

Piers Gaveston, 1st Earl of Cornwall, was the close friend and favourite of Edward II. He was exiled in 1307 by Edward I and again in 1308 by Edward II because of his arrogant and offensive behaviour and, in the opinion of the barons, his access to royal patronage and his unduly strong influence over the king. As a result of demands made by the Ordainers, a committee of 21 earls, barons and bishops, he was exiled for a third time in November 1311 with the penalty of being an outlaw if he returned. Nevertheless, the king declared that this exile was unlawful and Gaveston returned in January 1312.

The barons, led by Thomas of Lancaster and Guy de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, now assembled their private armies and civil war threatened. Some historians state that, in 1312, the barons assembled their forces in Wheathampstead. They refused to receive envoys (Papal Nuncios) and a letter from the Pope, who had lifted an interdict against Gaveston, demanding instead that the king should meet them in person. The barons were ultimately successful in curbing the power of the monarch and in taking Gaveston prisoner, executing him at Warwick on 19 June 1312.

Salmon's "History of Hertfordshire", published in 1728, describes this episode as follows:

"Whethamsted is the Place where the rebellious Barons in 1311 assembled their forces against Edward II under the usual Pretence of restoring to the Church or State their Liberties that had been invaded. Hither came two Nuncios from the Pope to mediate a Peace, but the Lords rejected their Offers, and roundly told them, they had amongst themselves learned and pious Bishops, whose Counsel they would sooner rely on than that of Foreigners, who did not understand the cause of their Commotions: Adding; They would never suffer Strangers to intermeddle in their private Affairs, nor what concerned the publick Safety : Upon which the Nuncios got off in Haste and Confusion."