



Clockwise from left: Ermengildo Zegna wool-trofeo/denim jacket, £1,390. Maison Corthay calfskin and denim Wilfrid shoes, £1,490. Dolce & Gabbana stretch-denim jeans, £375, from Mr Porter. Louis Vuitton washed-denim-print Constellation tie, £140

As major menswear brands take denim far beyond jeans, the one-time workwear staple now more than holds its own in formal surrounds. **Nick Scott** reports. Photography by **George Ong**

OUT OF THE BLUE

An 1864 Webster's Dictionary referred to denim – a fabric that began its journey towards ubiquity when jeans were invented to weather the toils of the Gold Rush and the Wild West – as “a coarse cotton drilling used for overalls, etc”. In the mid-1980s, Yves Saint Laurent described denim jeans as having “expression, modesty, sex appeal, simplicity – all I hope for in my clothes”. Denim's transition from workwear to desirable casualwear proved not to be the final twist in the fabric's rich narrative. Despite decades of “No jeans” being a dress code imperative of upmarket clubs and restaurants, in recent years this hardy textile has been breaking a sartorial glass ceiling and becoming acceptable for dressier occasions. “Denim is no longer regarded as a casual fabric,” says Mark Frost, design director of Gieves



Clockwise from left: Paul Smith cotton/denim blazer, £700. J Fitzpatrick calfskin and denim Wedgwood boots, £370. Drake's denim jeans, £195. Gieves & Hawkes denim jeans, £195. Berluti denim jeans, £380. Saint Laurent denim jeans, £420

& Hawkes, whose latest jeans (£195, pictured near right) have a gently tapered but forgiving silhouette that look more like trousers than jeans.

Indeed, smart jeans such as these have helped kick-start the more formal denim trend, with a host of designers proving that jeans no longer mean dress-down. Cerruti's slick wash-selvedge pair (£250) are an excellent choice for those wishing to opt for black, as are Dolce & Gabbana's stretch-denim offerings (£375, pictured on previous page); French label Berluti has smartened up the slim silhouette of its latest jeans (£380, pictured second from bottom left) with pressed front creases, as has Emporio Armani with its pleated, tapered denim trousers (£175, pictured overleaf). Turnbull & Asser's five-pocket Hain pair (£125) are a more vibrant option, while perhaps the most striking new addition is British tie connoisseur Drake's first foray into denim (£195, pictured top far right). Featuring a straight leg with a gentle taper, these jeans have a higher rise which, Drake's suggests, makes for better proportions when paired with a tailored jacket. When a brand renowned for its old-school, English artisanal heritage incorporates a new fabric into its arsenal, it's surely a sign that the cloth in question is going up in the world.

Trousers are just the start of denim's acceptance into more formal dress codes. “I've recently noticed some of

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our customers wearing denim and chambray shirts with their structured tailoring,” says Christopher Modoo, senior creative director of Savile Row tailor Chester Barrie. “It's a good look. If you're pairing one with a full suit, I'd suggest wearing a textured tie, such as shantung, or one that's knitted. The denim shirt collar should be quite widely spread, rather than a button-down. If worn with a blazer, I'd suggest grey flannel trousers, not jeans.”

London bespoke shirtmaker Emma Willis has also seen a growing appetite for smart denim shirts. “We use several shades of deep indigo blue and design them with our classic and cutaway collars, depending on the shape of a man's face and build,” she says. “I'd recommend a square single cuff with two smoked mother-of-pearl buttons to match the front buttons. A fly front would look elegant too.” Such a creation (pictured overleaf) from Willis's Jermyn Street emporium would come to £290.

“I love the versatility of mixing denim with tailoring,” says Jason Basmajian, chief creative officer of Cerruti, which has a two-tone denim shirt (£150) in its current collection. “A denim shirt can look great with a dark suit.” Demonstrating just how far into formalwear denim shirts have ventured, Turnbull & Asser (£225, pictured overleaf) even suggests wearing its denim/cashmere dress shirt with a classic T&A collar with a dinner suit.

And while the words “denim jacket” may conjure a weekend look, this, too, is changing. A few years back, Italian entrepreneur Lapo Elkann would often sport a bespoke six-button, double-breasted blazer in washed-out, slightly distressed denim, and the major menswear brands have caught on. Ermengildo Zegna's new formal jacket (£1,390, pictured on previous page) comes in what the Italian label describes as a “wool/denim” textile which, it claims, boasts all the durability of traditional denim along with the soft richness of the company's



in-house wool trofeo (its research team has been working for several years on conquering wool's resistance to the denim dyeing process).

Zegna's most significant contribution to denim's increasing clout in formal surrounds, though, is the fact that this jacket can be part of a two-piece suit (the trousers are £475). The ensemble's not quite as polished a look as the indigo three-piece suit with double-breasted waistcoat that Ralph Lauren introduced in 2014 as a part of its Purple Label (which was modelled not only with a button-down shirt, tie and pocket square but also a pocket watch), though it would pass muster at a wedding or work dinner.

In a similar vein is Paul Smith's cotton/denim blazer with contrast stitching (£700, pictured on previous page), which pairs well with either light-coloured chinos or white denim Saint Laurent jeans (£420, pictured on previous page) for a nautical look, or checked suit trousers – which can be as bold as you like. If denim tailoring feels too paradoxical, consider jackets in the "thick shirt" style by Private White VC (£695, pictured top right) or Hardy Amies (£175).

Zegna's wool/denim jacket as part of a two-piece suit could pass muster at a wedding or work dinner

Sealing denim's credentials for what might be termed "high casual", Zegna has even taken the fabric to its footwear range: Ermenegildo Zegna Couture's triple-stitch trainers (£415) in trofeo wool/denim and Z Zegna Neoprene chukka boots (£295) can be paired with suits on less stuffy occasions. Ermenegildo Zegna also does a stylish indigo backpack (£1,175) in the same material, as does Ralph Lauren Purple Label (£700, pictured right). J FitzPatrick takes denim footwear up a gear with its Wedgwood boot with denim shaft upper (£370, pictured on previous page), and Maison Corthay goes one step further with dark brown calfskin Wilfrid shoes (£1,490, pictured on opening page) with a denim panel.

Perhaps the strongest indicator of all, though, that denim now has enough cachet to be worn alongside the finest wools and West Indian Sea Island cottons is its use for high-end ties. Hepville, a one-man custom



Clockwise from top left: **Emma Willis denim shirt, £290.** **Hermès denim tie, £100.** **Emporio Armani denim trousers, £175.** **Private White VC denim jacket, £695.** **Turnbull & Asser denim/cashmere shirt, £225.** **Ralph Lauren Purple Label denim backpack, £700**



clothing maker near Bremen, Germany, does a fantastic tie (£60) in selvage denim sourced from Japan, and the major players are getting in on the act, too, as evidenced by two slim, simple offerings: Louis Vuitton's washed-denim-print Constellation (£140, pictured on opening page) and one in denim (£100, pictured second from top left) from Hermès.

It's clear this robust fabric's ascendance from the practical workwear realm to smart society is complete. One can only speculate as to what Soviet-era Kremlin Politburo officials, who banned jeans for their capitalist decadence, would make of the material today.

MATERIAL GAIN

Berluti, 43 Conduit St, London W1 (020-7437 1740; www.berluti.com). **Cerruti**, www.cerruti.com and see Harrods. **Chester Barrie**, 19 Savile Row, London W1 (020-7439 6079; www.chesterbarrie.co.uk). **Dolce & Gabbana**, www.dolcegabbana.it and see Mr Porter. **Drake's**, 3 Clifford St, London W1 (020-7734 2367; www.drakes.com). **Emma Willis**, 66 Jermyn St, London SW1 (020-7930 9980; www.emmawillis.com). **Emporio Armani**, 191 Brompton Rd, London SW3 (020-7823 8818; www.armani.com). **Ermenegildo Zegna**, 37-38 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7518 2700; www.zegna.com). **Gieves & Hawkes**, 1 Savile Row, London W1 (020-7434 2001; www.gievesandhawkes.com). **Hardy Amies**, 8 Savile Row, London W1 (020-3696 1408; www.hardyamies.com). **Harrods**, 87-135 Brompton Rd, London SW1 (020-7730 1234; www.harrods.com). **Hepville**, www.etsy.com/de/shop/Hepville. **Hermès**, 155 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7499 8856; www.hermes.com). **J FitzPatrick**, 16A Dufours Pl, London W1 (020-3105 0559; www.jfitzpatrick footwear.com). **Louis Vuitton**, 17-20 New Bond St, London W1 (020-3214 9200; www.louisvuitton.com). **Maison Corthay**, 24A Motcomb St, SW1 (020-7235 5481; www.corthay.com) and see Harrods. **Mr Porter**, www.mrporter.com. **Paul Smith**, 9 Albemarle St, London W1 (020-7493 4565; www.paulsmith.co.uk). **Private White VC**, 73 Duke St, London W1 (020-7629 9918; www.privatewhitevc.com). **Ralph Lauren**, 1 New Bond St, London W1 (020-7535 4600; www.ralphlauren.com). **Saint Laurent**, 32-33 Old Bond St, London W1 (020-7493 1800; www.ysl.com). **Turnbull & Asser**, 71-72 Jermyn St, London SW1 (020-7808 3000; www.turnbullandasser.co.uk).

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