Groz Block plane – worth the money?

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A block plane is small plane that can be used with one hand. They are often used for trimming, and some carpenters carry one around in the pocket of their apron, hence they are sometimes called apron planes. One well-known example is the Stanley 60½. This is a low angle block plane that is a handy tool for trimming edges. The low 12.5° angle of the blade works well for trimming end-grain. The bed angle for the blade is 12.5° and it is sharpened at 25°, making an overall cutting angle of 37.5°. (The standard angle of a bench plane is 45° which is a good overall compromise.) The lower angle does give better performance in end grain.

The main problem with the Stanley 60½ is that it is, alas, rather expensive for a casual user. So I was tempted by a budget plane from Groz (model BP-605 at £14-30) to give as a gift. It is a lot cheaper, so I expected that it would require some work.

It turns out that it is not nearly as well made as my English-made Stanley 12-060. From the picture, you can see that they are very similar in appearance. There are some differences in the details.

The bodies of the planes are the same size. The blade angle of the Groz is 13.5° which is practically the same. The clamping toggle is made from pressed steel and does not work as well as the Stanley's cast item. Both the knobs on the Groz stick out more and are less comfortable to use. On the 60½ type planes, the mouth opening in front of the blade can be adjusted by slackening the front knob and moving the lever. However on the Groz, out-of-the box, it is not possible to close up the mouth, even when the lever is fully over. You can see the difference between the two in the picture. The Stanley can close right up, whereas the Groz has a large gap remaining. You can also see some other issues visible in the photo of the Groz – the side of the sole plate the forms the front of the mouth is skew, (which was easily corrected by filing), and there are chips in the paint, new out-of-the-box. Also, you can see signs of incipient rust on the cap iron, above the name.

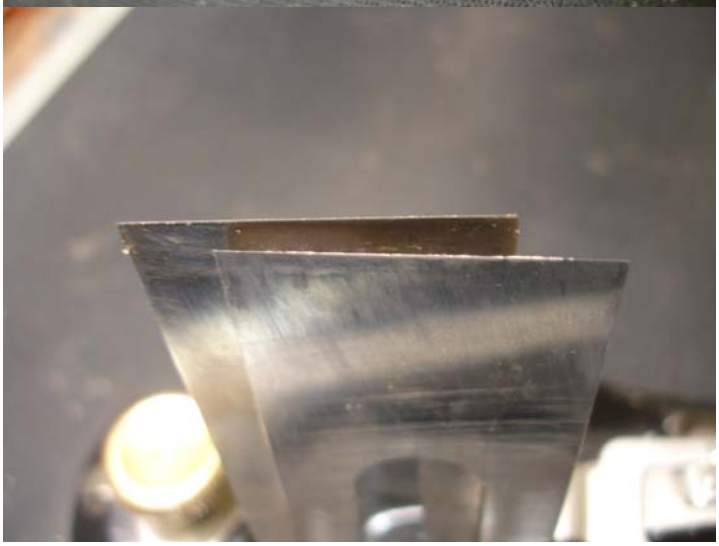
To close up the mouth, I filed the slot in the adjustment lever to extend it, which helps. It is then far over to the side for a small mouth opening. The picture shows this with the front knob removed for clarity. Doing this locates the sole plate further

back to close up the mouth, but it leaves an unsightly gap in the front, with some sharp points exposed. The Groz is on the right, and the Stanley on the left. Groz changed the design slightly, but clearly, somebody did not get their sums right. I removed the sharp edges by grinding the front of the sole as shown in next the picture on the left. (I wonder whether the sole plate was not inserted the wrong way around, before being ground to fit?)

The main problem is the blade supplied with the Groz, which is useless. On the box, it says that the blade is hardened to 58-62 RC, which is what one would expect from a decent carbon steel blade. However, this is not the case. It is so soft, that the edge turns on SA pine after a couple of cuts. In the picture, you can see how the edge has turned over on the blade in the front. The Stanley blade is at the rear.

I suspected that perhaps the blade was simply not hardened correctly – perhaps it was the right grade of steel, but that it was not manufactured properly. So I attempted to harden the blade, by heating the end to cherry-red and quenching it in water. Afterwards, I had re-flatten the back as it did distort slightly. I resharpened the edge, but unfortunately, this was to no avail, as it remains as soft as before. There is clearly not enough carbon in the steel to make it hardenable. The detailed picture shows a portion of the re-treated blade, discoloured after heating. The turned edge (after trying to cut SA Pine) can be seen on the left. This blade is made of mild steel at best.

I bought a replacement Stanley blade which allowed me to continue with fettling the plane to attempt to make it useable.



The other criticisms I have of the Groz, are that the sides of the mouth lack the blade location lugs of the Stanley and the adjustment mechanism is sloppier.

The bed on which the blade rests was also not flat, and aligned with the sole, but careful attention with a file corrected this.

Even if one regards this plane as a kit of parts, it is not redeemable. The blade can be replaced, but the location of the sole plate is a problem, that cannot be fixed.

Alternatives

Even if you have the time and not the money, the Groz BP605 plane is not worth buying. I can't think of any part of the Groz design that is better than the Stanley. Rather save up the extra money and get the Stanley 60½. The Stanley may require a little work, but it at-least has a useable cutter. If you have lots of spare money, look at the Lie-Nielsen, or Veritas apron planes. These are much more expensive, but are reputed to be useable straight out of the box. They also come with A2 steel blades, which are a step above ordinary carbon steel.

Another alternative is the Award 60½ (R365- at Hardware Centre) – I haven't tested the Award, but a cursory inspection did not reveal any of the above mentioned problems. The Award has a separate knob to clamp the blade, instead of the toggle, which you may prefer. (Just be careful you get the one you want, as some of the stock was mislabelled as a 60½, being a 9½ . The 9½ (21° blade angle) is same size but has a steeper angled cutter – this may be what you want, just make sure.)