

The photograph that took four years to take

The first thing that I noticed when I moved my family to Linlithgow in 1967 was the new steeple on St Michael's Parish Kirk, which only three years before had been constructed in a daring modern design in gleaming aluminium. The building of St Michael's Kirk was completed in 1540 just in time for the infant Mary Queen of Scots to be baptised there in 1542. Originally, the square tower had been topped by a 'crown steeple', an ornate design in stone for King James III by one of my Mylne ancestors who, for five generations, father to son, had been appointed King's Master Masons of Scotland, right through the reigns of both Charles I and Charles II which included the design of the Royal Palace of Holyrood in Edinburgh. The original stone crown on St Michael's Kirk had been topped by a weather-vane bearing the King's royal emblem – which, incidentally, had been blown down by a violent storm in 1768.

There were only four crown steeples, including Aberdeen University and St Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, all designed by the Mylne family, but in 1820 the one on St Michael's was found to be in a state of collapse, too heavy for the tower that supported it, and so it was removed in 1821. If you study the historic information board now to be found by the roundabout at Tesco's at the East end of the High Street, you will find an early photograph showing in the background St Michael's Kirk as it stood for over 150 years with just a bare square tower with a small stone pinnacle at each corner. Although the brand new steeple aroused quite a controversy when first erected as part of the major face-lift given to the High Street in the 1960s, I was struck by the bold geometric design of four soaring silver spears crossing near their summit and so cleverly creating four tall triangles above the tower roof, all pointing skywards.

As all good steeples should, it caught the eye and commanded attention.

Soon after we settled into Mains House, then on the Western edge of the town, I climbed Cockleroy on a sunny day, with the town of Linlithgow stretching out alongside the Loch below me, and there glinting in the sunshine was a sliver of silver declaring the presence of the Kirk as the centrepiece of the town in a very satisfying way. I've been an admirer of the new steeple ever since.

I soon discovered the joys of Linlithgow for a photographer, especially at sunset when the black silhouette of the ruined Palace and vibrant Kirk presented a dramatic contrast if an orange sky was reflected in the waters of the Loch. I was always tempted by a good sunset and had learnt early on that in reality a standard landscape taken with a 50mm lens merely revealed what a tiny object the orb of the sun was in a wide skyscape. To make a dramatic sunset picture it was vital to use a moderate telephoto lens, magnifying the central subject at least four times to create the right effect without it appearing unnatural. Then suddenly one day the idea occurred to me that the ultimate dramatic picture of a sunset at historic Linlithgow would be a geometric study of the circle of the orb of the setting sun precisely framed in one of the four triangles of the silver steeple. Little did I realise what a challenge I had set myself.

First of all I had to wait for – and not miss! – the right sunset. This would be not too bright, which would create flare in the lens pointing directly into the sun, an unavoidable risk; but bright enough to use the full circle to good effect, carefully positioned exactly filling the triangle. Trials with lenses of various focal lengths soon established that the best lens was my most powerful – and of course also most unwieldy – 600mm telephoto, for which a sturdy tripod was essential for a steady, sharply focussed composition, which would enlarge the image of the sun to fit exactly in the triangle. My options were narrowing as only an orange or even red sun would avoid causing flare at a magnification of twelve times. With a heavy lens and a solid tripod as essentials, I next needed a good site, preferably close to a road offering flexibility in finding the exact position for the camera which had to be basically level with the top of the tower. Luckily the town is built on a fairly steep slope and it turned out that a position slightly above the canal was called for. The next problem was

that the descent of the sun through the evening sky would always be a curve so that getting the final position exactly centred on the triangle meant being square on to the tower and exactly the right height above it. The circle would then enter the triangle on a curve sloping down from about eleven o'clock into the triangle. This meant that at the last minute – and the correct final position would only last perhaps 15 seconds before it was too low and too late – great flexibility would be needed to adjust the camera position by moving and stabilising a heavy camera on a seriously solid tripod rapidly enough to catch the exact, correct position. A sloping field, allowing movement both horizontally and vertically at the last moment, seemed to be the answer but it was all rather critical and involved the most precise preparation and concentration, with everything still dependent on getting the right weather and the right colour of sunset.

I can't remember now how many times I turned out with all the gear, thinking how lucky I was to have found a site offering exactly what I needed on the steeply sloping ground above and to the east of the canal basin, only to watch, as crisis point approached, the sun disappear behind a dense bank of cloud on the horizon, or perhaps the sun descending into a band of clear sky so that it shone at full strength into the lens, making it even dangerous to use the eyepiece at risk of blinding myself. The window of opportunity was also clearly only a few weeks in October when the curved descent of the sun's orb followed a track where it was possible, after all my preparations and positioning, to be in exactly the right place to get the chance to make an exposure. I had worked out the possibility of getting a second chance if first time the golden orb dropped at an angle slightly out of position. I would have to move slightly to the right, and also slightly further uphill to achieve those few seconds (perhaps fifteen at most) when the image of the sun was exactly centred in the triangle. If I left it too long the chance was gone, and at least once I suffered the chagrin of wasting a perfect sunset where I no longer had the space to move the camera enough.

At last, after four years of trying, with many wonderful sunsets and plenty of disappointments, I achieved a result that was so nearly perfect that I decided to call it a day – or rather an evening.

Well, in fact, about a dozen frantic evenings over a period of at least four years to realise the dream. Dare I say that it gives me an orange glow of satisfaction to have faced and beaten the challenge? And I can't help feeling that my great, great, great, great, great, great ... grandfather would have been pleased, although I am sure he would have preferred the orb of the sun to be balanced on the top spike of his beautifully carved stone crown than enclosed in a shiny triangle of aluminium.