



Resonate

Voices from Leonard Cheshire

**Leonard
Cheshire**





Voices from Leonard Cheshire

Leonard Cheshire was Britain's most highly decorated RAF Group Captain, a war hero who went on to dedicate his life to 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 accompanies an exhibition that shares the story of Leonard Cheshire, including clips from our sound archive. It has been created as part of Resonate, a project supported by National Lottery players and the Foyle Foundation.



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Leonard Cheshire's early life

Leonard Cheshire was born in Chester in 1917. He grew up in Oxford, attending the Dragon Primary School and going on to win a scholarship to Stowe School. From there, Leonard followed his father's footsteps to Oxford University to study for a degree in Jurisprudence at Merton College.

“

It's not just Fred Astaire that this brings back to me, but the people I was with, the years before the War and what was going to happen.

”

Leonard Cheshire

Listen to Leonard talk about growing up in Oxford:





“

I was thinking, as you were arriving Leonard, of the night of 24th April 1944... I simply couldn't understand how you did it, because you were so low in all that fire. And you seemed to know exactly what you were doing, and you told us exactly what to do. It was an astonishing achievement of yours.

”

Sir Noble Frankland

A legendary war career

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Leonard Cheshire signed up to the RAF to fight for his country. His war career was legendary, and in 1944 he became the most highly decorated Group Captain in Bomber Command when he was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Listen to Leonard and his friend Sir Noble Frankland talk about his methods of low-level marking in a Mosquito aircraft over Munich, 1944:





The first Cheshire Home

For the sake of those who did not survive, Leonard wanted to make the post-war world a better place. In the spring of 1948, Leonard welcomed dying ex-serviceman Arthur Dykes into his home and cared for him. By the summer of 1949, Leonard's home had 24 residents with a range of disabilities. The charity now known as Leonard Cheshire was born.

“

Well as the war was coming to an end, and I could see that it looked as though I was going to get through, I thought that being one of the fortunate ones, I ought to do something to try and work – I don't know how to put it – to help build a world in which there wouldn't be war – a better world.

”

Leonard Cheshire

Listen to Leonard talking about how his charity work started in this clip:



Expansion at home

Leonard had discovered a gap in the new social care system. Local communities began coming to him for support in setting up their own 'Cheshire Home'. Leonard took a very local approach to setting up the homes – establishing local committees to run and maintain them and enlisting local people to give their time, energy – and funds – to get things going.

“

The last thing that the other homes wanted was Ampthill or Staunton...But it was just this feeling that here was a house that was needed. And I knew that there we're so many disabled [people] who were wanting an opportunity, and the two married.

”

Leonard Cheshire

In this clip, listen to Leonard talking about how his work started at Staunton Harold Hall, the fifth 'Cheshire Home' in 1954:





Expansion overseas

By 1955 there were five homes in the UK and the first overseas project had opened just outside Mumbai, India. The next few years saw rapid expansion into other countries and by 1960 the charity had over 50 services in the UK, five in India and was active in 21 other countries.

“

It was a tremendous step for me to take, although I look back on it with happiness now. I only had a total of £100 to take with me to India, and only one address out there.

”

Leonard Cheshire

Listen in more detail to Leonard's first trip to India:



Leonard Cheshire, humanitarian

Leonard became a well-known figure around the world, both for his wartime record and for his work on disability. He accepted the Harding Award in 1978 for his work for disabled people and in 1981 the Order of Merit. In 1991 he was elevated to the peerage as Baron Cheshire of Woodhall Spa, in Lincolnshire.

Listen to Leonard's acceptance speech for the Harding Award, 1978:



“

I'd also like to accept it behalf of others in so many different ways who are working amongst disabled people. On behalf of disabled people themselves, who are making such a big contribution in their own way to the development and evolution of our society.

”

Leonard Cheshire





Leonard Cheshire's final years

By the early 1990s, Leonard Cheshire was experiencing health problems that were eventually diagnosed as Motor Neurone Disease. His last personal project was to set up the Leonard Cheshire Archive as a way to remember people who had helped him in his work and to act as a centre of research on his life and achievements.

He died from the effects of Motor Neurone Disease on 31 July 1992 at his home in Cavendish, at the age of 74.

“

He felt that instead of being on the outside of the world of disability looking in, he was now one of those for whom he had spent the best part of his life serving. Mind you, he didn't put it quite like that, his version was much humbler.

”

Wally Sullivan

In this clip, a colleague and close friend describes Leonard's final years:



The charity today

The work of Leonard Cheshire continues and today we support more than 75,000 individuals in the UK and around the world to live, learn and work as independently as they choose, whatever their ability.

“

We need this involvement of the whole world, whatever nationality, whatever condition of the country - each has got his own contribution to make....a tiny little drop makes up the ocean.

”

Leonard Cheshire

Listen to Leonard reflect on his humanitarian work and its potential:



We'd love to hear your comments

Please do share your comments with us about this exhibition. You can tweet us [@archiveslc](https://twitter.com/archiveslc) or email archivecentre@leonardcheshire.org. More about our history can be discovered on our website: www.rewind.leonardcheshire.org

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