

## **Piers Gaveston, 1st Earl of Cornwall. (c1284 to 19 June 1312)**

**By Barry Murphy**

This part of History is not often put into text. I have gathered notes from many places and put them down in date order. The life of Piers Gaveston and notes on the man can be found on many websites, etc. but this has been put in the way that explains what happened in his life, the surroundings in which he grew up, and the way his life impacted on our history.

To find out about this man we must first look at the Royal King of that time. King Edward I (born 1239) spent many of his years in battles with the Welsh and the Scots. As King Edward I gained land by war he would have a castle built to keep the public of the area at bay and have somewhere to govern from. Caernarfon, being one of the many built by Edward, was the birth place of his first son, Edward II (April 25th 1284). For many of those years a Gascon Knight stood by his side. His name was Arnaud de Gabaston (father of Piers). Arnaud, had been held hostage a number of times for political reasons by Philip IV of France, and had fled to England with his son in 1297. Piers' mother "Claramonde" died in 1287.

Warwick castle was already being built by this time on the order of Ethelfleda, daughter of Alfred the Great. In 914AD she ordered the building of a 'burh' or an earthen rampart to protect the small hilltop settlement from Danish invaders. And in 1260 stone replaces wood in castle construction.

In 1290 Edward's first wife, Eleanor, died in Nottinghamshire. Her body was taken to London and a cross erected at each stop along the journey - Geddington, Hardington, Waltham, and the most famous at Charring Cross.

Arnaud's son (Piers) being in his teens, impressed the King so much with his strength, talent and ambition that the King appointed him to serve as a model for his son, Edward II, at Caernarfon.

In 1301 Edward makes his son the Prince of Wales, the title placed on every first born son of the monarchy ever since.

In 1304 Edward I awarded Gaveston the wardship of Roger Mortimer of Wigmore, after the death of Roger's father, on the request of young Edward, Prince of Wales. This put Gaveston in charge of Mortimer's possessions, and served as proof of the king's confidence in his son's companion. Roger was another young companion of the Prince. More about Roger Mortimer later.

The prince was trained in warfare and statecraft. He took part in several Scottish campaigns, but all his father's efforts could not prevent him acquiring the habits of extravagance and the way the young prince looked after Piers. He had so little confidence in himself that he was always in the hands of some favourite who possessed a stronger will than his own. In the early years Gaveston held this role, The Prince's partiality for Gaveston started making him act unlike a royal Prince, and in the end the King had little choice but to exile Piers for corrupting his son.

He was recalled from exile a few months later after the king's death led to the prince's accession to King Edward II (July 7 1307).

Edward II arranged Piers' marriage to his niece, Margaret de Clare, (born October 12th 1292). The marriage took place at Berkhamsted Castle. This was the favoured residence of Edward II and he granted the Castle to Piers in 1309. Margaret was the second daughter and third child of Gilbert the Red - Earl of Gloucester (1243 -1295) and Joan of Acre (1272 - 1307).

1307 was an eventful year for Margaret:

Her mother Joan died on 23 April, and her grandfather Edward I on 7 July.

It's possible that she was only fifteen at marriage to Gaveston. The marriage took place on 1st November 1307. The charter bestowed upon Piers the Earldom of Cornwall. Piers had an income of £4,000, making him one of the richest men in the country, and now linked to the Royal family.

Having this wealth and popularity with the new King made him very disliked with the great lords and barons of the time. And on December 26th 1307, Edward took an extraordinary step in appointing him Custos Regni (Keeper of the Realm or Regent), while he went to France to marry Isabella. (She was the youngest surviving child and only surviving daughter of Philip IV of France.)

A vita of the time spoke "An astonishing thing that he who had lately been in exile and out-cast from England should now be made a Guardian of the Realm."

Philip of France was deeply in debt to the Knights Templar at this time, whose existence was tied closely to the Crusades. Rumours about the Templars' secret initiation ceremony created mistrust, and having lost the Holy Land, King Philip IV of France took advantage of the situation. He ordered the arrest of all the Knights Templar in France. On Friday the 13th October 1307 (the real reason the day carries bad luck) all the Templars in France were arrested on a variety of charges and accusations. The trials of the Templars lasted from that date through until March 19th 1308. (Philip had the last Master of the Templars, Jacques de Molay, burned at the stake in 1314.)

On his return to England with the now Queen Isabella, him being 23 and Isabella just turning 12, he caused a scandal by rushing up to Piers at Dover, hugging and kissing him repeatedly. This and his antics at the King's coronation strengthened the already bad feeling people had towards Piers. When the parliament met a few days later at Westminster, a powerful confederation of earls and barons demanded Piers exiled. They were led by Henry de Lacy, Earl of Lincoln, who was the most senior of Earls, and who had deep concerns about the King's obsession with Piers.

Whilst in France, Philip had asked Edward to arrest the Templars in England as he had done. Edward at first refused to believe the accusations. But after the intercession of Pope Clement V, King Edward ordered the seizure of members on January 8th 1308. Most of the Templars acknowledged that their belief that the Order's Master could give absolution was heretical,

and were then reconciled with the church. However, William de la More refused to do so, and remained a prisoner in the Tower of London until his death.

The powerful earls and barons were putting pressure on Edward to exile Piers. Edward agreed to exile Piers on the 18th May 1308. It had taken him many months to give in, but he was facing civil war. Edward came up with a plan. On 16th June Edward exiled Piers to Ireland, but made him Lord Lieutenant of Ireland before he left, giving Piers considerable comfort whilst in exile. Edward went to Bristol to see him off to Ireland. He sailed on 28th June.

Piers stopped in Ireland for almost a year, returning to England on or about the 27th June 1309, and by the 5th August was re-granted his Earldom of Cornwall. According to letters, tension ran high in England around this time. On the 18th October, Edward summoned parliament, but a number of earls refused to attend, giving Piers' presence as their reason. He tried again, summoning them to York on the 8th February 1310. Again the earls refused, stating that Gaveston "their chief enemy", who had set the baronage and the realm in uproar, was by the King's side.

By August of 1310 Edward, with wife Isabella, along with Piers and wife Margaret, were in Scotland. The Ordainers (like the government today) were making reforms and bills giving powers to others in high ranking places. To avoid the Ordainers rather than have any desire to fight in Scotland, they spent almost a year there. They were joined by the Earls of Gloucester and Surrey. Surrey was one of only three earls who was not an Ordainer.

By the summer of 1311 the Ordainers were ready with their reforms, and had summoned Edward down from the north.

He left Piers and his wife Margaret in the stronghold of Bamburgh, for their safety. Margaret would have been pregnant by this time.

Slowly Edward came south to meet them. The Ordainers, all forty one of them, met at parliament on the 16th August, and to his horror Edward saw severe limitations placed on his power. He protested and pleaded that some were fabricated out of spite and would be disadvantageous to him. But the one that horrified him the most was the twentieth:

This quote is taken from the vita:

"Piers Gaveston has led the King astray, counselled him badly and persuaded him deceitfully and in many ways, as to do evil.... Piers Gaveston, as a public enemy of the King and Kingdom, shall be utterly cast out and exiled, not only from England, but Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Gascony, and from every land as well beyond the sea as on this side of the sea, subject to the lordship of the King of England, forever, and without return."

Gaveston was exiled for a third time. It is more than likely that he went to Flanders, but only stayed for a short time before heading back to England. Edward and Piers met at York in mid-January 1312 to see Piers' new born child, Joan. Still in exile, The king took a great risk to be with him. And they were not alone; Pembroke, who was not among the Ordainers, and had been sympathetic to the king in the past, was also there.

Joan Gaveston (Piers' daughter) was born in York around the 12th January 1312. Queen Isabella joined them a day or two after. She and Edward II conceived Edward III around this time (Edward of Windsor).

On the 9th June 1312 at Deddington in Oxfordshire, Pembroke left Piers at the rectory while he himself went to visit his wife. When Warwick (Guy de Beauchamp, 10th Earl of Warwick) found out about Gaveston's whereabouts, he rode out immediately to capture him.

The next morning Warwick appeared at the rectory and took Piers captive, returning with him to his castle at Warwick. Piers was held there until the 19th June 1312, when before an assembly of barons, including Warwick, Lancaster, Hereford, and Arundel, was condemned to death for violating the terms of the ordinances. He was taken out on the road towards Kenilworth as far as Blacklow Hill, where two Welshmen ran him through with a sword, before beheading him. He was 28 years old.

### **Piers Gaveston 1284 - 1312.**

It has not been documented as to where King Edward was when the news came of Piers' death. But as Piers was under excommunication, his body was not buried straight away. A group of friars took his body to Oxford, where it lay until the king had secured a papal absolution on the 2nd January 1315. Then he held a lavish ceremony followed by the body being buried at Kings Langley.

Edward also helped Gaveston's widow, Margaret. She was given an income of £1,333; one of the largest incomes of that time, and took her into his own household.

Little Joan Gaveston grew up at Amesbury Priory in accordance with Piers' wishes. The king tried to find a suitable marriage for Joan, but these arrangements came to nothing when Joan died in 1325 at the age of thirteen.

One might think that this is the end to this little piece in history, but there is always more....

King Edward II's son was born at Windsor Castle on 13th November 1312, Edward of Windsor, later to become King Edward III. At only four days old he was granted the name Earl of Chester.

Following Gaveston's death, the King found new favour to his nephew-by-marriage (Hugh Despencer the Younger).

Hugh Despenser became a royal courtier in 1318. He manoeuvred himself into the affections of King Edward. This was much to the dismay of the barons as they saw him both taking their rightful places at court and being a worse version of Gaveston. The barons were worried at the privileges Edward lavished upon him. Especially when the younger Despenser began in 1318 to proclaim for himself the Earldom of Gloucester. This started what is now known as The Despenser wars.

Philip of France had the last Grand Master of the Templars, Jacques de Molay, burned at the stake in 1314. As he burned in agony he invited both Philip and The Pope to join him within a year. Philip, King of France, died of a heart attack whilst on a hunt. And Pope (Clement V) had cancer, was chronically ill, and also died within that year.

It is said that with the pope's death, while his body was lying in state, a thunderstorm developed during the night and lightning struck the church where his body lay, igniting the building. The fire was so intense that when it was extinguished, the body of Pope Clement V was almost destroyed. Perhaps adding to myths and legends that surround the Templar knights. Philip of France was succeeded by his son "Louis X of France".

By 1325, Isabella's marriage to Edward II was almost over, She was facing increasing pressure from Hugh Despenser the younger, Edward's new royal favourite. And with her lands in England seized, Isabella began to pursue other options. When her brother, King Charles IV of France, seized Edward's French possessions in 1325, she returned to France, initially as a delegate of the King charged with negotiating peace between the two countries. However, while over there, she started an affair with the exiled Roger Mortimer. In a tactical error by Edward, he also sent his son there. Now having her son by her side, Isabella declared that she would not return to England until Despenser was removed.

Roger Mortimer was imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1322 for having led the Marcher Lords in a revolt against Edward, in what was known as the Despenser wars, but escaped and fled to France. The younger Despenser was granted the lands belonging to him.

Isabella and Mortimer returned to England with an army to oust Edward, redeem the trust of the people and take the throne. Their army quickly re-gained land and soon the King's army fled.

Edward II was at Kenilworth Castle when the sweeping army of his wife, Isabella, and Mortimer took control of the Realm.

Whilst at Kenilworth Castle on the On 20th January 1327 Edward II was informed of the charges brought against him:

1. The King was guilty of incompetence, allowing others to govern him to the detriment of the people and Church.
2. Not listening to good advice and pursuing occupations unbecoming to a monarch.
3. Losing Scotland and lands in Gascony and Ireland through failure of effective governance.
4. Damaging the Church and imprisoning its representatives.
5. Allowing nobles to be killed, disinherited, imprisoned and exiled.
6. Failing to ensure fair justice, instead governing for profit and allowing others to do likewise.
7. Fleeing in the company of a notorious enemy of the realm (Gaveston), leaving it without government, and thereby losing the faith and trust of his people.

On 3 April, Edward II was removed from Kenilworth and entrusted to the custody of two subordinates of Mortimer, then later imprisoned at Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire where, it was generally believed, he was murdered by an agent of Isabella and Mortimer on 11th October 1327.

Edward was 43 years old.

Following the announcement of the king's death, the rule of Isabella and Mortimer did not last long. When Edward III came of age in 1330 he charged Mortimer with fourteen accounts of treason, most significantly the murder of his father, Edward II. Roger Mortimer was executed. He spared his mother and gave her a generous allowance but ensured that she retired from public life. It is said that Cheylesmore Manor in Coventry was owned by Queen Isabella, and it may be that this is where she retired to. The fact is that she died at Hertford on 23rd August 1358.

In 1821 on Blacklow Hill near Warwick, Bertie Greatheed (the son of Samuel Greatheed of Guy's Cliffe) completed a project that he had been proposing for some time. He erected a stone cross to mark the execution site of Piers Gaveston, 1st Earl of Cornwall.

The words he wrote on the stone: -

"In the Hollow of this Rock, was beheaded, on the 1st Day of July 1312,  
By barons lawless as himself, PIERS GAVESTON, Earl of Cornwall;  
The Minion of a hateful King. In Life and Death. A memorable instance of misrule."

(He got the date wrong.)

The cross now stands in woodlands on private land, and is not recognised as English Heritage.