



He's the oh-so-charming face of the British small screen. But James Norton requires more than a second glance to really work him out

Jacket, £1,995 by Belstaff; Sweater, £395 by Gieves & Hawkes; Jeans, £194 by Frame; Boots, £415 by Crockett & Jones; Helmet, £430 by Lewis Leathers

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

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Jacket, £1,340 by APC at matchesfashion.com; Shirt, £189 by Frame; T-shirt, £29 by Jigsaw; Trousers, £195 by Kent & Curwen; Socks, £12 by London Sock Co; Boots, £445 by Tricker's; Norton wears his own Rolex Oyster Perpetual Air-King throughout

By the side of the A2 as it roars across Blackheath is a small slate-grey hut selling burgers for £1.60 and tea for 70p in Styrofoam cups. Builders stop here, as do school kids on their way home from sports practice, and bikers on their Harleys. And in the middle of all this, holding court and charming the camera, is a man right at home.

James Norton is something you don't encounter much in showbusiness these days: he's proper, old-school charming. In an age of political polarisation and rancorous debate, Norton is the antithesis to all that anger and unpleasantness. He makes you feel you can have a conversation with him and be listened to; that if you recognised him in the street he'd be as approachable as if you were an old friend – only with sharper cheekbones and brighter blue eyes.

He's not often recognised, and, spending time with him, you slowly realise that what you see on the surface isn't quite all there is to him. In the afternoon that we spend hiding out on the heath, only one or two people stop to ask for selfies. Norton might be a household name, but he's perfected the art of flying under the radar.

He's also adept at winning hearts across the country. In just a handful of years, Norton has become a darling of the British small screen, helped by the crowd-pleasing roles he's taken on since leaving the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in 2010. With the notable exception of *Happy Valley*, in which he played psychopath Tommy Lee Royce – '8 million people are currently wishing me dead,' he told *The Telegraph* in 2014 – he's carved out a role for himself as a stalwart of Sunday-night television. First there was a walk-on part in *An Education*, followed by a spell in the theatre, before he played a crime-fighting vicar in *Grantchester*

Jacket, £345 by Oliver Spencer; Sweater, £320 by Officine Générale at matchesfashion.com

Hat, £85 by Raey at matchesfashion.com; Shirt, £179 by Albam; T-shirt, £88 by The Kooples

alongside Robson Green. So far, so quintessentially British. Then his chiselled appearances in *War & Peace* and *McMafia* ensured his small-screen heart-throb status and all-round nice guy persona.

But Norton says he doesn't want to just be nice. 'Any type of pigeonholing is dangerous,' he explains, as he sips a pint of Gamma Ray after the shoot in a nearby pub, the picture of ease. Talking to him is like getting to know a politician from another era (a Bobby Kennedy, perhaps) or a suave, charismatic Bond villain from the Pierce Brosnan era. You're charmed, of course, but you can't shake the feeling that there must be something darker bubbling away under the surface – if only you could uncover it.

Brought up in Yorkshire and educated at Ampleforth College, before attending Cambridge and RADA, Norton is ostensibly part of the current generation of public school-educated actors that includes the likes of Eddie Redmayne and Tom Hiddleston. But Norton seems keen to distance himself from the trajectories of this group, previously calling the fixation on Redmayne's private education 'ridiculous', and that actors' backgrounds should be 'irrelevant' when it comes to roles.

However, unlike other celebrities whose personalities have been media-trained into near oblivion – and Bond villains, of course – Norton doesn't hide his motives: about Brexit, about climate change, about Trump. 'I have an opinion and I don't think that because I have a small public profile, that opinion should in some way be stifled,' he says, suddenly more serious. 'I'm not a politician, I never want to be one, but at the same time I don't think it's wrong to voice an opinion if you believe in it.' This has, naturally, brought him quite a lot of slack on social media, especially when he tweeted his support for the petition revoking Article 50.

'It's a hard time to stand by what you believe, as you get shot down. There's so little respect for differing views right now and it makes people wary of voicing any kind of opinion,' he muses, leaning back in his chair. 'I think whatever happens with Brexit, what is palpably clear is that the scars from this experience are going to take a long time to heal. Everyone's just entrenched themselves in their views.'

This opinionated streak and wish to avoid being pigeonholed also extends to his



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approach to film. 'I want to be able to mix it up as much as I can,' he continues. 'And I would hate to be defined as a TV actor, or be typecast in any way. As an actor you want to be considered for all sorts [of roles].' He pauses. 'You don't want to be seen as the guy who always plays the nice guy. You want to be playing the nasty pricks as well.'

Over the next few months he'll certainly be doing that. He'll be appearing in the BBC drama *The Trial of Christine Keeler* as Stephen Ward, the social-climbing osteopath and potential spy at the heart of the Profumo Affair, as well as in *The Nevers*, a new Victorian sci-fi drama written and directed by Joss Whedon. Film-wise, he stars opposite Emma Watson and Saoirse Ronan in *Little Women* in the New Year, and in *Mr Jones*, the film about Welsh journalist Gareth Jones, who travelled to the Soviet Union in 1933, uncovering the Ukrainian genocide.

Unsurprisingly, it's the more complex characters like Stephen Ward that hold the most fascination for Norton. Ward was at the very centre of the Profumo Affair, and introduced Keeler to both John Profumo and Yevgeny Ivanov, the Russian naval attaché suspected of being a spy. 'The [characters] who aren't the villains, who no one really knew who they were. That's real life and human beings in a nutshell. If a role is well-written enough, it encapsulates that complexity,' he says, smiling. 'Stephen Ward was an enigma – an enigma to himself. And that's so fascinating because it's like a puzzle. It's like sitting down with someone in an interview and going "who the fuck are you", and never really finding an answer.'

Norton says he also has a deeper urge to make a difference through the films and TV shows that he makes. 'My sister is a doctor, and we often joke that my life is so frivolous in comparison,' he explains. 'She saves three lives a day, while I put on a silly costume and prance around for a few hours.' He found working on telling the real-life story of Gareth Jones particularly compelling, especially following the film's glowing reception from journalists at the Berlin Film Festival. 'Fuck it was incredible. Sometimes you can do something in a very small way, and there are moments when you can feel proud of what you do.'

To chase that feeling, Norton has just launched his own production company, Rabbit Track Pictures, alongside TV and

film executive Kitty Kaletsky. ‘We want to champion women and men, and different ethnicities and ages, and genders and sexualities. We want all stories to be heard,’ he explains. He’s also keen to support female writers and directors in particular. ‘The fact that I’ve worked with some fantastic female directors and writers, I hope that’s a sign that things are starting to go in the right direction. I’m aware that as a white man, I can’t just go “everything’s fine now.” There’s still a long way to go. [But people like] Sally Wainwright, Agnieszka Holland and Greta Gerwig, these are the powerful voices right now.’ He’s also hoping to turn his hand to directing. ‘Partly because I’m a control freak and I just want to feel like I’m in control. I want to put my name to something that is mine and I can stand by it.’

This news will certainly pique the interest of the bookmakers convinced Norton is set to assume the mantle of James Bond – as of early October, he’s currently tied at 4/1 alongside Hiddleston and Richard Madden. Even more interesting is the fact he prefers films and TV shows with more depth than, say, a big-screen spy movie. ‘I enjoy the spectacle of a big blockbuster – a Marvel something – but what really interests me and what I really love when it comes to watching and making films is the very personal human stories which I can relate to. For me, the less spectacle the better.’ In an age when most actors would drop everything to don some Spandex, Norton is taking quite the stand. Anyway, with his love of complex, potentially dangerous characters and personal charisma, he’s probably more suited to playing a Bond villain.

Shortly after, having finished his pint, Norton says it’s time for him to leave – he is late for a night at the opera with his girlfriend, fellow actor Imogen Poots. In a flash he disappears out onto the stormy heath again, shrouded from the weather under a beanie and a rain mac.

Before he left we took a picture on my phone. When I look back at the selfie, I notice that I appear slightly dazed; bowled over by the force of his charm, but perhaps not really closer to finding out the real man beneath it all. If anyone has mastered the art of hiding in plain sight, it’s Norton.

The Trial of Christine Keeler is on BBC1 at Christmas. Mr Jones is released in February



Jacket, £1,400 by Boss;
Sweater, £495 by Gieves &
Hawkes; Chinos, £200, by
Frame

Jacket, £325 by AG Jeans;
Shirt, £160 by Frame; T-shirt,
£45 by Albam; Chinos, £200,
by Frame

