**Film Transcription**

**Rewind – Leonard Cheshire Disability, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.**

**Film Title:** On Reflection – Leonard Cheshire in Conversation – Staunton Harold

**Duration:** 12:54

**Transcription Date:** 8th July 2016

**Archive Number:** N-608069

**Summary of Main Points**

00:28 – The male narrator introduces Leonard Cheshire, describing his recent recovery from tuberculosis and his interest in finding new premises

00:51 – Leonard Cheshire discusses Ampthill and Staunton. He explains the history of Staunton

06:03 – Leonard Cheshire discusses how he raised the funds to purchase Staunton with the support of a builder called Mr Ravenshire

08:53 – Leonard Cheshire talks about the voluntary groups that helped to renovate Staunton

11:08 – Leonard Cheshire discusses how Staunton gave him the courage to go to India

**Start of Transcription**

00:00 – 00:14 [no speech].

00:15 – 00:27 [musical background for titles].

00:28 **Male Narrator:** So Leonard Cheshire came out of the hospital at Midhurst, he’d been cured of tuberculosis. Now he was back at work and he wanted new premises. He found Ampthill through the Historic Buildings Council and on the borders of Leicestershire and Derbyshire, there was Staunton, still beautiful ... but both were sadly neglected mansions.

00:51 **Leonard Cheshire:** They were very dilapidated and, and I think in a way, they fitted my mood, my state, cos what I can never forget about Ampthill and Staunton is the feeling that they were needed. That, that they had a, they had a personality, they had a life, they had a future but there was nobody to give them that future. When I got to Staunton, I shall never forget it ... err to begin with, that distant view as you drive along the road, you look down and into this hollow and there’s this huge house nestling surrounded with trees. That in itself was very evocative. And when eventually I got inside the building, this rather cold, very cold, damp February day, in this huge hall, front hall, rain coming through the ceiling, and then at least two storeys above it, this feeling of, um, it had had so much history and it’s future was finished. And then there were these 3 people from the neighbourhood who’d come to see who I was, I mean they didn’t know who on earth I was. The thing that I noticed was that they, they loved Staunton, they felt that Staunton belonged to the District and I could see that they were determined if they possibly could to give it a future but everybody being tried, the Archbishop of Canterbury, every, almost every charity and institution being approached and nobody could see any sense to it.

02:14 - Lady Ferrers err … who’s home it had been, had written to me in Midhurst. She had offered me her husband’s clothes. He died the night before the auction of a broken heart. Their house had been in the family for 500 years. It was a very historic house. Well, I think one has to picture its history. Err it was built, the new building was built in 1556, in err 1668, I think, under Cromwell, Sir Robert Shirley had built a church, the only church that was built in Reformation times. Cromwell was very angry that he’d built this church and he sent a deputation to him. Now Robert Shirley was having a picnic with his family by the lake, err a nice summer’s day and they heard the sound of hooves, horse’s hooves coming down this drive, same drive that we’d driven down. And this was a ... deputation from Cromwell which said you’ve built yourself a church so you’ll build me a battleship and err Robert Shirley said I won’t, so he was put in the tower and he died in the tower at the age of 28 because he would not give in to Cromwell. So that was the spirit in which, err Staunton had started. If we look at the inscription over the church, I think that it epitomises Robert Shirley. Part of it says this: ‘whose singular praise it is to have done ye best things in ye worst times and hoped them in the most calamitous.’ Anybody who reads that quotation is bound to feel inspired. And I think there was something there that made me feel, you must respond.

04:23 - Now Lady Ferrers was ill, she was in bed, she couldn’t get up out of bed to, to come over that day in February but err, I said that I would take the house if we could get it away from the demolition firm but the demolition firm did not want to sell it. And so a public inquiry was held to determine whether or not the preservation order that had been put on it by the Historic Buildings err Council should hold or whether it would have to be given up. In other words, um, could the demolition man be prevented from demolishing it? Everybody thought the inquiry would go the wrong way. At the inquiry, the demolition firm, um argued and proved that the damage was such that it would cost 110,000 pounds to put it in order and I really think that that estimate was accurate. [Laughing in background]. See it had been requisitioned in the war, err Lord Ferrers pushed out at a fortnight’s notice. It had been occupied err by the army and they’d not treated it well and then Italian prisoners of war were put in it. It had been terribly damaged, the lead had been pinched off the roof, it had been empty for nearly 10 years and all this time while they were arguing, rain had been coming in. So here was this house. The inquiry went the right way and so we were allowed to buy for 15,000 pounds ... but the trouble was we didn’t have 15,000 pounds.

06:03 We were able to raise 1500 to put the 10% down and agreed that we would err, complete on St George’s Day, April the 23rd, on condition that we could move in first and so we moved in. Well there was the problem with money, how were we going to pay for this, put this 15,000 pounds down on April the 23rd? Now, a few days previous to the 23rd, we had our first family day at Le Court and the Queen Mother came down, that was our great occasion and to it came a man who had given some money to, to St Bridget’s called Mr Ravenshire. He was a builder and he was a very wealthy builder. I went up to him after the Queen Mother had gone and asked him if he could help. Err he said ‘yes’ and he agreed to give 5,000 pounds, to our immense surprise 5,000 pounds. A friend of mine, an Irishman who had a wonderful gift of the gab drove him up to London. By the time they got to London it was 10,000 pounds so we now had 12,000 pounds towards the 15. Enough, with apologies to the builder, to get away with it. Now, I have found, if I’m not being, you know, pushing my own opinions that when somebody comes to you with a project that they want to promote, course you look at the project in itself but you look at them and if you can see that they are determined on it, if you can see that they really mean it, that they’re going to go through with it come what may, I find this influences your judgment. And I think that it was this more than anything that persuaded me to take what was not really a very sensible step. I had nothing behind me. I had the little experience of Le Court, I was not in good health. The last thing that the other homes wanted was Ampthill or Staunton. The newly formed trust didn’t think that it was very sensible but it was just this feeling that here was a house that was needed. And I knew that there were so many disabled … who were wanting an opportunity and the two married, two things, erm were clear. First, the obvious one that the whole District looked upon Staunton as theirs and they were determined to get it going. The second thing was that it was a challenge, it was a very broad canvas and I, I learnt a lesson that err I’ve seen repeated elsewhere, that if you present people with a big challenge, they’ll respond and they’ll respond in a big way. If it’s a small challenge, had it been just a little bungalow, there would have been hardly anything. There was no electricity, there was virtually no water.

08:53 You can imagine the, the damage there was in the house and they used to come round, err I’m not exaggerating 50, there’d be 50 voluntary helpers every weekend and err every village, every little group would take over one room, it would be the err, the coal or rotary room or whatever it might be. They’d all take over, that was their room. At the end of the weekend they locked it so that nobody could see what they were doing and it remained locked till they came back the following weekend. Err every little group that took on a room would find the money to purchase the materials. The men would mend the holes, plaster the walls and the ceilings and then the wives would come in and furnish it. We left everybody to choose their own colour scheme and the colour schemes, absolutely startling some of them, I can’t. So it was no use I interfering, they had to be left to choose their own colour schemes and according to their different backgrounds and so on, so they chose their colours. But they did feel it was theirs and even up till this day, those little groups still keep that room, that particular room going. They repainted and they redecorated and they refurnished it. There was this sense of personal involvement.

One must remember that Staunton did make a huge difference to Lady Ferrers. I mean her health was broken but the moment she saw the house coming back into use, she seemed to get over that illness. She had tremendous willpower. She was held in great respect and she was really a central figure around whom everybody collected in a, in a certain sense. Lady Ferrers got up out of bed, this was a completely new chapter for her. She’d come over for the weekend and her job was to offer everybody tea. She used to take the tea around and there she was, err a very err commanding, a very fine, strong looking person though she was not in good health, in this front hall where I’d originally seen this rain coming through, receiving people. I can never forget that one day um, a journalist came up from Leicester to see what was happening. Lady Ferrers saw him, she walked straight up to him, picked up a broom and said: ‘young man, take this broom and go and err go and sweep the dining room out’, and he did.

11:08 Well, all all that year of course, I was wrestling in my mind with the problem of India, dare I accept this invitation? Err, we had in fact asked somebody to go out ahead of me to have a look at it but err, no I needed confidence and I think I needed the courage to do it. I, I needed certainty that err, it was the right thing to do and somehow seeing what was happening at Staunton and realising what human generosity and determination can do, watching it, gave me that courage and it gave me a feeling that yes it was the right thing to do. It was a tremendous step for me to take although I look back on it with happiness now. I only had a total of a 100 pounds to take with me to India and only one address out there. I was leaving behind me err five homes that were each struggling very hard. I knew that none of the committees felt that it was the right thing to do but Staunton persuaded me and when I looked at Staunton there was 55 bedrooms, although the work was far from complete and I saw what had been done just by ordinary people in that short time, I felt yes, to me now all the overseas expansion is due to Staunton and of course the homes that preceded it but essentially Staunton.

12:39 [Music to end film] to 12:47

12:48 [no speech] to12:54

**End of transcription**