

# THE BACKYARD BOATSHOP

David Parker  
continues his  
series on using  
boat tools

## The Sailrite Ultrafeed Sewing Machine



Even when you have lost count of the boat shows you've worked at, new stands still pop up which really capture your interest. At the last Southampton Boat Show, I first saw one of these Sailrite sewing machines and it clearly wasn't only *my* interest they captured. For the duration of the show, the Solent Sewing Machines stand was buzzing with visitors trying out their portable heavy duty sewing machines. They're terrific bits of kit.

I had never used a sewing machine before but I found once you get into it, there are lots of potential jobs on a boat for a machine like this. It can be used for making or repairing sails, boat covers, canvas bags, spray dodgers or upholstery. The US manufacturers Sailrite produce a catalogue which includes everything from making your own sail kits to harnesses and it includes a comprehensive inventory of fabrics and accessories for a whole range of assemblies.

I decided to try making some things from scratch and went to my local

sailcloth distributor, Kayospruce, to get some material. As a complete novice, I began with several simple projects: a heavy canvas bag for the anchor on our dayboat, followed by some tough boat bags for lashings, new webbing straps for securing a canoe to a roof rack and as I became more familiar with the machine, a small cover for a wooden garden table. The finished articles might not look pretty close up but they do the job for which they were intended. Frankly, I'm rather chuffed with the results.

In the past, I've been disappointed with my efforts at hand sewing. Small areas were not too bad but sewing in a bolt rope by hand, for example, can seem tedious, not to say endless. But I found that using a proper sewing machine, I actually enjoyed turning squares of material into practical items for the boat; I can imagine sail repairs would be similarly less daunting. There is also the appeal of making things to your own specification. For example, none of the anchor bags I've

had in the past has lasted, so it's satisfying to get some good thick cloth and make a really strong one. I'm glad to say my seams passed their first test when the children used the bag for sack races round the house.

Though they are portable, the Sailrite sewing machines seem both and well engineered. They are made in the USA and Solent Sewing Machines, which specialises in selling long arm commercial machines to sailmakers, is the sole UK agent. I met the company directors Ian and Melanie Jenkins at the Southampton show where they were exhibiting for the first time. Ian told me: "Several boat owners told us they had been looking a portable machine like this for years."

To evaluate the machine, Melanie suggested I should take one home to try out because this is how a beginner gets started. She was right because this is a tool which demands a hands-on approach. Each machine comes with a manual and two instructional DVDs. Working steadily through them, you quickly get a feel for the machine.

At the beginning, if you're new to sewing, some of the terms used in the instructional information may be unfamiliar but once you begin, it all becomes clearer. Inevitably I suffered from a few tangles and snags but soon things like bobbin winding and gauging thread tensions for strong seams became less fiddly. I also learned pretty quickly how to put pins in so that I didn't stab myself every few seconds when feeding material through. A sailmaker friend also helped me out here by giving me some double-sided tape which is by far the easiest way to keep material in place before you hem it.

Various models are available and each comes in its own case with an assortment of needles, a thread stand and a spool of sailmaker's thread. The one I tried is the Deluxe Ultrafeed,



with its impressively named Monster 11 balance wheel: 7lbs (3.2kg) of solid nickel-plated steel. The Monster allows the user the option of hand cranking the machine like an old-fashioned mangle if no mains power is available. This is really useful, of course, if you plan to take the machine on board. Having said that the 220 volt motor on the machine only draws 0.7Amp, so with an inverter the average boat battery should cope easily.

There are two balance wheel options; the other is plastic. Both are designed to give you slow speed power and control when sewing. I found that at the beginning when I was doing a line of stitching, I tended to feed the work in faster than was necessary. This was out of the habit of using saw and router benches when you need to keep the momentum steady by using a constant feed rate. Taking things slowly, even stopping 'mid run' is not a problem with cloth and helps you keep a straighter seam, particularly as you don't have any guides to run edges against.

The machines are geared with a two drive belt assembly that will push the needle through very thick work. They also have what's known as a walking foot which helps you feed heavy fabrics easily; you can feel them being drawn under the needle. However, I found that with bulkier items, such as making my small cover, it's best to support the material as much as possible so the weight of it doesn't drag on the seam you are trying to sew. The bigger the sewing

table you've got the better, when you need to support a large expanse of material; for most amateurs, making a sail would probably mean working on the floor.

Each machine is capable of a straight stitch up to 1/4" (6mm) long and this is the one I found I used most for heavy duty canvas work. The length of the stitch is simply adjusted with a lever, as is the direction of feed. So when you go back over a seam to finish it off, you just put it into reverse as it were and then you can double up a seam so that it's tight and secure. The DVD has lots of other sewing tips; for example, you lift the foot but keep the needle in the material when you want to rotate the fabric to go in another direction.

The higher specification machines also have the option of a zig-zag stitch up to 3/16" (5mm) wide which I found particularly good for webbing when I made up the strops with buckles. When working 'across the grain' in webbing – going at 90° to the warp – a small stitch worked well but running parallel to the warp, I found the straight small stitches seem to get buried. However, the zig-zag stitch was much stronger and I imagine you would certainly want this zig-zag option to undertake any serious sailmaking. In demonstrations at the boat show, they had these portable machines running through 9 layers of 10oz sail cloth; the same as sewing through the thick corner of a mainsail on a large yacht.

The various options on the Deluxe

model can be purchased separately and added on to a basic machine. One thing it does come with which I think is pretty essential is a light for night use; following seams in the shadows is tiring on the eyes. I found that the ideal for sewing is lots of natural light. You can't set up scaled measurement guides to ensure the hem will be the same width every time so being able to see what you're doing is essential.

The Deluxe model comes with a tough carrying case of vinyl covered plywood, with reinforced corners and heavy duty catches. Cushioning inside the lid means the machine can be stored in any position; again handy if you plan to keep it on board. However, I found this cushioning came off, so the box manufacturers need to be a bit more generous with the glue.

Prices start at £446.50 for the LS-1 Base model, the LS-1 Deluxe is £564, the LSZ-1 Base with the zig-zag stitch is £575.75 and the top of the range LSZ-1 Deluxe is £693.25.

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