

# Factsheet

## Gunpowder at The Tower of London

- Gunpowder is made from mixing sulphur, charcoal and saltpetre (potassium nitrate). It is thought to have been discovered in Ancient China, where the noise it created was used to ward off spirits and for celebrations, including New Year.
- Years later in England, Roger Bacon, a Franciscan scholar writing in the 1260s, described how gunpowder was still used as a toy for its sound effects.
- Most medieval nations, including England, France and Turkey, have taken credit for linking gunpowder to the gun and its use in weaponry.
- By the 1300s gunpowder was used in weaponry and armies began to have gunpowder specialists. Gunfounders were highly respected, and a core of gunners was retained by the state. There were no standing armies as such at this time.
- In the seventeenth century the Tower of London was the largest store and manufactory of military equipment in the nation (in order to prevent its use against the King). The White Tower was the largest powder store, which included gunpowder. The storage and supply of gunpowder and its ingredients constituted one of the main offices at the Tower. A special 'powderhous' is even reported at the Tower as early as 1461.
- In 1594 hatches were fitted in the roof of the powder-room store in the White Tower so that barrels could be easily hoisted to the ground floor. From the early seventeenth century the Tower also had facilities for testing and proving the explosive strength of gunpowder.
- Although the main store was at the Tower, outsiders could still get hold of gunpowder easily. At the time of the Gunpowder Plot the pay of soldiers was docked for the gunpowder they used and hence they would sometimes try to make money by selling some of their surplus undercover. Also, although gunpowder was supposed to be stored in locked vaults, this was not always the case.

- Gunpowder is fairly sensitive to travel and external conditions and in the case of Guy Fawkes some of the gunpowder put aside for the blast was found to be damp and decayed by the time November arrived, and hence may not all have exploded, even if the plotters had succeed in their attempt.