

Who Was Piers Galveston?

The table fork was unknown in the Middle Ages, except for those belonging to Piers Galveston, who owned three for eating candied pears. Some version of this sentence appears in literally hundreds of books, articles, and blog posts relating to eating utensils. Not only is it not true, but it is such an unusual statement. If only Piers Galveston owned table forks, in Medieval Europe, wouldn't that make him the inventor of the table fork? Or, at least, the patron of the actual inventor? Who was he and why has he been relegated to, perhaps, the most famous person to be found in a footnote?

This paper is a brief history of the one time Earl of Cornwall; it is not a complete study and my information comes from many sources. I am forgoing the use of footnotes to make this an easier read.

We could look up his entry in Wikipedia and find out the date of his birth and death, where he grew up and other such mundane trivia. But I wish to briefly present the person that was Piers, not simply names and dates. We know that he was born in the Duchy of Gascony, near Bearn, which was, at that time, ruled by the English Crown. His family came from the village of Gavaston and many contemporaneous documents refer to him as Pieres de Gavaston. His father, Arnaud de Gavaston, was a knight in service to Edward I and served in various campaigns in Wales, France, and Scotland. His son, Piers, most likely served under his father's command on some of these campaigns. Sometime around the year 1300, Piers was noticed by King Edward I, for his skill of arms, and was made a member of Prince Edward's household.

In order to talk about Piers, we need to speak about the Prince of Wales, Edward Caernarfon. Fourth son and heir to Edward I of England (Longshanks) and born in 1284 in Caernarfon castle in Wales. Young Edward, who I will refer to as just Edward and his father as Longshanks, grew up tall and handsome as his father, but without his father's ambition, will or charisma. Instead of focusing on learning how to fight, lead an army, or govern a realm, Edward was more interested in ditch digging, rowing boats, and thatching roofs. The chronicler Ranulph Higden wrote that Edward, instead of consorting with knights and nobles, preferred the company of "jesters, singers, actors, carriage drivers, diggers, oarsmen and sailors." The author of [*The Life of Edward II*](#) wrote, "If only he had given to arms the attention that he expended on rustic pursuits he would have raised England on high."

However dotting a father Longshanks was to his older children, he was less than a father to Edward and more of a monster. It might be because Longshanks saw the deaths of most of his children. Or his hatred towards the Scots, and the Welsh, and the Irish, and the French, and all who dared oppose him in any fashion. Had Longshanks been a better father, and treated Edward in the same fashion as he treated his older siblings, Edward might have grown up to be a more self confident and self sufficient person. But Longshanks viewed Edward's inability to be a perfect copy of himself as a personal insult. Instead of being a better father, Longshanks introduced Piers Galveston to Edwards household. Piers was a couple of years older than Edward, but was a famous jousting and had won renown on the battle field. I can imagine Longshanks ordering Edward to "be more like this squire."

Unfortunately, Piers was lazy, egotistical, greedy, rude, insulting, and knew a golden goose when he saw one. Household accounts list Piers as Edward's companion and not his squire. Piers not only was paid to be Edward's friend (somewhere around £70 a year, or about \$60,000 to \$120,000 in today's money), but ate at the Prince's table and was given appropriate clothes, by the household, so that he would not "diminish the look of the household and the Prince's person." Not bad for the son of a poor knight.

This was not enough for Piers. He asked for, or demanded, lands and titles, the true way to support one's self. Longshanks was having none of that and rebuked his son multiple times for such unearned requests. In 1305 Longshanks ordered a reduction of Edward's household, most specifically, dismissed both Piers and Gilbert de Clare, one of Edward's cousins. Edward wrote to his sister, Elizabeth, asking her to ask their step mother, Queen Margerite, to intercede with the King. "If we had those two, along with the others whom we have, we would be greatly relieved of the anguish which we have endured and from which we continue to suffer from one day to the next."

Two months after Longshanks had captured William Wallace, and had him executed, he allowed Piers and Gilbert to be reinstated in Edward's household. In May 1306 Longshanks knighted 267 men in Westminster, including Edward and Piers, at what was known as the Feast of the Swans. The king purchased eighty rolls of scarlet and other

colored cloth, 2500 yards of linen and 5000 yards of canvas for new clothing for the new knights, and Edward gifted Piers with a black warhorse with three white feet, valued at £60. However, by the beginning of 1307, Piers was out again. First by going AWOL while on campaign in Scotland with Longshanks in order to attend tournaments in France, and secondly by Edward's foolish demands for his BFF.

"You bastard son of a bitch! You want to give lands away? You, who never gained any? As the Lord lives, were it not for fear of breaking up the Kingdom, you should never enjoy your inheritance!" This was recorded by Walter of Guisborough as Longshanks's response to Edwards first demand that Piers be raised to the rank of Count and then the second demand that he be raised to the rank of Earl and given the vacant earldom of Cornwall. Recorded gossip tells us that Piers would not stop asking Edward for land and Edward finally approached the King. The end result was that Longshanks exiled Piers to the continent, there to "await his recall." Piers was given a annual salary of 100 marks (almost £67) and was told to amuse himself on the tournament circuit (of which he did well). Edward accompanied Piers to Dover, and showered him with money and gifts: the vast sum of £260, five horses, sixteen tapestries in diverse colors, two quilted tunics, and two jousting outfits, one of green velvet decorated with pearls and gold, and silver piping, and the other of green sindon.

Longshanks died a few months later, in July, and the now King Edward wasted no time in recalling his friend, granting him the earldom of Cornwall, and setting him up with the hand of Margaret de Clare, the Countess of Gloucester. Edward did this to "strengthen Piers and surround him with friends". This also made him very wealthy; the income from Cornwall was valued at around £4000 a year. Defiantly a rags to riches story. Pier's social climbing was not very popular with the other peers of England: the earldom was traditionally reserved for members of the Royal family, and the thought of rubbing elbows with a lower-class, foreign knight was insulting. And speaking of insulting, Piers was. All of the time. While the peers did not like Piers, they had good reason to hate him. Piers would openly insult and mock the peers of the Realm any chance he could.

The Life of Edward II tells us, "The earls and barons he despised, and gave them insulting nicknames" He called Guy Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, "the black hound of Arden". Henry de Lacy, Earl of Lincoln, was called "boele-crevee", or burst-belly, which might be a fat joke. Edward's cousin Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, was called "the Churl" and "the Fiddler". Ralph de Monthermer, Earl of Gloucester and Edward's brother-in-law, was called "whoreson". And the list goes on and on.

Normally, when one is insulted, at this level of society, one would issue a challenge to a duel. However, Piers was considered one of his generation's best jousters and no one wanted to lose a duel and "prove" the insult. That would be like me challenging Mike Tyson to a duel: you know that he will choose boxing as the method of the duel and then beat the stuffing out of me. The nobility would have to take the insults and bide their time. To add further insult, Edward left England, in January of 1308, for two weeks and left Piers in charge as Regent. Edward had traveled to France to get married, and contemporary accounts say that Piers was uncomfortable and out of his depth, but that he did nothing worse than making the earls who remained in England kneel to him as regent.

On February 25th, 1308, Edward and his new bride, Isabella of France, held their coronation as King and Queen of England. To organize the celebration, Edward hired the best, the most renown party planner in all of Europe..... No, he gave Piers a tonne of money and told him to take care of it.

A Royal Coronation was a big thing, not just for the King, but the Kingdom. Everything was staged so that the King was shown as not only the legal and blessed person to wear the crown, but was seen to be visibly supported by the peers of the realm. There was a role for each of the highest members of the peerage. Preceding the King and Queen were earls, "especially who by kingship are nearly related to the King". The Earl of Hereford and Essex carried the King's scepter. The King's brother-in-law, the Earl of Lancaster, carried the royal sword, Curtana. The Earl of Lincoln carried the royal staff. Prince Henry, Edward's younger brother, carried the King's rod. And, wearing royal purple and pearls, Piers Galveston, the newly made Earl of Cornwall, carried the crown of Edward the Confessor in his "filthy hands" according to the Saint Paul's Annalist. In addition, Piers wrote himself into other parts of the coronation: He attached one of Edward's spurs, he unfolded the golden mantel, he retrieved Curtana from the altar, an act that should have been done by "who is the greatest of those present" and he held onto the sword during the outward procession, which he led. In a society that depended on a strict hierarchy, Piers managed to anger almost everyone. The ones he didn't tick off during the coronation, he managed to do so during the coronation feast.

Starting off, the wall behind the royal table was covered by tapestries emblazoned with the arms of Edward

and Piers, which had been commissioned at a cost of £5 from London upholsterers, John Engine and John le Tapyter; somewhere around \$5000 in today's money. There are no reports that the Queen's arms were present in the hall. At high table, Piers put himself next to the King, still wearing royal purple and pearls, but augmented with the best of the jewelry from the Queen's coronation and wedding presents. The Saint Paul's Annalist described him as "so decked out that he more resembled the god Mars than an ordinary mortal".

Edward spoke almost exclusively with Piers during the feast, something that really ticked off the visiting peerage and Isabella's kin. Granted, the Queen was only 12 at that time, but Edward was a Plantagenet King and should have shown better courtesy towards his wife and guests. It was as if Edward wanted to anger the visiting French, or he just didn't care. We cannot support the claim that Edward didn't speak French and therefore could not speak directly to his wife: the language of the English court was French, not English. The very least Edward could have done was to engage in conversation with his new kin by marriage. Perhaps point out, to his bride, who the movers and shakers of their court were.

The feast that Piers organized cost more than £2800, up to \$3 million in today's money, based on entertainment and labor costs. And I think that Piers kept most of the cash. The food wasn't served until after dark, there weren't enough servers, and the food was either burned or under cooked. It is apparent that Piers had as much tact and leadership with the cooks and servers that he had with the peers of the realm: the cooks and servers hated him and most likely did their worst in order to embarrass the King's favorite.

Within days of the coronation, Parliament met with one goal in mind: Piers's behavior and antics at the coronation was a national embarrassment and he would have to go. By March, civil war loomed. The bridges across the Thames were broken and the King fortified himself at Windsor. When Parliament met in April, a large group of magnates, led by the Earl of Lincoln, demanded that Piers be exiled from the Kingdom and stripped of all lands and titles, writing that "He disinherits the Crown and....puts discord between the King and his people." Archbishop Winchelsea threatened to excommunicate Piers unless he left England by the end of June. In this conflict, Edward compromised. He agreed to exile his BFF, but, instead of banishing him completely, he appointed Piers as lieutenant of Ireland and granted him some £4000 of annual revenue from the King's own lands in Aquitaine.

In April 1309, Edward negotiated with Parliament to get Piers back. The King agreed to upholding Magna Carta and the Forest Charter of 1217 as well as a half-dozen statutes intended on reducing the Crown's power. But Edward got what he wanted; Piers was allowed to return to England, where he apparently learned nothing during his exile and continued his insulting and grating ways. He managed to cause a big to-do when he removed one of the Earl of Lancaster's retainers from a royal office and replace him with one of his own. In 1311, the Lords Ordainer, a commission of 21 of the realm's highest nobles and bishops, set up in 1310 to oversee the Crown, presented the King with a list of 41 new ordinances, including restrictions on the King's ability to go to war, to tax or borrow money, or even to leave England without approval. But it was ordinance number 20 that was the worse for Edward: Piers Galveston was declared a traitor and an open enemy of the King and was to be exiled "for all time and without hope of return" from all lands subject to the King of England.

Edward had no choice but to comply and Piers was exiled for the third time in November 1311. But there is little to no evidence that he actually left England since he was back by the King's side by Christmas. With his friend by his side, Edward declared the Ordinances null and void as he was forced to agree to them under duress. Edward restored Piers's titles and lands and sent the newly restored Earl to Scarborough castle.

In March, 1312 the Archbishop of Canterbury officially excommunicated Piers and the Earls of Lancaster, Pembroke, Hereford, Arundel, and Warwick gathered their knights and rode off to Scarborough to arrest Piers. Forewarned, Piers and Edward escaped to Newcastle. In hot pursuit, Lancaster chased them to Tynemouth Priory, where Edward and Piers split up. Edward fled North to York and Piers tried to sneak back to Scarborough. He was not successful and, on May 19th, was captured by the Earls of Pembroke and Surrey. Piers negotiated terms of his surrender: Parliament would try him and the two Earls would protect him until his trial. The Earl of Pembroke took ownership of Piers and they rode to Wallingford, where Piers would be held until his trial.

In June, for some reason, Pembroke left Piers unguarded. He would later claim that this had been a mistake and that he had intended no harm. The day after Pembroke left, Guy Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, showed up with a "strong force" and entered the chambers Piers was staying in. "I think you know me; I am the Black Dog of Arden. Get up traitor!" Piers was led, hands roped to the back of a horse, to Warwick Castle, where he was sentenced to death

and then put on trial by the Earls of Warwick, Lancaster, Hereford, and Arundel. Piers was not allowed to speak in his defense and was not allowed to summon anyone to do so, either. On June 19th, he was dragged to Blacklow Hill and beheaded by two Welsh soldiers, who left his body where it lay. The author of The Life of Edward II wrote that the body was found by four shoemakers, who summoned a friar. The friar was unable to bury the body, since Piers had died while excommunicated, but “carried away the head in his hood and brought it to the King.”

And thus ended the life of Piers Galveston. But, what about the forks? The man is most well known for owning forks. Well, this was due to an inventory of his possessions that he left behind at Newcastle. The clerk did notate that among the effects were “trois furchestes dargent pur mangier poire” (three silver forks, for eating pears). Candied pears, at that: an expensive treat. Also among his lost possessions were:

“A buckle of gold with two emeralds, two rubies, two sapphires, and eleven pearls”

“A golden piece of jewelry with nine emeralds and nine garnets”

“Another belt of lion skin, decorated in gold with a cameo, worth £166”

“One hundred silver shields, each marked with an eagle”

“A fur-backed altar frontal of green cloth, decorated with gold birds and fishes”

“A ruby worth £1000”

Piers was around 30 at the time of his death. Greedy, yes, insulting, also yes, but cruel? Mean spirited, yes, but he didn't go around murdering people. At least not English people. He was a handsome, athletic, clever, arrogant, flamboyant peacock who had to be at the center of attention. He was a good fighter: he was considered the “King of the Joust”, someone who could unhorse almost anyone, when he was 16 or 17. It is debatable if he was a good commander: his campaigns in Ireland and Scotland were less than spectacular. How insulting do you have to be to warrant the death sentence?

I think that his insults were just the icing on the cake; they provided personal justification for his enemies, of which he made many, to extract revenge. It was his influence with King Edward that was the real issue. Not only did Edward give Piers pretty much everything he demanded, including gifts and lands intended for others, but Edward would only take advice from Piers; and Piers didn't seem to have good judgement. Both Piers and Edward lacked the ability to plan ahead or think of the consequences of their actions. They lived in the moment. When they wanted something, they wanted it right then and there and damn the consequences or the repercussions. Edward was the King of England, very few could tell him no, and Piers was the King's favorite; only the King could punish him. I was only able to find one surviving letter from Piers Galveston (To John Langton, bishop of Chichester and chancellor of England) and none are on record from Edward to Piers. With only the words of others, we cannot truly know the relationship the two men had: did Piers keep demanding gifts from Edward to remain his friend, or did Edward offer gifts to keep Piers happy. Or did the two play a game to stick it to the “fuddy-duddies”. In any case, Piers managed to amass an awesome amount of wealth simply by being the King's friend.

Perhaps if Piers offered better advice, or pushed Edward to think of England first and personal pleasures second, the Peers of the Realm wouldn't have had to hunt him down and execute him. LBJ was a real bastard to work for, but at least he got things done in Congress and in the White House. The biggest failing of Piers was how he upset the strict hierarchy of English society and made a mockery of the system of fair government. If Piers had inspired Edward to run the Kingdom better, if he had delivered on his military goals, if there had been tangible results of campaigns in Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and France, perhaps the peers of the realm would have put up with the insults and bad behavior. But Piers managed to produce nothing other than chaos and managed to acquire so much unearned wealth, at the expense of others, and help Edward lurch from one self-inflicted crisis after another, that the Peers of England used every method at their disposal to dispose of him: first through legal action and then less than legal action.

The Barons knew that Edward was a bad king because he only accepted advice from a terrible person: if only they could remove that terrible person, Edward would have to turn to more competent people. Unfortunately, they did not expect that Longshanks's iron will would be inherited by his youngest son and would rear its ugly head when it came to Piers. Unfortunately, Edward's inability to distinguish between good and bad friends did not end with the death of Piers Galveston: he fell into the same co-dependent relationship with Hugh Despenser the Younger; a man with the same greed and lack of empathy as Piers, but with the ability to actually plan and organize. Spoiler: he also was executed by the Peers of the Realm.

But, with all of what I have written, why is Piers known only for table forks? There is a significant amount of

information about him: this paper is just a fraction of what has been written about his life in recent years. Why has he been relegated to a footnote in most history books? I believe that the Victorians tried to write him out of the history books. The relationship between Edward and Piers was not considered “kingly” or “moral” or “natural” in their opinion. A good deal of the Victorian history books boil down Piers Galveston as an effeminate sorcerer who cast a spell on young Edward to inflame what Oliver Wilde called, “the love that dare not speak its name” several centuries later.

However much past generations tried to ignore or cover up any hint of a homosexual relationship, if it existed, we have to acknowledge it. Not as a source of shame or sin, but as a description of two men who, while only knowing each other for a dozen or so years, were inseparable and willing to burn everything to the ground to be with one another. Despite what some people might think or say, homosexuality was not considered a cardinal sin through out the early middle ages. There were same sex marriages, often called spiritual brotherhoods, that were sanctified with the same prayers and rituals as those between men and women. While not encouraged, homosexuality was certainly tolerated, particularly among the peerage, as long as the men married women and sired “an heir and a spare” and did their jobs competently, whether for the government, guildhall, manor, or battle field. It is interesting to note that sex between men who were married to women was not considered adultery: I find that strange. However, in 1306 Andronikos II, the Byzantine Emperor, declared that sex between men would henceforth be a sin in the same category as incest and witchcraft and he wanted ban same sex marriages.

The same month that Longshanks banished Piers and Gilbert from Edward’s household, Pope Clement V made it his top priority to get young Edward married. Modern historians make the argument that Longshanks was a homophobe and got rid of Piers and Gilbert to keep his son from doing anything the King did not like. Edward Longshanks hated so many people, I am not surprised that he might have hated anyone who had the appearance of being gay, even his own son. Most of the references to Edward’s and Piers relationship were written not only after the death of Piers, but after Edward had fallen out of grace, himself. In the 1320s one anonymous chronicler wrote that when Edward first saw Piers he, “...fell so much in love that entered upon an enduring compact with him and chose and determined to knit an indissoluble bond of affection with him.” Chroniclers in the 16th century emphasized how Edward and Piers often shared a bed and kissed one another when they met after long absences. Bed sharing was common and a sign of trust and the French still kiss one another’s cheeks in friendship.

The Life of Edward II, written around 1326, the year before Edward’s execution, tells us, “Jonathan cherished David, Achilles loved Patroclus. But we do not read they were immoderate. Our King, however, was incapable of moderate favor, and on account of Piers was said to forget himself, and so Piers was accounted a sorcerer.” The Flores Historiarum, compiled in 1325, describes Edward as “overcome with his own wickedness and desire for sinful, forbidden sex.” Again, written at a time when Edward was deeply unpopular for failed military campaigns, inadequately dealing with the massive flooding which set off a five year long famine, loss of tax revenue, loss of territories in France, et cetera.

We don’t know the exact truth of the relationship between Edward and Piers, and we certainly don’t know what went on in the King’s bedchamber. Charges of sin and sodomy were certainly used against Edward and the hated Hugh Despenser the Younger towards the end of Edward’s reign and life. Queen Isabella’s supporters certainly used it as one item in the list of justification of her civil war against her husband. The Tudors and Victorians certainly ran with the idea. It was one of the central themes of Christopher Marlow’s play, Edward II. A good deal of the myths of both Piers and Edward’s relationship date to the late 16th century, including the one about the red hot poker. Charges of homosexuality have been used to ruin people’s reputations for centuries. The claim, whether true or not, has often been used a cudgel to destroy lives and livelihoods. The Knights Templar were dissolved around this time and the order’s officers tortured and put on trial for, among other things, homosexuality, by the same Pope Clement who arraigned the marriage of Edward and Isabella. Then, as well as now, if you want to ruin the character of someone, call them a queer. Some things never change no matter how much they should.

Personally, I think that Edward truly loved Piers with all of his heart. And I think that Piers loved only himself. Piers had plenty of opportunities to put the King and Kingdom ahead of his own greed and ambition, but he never did anything to maintain peace in the realm. It is irreverent if they had an erotic or platonic relationship. There does not appear to be any mention of homosexuality during Piers’s lifetime. It wasn’t written down anywhere that has survived and it wasn’t mentioned during Piers’s “trial”. It wasn’t even mentioned in records accounting Piers’s first exile. The rush to get Edward married could just be Longshanks making sure that the Plantagenet line would continue: he was nearing 70 and had one surviving son. And Piers was probably enough of a jerk that Longshanks wanted him as far away as possible.

Victorian historians claim that Edward had to have been gay because he would not bed Isabella on their wedding night or on their coronation night. Which brings up an interesting question about these Victorian historians: what the hell? They thought that the 24 year old Edward having sex with a man was bad but having sex with a twelve year old girl was okay? What the hell? Many of the same historians use this same argument to “prove” that Richard II was gay, as well, because he would not have sex with Isabella of Valois, his seven year old bride. That’s not being gay, that’s being a decent and moral human being. In any case, Edward waited until Isabella was 16 before getting her pregnant (during Lent, no less). They had four children, and Edward had an illegitimate son with an unknown woman. Piers and Margaret had one child that survived (there is questionable evidence that a second daughter was born around 1310) and he also sired an illegitimate child with an unknown woman (probably not the same woman). Edward certainly fulfilled his duty of an “heir and a spare”.

It doesn’t matter if Edward and Piers were gay, straight, or bi, That really does not define who they were or justify their actions. Later historians and authors use this as a reason why they did bad things without examining actual recorded facts. The apparent gay charges against Edward and Piers were written years, even decades, after the death of the Earl of Cornwall. Some historians claim that Hugh Despenser the Younger was castrated, at his execution, because of sodomy (Christopher Marlow wrote it in his play). Except he wasn’t. Sodomy was considered a sin, in the 1320’s, but not one punishable by mutilation. And if it was, why wasn’t Piers castrated? He was only beheaded. Hugh was castrated because that was part of the horrible execution of Drawing and Quartering, the fate of a “robber, traitor, and a tyrant.” Piers was executed for his control over Edward’s patronage and access, for draining the royal treasury, for filling official offices with his own men, for creating a diplomatic nightmare with his coronation planning, and for being a low-born foreigner who insulted anyone and everyone he could; not because anyone disapproved of whose bed he was in. The historical gay-bashing was just used to avoid admitting that peers and anointed kings are just as human, and just as fallible. as everyone else.

As I have said, if Edward was a more competent king, and if Piers was a better advisor, this issue would barely make a footnote. Piers was like an out of work friend, sleeping on your couch, who insists that both of you go out drinking, every night, until 2am. And that you pay. He might be your best friend, but he’s probably not the best person to help you make important decisions. Eventually, your other friends, as well as your family and co-workers, are going to have an intervention. And in 1312, the highest peers of England held an intervention for Edward I and removed one of the most colorful and flamboyant characters of his time, for the good of the Crown and of England.

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