

# “I’m always looking to find ways out of my comfort zone”

James Caan’s adventurous approach to life has taken him to philanthropic projects in his native Pakistan and a new role as chairman of The Big Issue. The Dragons’ Den star reveals what motivates him

**W**hen entrepreneur James Caan set up his first business – recruitment agency Alexander Mann – in exclusive Pall Mall, his clients waiting for him in reception were unaware that his broom-cupboard-of-an-office upstairs barely fitted him, let alone a desk.

What they also didn’t know was that the unassuming young man looking after their recruitment needs was to one day become one of the UK’s most illustrious and successful entrepreneurs. Alexander Mann was the brainchild and vision of James Caan, born Nazim Khan in Pakistan and raised in London’s East End.

“I think opposites attract,” says Caan, leaning back on a black leather swivel chair inside the Mayfair hub of his most recent venture, the private equity firm Hamilton Bradshaw – another *nom de guerre*. “I’m always looking for ways to take me out of my comfort zone. If I’d just done what I did yesterday I wouldn’t have grown. It’s what makes me alive.”

Caan’s humble beginnings seem utterly removed from the grandiose marble entrance of Hamilton Bradshaw.

Upstairs in his office, his face adorns many magazine covers on the wall; a framed photograph of Caan shaking hands with former US president, Bill Clinton, sits across from his desk; there are antique leather-bound books sat aside his

screen: one spine reads ‘Government’ in guilt lettering and another, ‘Dragons’ Den’, the TV show in which he sits as one of five investors in Britain’s business hopefuls.

He enters a room like a tornado but has the manners of an English gent.

This morning, his Blackberry is buzzing. He’s closing a deal on a healthcare business but next month he’ll visit Pakistan as the recently appointed chairman of The Big Issue: the person who, with Big Issue founder and Editor-in-chief John Bird, will spearhead the magazine’s Pakistan arm.

It all seems slightly incongruous: the gleaming London office, the multi-million-pound turnover, the refined demeanour, the desire to champion the homeless in his homeland. “When I was growing up I was very focussed on building a business,” says Caan, admitting that philanthropy was not a stop on the route he had anticipated.

“As you mature you become more aware of the world around you. To be in a position to want to give back is, I suppose, to be in a position where money isn’t everything,” he says. “I’ve chosen to spend money on things that are not just important to me, but important to other people.”

While “giving back” has become Caan’s next step, there is also the sense that he is peeling back the façade and rediscovering his roots.