Archiving Your Photo Collection I

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Statistics tell us that, once we switch to digital, we take three times as many shots compared to film. Handling this flood of digital data has become a major concern.

There are two issues here. First, we need to store our images safely. Whole libraries of images have been wiped out through a single hardware failure. The keyword here is redundancy. If your images only live on your hard drive and nowhere else, you are playing Russian roulette with your photo collection.

Secondly, we have the issue of data management. As your collection grows it needs organising and cataloguing. What's the use of having tens of thousands of images stored safely, if you don't know what you have got and where to find the right image?

We looked at the hardware side of archiving in the October 2005 issue. I want to briefly recap the key points. But the main topic of this series is going to be the organising side of the archiving process. A whole software industry has grown around the subject of Digital Asset Management (DAM). Today I want to focus on Adobe's Bridge. Next month we'll have a closer look at some more specialised DAM programmes.

About Backups and Archiving

Don't confuse backups with archives. Backups are usually automated, incremental copies that reflect the current state of your system. Archives are long-term. These are images and other files taken off the working hard drive to make room for new data.

You have to accept that any archive media will degrade over time, unless the zeros and ones are engraved into stone. Any other of the even slightly convenient archive solutions will deteriorate over time and need to be maintained. The first step is to duplicate, or better, make triplicate copies of the data, preferably to be stored at different locations. Hard discs are the most convenient media: they are fast, can hold hundreds of Gbytes, and they are affordable. Remember: time is expensive and images are irreplaceable!

When archiving to optical media, keep in mind that burnable CDs and DVDs are based on photosensitive dyes, which degrade with time. In commercially pressed discs the data is stamped on a metal foil.

Finally, the archives need to be refreshed periodically by copying the data to new media. Here we take advantage of improvements in technology. Time will tell if my current photo DVD archives are going to be copied to Blu-ray discs or HD-DVDs.

Adobe's Bridge used for Sorting

The first file browser in Photoshop 7 was a simple tool for a quick preview of images in a folder. In Photoshop CS the file browser became a mission-critical tool for anybody using Raw files. In CS2 it was replaced by a standalone application, the Bridge, which got many new functions, not just for viewing, but also for evaluating and comparing images.

The first thing after coming home from the lab with a batch of film was to look through the slides and sort them on a light table. Well, after downloading the images from the memory card, the Bridge now provides us with an electronic light table:
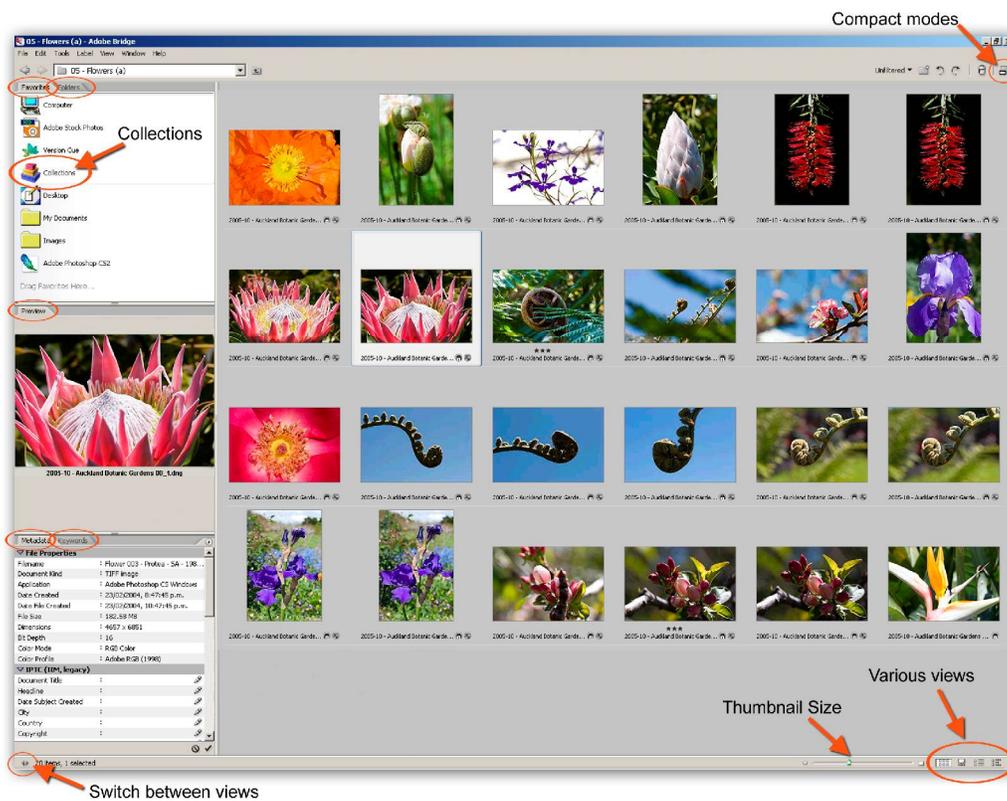

Fig. 1: Bridge in Default Mode

It is worthwhile exploring the various view modes: the compact and ultra-compact modes, the full light table, the filmstrip mode for a large preview and finally the slide show function.

You will notice that the Bridge does take its time when building thumbnails. Speed is not one of its strong points, compared with other image browsers, especially if you have folders full of camera Raw files. The solution is to go to Tools > Cache > Build Cache for Subfolders and simply head off for lunch.

On the other hand, if you are in a hurry, you can use Photoshop while Bridge is busy building thumbnails, because it is a separate application.

Once through the thumbnail building process, Bridge is very responsive and you can sort your images by moving them around, like on a real light box, deleting the obviously bad ones and ranking the rest.

Right-clicking on a thumbnail will give you a whole lot of options to choose from, including assigning a label, from 'poor' to 'excellent', which translates into a colour coding. Or you can use the star rating from 1 to 5-star. The easiest way of applying a rating is to use the Cntrl (Mac: Cmnd) key together with a numeric key.

Fig. 2: Rating your Images

On the top right of your screen you can find a label 'Unfiltered'. Click on the little triangle next to it and you narrow down the number of images displayed by their ratings, e.g. 'Show 3 or more stars'.

Once you have selected the keepers, got rid of the rejects and rearranged the images, it is a good time to rename them. The Batch Rename function allows you to rename a folder full with any combination of text, date and consecutive numbering.

Adding Metadata

The Metadata tab gives us a host of information about every image. Literally metadata means 'data about data' and this information stays with your image file wherever it goes, even after renaming and saving in a different file format. Needless to say, this is the place to put our name, copyright and any other identification.

Under File > Info you can add your name, image description, keywords and copyright information. There is lots of repetitive information to be entered; fortunately the programme remembers recently typed metadata for each field in the File Info dialog box. Just click on the little triangle to the right of the metadata field and previously entered text can be selected. Or you can prepare a master form with all recurring information, then choose 'Save Metadata Template' from the dialog box's popout menu (top right triangle). These templates can later be applied to a whole bunch of new files.
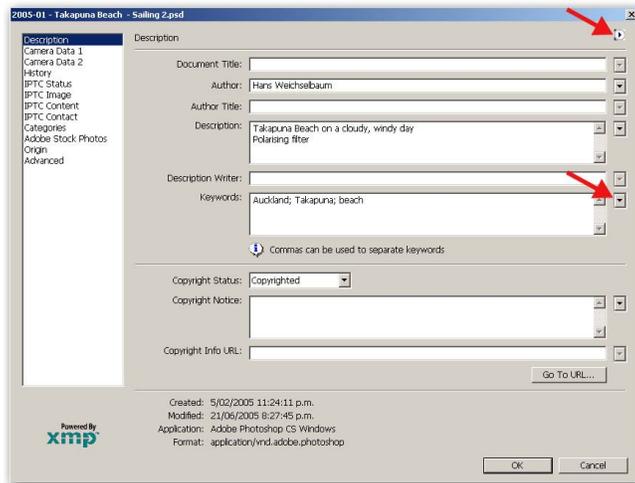

Figure 3 - File Info

All this can also be done from Photoshop after opening a file. In Bridge we can access and change the metadata without opening the image file (important in the case of JPEGs, which would need to be resaved!). We are talking here about the IPTC (International Press Telecommunication Council) metadata, which is fully editable. EXIF camera data is not editable. If you find it necessary to change an entry, e.g. the date has not been set correctly by the camera, then you will need special software, such as ACDSee or Exifer.

There are times when a photographer does not want to share information about the capture of an image with a client. The best way of doing that is to select the entire image, then copy and paste it into a new image file.

Indexing your Images with Keywords

We have already come across keywords in the File Info dialog box. Bridge reserves one of its tabs to keywords.

You can add new categories and keywords by clicking on the icons at the bottom of the tab, or on the little triangle at the top right. The idea is to assign keywords from a set of well-defined terms, without having to type them out. They can also be applied to a number of images in one go. Keywords can also

be entered through the File Info panel; the danger there is that we use different descriptions with the same meaning, e.g. 'city' and 'town', which will make a later search for that subject more difficult.

Retrieving Images

The main purpose of cataloguing your image collection is to be able to quickly find an image, or group of images, meeting certain criteria. Simply select Edit > Find. Here you can include several metadata characteristics, e.g. keywords and creation date:
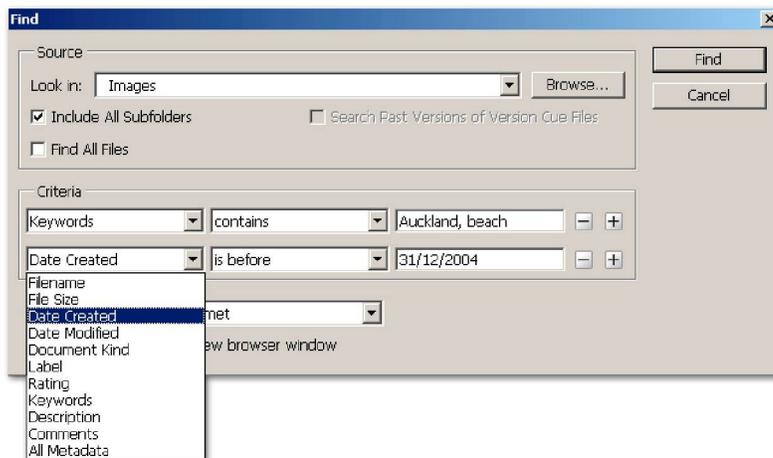
Fig. 4 - The Find command

Bridge's search of EXIF data is still limited. For example, if you look for shots taken at ISO setting 800, you can search for '800' in 'All Metadata' and the results will include images 800 pixels wide, as well as shots taken with an 800 mm lens.

Specialised DAM programmes, such as Extensis Portfolio or iView Media Pro are better designed for sophisticated searches. They create their own database, can handle image collections spanning over external discs, and are much faster.

Catalogue Sets, Collections and Virtual Copies

Organising your collection with keywords will not get you very far. In general there is no way of making nested sets with keywords and you will end up with a giant 'flat' list.

The answer is to make nested 'virtual' sets. We are going to look into that in more depth next month. Some DAM programmes call them 'Catalogues'. Photoshop Elements users will be familiar with 'Collections'. The original image

lives in the folder where we put it, named after the project, client or the date. But then we can make as many virtual copies of the image as we need to sort it according to time, event, location, content etc.

Unfortunately, the Collections in Bridge are really just "saved searches". There is no way for the user to create a Collection without first defining a set of search criteria. Likewise there is no way in which you can subsequently add or remove images to/from the Collection without first ensuring that all the original search criteria are met.

Bridge's cache holds all the information image thumbnails, previews and sort order, often also the keywords and metadata. The default is a centralised cache. Keep in mind that this information is lost if you burn a folder to a CD or DVD. You can opt for distributed caches (go to Preferences > Advanced), or you can later do that through Tools > Cache > Export Cache. Bridge will put two files into the respective folder, which need to be moved with the images.

Adobe's Bridge has evolved into something a lot more powerful than a simple image browser. Many photographers use it as a DAM tool to maintain their image collection. No doubt, some shortcomings will be ironed out in the next version. In the meantime it is worth looking at other, more specialised and powerful DAM programmes. That's our topic for next month.