



Discover Our History

Leonard
Cheshire 

Introducing our history

Leonard Cheshire was Britain's most highly decorated RAF Group Captain, a war hero who went on to dedicate his life to his humanitarian work during peacetime.

He founded our charity Leonard Cheshire, which supports disabled people in the UK and around the world to live, learn and work as independently as they choose.

This booklet shares the story of Leonard Cheshire. You will also find out more about the Leonard Cheshire Archive Centre and our heritage project, Resonate.

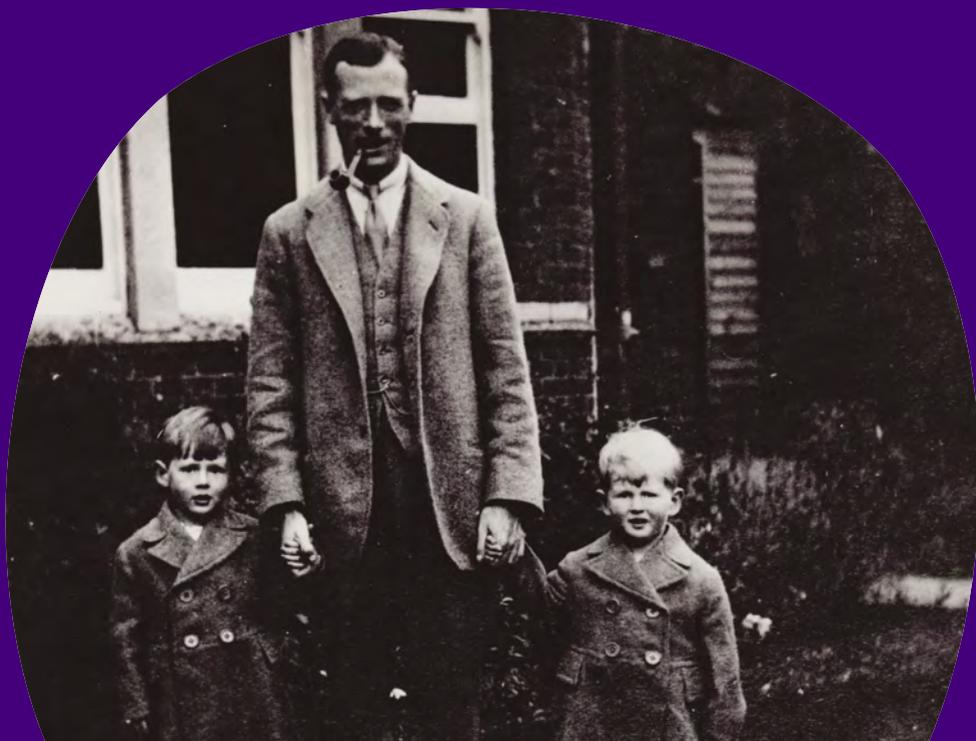
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Leonard Cheshire: the early years

Leonard Cheshire was born on 7 September 1917 in Chester. His father, Professor Geoffrey Cheshire, was away serving in the First World War. After the war ended, the young family – now joined by Leonard’s younger brother Christopher – moved to Oxford, where Professor Cheshire had taught law since 1911.

From the local preparatory school, The Dragon, Leonard won a scholarship to Stowe School, Buckinghamshire. At school, Leonard wasn’t particularly academic and was far more interested in tennis, fast cars, betting and Savile Row suits. But he followed in his father’s footsteps to the University of Oxford, studying law at Merton College.





Leonard Cheshire: wartime

Leonard joined the Oxford University Air Squadron in 1936. He volunteered to join up with the RAF in 1937 as a way of getting out of his finals, but his father made him sit his exams before going on Officer training in 1939.

He served in the Bomber Command during World War II, and became the youngest ever Group Captain at age 25. He later volunteered as Wing Commander of the RAF 617 Squadron 'the Dam Busters'.

Leonard's war career was legendary. By 1944 he had completed 100 operational bombing missions, an unequalled record. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order with two bars, the Distinguished Flying Cross, and the Victoria Cross.

In 1945 Leonard took up his 101st and final mission as the official British observer at the dropping of the atom bomb on Nagasaki. His experience serving in the war had a profound effect on him and he left the RAF on medical grounds in 1945.

The origins of the charity

For the sake of those who did not survive, Leonard wanted to make the post-war world a better place.

In 1948, Leonard was asked to find a home for a man called Arthur Dykes, who was terminally ill. He offered to look after him at Le Court, his home in Hampshire.

Arthur's dying wish to Leonard was that 'if somebody else comes along, whoever it might be, don't turn him away'. So Leonard never did. By 1950 there were over 20 disabled people living at Le Court. Le Court became the first 'Cheshire home' and similar homes soon opened across the country.

Leonard Cheshire's foundation went on to establish homes for disabled people with the support of local communities. Day centres were introduced in 1968 and by 1970 there were 50 'Cheshire homes' in the UK and a presence in 21 other countries. In 1979 the charity began providing care for disabled people at home, the first in Gerrard's Cross.





Leonard Cheshire: later life

Leonard married fellow humanitarian Sue Ryder in 1959 and together they worked on various projects around the world, especially in Poland and India. They had two children and the family lived at the Sue Ryder care home in Cavendish, Suffolk.

Just as Leonard's courage and leadership had been acknowledged during the war, so were his peacetime achievements. Leonard was awarded the Order of Merit in 1981. In 1991 he was given a life peerage and took Baron Cheshire of Woodhall as his title in memory of his time with 617 Squadron at Woodhall Spa in Lincolnshire.

Leonard was later diagnosed with motor neurone disease and he died aged 74 on 31 July 1992.

Leonard Cheshire today

Today, the charity Leonard Cheshire has 120 residential and supported living services in the UK and is part of a Global Alliance of Cheshire services in 54 countries internationally.

We continue to work towards Leonard's vision of a better world, and his belief in equality, choice and independence for disabled people. That belief is at the heart of everything we do.

We directly support over 60,000 disabled people each year. In addition to our care and support services, we run programmes in the heart of communities that support independence, enabling people to find work, learn new skills or get a school education in developing countries.

We campaign alongside disabled people to bring about changes for the better, and to challenge ignorance and unfairness in society.





The Archive

The Leonard Cheshire Archive was set up in 1989 – one of the last projects initiated by Leonard Cheshire himself. It is dedicated to collecting, organising and disseminating information about his life and the development of the voluntary organisations he founded.

The archive contains records relating to our charity and Leonard Cheshire, including film, sound and photograph collections. Part of the film archive is curated on our behalf by the British Film Institute.

The present Archive Centre in South Derbyshire was opened in 2005, providing purpose built specialist preservation and research facilities.

The archive is open on weekdays to researchers by appointment. Contact details can be found at the end of this booklet.

What is Resonate?

Thanks to National Lottery players and the Foyle Foundation, we have been able to digitise over 500 sound tapes from our archive. These tapes include recordings of Leonard Cheshire talking about his life and work, and oral history interviews recorded with past trustees, staff, supporters and disabled people supported by Leonard Cheshire.

The tapes are being listened to and transcribed by a team of digital volunteers, who are helping us produce a podcast sharing the history discovered. A selection of the tapes will be available to view online and will be open to researchers at the archive.





Find out more

If you're interested in finding out more about the history of Leonard Cheshire, go online to our website at rewind.leonardcheshire.org

On the website you can view films and photographs, browse issues of the Cheshire Smile, and listen to archive oral history interviews. You can also read in-depth articles on different topics from our history and listen to our Resonate podcast.

You can follow us on Twitter [@archiveslc](https://twitter.com/archiveslc)

Our Resonate podcast is available on the Anchor app <https://anchor.fm/leonard-cheshire-archive> and Spotify.

Contact the Archive

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