice (the shortest day and longest night of the year, which typically falls on December 21 or December 22) by using evergreens. These plants served as a sunny reminder that other greens would grow again once spring and summer returned.

People in some countries believed evergreens stood for everlasting life and even had the ability to ward off evil spirits and illnesses—another reason for the tradition of hanging evergreen boughs above doorways and inside homes.

1444

[Some say](#) the first-ever Christmas tree was in London, near what is now Leadenhall Market. However, it seems it was a one-time trend, as Christmas trees wouldn't be back in Britain until the 19th century.

1500s

Many believe Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, began the tradition of adding lighted candles to a tree, which is why we decorate trees with strands of lightbulbs today. The story goes that while Luther was walking home one winter evening, he saw twinkling stars among evergreens and wanted to re-create the magical moment for his family.

1771

While Christmas trees were appearing in Germany years earlier, the trend really caught on after writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe [visited Strasbourg](#), near the German border, and included the concept in his novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

1820s

The first record of a decorated evergreen tree in America was that of German settlers in Pennsylvania.

1846

Queen Victoria, German Prince Albert, and their children were shown standing around a Christmas tree in the [Illustrated London News](#). Because Victoria was very popular with her subjects at that time, the Christmas tree trend took off in both Britain and the East Coast of the United States.



Christmas with Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, their children and Queen Victoria's mother, in 1848 as depicted in the Illustrated London News. Getty Images

1882

When Edward H. Johnson, the vice president of Edison's Electric Light company, decorated a tree with 80 red, white, and blue lightbulbs and displayed it in his New York City window, a newspaper in Detroit helped him earn the title "[Father of the Electric Christmas Tree.](#)"

1895

Some Americans were still skeptical about using electric lights on their Christmas trees, although apparently not President Grover Cleveland. He is said to have introduced [the first electrically lit White House Christmas tree.](#)

1903

General Electric began selling Christmas light kits so that people could decorate their Christmas trees more easily than ever.

1917

But it was [Albert Sadacca](#) who is believed to have really made Christmas tree lights mainstream. The New York teenager had heard about a candlelit tree that burst into flames and started stringing lights for his family's novelty business. Painting the bulbs proved to be the ticket—and one day his business became NOMA Electric Company (National Outfit Manufacturer's Association), the largest Christmas light manufacturer in the world for many years.

1931

The [first Christmas tree went up in Rockefeller Center](#)—only it was a lot smaller than the ones debuted these days. And

instead of an official lighting before a crowd of spectators, this one was orchestrated by construction workers.

1933

Two years later, a lighted tree was placed in Rockefeller Center, sparking the city's annual tradition.



The Christmas tree at Rockefeller Plaza on December 20, 1934. Getty Images

Today

After a rich history, [Christmas trees](#) (both real and artificial) have become the centerpiece of the season—and a classic Christmas tradition that doesn't appear to be going anywhere anytime soon.

November 5 is the day when Britons everywhere set fire to things and let things off. But why?



What is bonfire night?

November 5 – which this year falls on a Saturday – commemorates the failure of the November 1605 Gunpowder Plot by a gang of Roman Catholic activists led by Warwickshire-born Robert Catesby.

When Protestant King James I acceded to the throne, English Catholics had hoped that the persecution they had felt for over 45 years under Queen Elizabeth I would finally end, and

they would be granted the freedom to practice their religion.

When this didn't transpire, a group of conspirators resolved to assassinate the King and his ministers by blowing up the Palace of Westminster during the state opening of Parliament.

Guy (Guido) Fawkes, from York, and his fellow conspirators, having rented out a house close to the Houses of Parliament, managed to smuggle 36 barrels of gunpowder into a cellar of the House of Lords – enough to completely destroy the building.

(Physicists from the Institute of Physics later calculated that the 2,500kg of gunpowder beneath Parliament would have obliterated an area 500 metres from the centre of the explosion).

The scheme began to unravel when an anonymous letter was sent to William Parker, the 4th Baron Monteagle, warning him to avoid the House of Lords.

Guy Fawkes tried and failed to blow up Parliament in the Gunpowder Plot

The letter (which could well have been sent by Lord Monteagle's brother-in-law Francis Tresham), was made public and this led to a search of Westminster Palace in the early hours of November 5.

Explosive expert Fawkes, who had been left in the cellars to set off the fuse, was caught when a group of guards discovered him at the last moment.

Fawkes was arrested, sent to the Tower of London and tortured until he gave up the names of his fellow plotters.

Lord Monteagle was rewarded with £500 plus £200 worth of lands for his service in protecting the crown.

Who were the Gunpowder Plot conspirators?

Guy Fawkes, Thomas Bates, Robert and Thomas Wintour, Thomas Percy, Christopher and John Wright, Francis Tresham, Everard Digby, Ambrose Rookwood, Robert Keyes, Hugh Owen, John Grant and the man who organised the whole plot – Robert Catesby.

The conspirators were all either killed resisting capture or – like Fawkes – tried, convicted, and executed.

The traditional death for traitors in 17th-century England was to be hanged, drawn and quartered in public. But this proved not to be the 35-year-old Fawkes's fate.

As he awaited his punishment on the gallows, Fawkes leapt off the platform to avoid having his testicles cut off, his stomach opened and his guts spilled out before his eyes.

Mercifully for him, he died from a broken neck but his body was subsequently quartered, and his remains were sent to “the four corners of the kingdom” as a warning to others.

The aftermath

Following the failed plot, Parliament declared November 5th a national day of thanksgiving, and the first celebration of it took place in 1606.

Following the plot, King James I sought to control non-conforming English Catholics in England. In May 1606, Parliament passed ‘The Popish Recusants Act’ which required any citizen to take an oath of allegiance denying the Pope's authority over the king.

Observance of the 5th November Act, passed within months of the plot, made church attendance compulsory on that day and by the late 17th Century, the day had gained a reputation for riotousness and disorder and anti-Catholicism. William of

Orange's birthday (November 4th) was also conveniently close.

Guy Fawkes Day today

The Houses of Parliament are still searched by the Yeomen of the Guard before the state opening, which has been held in November since 1928. The idea is to ensure no modern-day Guy Fawkes is hiding in the cellars with a bomb, although it is more ceremonial than serious. And they do it with lanterns.

The cellar that Fawkes tried to blow up no longer exists. In 1834 it was destroyed in a fire which devastated the medieval Houses of Parliament.

Guy Fawkes Day is celebrated in the United Kingdom, and in a number of countries that were formerly part of the British Empire, with fireworks, bonfires and parades. Straw dummies representing Fawkes are tossed on the bonfire, as well as those of contemporary political figures.

Dummies have been burned on bonfires since as long ago as the 13th century, initially to drive away evil spirits. Following the Gunpowder Plot, the focus of the sacrifices switched to Guy Fawkes' treason.

Traditionally, these effigies called 'guys', are carried through the streets in the days leading up to Guy Fawkes Day and children ask passers-by for "a penny for the guy." Today the word 'guy' is a synonym for 'a man' but originally it was a term for an "repulsive, ugly person" in reference to Fawkes. The fireworks represent the explosives that were never used by the plotters.

In Ottery St Mary, south Devon, in a tradition dating from the 17th century, barrels soaked in tar are set alight and carried aloft through parts of the town by residents. Only Otterregians – those born in the town, or who have lived there for most of their lives – may carry a barrel. Lewes, in southeastern

England, is also the site of annual celebration. Guy Fawkes Day there has a distinctly local flavour, involving six bonfire societies whose memberships are grounded in family history stretching back for generations. The only place in the UK that does not celebrate Guy Fawkes Night is his former school St. Peter's in York. They refuse to burn a guy out of respect for one of their own.

At a glance – 7 things you never knew about Guy Fawkes

1. Guy Fawkes did not die from being hung, drawn and quartered:

As he awaited his grisly punishment on the gallows, Fawkes leapt to his death – to avoid the horrors of having his testicles cut off, his stomach opened and his guts spilled out before his eyes. He died from a broken neck.

2. Guy Fawkes was not the Gunpowder Plot's ringleader:

There were 13 conspirators in the plot, which was masterminded by Robert Catesby, a charismatic Catholic figure who had a reputation for speaking out against the English crown. But it was Fawkes who gained notoriety after the plot was foiled, for he was caught after sneaking into the cellar beneath the House of Lords to ignite the explosives.

3. Guy Fawkes won the unlikely admiration of King James I:

Fawkes withstood two full days of torture and expressed his regret at having failed his mission. His steadfast manner earned him the praise of King James, who described Fawkes as possessing "a Roman resolution".

4. Guy Fawkes has an island named after him:

He is one of Britain's most infamous villains, whose effigy has been burned and whose demise has been publicly celebrated for more than four centuries. Yet to the north-west of Santa Cruz Island in the Galapagos Islands, a collection of two uninhabited, crescent-shaped islands is named Isla Guy Fawkes, or Guy Fawkes Island.

5. The Houses of Parliament are still searched once a year to make sure there are no conspirators hiding with explosives:

Before the annual State Opening of Parliament, the Yeomen of the Guard search the Houses of Parliament to make sure

there are no would-be conspirators hiding in the cellars. This has become more of a tradition than a serious anti-terrorist precaution.

6. The cellar that Fawkes tried to blow up no longer exists:
It was destroyed in a fire in 1834 that devastated the medieval Houses of Parliament.
7. The gunpowder would have done little damage to Parliament:
The 36 barrels of gunpowder that Fawkes planted in a cellar below the Houses of Parliament would have been sufficient to raze it to the ground, while causing severe damage to neighbouring buildings. However, some experts now claim that the gunpowder had "decayed", and would not have properly exploded even if ignited.

