Clapham Bridge

An example in split-grade printing

by Chris Woodhouse

It is ironic that one of my favourite images from my 35 mm days was taken with the worst lens I have ever owned. It only took two films before I identified serious aberrations and terrible colour fidelity. In the early days of zoom lenses, the standard zoom of the 20 to 80-something variety were optically worse than their fixed focal length cousins. Their use however, was popular with many walkers, for the dramatic improvement on portability and convenience that they provided.

In this case, I was walking through Yorkshire in England, starting from the delightful village of Clapham, following the Clapham Beck towards Trow Gill, fully laden with waterproofs and supplies. Bitter experience and weary limbs dictated that camera equipment had to be small and light, or it was left behind. Yorkshire is a magnet for many photographers and walkers. Often the two pastimes do not go hand in glove, especially when your companion is a walker. A keen eye is needed for an image opportunity, slippery rock and the path ahead, all at the same time. Thankfully, an obligatory chocolate-stop allowed the opportunity to make the most of this idyllic scene.

fig.1 Straight print, filter 2.5, 6.7 s, Agfa Multicontrast Classic

Exposure

The camera was a trusty old Contax RTS II, with the anonymous zoom lens set to 28 mm, loaded with Ilford Delta 400. The oversize filter thread and the threat of vignetting dissuaded the use of filters. I used the centre weighted metering with the zoom lens set to 90 mm, measured under the arch and returned to the 28 mm setting, reducing the exposure by 2 stops. I wanted the water to show movement, but I needed to avoid camera shake. Three hand held frames were taken, all with the same exposure, but with increasingly smaller apertures and slower shutter speeds. By taking the frame at the end of an exhalation, I was

fig.2 Split-grade test, filter 00, 2.1 s, plus filter 5, starting at 4.2 s in 1/3 stop-increments

fig.3 (right) Basic split-grade print with first exposure at 2.1 s filter 00, plus a second exposure at 8.5 s filter 5. Notice how the sky has gone blank white and the bridge has become more dynamic.

fig.4 (far right) Basic split-grade print, water dodged during first exposure, sky and tree tops dodged during second exposure. The sky was burned down for an additional 3 1/3 stops with filter 00.

fortunate to obtain a sharp image with a 1/15 second exposure. Today, I take along a Leica mini tripod as a shoulder stock or my carbon-fibre tripod on all but the longest treks.

Processing and Printing

Film development was with my then standard soup of Ilford Ilfotec HC, diluted 1+31, for 9 minutes at 20°C. The negatives showed good shadow detail and a dense sky area, from the bright flat cloudy sky, typical of the sort that frustrates the landscape photographer. A straight print is shown in fig.1. The exposure and contrast were chosen here to show the information on the negative. An evaluation of this image shows several weaknesses, starting with the bright, featureless sky. Since the trees on the hillside cross the horizon, a simple burn-in exposure to the sky area would darken the treetops unacceptably. The bridge and beck lack sparkle, and there is no depth or feeling to the picture. Visually the eye follows the water, right out of the picture. I realised that the only way to get a satisfactory print was to use variable contrast paper and use different contrast settings for different parts of the image. This might be done by combining separate exposures, or more easily, by selective dodging during a split-grade exposure.

The next image, fig.2, shows a test strip for the split-grade exposure. Here the stone highlights were determined with an enlarger meter and printed in with filter 00. A test strip using filter 5 was overlaid on top of this filter 00 exposure to set the overall contrast, tonal separation and shadow definition to the bridge. The straight split-grade print is shown in fig.3 and is made up of 2.1 seconds with filter 00 and 8.5 seconds with filter 5.

To make things easier, the two timing channels of the StopClock enlarger timer were used to store these base exposures. These two times and any burn-in sequences at either filter setting could then be selected quickly, saving valuable time and confusion.

Turning our attention to the sky, the plan was to mask the sky area, including the treetops, using a bent card during the hard-grade exposure. This reduces the print density of the dark branches in preference to the basic sky tone. Now in theory, the sky could be darkened with a soft-grade burn-in exposure, using a soft-grade setting, such that the treetops looked tonally balanced with their bases and with a considerably darker sky density. For this, a test strip was used with a basic +2 stops filter 00 exposure, and 1/3-stop exposure increments at the same filter setting. The treetops are matched with the tree bases from fig.3 and the correct burn-in exposure was determined. In this case, an additional 3 1/3-stop exposure was required with filter 00.

Fig.4 shows the fruits of this approach. In fig.4, I dodged the water for 50% during the 2.1-second soft-grade exposure to lighten the highlights and add sparkle. Then, without changing filter, I used a rough card mask to subject the sky to another 3 1/3-stop burn-in. Now, during the 8.5-second hard-grade exposure, I masked the sky area with a rough, moving mask to lower the density of the treetops. Even so, the water was still flowing out of the picture and the sky lacked weight. In fig.6, the exposure was completed, using a floppy mask and a further 2 1/2-stop burn-in along

each edge, through filter 00. This darkened the highlights without adding much shadow tone. In addition, the witness mark on the main trunk was disguised with a further filter 5 exposure of 1 stop through a hole in a piece of card. Lastly, the gate in the middle was dodged briefly for 1/3 stop during the main filter 5 exposure to add a feeling of airy light.

Finally, the print was briefly toned, washed, lightly bleached, washed and then toned again in variable sepia toner, using 1 part toner and additive to 9 parts water. Apart from the archival qualities that sepia toning bestows, for me, the warm tone imparts a timeless feeling to this tranquil scene and gives a painterly feel.

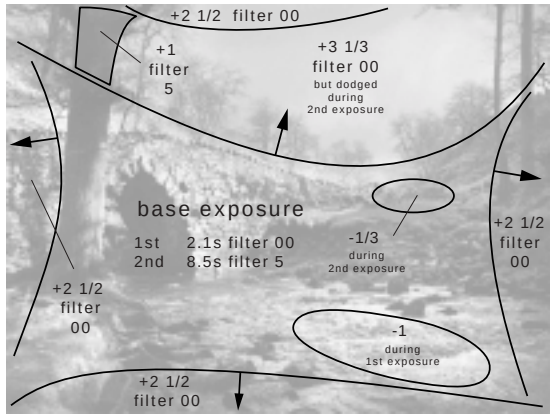

fig.5 (left) This is the print map for the final print, showing highlight and shadow dodging during the split-grade exposures and burn-in exposures for sky and edges.

fig.6 (below) Final print, exposure as fig.4, but with additional dodging during filter 5 exposure around gate, additional 2 1/2-stop filter 00 exposure for each edge and some added exposure to tree trunks. Finally, the print was lightly bleached and toned in variable sepia toner.