

Best in CLASS

A million-seller worldwide, UK gun shops have moved more of this gun over the past two decades than any other break-barrel. **The editor** aims to find out what makes SMK's B2 such an amazing air rifle...

As a lover of all things airgun, I make no excuses for the amount of money I spend on top-end kit, like my state-of-the-art Daystate AirWolf, Theoben Elan and Air Arms EV2. Equally, though, I'm as happy as Larry plinking away with cheaper airguns – and I'll never forget my airgunning roots which, like so many other airgunners, began with the 'humble' Gat air pistol. The gun I've got here, however, is effectively the rifle equivalent of the Gat in that it's probably introduced more people into the sport than any other air rifle – and with a current price tag of under 70 quid, it's not going to stop doing that any time soon, either!

It's SMK's B2 – this one being the 'more expensive' Custom Model. At £69.95, it's the same price as the Custom B2 Carbine (which loses 120mm of barrel length), and £30 more than the standard B2 and B2 Carbine, which trades price for slightly less posh woodwork and metal finish. Yes, even in 2013, you can buy an air rifle for under £40!

Of course, I'll state right from the outset that, at these prices, you have to be realistic in your expectations. But by the same token, £40 (or £70) may be a lot of money to someone who can't afford any more – so in that respect, the rifle has got to give a good account of itself to be a worthy investment. Just because a rifle is cheap isn't an excuse for it to be rubbish.

Many airgunners will never entertain the cheaper end of the market on the grounds that cheap equals nasty – but, actually, such a view is extremely blinkered (if not a little arrogant). I take my hat off to the importers of the Chinese-made B2 model, Sportsmarketing, for making such guns available – and I applaud the company's ethos of 'making the sport comfortably affordable'. Without their help, the higher-end of the market would probably not be as popular as it is – let no-one forget that you need grass roots shooters in order to cultivate the bigger scene.

So, to the gun itself – a mid-powered break-barrel available in .177 or, as I've got here, .22. This being the Custom B2, the sporting stock is 'deluxe', and it carries the full-length barrel – which, at 480mm, is certainly a long one as far as springers go. I'd probably plump for the 360mm carbine model if I was choosing this gun. It would take a little weight from the front and still pose no problems to cock, given this is a half-power plinker's rifle.

When it comes to expectations, I'll openly admit that mine were exceeded. Not by a bit... but by a lot. A helluva lot. For the money, the standard of finish to both wood and metal is really quite astounding and while 'finish' might not be where you want the money to be spent when you're in the market for a budget airgun, it comes as a welcome bonus all the same.



FORESIGHT 'NOSTALGIA'

When adjusting the foresight for windage, you need to move it in the direction opposite from that you wish to move the downrange point of impact. For instance, if the gun's shooting to the left and you therefore need to move the shots to the right to hit dead-on, then tap the foresight blade to the left (as viewed by the shooter).

Time was, airguns from China had metal surfaces roughly equivalent to the face of a metal file – but my Custom B2 exuded a smooth polish that had been evenly blued to present a very decent action indeed. It's certainly on a par with any £200-plus springer I can think of.

And the Custom's woodwork is quite impressive – a reddish-brown stained hardwood that sports a solid rubber butt pad, Monte Carlo cheekpiece with raised comb, a well-angled grip and laser-etched chequer panels for both hands. These aren't conventional 'diamonds', merely cuts into the wood – but the visual effect works well, even if it's not quite as practical as pressed or hand-cut chequering.

The length of pull – the distance between butt and trigger – is slightly shorter than average, at 345mm, but it didn't feel too cramped for me and will certainly assist younger or smaller shooters. Given its price point, it may very well appeal to the teenage market – so it's a sensible dimension for this rifle.

As for the trigger itself, I had expected it to be pretty rough – that's par for the course of a sub-£100 airgun. But, as with the overall finish, it surpassed my preconceived notions – and by a country mile. It may not offer any form of adjustment, but my gun's unit boasted a two-stage let-off, with the short first stage giving way to a very crisp second-stage break-point. If I was splitting hairs, I'd say there was a modicum of 'creep' through the second stage, but it's really quite minimal and not at all a hindrance to accurate shooting. If you were learning by way of this gun, it wouldn't teach you any bad habits, that's for sure.

What I particularly liked, too, was the shape of the blade itself. Although it's made from pressed metal (and probably the cheapest-

looking component on the whole gun), it's got a perfect 'hook' for your finger pad, and comes with a raised section on the very tip. The tactility of this, I found, made a really good reference point as I slipped through the release.

Although the rifle's main cylinder has been dovetailed with 11mm grooves for standard telescopic sight mounts – which extend a healthy 135mm, too – I chose to shoot the Custom B2 using only the open sights which are fitted as standard. If you're on a budget, my guess is you buy a rifle minus any optional sighting set-up until your finances allow – and at least this break-barrel comes complete with rather nifty opens.

Again, these impressed me. The rearsight utilises a sliding ramp system to raise or lower the U-notch leaf, and although there's also a vernier marked in five-step intervals between 10 and 35, I wouldn't take it as gospel that they're accurate yardages! That said, my .22 sample could just about take out tin cans at 30 yards with the setting on '35'.

There's no windage adjustment on the rearsight, but the B2's foresight does allow side-to-side adjustment of the impact point. It's a little old fashioned – though some might call it 'nostalgic' given it was the 'norm' on many airguns 50 years ago – in that you have to drift the foresight unit in its lateral dovetail (see panel above).



Pellets push comfortably into the breech courtesy of a well-chamfered entry port



The two-stage trigger unit features a nicely hooked blade



The B2's rearsight has a sliding ramp system to raise or lower the POI

TEST: SMK CUSTOM B2

Above: The Custom B2 punches above its weight in terms of price

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

MODEL: Custom B2
DISTRIBUTOR: Sportsmarketing • www.sportsmk.co.uk
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: China
CALIBRE: .177 and .22 (tested)
ACTION: Spring-and-piston
COCKING: Break-barrel
OVERALL LENGTH: 1,095mm
BARREL LENGTH: 480mm
WEIGHT: 2.95kg
STOCK: Hardwood, right-hand sporter
SIGHTS: Height-adjustable rearsight; windage adjustable foresight
TRIGGER: Two-stage, non-adjustable
SAFETY: None. (Can be decocked)
POWER: 575fps with 13.25-grain Spitfires
PRICE: £69.95



The breech pivots around a bolt, complete with locking screw

Note the unusual configuration of the breech's sprung plunger



For me, the rifle's sights were spot-on for windage straight out of the box, but a shooting mate of mine found the Custom B2 shot to the left for him. That was probably due to our different shooting styles – but it wasn't too difficult to drift the foresight unit to the left to counter this discrepancy using an engineer's punch and a light hammer. I noticed a vernier on the unit itself – though no mark on the barrel with which to align it – and the sight is all-metal, including a solid metal shroud to protect the rounded post inside it.

As my test rifle was the full-length barrel model, the sighting base of 440mm made for some very accurate shooting and I frequently grouped shots inside an inch at 20 yards with the Spitfires that I was sent with the test gun. Not bad at all for a rifle in this price bracket – and the predictable trigger certainly helped.

There are other ingredients in this rifle's accuracy mix, though – and the barrel lock-up is certainly one of them. Pivoting around a bolt (complete with locking grub screw), the B2's breech is quite unusual in that its sprung plunger is situated at the end of the main cylinder, rather than within the breech block. It's the block which has the detent into which the plunger engages and although seemingly in reverse, the lock-up is very positive, with no hint of movement once the barrel is 'shut'.

To release the barrel ready for cocking, you don't have to do the usual 'hand slap' at the end of the barrel, either. The B2 sports a very user-friendly barrel release catch, which is actuated by the lever at the left of the breech area. Pushing this forward with your thumb effectively pulls back the plunger, allowing the barrel to fall open under its own weight, after which you can pull it the 120 degrees to full-cock. Not being a full-powered springer, cocking effort is very manageable for any teenager.

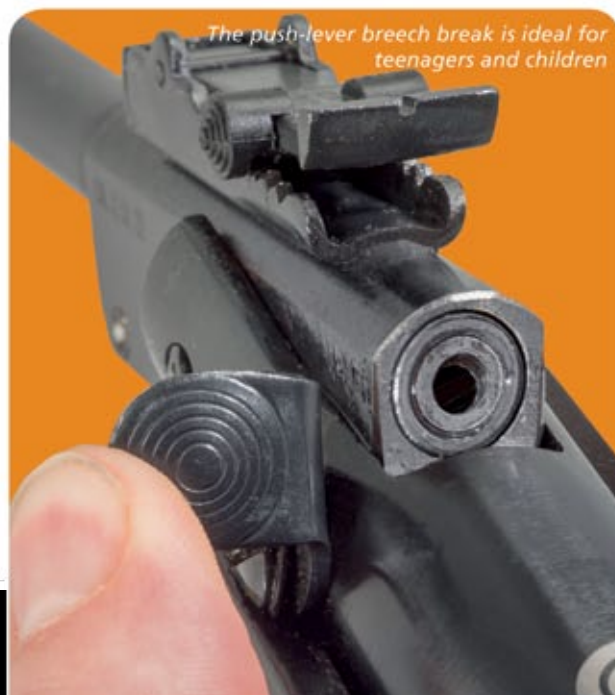
Although the leather breech seal looked decidedly rough – as leather ones always do! – my Spitfires pressed neatly in to the rifling courtesy of a well chamfered breech entry and the chrono readings proved there were no consistency issues as shots were always within +/-10fps of the average. On many airguns at this end of the price spectrum, the breech area lacks this kind of attention – and I was equally as impressed at the muzzle, which was very neatly machined at the crown.

While Sportsmarketing claim 450fps in .22 and 600fps in .177, my test rifle – surprise, surprise! – beat that... and by a considerable margin. With 13.25-grain .22 Spitfires – and after 50 or so shots to burn the excessive manufacturer's oil – it averaged 125fps more than the quoted figures.

In power terms, 575fps translates to a tickle under 10ft/lb, making my Custom B2 more than capable of close- to mid-range hunting.

And the B2's firing cycle was surprisingly quick, albeit with a little bit of twang on discharge that could easily be remedied by some Abbey LT2 grease on the mainspring. Recoil was less of a kick and more of a quick slap in your shoulder, and certainly nothing to fight against in the quest for accuracy. As I used only opens in my testing, I can't attest to the rifle's ability to hold a scope firmly in place – but although the receiver's lacking any form of arrestor plate, I can't see a scope 'creeping' along the dovetails with this amount of recoil. Use good mounts and a scope to match the rifle's dimensions and you should be okay.

The more I shot with the Custom B2 on my garden range, the more I had to keep reminding myself of how affordable this gun is, because it's easy to think you've got something costing upwards of £150 in your shoulder! It's well balanced, comfortable and really enjoyable to while away a few hours plinking with – and the deluxe Custom model is certainly a rifle I'd be happy to display on the wall. Whether you see the B2 as an entry into air rifle shooting, or simply as a terrific value airgun, at this price point, I'm certain there is not a better air rifle out there. ●



The push-lever breech break is ideal for teenagers and children