

Philippa of Lancaster

From a talk given in July, 2015 to mark the 600th anniversary of her death, based on the author's historical novel, "*Philippa of Lancaster – English Princess, Queen of Portugal*".

By Isabel Stilwell

Remembering Philippa of Lancaster 600 hundred years after her death, nearly to the day, is a way of paying homage to a great queen. As the eldest daughter of John of Gaunt and Blanche of Lancaster, she was the granddaughter of the great Edward III. She left behind her much-loved England to marry the Portuguese King, João I, on the 11th of February, 1387, when the population of Porto filled the streets to enthusiastically acclaim *Filipa de Lencastre* as the Queen of Portugal. A woman of unwavering faith, known for her generosity and strong will, she was determined to change the Portuguese Court, which was so different from the one that she had grown up in. Philippa gave birth to her first child when she was 28, and this marked the start of the *Ínclita Geração*¹, which would one day set sail in search of new worlds, forever changing the destiny of Portugal, and, indeed, of the world. She died of the plague on the 18th of July, 1415, at the age of 55, and was undoubtedly one of Portugal's most important queens.



Philippa of Lancaster, Queen of Portugal

¹ The "Illustrious Generation"

Philippa's Parents

Philippa's father, known as the "last knight of the Middle Ages", was John of Gaunt, so named, as he was born in Ghent (Flanders). He was the third son of the Plantagenet King Edward III, younger brother to Edward, the Black Prince, and uncle of the future King Richard II. He was reputedly very good looking, charming, brave, clever, and loyal and was also tall for the period, standing at five feet eight, as shown by his armour in the Tower of London. Since the age of ten, he had been at war often losing. A 'lady's man', he fathered five illegitimate children.



John of Gaunt (1340 – 1399) – note the rose of the House of Lancaster

Philippa's mother, Blanche, was the Duke of Lancaster's daughter. The Duke only had two daughters, Blanche and a sister. Chaucer says she was "The fairest of the land". She was known for her rosy skin, and was kind and clever, and could read and write, which was rare for women of her day. Blanche married her distant cousin John of Gaunt in Reading Abbey, aged just fourteen. Indeed John was only nineteen. Ten months later Philippa was born, on the 31st of March, 1360, at Leicester Castle, England. She was named after her paternal grandmother, Queen Philippa of Hainault, the wife of the Plantagenet King Edward III.

Philippa's Childhood and her Siblings

Accounts recall that Philippa was fair headed, with very blue eyes, and pale skin, and that she was much plainer than her mother. Much of what we know about her childhood comes from her father's copious letters - 500 hundred of them are still intact in the archives. He was reputed to need 10,000 sheep skins a year to make parchments for his prodigious writing and he kept an entourage of 300 hundred officials, and six lawyers. John's letters state that Philippa's wet nurse, Maud of Leicester, stayed with the family for a long time.

When Philippa was nearly four years old, her sister Elisabeth was born. Having been her mother's only daughter for nearly four years, she and Blanche appeared to have had a very close relationship. Elisabeth, I suspect, was her father's favourite, as she was red headed, with a temper, and was energetic, very much like her father. Elisabeth went on to marry three times. Finally, when Philippa was six, a male heir was born in 1367, and he survived. Henry was born at Bolingbroke in Lincolnshire, now just a pile of stones, and was known as Henry of Bolingbroke, later becoming King Henry IV in 1399.

Philippa lacked for nothing, as her father, John of Gaunt, was one of the richest men in the Realm. She was provided with the best tutors, and learned French, English, and Latin. She loved Geography and Astronomy, which at that times equated to astrology, and she gained a reputation for predicting the outbreak of war. Then a terrible blow struck Philippa, when her beloved mother, Blanche of Lancaster, died of the plague in 1369, aged just 24. Philippa was now nine years old, Elisabeth was five, and little Henry was only two. Her father was away fighting during the Castilian Civil War at the time.

Her father married his second wife, Constanza of Castile, in 1371. She was 20 years younger than him, and he brought her to England with all her Spanish court, and through the marriage he became the King of Castela and Aragão. She gave birth to a daughter, Catalina, who was Philippa's half-sister. At about the same, her father's long-term mistress, Lady Katherine Roet Swynford, gave birth to John, the first of three illegitimate sons and a daughter. A dazzlingly beautiful Belgian aristocrat, Katherine had been packed off to the countryside by her then husband, "Hugh" Ottes Swynford, as the older ladies of Court thought her too beautiful to be in sight of their husbands! She was Philippa's governess and her four children were legitimised when she became John of Gaunt's third wife in 1396, two years after the death of Constanza of Castile. Her father had meanwhile become the Duke of Lancaster in 1377, when the plague took the life of his father-in-law.

Philippa now had three half-brothers and two half-sisters and this not-too-orthodox family spent long spells at Kenilworth Castle in Warwickshire, which was Philippa's favourite home. She was a happy teenager, even though she was a worrier, and a reserved child. John of Gaunt letters tell us that on her 13th birthday he gave her ten golden buttons and a filet of gold and precious stones for her hair. He also bought his three "girls" horses and saddles adorned with glitters, and money for their wardrobe, referring to "my much-loved daughters Philippa and Elisabeth". John of Gaunt John invested a lot of money and time in Kenilworth, building great halls and new kitchens, using glass for the first time, which made it possible to

build bigger windows. Philippa must have inherited her father's interest in architecture, for later in her life she sent for her father's architects to re-model her palaces in Portugal, and to help build the massive Mosteiro da Batalha.

Kenilworth became a seat of knowledge, science, religion, and poetry, and it was to here that Geoffrey Chaucer, who was Katherine's brother-in-law, brought a model of an astrolabe for John of Gaunt's children, having been inspired to write the *Astrolabe Treatise*, after travelling to Italy. Indeed, it was John who encouraged Chaucer's studies and travels, and who paid his bills.

At the age of 20, Philippa became the oldest of the three original siblings to remain unmarried, as Elisabeth had married John Hastings, a young boy aged nine when she was 16, and Henry was married soon afterwards in Lincoln Cathedral. She was 21, when the Savoy Palace, her father's house in London, was sacked and burnt during the Peasants Revolt in 1381. John of Gaunt had gone from hero to villain, and it was this year that he separated from Katherine. He talked of marrying Philippa to her cousin Richard, now the King of England, or with the French king, but kept her as a political pawn, until she eventually married in 1387, aged 27.

Philippa's marriage to João I of Portugal, Mestre de Avis

João I, Mestre de Avis, was acclaimed King of Portugal in 1384 and at the age of 27, fought bravely at the Batalha de Aljubarrota, in 1385, winning Portugal's independence from the Spanish, with the help of English archers. João I was the illegitimate son of King Pedro I with a commoner, and became the first king of a new dynasty, the "Dinastia de Avis". To help in the continuing war against the Spanish, King João sent two ambassadors to England in 1386 to ask King Richard II for help. One of these was Lourenço Fogaça, who spoke French, and when he visited John of Gaunt's castle, Philippa must have spent long evenings listening to his tales of King João and Portugal.

As the King of Castela through his marriage to Constanza, the Pope had given John of Gaunt his blessing, and a treaty of mutual help was signed between Portugal and England at Windsor on the 9th of May, 1386. John then decided to leave for Spain with Constanza and his daughters, one of whom he would betroth to D. João I, who, in return would help him win the Castilian throne. So he set sail with four of his daughters – Philippa, aged 26, Blanchet (illegitimate), aged 26; Elisabeth, aged 22, pregnant by her lover – John Holland, the head of John's army, and; pampered Catalina, aged 14. Elisabeth's baby was born in Santiago de Compostela in Galiza, near to the monastery of Celanova, where Philippa is reputed to have prayed that God bless her if chosen to marry the King of Portugal.

After a long summer and autumn, D. João's letter finally arrived, setting up the rendez-vous to meet John of Gaunt to discuss the hand of one of his daughters at Ponto de Mouro in Northern Portugal, on the 1st of November, 1386 - All Saints Day. Fernão Lopes, the chronicler, says that D. João delayed the meeting as long as possible, as he wanted to avoid English soldiers being present in the north of Portugal before the new wine was safely behind

closed doors! Obviously the behaviour of the English archers at Aljubarrota had been experience enough. At the first meal between the future father-in-law and son-in-law, Fernão Lopes describes how D. João I was impressed by the tapestries and the fantastic marquees of the English. I would like to believe that Lourenço Fogaça, who had been in England with Philippa and was by now a good friend of hers, would have told D. João I to choose Philippa, explaining that she was kind, clever and the best suited for the throne. Furthermore, Catalina was Castillian! Having negotiated the hand of Philippa and the military cooperation, John of Gaunt then returned to Celanova to break the news to his daughters and wife. Fernão Lopes tells us that Philippa was happy, and that Constanza had said “*Thank God. My daughter is too young to marry*”.

Ten days later, 200 archers and the Archbishop of Braga², together with João Rodrigues de Sá, the proxy for the Portuguese King, arrived at Celanova. As Dom João I had not arrived yet, the couple were blessed in a pro forma, and Philippa was sent to bed with the proxy – but with the sword of chastity between them! After what must have been a long night, Philippa left for Oporto, where the wedding was to take place. However, Philippa had to wait for three months, in the cold Bishop’s Palace, as D. João had rushed off to war again. Philippa was told that the Court was waiting for a Papal dispensation for their marriage, as D. João had taken a vow of chastity, being the head of the religious order of Avis, however this dispensation took ages to arrive. Philippa must have been nervous, and may have overheard the Portuguese ladies of Court gossiping about her. Maybe they repeated what Fernão Lopes wrote: “*taking in to account her father’s life of scandal, and her upbringing in a house of sin, are her eyes really blue, or can you see muddy waters at the back of them?*” It would have been at this time that she would have heard about Inês, the mother of D. João’s two illegitimate children, and from what we hear, she was very beautiful ... and younger than the new bride.

However Lent was approaching, and John of Gaunt wanted his son-in-law to go and fight at the front. Therefore someone was primed to say that the dispensation has already left Rome³. Philippa and D. João were blessed on the 2nd of February, 1387, and were married on the 14th of February. After their wedding night, D. João left to help his father-in-law conquer the Castilian throne. The new Queen of Portugal then headed south to Coimbra, where she presided over the Court in May. She was determined and intelligent, and knew how to manage affairs, and must have impressed her husband. In the meantime, the war on the Castilians was lost, but Catalina was soon to marry the son of the usurper, and became Queen of Castile, restoring peace and leaving two of John of Gaunt’s daughters as queens.

² Called Lançarote - “Lancelot”

³ In reality, it arrived years later!



The Royal Wedding between D. João I of Portugal and Philippa of Lancaster, 1387

D. João decided that it was time to show his country to Philippa, and they travelled south. By this time Philippa was pregnant. They stopped off to see the building of the commemorative Mosteiro de Santa Maria da Vitória, in Batalha, and it was here that her father's passion for building was awakened, and she contracted Huget (a Catalanian), her father's architect, to build the chapel where she planned to be buried beside her husband, with her future children around her. The Royal Couple decide that each, in turn, would name their children – first with an English name, then with a Portuguese one, and so on. If the first-born was a boy, then it would be João's turn to name him, and if it was a girl, then Philippa could choose the name. Accordingly, when a daughter was born in Lisbon castle, she was named Branca, in memory of her grandmother - Blanche⁴. The Royal Couple then moved around a lot, for the people to get to know their King, and their subsequent children were all born in different cities: Viseu, Coimbra, Porto, Évora, and Santarém. In chronological order, they were baptised: Branca, Afonso, Duarte, Pedro, Henrique, Isabel, João, and, finally, Fernando.

Life in Portugal

Philippa loved Sintra, and she had the Palace in the old town renovated with its unique 33 metre tall chimneys, which became known as the "*Paço da Rainha*". We know details about this palace at the time through the descriptions written by their second son, Duarte. Philippa loved hunting, as did D. João and she insisted that men and women have meals together, in the same hall. She was very strict with her Court, which she described as being very "medieval". She wants women to be occupied and in prayer, and encouraged them to learn to

⁴ She died before reaching her 1st birthday.

read and write. This she had learned from her past, and she wanted no single ladies to be around, indeed it was she who was to decide who should marry who, and she compelled them to obey.

As mentioned above, it was Duarte, the future king, who tells us about the childhood of the Avis children, as do the chroniclers Fernão Lopes and Zurara. Duarte ascended to first-in-line after the tragic death of his eldest brother, Afonso, who died in Braga aged ten. Philippa ensured that the children were well educated, and provided good teachers, and had books translated, compiling an important library. She would have told them the tales of Lancelot, and for sure told them about the achievements of their Plantagenet ancestors. The children learned to write Latin and French, and were very well read, and well versed in articulating their own thought, and in argumentation – as the letters and documents show.

The chroniclers say Philippa was always praying and was quite a bore... but think that with four boys in a row, that if they did not get on well, then they would not have gone on to have three more children ... and no illegitimate children were born during their marriage. Indeed, contemporary pictures show D. João I with his hands in prayer, so I think that he became slightly more boring!



D. João I of Portugal

The three eldest children were always very close (Duarte, Pedro and Henrique). **Duarte** was the sensitive boy, being very close to his mother, and was very hard working. His father was to overburden him with work, and he suffered from depression, which he himself described in detail. **Pedro** was very bright, and was to travel around the world, including going to visit his uncle, the King of England, where he was honoured with the Order of the Garter.⁵ **Henrique** was always very energetic, but a bully, and was his father's favourite. **Isabel** was the only girl, but she studied hard, and was very well educated. Later she was to become the Duchess of Burgundy, a great politician, and one of the most powerful women in Europe. **João** was clever and sweet, and when Philippa died young, he was put under Duarte's and Isabel's care. Finally, **Fernando**, who nearly died at birth⁶, was spoilt, and ended up a saint, as he was imprisoned and murdered in Fez. They were in fact, to be judged by contemporary historians as the "illustrious generation".

The Family Picture (The Paineis de São Vicente)

The famous "Paineis de São Vicente"⁷, which were commissioned to be painted by the artist Nuno Gonçalves, c. 1470, is a major work of highly symbolic importance in Portuguese culture, being a unique "group portrait" in the history of European painting, depicting the contemporary Avis family history, with 58 personalities grouped around São Vicente.. including Philippa and her husband of 28 years, together with their four youngest children⁸.

Philippa had three ceremonial swords made, embossed in gold and precious stones⁹. She asked her boys never to fight between themselves, and then breaks a wooden cross into four pieces and gives a piece to each boy and the fourth to her husband¹⁰. Later she gave the sons their swords. Zurara (who was not present) "transcribed" Philippa's speech:

"My husband, I ask you, if God will grant me but a few more days of life, to knight my sons before me, with the swords that I will give them with my blessing. Although it is said that words bestowed by women soften the heart of a knight, I am certain that, as I am descended from whom I am, that they could never be weakened after receiving them from my hands."

⁵ D. João I, his father, was the first foreign king to receive this honour.

⁶ He was born when his mother was 42. D. João wanted Philippa to miscarry, which she refused to do.

⁷ On exhibition at the Museu de Arte Antiga, in the Rua de Janelas Verdes, Lisboa.

⁸ Pedro is depicted dressed in green.

⁹ Henrique's can be seen in the Museu da Marinha at Belém.

¹⁰ Duarte and Henrique are buried with theirs.



The Paineis de São Vicente

Left Panel: At the centre with the Bible is D. Fernando, Infante Santo; at his right, Isabel, the only daughter, the duchess of Burgundy; to his left, the “Infante” D. Henrique, with his black round hat; kneeling down, is Duarte, the King, and beside him with the sword, is his son Afonso, the next king. **Right Panel:** With the black Moorish helmet, is D. Fernando; dressed in red is D. João; D. Pedro is in green, wearing a belt of the Order of the Garter; kneeling down, in purple, is D. Henrique.

Philippa’s death in 1414

Philippa died of the plague at Odivelas, Lisbon, aged 55, on the 18th of July, 1414, 29 years to the day after her arrival in Galiza from England. It was a very hot day and she was buried immediately at Odivelas, later to be disinterred and re-buried at the Mosteiro da Batalha.



The Mosteiro de Batalha – the resting place of Philippa of Lancaster

The siege of Ceuta, 1415

Ten days after Philippa's death, a fleet of 240 boats and an army of 20,000 men sailed from Lisbon for North Africa to fight the Moors. With them sailed three of Philippa's sons: the heir to the throne, Duarte, Henrique (later known as 'Henry the Navigator'), and Pedro. The King told them to strip off their mourning clothes, as they were not leaving in mourning – but instead were going to glorify God and honour their mother. A month later, the fortified city of Ceuta fell to the Portuguese on the 25th of July, 1415, and the three sons were knighted on the field of battle by their father, D. João I, with the swords that Philippa had had made.

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*Isabel Stilwell is a Portuguese journalist and writer. She worked for many years as the editor-in-chief of various magazines and daily newspapers and now writes a weekly column in *Jornal de Negócios*, and reports for two magazines and also co-hosts a daily radio show on Antena 1. The novel 'Filipa de Lencastre' changed her professional life, having sold more than 50,000 copies. Due to the book's astounding success, since then she has written five other historical novels about other Queens of Portugal: 'D. Catarina de Bragança', who was the only Portuguese princess to become Queen of England; 'D. Amélia', the last Queen of Portugal; 'D. Maria II', a Queen in her own right whose uncle tried to steal her throne; and 'D. Isabel de Borgonha', the life of Isabel, the Duchess of Burgundy, the only daughter of Philippa of Lancaster, a powerful women in medieval times. 'D. Teresa', mother of the first King of Portugal, Afonso Henriques, is her most recent historical novel, which was published in May 2015. "Philippa of Lancaster – English Princess, Queen of Portugal", is her first book that has been translated into English.*