

Bonfire Night.

Penny for the Guy

(A few 'Uncle Joe's' in your pocket)

Remember, remember the fifth of November - went the old nursery rhyme , thinking of that ditty sends me on that well trodden path to times of yore . It's sadly but undeniably true that bonfire night has lost much of its 'glow' it has been greatly diminished by the emergence of Halloween; something almost unheard of in the 1950s apart from its religious significance , 'trick or treat' has largely replaced 'Penny for the Guy' and pumpkins have superseded pomegranates .



Before the Halloween phenomenon 'Bommie night' to children in the excitement stakes was second only to Christmas. The whole 'shebang' started weeks before the big night. Collecting items of every conceivable sort - old furniture , doors ; flock beds- I remember making regular appearances in the early 1950s , no doubt as people started to buy spring interiors ;orange

crates, carpets , anything that would burn and when you think about today old tyres how dangerous was that ! Every 'Bommie' would have at least one which was used as a crown on the wigwam shaped beacon.

Weeks before the big event it seemed like every corner had been commandeered to house a Guy Fawkes , sat in a 'tan-sad' or old pram if wheels were not available then Guy would have to sit on the pavement propped up against a wall or gas lamp .Every passerby would be regaled by 'penny for the Guy' followed very politely by Mr.or Mrs. if you were not sure a lady's marital status ,Miss; you can't risk offending a potential benefactor ! More often than not the youngest of Guy Fawkes's retinue would be encouraged to ask the question, it was obvious even to children that the younger the child the better the response. An old lady from my street ,Mrs Kelly would always give an 'Uncle Joe's' or a piece of 'Cough Candy', the same reward if you ran an errand for her.

Far and away the best pitch was outside a pub failing that a shop - you soon realised that you couldn't just set up stall anywhere the fancy might take you , there would be consequences if you did, ranging from your Guy meeting an early demise or your 'bommie' being 'pogged'

(collapsed) or worse still a rival gang raiding your stash of flammable pieces to take away in triumph to augment their own pile. Weeks before the 5th lads would take it in turn to guard their precious cargo lest rival gangs would come from other streets to help themselves to your hard got treasure .



Money raised from the ' Penny for the Guy ' endeavours would be pooled to buy fireworks and 'Uncle Joe's Mint Balls' it wouldn't be bonfire night without a few' Uncle Joe's' in your pocket ,one enterprising shop gave 4 in a little three cornered bag if you spent half a crown on fireworks;

I remember the notice saying ' sparklers do not count to the total ' . All this in preparation for the big night -and it was a big night .Children for weeks had been looking forward the lighting of the bonfire . It was always a Dad who lit the fire often using paraffin as a accelerant! Imagine that today! Enough to send health and safety officer into a spin like a Catherine Wheel ,this type of firework was particularly liked by girls, it would be

pinned to a gate or fence when ignited would spin at great speed spilling colours of every hue into the night air , in the process leaving a scar on a gate or whatever had been used as a host .Younger children would be satisfied with a sparkler; older boys were obsessed with 'Penny Bangers ' they did exactly as it said on the packet - just make a bang. Boys would find it amusing to startle each other and would find great delight in placing one behind a group of girls to watch the histrionics unfold , quite cruel when you think about it.'

Another cruel aspect of the night as far as poor old Guy Fawkes was concerned, when amid great cheers his effigy is thrown unceremoniously onto the flames to be engulfed in seconds.

I, along with the vast majority of children hadn't a clue what this was meant to symbolise . I think teachers missed a golden opportunity to use the event as history lesson , linking bonfire night with The Gunpowder Plot .'The plan was to blow up The House of Lords during the [State Opening of Parliament](#) on 5th November 1605; it wasn't used at my school, or if it was I must have been too excited to remember , I can (almost) however recall the nursery rhyme in full -

Remember remember the fifth of November
Guy Fawkes, Guy Fawkes, 'twas his intent
To blow up the King and the Parliament
Three score barrels of powder below

Poor old England to overthrow
By God's providence he was catch'd
With a dark lantern and burning match
Holler boys, holler boys, let the bells ring
Holler boys, holler boys, God save the King!

To the more gentle side of the celebration Mothers would make treacle toffee, a must for that night , pomegranates would make a yearly appearance, another treat were potatoes baked in the edges of the fire as were chestnuts , I think older readers, like me will remember how good they tasted ; bizarrely the soot smudged round your mouth seemed to add to the taste !

When I was a child almost every corner shop sold fire-works - separately and in boxes. Better off families with the wherewithal would buy a boxes ,this didn't sit well with boys in the family as they didn't have bangers ; usually a Rocket , a Roman Candle , a Catherine Wheel , a Snow Shower. Traffic Lights and a few others whose names escape me , I can however remember the names on the boxes - Wessex with a silhouette of Guy Fawkes with tall wide brimmed hat looking over his shoulder furtively; I always thought it quite a scary image for children, and of course the old favourites Brocks and Standard . Incidentally bangers were made illegal 1997.

The following day acrid smoke hung over the town , like a wet blanket ,skeletons of mattress and other materials that hadn't burnt in the previous night's infernos, scattered across every piece of spare land. Early risers might even see the drying embers of the fires breathing their last, so to speak. Children would have feeling of anticlimax, the chance to earn extra pocket money from. ' Penny for the Guy' lost for a year. The excitement of the previous weeks gone up like smoke. Still, Christmas to look forward to ,only seven weeks away but to children that seemed an age. Then the realisation that there would be another chance to earn pocket money- Carol Singing!

I am aware that in my younger days the law was not very rigorous regarding the sale of fireworks. The law has been tightened significantly in recent years and in many respects - they may not be sold to anyone under 18 years they must be sold in boxes it is illegal to split and sell separately they may only be sold between- 15 October to 10 November. 26 to 31 December. 3 days before Diwali and Chinese New Year. You must not set off fireworks between 11pm and 7am, except for: Bonfire Night, when the cut off is midnight New Year's Eve, Diwali and Chinese New Year, when the cut off is 1am. I know some people will think these regulations are thought up by killjoys but I think the vast majority think the law should be tightened much further, a view I'm sure would be echoed by all the cats and dogs in Wigan!

