# Leonard Cheshire Archive Resonate Podcast – Episode 5 Transcript

00:00:07:15 - 00:00:24:00

[Festive music plays]

[Stephanie]

Hello, everyone. Stephanie, here, the archivist for disability charity Leonard Cheshire. In this festive episode of the Resonate podcast, I'll be holding your hand as we go through the archives, looking at Christmases past Christmas was very important to our founder.

00:00:24:08 - 00:00:37:07

Did you know he used to send over 4000 Christmas cards a year? You may not have started your Christmas card lists yet, but perhaps this will give you a little bit of inspiration. In this clip from our Oral History Archive.

00:00:37:20 - 00:00:44:09

Here we have Leonard’s secretary Joan, who talks about the mammoth undertaking of writing Leonard’s Christmas cards:

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[Joan]

Have you heard about the Christmas cards and all that performance that used to go on? [laughs] Well, they were very, very important to Leonard, Christmas cards. He used to have about... he used to send every year about three or four thousand cards. He always liked to keep in touch with not only his friends but, you know, people he had met perhaps only fleetingly at an engagement. People who had done him a little act of kindness, or played tennis with him, or had got up at the crack of dawn to drive him to an airport. All these people he used to take a note of their name, or address, and they were put down on the Christmas card list. And not just for the following year, but, you know, for evermore they had cards. It did mean an awful lot to these people and so this was a very large job that had to be done every year. It started in August, coded them all because - at the end of each name and address there were little crosses, three crosses meant he signed them 'Leonard Cheshire and Sue Ryder', and she signed. Two crosses were 'Leonard Cheshire', one cross 'Leonard'. Then it was 'Leonard and Sue', then if it was a dash, there was a little personal message that was put in, oh... some were GC. It was a total nightmare! Anyway, that was very important.

00:02:10:11 - 00:02:25:13

[Stephanie]

So, there you go. If you really wanted to, you could use Leonard’s system for signing your Christmas cards. But I doubt anyone nowadays has over 4000 of them to send. Christmas also appears in some of the stories of our homes.

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Take St Teresa's, who had a very ‘interesting’ first Christmas dinner. In this speech to a community group in Melbourne in the 1970’s, Leonard tells the story.

00:02:38:02 - 00:03:43:10

[Leonard Cheshire]

I well remember the day 21 years ago when we had our first Christmas in our first home. We had no means of giving the eight patients that there were in the home at that time, a special Christmas because we were struggling to keep going and nobody had given us a Christmas box. Two days before Christmas, a little boy of eleven suddenly turned up with a duck, and he won this duck in a raffle. And instead of giving it to his mother or whatever else he might have done with it, he said, ‘I will give it to the patients at St Teresa's’. And so, this boy's gift really made their first Christmas dinner. And ever since that day, in one way or another, we have had help from the young and I would like to say what a difference it makes.

00:03:44:06 - 00:03:59:18

[Stephanie]

I'm afraid I'll have to correct Leonard there and say that St Teresa's in Cornwall is actually our second service. This Christmas at St Theresa's was in 1951, but by 1954, Leonard was in a completely different country, celebrating Christmas.

00:03:59:24 - 00:04:19:21

He had just got out of hospital, where he'd been treated for TB. When Leonard was in hospital, he received correspondence from all over the world asking him to come and help in their local communities. One country that was especially interested was India, and Leonard was invited out there when he felt better. As soon as he was discharged from

00:04:19:21 - 00:04:39:08

hospital, Leonard set sail from India, arriving with his own car and caravan to use as an office, which became quickly impounded, and he had to pay a large fine. With no money, Leonard only had a letter of introduction, and he goes on to tell us here in this clip what happened next:

00:04:39:08 - 00:04:53:14

[Leonard Cheshire]

In Bombay [Mumbai] I had just one address, that somebody had given to me. This was the wife of the chief engineer at Burma-Shell. And she kindly came to meet me, she didn't know what it was all about. And I explained to her and said that I was looking for a property.

00:04:54:23 - 00:05:14:24

So obviously, this took her by surprise, but she took me out in her car, and eventually we did discover, I think it was an acre and a half of land, in the jungle, 15 miles north of Bombay. The great advantage was that the owner was prepared to let me have it on a promise to pay when I

00:05:14:24 - 00:05:37:10

could [laughter]. I think that he had been trying to sell it for a long time. I thought that I probably was as good a bet as anybody. We then wanted somewhere, a house, a building. Well, Nina managed to get the main contractor for Burma Shell who was finishing a contract, to give us his contractors hut, an asbestos hut.

00:05:38:09 - 00:05:45:04

And this he put up on top of this little bit of land. Over Christmas, so we called it Bethlehem House.

00:05:46:03 - 00:05:59:04

[Stephanie]

The Christmas theme doesn't stop there. Soon Leonard had two residents living with him in the asbestos hut, and him and some helpers were nursing them and trying to get some money together to get things on a firm footing.

00:05:59:19 - 00:06:07:03

This is when somebody in the local community suggested that they put on a fundraising pantomime. He explains more in this clip:

00:06:07:23 - 00:06:22:06

[Leonard Cheshire]

We held our first committee meeting on packing cases around, under this tree. I seem to have spent half my life around packing cases and rooms that are being built. Now, the one thing that the committee talked about was money.

00:06:23:10 - 00:06:42:09

And one of the distinguished Indian ladies said, ‘Now, look, we have two patients. We have no furniture, and we have 35 rupees in the bank, it was about £5 in the bank. What are we going to do?’ So, Nina said, ‘I know my husband will put on a pantomime’. Well, everybody said

00:06:42:14 - 00:06:56:06

‘Very good idea’. And I'm convinced that they didn't know what a pantomime was. And, of course, Jimmy, Nina's husband knew nothing about this, and evidently, she was waiting for a convenient moment to break the news to him.

00:06:57:22 - 00:07:14:24

But the convenient moment didn't somehow come and at the next meeting, we got Jimmy as chairman. And as the meeting was started, one of the Indian ladies jumped up and said, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, before we start this meeting, I think we'd like to thank Mr Carney for agreeing to put on a pantomime’.

00:07:15:21 - 00:07:32:14

First, he'd heard of it! We always wondered what happened when they got home. But the pantomime was put on and on one condition, Jimmy said, ‘I insist that you get the Governor’. We thought, ‘Well, what's this pantomime going to be like?!’

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But the pantomime went on and the Governor came and what was more important, The Minister of Finance. And it was the first pantomime being put on in Bombay, and it was so successful that it had to be put on another four days after Christmas, and the Minister of Finance, as it happened, had been at school in

00:07:54:07 - 00:08:12:22

England and he'd never seen a pantomime until this day. And he was so pleased with it as he went out, he said in a very loud voice ‘If there's anything you want, I hope you'll tell me’. And he said it publicly so that really he was committing.

00:08:13:22 - 00:08:17:08

And we said ‘Yes. What we want is a road!’

00:08:19:15 - 00:08:37:03

[Stephanie]

What a way to get things done! The Bombay pantomime became a regular social fixture, and it is one of the things from our 70 plus years of history that I get asked about the most. Most people want photographs of this event because it appeared in all the society pages in the Mumbai press.

00:08:37:21 - 00:09:04:14

We do have some, but unfortunately not an awful lot, and neither do we have film. But it was something that was very much celebrated and made a big impact at the time. [music break] Adventures with Christmas cards appears to be a theme in our history, and on our library shelves we have a blue book called ‘The Story of St Bridget's

00:09:04:14 - 00:09:32:07

Cheshire Home’. St Bridget's was set up in a seaside town down in West Sussex in 1955. This Christmas card related event was so momentous that it's made itself into this annal of history. Reading directly from the book: ‘An event took place in 1964, which now amusing, but was then catastrophic. A well-intentioned supporter who sent old Christmas

00:09:32:07 - 00:09:55:09

Cards to St Bridget's, decided on her own initiative to appeal for used cards in Woman's Weekly, one of the largest circulation magazines at the time. The following is reproduced courtesy of the Evening Argus, Brighton: When the mail man calls at St. Bridget’s Cheshire home in East Preston, there are no excited people waiting to see who the letters are for. They already

00:09:55:09 - 00:10:12:21

know! In the past ten days, 50 Post Office lorries have called at the home and dumped over 500 mailbags on the doorstep. When the reporter called at the home, he told the matrons that a GPO lorry had just pulled up outside with another 80 mailbags to deliver,

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she looked around in despair and said, ‘What's another lot? I really do not know what they're going to do. We've got two million of them already!’ ‘Two million what?’ The reporter asked. ‘Old Christmas cards!’ Matron replied. It all started about twelve days after the advert appeared.

00:10:32:11 - 00:10:48:16

Already, one of the garages is bursting at its sides with unopened sacks of mail; walls in the hallway are lined with parcels up to the ceiling. The Linen cupboard has been emptied of linen and completely filled with parcels; and our occupational therapy room has been turned into a gigantic sorting office.

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The moral of the story is always obtained committee approval before taking action!’ Some of the key players in this adventure have left is an oral history interview, and you can hear them laughing about it in this clip:

00:11:04:21 - 00:11:36:15

[Jill]

In the blue book there’s a funny story talking about post about Christmas cards, how you got hundreds and thousands... How did that happen? [Eileen] We did … Well they used to collect the cards and remade them Nora and Charles didn’t they?

[Anne] And then we found them, not sack loads, but van loads!

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[Jill] Van loads!

[Peter] Train loads!

[Jill] So millions? Must have been millions.

[Anne] Yeah they were all over the place. Stacked along the hall. In the shed.

[Jill] Everywhere

[Anne] Everywhere. We couldn’t move for Christmas cards [laughter].

[Jill] What did you do?! Well did you use them all?

[Everyone] Oh yes!

[Eileen] They were recycled.

00:12:08:05 - 00:12:14:21

[Jill] Well it was worth it then.

[Eileen] And Nora and Charles, they worked very hard

[Peter] They did Christmas cards from morning ‘til night those two

[Stephanie]

So there we have it direct from residents Eileen and Anne and volunteer Peter, that Nora and Charles, the residents responsible for making Christmas cards every year, recycled every single one of those over 2 million cards to make new Christmas cards. Could we call that a Christmas miracle?

[music interlude]

00:12:37:02 - 00:12:52:19

[Stephanie]

Now we've come to the end of our trip through the archives, I hope you feeling a little bit more festive. And I'd like to wish you from all of us here at the Leonard Cheshire Archive, a very restful holiday season and a very merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

00:12:53:08 - 00:13:00:16

[Stephanie]

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[Music ends].