

## **A KING'S FRIEND BETRAYED**

In 1977 BBC Radio 4 ran a long series on the history of the monarchy for Silver Jubilee Year. The first episode on Edward II and the death of his friend Piers Gaveston is a reminder of Deddington's most dramatic association with the English crown.

Edward, tall and handsome, looked every inch the king, yet he was more fitted for the life of an eccentric idle. He preferred sport to politics and hanging around an armourer's workshop to fighting in tournaments. Bored by state business, he soon lost his grip on the country and earned the angry contempt of the aristocracy because he favoured French-born playboys. Chief among them was the arrogant, foppish but talented Gaveston. In the spring of 1312 he and the king were on the run from a baronial army in the north. Piers was holed up in Scarborough Castle, Edward trying to recruit supporters in York. On 19 May, Piers Gaveston surrendered to the Earl of Pembroke on condition he be allowed to plead his case before Parliament. Pembroke gave his oath to the terms on behalf of the whole baronial faction. Gaveston was to be held in Wallingford Castle until Parliament could be convened. He was escorted south by Pembroke.

On 9 June the company reached Deddington and Gaveston, with a small guard, was lodged in Castle House (not the castle which even then was badly dilapidated!). The earl rode on to Bampton where his wife was staying. That was a bad mistake. Pembroke, a man of honour, felt bound by his oath; worse still the king, if he ever recovered his power, would hold him responsible for the favourite's safety. Other barons had neither scruples nor interest in keeping Piers safe. Guy, Earl of Warwick, was one of his bitterest enemies. When a horseman cantered under the gates of Warwick Castle with the news that Piers was alone in Deddington, the angry earl seized his opportunity. He and a small force were on the road to Banbury and the south well before dawn.

Early the next morning, Saturday 10 June, Gaveston was awakened by his guard to see a posse of horsemen led by Warwick taking up position round the house. There was no escape from the trap. Warwick himself rode up and bellowed at the windows: 'Get up, traitor, you are taken!' His 'guard' had melted away and Piers, having thrown on some clothes, stumbled barefoot and bare headed, terrified down the stairs. Without ceremony the royal favourite, once the kingdom's most powerful lord, was forced to trudge back up the road the way he had ridden the day before. He was half way to Warwick before his new captors gave him a horse. His destination was a dungeon in Warwick Castle. On Monday, 19 June, he was dragged out to Blacklow Hill on the road between Warwick and Kenilworth, there to be done to death.

London and Reading chroniclers give a detailed account of the capture of Piers Gaveston at Deddington. Neither makes any mention of the reactions of the local inhabitants. It is hardly surprising. When armed men were riding the streets sensible stayed abed.

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