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Winch strip

Some sailors expect their winches to work year after year with little or no maintenance. Mark Corke offers a step-by-step guide to servicing this vital piece of deck gear.

Winches are expensive, have a hard life and are often subjected to very heavy loads when they are needed the most – so it pays to look after them. Overhauling a winch for the first time can be daunting, but approached methodically it can take no more than an hour to service one. After you've done it once or twice, you'll wonder what the fuss was about.

You won't need much equipment for this job: plenty of clean rags, some mineral spirits or paraffin, and a container in which to clean dirty parts. You'll also need a couple of screwdrivers – one small and one medium size – and perhaps a set of needle-nose pliers for replacing small parts, like pawls. All major winch manufacturers supply overhaul kits, which include grease for bearings, oil for pawls, pawl springs, a small brush, and an instruction booklet. The Lewmar kit, for example, retails for around £16 and is universal across its entire winch range. All major manufacturers also have helpful websites. Harken has an online parts list for its complete line (www.harken.com).

Once you've got all you need, follow this step-by-step guide. The photos show a small self-tailing Lewmar winch (the differences from manufacturer to manufacturer are minor). The major parts of all winches as shown in the accompanying photos are very similar.



All major manufacturers, like Lewmar and Harken, supply kits for servicing their winches. These usually include tools and pawl springs. Winches should be serviced once a year



On some winches the drum is held in place with a spiral spring clip that sits in a shallow recess in the top of the spindle. Use a small electrical screwdriver or knife to pry out one end and carefully ease it out of its groove



Andersen winches have the top plate retained by four setscrews



1 First you need to remove the drum. Unscrew the collar from the top of the winch. If it's stiff, free it by placing a block of wood in one of the dimples and giving it a sharp tap. Harken uses a screw in the bottom of the winch spindle to hold the drum in place



2 The O-ring seal under the top cap prevents dirt and salt from getting into the gears. Check the condition of this where fitted and replace it if at all suspect. You may have to cut out the old one with a razor blade if you cannot pry it out with a small screwdriver or knife



3 If the winch is a self-tailer (as shown here), lift off the self-tailing arm. It is sometimes locked in place by salt and corrosion and might require a tap with a soft mallet



4 Remove the two half-moon-shaped retaining collets. On older winches these may be seized and might need prying out with a screwdriver. If they are really in tight, spray on some penetrating oil. Don't hit the collets with a hammer; they may distort in their seats, making them even harder to remove



5 Insert your finger into the centre and lift out the spindle. You may have to twist it slightly to release it from its seating



6 Lift off the drum. Don't be surprised if the roller bearings don't remain on the bronze spindle; sometimes they remain wedged inside the base of the drum



7 Remove the roller bearings and check for wear. If they rattle in the cage or are ridged, replace them. Give them a thorough clean with mineral spirits or paraffin to remove dirt. Use a clean rag to wipe off. Also clean the spacer O-ring shown at the bottom of the photo



8 Use the end of a small screwdriver to lift out the gear retaining pins, which simply drop-fit through the winch body housing. You can now remove the gears from the winch body for cleaning and inspection



9 Separate the two halves of the gear assemblies and check the condition of the pawls, especially the springs. Any broken or tired ones will need replacing. These vital springs are the smallest part on any winch and are the bits most likely to be lost, so take care



10 After a thorough cleaning in mineral spirits or paraffin, dry each part, then lightly lubricate the pawls and springs with oil. Return the pawl assemblies to the ratchet gear in the same order they came out



11 Drop the gear retaining pins back into position with the flat edge of the pin facing the winch spindle. These should slide right in and fit loosely



12 Refit the O-ring spacer over the winch body and roller bearings, which should be lubricated with the special grease in your kit. Replace the drum then lightly grease the self-tailing arm and top cap and refit. Check the winch before moving on to the next one