

TOP OF THE CLASS!

More than 30 years after it was introduced, the Weihrauch HW45 is still the best spring air pistol you can buy – says Gerard MacConnachie

I have in my man-drawer a camera lens. Timeworn and archaic, the heavy alloy from which it is made can be seen through the many chips and scratches on its enamelled black finish. It is redundant; it fits no camera body in my possession and in the world of photography it has long since been replaced by smaller, lighter examples of its kind, but I keep it because its value goes far beyond its worth as a device for focusing light. The lens is imbued with unmistakable quality. It is small, yet heavy. The focusing ring offers just the right degree of resistance and is smooth in operation, while f-stops are dialled in with a damped precision. Shake the lens and you

are met with a deafening silence. It is a fine piece of engineering, and could very easily have come out of the same workshop that produced the Weihrauch HW45.

THE HISTORIC HW45

The air pistol shooter has never really been spoiled for choice. Where the rifle buyer has always enjoyed a broad range of manufacturers and models, the pistol enthusiast has been faced with a relatively meagre selection of underpowered springers, the aesthetic appeal of which could vary from 'quirky but interesting', to 'quick, hide it, someone's coming!'

When the HW45 first appeared in the advertisements of Airgun

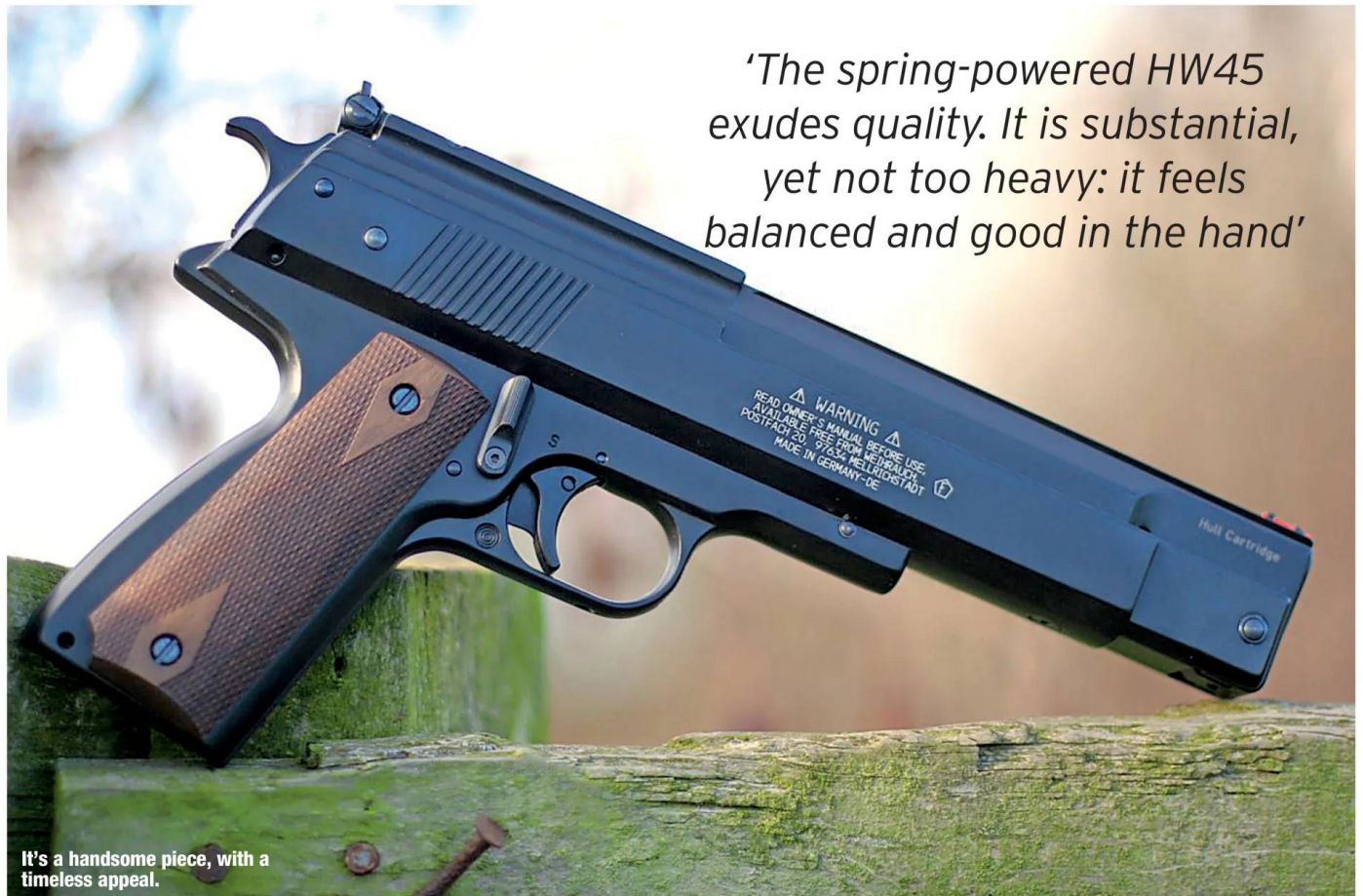
World over three decades ago, it certainly stood out. Some observers were, and remain, uncomplimentary; in a small photograph with no context, the pistol can indeed look unbalanced, like a Colt 1911 with an aircraft carrier stuck on the top., but when you pick up the box in the shop for the first time, and you feel your pulse quickening slightly as you open the cover and wield the polythene-wrapped handful of metal and walnut, any preconceptions evaporate.

QUALITY

Just like the camera lens, the spring-powered HW45 exudes quality. It is substantial, yet not too

heavy: it feels balanced and good in the hand. Shake it and you will hear nothing rattling around inside. The metal is finished in a matte black coating and the pistol grips are finely chequered, while the Weihrauch safety mantra is etched in fine white lettering. Only the dayglo fibre-optic sights look incongruous, and it is hard to see how their addition has improved upon the iron sights which they have replaced.

Hold down the over-lever cocking system with your free hand, and pull back the mock hammer to disengage it. Inspect the transfer port and piston assembly, and note the whiff of engineering that meets your senses. Click it back into place





Modern versions have Tru-glo sights.

without cocking it, and hold the pistol to your ear. Listen to the oily click of the assembly as you dry-fire the predictable two-stage trigger. It sounds deep and substantial.

POWER OPTION

Cock it fully now, all the way. It has a 'half-power' cocking option, but to me that's pretty much redundant, unless you're shooting at ultra-close range. Firmly thumb a pellet into the breech and swing the lever back over and click it into place, noting as you do so the precision and absence of slack at every stage of the process. This tactile pleasure extends to the operation of the safety lever, which snicks meaningfully into place.

Take aim at your target. The grip and stance you employ are irrelevant at this stage; this is all about savouring the moment. Now, take up the first stage of the trigger, then enjoy the snap of the second stage release as the big pistol kicks in your hand to the accompaniment of a conspicuously loud crack from the muzzle. Then, as you smell the burnt oil and load up another pellet, feel the ache in your jaw as you realise the size of the stupid grin you are now wearing.

RUNNING IN

Your new HW45 will continue to diesel for an unknown number of shots. In my pistol's case, it was around 50 until it settled down,

but even now, after countless tins, the pistol rewards the nostrils with a trace of smoke after each pellet. If you have any soul whatsoever, you would not change this for the world.

As you get to know it, you will learn that the HW45 rewards more than anything else consistency of approach. A light artillery-style grip delivers the best results, as there is considerable recoil, but whatever grip you get comfortable with, the most important thing is that you stay with it. Any deviation from your standard approach will see your pellet landing anywhere but where you want it. Mastering the HW45 is challenging and deeply rewarding, and once you know how to shoot it, you will record impressive groups, if that is your thing, but you will have the most fun simply shredding up tin cans at a range of impressive distances.

POWERFUL PERFORMER

The HW45 is powerful for an air pistol. Weihrauch claims it is right up to the legal limit, which is 6 ft.lbs.. It is doubtful whether many examples actually reach this, but that is irrelevant; it is powerful enough, and getting hung up on a foot-pound here or there is an unwarranted distraction. This splendid airgun is designed as a recreational pistol, and in this regard, it has no equal.

A number of variations on the original have appeared over the



Opening the pistol fully gives you the max-power option.

decades, but as is so often the case, when something is right from the word go, it needs no further adjustment. The Silver and Black Star editions feature a much more substantial pistol grip which completely alters the appearance of the gun, echoing the lines of Olympic-style target pistols. Leaving aside the subjective aesthetics, this heavier approach makes perfect sense on a pneumatic pistol where there is no recoil to take into account, but the HW45 has plenty. The larger grips inherently promote a full-handed grasp which runs counter to the need for a delicate touch with the HW45.

BEST IN .177

Although available in .177 and .22, like all low-power airguns, the HW45 works far better in the

smaller calibre. Choose .177 for its higher velocity and flatter trajectory, and if you really want a .22, you can buy a replacement barrel and swap it over with a little fiddling.

The HW45 is expensive, but more than 30 years after it appeared, I think it remains the finest spring-powered pistol money can buy. If you look after it, you will be able to hand it down to your children, and they in turn will be able to do the same for their own offspring. In a digital age, it is a defiantly analogue instrument, and just like the camera lens, its value goes far beyond its ability to carry out the basic function for which it was made.

Never sell it: if you do, start saving straight away for the replacement which you will inevitably buy. Trust me. ■