# Resonate Podcast Episode 6

00:00:00 [Music introduction]

[Stephanie] Hello everyone and welcome to the Resonate podcast, coming to you from the Leonard Cheshire Archive in South Derbyshire, England.

My name is Stephanie, I am the archivist for international disability charity Leonard Cheshire. Stay with me as I talk a little more about our amazing 73-year history.

[Music break]

00:00:27 This is episode 6 of our podcast, you can find previous episodes on the Anchor app or on our website, [www.rewind.leonardcheshire.org/category/podcast](http://www.rewind.leonardcheshire.org/category/podcast) where you can find all links to past episodes on Anchor or YouTube, alongside a transcript.

[Music break]

00:00:54 This episode we are delving into the archive to find out more about the life of our founder, Group Captain Lord Leonard Cheshire VC, OM. Did you know that he was married to another famous humanitarian, perhaps known better for her line of high street charity shops? Stay tuned to find out more.

[music break]

00:01:16 In 1917 Leonard Cheshire was born in Chester, his father away fighting in the first world war in the Cheshire Regiment. The building on 65 Hoole Road, now has a blue plaque commemorating his birthplace.

00:01:30 The war baby of the first world war became a young man facing the second. Leonard volunteered for the Royal Air Force as a way to get out of his university exams, but his father (an Oxford Don) made him sit them first. His career in RAF Bomber Command made him famous for acts of courage and becoming the youngest RAF Group Captain and one of the highest decorated members of Bomber Command.

00:01:53 During the war, Leonard married Constance Binney, a retired actress 21 years older than him, who he met when posted to the USA in 1941. However, after the war the pair agreed to separate, and Leonard returned to the UK. The couple divorced in 1951.

00:02:09 Sue Ryder was born in Leeds in 1924 at Scarcroft Grange, also graced with a blue plaque marking her birthplace. Her father once headed the Tetley brewing company and owned estates in Yorkshire and Suffolk.

00:02:22 Sue grew up close to her mother, who spent her time as a voluntary social worker. This inspired Sue to train as a nurse, and when war broke out, she added a year to her age and volunteered with the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry.

00:02:34 Sue was posted to Special Operations Executive, known as SOE, supporting secret agents, and was sent to postings in the UK and then abroad, for the most part in Poland, a country that would win her heart. She also lost a spouse and a fiancé to the conflict.

00:02:52 When the two first met, at Ampthill in 1955, they were at the same point in their lives, as Sue Ryder explains in this clip:

00:03:00 [Sue Ryder] ‘The story really begins in the War. During those years, my husband was actively engaged, night after night on more than over 100 bombing raids over Germany, while I had the privilege of serving with Special Forces, men and women in the Resistance and those captured by the Gestapo and sent to Nazi concentration camps, where 20 million people of over 30 different nationalities were killed. The events and scenes of those overcrowded days made an immensely deep and unforgettable impression on me.

00:03:37 Meanwhile my husband had been present at the final act of the war – the dropping of the atom bomb on Nagasaki - and the introduction of the nuclear age. He came back home, wanting to continue to struggle for peace and freedom for which the war had been fought, but yet, not knowing quite how to start. Finally, he founded homes for the sick, first in England and then in different countries. Principally India, Asia and Africa. In 1959, after we had married, we decided to start a joint community on an international basis in India. And so, began our first venture together.’

00:04:28 [Stephanie] This first venture was Raphael, near Dehra Dun in India. It is a village, with a hospital, school and independent living facilities, supported by staff and international helpers. Raphael marked the couple’s engagement in 1959. The details of their engagement were leaked to the press, which included the Daily Express headline ‘Cheshire VC – My Romance Secrets’.

00:04:51 Perhaps because both were private people; Leonard was convalescing from TB (India was thought to be a better climate for his remaining lung) and they wanted to start a joint project in India, Leonard and Sue married in a private chapel in Mumbai’s Roman Catholic Cathedral on 5th April 1959, before a few close friends.

00:05:13 Until he married, Leonard had spent his time living at the Cheshire Homes he founded, the last in the UK being Staunton Harold Hall, Leicestershire, then after moving to India, various hostels and tents in Mumbai. Sue lived at the first Sue Ryder home in Cavendish, Suffolk with her mother, and after they married, the couple set up home there.

00:05:31Leonard talks about his house in the following recording:

00:05:36 [Leonard Cheshire] ‘I would like, if I can, to introduce you to my home. Because I am sitting here in my office, at my desk. I spend a lot of time here, much of it spent dictating letters. I have a little dictaphone here, and I can give any instructions I like. I can write to Matron, and I can say, ‘Dear Matron, I think that discipline needs tightening up a little’. Whether she’d take any notice doesn’t matter [chuckles] but this is where I sit and write my letters. We don’t live in a little house of our own, we live in the Sue Ryder home. This is the headquarters of my wife’s work. Hers is a separate organisation, though we work together as best we can, because they have different objectives, the two foundations. And here in this house, there are 30 survivors of those concentration camps. It’s not the moment for me to tell you about that, except perhaps to say that they have been through suffering and an agony that few people have been through.

00:06:43 In addition to the 30 residents, there is the whole headquarters organisation of the Sue Ryder Foundation. That means the general office, where, as you’ll see, there’s something like 5 typewriters going hard. There’s the appeal office which is responsible for raising the £250,000 a year that the Sue Ryder Foundation has to collect, for its overseas homes and its homes in this country. There’s the Christmas card room where over £60,000 worth of Christmas cards are sold every year, just from this room - they’re sent out by post. And their different departments. You’ll find that there’s a lot of young people here - the residents are called the bods [chuckles]. In all, there’s 60 of us. We have one little part of it, we have our bedroom, and Jeromy and Elizabeth, our children, they each have a little room. My wife has her office and I have this office here that you see where I spend a good deal of my time. We’re very lucky, with a garden - we’ve got a little lake, well we call it a lake, it’s really only a pond, but it’s got ducks on it. It’s a quiet village, Cavendish, it’s a very beautiful village. We are a bit remote, but that helps me. If you look at it from the outside, it looks very peaceful, if you look through the outside gate. But once you come inside you realise that it isn’t, and it’s on the go all day. And often at night, we have to man the telephone at night, we never quite know what’s going to come through!

00:08:16 From this recording, it is obvious that the work of Leonard and Sue whilst separate in terms of objectives, was complementary in values, and in their lifetime both people considered all their charitable foundations to be part of the same ‘family’.

00:08:30 After their marriage, they were soon off on a trip to Australia to raise money and awareness of the work in India and at Raphael. This work eventually came under a separate charity called Ryder-Cheshire, which ran in the UK and Australia and New Zealand.

00:08:44 To find out more, I spoke to Rory McEwan, president of charity Ryder-Cheshire Australia, which still runs today.

00:08:51 [Rory] ‘We really came about because Leonard came to Australia and well after the work he did in ’57, 58. Um, obviously just out at Dehra Dun and establishing the home of Raphael. He then decided to call in his Australian contacts, mainly people he knew through the Air Force, Australian force and obviously the Royal Air Force.

00:09:18 And with a very clear mission - to raise the money he needed to fund the vision he and Sue had together. Their first vision together, this was exciting for them, like this was the thing they were - so they've got married, and this was very new on, and here they were almost on their honeymoon, living in a tent in the forest, and him dreaming of what was going to happen. And then coming to Australia to start telling the story. That inspired a lot of people and the focus then was simply to raise money. For Raphael’.

00:09:50 [Stephanie] Ryder-Cheshire Australia today supports Raphael, a Cheshire Home in Timor-Leste and two other homes in Australia.

00:09:58 The UK branch of the charity was based at Staunton Harold Hall in Leicestershire; the charity closed in 2010, its work with volunteers continuing under separate charity Enrych and its work fighting against Tuberculosis under charity Target TB – a charity close to Leonard’s own lived experience of being hospitalised with TB for two years, and living the rest of his life with the after effects.

00:10:21 Ryder-Cheshire UK supported Raphael, much like the Australian charity, but also did more. One objective was the relief of famine caused by natural disasters – most notably the Ethiopian famine in the 1980s, caused by drought and civil war, and Tuberculosis care and prevention in India. A large project started in 1984 with the United Nations in Katumba, Tanzania that rehabilitated disabled Burundi refugees. In Kathmandu, alongside the Nepal Disabled and Blind Association, Ryder-Cheshire set up a home for the rehabilitation of young disabled people. In Madras, the Gabriel centre was set up to train people with Leprosy in a trade, to help them find work. In the UK the foundation set up the Raphael pilgrimage for disabled Christians, which goes every year to Lourdes in France and the Ryder-Cheshire film unit, the soundtracks and films we still have here at the Leonard Cheshire archive.

00:11:15 [Music break]

00:11:19 Towards the end of his life, Leonard became increasingly concerned with the impact of natural disaster on the lives of disabled people, especially after Ryder-Cheshire’s experience setting up a feeding station for refugees during the Ethiopian famine. He decided to set up his own charity to tackle this, called the World Memorial Fund for Disaster Relief. Previous Ryder-Cheshire Chairman, and World Memorial Fund Chairman, Sir Peter Ramsbotham explains in this clip:

00:11:46 [Sir Peter Ramsbotham] ‘And he started out. He just wrote to 15 Ambassadors and said I’m not launching anything officially, I just want to get this thought across to everybody. And the thought was that he would raise money, to have an international council, they’d raise it worldwide and he would form a disaster relief fund out of the money it raised. The idea was that you collect £5 from all the millions of people in the world who want to remember those who died in the war, for them. In other words, a living memorial, men, women and soldiers, they died in these disasters and their gift through this memorial fund will be to relieve disaster, which was occurring in the world, at that time.

00:12:24 He had very much in mind, the relief of natural disasters, and was writing then to the Prime Minister and I suppose other people, how to help in the natural disasters that were occurring in the world, and also the famines in Sudan and Ethiopia. So that was how he originally conceived it’.

00:12:43 [Stephanie] These concerns of Leonard’s in the early 1990s about the impact of climate change and disaster on lives, especially the lives of disabled people, forsees current global concerns with climate change that are occupying our minds today, especially during a worldwide pandemic. Leonard was concerned with the future – the motto of the Memorial fund was ‘for every life lost, a life saved’.

00:13:07 An early fundraising project with the World Memorial Fund was the Berlin concert in 1991 by Roger Waters and friends of Pink Floyd’s ‘The Wall’, that Leonard kicked off by blowing a first world war trench whistle. This concert was famous for its size – over 300,000 people attended- and being held on Potsdamer Platz, which had once been no-man’s land, so soon after the Berlin wall came down. One of the first projects was the building of anti-cyclone shelters in Bangladesh.

00:13:37 Unfortunately, Leonard was not able to proceed with this work for long as he soon became ill, eventually diagnosed as Motor Neurone Disease, and died in 1992. His final charity closed and remaining funds and work was taken on by his Leonard Cheshire foundation and Ryder-Cheshire.

00:13:57 From this brief history of two lifetimes dedicated to humankind, it can be seen how much of both Leonard Cheshire and Sue Ryder’s lives were dedicated to the work. I never met either, but I did ask Rory McEwan about his thoughts on their dynamic:

00:14:12 [Rory] ‘They were both so, so self-confident in their own way. And There was no point in them competing. I mean she could command an audience just so well, in her special style. He was so remarkable in the way he could work a room. By not gathering people around him and being the centre of attention, but just quietly touching, touching base with everybody in terms of where they were. And that ,I mean that just leaves such an enduring feeling from that person, you know ‘I've met you once but for my life I'll be your apostle’.

00:14:48 [Stephanie] Yeah?

00:14:49 [Rory] And that's what he did. He sold - in very small …for in - in a few fleeting moments he just sold people to ‘follow me’.

00:14:55 [Stephanie] I was listening to an oral history interview with Sir Peter Ramsbotham, who was obviously involved in Ryder Cheshire UK, and he said about Leonard. ‘He could charm the wallpaper off the walls’.

00:15:06 [Rory] Yes, absolutely.

[Stephanie Chuckles]

00:15:07 [Rory] And - but one at a time. He didn't have to charm groups, he charmed individuals.

[Stephanie] Right. Individuals.

00:15:12 [Rory] He wasn’t one to enter into debate. But Sue was -if she picked up an element that she didn't agree to, she would quickly say, ‘Well, I don't agree with you on that’ - Or ‘Well, why would you even think that way?’ Or ‘That's not a fair and reasonable thing to say?’ [laughs]

00:15:31 [Stephanie] Wonderful!

00:15:34 [Rory] Yes, yeah, so yeah. So I'm not really. I can't really. I mean, it's only me sort of hearing stories. But people came to him.

00:15:42 [Stephanie] Yes, they did. He was a true leader.

00:15:45 [Rory] Yes, yeah. Well even this businessman, who wasn't a very nice fellow, really, was so impressed it was almost like ‘Here - take my aeroplane, take my pilot, go and do what you need to do’.

00:15:57 [Stephanie] Yeah? It's amazing!

00:16:00 [Rory] Wonderful!

00:16:03 To find out more about the work of Leonard Cheshire and Sue Ryder, you can visit our website [www.rewind.leonardcheshire.org](http://www.rewind.leonardcheshire.org). On here you can see films, listen to their speeches, look at photographs and read copies of The Cheshire Smile. They all document the work of both Leonard and Sue together from the mid-1950s.

00:16:26 To find out more about the work of Ryder-Cheshire Australia, visit their website [www.ryder-cheshire.org](http://www.ryder-cheshire.org).

00:16:36 Disability charity Leonard Cheshire supports disabled people to live, learn and work as independently as they choose – whatever their ability. Our work has an impact on individuals, the public, organisations, and at national and global levels in order to reach this goal. To find out more, visit our web page <https://www.leonardcheshire.org/about-us>.

00:17:01 [Music break]

00:17:06 Thank you for listening to episode 6 of our podcast – see you later in the year for episode 7! If you require a transcript, please visit <https://rewind.leonardcheshire.org/category/podcast/> where you can download a transcript for this episode and all previous episodes.

00:17:27 If you have any questions or ideas for a future episode, please do get in touch via twitter @archiveslc or email archivecentre@leonardcheshire.org.

00:17:37 [Music ends]

00:17:42 [Podcast ends]