

WASC 2034

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' Guy Fawkes  
Gunpowder'  
Guardian





The box and its contents, allegedly linked to the plot by Guy Fawkes (above)  
Main photograph: Garry Weaser

'The fact that we have cannon grade gunpowder, which is still in granular form and capable of analysis, could transform our understanding of the subject'

## 'Guy Fawkes gunpowder' could alter plot for historians

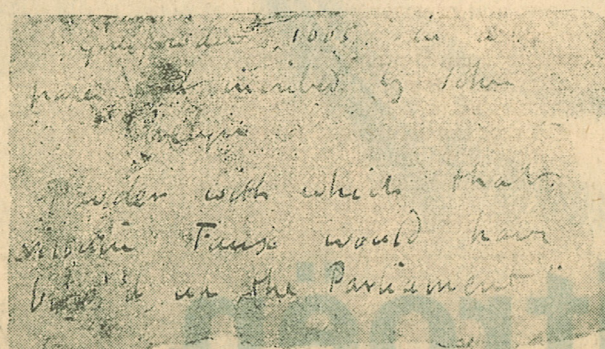
Maev Kennedy Arts and heritage correspondent

A box of gunpowder has been discovered in the basement of the British Library with a handwritten note claiming that it comes from the barrels with which Guy Fawkes hoped to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605.

It was found among the family papers of John Evelyn, the 17th century diarist, a massive archive which came to the library five years ago and is only now being catalogued.

Evelyn's grandfather was the most successful gunpowder manufacturer of his day. The find is of great historical importance even without the Guy Fawkes connection: it may be the oldest gunpowder surviving, apparently in perfect condition, anywhere in Europe.

The box will be removed for safe keeping to the Royal Armouries' artillery collection at Fort Nelson in Hampshire, by



'Gunpowder with which Faux would have blown up parliament'

keeper Nicholas Hall, who described the find as "marvelously exciting".

Meanwhile, staff at the library, reassured that the gunpowder would not actually blow up, were still gingerly examining the contents.

A torn scrap of blue paper, only found yesterday morning, has an inscription in what appears to be 18th century or earlier handwriting, stating:

"Gunpowder 1605 in a paper inscribed by John Evelyn. Powder with which that villain Faux would have blown up the Parliament."

There was also a black edged "mourning" envelope, with an inscription in much more recent handwriting claiming: "Gunpowder. Large package is supposed to be Guy Fawkes' gunpowder".

Underneath that another

hand has added a rueful note in pencil: "But there was none left! WEH 1952"

Historian Antonia Fraser, an authority on the history of the Gunpowder Plot, was able to tell the library that the barrels, found in a cellar under the palace of Westminster, were taken to the Tower of London.

Mr Hall said that the standard procedure of the day would have been to reissue the gunpowder if it was still in good condition, or to sell it for recycling into usable components, such as the valuable saltpetre.

A note in the tower archives recorded the gunpowder as "decayed", but he speculated that samples could have been returned to the Evelyn family, whose fortune came from gunpowder manufacture, as part of the investigation.

The gunpowder, which includes two solid bars and numerous small paper packages, was found packed into an

early 20th century stationery box.

It was only opened a week ago, by a conservator working on the task of cataloguing the archive.

She took one alarmed look and contacted Keith Miller, the library's safety officer, who described it as a "career first", and called in the Royal Armouries.

The gunpowder itself is a unique discovery. "I am not aware of such old gunpowder surviving in original condition in this country or anywhere else," Mr Hall said.

He has test fired bronze and iron cannon, made by the Royal Armouries based on those found on the sunken Tudor warship the Mary Rose, but the use of modern gunpowder made it hard to assess their original fire power accurately.

"The fact that we appear to have cannon grade gunpowder, still in granular form and

capable of analysis, could transform our understanding."

Guy Fawkes was tortured into confession, and hanged drawn and quartered 14 years before John Evelyn, one of the most famous of English diarists, was born in 1620.

However, gunpowder was the foundation of the Evelyn family fortune. His grandfather was one of the earliest and most successful gunpowder manufacturers of the 16th century.

The box appears to contain samples of different grades of gunpowder, carefully labelled with their use, and the type of wood from which the charcoal was prepared.

John Evelyn witnessed and recorded some of the most sensational events in English history, including the death of Charles I and the flight into exile of his family, the death of Oliver Cromwell, the last great plague in London, and the Great Fire of London in 1666.