

# DOCTOR WHO'S GOLDEN AGE

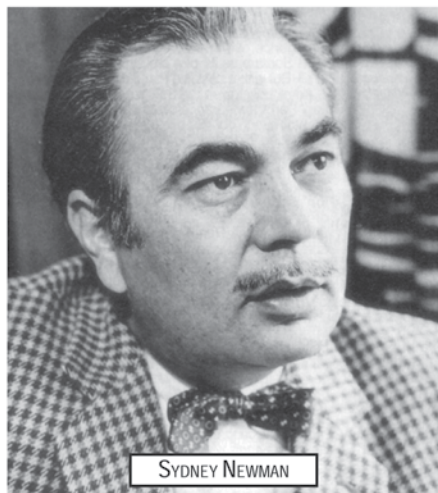
The 1970s has sometimes been referred to as the “golden age” of British television, but arguably that accolade could be more appropriately bestowed upon the 1960s.

Following its establishment back in 1936, the BBC's television service initially had a rather staid and stuffy public service image – grounded in the objectives that the BBC's first Director General Lord Reith had set it to “educate, inform and entertain” (“entertain”, significantly, coming last on the list). This prevented the BBC from gaining true popularity, particularly amongst the working classes (few of whom could, in any case, afford television sets, ownership of which was thus confined mainly to the middle and upper classes). The catalyst for change came in 1955 with the launch of the commercial ITV network.

The ITV companies took, right from the outset, a much more populist approach than the BBC. In doing so, they drew significant inspiration from other countries with established commercial television industries, not only adopting similar programme formats but also buying in numerous film series (particularly from the US) and recruiting many experienced writers, directors and producers. The latter group consisted, in particular, of new recruits from Canada and Australia, as Commonwealth citizens were entitled to enter and work in the UK without official restriction.

The BBC at first remained aloof and somewhat disdainful of its commercial rival, but was forced to take notice when (aided by the falling prices and thus more widespread ownership of television sets) the ITV companies started to romp ahead in the ratings. Much to the distaste of many in its upper echelons, the BBC had to change in order to compete. One of the ways in which it did this was to lure numerous young creative talents away from ITV (and in some cases direct from Commonwealth countries and elsewhere) with offers of attractive new contracts. The potential of these contracts was greatly increased in 1963 when the government authorised the following year's launch of the second BBC channel, BBC2. The Corporation consequently found itself with dozens of new posts to fill.

Thus the scene was set for one of the most remarkable and fascinating eras of the BBC's history. Under celebrated Director General Hugh Carleton Greene, the creative interaction, and often friction, between the conservative “old guard” with their high culture tastes, and the young, commercially minded firebrands recruited from outside, led to an incredible outpouring of superb and innovative new programming, right across the spectrum of the television service's output, which the ITV companies struggled to match.



SYDNEY NEWMAN

**Doctor Who** is perhaps the archetypal example of a successful and enduring series born of this turbulent creative melting pot. Anyone who has read the published accounts of its creation, such as the one that David J Howe, Mark Stammers and I gave in *The Handbook – The First Doctor*, will know of the battle of wills that Head of Drama Sydney Newman had with Chief of Programmes Donald

Baverstock to bring his pet project to the screen. Newman was a brash, no-nonsense Canadian with an earthy vocabulary and working class background. He had newly joined the BBC at the end of 1962 after holding a similar post at ABC (the ITV company for the Midlands region). At ABC, Newman had introduced “kitchen sink drama” to Britain in the **Armchair Theatre** strand, and been involved in the creation and production of many popular programmes, including **The Avengers**. Baverstock, on the other hand, was a diffident, well spoken man of upper class background who had been at the BBC for many years and produced numerous current affairs programmes. Two more contrasting characters it would be difficult to imagine, and there was certainly no love lost between them: Rex Tucker, who was briefly assigned as “caretaker” producer/director of **Doctor Who** before the appointment of its first official producer Verity Lambert in June 1963, once confided to me that he recalled hearing Newman refer to Baverstock as “that bloody bastard Baverstock”.



DONALD BAVERSTOCK

Fortunately Newman was a man who thrived on conflict and loved the creative atmosphere within the BBC at this time. “That place was just so alive back then!” he told me in an interview some years ago. “So full of ideas and creativity. I never wanted to go home at night!”

The impression one gets when researching and indeed watching productions of this era is that the gifted individuals closely involved in their creation were passionate believers in television as a medium. An inspirational medium of boundless possibilities, with its own unique strengths and characteristics. A medium of genuine intimacy and immediacy, transmitting electronically-captured words and pictures – many of them live – direct into ordinary people's sitting rooms. A medium that, despite its essentially domestic context, nevertheless engendered feelings of a shared national experience as, with only a small number of channels to choose from, and transmissions restricted mainly to evenings and weekends, almost every programme was seen by a significant proportion of the total viewing audience and took on the quality of a notable event to be eagerly discussed with friends, neighbours and workplace colleagues the following morning.

This contrasts starkly with the situation today, when there are literally dozens of channels available, for British satellite and cable viewers, at least. Even those who work in television seem in many cases to subscribe to the pernicious but insidious view that it is just a poor relation to the cinema, and all too often just a stepping stone for them toward a hoped-for career in that industry. The steadily increasing involvement of British television networks in feature film production, pioneered by Channel 4 in the mid-1980s, has been generally hailed as an admirable and forward-looking development. However, to those who care about television as a separate and distinctive artform, it can arguably be seen as a highly regrettable and retrograde step. Whereas at one time most British television drama was videotaped in electronic studios, now most of it is shot on film. Even technological advancements in recent years seem to have been predicated upon a tacit assumption that television is somehow inferior to cinema and ought to be made to resemble it as closely as possible. As a result, we now have costly “home cinema” equipment on sale in the shops, pay-per-view movie channels and widescreen digital sets seemingly designed to suggest that even the very shape of television pictures, as they have been traditionally seen, is something to be abhorred and improved upon.