8 Layer Masks and Clipping Masks

Layer Masks

Layer masks are an extremely powerful editing tool. They allow non-destructive editing of layers by hiding part of a layer so that the layer underneath can be seen. This is done by adding a Layer Mask to a layer by clicking on the "Add Layer Mask" icon ⊡ at the bottom of the Layers panel and then painting on the mask using any of the pixels drawing tools such as the Brush tool or the Gradient tool, with black selected as the foreground colour. Painting with black on a mask creates a "Virtual" hole in the current layer. To remove the effects of the mask, switch the foreground colour to white and paint on the mask to erase the hole.
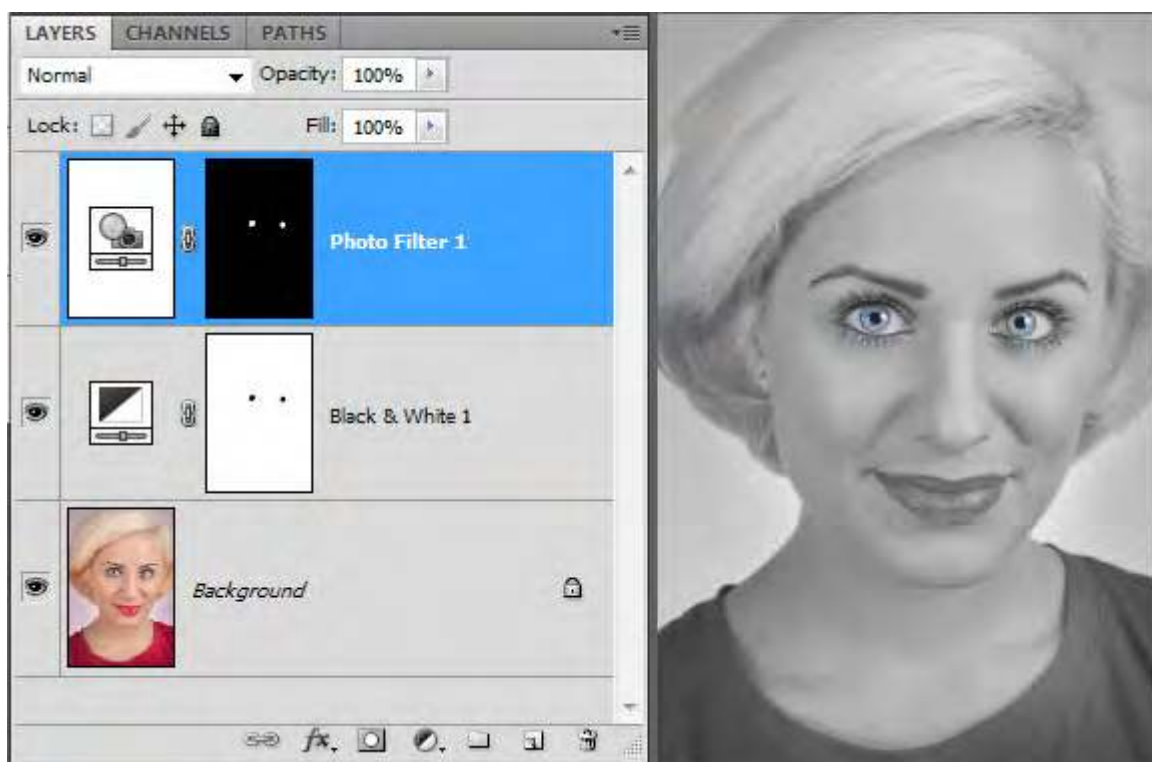

Fig 8.1 two Adjustment layers have been added which have masks already attached.

In fig 8.1 we have a portrait that has had two Adjustment layers added – one to remove the colour information and one to boost the eye colour. The process for creating this effect is as follows:

- The first Adjustment layer is a Black and White adjustment and was applied by clicking on the "Create new Fill or Adjustment Layer" icon ⬤ at the bottom of the Layers panel. The settings were then adjusted in the Adjustments panel, fig 8.2.
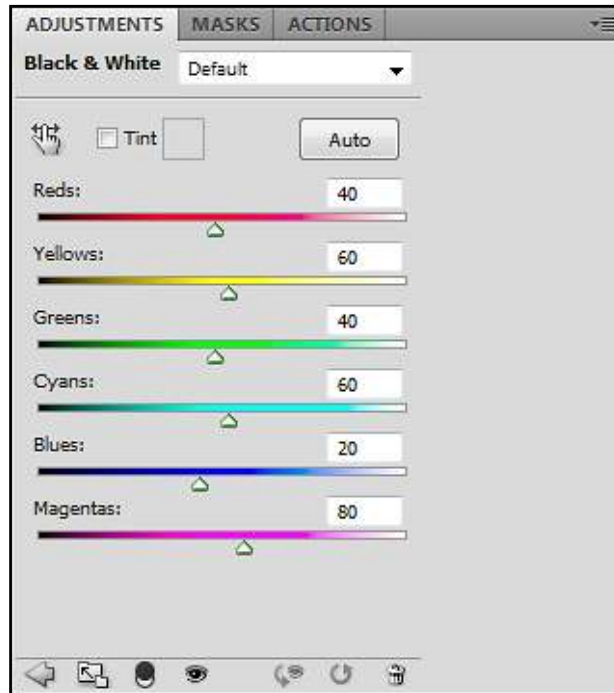
Fig 8.2 the Black and White Adjustment layer settings. Use the sliders to change the

grey values corresponding to that particular colour.

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- The Brush tool was then selected and black chosen as the Foreground colour
- Click on the mask thumbnail in the Layers panel to make it active and then paint over the eyes. By painting with black on the Mask we are creating an area of transparency which allows us to see the colour layer below.
- The second Adjustment layer is a Photo filter Adjustment with blue selected to enhance the existing eye colour, fig 8.3. However, in this case, instead of want to create a hole to the layer below, we want the opposite of the previous Adjustment layer. We want to apply the Adjustment to the eyes and have the rest of the layer transparent. The easiest was to achieve this, is to go to the Masks panel and click on the Invert button, fig 8.4. The Layer Mask will now appear solid black. This means that the layer is completely transparent.

Fig 8.3 the Photo filter Adjustment settings in the Adjustments panel.
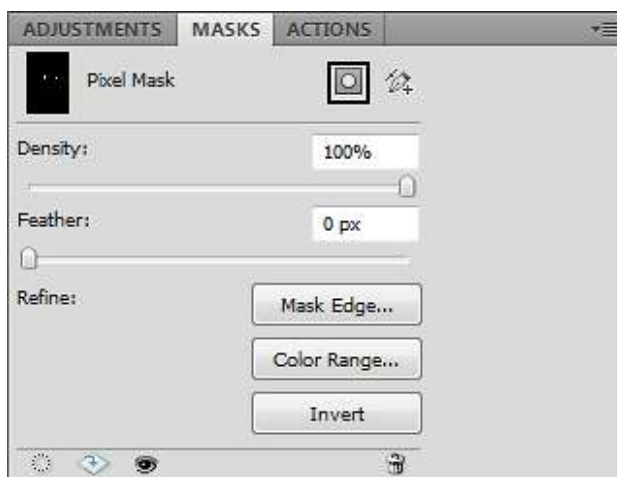

Fig 8.4 use the Invert button in the Masks panel to reverse the effects of the Layer Mask.

- Select the Brush tool once again, but this time set the foreground colour to White.
- Click on the mask thumbnail in the Layers panel to make it active and then paint over the eyes. By painting with White on the Mask we are making the layer opaque, and as a result, the effect can now be seen.

Layer Masks are great when used to limit the effect of an Adjustment layer as in the previous example. But they can also be used for blending two separate images together. In fig 8.5 we have an image of a church, but the sky is plain and boring. We can use a Layer Mask to remove the existing sky and replace it with one from a completely separate image.
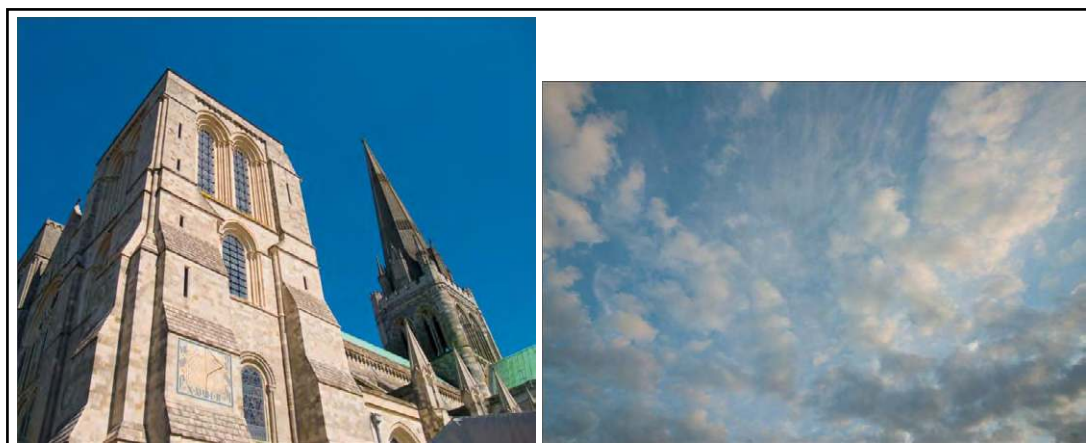

Fig 8.5 the two images we wish to blend together.

Here is the process for replacing the Sky:

The first step is to have both of the images open in Photoshop. Whilst looking at the Sky image, select the Move tool from the Tools panel then click and drag the image to the tab that contains the Church image. When the Church image appears continue to drag downwards over the image and then release the mouse. You should then have both images in the same document but on different layers, fig 8.6.
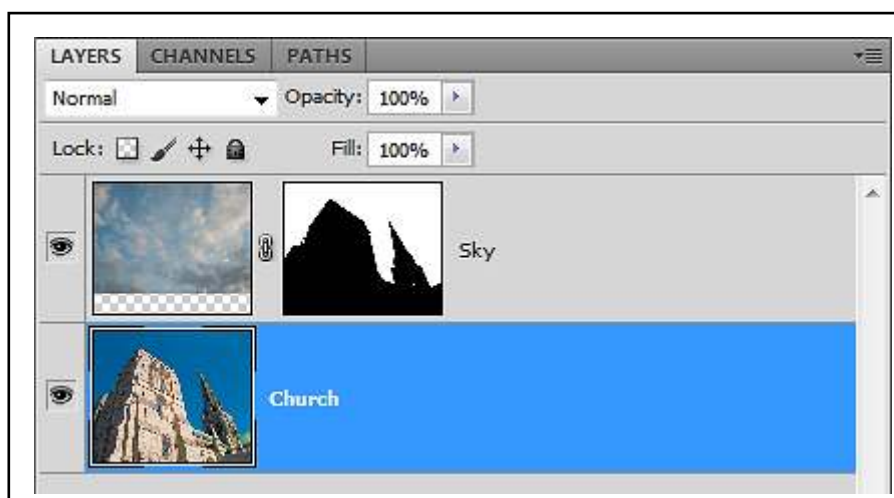

Fig 8.6 the Sky image has been dragged into the Church image and appears on a separate layer.

Temporarily hide the Sky layer by clicking on the eyeball icon on the left hand side of the layer.

Click on the Church layer to make it active and then choose the Magic Wand tool from the Tools panel. Set the Tolerance value in the Options panel so that when you click on the blue sky it is completely selected but none of the Church is selected, fig 8.7. In this case I found that a Tolerance of 70 worked great, but you may have to experiment a bit with your own images.
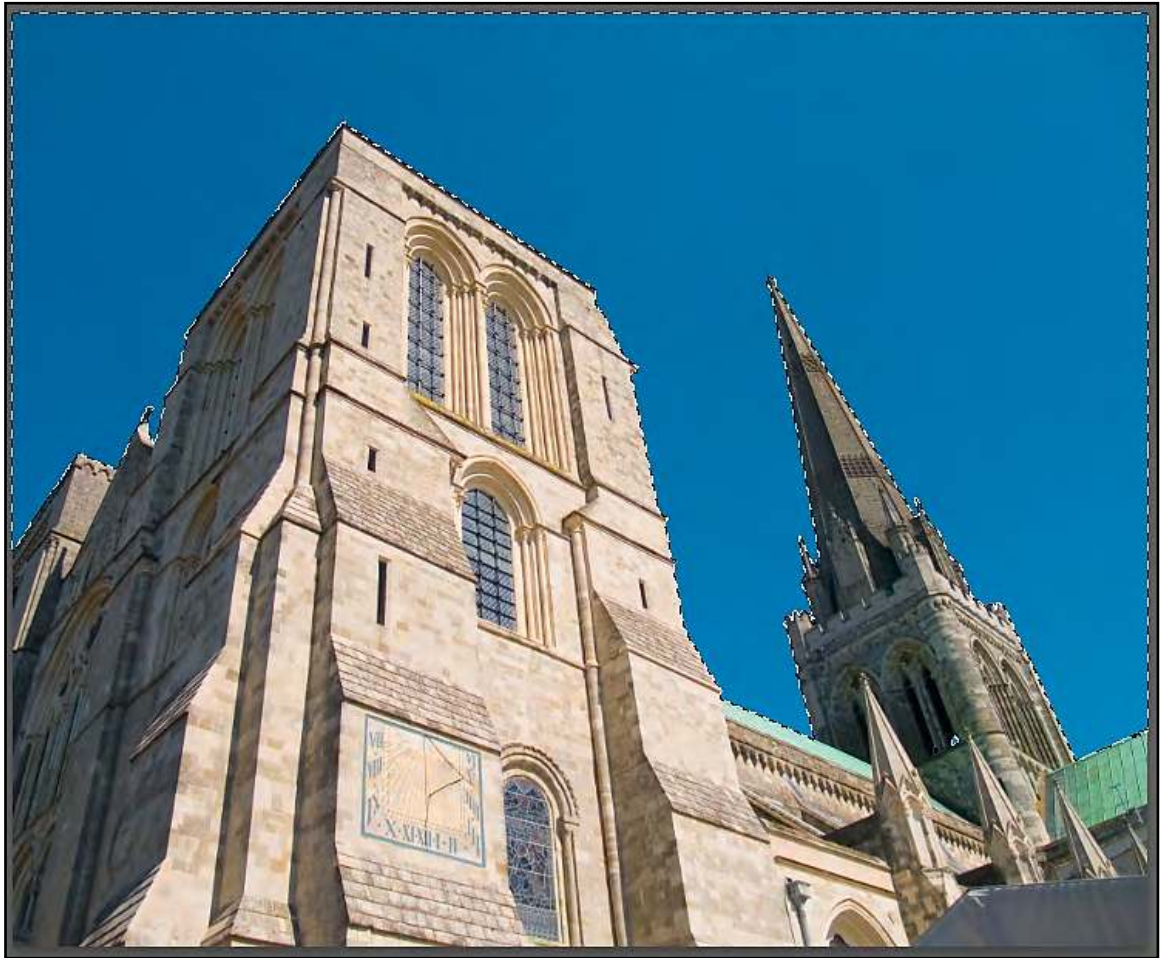
Fig 8.7 the Magic Wand tool has been use to select the Sky.

Click on the eyeball icon to make the Sky layer visible once again and then click on the layer to make it active.

If you click on the Create Layer Mask icon whilst you have an active selection, a Layer Mask will be created that follows the selection outline exactly, fig 8.6.

You will notice that there is a linked chain icon 🔗 between the thumbnail of the image and the Layer Mask in the Layers panel. This shows that the image location is locked to the mask position. However, if you click on the icon it will disappear allowing you to move the mask and the image independently. With the link removed, click on the image thumbnail then choose the Move tool from the tools panel. You can then click and drag the Sky around to find the best position and the Layer Mask will remain in place.

Fig 8.9 the completed image.

When you are happy with your composite image you can flatten it into a single layer by choosing Flatten Image in the Layers panel flyout menu, fig 8.10
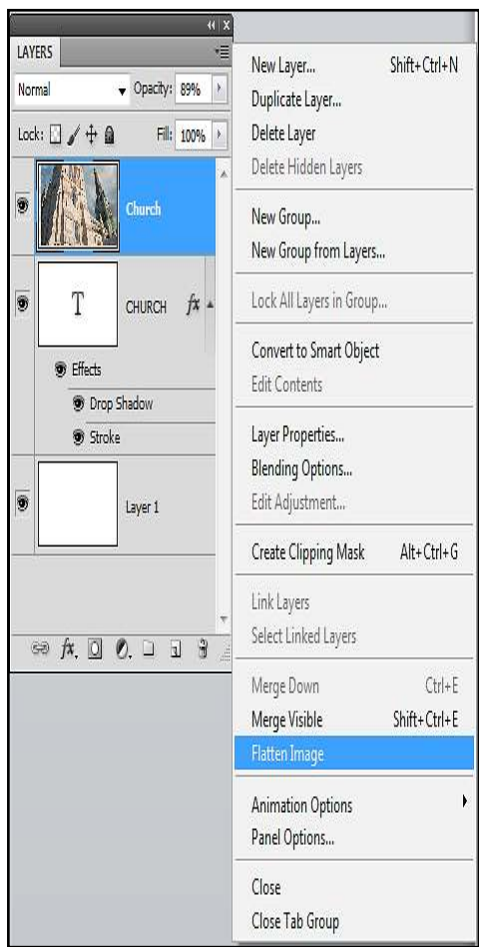
Fig 8.10 you can choose to Flatten all of the layers into a single layer from the Flyout menu in the Layers panel.

Clipping Masks

Clipping Masks are very different from Layer Masks in that with a Clipping Mask you place the contents on one into the opaque pixels of the layer below. For example, you can create a Type layer, place an image in the layer above the type in the Layers panel and clip the image to the type, fig 8.11. To clip one layer to another, click on the top layer to make it active and then go to the Layer menu and choose Create Clipping Mask, fig 8.12.

Fig 8.11 the Type layer has been used as a Clipping Mask for the Church layer. The Clipping is indicated on the Church layer by the indent sign and the moved thumbnail image.
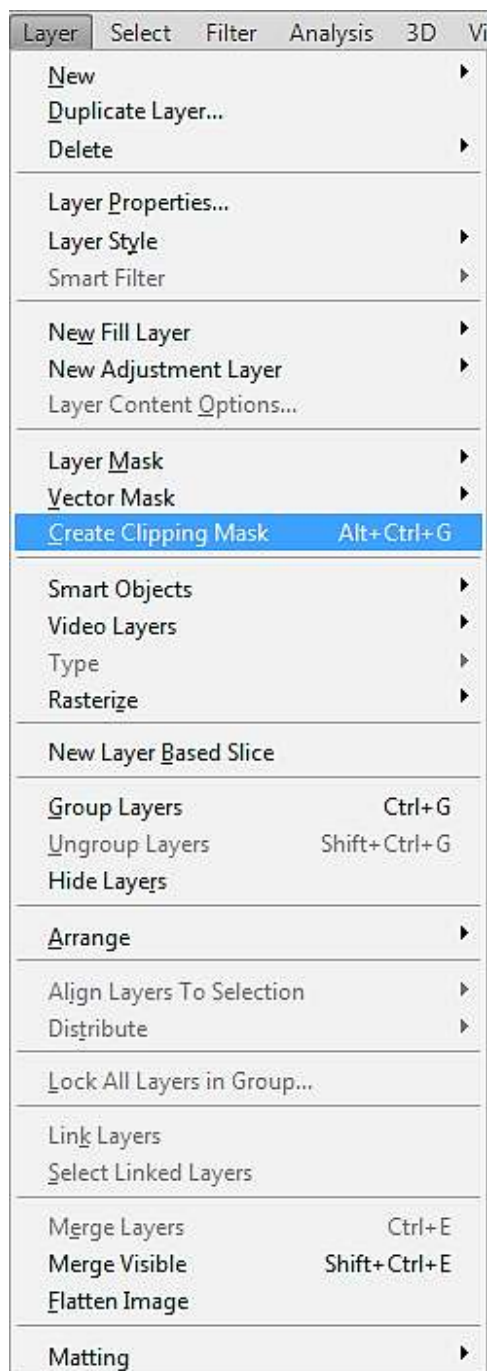
Fig 8.12 the Create Clipping Mask option in the Layer Menu.

An alternative way to create a Clipping Mask, is to place your cursor on the border between the two layers and Alt/Option (PC/Mac) + Click.