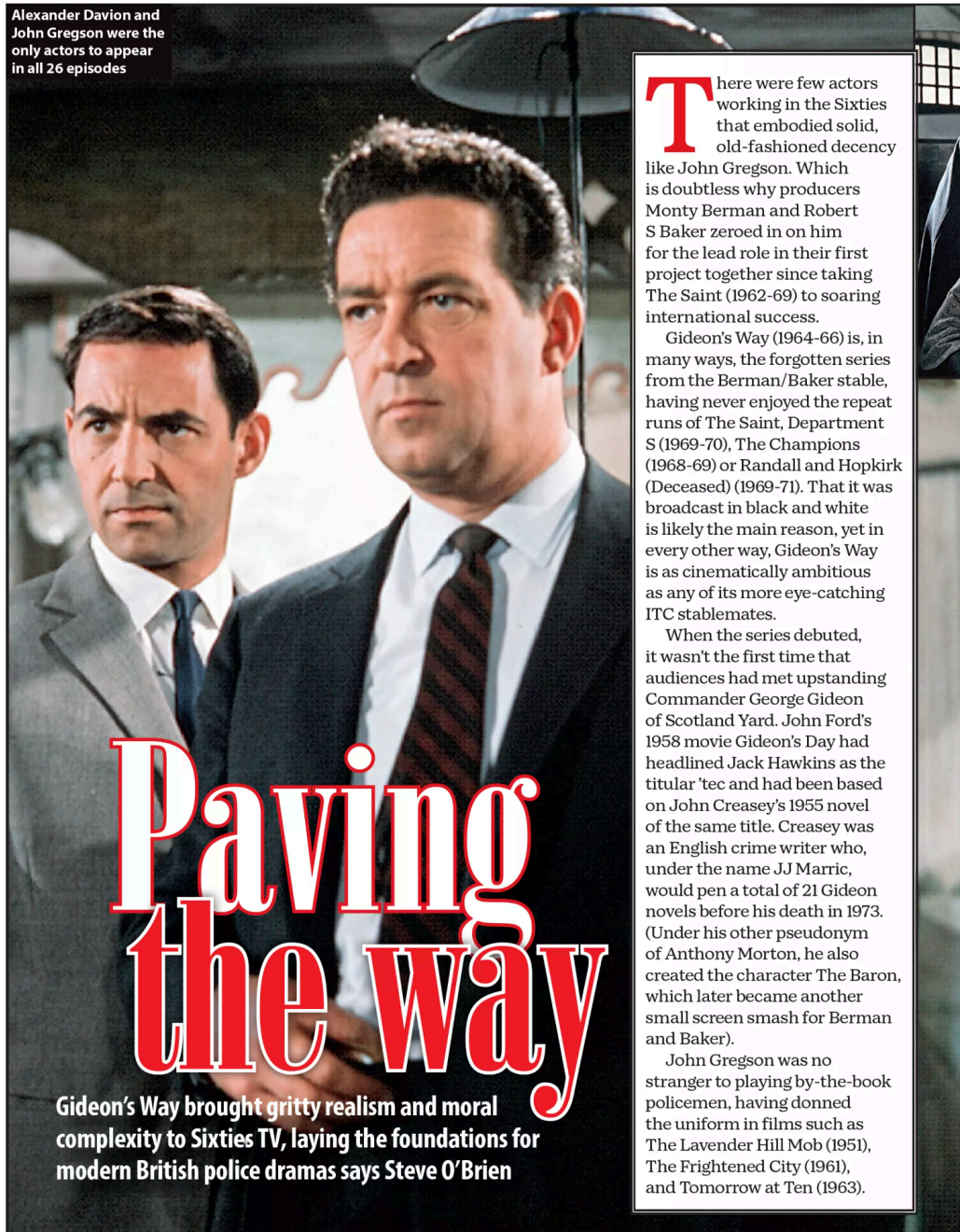


Alexander Davion and John Gregson were the only actors to appear in all 26 episodes



Gideon's Way brought gritty realism and moral complexity to Sixties TV, laying the foundations for modern British police dramas says Steve O'Brien

There were few actors working in the Sixties that embodied solid, old-fashioned decency like John Gregson. Which is doubtless why producers Monty Berman and Robert S Baker zeroed in on him for the lead role in their first project together since taking The Saint (1962-69) to soaring international success.

Gideon's Way (1964-66) is, in many ways, the forgotten series from the Berman/Baker stable, having never enjoyed the repeat runs of The Saint, Department S (1969-70), The Champions (1968-69) or Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased) (1969-71). That it was broadcast in black and white is likely the main reason, yet in every other way, Gideon's Way is as cinematically ambitious as any of its more eye-catching ITC stablemates.

When the series debuted, it wasn't the first time that audiences had met upstanding Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard. John Ford's 1958 movie Gideon's Day had headlined Jack Hawkins as the titular 'tec and had been based on John Creasey's 1955 novel of the same title. Creasey was an English crime writer who, under the name JJ Marris, would pen a total of 21 Gideon novels before his death in 1973. (Under his other pseudonym of Anthony Morton, he also created the character The Baron, which later became another small screen smash for Berman and Baker).

John Gregson was no stranger to playing by-the-book policemen, having donned the uniform in films such as The Lavender Hill Mob (1951), The Frightened City (1961), and Tomorrow at Ten (1963).



When shown in the US, under the title Gideon CID, the title sequence was adapted to show more violent scenes

Gideon, however, would become the character that would define him as an actor.

MORAL ROLE MODEL

Looked at now, the character of George Gideon seems impossibly, implausibly flawless. While police officers around him can be inept, corrupt, prejudiced or simply brusque, Gideon is the one they all look up to. He has the model family (unlike many crime series of the time, Gideon's Way gives us more than a glimpse at its protagonist's home life), an unblemished record, and he is the one who keeps calmest in the stormiest of storms.

Yet, for all that, what sets Gideon's Way apart from most of those other ITC shows is its realism. While The Saint, The Champions et al were unashamedly escapist, revelling in their exotic locations (even though, more often than not, they were replicated on Elstree soundstages) and larger-than-life villains, Gideon's Way was far more engaged with the social realities of the mid-Sixties. One episode, The V Men (S1,E2) for example, explores the rise of the far-right, focusing on a politician, Sir Arthur Vane (clearly modelled on British fascist Oswald Mosley) who finds himself the target of a bodged assassination attempt. Another, The Big Fix (S1,E4), focuses on the issue of horse doping, and Boy with Gun (S1,E23) tackles the issue of knife crime

and juvenile delinquency. While the show's nearest equivalent, the BBC's Z-Cars (1962-78), was limited in its storytelling by its theatrical, multi-camera format, Gideon's Way was able to film on real streets and in real locations, giving its storylines a gritty verisimilitude.

STRONG PEDIGREE

There were 26 episodes of Gideon's Way produced, many based on original stories by John Creasey though with a smattering of originals written specifically for the screen. Vintage TV enthusiasts will recognise many of the series' writers, from future Doctor Who scribe Malcolm Hulke and Thunderball's Jack Whittingham to Carry On's Norman Hudis, while its directors include many names synonymous with ITC from Leslie (father of Barry) Norman to Cyril Frankel to Roy Ward Baker.

Though Creasey fans found the series generally faithful to the books, Berman and Baker's biggest contribution to the series was the invention of Detective Chief Inspector David Keen, played by Alexander Davion. Young, handsome and in some ways a proto-Gideon in his dogged pursuit of the truth, Keen was included to give the series a dash of sex appeal. He's much more in the traditional ITC mould, and, in another universe, could have easily headed up his own detective show.

Other regulars included Hugh Ross Williamson as Detective Chief Superintendent Bell and Daphne Anderson as Gideon's wife Kate. Even Gideon's three children are given prominent roles, being played by Andrea Allan, Richard James and, as youngest son Malcolm, Giles Watling. In fact, a must-see moment occurs in the episode The V Men when 12-year-old Malcolm tells his father that he's going to 'run for office'. A prescient moment

since, 53 years later, Watling would become the Conservative MP for Clacton.

John Gregson died far too young, of a heart attack aged just 55 in 1975. He'd appeared in some of the most iconic British flicks of the Fifties and Sixties, including Genevieve, The Titfield Thunderbolt (both 1953) and The Longest Day (1962) and indeed was ranked the ninth most popular British star of 1956. Yet it's George Gideon that will forever be his signature role. Outside of Ford's 1958 film, there's been no other attempts to bring John Creasey's most famous creation to the big or small screen, a testament to how definitive Gregson's portrayal was.

Gideon's Way was clearly an influence on later police dramas such as The Sweeney (1975-78) and Target (1977-78), TV shows that took its documentary-style grit and ramped it up, yet, in many ways, it's never had the respect it so clearly deserves. Because without it, the TV crime landscape of the Seventies would have looked very different.



The show boasted an impressive roster of guests including an early appearance by Donald Sutherland



An insight into the detective's domestic life was an unusual feature of the show

DID YOU KNOW?

This series is referenced in the first episode of Morse prequel, Endeavour (2012-23). Detective Sergeant Jakes (Jack Laskey) says to Detective Constable Morse (Shaun Evans), 'It's not Gideon's Way but...'