# **Leonard Cheshire Resonate Podcast – Episode 4 Transcript**

[Stephanie]

Hello everyone, my name is Stephanie Archivist for disability charity Leonard Cheshire.

Welcome to our Resonate podcast.

I am speaking to you today from our archive center building in leafy Netherseal, South Derbyshire.

You may have listened to the previous three episodes of our podcast talking about our recent Resonate project thanks to the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Foyle Foundation. We digitized our historic sound archive and had it transcribed by our wonderful digital volunteers. Do see those episodes to find out more.

[Stephanie]

Resonate may have come to an end, but we are going to continue our podcast, but this time with a slightly different theme. Each episode I will be investigating a snapshot of our history we do have an amazing 73 years to choose from our charity, begun in our founder’s home in 1948. Group Captain Leonard Cheshire VC OM was famous in his lifetime for his exploits in the Second World War, including becoming Wing Commander of RAF 617 Squadron ‘the Dam busters’. He was discharged from the RAF to a psychiatric hospital and struggled to adjust to civilian life. To help himself and others like him, he started a self-help community in his own home, Le Court in Hampshire. This initial venture failed, but one member, a disabled man, called Arthur, came back to Leonard looking for a place to live and that set into motion the chain of events. That led to the charity Leonard Cheshire today.

Leonard started his work by inspiring communities to build homes and provide facilities for local disabled people and this idea is spread quickly across the UK and then overseas first to India and then all over the world. Today the charity supports 61,000 disabled people in the UK and internationally through providing assisted living and residential care settings and our employment, education, and community programs.

[Stephanie]

In this podcast I am taking us back to the beginnings of the archive. Our first ever archivist was a resident of the court called Frank Spath a fascinating character and a man of prolific output who looms large in our archive collections, even today, Frank moved to Le Court in 1955 and lived there until his death. He wasn't just an archivist, he was the editor of the Cheshire Smile, a disability themed magazine produced by the residents of the then Leonard Cheshire Foundation. A biographer, researcher, and disability activist, we are incredibly lucky to have his archive collection here.

I'm joined in conversation about Frank by Doctor Laura Crawford. Laura is a senior research fellow at Northumbria University, a volunteer on our Resonate project and she researched her PhD about the Cheshire homes using our archive.

[Stephanie]

I think during your research Laura you must have had an insight into Frank’s life and achievements by reading his correspondence we have his archives here at the Leonard Cheshire Archive, and I just wondered what were your initial impressions of him?

[Laura]

So for me, Frank was one of the most kind of, familiar faces, voices that appeared in the archives when I was doing my research. So much so that I felt that I that I even knew him, and I would say his biggest contribution to the home was his work with the Cheshire smiles. So, he was the editor for 14 years and under his editorship it really kind of developed into this, uh, this magazine for the whole foundation, not just the Cheshire Homes. There's some quotes that I found in the archive that the readership was about 700. Once he took over and it was 7000 within a couple of years. So, he really kind of steered the way for the Cheshire Smiles to be a platform to discuss themes related to disability to life in residential care. And as well as a platform to connect the different homes across the world, I think the Cheshire Smiles are one of the most amazing resources to understand disability history.

It's written and edited by disabled people from as early as the 1950s. That resource in and of itself is an amazing way to track those changes in society. If you pick up a Cheshire Smile from the 60s, you can really engage with the debates that were happening at the time about rehabilitation and about where disabled people could live, whether it's in the community or residential homes or what provision existed, you can really get a kind of- get a sense of what society was like at that time. It's this little microcosm of capturing that moment in time, and I think that resource in and of itself is a phenomenal piece of history that Frank was spearheading.

[Stephanie]

Yeah, it was a real achievement what he did with the Cheshire Smile. I know he won awards and things for his editorship of that magazine. I think he's probably worth talking a little bit about where Frank came from, because when he moved to Le Court, I think he was in his 30s. He's still a young man, but he wasn't like some of the other residents who would move there from the age of 15 or towards the end of their life. I know he did a little bit of research about his family background because he had an unusual surname ‘Spath’. And to me, when I first learned about him, I thought oh he must be German, but he wasn't. He was born in London, but he realized after his father died that his father was actually German. So he did a lot of research into his father's life because he didn't really know anything about where he came from, but from what he did divulge in articles and what people wrote about him in the Cheshire Smile, Frank was a London boy. He was born in Kensington and brought up in Earls Court, he said that he became disabled, he became paralyzed at the age of 16. He was the same age as the founder born in 1917, so it's always interesting to track Leonard Cheshire’s own life and Frank's own life and just see how those two things differ.

One thing that I've always wondered was he became paralyzed in 1936, so actually he lived through the blitz as a disabled young man. And I kind of wish if I had a time machine that I could get in it and go back and just start asking what that must have been like 'cause Kensington got some direct hits and I've actually had a look on Google Maps; where he lived was right by the train line, so I did a little bit of research. And actually, somebody had asked him about what what it was like in the blitz and poor Frank and his family basically sat the blitz out in the basement of their house. And to get through the horror of having bombs dropped on him, he just read he read and read and read and I think that's behind why he was seen as such a wise person. He was quite erudite I guess, and well read. Knew what how to write, how to edit, which is why he was given the editorship of the Cheshire smile.

Shall we talk a bit more about his role on the Cheshire smile? Because actually that is quite significant 'cause the Cheshire smile when it first started was more of a jokey magazine. Maybe along the lines of ‘Punch’ [magazine] run by the editor, Syd Radford, who Frank actually knew; they'd both been in Saint Stephen's Hospital in Chelsea before Le Court came into their lives. So what, how do you think it changed? Can you describe to me the change in direction and what that looked like and sounded like?

[Laura]

Yeah, so if you look at the copies of the Cheshire smile once Frank had taken over as editor, you can definitely see that change in tone. So, the initial versions of the smile there's a lot more cartoons. It was quite kind of gossipy, almost about things that were happening in the home, and if you didn't live in Le Court, I don't think you would get the kind of inside jokes.

Whereas under Frank it really became this platform for kind of a critical commentary about issues that were happening within and beyond the homes, and it became a place where residents from across the network of homes could could submit stories or articles about things that they were interested in. Frank actually put together, once he took over kind of a manifesto or a vision for the Cheshire smiles and he said that one of the kind of core aims for the Cheshire smile was to kind of foster hunger and talent within the homes to get more people contributing to the magazine And also to enable readers to kind of keep abreast of things that were happening in other organisations who had similar goals to the Cheshire homes. So, organisations like the Red Cross, the Central Council for the Disabled and different societies across the UK and internationally. So he really wanted to kind of change the tone and saw the potential of the Cheshire Smile to be this voice and connecting all these different groups together.

[Stephanie]

It's amazing, really. The undertaking that he decided to go with. He had that vision, and he could see that there was the appetite there and also it was a groundbreaking publication 'cause I don't think there was anything really like that at the time. There are some magazines that come around a bit later that you hear of in the Cheshire smile articles. But I think it was seen as as an example as well as being Frank's brainchild. He did kind of get other people in on the action, so to speak. We have articles from people like Paul Hunt talking about his work in his writing with the social model and people like John Evans talking about going to America to look at alternative living options. And then there's also smaller stories from like local papers and local journalists talking about people doing everyday things.

He was also involved with [charity] Holidays for the Disabled. I've been reading a couple of his reports from various holiday camps, so I guess this was like the ‘60s was the area of era of Butlins and the holiday camp, so there were a couple set up in Norfolk I think for disabled people. So there's some reports remarked of him talking about people. Getting drunk and singing ‘Granada’ at 10:30 at night and having to go home the next day with a hangover, so he had a sense of humor [chuckles].

[Laura]

Yeah, it definitely comes off in in a lot of the things that I've read that Frank was just that person who wasn't necessarily the loudest voice in the room. But he was involved in everything and everything that he was involved with he had this kind of very humble manner about him, but very earnest in what he was trying to achieve.

[Stephanie]

I mean his energy just must have been boundless because he was the editor for the Cheshire Smile. He was on the committee for Holidays for the Disabled, was on the Patients Welfare Committee, he was involved in all sorts. He was representing the Foundation abroad, the Leonard Cheshire Foundation at various Expos. He was even in attendance when Leonard Cheshire got his humanitarian award in 1978. He was, Frank was taken to Brighton to watch him receive the award. He also went to Rome. I think you know a little bit more about the Rome trip.

[Laura]

Yes, so in 1984 there was the International Family Week of the Cheshire Homes and Frank was one of the representatives from Le Court Cheshire Home. So they had an audience with the Pope in the Vatican City and Leonard Cheshire and Sue Ryder renewed their vows in Saint Peter’s. And Frank was there to see it all happen.

So, another interesting theme is the relationship between Frank and Leonard Cheshire. There had been several books that had been written about Leonard Cheshire, but Frank didn't feel that they were accurate. He felt that there was information that was missed, and he was determined to kind of rectify this, so he wrote his own account of how the Cheshire homes started and it was described as a labor of love due to his respect for what Leonard Cheshire had done, and the movement, and his admiration for him as a person that he wanted to get it right essentially.

[Stephanie]

The residents that were living in Le Court in the 1950s did have that personal relationship with Leonard because Leonard was living with them in those years. His main home was Le Court, so they know, he had a room next door. He was in the dining room with them every day, they knew him. They knew Leonard, so they were able to say to Leonard what they thought. Which I think is why when the residents were looking at how to best represent themselves in the structures of the Cheshire homes, I think that is why Frank was on the committee looking at how to tackle that problem.

[Laura]

I think that's a massive point. Those earlier residents had had an ear to Leonard almost that they could voice those kind of ideas or suggestions for change within the home. Also having that personal relationship with Leonard, I think it created more of a sense that it was a home rather than a care home. I appreciate that's just semantics, but it's that sense of feeling that was generated by, you know, having that close bond with Leonard and I think that Frank did leverage that relationship to the benefit of the homes. In 1963 there was a series in the Cheshire Smiles called ‘The role of the residents’ where a lot of these ideas about the resident sharing the management of the homes and having a voice within that, it was, uhm, it was Frank who discussed this with with Leonard and Leonard, wrote an initial article in the Cheshire smile saying we want to hear people views and that started this series of discussions about the role of the residents. So you can see that playing out in the things that happen. That relationship between Frank and Leonard.

[Stephanie]

I was reading one of Frank's annual newsletters. He wrote a newsletter every year for his friends that he'd send out. And even in the 70s he's talking about how the ‘old guard’ had died. And but - you know, it was a shame that such a part of history had passed away, and I think that's possibly behind why he ended up becoming our first archivist, the first archivist 'cause he'd been documenting this movement as he was experiencing it, so we have files of newspaper clippings that he'd taken of various high profile disabled people from the foundation and without. He was trying to keep records of different homes starting and we've got the beginnings of a filing system where he was trying to keep the history of each home. But to be honest the expansion of the Cheshire homes exploded so much in the 60s he probably couldn't keep up with it [laughter]. And then he was obviously, as you said before he was writing, ‘How the Cheshire Homes Started’ with his magnum opus and also writing another autobiography, sorry another biography. And he was actually one of the people who set up the archive as it is today. We've got some correspondence between him and Leonard Cheshire from 1984 talking about sending his files to the then Resource Center in Staunton Harold Hall, which is our predecessor. So he's obviously - has been thinking about this all along, from the 50s onwards about how what Leonard Cheshire was doing and the things that were happening in Le Court and the other homes and the services they were providing needed to be recorded. That's amazing. It's amazing really.

[Laura]

It is amazing to have the foresight to capture this movement before people even knew it was a movement, if that makes sense. There was a, I think he was a staff member actually, who wrote an essay on the Cheshire Homes. I think he's called Michael Cairns.

[Stephanie]

Yes, that's the chap, yeah.

[Laura]

And he called that group of residents -you mentioned the old guard - ‘The Action Group’ - that they were the people, they had their different methods of going about it, but Paul Hunt, Peter Wade, Barbara, Frank were all members of this Action Group who wanted to kind of consider different ways of the residents taking a more active role within the community at Le Court and in the foundation more broadly. And there was a sense that they also the residents looked towards Frank because he was that little bit older and he was really well read so he brought with him in this kind of air of knowledge and kind of conviction that I think that group went on, and I think it really helped pursue some of those goals and have a platform to discuss the role of the residents.

[Stephanie]

So we've spoken about Frank being the editor of the Cheshire Smile and his literary pursuits, but he also represented the Leonard Cheshire charity outside the home and abroad, and he traveled the world. Can you remember where he went? I know he used to write a report wherever he went.

[Laura]

So if you look through the Cheshire smiles you can see numerous different events where Frank was representing the home, he was giving a lecture or who's at some kind of speaking event. One of the ones that I looked into quite closely in my research was the British trade fair in Oslo in 1966. So as part of that, himself and Barbara Lloyd Evans/ Beasley were there to represent the idea of innovative adaptive devices for disabled people.

So Frank’s brother [Jack] came into the home quite a lot to help modify wheelchairs for other residents, so he'd help modify Frank’s wheelchair and also assisted some of the other residents to have kind of bespoke assistive devices. In the 60s there was a group at Le Court called Independence Unlimited and they had a workshop whereby local tradespeople would volunteer their time to assist, and with modifying the wheelchairs for the residents. In Frank's case his wheelchair was modified so that he could steer it independently, and also that he could have a desk because his job as the editor of the Cheshire Smile - it was described as a full-time job. He was working over 48 hours a week and he had to have a place that he could answer all his correspondence, will be making his notes and with ideas for the next edition of the Cheshire Smile. I know Jack also adapted some other people’s wheelchairs.

[Stephanie]

I think once folk had seen Frank and his nifty little bicycle bell and pulley system that meant he could steer himself around, that some of the other residents who'd had new chairs wanted the same. You can't blame them really, so Jack could be coming to see Frank, well, actually wouldn't be seeing his brother at all. He'd be in the workshop helping someone with their wheelchair.

[Laura]

Yeah, I, I think I remember reading that somewhere in the archives that Frank didn't mind, you know he'd had his wheelchair modified. He didn't mind if Jack was helping some of his - some of the residents.

[Stephanie]

It's quite nice really, and it's wonderful that there was that kind of atmosphere that where people could chip in and help; Independence Unlimited being a prime example. I mean, we've got film of them adapting all sorts of things for residents, so there's Albert Baker the painter has an adapted easel so he can stand and paint with his mouth. There's bespoke door openers in the workshop that they've invented using a piece of string and a reel of cotton. It's just really ingenious stuff - quite basic to today's eyes, but they had to make their own equipment because there just wasn't the equipment out there.

[Laura]

I think that's what's really interesting about Independence Unlimited. The lived experiences of the residents were driving forward these innovations that were, you know, tailored to the exacting needs of each individual - I think just watching No Limit [a film] which is on the website is just such a fascinating insight into that.

[Stephanie]

Well, I think we've probably exhausted all our knowledge about Frank, but I do hope that people have been interested and that they have enjoyed listening to this podcast. Go and have a look at our website because Frank is a star of stage and screen and he appears in quite a few of the films that we have digitized on there and also we have every Cheshire Smile since it began in 1955. Digitized and up on the website for people to read. So please do go to our website. It's at [www.rewind.leonardcheshire.org](http://www.rewind.leonardcheshire.org). And thanks also to Laura for letting me pick her brains about one of our local star residents. We may come back and talk about someone else, 'cause there's definitely more to talk about with what was going on in Le Court in the 60s. So thank you very much, Laura.

[Laura]

Thanks Steph.

[Stephanie]

We have now come to the end of this episode. I hope you've enjoyed listening. Our podcast is available on YouTube and on the Anchor, Spotify and iTunes apps and wherever you can get podcasts. You can download a transcription from our website www.rewind.leonardcheshire.org. Look for our news page. You can keep up to date with the archives work by following us on Twitter @archiveslc. But for now, this is goodbye and thank you very much for listening.

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