

Benson ON A BUDGET

Want one of these guns? Well, I've owned one or two XS78 rifles and, out of the box, they were certainly usable - something of a rough diamond - but a huge improvement on typical Chinese budget guns. With a bit of fettling they could be turned into something very useful indeed, and this fact began a whole new cottage industry of aftermarket spares or tuning services, there's even a few websites dedicated to this rifle.

The basic guns still have some niggly little faults. The plastic butt plate feels a bit cheap - though I suppose that's not too surprising - and other areas of 'niggleness' are the pressed steel open sights, which are neither terribly precise nor easily adjusted, but no problem if you fit a scope as most users do. The final fly in the ointment is the basic model's plastic barrel band, which is functional, but when the rest of the action is metal it's a bit of a let-down.

After all that, I bet the vast majority of shooters didn't even notice such minor niggles. All they were after was a budget priced plinker, to pop away at cans in the back yard - which is exactly what they got. And three squillion plinkers can't all be wrong, the basic gun must be one of the best UK sellers at the moment.

Jamie Benson rejoins the mag with his assessment of the QB78 Deluxe - a proper budget-beater if ever there was one

From the enthusiasts, though, I'd bet there were mumbles about how they'd rather have a few small improvements and pay a few quid more. These mumbblings must have been heeded, because SMK have sorted them all out, added a few superb features and, most importantly, *not* added much to the budget price, either.

What you see here is the QB78 Deluxe model, and its most obvious improvement is the new gold coloured bolt handle and trigger - which I accept adds nothing to the functionality of the rifle but it does look nice. Part of the enjoyment of any new air rifle is the aesthetics and I wonder how many teenagers got one of these for Christmas and spent a good few minutes just looking at it with a cheesy grin.

The next big improvement is the stock where wood quality, I'm sure, has improved. The timber appears to be noticeably better in graining and finish, and most importantly it now has a rubber butt pad, which not only looks and feels good but also adds a bit more length.

FEELS BETTER

The stock is also slightly chunkier around the comb than the basic model and feels much better for it. It's a small difference to the overall quality and feel of the rifle.

Another distinguishing feature of the deluxe model are the open sights. The new ones are fully adjustable and use fibre-optic elements - the rearsight glows green and the foresight has a glowing red pip. These optics pick up ambient light, directing it towards the end of the element, and it's surprisingly effective in low light. Just the ticket for rat shooting.

Another obvious improvement is the barrel band. The new one is made from anodised alloy and is slightly thicker, though I'd prefer a pair of grub screws holding it to the cylinder rather than the single screw between the cylinder and the barrel. Still, a significant improvement over the original.

The barrel appears to be thicker than the older model too, which could be a boost if you fancy doing away with the barrel band and free floating the barrel. Whilst in comparison mode I've also decided that the deluxe model has a slightly better finish on the metal surfaces. Another upward trend.

PROOF OF THE PUDDING

Now for the additional proof of the pudding: the shooting. If you're not familiar with this type of rifle, all you do is unscrew the cylinder end-cap and drop in a pair of 12-gram CO₂ capsules from which you can expect around 50 full-power shots - which should run at 9 to 10ft.lb on a cool day.

You will get variations in power with temperature and, although it's good practice to check your zero every time you hunt, only the most dedicated shooter will shoot serious targets when it's less than about 8°C and it rarely gets above 24°C in the summer. That 16°C window pretty well sums up our UK climate and it's not going to make an enormous amount of difference to this rifle.

The good thing about CO₂ is that you get a reasonably consistent power curve before it drops off the end



from 'exhaustion'. Most shooters plink away until the gas is barely a sniff in the tank, which is fair enough for tin cans, but if you plan a spot of close-range ratting don't run until empty, use the top of the charge. 30 or 40 rats would be one for the record books anyway!

PLEASANT SURPRISE

The accuracy of these guns comes as a pleasant surprise to most owners. With a clean barrel and quality pellets most competent shooters can expect thumbnail-size groups at around 20 yards. Well of course it's not in the FT league but it is more than adequate for pinking and close range hunting.

Price is certainly a big attraction. The club where I shoot has a raft of XS and QB owners, including an XS79 with the large CO₂ 'AirSource' tank, and there were five on the range the other day, all bought by folk who normally shoot Daystates and Rapids. So what's the attraction? Simply that they are huge fun to shoot and especially appealing to those who love to customise.

I can see the attraction of customising the base model

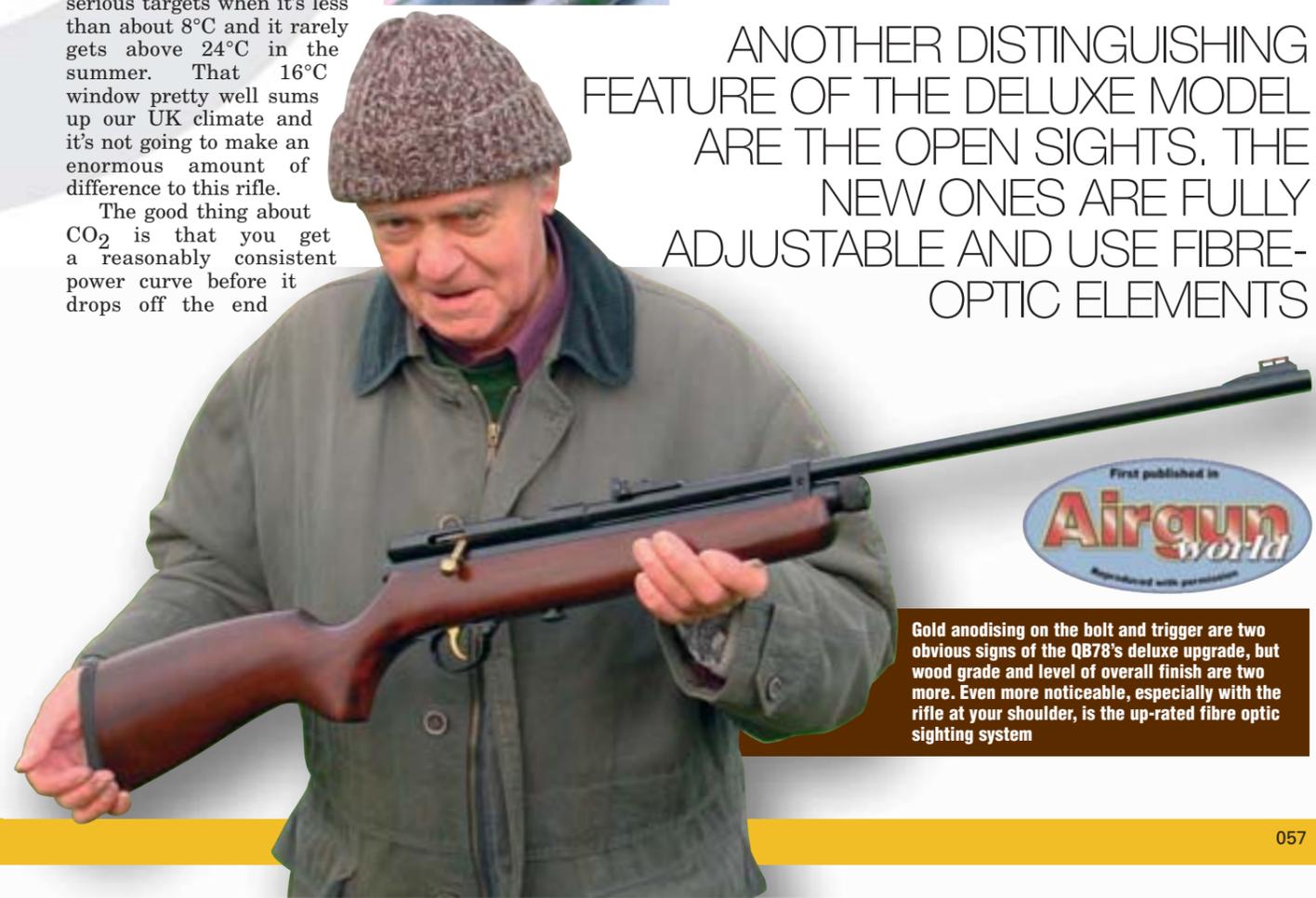
but, so far, nobody has touched a deluxe model which I guess says it all really. I'm sure it *would* benefit from a touch of polishing in the bolt and hammer assembly but this rifle shoots perfectly well out of the box, so there's no real need to mess with things. The bolt is a bit stiff when new but gets smoother after a few hundred shots - and it's a heck of a lot easier than cocking a springer!

I suppose I might adjust the trigger sear a touch, to reduce a small element of creep, but that's about it. Getting at the adjustment screw means punching out the safety catch from the opposite side and undoing the stock nut to release stock and action, at which point the sear engagement is visible through the small hole in the trigger assembly side and the trigger is adjusted via a grub screw. It's totally shootable as it is but there's no harm in knowing.

I'll write this last bit quietly. I don't actually *know* the recommended retail price of this rifle but, although I suspect it's over £100, if you shop around you can find them for less. Worth it? You bet!

ANOTHER DISTINGUISHING FEATURE OF THE DELUXE MODEL ARE THE OPEN SIGHTS. THE NEW ONES ARE FULLY ADJUSTABLE AND USE FIBRE-OPTIC ELEMENTS

Join the Q



Gold anodising on the bolt and trigger are two obvious signs of the QB78's deluxe upgrade, but wood grade and level of overall finish are two more. Even more noticeable, especially with the rifle at your shoulder, is the up-rated fibre optic sighting system