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Gunpowder Plot

Can you uncover the plans of the plotters?

Key Stages 2-3 | Early modern 1485-1750

Lesson pack



Introduction

Around midnight on Monday 4 November 1605, Sir Thomas Knyvett was ordered to carry out a search of the rooms below the hall in which Parliament, crammed with MPs and Lords, would be opened the following day by King James. There he met a man coming out of a room packed with firewood who gave his name as John Johnson. Knyvett arrested him and searched the wood to find hidden within it 36 barrels of gunpowder, enough to blow up the entire Palace of Westminster and everyone in it. Johnson carried fuses and a timer. He was taken straight to the Tower of London to be questioned.

King James' men had decided to search the Palace because of a letter that Lord Monteagle had received a few days before. Monteagle took the letter straight to the government.

Use this lesson to see if you can unravel the secrets of these original documents about the gunpowder plot.

Suitable for:

KS 2 - 3

Time period:

Early modern
1485-1750

Connections to the Curriculum:

Key stage 1:

An event beyond living memory that is significant nationally; Significant people.

Key stage 3:

The development of Church, state and society in Britain 1509-1745

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Teacher's notes

This lesson contains a History Hook starter video to hook students into the lesson.

This lesson introduces students to the famous plotter's letter sent to Lord Monteaagle warning him not to attend Parliament. It is worth getting students to try and read the document, however transcripts and additional simplified transcripts are also provided. The second source is an extract from the examination of John Johnson, also known as Guy Fawkes. A government proclamation then details the search for the plotters and the last source explains what happened to some of them. Teachers may wish to use the lesson for a group-based activity or pair working. Work on the topic could be extended by the following activities:

Use the evidence to construct a short video drama/documentary investigating the plot with the key characters: King James, Lord Monteaagle, 'John Johnson', Thomas Percy and others. Questions for discussion: What was the significance of the plot for the reign of James I? What could have happened if the plot had succeeded? See external link below. Explore other aspects of the reign of James I using other documents from The National Archives in related resources.

Sources

The documents in this lesson are all taken from SP 14/216, the 'Gunpowder Plot Book', a collection in three volumes, of the most significant government documents relating the plot.

The image of James I and VI used is from KB 27/1522.

Background

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, followers of the Roman Catholic religion in England had faced serious difficulties including harsh fines and the risk of imprisonment or violence. Catholic priests, vital to the practice of the religion, were banned and government spies tried hard to round up those who were secretly working in the kingdom.

When James I came to the throne Catholics in England thought that things would get better for them, but James kept all of Elizabeth's tough laws against Catholics. Very early in his reign a group of Catholic noblemen decided that the King would have to be killed for things to change.

On 26th October 1605 Thomas Ward, a servant of the Catholic Lord Monteagle, was given a letter by an 'unknown man' to give to his master. When Monteagle read the letter he found it was a warning to stay away from the opening of Parliament, due in a few days. He gave the letter directly to the Privy Council and the King in Whitehall.

Although the conspirators knew the letter had been passed to the government they decided to go ahead as planned, trusting that their explosives expert was unknown to the authorities.

After the explosion, the plan was that certain plotters would lead an uprising in the Midlands. They would kidnap Princess Elizabeth, James I's nine year old daughter from her household at Coombe Abbey. Using her as a figurehead, they would rule the country and restore the rights of Catholics. However, their explosives expert was disturbed as he arrived to light the fuse.

The trial of the eight surviving conspirators was held in the same room they had tried to blow up: Westminster Hall, within the Parliament building. All eight were found guilty and by the end of January 1606, all eight had been executed. The plotters were hung, drawn and quartered. Their heads were then set upon poles as a warning to others.

As result of the plot, James I became more popular having survived an attempt on his life. However, it became harder for Catholics to practise their religion or play a part in society.

Background

Finally, there is no doubt that Guy Fawkes is remembered incorrectly as the main plotter, a myth perpetuated as generations of children celebrate Bonfire Night.

External links

[The Gunpowder Plot](#)¹

More background and resources on the plot produced by Parliament.

[Civil War and Revolution](#)²

What if the gunpowder plot had succeeded?

[Visual sources](#)³

Find some more visual sources on the Gunpowder plot held by the [London Metropolitan Archives](#).

¹ <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/parliamentaryauthority/the-gunpowder-plot-of-1605/>

² https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/gunpowder_hutton_01.shtml

³ <https://www.londonpicturearchive.org.uk/search-results?key=VXsiUCI6eyJ0YXgiOjUsInQiOlsiR3VucG93ZGV>

Tasks

History Hook - Starter Activity

[Watch History Hook: Gunpowder Plot here.](#)¹

Source 1: This is the letter sent to Lord Monteagle a few days before parliament.

- What two steps does the writer want Lord Monteagle to take?
- Why does the writer suggest that Lord Monteagle should follow this advice?

Source 2: This is a copy of the examination of John Johnson.

- Who do you think John Johnson might be?
- What did Johnson plan to do to parliament?
- Name one of the other plotters whom Johnson mentions
- Was Johnson worried about any Catholics who might have been there?

Source 3: This is a proclamation (royal demand) made after the plot was discovered.

- Why does the government want Thomas Percy to be captured alive?
- Who else has Thomas Percy tried to blow up apart from the King and Parliament?
- Why do you think the plotters might have wanted to kill these other people?
- Read the description of Thomas Percy. Do you think it is enough information for him to be found?

Source 4: Soldiers tracked Thomas Percy to Holbeach House in Staffordshire. This is a statement given by Thomas Wintour, another one of the plotters who was there:

- Who were the plotters present at the house?
- What happened when the 'company beset' (soldiers attacked) the house?

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6IWQH53f8Y>

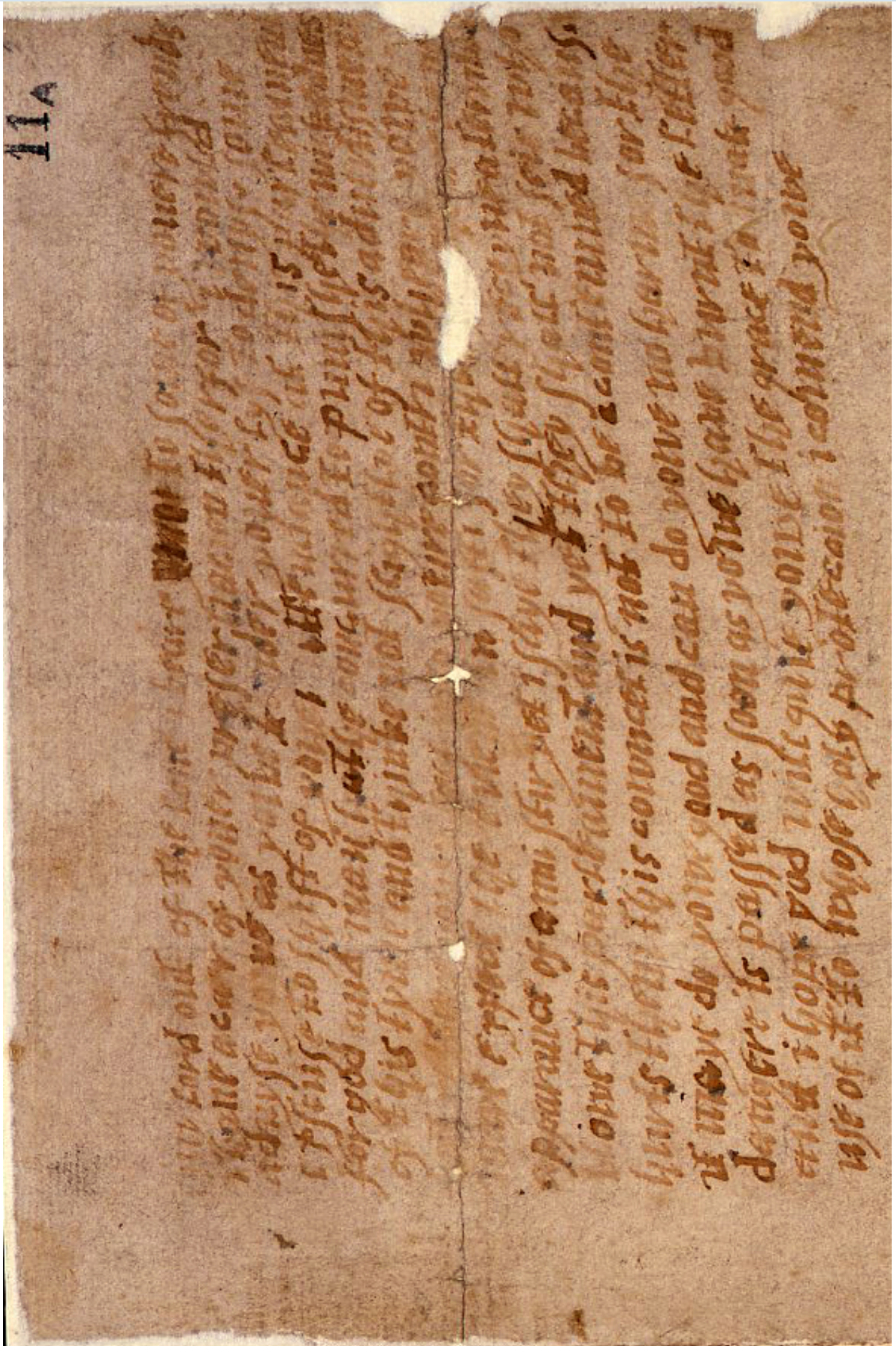
Tasks

Source 5: Guy Fawkes/John Johnson has been questioned and given more information. Read this extract and answer the following questions:

- What was the plotters' plan for Princess Elizabeth?
- Does this support the evidence provided in Source 2?
- Why do you think Fawkes seems to have changed his story?
- Finally, look at all of the sources again and write a report on the plot including the following:
 - Who was involved?
 - What was the plan?
 - Did it have any weaknesses?
 - What was the outcome?

Source 1: The Monteagle Letter, 1605.

Catalogue Ref: SP 14/216/2



Transcript: Source 1

My lord, out of the love I beare to some of youere frends, I have a care of youre preservacion, therefore I would aduysse you as you tender your life to devise some excuse to shift youer attendance at this parliament, for God and man hath concurred to punishe the wickedness of this tyme, and thinke not slightly of this advertisement, but retire yourself into your country, where you may expect the event in safety, for though there be no apparance of anni stir, yet I saye they shall receive a terrible blow this parliament and yet they shall not seie who hurts them this cowncel is not to be contemned because it may do yowe good and can do yowe no harme for the dangere is passed as soon as yowe have burnt the letter and i hope God will give yowe the grace to mak good use of it to whose holy proteccion i comend yowe.

Simplified transcript

My lord, out of the love I have for some of your friends, I want to make sure you are safe. Because of this I would advise you to not attend this sitting of parliament because God and man have agreed to punish the wickedness of this time. Do not think this is a joke, go to your estate in the country where you will be safe, because although there is no sign of any problem yet, this parliament will receive a terrible blow, but they will not see who it is that hurts them. This advice should not be ignored as it may do you some good, and it can do you no harm because the danger will have passed as soon as you have burned this letter. I hope God grants you the grace to make good use of it, and that he protects you.

Glossary

Preservacion : safety

Concurred : agreed

Country : estate

Transcript: Source 2

D. He saith, that he knows not but by generall report and by making ready of the kings barge, that the king was coming thither the first day of this parliament, But confesseth that his purpose was to have blowne upp the upper house whensoever the king was there.

E. And being demanded if his purpose had taken effect, what would have ben done with the Queenes Majesty and her royall issue, saith that if they hadd ben there he wuld not have helped them,

F. And being demanded if the king and his royall issue had ben all taken away whom would have ben published or elected king, Saith Percie never entered into that consultation.

G. And being demanded when the king, his royal issue, the Nobles, Bishops, Judge, and of the principall of the Comons, were all destroyed what government would have ben, Answereth we were not growne to any determination therein, and beeing but a few of them the could not enter into such conforsation, but that the people of themselves would decide a head.

H. He confesseth that he hath knowne Mr Percy two or three years but served him not, but about three moneths before the house was hired as is aforesaid, I. Being demanded what noble men were warned, that they would not be there at that time, Answereth, wuld durst not forewarn them for feare wich should be discovered , And being asked why he would be a partie to any acte that might destroy any that was of his owne relligion, Answereth, we meant principally to have resported [regarded, seen] somme safely, and would have prayed for them.

Simplified transcript

D. He said he did not know, except from rumours and from the Kings barge being made ready, that the king was coming here on the first day of this parliament, but he did confess that his job was to blow up the upper house when the King was there.

E. And, being asked what would have happened to the Queen and her children if his plan

Transcript (cont.): Source 2

had been carried out, he said that if they had been there, he would not have helped them.

F. And, being asked who would replace them if the King and all his heirs had been killed, he said Percy never asked that question.

G. And being asked, when the King, his heirs, the Nobles, Bishops, Judge and the leader of the commons were all destroyed, what kind of government would there be, he answered that the people themselves would elect a head.

H. He confessed that he has known Mr Percy two or three years, but hasn't worked for him, however about three months ago the house was hired as is already mentioned.

I. Being asked what Noble men were advised to stay away from parliament at that time, he answered that he wouldn't dare warn them for fear that they should be discovered. And asked why he would be a part of any act that might kill someone of his own religion [Catholic], he answered that some would have been seen safe and they would have prayed for them.

Source 3: Proclamation for the arrest of Thomas Percy, 5th November 1605. Catalogue Ref: SP 14/73/67

A Proclamation for the search and apprehension of Thomas Percy.

WHereas one Thomas Percy a Gentleman Pensioner to his Maiestie, is discovered to haue bene priuie to one of the most horrible Treasons that euer was contriued, that is, to haue blowen vp this day, while his Maiestie should haue bene in the vpper House of the Parliament, attended with the Queene, the Prince, all his Nobilitie & the Commons, with Gun-powder (for which purpose a great quantitie of Powder was conueyed into a Vault vnder the said Chamber, which is this morning there found) the Chamber where they should bee assembled, which Percy is sithens fled: These are to will and command

mand all our Officers and louing Subiects whatsoeuer, to doe that which we doubt not but they will willingly performe according to the former experience we haue had of their loue and zeale toward vs, That is, to make all diligent search for the said Percy, and him to apprehend by all possible meanes, especially to keepe him aliue, to the end the rest of the Conspirators may be discovered. The said Percy is a tall man, with a great broad beard, a good face, the colour of his beard and head mingled with white haire, but the head more white then the beard, he stoupeth somewhat in the shoulders, well coloured in the face, long footed, small legged.

Giuen at our Pallace of Westminster, the fift day of Nouember, in the third yeere of our Reigne of Great Britaine.

Anno Dom. 1605.

Transcript: Source 3

Whereas one Thomas Percy, a Gentleman Pensioner to his Majesty, is discovered to have been privy to one of the most horrible Treasons that ever was contrived, that is, to have blown up this day, while his Majesty should have been in the upper House of the Parliament, attended with the Queen, the Prince, all his nobility and the Commons with Gunpowder (for which purpose a great quantity of Powder was conveyed into a vault under the said Chamber, which is this morning there found) the Chamber where they should be assembled, which Percy is sithens fled: These are to will and command all our Officers and loving Subjects whatsoever, to do that which we doubt not but they will willingly perform according to the former experience we have had of their love and zeal towards us, That is, to make all diligent search for the said Percy, and to apprehend by all possible means, especially to keep him alive, to the end the rest of the Conspirators may be discovered. The said Percy is a tall man, with a great broad beard, a good face, the colour of his beard and head mingled with white hairs, but the head more white than the beard, he stoopeth somewhat in the shoulders, well coloured in the face, long footed, small legged. Given at our Palace of Westminster, the fifth day of November, in the third year of our reign in Great Britain. Anno Domini 1605

Simplified transcript

Whereas one Thomas Percy, a bodyguard to the King is found to have been involved in one of the most horrible acts of Treason ever planned, that is, while the King, Queen, Prince, all the nobility and the commons were in the upper house, it was to be blown up with gunpowder (and for this purpose a great deal of powder was moved into a cellar under the house which was found there this morning), and Percy has now run away. These commands call our Officers and loyal subjects to willingly search for Percy and arrest him using all possible means, but keeping him alive, so we can discover the rest of the plotters. Percy is a tall man with a great broad beard and a good face. His beard and head is sprinkled with white hairs, however his head is whiter than his beard. He stoops slightly and has a good colour in his face as well as big feet and short legs. Given at the Palace of Westminster, the fifth of November 1605.

Transcript (cont.): Source 3

Glossary

Gentleman Pensioner: Bodyguard

Sithens : now

Source 4: Thomas Wintour's Confession, 23rd of November 1605.

Catalogue Ref: SP 14/216/114

When I came I founde m^r. Catshye &
 reasonable well, m^r. Percy, booye & Wright, m^r.
 Ruckwood, and m^r. Grant. I askede them what they
 resolved to do, they answered, we meane how to dye.
 I sayd againe I would take the same part as they
 did; about eleven of the clocke came the company
 to besett the house, and as I walked into the court
 was sett into the shoulder, w^{ch} lost me the use of
 my arme, the next sett was the s^r Wright
 strucke dead, after him the younger, m^r. Wright,
 and fourthly Ambrose Ruckwood; then sayd m^r.
 Catshye & me standinge before ye door they would be
 enter, stand by m^r. Tom, and we will dye by y^e.
 I. quoth I, I have lost the use of my right arme

and I feare God will cause me to be taken, soe as
 we stood close together m^r. Catshye, m^r. Percy, and
 my self, they two were sett (as farr as I could
 see, w^{ch} one bullett) and then the company entered
 upon me.

Transcript: Source 4

When I came I found Mr. Catesby reasonable well, Mr. Percy, both the Wrights, Mr. Rokewood and Mr. Grant. I asked them what they resolved to do. They answered "We mean here to die". I said again I would take such part as they did. About eleven of the clock came the company to beset the house, and as I walked into the court was shot into the shoulder, which lost me the use of my arm. The next shot was the elder Wright struck; after him the younger Mr. Wright, and fourthly Ambrose Rokewood. Then, said Mr. Catesby to me (standing before the door they were to enter), "Stand by, Mr. Tom, and we will die together." "Sir," quoth I, "I have lost the use of my right arm and I fear that will cause me to be taken." So as we stood close together Mr. Catesby, Mr. Percy and myself, they two were shot, and then the company entered upon me.

Simplified transcript

When I came I found Mr. Catesby reasonably well. Mr Percy, both the Wrights, Mr Rokewood and Mr Grant were also there. I asked them what they planned to do. They answered "We mean to die here". I said again that I would do the same as them. At about eleven o' clock the house was raided by soldiers and as I walked into the courtyard, I was shot in the shoulder, which lost me the use of my arm. The next shot struck the elder Wright, and after him the younger Mr Wright, then fourthly Ambrose Rokewood. Mr Catesby then said to me (standing in front of the door they were about to come through) Stand by Mr Tom, and we will die together." "Sir," I said "I have lost the use of my right arm and think that means I will be captured." So as we stood close together, Mr Catesby and Mr Percy were shot and I was arrested.

Glossary

Quoth : said

Beset : attacked

Source 5: Examination of Guido Fawkes.

Catalogue Ref: SP 14/216

When I came I founde m^r. Catshye &
 reasonable well, m^r. Percy, booye & Wright, m^r.
 Ruckwood, and m^r. Grant. I askede them what they
 resolved to do, they answered, we meane now to dye.
 I sayd againe I would take the surer part as they
 did; about eleven of the clocke came the company
 to besett the house, and as I walked into the court
 was sett into the shoulder, w^{ch} lost me the use of
 my arme, the next sett was the s^r Wright
 strucke dead, after him the younger, m^r. Wright.
 and fourthly Ambrose Ruckwood; then sayd m^r.
 Catshye & me standinge before ye door they would be
 enter, stand by m^r. Tom, and we will dye by y^e.
 J. quoth I, I have lost the use of my right arme

and I feare God will cause me to be taken, soe as
 we stood close together m^r. Catshye, m^r. Percy, and
 my self, they two were sett (as farr as I could
 see, w^{ch} one bullett) and then the company entered
 upon me.

Transcript: Source 5

Forasmuch as they knew not well how they should come by the person of the Duke Charles [the future King Charles I, aged 5], being near London, where they had no forces (if he had not been also blown up) he confesseth that it was resolved among them that, the same day that this detestable act should have been performed, the same day should other of their confederacy have surprised the person of the Lady Elizabeth [the King's eldest daughter, aged 9] and presently have proclaimed her Queen, to which purpose a proclamation was drawn, as well to avow and justify the action, as to have protested against the Union, and in no sort to have meddled with religion therein, and would have protested against all strangers, and this proclamation should have been made in the name of the Lady Elizabeth.

Simplified transcript

They did not know how they would be able to get Duke Charles [son of King James] if he had not also been blown up as they did not have any forces (soldiers) near London. He confessed that it was decided amongst them that, on the same day that this horrible act was carried out, one of their group should kidnap the Lady Elizabeth [eldest daughter of King James] and declare her Queen, and a statement made in her name which justified this step and that it was her wish not to interfere in religion of the country.



Why do our hyperlinks come with footnotes?

Our resources are designed to be printed and used in classrooms, which means hyperlinks aren't always accessible digitally. We include the full link at the bottom of the page so that you can type in the address without distracting from the main text of the lesson materials.

Did you know?

The National Archives Education Service also offers free workshops onsite in Kew and online in your classroom.

Our [Onsite Workshops](#) are available for free here at The National Archives and allow students to experience genuine original documents reflecting over 1000 years of history. From Elizabeth I's signature to the telegrams of the sinking Titanic, students love the wow-factor of being able to see real history on the desk in front of them.

Our [Online Workshops](#) allow our Education Officers to teach through your projector, leading discussions and guiding students through activities based around original documents. All you need is a computer with a projector, webcam and microphone. We'll arrange a test call before your session to check the tech is working.

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