Lightroom Bitesize: Using Virtual Copies

Mention the word 'virtual' and most people just switch off, thinking that you are talking about some futuristic sci-fi type mumbo-jumbo. But virtual copies in Lightroom can be really, really handy.

Why?

Well, sometimes you post-process an image and, after all the adjustments have been made and you look at the completed image, you think "I wonder what it would look like if I had done 'this' instead?"

For example, I quite often process a colour image only to wonder if it would look better in black & white.

One way of dealing with this is to export the image and then reset all of the adjustments and start again. But what if you then decide that the first version was better? You have now lost all of those original adjustments.

This is where virtual copies come in.

I keep mentioning in my Lightroom Bitesize tutorials that Lightroom never actually alters the original RAW or JPG image. All it does is record all of the adjustments made in a separate file (the one stored in the catalogue) and applies them every time you open the image in Lightroom. This is known a 'non-destructive editing'.

So when you make a Virtual Copy, you are not making a copy of the original image at all, what you are doing is creating a new catalogue file, alongside the original, in which you can record a different set of adjustments.

Lightroom Bitesize

by
John Hallett Photography

Let's go over this again:

You initially import the original image file (as either a RAW or JPG) from your camera. This is stored in a designated place on a hard drive of your computer.

RAW or JPG

Then you make some adjustments in the Develop module. The original image remains untouched but a new file is generated in the Catalogue – which should be on an entirely separate hard drive of your computer (or at least a separate partition).

RAW or JPG

+

Catalogue file

When you make a Virtual Copy you don't make a copy of the image file, all you do is add another catalogue file which can hold another set of adjustments.

RAW or JPG

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Catalogue file 1

Catalogue file 2

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You can make as many as you like – and because individual catalogue files are so small, it makes very little difference to your hard drive capacity – certainly a lot less than duplicating the entire image again.
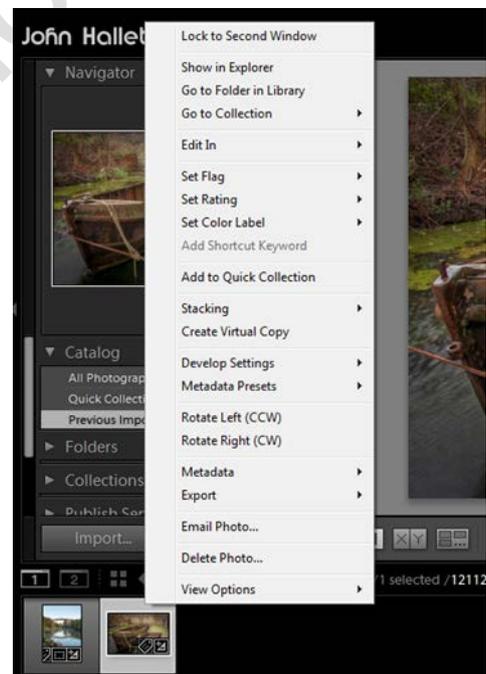

RAW or JPG

+

So how do we create a Virtual Copy?

Unusually it doesn't matter which module you are in.

Just highlight the image in the filmstrip at the bottom of the screen and then right-click on your mouse. Choose 'Create Virtual Copy'.

Alternatively, you can use a keyboard shortcut by holding the Ctrl and apostrophe key together.

You will notice a duplicate image in the filmstrip - and by highlighting it this 'virtual' image can be edited in an entirely different way.

Go into the Develop module and click the Reset button. This will remove all of the previous adjustments so that you can start again from scratch.

Here, I'm going to create a black & white version with a very slight split-tone to see how it compares.
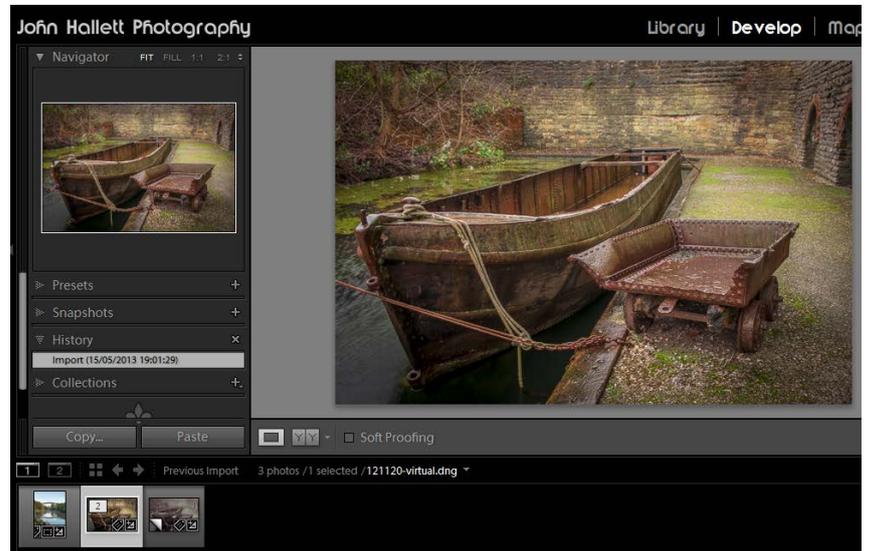

Now without virtual copies if I decided I preferred the original colour version I would have to reset the adjustments once again and try and remember what I did the first time.

But with virtual copies I can just click on one image in the filmstrip......

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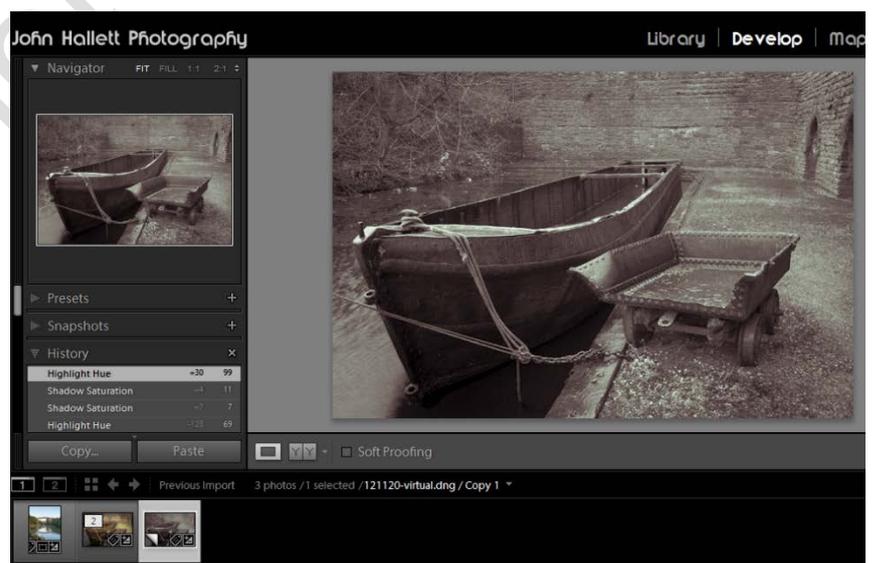
..... or the other.

So virtual copies are very useful if you want to try processing an image in more than one way. Remember, you can create as many as you want.

If you have previously looked at my Lightroom Bitesize tutorial on 'snapshots' you will see that the purpose of those is much the same as virtual copies. It really is down to your workflow preference but they are both very useful tools to be aware of.