

WINCHRITE

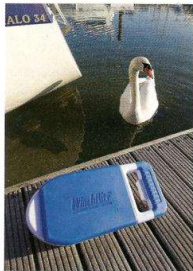
The Winchrite is described by its manufacturers as 'an affordable, lightweight, safe cordless and easy to use electric winch handle'. Utilising recent advances in lithium ion battery technology, the device feels like it's basically a very chunky version of a cordless electric drill with a gearbox to gear its motor's output rotation speed down to one more appropriate for a yacht's winch. The trigger provides variable speed, like many power drills, from a steady crawl to a frantic 120rpm. At 6.5lb, it's obviously heavier than a normal manual winch handle, but not unwieldy. A splashproof switch under the front of the unit allows it to be switched between clockwise and counter clockwise rotation direction to cater for twin speed winches, or the (rarely found nowadays) single speed winches that are rigged to load counter clockwise.

When I first set eyes on this device I had serious misgivings about it. I reasoned that once a sailor loses strength or endurance to the point that heavy winching jobs are a real chore, perhaps he ought to be looking at taking up cross-stitch instead. However, after showing the device to some of the old hands down at my sailing club, I soon revised my opinion. Most of the cruisers at my club are male and past retirement age and, while they might still be strong enough to winch all lines themselves, many sail with other people, often their wives, who sometimes struggle to winch in heavy loads, such as that final Gin on the main halyard. Surprisingly, to me, many of the sailors I canvassed would seriously consider buying such an item and, not only that, some even considered it reasonably priced at six hundred quid when compared with the cost of replacing a boat's winches with integrated electric winches.

The second issue I had with it was that I guessed that holding onto the torque of this device might require strength very close to that of winching



A small (11st) man could be winched up, but it struggled with chubbers.



conventionally. I figured that to make this work for less powerful users it might require some kind of hefty upright post affair to be added to the coaming for the Winchrite to lever against. When we used it, this proved not to be the case. Holding it, even when winching heavy loads, was a one handed affair and the strain could be further eased by a carefully wedged knee.

Despite lots of warnings in

the instructions and on the unit itself (it's a US product after all) about not winching people up the mast, the most convenient way of placing a heavy load on this for our testing purposes was to try to replicate the hardest winching job on a boat, which is usually winching a heavy man up the mast. Our 11 stone man was winched easily and rapidly up, but our 15½ stone and 17 stone men (we're not mentioning names here) were winchable with the Winchrite, but only an inch at a time, because the device has an overload protection that kicked in with this additional load, leading to the trigger needing rhythmical re-squeezing every couple of seconds. We found that a strong man with a 12in handle was able to raise the heavy man up the mast faster than the Winchrite. This is not a criticism of the device though, because if your crew contains a strong man for every winch, you're simply not in the market

for a device like this.

Winchrite shows some well thought out design ideas. I particularly liked the fact that the back of the unit was flat and rubber covered, making it stay where we put it on a heeling, wet non-slip surface, such as a cockpit seat. Battery life seemed adequate for a day sail, but it would need charging overnight on a longer passage. The device comes with a mains charger for home and a 12V cigarette lighter socket charger for on board. If I owned one, I'd put a lanyard on it, because losing it overboard during a tack would be somewhat gutting and the financial equivalent of losing 20 conventional winch handles all in one splash.

Aside from the fact that I'm still fortunately too young to require electric winches I only had one minor annoyance with this product: the rather subjective opinion that it would benefit from a differently orientated trigger arrangement. I reckon a longer handle tapering into a trigger handle in line with the body would be easier to hold onto, or the same layout as a conventional handle. It's no coincidence that all winch handles have this same format and holding onto a stationary handle probably requires a similar activity to turning one, so why not just arrange it similarly to the handles we're used to? *JF*

WE LIKE

- Makes light work out of a heavy job

WE DON'T LIKE

- Trips out at a level where a strong man could still winch
- I felt that it could be ergonomically better

VERDICT ★★★★★

If you're struggling to find the strength to winch in lines while sailing, the Winchrite could buy a couple more seasons' sailing.

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