

# HATRICK



What can £50 get the airgunner these days? A lot actually – and **Nigel Allen** has been trialling three SMK pistols which each return change from a £50 note!



**T**esting some of the most technologically advanced and, subsequently, most expensive guns on the market can be a very rewarding experience – and I appreciate just how lucky I am in my job. But don't ever think I've forgotten my airgun roots. I know most people 'get into' airgunning by starting out at the cheaper end of the scale – and I also know plenty are also happy to stay there. Indeed, many of my shooting mates regularly buy a sub-£150 airgun just because it's affordable and, nowadays, is going to represent superb value for money.

Which is why I've been keen to spend some time with these three Chinese-made, spring-powered air pistols from SMK. Amazingly, the S2, XHS3 and QS24 each cost under 50 quid, and given spring-driven pistols are what got me into airgunning all those years ago – a Gat, followed by a Diana G4, followed by a Panther Deluxe – I was looking forward to some 'grass roots' shooting enjoyment.

When it comes to entry level pistols, I believe there are two groups of people who buy them: beginners and established plinkers looking for something inexpensive to enjoy in the back-garden. I am still – and will always remain – in one of these categories.

First impressions? Well, if you let the packaging influence you, you're likely to pass these pistols over. At these prices, such lacklustre boxing is fully understandable. But it's a shame. While I, personally, know how much SMK has done to dispel the idea that low cost equals 'cheap', a lot of newcomers aren't. And it's a serious loss to them if they miss the excellent product that

lies within. Just as you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, don't judge a low-cost SMK by its packaging! Be happy in the knowledge that the majority of the production costs are clearly going on the gun itself.

And so to the guns. My eyes are drawn toward the XHS3, with its synthetic grips, as is my right hand (though it's suitable for lefties, too). It feels good in the palm, with the stippling and contours contributing to a natural hold; no faffing about trying to find the best position with this pistol.

A quick inspection reveals that there's a fully-adjustable rearsight and a grooved rail for an additional sighting aid, such as a reflex, red-dot or telly. Like the S2 model, though, there's no safety, nor anti-beartrap – so while, on the plus side, you can decock the gun by holding the barrel and 'riding' the spring, it must be stressed to beginners that fingers need to be kept well away from triggers and breech faces.

My test trio were all in .177 calibre, and the S2 and XHS3 are also available in .22 – though, unusually, this is with a smoothbore barrel as

**Above:** The QS24, with the second hand supporting the shooting wrist, delivers more than acceptable accuracy

**Above right:** Left to right, the S2, QS24 and XHS3 won't break the bank



*The S2's rears are basic, but perfectly functional*



*The XHS3 features finger adjustable turrets for windage and elevation*



*As befitting the gun with the highest price, the QS24 has the best machined rears*

**Below:** The in-trigger safety on the QS24 is a reassuring safety feature, but its position is too close to the trigger

**Centre right:** SMK's Spitfire pellets are the perfect complement to the three pistols on test



opposed to the .177s' rifled version. The S2 and the QS24 boast hardwood grips, with the S2 dressed in a lighter wood. There's something quite classical about the S2 – it's a utilitarian design in some ways, and in its simplicity lies its attractiveness; it's reminiscent of the old Luger.

Being the least expensive of the three, you'll find the odd flaw in the finish of the S2 – so it's worth splashing out the extra fiver on its slightly more attractive XHS3 sister. Its dark, wooden stock is complemented by a scalloped grip, as opposed to the S2's more rounded one.

The QS24 is the most expensive gun on test (if you can call £49.95 expensive!) – but it's also the most feature-heavy. An in-trigger auto-safety is a welcome feature, though be careful when using it as it's quite close to the trigger blade.

The pistols' barrels certainly lock-up positively – and while you can never say 'too positively', straight out of the box I needed to give them a hefty tap to 'break' the sprung latch that keeps their breeches shut. That's great for maintaining consistent accuracy, but a junior gunner could struggle during the 'running-in' period of around 100 shots or so, which these guns need to 'loosen up'. Word of warning to the grown-ups, too – the foresight post can make your palm quite sore, so try and grip the barrel in a way that stops it digging in to your hand.

Key to enjoying these SMKs is having realistic expectations over their accuracy – these are not 10-metre paper punchers and you'll be kidding yourself if you think you're going to stick in one-hole groups from a one-handed stance. These are pistols that are meant to be fun to shoot – so replace your paper bullseyes with tin cans... and throw in the odd matchbox when you're a bit more proficient. You'll enjoy them all the more.

And it has to be said that the higher-priced QS24 clearly knocks the XHS3 and the S2 into the runners-up slots in terms of grouping ability, partially because the latter have quite a heavy trigger pull. Actually, it's not a criticism; priced in the entry-level sector, I think it would be irresponsible of SMK to offer their pistols with more sensitive triggers on guns which may very well be used as trainers – and, as many a match shooter will tell you, there's a lot to be said for learning how to use a heavy trigger properly. I'd be lying if I said I didn't call the odd shot because I'd pulled the trigger, but if you get a firm grip – perhaps with one hand supporting the wrist of your shooting hand – trigger control becomes quite manageable.

Even though all three pistols' triggers broke consistently, the QS24 is the smoother, more accurate shooting experience. It's also the gun with the most poke, so picking off tin cans – which pierced nicely with the Spitfires that SMK supplied me – is an enjoyable way to spend any afternoon. If you like to 'push your distances', the QS24 is definitely the one to go for – its extra power, lighter trigger and nice balance certainly extend your effective range. And it was good to see that buying an affordable pistol wasn't rendered pointless with the need to match it with expensive ammo – the cost-effective Spitfires paired well with the S2 and XHS3 models, too.

I mentioned the benefit to newcomers of heavier triggers, and I'd actually comment that the S3 and the XHS3 help in the teaching of good shooting habits in other areas. To get the best out of them, you have to ensure the correct grip and trigger follow-through – all important elements one needs to become a proficient shot. I wouldn't dismiss them on any level; indeed, I'd be as happy recommending them to someone looking to get into airgunning with a long-term







**Top centre:** Be careful when cocking the QS24 as the foresight post can cause discomfort

**Top right:** It's hard not to be reminded of a Luger when holding the S2

**Above:** The XHS3's contoured grip promotes a positive hold

**Below:** Don't expect Olympic accuracy from a one-hand hold – expect lots of fun!

view to shooting seriously as I would to someone who simply wants a fun-gun for the garden.

All three pistols have machined grooves for attaching optics, though I'm not sure I'd have much need for a telescopic sight. Think red-dot, though, and their plink factor goes up a couple of notches, for sure. But a telly's not needed – the opens are plenty good enough to do the job these pistols are designed to do, with those of the XHS3 and QS24 being finger adjustable via thumbwheels.

Despite their lowly price-tags, all three pistols really excite me. Where they truly excel is that the potential for improving your shooting is as attainable as the potential for getting maximum shooting enjoyment. You won't have to search hard on the internet and forums to find tips and tricks to maximise the performance of these SMKs, either – from simply lubing up the sears to undertaking complete overhauls, these three pistols appear to be tinkers' dream guns.

While I've been fascinated reading up on all these online postings, though, I haven't been tempted to take the pistols into the workshop myself. I don't feel the need to do so, nor has a 'mechanical' forced me to do so. As they're about shooting enjoyment, why waste time taking them apart? After all, I pay more to take me and my boy to a game of football on a Saturday than even a QS24 costs – and we've had hours more fun for our money plinking away in the backyard with that. Plus, come 5 o'clock, it's never all over, either! ●



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS			
MODEL	S2	XHS3	QS24
MADE IN	China		
CALIBRE	.177(tested), .22	.177(tested), .22	.177
SIGHTS	Fixed front, adjustable rear		
LENGTH	335mm	343mm	367mm
WEIGHT	1.08kg	1kg	1.26kg
SAFETY	None	None	In-trigger, resettable
ACTION	Break-barrel		
SRP	£29.95	£34.95	£49.95
DISTRIBUTOR	Sportsmarketing, 01206 795333, www.sportsmk.co.uk		