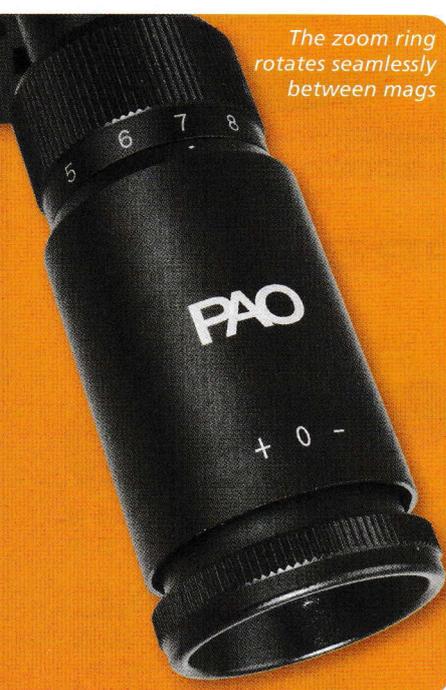


Shooting GEM

They say you only get what you pay for – but how will **Thom Jarrino** rate PAO's upgraded Topaz 3-9x50 IR scope that comes with a stack of goodies for an all-up price of just £60?



The zoom ring rotates seamlessly between mags



Though a relatively new brand, Professional Airgun Optics – PAO – has certainly delivered what it set out to do: that is to supply good quality, ready-to-go glassware at an affordable price. In an age where you often end up 'getting what you pay for', their approach is a refreshing change, and every PAO optic I've used to date has easily been worth its asking price – plus all the scopes come ready-mounted into the bargain.

Along with its new box labelling, PAO's 3-9x50 IR Topaz

model has received a bit of an upgrade – specifically to the lens quality. But as its asking price is still only £59.99, it's got the potential to be the bargain scope of the year. After all, it comes with a dual-illumination mil-dot crosshair, flip-up see-through lens covers, a quick-focus eyepiece, finger-adjustable turrets and a set of two-piece high mounts!

Let's start with all the add-ons. The flip-ups are very neat – and (like the majority of see-through types) while you can't exactly shoot with them 'down', they are a very practical lens cover. Just pop them up in a jiffy when you need to take aim... and clip them back down to protect the lenses between shots.

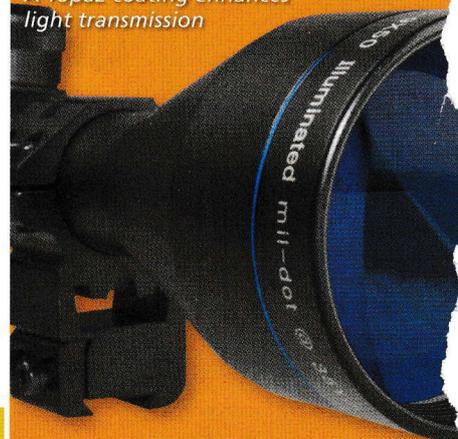
Easy and practical is how I'd describe the windage and elevation turrets, too. They're suitably protected under dust cover which, once

screwed off, reveal 1/4MOA clickers that can be dialled around without the need of a coin thanks to a raised finger grabber. The bezel underneath can also be repositioned to '0' if you so desire, though you'll need a tiny watchmaker's screwdriver to do this, and you'd also need to make a notch mark on the turret wall to reference against.

One of PAO's USPs has always been that their scopes are rifle-ready – but while the Topaz comes with standard-fit (11mm) mounts as expected, its particular two-piece set is certainly rather nifty – much better than you have a right to expect on a 60-quid scope, in fact. They're double-clamped at the base and rings, but I'm particularly drawn to the style of the top cradle, which sports a flat-top and cutaway that adds a certain flair of individuality to the scope's overall look. They support a one-inch tube made from aircraft-grade aluminium, which has then been hard-anodised in a tough, anti-reflective matt black.

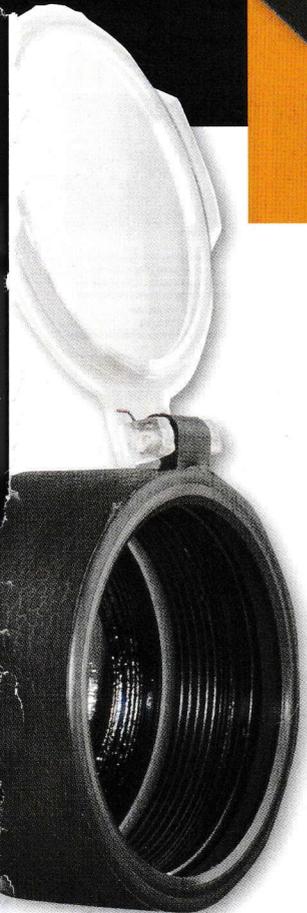
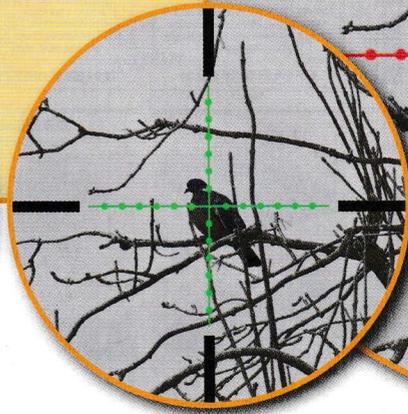
The zoom ring on my test sample rotated very smoothly, steplessly between its 3x and 9x range. Though I didn't test in arctic conditions, I can't see it stiffening up too badly in the cold, either. To assist in the constant positioning of the ocular flip-up, the eyepiece stays put – dioptre focus is achieved via a quick-turn ring. Although this doesn't sport a protective rubber surround, the rubberised boot of the flip-up cap suffices in this respect –

A Topaz coating enhances light transmission

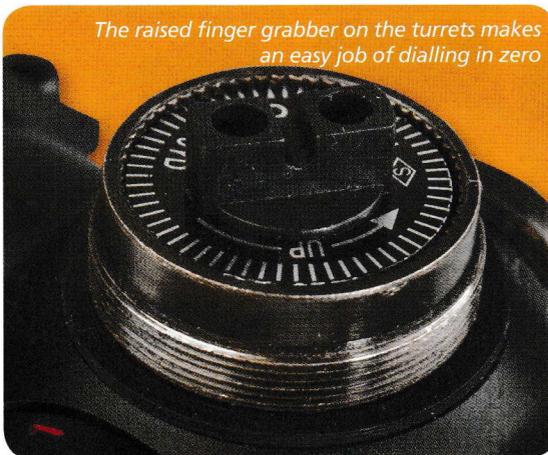




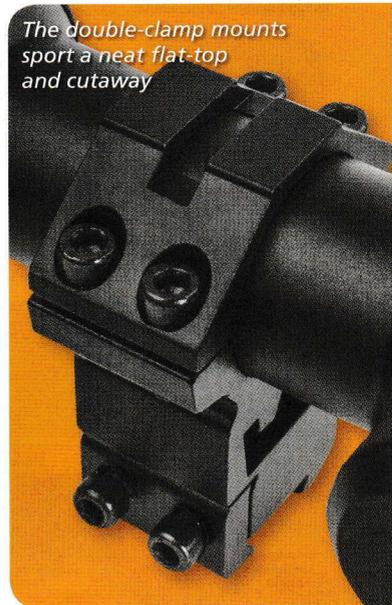
The Topaz's IR facility lets you choose the best reticle for the target's sight picture – black, red or green. The brightness intensity of the latter two can be boosted between 1 and 5 via the side-mounted rheostat.



Main image left: The practical see-through flip-up lens covers are just one of many great features of PAO's upgraded Topaz



The raised finger grabber on the turrets makes an easy job of dialling in zero



The double-clamp mounts sport a neat flat-top and cutaway

and the scope's eye relief is safe enough for use with a recoiling air rifle.

Around 335mm away from the eyepiece sits the objective lens – sized at 50mm diameter to maximise light transmission. It's been multi-coated too, with a transmission-enhancing Topaz blue coating. Given this is the 'upgraded' part of PAO's new model, I was keen to see how this scope fared in low-light conditions – and although I didn't have its predecessor to assess it against, I can confirm that it offers a very bright sight picture.

In high-contrast situations – like when shooting into the bare branches of a tree against a bright sky – the target image rendered very well indeed, with no colour fringing, lens flare or 'ghosting' of the crosshair. Out in the open, when the ambient reading was too low for the naked eye to see properly, the view through the PAO was quite extraordinary, though. By gradually dialling back the magnification, I was able to 'hunt the hedgerows' until it was almost lamping time.

While the Topaz lens coatings and oversize objective make this a good dawn-through-dusk scope, its low-light performance is further enhanced by the PAO's IR capability – its mil-dot reticle can be illuminated red or green to suit the target's background.

As it's only the 'hanging' element of the crosshair – the wires between the thick, outer posts – which illuminate (with the aid of a CR2032 button battery), I found the sight picture to be uncluttered when shooting in IR mode. However, while each colour offers five brightness intensities, I found the highest (setting 5) to be a little too glary.

For daytime use, with the side-mounted rheostat set to either 'R' or 'G', the reticle remains black. The central crosswires are thin enough not to obscure the target, but visible enough to locate against busy backgrounds. The six mil-dots on each bar are nicely spaced for both airgun trajectories and windage drift, though you'd need a gale to fully utilise the extreme dots on the horizontal wire!

There's no adjustable parallax collar on the Topaz, but as it's an airgun-dedicated scope, the lenses' parallax factor has been set by the factory to be error-free at 35 metres. This is certainly good news; firearms scopes that are parallax-corrected at 100m usually give a blurred image at airgun ranges, not to mention aiming errors if you don't place your head in the same position for each shot. In the PAO's case, I enjoyed a very crisp match of reticle and target at 15 yards (on 5x) – and at 35 yards, not only were things razor-sharp even at 9x power, but I got no hint of parallax shift no matter what angle I looked down the tube.

For the money, I'm very impressed with this upgraded Topaz. As PAO backs up its scope's water-, shock- and fogproof credentials with a lifetime warranty, it'll no doubt be a hard scope for any airgunner to resist – especially if you're after an optic that can handle low-light conditions. Don't let its lowly price put you off. This is one case where you don't simply get what you pay for – you get a considerable amount *more!* ●

