

## New" Islington Wells"

1684: The discovery of a chalybeate spring in Islington has led to an enterprising businessman establishing a dancing room, walks, arbours, and gaming tables on the site. He is promoting the venue as Islington Spa - the new Tunbridge Wells.

## Starving Otway chokes to death

1685: He choked to death on the first food he had eaten in days, dying, totally destitute, in an alehouse. Such was the sad end for the 33 year old playwright who fell from noble favour. His first play, "Alcibiades", written when he was 23, brought him into contact with the actress Mrs Barry, for whom he immediately developed an obsessive and unrequited passion. A year later he had a great success with "Don Carlos", but because he made enemies at court and found it impossible to live in the same city as Mrs Barry, he enlisted as a soldier and served in Flanders. After a few years he returned to London and resumed his writing career, but in spite of the fact that "Venice Preserved" (1682) is one of the finest plays of the age, he failed to find any financial security.

It is said that he was recognised by a theatregoer, who discovered him, distressed and starving in an alehouse. The theatregoer immediately purchased some bread to give him. Thomas Otway fell ravenously upon the food and promptly choked to death.

## "Orange Moll" sues over concession loss

1684: Following the merger between the Drury Lane and Dorset Garden's Theatres, the new management has dispensed with the services of "Orange Moll" and awarded the sales concession to someone else. "Orange Moll" - Mrs Mary Megs - is suing for breach of contract, claiming she has a legal right to the concession until the year 1702.

# THEATRES MOURN DEATH OF CHARLES II

1685 : The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and all other places of entertainment, closed their doors on February 2nd when it was reported that King Charles II had fallen unconscious with a stroke. Four days later, at midday, the King died, having said to his doctors "I am sorry, gentlemen, for being such an unconscionable time a-dying". It is claimed that his last words were "Let not poor Nelly starve" - a reference to the former actress, Nell Gwynn, the King's mistress. The King was much loved in the theatre world for his support and patronage of the arts, for his ready wit, and for his ability to laugh at himself. He is said to have roared with laughter when he heard the verses written by the late Earl of Rochester : "We have a pretty, witty King, Whose word no man relies on: Who never said a foolish thing, Nor ever did a wise one".

The King's successor is his brother, who becomes King James II. Because the new King is a Catholic and is passionately committed to restoring Catholic rights and advancing the Catholic religion, the country is in a political turmoil with Charles' eldest illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth claiming the throne as the Protestant heir.

## New King saves actor from gallows

1685 : "Scum" Goodman, the actor, was finally dismissed from Drury Lane because of his outrageous behaviour - which included the attempted murder of his mistress's two children. Short of money, he discovered a means whereby the courageous, dare-devil and reckless man could acquire some. He became a highwayman. However, he was quickly captured and sentenced to be executed on the gallows. Because of his public support for King James II against the Pretender to the Throne, he appealed to the new King for clemency, and was pardoned. The scandal surrounding this has made Scum Goodman an object of curiosity, and he has been given back his former post at Drury Lane, where his appearances are quickly sold out.

## Thomas Betterton is acknowledged as the country's greatest actor

1685: It has been 25 years since London's theatres re-opened after the Restoration, during which time Thomas Betterton has emerged as the country's leading actor. He is best known for his performance as Hamlet, a role he first played in 1661, and has returned to many times since. It is said that Betterton is so engrossed in his part that, upon meeting the Ghost in Act 1, he actually turns white with fright. Barton Booth, once playing the Ghost, was so astonished by Betterton's reaction, that he was, himself, terrified and unable to continue for a few moments. Other actors have stated that Betterton immerses himself so deeply in his role that it is sometimes disturbing to appear on the same stage.

*Thomas Betterton, the most acclaimed actor of the age*

