

12/35

Aristocracy on TV at BFI Southbank in July

featuring the Mitfords, Churchills and Astors



During July **BFI Southbank** goes posh and presents a season of TV productions which focus on the British aristocracy. With Jubilee celebrations in full swing and one year on from the Royal Wedding, the public's fascination with the aristocracy is enjoying a renewed surge. For instance, in just two years *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010) has built up a phenomenal global following and will soon feature screen legend **Shirley MaLaine**, who is currently the star of her own retrospective at **BFI Southbank**. This season will profile members of three families who continue to fascinate the British public: the **Mitfords**, **Churchills** and **Astors**. TV has been drawn to the aristocracy's heady mix of money, glamour politics and power for decades, and documentaries including **Whicker Considers: The Aristocracy Business** (YTV, 1968), **Aristocracy** (Episode 4: *The Survival of the Fittest*, BBC, 1997) and **Man Alive: Living Like a Lord** (BBC, 1966) will delve into how the other half live. This season provides a fascinating look at a class reinventing itself for a new millennium and provides an absorbing time capsule of the period.

Not many aristocratic families achieved celebrity status akin to the Mitfords, Churchills and Astors. **Nancy Mitford 1904 – 1973: A Portrait by Her Sisters** (BBC, 1980) combines interviews with most of her sisters with footage of Nancy to address a complicated family history, giving the viewer an intimate insight into the aristocratic world of the Mitfords' childhood. This will be followed by **Jessica Mitford – The Honourable Rebel** (BBC, 1977) in

which Jessica tells of her journey from aristocrat to communist, starkly juxtaposed with the story of sister Unity's friendship with Adolf Hitler and involvement in the fascist movement. Also featured in a pair of films is Nancy Astor. **Nancy – A Portrait of Lady Astor 1879-1964** (BBC, 1979) and **Lady Astor (Interviewed by Kenneth Harris)** (BBC, 1962) paint the first female MP as a rebellious outsider and provide a glimpse into a lost aristocratic world. No season on the aristocracy would be complete without the inclusion of the Churchill family. In the drama **Walk with Destiny aka The Gathering Storm** (BBC, 1974) Richard Burton portrays Winston Churchill during his rise to great wartime leader and in **At Home: Randolph Churchill** (BBC, 1957) the BBC was given unprecedented access to the Churchill family home as Randolph conducts a tour of his garden and library. This documentary perfectly illustrates the BBC's deferential approach to the aristocracy in the 1950s.

A set of three documentaries will start with **Whicker Considers: The Aristocracy Business** (YTV, 1968) in which Alan Whicker scrutinises the lordships of North Riding of Yorkshire with his usual incisive wit and candour. Following this will be an episode of the major BBC series **Aristocracy** (Episode 4: *The Survival of the Fittest*, BBC, 1997). In this final episode director Sam Organ examines what it means to be an aristocrat in the modern age, and the links between aristocracy and Eton, Oxbridge, Conservative politics and the art world. The episode also features the then Duke of Devonshire (and husband of Deborah Mitford) talking about reinventing Chatsworth as a commercial tourist venture. Incidentally the present Duke and Duchess of Devonshire can be seen in the current BBC series *Chatsworth* (2012), once again highlighting the public's continued interest in the aristocracy. Finally in **Man Alive: Living Like a Lord** (BBC, 1966) reporter Christopher Brasher looks at the differing lifestyle of 20th Century Lords. From the 11th Duke of Argyll with his 80,000 acres to the post office worker who discovered he was the heir to a Scottish estate.

Finally in two dramatisations, the season will look at the aftermath of the Second World War, when social upheaval left the aristocracy looking dangerously anachronistic. In **And Did Those Feet** (BBC, 1965) dramatist David Mercer created nightmarish images that literally embody the decay he saw in the aristocracy. Trevor Griffiths' **Country** (BBC, 1981) eschews nostalgia for more direct themes of class warfare, using the 1945 Labour landslide as a brilliant metaphor for social change.

While a number of people still believe the culture and manners of the aristocracy define what it means to be British, the reality on the ground has been a complex story. For some it has been a tale of gradual decline, for others spectacular reinvention and adaptation to the modern world.

Screenings taking place during the Aristocracy on TV Season:

Nancy Mitford 1904-1973: A Portrait by Her Sisters

BBC. 1980. Dir Julian Jebb. 63min

Interviews with most of her sisters combine with footage of Nancy herself (from *Tempo*, ABC 1966) to provide a uniquely intimate glimpse into the aristocratic world of the Mitfords' childhood. Best known for the success of her books *Love in a Cold*

Climate and The Pursuit of Love, Nancy knew both penury and later success as the toast of Parisian society. Sister Diana is confronted over charges of anti-Semitism, and they discuss the impact on the family of Unity's friendship with Hitler. A complex family portrait reflecting the wide range of opinions within the aristocracy at that time.

+ Jessica Mitford – The Honourable Rebel

The Lively Arts. BBC. 1977. Prod Michael Barnes. 60min

Jessica Mitford tells of her journey from English aristocrat to Communist Party worker then successful author (*The American Way of Death*) and finally feted grande dame of US liberal society. Just as Unity was turning to fascism, Jessica was radicalised by the poverty she saw in London's East End. Supplying the perfect image, Jessica describes how Unity carved the swastika and she the hammer-and-sickle on the window pane of the family home with their diamond rings!

Wed 4 July 18:00 NFT2

Whicker Considers: The Aristocracy Business

YTV. 1968. Dir Michael Blakstad. 24min

Quoting Oscar Wilde on the aristocracy ('the best thing in fiction the English have ever done'), Alan Whicker, with his usual incisive wit, looks at the lordships of the North Riding of Yorkshire. Both amusing and riveting in the candour of his interview technique, he manages in just 24 minutes to pierce the aristocratic armour.

+ Aristocracy: Episode 4: Survival Of the Fittest

BBC. 1997. Dir Sam Organ. 50min

This major series concluded by looking at what it means to be an aristocrat in the modern age, and examining the continuing links between the aristocracy and Eton, Oxbridge, Conservative politics and the art world. While the Duke of Devonshire talks about reinventing Chatsworth as a commercial tourist venture, others talk of selling off the family silver as new money triumphs.

+ Man Alive: Living Like A Lord

BBC. 1966. Dir Richard Thomas. 28min

Reporter Christopher Brasher looks at the spread of the ennobled in the 20th century, from the 11th Duke of Argyle with his 80,000 acres to Lord Litchfield as the embodiment of the contemporary glamorous 'working' lord. Then there is the post office worker who discovered he was heir to a Scottish estate and Lord Blyton – the pit worker and Labour MP sent to the Lords by Harold Wilson.

Wed 11 July 20:30 NFT3

And Did Those Feet?

The Wednesday Play. BBC. 1965. Dir Don Taylor. With David Markham, Willoughby Goddard, Patrick Troughton, Silvia Kay. 106min

Writer David Mercer commented about his play that the aristocracy are 'incapable of making any future social development'. Mercer's extraordinary work provides the physical symbol of aristocratic decline in the decaying body of Lord Fountain (Patrick Troughton) while his illegitimate twins represent the madness of a world without order. In mixing aristocracy and the surreal dream-world, Mercer creates a nightmare vision that forces the 'Establishment' to confront its own demise. Breathtaking in its freewheeling audacity and construction, and clearly born of the creative dynamics of the 60s. Director Don Taylor pushes at the boundaries to show just what the single play of the period could achieve.

Thu 12 July 18:10 NFT3

Country

Play for Today. BBC. 1981. Dir Richard Eyre. With Leo McKern, James Fox, Wendy Hiller, Penelope Wilton, Jill Bennett. 85min.

Conceived by Trevor Griffiths as the first of a series – ‘Tory Stories’ – that would chart the development of Conservatism up to 1979, the single film that was made is both politically powerful and subtle in its dissection of an aristocratic family on the eve of the 1945 Labour landslide. Totally different in tone to *Brideshead Revisited* (also from 1981) – and wittily utilising *The Godfather* as a reference – it eschews nostalgia for Griffiths’ more direct themes of class warfare. In the image of the family business, brewing beer for the masses, Griffiths finds the perfect metaphor for the link between commerce and power that will ultimately ensure the family’s survival. James Fox is a marvellously louche elder son, who sees how the aristocracy must adapt to this brave new world. Beautifully directed by Richard Eyre.

+ Timewatch: The Rise and Fall of the Aristocracy

BBC. 1984. Prod Peter Maniura. 18min

This segment of the programme asks why the English aristocracy have fared better than their continental counterparts and managed to avoid being dispossessed, even through the very British form of revolution under Cromwell.

Sat 21 July 16:00 NFT2

Nancy – A Portrait of Lady Astor 1879-1964

Women of Our Time. BBC. 1979. Prod Jeremy Bennett. 50min.

Nancy Astor’s status as the first woman to take a seat in the House of Commons is assured. John Crigg investigates her life, thrust as she was by dint of her marriage to Waldorf Astor into the British aristocracy. What emerges is a complex portrait of a contradictory and forceful personality. A fanatical Christian Scientist, she was well to the left of her conservative colleagues on social issues. She visited Bolshevik Russia to tell Stalin off, played a major role in the appeasement movement of the 30s, and shone as a morale booster in the blitz.

+ Lady Astor (Interviewed by Kenneth Harris)

BBC. 1962. 28min

Although Kenneth Harris’s interview displays all the deference common to the period, fortunately Lady Astor’s natural candour and tendency to gossip provide tantalising glimpses into a lost aristocratic world, her relationship with Churchill and the attitudes of her fellow MPs to her taking her seat. A telling portrait of a rebellious outsider.

Tue 24 July 18:20 NFT2

Walk With Destiny aka The Gathering Storm

BBC-Clarion Productions-Le Vien International. 1974. Dir Herbert Wise. With Richard Burton, Virginia McKenna, Ian Bannen, Robert Hardy. 75min

No season about the aristocracy would be complete without the most famous aristocratic family of them all – with perhaps the greatest influence on our immediate past – the Churchills. Richard Burton, in one of his rare roles for UK television, supplies a fine performance in writer Colin Morris’ unashamed eulogy to Churchill. Offering glimpses of the domestic and political life of the Churchills prior to the war, the play very effectively charts how Winston was brought in from the political wilderness to take up his final great role as wartime leader.

+ At Home: Randolph Churchill

BBC. 1957. Dir Humphrey Fisher. 40min

Perhaps realising the power of television as a propaganda tool, Randolph Churchill, in an unusual move for the time, allowed the BBC to broadcast live from the family home. As his children watch the broadcast, Randolph Churchill takes us on a tour of his garden and library before settling down to discuss his life, politics and writing. A fascinating time capsule that perfectly illustrates the BBC’s deferential approach to the aristocracy in the 50s.

Tue 31 July 18:00 NFT2

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NOTES TO EDITORS

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- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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