

THE FORSYTES

Review by **John Davis**



The Forsytes adapted from the novels of John Galsworthy by Debbie Horsfield; produced by Mammoth Screen; directed by Meenu Gaur; Channel Five (6 episodes)

One reviewer described this recent presentation as Mills and Boon meets John Galsworthy and as subtle as a migraine but that sounds small minded.

Ardent followers of other similar productions like *Downton Abbey* and *Bridgerton* will know what to expect and this will undoubtedly fill the gap until a new season of *Bridgerton* is released early in 2026. There is *The House of Guinness* and *The Empress*, both courtesy of Netflix, among others available in the meantime.

The Forsytes is not without pedigree. The script has been written by Debbie Horsfield, probably best known for her adaptation of the *Poldark* novels, and the cast includes Francesca Annis, Tuppence Middleton, Eleanor Tomlinson, Jack Davenport and Danny Griffin.

And there seems to have been no expense spared by the production company with the use of well-chosen locations, lavish costumes, restful pastel-decorated interiors and softly tinted lighting throughout. Even the small back street town-house in which seamstress Louisa Byrne lives and plies her trade has almost angelic streams of light pulsing through the windows most days. Symbolism perhaps, or am I being cynical?

This is just the latest in a number of adaptations of Galsworthy's Forsyte 'saga' a number of books originally written by the author between 1906 and 1921. The continuing story was to win the novelist the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1932. With only six episodes on show this time, and given the overall content, later Channel Five series seem inevitable.

The Forsytes are a large middle-upper class English business family, operating in the financial sector, not unlike the background in which Galsworthy himself grew up. The essential thread of the plot is the way in which cousins Jolyon Junior and Soames vie with each other to become head of the family firm. There is no problem distinguishing between the appearance and characteristics of the two leading protagonists as Jolyon assumes the 'handsome prince' role while Soames has a black moustache to help us categorise him.

Woven around these central figures there are numerous sub-plots involving senior members of the family, wives, daughters and servants etc. with plenty of layers of grey in between the black and white of knottier issues to move things along.

Perhaps the point on which the production falls down most, for me, is the way in which some aspects of the storyline do not dovetail comfortably into the overall mores of the Victorian era. For instance, in a period when marriages, arranged according to class, were a feature and wealth and social standing paramount, it would be unusual that a young lady would be given 'carte blanche' to 'pursue her dreams' when seeking a husband.

Footnote: The first television adaptation of The Forsytes Saga was broadcast by the BBC in 1969, originally on a fledgling BBC2-available only to limited viewers. When it was repeated later on BBC1, it went out at 7.00 p.m. on a Sunday evening. Regular church worshippers were up in arms as Evensong usually started at 6.00 p.m. and often lasted over an hour. With no streaming services or catch-up, viewers were missing the crucial opening scenes of the next episode (and there were twenty-six of them). When clergy all over the country came under intense pressure, many of them wilted and Evensong moved forward to 5.30 p.m. until the series was complete.