

Neath & District Photographic Society

Using Levels

One of the first adjustments we make in Photoshop is to adjust the **Levels**. But what are **Levels**?

When you press the shutter on your camera the image is captured on the CCD, the metering system of the camera tries to take a neutral image by averaging the exposure to a neutral grey. Depending on the metering you use (Spot, Centre Weighted or Average) you will get varied results. We can control this metering by checking the **Histogram** on the camera.

When you import the image into Photoshop you can make 'tweaks' to the image to improve detail in shadow and reduce highlights or even remove colour casts by using Levels. Thus a 'flat' looking image can be given an injection of life that can really make the image jump out at you.

Let's look at the **Levels Adjustment Palette**.

Open an image then create an **Adjustment Layer** for **Levels**, (as in the previous Tutorials)

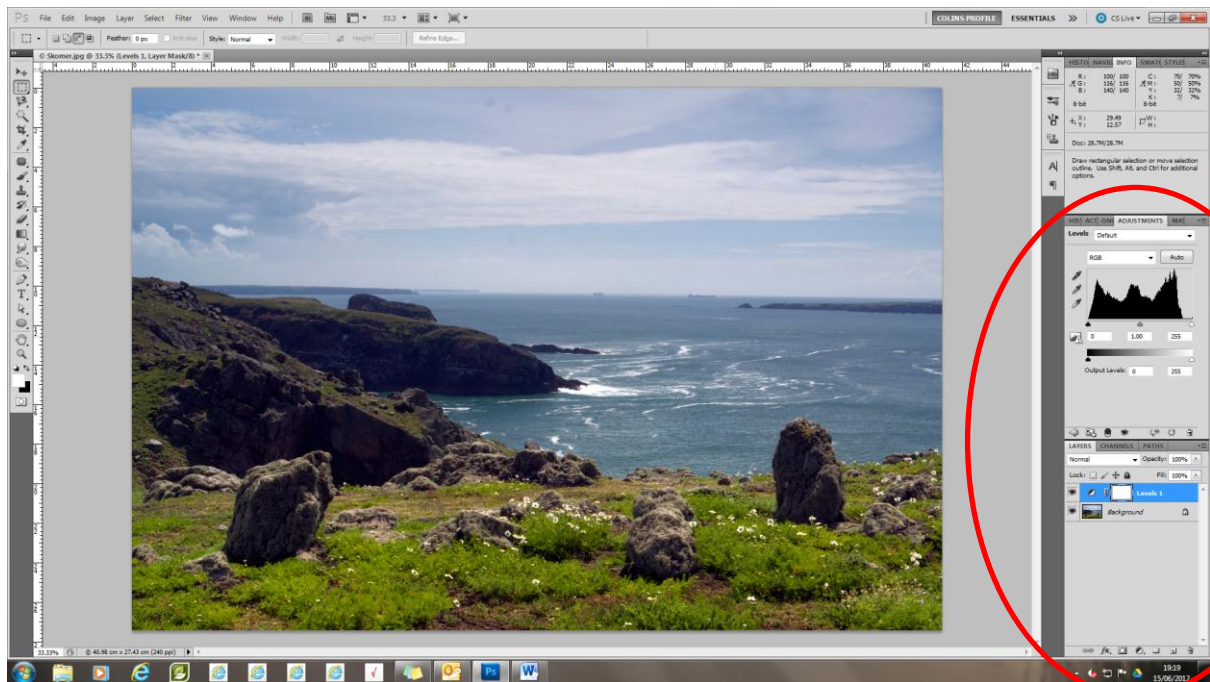


Fig 1

Below is an enlargement of the circled area showing the **Layers Palette** with a **Levels Adjustment Layer** and the **Levels Adjustment Palette** (fig 2).

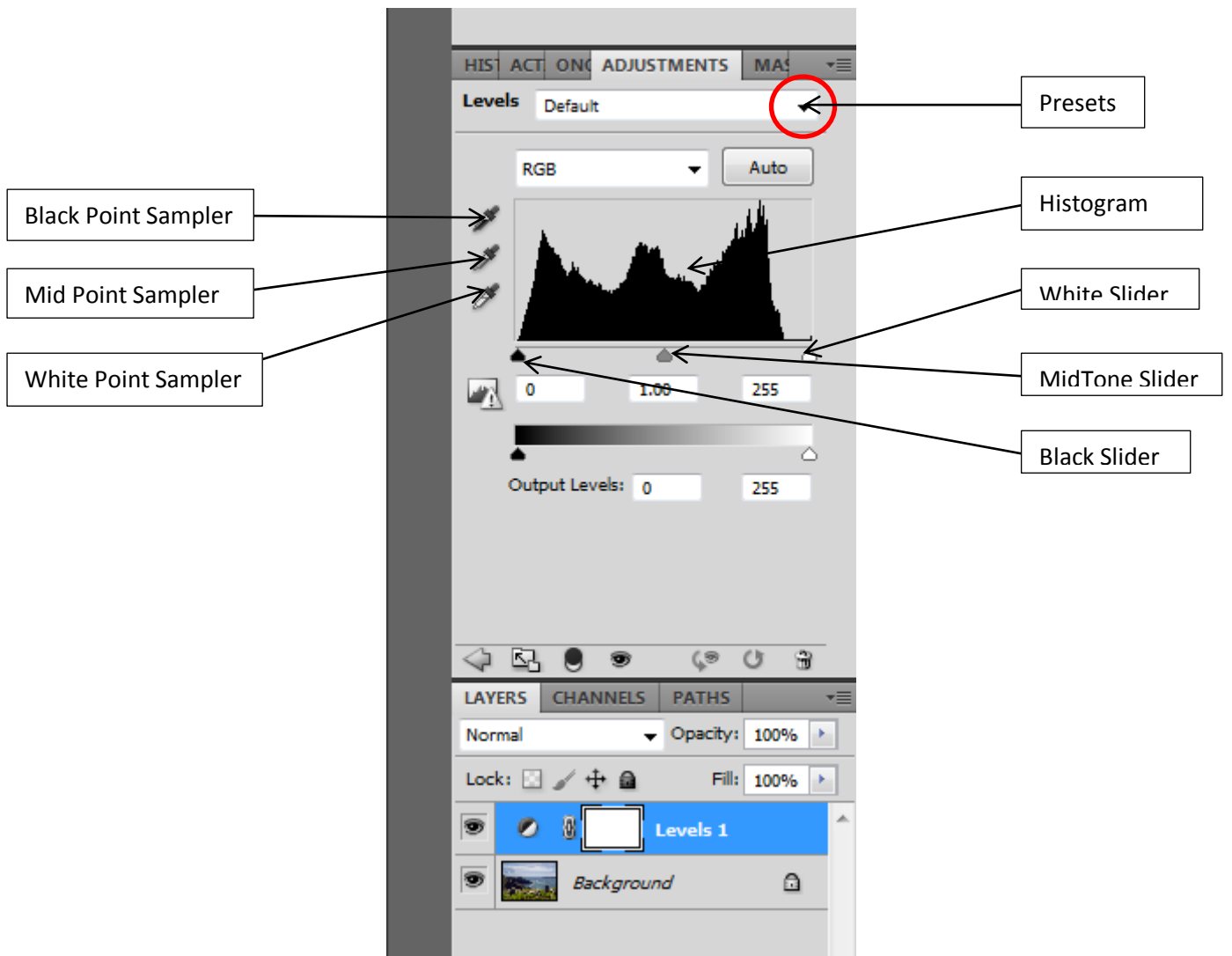


Fig 2

Try moving the sliders around and watching the **Histogram** changing. The **Histogram** is a graphic representation of all the pixels that make up your image. In a neutral image they would start at the bottom left hand corner rising to a rounded summit and falling into the right hand corner. Similar to fig 3. In reality this is not always the case.

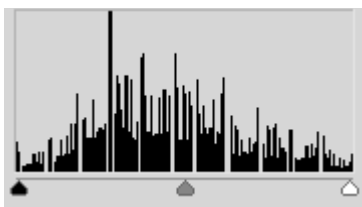


Fig 3

If you have a lot of dark pixels in your image (black clothes etc.) then there will be a grouping of pixels to the left, similarly if there are a lot of white pixels (snow etc.) then there will be a grouping to the right. Each photograph will have its own unique **Histogram**.

Getting it Right

Below is one of many ways to adjust **Levels**, as you explore **Photoshop** or speak to others no doubt you will pick up more ways. There is no wrong or right way as long as the end result is acceptable to you.

Select the **Black Point Sampler** (fig 2) and hold down the **Alt Key** on your keyboard. The image will turn White and the darkest part of the image will show up on the image, click the sampler on the darkest point. Now repeat with the **White Point Sampler**, remember to hold down the **Alt Key**, the image will go Black and the lightest point will show on the image, click on the lightest point.

Now to find the **mid point**, select the **Mid Point Sampler** and without holding the **Alt Key** down pass the Sampler over various areas of the image. Look for the **INFO Tab**, if it is not showing then go to **Window>Info** or press **f8**. (Fig 4)

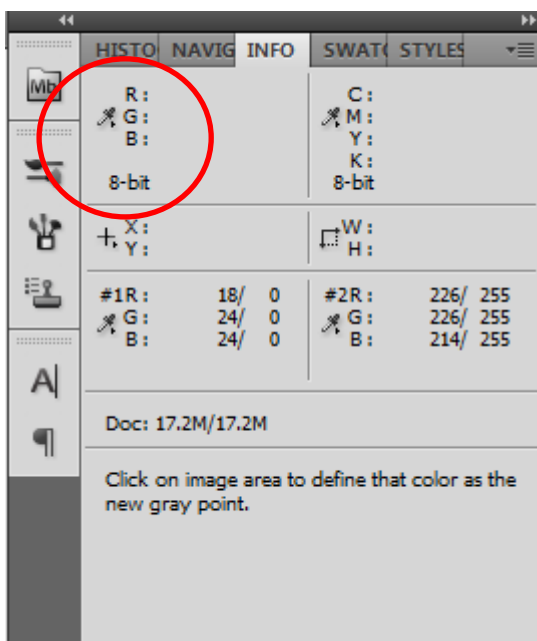


fig 4

As you move the sampler around the image the **RGB** values (circled) will change. For a neutral or mid tone the three values need to be as near to 127 as possible. Clicking on various point of the image will produce varying colour casts, try it out.

Your image should now have a good tonal range and distribution of pixels.

Points to remember

- Check your **Camera's Histogram** regularly, get it right in the **Camera** and there is less to do in **Photoshop**.
- If your white pixels are too far over to the white then you will have burnt out whites with no detail, this is not recoverable, it is better to underexpose than overexpose.
- Detail can be recovered from shadow area, and most images can be improved by **Levels**.
- You cannot make a silk purse out of a sows ear. Get it right first time.