

Producing Spectacular Black and White DPI's and Prints

Workshop held on 24th Jan 2012

Introduction

Unless you are trying for a specific effect such as landscapes in the mist, the defining factor in good black and white images is plenty of contrast. Without this, images look boring, washed out and totally lacking that “oomph” factor. So it is not enough just to open an image in Photoshop and press a button marked “Black and White.” However, there are many ways to achieve the same effect in Photoshop and Lightroom, so if you are used to a certain way, then carry on.

You should seek to have really black blacks and really white whites, stopping just short of having no detail at either end of the spectrum. Then, every image I have converted to black and white has benefited from some “dodging” and “burning” to a greater or lesser extent.

Having got the black and white image exactly as you want it, there remains the challenge of getting a decent print from it. It used to be that you either had to have a very expensive ink-jet printer, which had a few cartridges of black ink of various shades, or you had a dedicated printer full of cartridges of various shades of black. All that is no longer necessary, as I hope to show when I bring along various prints produced on my Epson Stylus Photo 1400 printer to show you.

I should stress that that not every image is suitable for the black and white treatment. Types of image that are suitable are landscapes, steam engines, fun fairs etc. An easy way to view your images temporarily in black and white is to open a folder of images in Adobe Lightroom, select all or some of them and press the letter V key on the keyboard. To revert to colour, press V again.

Preparing the Image

Adobe Lightroom

This is more easily achieved in Adobe Lightroom than in Photoshop. In Lightroom, select the image and go to the Develop Module. There, move the exposure slider to the right, having first clicked on the two triangles at the top left and right on the histogram. If you move the slider too far to the right, the image will show red blotches over the burnt-out highlights. Back off the slider until the red blotches are minimized, then move the Recovery slider to the right until the red completely disappears. To deal with the black end of the spectrum, move the Blacks slider to the right. Move it too far and the blacks will turn blue. Back off the slider until the blue goes completely.



Next, click on the Black and White button and the image will lose its entire colour. Then manipulate the eight sliders (marked “red”, “blue” etc. under Black and White Mix until you achieve a pleasing image. You can carry out any of the other Lightroom functions now, such as cropping, etc. but as I am going to open the image in Photoshop anyway, I do any more manipulation there. Right click on the image and select “Edit in Photoshop CS5”. In the box, which then appears, click “Edit with a Copy of Lightroom adjustments” and then click “edit”. The image then opens in Photoshop. The rest of the procedures are described below in the Photoshop section.

Adobe Bridge and Camera Raw

Camera Raw not only handles RAW files, but handles TIFF and JPEG files as well. I have yet to find a control in Photoshop, which shows the whites burning out, and the blacks blocking out, in the image being worked on. There is this facility in Camera Raw, so I open any files there first from Adobe Bridge.

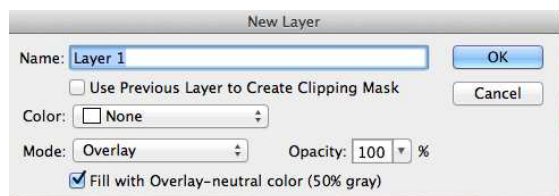
Open the image in Adobe Bridge. Right click on the image and select “Open in Camera Raw.” With the image open in Camera Raw, make sure that the two triangles at each top end of the histogram are active. Go to the fourth icon from the left marked “HSL/Greyscale” and click on “Convert to greyscale.” You then have eight sliders to play with similar to those mentioned in the section on Lightroom above. Go back to the first icon on the left (marked “basic”) and move the “Exposure” slider to the right until the highlights turn red. Then move the “Recovery” slider to the right until the red disappears. Move the “Blacks” slider until the blacks turn blue and then back off a bit. There are plenty of other sliders you can play with which can enhance your image in other ways, but for now we will open the image in Photoshop CS5, by clicking on “Open Image” and continue our operations from there.

Adobe Photoshop CS5

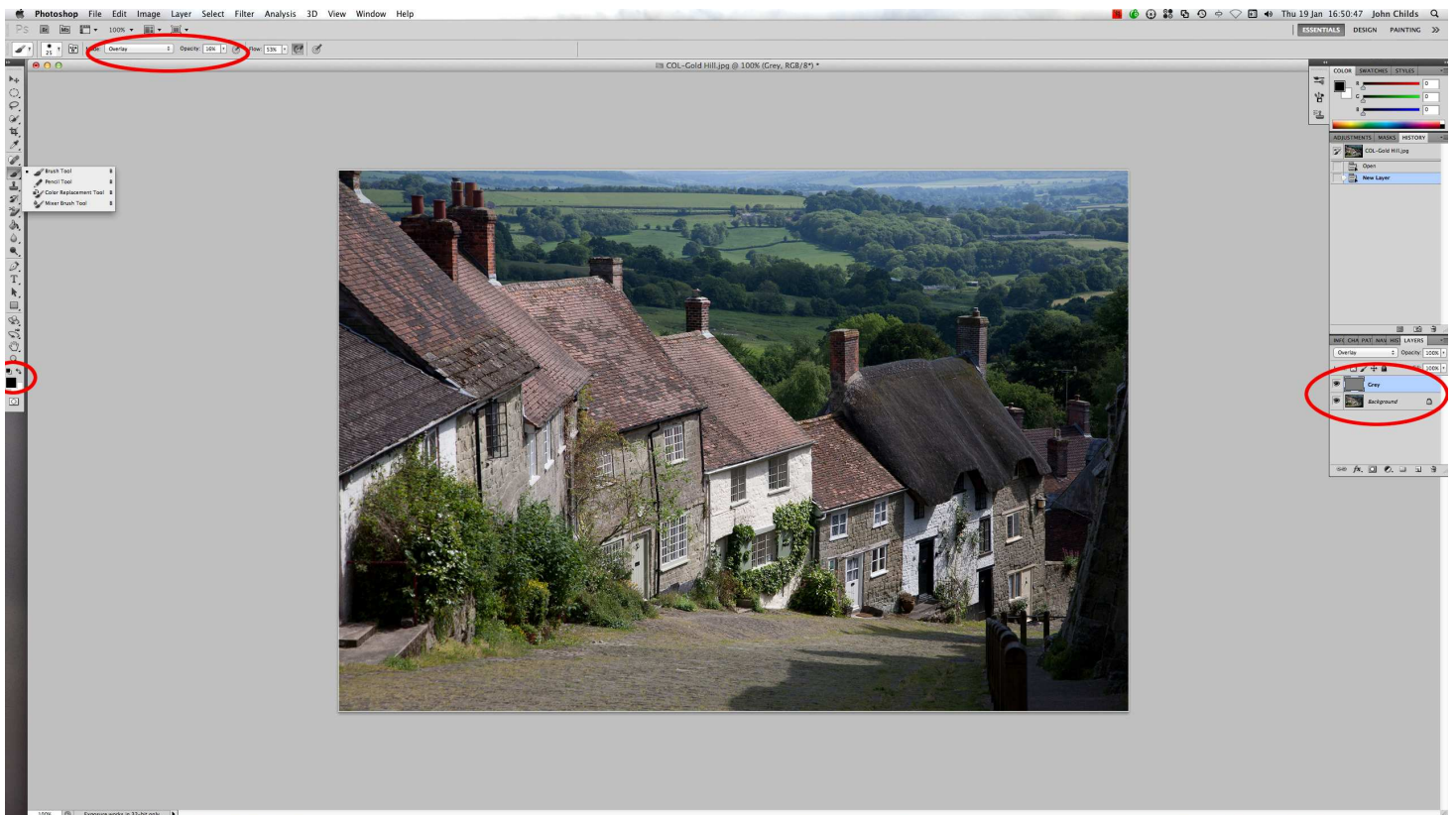
I have yet to really distinguish any difference, but I convert the Working Space from Adobe RGB or sRGB (or whatever) to “Working grey-Dot Gain 15%” (Edit>Convert to Profile). If I want to crop the image I do it now.

You should have a nice punchy black and white image, which could probably be left alone, but a bit of dodging and burning can always improve matters. These techniques selectively lighten dark areas and darken light areas. Indeed colour images can often be improved by a bit of judicious dodging and burning and having learnt the following techniques specifically for black and white images, I use them for my colour images as well. The object of it all, as relating to black and white images, is to increase the contrast in certain areas thus improving the overall contrast to make the images have a more “punchy” feel to them.

Firstly, click on Layer>New>Layer. In the box that then appears, rename the new layer as Grey or something like it. Change the “Mode” from “Normal” to “Overlay” and tick the box marked “Fill with Overlay-neutral colour (50% gray).” Then click OK. You will see in the layers palette that there is now a second layer coloured grey.



Make sure that the foreground and background colours in the tools palette (on the left hand side of the screen) are set to black and white. Select the Brush tool from the tools palette. Make sure the Mode box near the top of the screen is set to “Overlay”. The Gray layer in the Layers palette will automatically have been selected when it was opened. Move the “Opacity” slider (on the toolbar just to the top of the image being worked on) to about 25%. If you want to lighten any area, make sure the foreground colour in the Tools palette is showing white and start brushing on a dark area of the image. You will see it gradually lighten the more you work on it. To darken an area, use the brush on it whilst the foreground colour in the Tools palette is showing black.

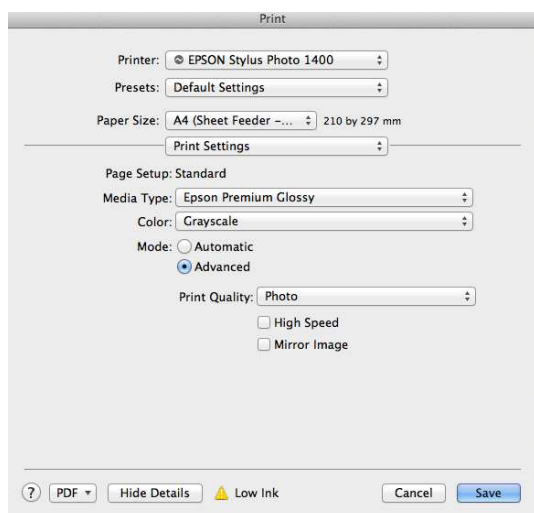
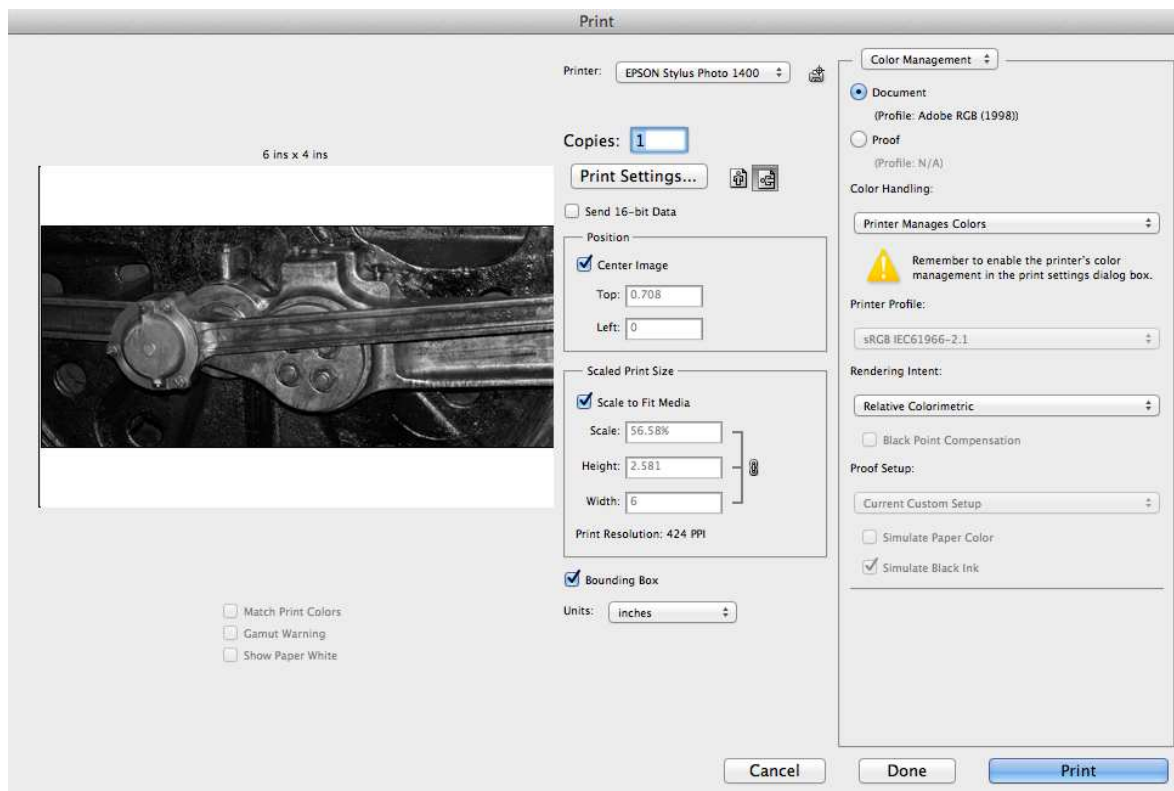


Do any other operations you feel necessary, such as cloning, etc. However, these operations should be done on the Background layer, not the Gray layer. Select the Background layer by clicking on it in the Layers palette on the right hand side of the screen.

Printing

This is where things get interesting and not a little bit exasperating! I use Apple Mac computers so the following instructions apply specifically to those. You will have to find the equivalent commands/ actions in Windows machines.

Select File> Print. In the big "Print" box that appears, select the printer in the top middle box. I click "Printer manages colours" and "Relative Colormetric" in the appropriate boxes. I also select the "Scale to fit Media" box. Select "Print Settings" and make sure that the type of paper, its size, etc. are selected as usual. However, I then select the "Color" box to read "Grayscale". Then go ahead and produce a small print to see how it comes out. If OK then carry on and print your masterpiece.



I have to say that in two books, which discuss printing black and white images, they say that “Color” should stay selected in the “Color” box rather than “Grayscale” (that I use). However, Grayscale works for me so I shall continue with it.

Conclusion

I hope you have been filled with the urge to convert some of your images to black and white. The only tricky bit concerns the Dodge and Burn techniques I describe above. By all means try the usual dodge and burn tools provided on the Tools palette in Photoshop, and these may meet your needs. However, I find the method of interposing a grey layer gives me much more control.

John Childs
19th January 2012

