

King Edward Plantagenet II King of England



Born: 25 Apr 1284 Carnarvon Castle, WALES

Married: Isabelle Capet

Died: 21 Sep 1327 Berkeley, ENG

Parents: King Edward I Plantagenet & Eleanor of Castile

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Edward II, (April 25, 1284 – September 21, 1327?) of Caernarfon, was King of England from 1307 until deposed in January 1327. His tendency to ignore his nobility in favour of low-born favourites led to constant political unrest and his eventual deposition. Edward is perhaps best remembered for his supposed murder and his alleged homosexuality.

Edward II was the first monarch to establish colleges in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge; he founded Cambridge's King's Hall in 1317 and gave Oxford's Oriel College its royal charter in 1326. Both colleges received the favour of Edward's son, Edward III, who confirmed Oriel's charter in 1327 and refounded King's Hall in 1337.

Prince of Wales

The fourth son of Edward I of England by his first wife Eleanor of Castile, Edward II was born at Caernarfon Castle. He was the first English prince to hold the title of the Prince of Wales, which was formalized by the Lincoln Parliament of February 7, 1301.

The story that his father presented Edward II as a newborn to the Welsh as their future native prince is unfounded (the Welsh would have asked the King to give them a prince that spoke Welsh, and he would have answered he would give them a prince that spoke no English at all); the story first appeared in the work of 16th century Welsh "antiquary" David Powel^[citation needed].

Edward became heir at just a few months old, following the death of his elder brother Alphonso. His father, a notable military leader, trained his heir in warfare and statecraft starting in his childhood, yet the young Edward preferred boating and craftsman work – activities thought beneath kings at the time.

It has been hypothesized^[who?] that Edward's love for "low brow" activities developed because of his overbearing, ruthless father. The prince took part in several Scots campaigns, but despite these martial engagements, "all his father's efforts could not prevent his acquiring the habits of extravagance and frivolity which he retained all through his life".^[cite this quote] The king attributed his son's preferences to his strong attachment to Piers Gaveston, a Gascon knight, and Edward I exiled Gaveston from court after Prince Edward attempted to bestow his friend with a title reserved for royalty. (Ironically, it was the king who had originally chosen Gaveston to be a suitable friend for his son, in 1298 due to his wit, courtesy

and abilities.) Then Edward I died on July 7, 1307 en route to yet another campaign against the Scots, a war that became the hallmark of his reign. Indeed, Edward had requested that his son "boil [his] body, extract the bones and carry them with the army until the scots had been subdued." but his son ignored the request and had his father buried in Westminster Abbey with the epitaph "Here lies Edward I, the Hammer of the Scots." (Hudson & Clark 1978:46). Edward II immediately recalled Gaveston and withdrew from the Scottish campaign that year.

King of England

Edward was as physically impressive as his father, yet he lacked the drive and ambition of his forebear. It was written that Edward II was "the first king after the Conquest who was not a man of business".^[cite this quote] His main interest was in entertainment, though he also took pleasure in athletics and mechanical crafts. He had been so dominated by his father that he had little confidence in himself, and was often in the hands of a court favourite with a stronger will than his own.

On January 25, 1308, Edward married Isabella of France, the daughter of King Philip IV of France, "Philip the Fair," and sister to three French kings. The marriage was doomed to failure almost from the beginning. Isabella was frequently neglected by her husband, who spent much of his time conspiring with his favourites regarding how to limit the powers of the Peerage in order to consolidate his father's legacy for himself. Nevertheless, their marriage produced two sons, Edward (1312–1377), who would succeed his father on the throne as Edward III, and John of Eltham, Earl of Cornwall (1316–1336), and two daughters, Eleanor (1318–1355) and Joanna (1321–1362), wife of David II of Scotland. Edward had also fathered at least one illegitimate son, Adam FitzRoy, who accompanied his father in the Scottish campaigns of 1322 and died on 18 September 1322.

War with the Barons

When Edward travelled to the northern French city of Boulogne to marry Isabella, he left his friend and counsellor Gaveston to act as regent. Gaveston also received the earldom of Cornwall and the hand of the king's niece, Margaret of Gloucester; these proved to be costly honours.

Various barons grew resentful of Gaveston, and insisted on his banishment through the Ordinances of 1311. Edward recalled his friend, but in 1312, Gaveston was executed by the Earl of Lancaster and his allies, who claimed that Gaveston led the king to folly. Gaveston was run through and beheaded on Blacklow Hill, outside the small village of Leek Wootton, where a monument called Gaveston's Cross still stands today.

Immediately following, Edward focused on the destruction of those who had betrayed him, while the barons themselves lost impetus (with Gaveston dead, they saw little need to continue). By mid-July, Aymer de Valence, 2nd Earl of Pembroke was advising the king to make war on the barons who, unwilling to risk their lives, entered negotiations in September 1312. In October, the Earls of Lancaster, Warwick, Arundel and Hereford begged Edward's pardon.

Conflict with Scotland

During this period, Robert the Bruce was steadily re-conquering Scotland. Each campaign begun by Edward, from 1307 to 1314, ended in Robert's clawing back more of the land that Edward I had taken during his long reign. Robert's military successes against Edward II were due to a number of factors, not the least of which was the Scottish King's strategy. He used small forces to trap an invading English army, he took castles by stealth to preserve his troops and he used the land itself as a weapon against Edward by attacking quickly and then disappearing into the hills before facing the superior numbers of the English. Castle by castle, Robert the Bruce rebuilt Scotland and united the country against its

common enemy. Indeed, Robert is quoted as saying that he feared more the dead Edward I than the living Edward II. Thus, by June 1314, only Stirling Castle and Berwick remained under English control.

On 23 June 1314, Edward and his army of 20,000 foot soldiers and 3000 cavalry faced Robert and his army of foot soldiers and farmers wielding 14 foot long pikes. Edward knew he had to keep the critical stronghold of Stirling Castle if there was to be any chance for English military success. The castle, however, was under a constant state of siege, and the English commander, Sir Phillip de Mowbray, had advised Edward that he would surrender the castle to the Scots unless Edward arrived by June 24, 1314, to relieve the siege. Edward could not afford to lose his last forward castle in Scotland. He decided therefore to gamble his entire army to break the siege and force the Scots to a final battle by putting its army into the field.

However, Edward had made a serious mistake in thinking that his vastly superior numbers alone would provide enough of a strategic advantage to defeat the Scots. Robert not only had the advantage of prior warning, as he knew the actual day that Edward would come north and fight, he also had the time to choose the field of battle most advantageous to the Scots and their style of combat. As Edward moved forward on the main road to Stirling, Robert placed his army on either side of the road north, one in the dense woods and the other placed on a bend on the river, a spot hard for the invading army to see. Robert also ordered his men to dig potholes and cover them with bracken in order to help break any cavalry charge.

By contrast, Edward did not issue his writs of service, calling upon 21,540 men, until May 27, 1314. Worse, his army was ill-disciplined and had seen little success in eight years of campaigns. On the eve of battle, he decided to move his entire army at night and placed it in a marshy area, with its cavalry laid out in nine squadrons in front of the foot soldiers. The following battle, the Battle of Bannockburn, is considered by contemporary scholars to be the worst defeat sustained by the English since the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

Tactics similar to Robert's were employed by victorious English armies against the French in later centuries, partly as a direct result of the enduring decisiveness of the Scots' victory. A young Henry V of England would use this exact tactic against French cavalry in a key battle on the fields of Agincourt in 1415, winning the day and the war against France.

'Rule' of the Despensers

Following Gaveston's death, the king increased favour to his nephew-by-marriage (who was also Gaveston's brother-in-law), Hugh Despenser the Younger. But, as with Gaveston, the barons were indignant at the privileges Edward lavished upon the Despenser father and son, especially when the younger Despenser began in 1318 to strive to procure for himself the earldom of Gloucester and the lands associated with it.

By 1320, the situation in England was again becoming dangerously unstable. Edward ignored laws of the land in favour of Despenser: when Lord de Braose of Gower sold his lordship to his son-in-law (an action entirely lawful in the Welsh Marches), Despenser demanded that the King grant Gower to him instead. The king, against all laws, then confiscated Gower from the purchaser and offered it to Despenser; in doing so, he invoked the fury of most of the barons. In 1321, the Earl of Hereford, along with the Earl of Lancaster and others, took up arms against the Despenser family, and the King was forced into an agreement with the barons. On 14 August at Westminster Hall, accompanied by the Earls of Pembroke and Richmond, the king declared the Despenser father and son both banished.

The victory of the barons proved their undoing. With the removal of the Despensers, many nobles, regardless of previous affiliation, now attempted to move into the vacuum left by the two. Hoping to win Edward's favour, these nobles were willing to aid the king in his revenge against the barons and thus increase their own wealth and power. In following campaigns, many of the king's opponents were murdered, the Earl of Lancaster being beheaded in the presence of Edward himself.

With all opposition crushed, the king and the Despensers were left the unquestioned masters of England. At the York Parliament of 1322, Edward issued a statute which revoked all previous ordinances designed to limit his power and to prevent any further encroachment upon it. The king would no longer be subject to the will of Parliament, and the Lords, Prelates, and Commons were to suffer his will in silence. Parliament degenerated into a mere advisory council.

Isabella leaves England

A dispute between France and England broke out over Edward's refusal to pay homage to the French king for the territory of Gascony. After several bungled attempts to regain the territory, Edward sent his wife, Isabella, to negotiate peace terms.

Overjoyed, Isabella arrived in France in March 1325. She was now able to visit her family and native land as well as escape the Despensers and the king, all of whom she now detested.

On May 31, 1325, Isabella agreed to a peace treaty, favouring France and requiring Edward to pay homage in France to Charles; but Edward decided instead to send his son to pay homage.

This proved a gross tactical error, and helped to bring about the ruin of both Edward and the Despensers as Isabella, now that she had her son with her, declared that she would not return to England until Despenser was removed.

Invasion by Isabella and Mortimer

When Isabella's retinue (loyal to Edward, and ordered back to England by Isabella) returned to the English Court on 23 December, they brought further shocking news for the king: Isabella had formed a liaison with Roger Mortimer in Paris and they were now plotting an invasion of England.

Edward now prepared for invasion, but was betrayed by others close to him: his son refused to leave his mother (claiming that he wanted to remain with her during her unease and unhappiness); his brother, the Earl of Kent, married Mortimer's cousin, Margaret Wake; other nobles, such as John de Cromwell and the Earl of Richmond, also chose to remain with Mortimer.

In September 1326, Mortimer and Isabella invaded England. Edward was amazed by their small numbers of soldiers, and immediately attempted to levy an immense army to crush them. However, a large number of men refused to fight Mortimer and the Queen; Henry of Lancaster, for example, was not even summoned by the king, and he showed his loyalties by raising an army, seizing a cache of Despenser treasure from Leicester Abbey, and marching south to join Mortimer.

The invasion swiftly had too much force and support to be stemmed. As a result, the army the king had ordered failed to emerge and both Edward and Despenser were left isolated. They abandoned London on 1 October, leaving the city to fall into disorder. The king first took refuge in Gloucester and then fled to South Wales in order to make a defence in Despenser's lands. However, Edward was unable to rally an army, and on October 31, he was abandoned by his servants, leaving him with only Despenser and a few retainers.

On October 27, the elder Despenser was accused of encouraging the illegal government of his son, enriching himself at the expense of others, despoiling the Church, and taking part in the illegal execution of the Earl of Lancaster. He was hanged and beheaded at the Bristol Gallows. Henry of Lancaster was then sent to Wales in order to fetch the King and the younger Despenser; on November 16 he caught Edward, Despenser and their soldiers in the open country near Tonypandy, where a plaque now commemorates the event. The soldiers were released and Despenser was sent to Isabella at Hereford whilst the king was taken by Lancaster himself to Kenilworth.

End of the Despencers

Reprisals against Edward's allies began immediately thereafter. The Earl of Arundel, Sir Edmund Fitz Alan^[1], an old enemy of Roger Mortimer, was beheaded; this was followed by the trial and execution of Despenser.

Despenser was brutally executed and a huge crowd gathered in anticipation at seeing him die. They dragged him from his horse, stripped him, and scrawled Biblical verses against corruption and arrogance on his skin. They then led him into the city, presenting him in the market square to Roger, Isabella, and the Lancastrians. He was then condemned to hang as a thief, be castrated, and then be drawn and quartered as a traitor, his quarters to be dispersed through England.

Abdication

With the King imprisoned, Mortimer and the Queen faced the problem of what to do with him. The simplest solution would be execution: his titles would then pass to Edward of Windsor, whom Isabella could control, while it would also prevent the possibility of his being restored. Execution would require the King to be tried and convicted of treason: and while most Lords agreed that Edward had failed to show due attention to his country, several Prelates argued that, appointed by God, the King could not be legally deposed or executed; if this happened, they said, God would punish the country. Thus, at first, it was decided to have Edward imprisoned for life instead.

However, the fact remained that the legality of power still lay with the King. Isabella had been given the Great Seal, and was using it to rule in the names of the King, herself, and their son as appropriate; nonetheless, these actions were illegal, and could at any moment be challenged.

In these circumstances, Parliament chose to act as an authority above the King. Representatives of the House of Commons were summoned, and debates began. The Archbishop of York and others declared themselves fearful of the London mob, loyal to Roger Mortimer. Others wanted the King to speak in Parliament and openly abdicate, rather than be deposed by the Queen and her General. Mortimer responded by commanding the Mayor of London, Richard de Bethune, to write to Parliament, asking them to go to the Guildhall to swear an oath to protect the Queen and Prince Edward, and to depose the King. Mortimer then called the great lords to a secret meeting that night, at which they gave their unanimous support to the deposition of the King.

Eventually Parliament agreed to remove the King. However, for all that Parliament had agreed that the King should no longer rule, they had not deposed him. Rather, their decision made, Edward was asked to accept it.

On January 20, Edward II was informed at Kenilworth Castle of the charges brought against him. The King was guilty of incompetence; allowing others to govern him to the detriment of the people and Church; not listening to good advice and pursuing occupations unbecoming to a monarch; having lost Scotland and lands in Gascony and Ireland through failure of effective governance; damaging the Church, and imprisoning its representatives; allowing nobles to be killed, disinherited, imprisoned and exiled; failing to ensure fair justice, instead governing for profit and allowing others to do likewise; and of fleeing in the company of a notorious enemy of the realm, leaving it without government, and thereby losing the faith and trust of his people. Edward, profoundly shocked by this judgement, wept while listening. He was then offered a choice: he might abdicate in favour of his son; or he might resist, and relinquish the throne to one not of royal blood, but experienced in government - this, presumably, being Roger Mortimer. The King, lamenting that his people had so hated his rule, agreed that if the people would accept his son, he would abdicate in his favour. The lords, through the person of Sir William Trussel, then renounced their homage to him, and the reign of Edward II ended.

The abdication was announced and recorded in London on January 24, and the following day was proclaimed the first of the reign of Edward III - who, at 14, was still controlled by Isabella and Mortimer. The former King Edward remained imprisoned.

Death

Edward II's tomb at Gloucester Cathedral

The government of Isabella and Mortimer was so precarious that they dared not leave the deposed king in the hands of their political enemies. On April 3, Edward II was removed from Kenilworth and entrusted to the custody of two dependents of Mortimer, then later imprisoned at Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire where, it is generally believed, he was murdered by an agent of Isabella and Mortimer.

The suspicion was elaborated in a later history by Sir Thomas More: -

On the night of October 11 while lying in on a bed [the king] was suddenly seized and, while a great mattress... weighed him down and suffocated him, a plumber's iron, heated intensely hot, was introduced through a tube into his secret private parts so that it burned the inner portions beyond the intestines.

It was rumoured that Edward had been killed by the insertion of a piece of copper into his rectum (later a red-hot iron rod, as in the supposed murder of Edmund Ironside). Murder in this manner would have appeared a natural death, as a metal tube would have been inserted into the anus first, thus allowing the iron rod to penetrate the entrails without leaving a burn on the buttocks.

According to Norman F. Cantor (In the Wake of the Plague, p. 75):

This savagery partly reflected hostility on the part of the Church and other opinion-makers to the king's homosexuality and his favoritism towards his young French male lover, but it also reflected the general malaise, anger, and pessimism of the new age of global cooling.

It should be noted that this gruesome account is uncorroborated by any contemporary source and no-one writing in the 14th century knew exactly what had happened to Edward II. The closest chronicler to the scene in time and distance, Adam Murimuth, stated that it was 'popularly rumoured' that he had been suffocated. The Lichfield chronicle, equally reflecting local opinion, stated that he had been strangled. Most chronicles did not offer a cause of death other than natural causes. Not until the relevant sections of the longer Brut chronicle were composed by a Lancastrian (anti-Mortimer) polemicist in the mid-1330s was the story of a copper rod in the anus widely circulated. In her biography of the king's wife Isabella, Alison Weir puts forward the theory based on the Fieschi Letter that Edward actually escaped imprisonment and lived the rest of his life in exile. Ian Mortimer, in his biography of Edward III, and in his biography of Roger Mortimer, also asserts that Edward II survived for at least another 11 years after his supposed death in 1327, and in fact died in Italy.

For Dr Mortimer's recently published online redaction of his argument why Edward II's survival is a matter of certainty, see his 'Note on the deaths of Edward II'.

Following the public announcement of the king's death, the rule of Isabella and Mortimer did not last long. Mortimer and Isabella made peace with the Scots in the Treaty of Northampton, but this move was highly unpopular. Consequently, when Edward III came of age in 1330, he executed Roger Mortimer on fourteen charges of treason, most significantly the murder of Edward II (thereby removing any public doubt about his father's survival). Edward III spared his mother and gave her a generous allowance, but ensured that she retired from public life for several years. She died at Hertford on August 23, 1358.

EDWARD II

1307–1327



THE COAT OF ARMS OF EDWARD II

ONE OF THE SADDER PERSONALITIES among English monarchs, it is hard not to feel sorry for Edward II, not only for the terrible manner of his death but also for the difficulties that beset him during his 20-year reign. The only surviving son of Edward I and his first wife Eleanor, Edward was born into a family of girls. He grew up dominated by female company as his father was frequently absent, yet he had a poor relationship with his mother. As a result, Edward was very reliant on his friends and was fiercely loyal to them, sticking to Piers Gaveston and then the Despensers long after it was clear to everyone else that they were bad for him and for the country. He was eventually deposed and murdered on his wife's orders in 1327.

EDWARD II

- ◆ **Born** Caernarfon Castle, 25 April 1284, fourth son of Edward I and Eleanor of Castile.
- ◆ **Acceded** 8 July 1307.
- ◆ **Married** Isabella of France, Boulogne, France, 25/28 Jan 1308, 4 children.
- ◆ **Crowned** Westminster Abbey, 24/25 Feb 1308.
- ◆ **Deposed** 20 Jan 1327.
- ◆ **Murdered** Berkeley Castle, 21 Sept 1327, aged 43.

REBELLION

Edward's reign was plagued by rebellion, largely because of his poor choice of advisers and the arrogant and inefficient way in which they governed in his name. Twice his nobles rebelled against him, murdering Piers Gaveston in 1312 and Sir Hugh Despenser and his son in 1326.



DEATH OF A FAVOURITE

Isabella and her lover Roger Mortimer can be seen in the foreground in this contemporary illustration, while Edward's favourite, Sir Hugh Despenser, is brutally murdered in the background.

ISABELLA OF FRANCE

Edward married Isabella in 1308 and the couple had four children. It is difficult to assess the nature of their marriage because Edward was almost certainly homosexual and his relationship with Gaveston was of that kind. Isabella thus had to accept considerable humiliation, which she endured until she fell in love with Roger Mortimer, an opponent of the King.



A PROSPEROUS REIGN

Although Edward had little interest in administration, his reign has gone down in history as one of increasing prosperity, for there was less taxation than under either his father or his son.

THE PRIVY SEAL OF EDWARD II



DEPOSING THE KING

In 1326 Isabella and her lover Roger Mortimer, who had both been living in France, landed in Suffolk (left) and marched against the King. Edward was deposed in favour of his 14-year-old son in 1327. For the next three years, Isabella and Roger ruled in the name of the young Edward III, but in 1330 Edward seized power. Mortimer was tried and executed and Isabella forced to retire from public life.



THE LOYAL FRIEND

Blessed with good health, good looks and a good brain, Edward was physically strong and enjoyed a variety of sporting interests. He was amiable, fond of good conversation, artistic and had a strong sense of humour. But many of his agreeable traits usually militated against him: although he was generous, he was unable to be severe when the occasion demanded, and his loyalty to his friends, one of his greatest virtues, led to his downfall, for he was a poor judge of character.

EDWARD II

After his death in 1327, Edward was buried in Gloucester Cathedral. His imposing tomb effigy is shown on the left.

EVENTS OF THE REIGN 1307 – 1327

- ♦ 1307 Edward II accedes to the throne on the death of his father Edward I.
- ♦ 1308 Edward's favourite, the Gascon noble Piers Gaveston, is exiled for misgovernment.
- ♦ 1309 Gaveston returns from exile in France.
- ♦ 1310 Parliament sets up a committee of Lords Ordainers to control the King and improve administration. The King's cousin, Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, takes control.
- ♦ 1312 Gaveston is kidnapped by the King's opponents and is beheaded.
- ♦ 1314 Edward and the English army are routed at the Battle of Bannockburn by Robert Bruce. Scottish independence is assured.
- ♦ 1320 Edward takes two new favourites, Sir Hugh Despenser and his son Hugh.



EDWARD'S DEATH

The circumstances of Edward's death were horrible. After his deposition in January 1327, he was eventually imprisoned in Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire, from where it was announced on 21 September that he had died. Isabella and Mortimer had ordered that he be put to death but with no external marking on his body to betray the violence. The only way to do this was by disembowelling: *cum vero ignito inter celanda confossus* – with a red hot iron inserted into the rectum – which was a conventional but gruesome death for homosexuals at this time.

BERKELEY CASTLE

Edward languished in Berkeley Castle for six months during 1327. At one point, with the help of friends, he escaped and hid but was recaptured and returned to his cell at Berkeley.

- ♦ 1322 Barons' rebellion, led by Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, is crushed at the Battle of Boroughbridge in Yorkshire.
- ♦ 1326 Edward's wife Isabella abandons him and with her lover Roger seizes power and deposes Edward. The Despensers are both put to death.
- ♦ 1327 Edward is formally deposed by Parliament in favour of his son Edward III, and is murdered in Berkeley Castle.