**Oral History Transcription**

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

**Participants:**

Jill Roberts – Archivist

Carmel Short – volunteer at Le Court, and employee of the Cheshire Foundation

**Duration:** 49:06

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**Summary of Main Points**

[00:11-05:24] How Carmel began volunteering for Leonard Cheshire Disability

[05:25-07-49] Carmel becomes secretary

[07:50-14:28] Jimmy’s story

[14:29-19:54] Trip to America and Rosa Searle

[19:55-21:43] The Italian bar in New York

[21:44-29:34] Patsy and Washington

[29:35-27:27] Offices in Market Mews

[27:28-30:37] Leonard Cheshire and the offices

**[Start of Transcription]**

[00:11] **Jill**: This is an oral history tape, made with Carmel Short, on the 12th of August, 1996. She’s in conversation with the archivist Jill Roberts.

[Pause 00:22]

**Jill:** Carmel, you’ve been involved with the Cheshire Foundation I suppose in *two* main, main roles, you were a volunteer at Le Court from 1953 for twenty years, like you said, and you also worked as an employee, in the offices. Erm, let’s talk about Le Court. What, what was your first involvement with the foundation? How did you know about Leonard Cheshire and his work? Did you live locally?

[00:56] **Carmel:** No, I [rustling] I saw a reference to Leonard’s work in the [unclear] universe. And, er, and I, I was working for BA at the time, and er, I wasn’t doing anything for anybo– [pause] I was just enjoying life and I thought well, maybe I could do something to help Leonard Cheshire with his work. And, so I wrote to Le Court and said, er, I don’t have much to offer but, er, if I could, help at weekends. So er, Alan Finch I think was warden at the time, and he invited me er to come down one Saturday, and to see what, what it was like, and erm, [pause 01:53-6] well at that time Leonard was in at Midhurst

[01:58] **Jill:** ah yes. TB sanatorium

[02:00] **Carmel:** That’s right. And so er, I stayed, I said well all I could do was wash up [laugh] and they said ‘Good!’ And er, so from then on, I went erm one weekend a month, and went on Friday evening, and er, by train, from Waterloo, sometimes one waited for the bus at Liss. They always kept my supper for me. And er,

[02:32] **Jill:** This is the, this is the old house, I presume?

[02:35] **Carmel:** Oh yes, yes. And, that was er, that, that was lovely. But then of course erm it was beginning to fall down and that’s been the time that that the Foundation decided to build a new home for them.

[02:55] **Jill:**  And you saw them through the move?

[02:58] **Carmel:** Oh yes.

**Jill:** You were one of the people who –

[02:57] **Carmel:** Funny things in the old house, we have lovely people from - lovely old ladies who – Miss Permaine, she had a black bird who’d come and sing on her-

**Jill:** she was a resident?

**Carmel:** oh yes, very fine lady she was. Miss Gaguer, another one.

[03:20] **Jill:** What kind of thing did you do?

[03:22] **Carmel:** Washing up, that’s all I, I ever do –

**Jill** whole weekend of washing up?

**Carmel:** er yes, helping to serve and things. I graduated to serving at the tables but I was *so* scared of handicapped people I thought they were all mental. And er, but then I found I got to know them all, as individuals. So if somebody said ‘oh move my, head, my neck’s gone stuck’, I didn’t mind touching them. I was afraid to, at first, that I would hurt somebody, erm, then, when we, moved, to the new house, ordered new kitchen, but I had my little washing up area. [laughs] And, er, then, er, what’s her name, er Clarke? Er, what was her, matron? Oh dear, I don’t remember. She was trained at Guy’s, or Barts, or one of those. And I was very much, er, a scullery maid, in her eyes. [Noise] *She* left. She got married to er, erm, Donovan. Her name now. And so, we got a new matron. And er, she, erm, let me, er, help with - I was to put people to bed and so forth. And so when Betty Clarke came back one day and saw me upstairs and she said ‘Oh! Disgusting to see the scullery maid working upstairs’. **Jill:** you’d been promoted?

**Carmel:** Mm, and I always looked after er Trot at weekends, when I went down

**Jill:** Who’s Trot?

**Carmel:** Trot, Miss Trout, she was one of the residents for years and years, she’d been in the old house. And er so she was my special er, person.

[05:25] **Jill:** But I believe G.C. had his eye on you cos he thought you were meant for um greater things, didn’t he?

[05:30] **Carmel:** Well, *he* really thought that er, I worked in the kitchen too cos that’s all he ever saw me and he saw me at Mass. So um, *then* somebody must have told him I was on the weekends as staff because he talked me into going to Market Mews to do a spot of filing for them.

[05:53] **Jill:** Is this still voluntary?

[05:55] **Carmel:** Oh yes, yes, when I was with BA.

[05:58] **Jill:** And Market Mews was the London Headquarters…

**Carmel:** That’s right

**Jill:** …for the foundation.

[06:00] **Carmel:** Yes, yes and of course I got to know Margot that time and, known her for some time –

[**Jill:** Margot Mason?]

Carmel: Yes. And er, I met Elaine, who was her assistant. And um, so I, I got in the end, I did most things, er, associated with Cheshire Homes over the years. Sometimes I’d get down and say, they’d say ‘cook! we haven’t someone to cook, for the weekend’. So I’d be ‘Cook’. And er –

[06:34] **Jill:** But in 1968, and you became, secretary?

[06:38] **Carmel:** That’s right, yes.

[06:40] **Jill:** Now is that the first full-time job you’d had, with the Foundation?

[06: 43] **Carmel:** With the Foundation, oh yes.

[06:45] **Jill:** And was G.C. – I believe you didn’t *really* want to leave British Airways, where you had a – [**Carmel:** No, no] very a nice job.

[06:51] **Carmel:** To lose my travel and all the rest of it. But er, oh it was the right time, and, er everybody encouraged me to take on the job cos Elaine was getting married, leaving to get married. And so, that was very nice, cos it didn’t feel like going to work. [chuckle]

[07:12] **Jill:** It was an extension of your weekend?

[07:14] **Carmel:** Yes, and I knew a lot of people in Cheshire Homes having met them - I’ve been to twelve Cheshire homes, so the Homes were very pleased, to know that in Head Office was somebody who was um, knew them, their needs, and so on. Especially the residents, yes, yes. Wasn’t that great impersonal Head Office.

[07:41] **Jill:** Because I suppose during the ‘60s that was exactly the time with the administratively the Foundation was expanding, perhaps becoming more impersonal?

[07:48] **Carmel**: Mm, yes, yes,

[07:50] **Jill**: You must have been erm, a bright light. [**Carmel**: Yes, yes (laugh)] But, just before you became a, full-time employee, was it still when you were with British Airways, you got this lovely story about Jimmy, from the Lake District [Carmel: Mm] on a visit to the Home. Was that still when you were a volunteer?

[08:09] **Carmel**: Oh yes, yes. [**Jill**: yes] Cos er, I feel we had, we had 10 percent travels. We were at Mary [unclear] so were able to fly out of [unclear] to tie them up [**Jill**: You were almost forced into it weren’t you?] Well, yes [**Jill**: with Jimmy.] Well we went – [**Jill**: Tell us the story.] Well, Jimmy, was er, a resident up in Holehird, Lake District [clears throat] and er, he went to Evensong in the summer one evening, [unclear – with [unclear] the same retreat] and er, there was um, er a visiting deacon from Jerusalem, and he gave a talk on pilgrimages and Holy Land. And afterwards, um Jimmy – he *met*, from group, on Holehird, and um Jimmy’d said, grunts, that he’d *loved* to go to Holy Land. Then the deacon, or dean or whatever he was said, ‘And why not?’ Then Beryl the secretary, put this little conversation in the newsletter, Holehird newsletter and the West Morning Times picked it up, repeating it. And er then people started sending donations, for Jimmy’s fare, to go on a pilgrimage. So much so, that Beryl was so worried because there no way that they could organise er a pilgrimage for Jimmy from up *there.* [**Jill**: Was he very badly disabled?] Oh yes, yes, very. Um, his arms spr- laid all over the place, and legs, and er, and he had a long chair, er, and equipment, couldn’t speak very well, but he made noises. We could understand him, but er, anyway, when Leonard got a letter from Beryl Lane from Holehird, he erm, put a letter to me on a tape, which Mary Quinn, [unclear] secretary, typed to me, saying could *we* organise something in London? Cos Leonard knew we’d been to the Holy Lands several times. And so, Mary and I, flew up one weekend to Holehird, to see what Jimmy was like, and er, whether we could manage him. It was Beryl Lane, and er Mrs Cotton, who was a volunteer up there. Both ladies in their 60s, 70s, said they would come with Jimmy, and er, and they would look after him at night. We said we would look after him in the day time. Anyway, I, after investigations I found the only people who would take him were Inter-church travel. Er, so it was all fixed, they, er came down, and flew, with Inter-church Travel. We met in Jerusalem. Er, Father Brady, who was the Scottish Episcopalian, was very pleased to see us, and that we didn’t know that there would two young couple to look after him in the day time. So he er, welcomed us with open arms, and there we had an Arab driver, and a car, allocated to us, he was great help. We got Jimmy everywhere – that was in Jordan. Then later when we moved into Israel, this was before the Six Day War. so er, after that we were into Israel, we were in a coach, and we lost our, er, Arab driver, a good help. Um we had Moses, who was the driver, and once we got him to Israel, the rest of the group, who hadn’t been very nice to us, in Jordan – [**Jill**: Do you think that was because they, were frightened of the responsibilities?] Oh certainly [**Jill**: Because they had to -] But having seen that we were capable of looking after him, we really were self-sufficient, erm, then they came forward, and were friendly towards us. We can understand, it was their, their holiday of a lifetime, and one or two of them had their own, we heard afterwards, their own handicapped people. It was really, they were on this trip for, a rest, from their caring. There were two nurses, and they helped us with Jimmy when er, we got to Tiberias. And um, we persuaded them to go into the water, which (laughingly) he didn’t want. But, he was an erm amazing character, um, he knew the Bible inside out, cos, um, his mother had taught him to read, I think that was the only book she had. And er, he knew, when we got to er, Tiberias, and er, we were at some point, and he would say where are we, and he’d tell us ‘That was where [unclear - he pigs ran down the here] His knowledge of the Bible is *far* greater than mine. So er, he’s not still at [unclear – Holehird home?], he moved to the Liverpool home, later. [**Jill**: At Greenwood House? The Orchard?] Yes! Yes, I think he’s there.

[14:29] **Jill:** And then, you left British Airways. Um, G.C. talked you into it, did he? I think he seemed to have been quite good at er – [**Carmel**: Yes, yes.] - had a way of talking people into things he wanted them to.

[14:42] **Carmel**: Well it was his idea, shall we say.

[14:44] **Jill**: What did he say to you?

[14:46] **Carmel**: I can’t remember. [laughs] But er, [**Jill**: Well your heart said it felt right anyway?] Yes, once I’d made the decision, yes, which I knew I was bound to [unclear - say] yes, [unclear]

[15:02] **Jill**: And did you get involved, then with organising another trip, to America?

[15:06] **Carmel**: Oh yes, that was er [**Jill**: A bit later?] A bit later [**Jill**: in the 70s wasn’t it?] Yes, yeah, an A-American group had been an engineer the year before, and er, I think him, I think it was at Le Court, when we had some international conference, or something. So they came, and I, I got involved with er [unclear], went on one or two trips with them, and then met them again in Ireland at [unclear]. And er, they were ni- they were a nice group, they – Leonard said, ‘Wouldn’t it be a good idea, if next year, we joined - a group of Cheshire residents, joined them in the er – this was New Horizons I think they were called – organised things for handicapped people, we joined one of their trips in the States. Er I said ‘Oh ridiculous, we can’t afford that – it was 250 pounds’. And he said, ‘Well, you never know, they don’t each have to have an escort’. He said, ‘Well, do a circular and see’. And we got about, 12 or more. And er, it was amazing. Tha- the person I looked after was Rosa Searle, she er, she couldn’t, er, afford an escort. But she er, she’d always wanted to go to the States. And, during the war, as a job, she had worked er, in nurseries, picking out cucumbers seeds, and er, tomato seeds, as a war effort. And she got 6 pence. I don’t know whether it was a day or a week. But she saved all her 6 pences, so she had enough in the post office.

[17:07] **Jill**: from all that time before!?

**Carmel:** Well that time after the war you see – oh I suppose it was cos you’re talking 30 years -

[17:14] **Carmel**: Yes, 30 years, she had her savings, her life savings, and this was what she’d *always* wanted to do. Well, oh that was a *great* trip. We had enough people to look after our – those we brought, we [unclear – flew with] T.W.A. (Trans World Airlines), they were very good to us. And there was Ron Travers, and Dale, and er, [**Jill**: his wife] his wife, and er, various other people, there was Alan Guinness’ sister, who was er, a very difficult lady. But they’d each had somebody to look after them. And er, but –

[17:58] **Jill**: Alan Guinness’ sister was disabled? Or was she - I don’t know whether she was actually -

[18:03] **Carmel:** Oh no she was disabled, yes. I don’t remember whether it was his sister or his wife’s sister, [**Jill**: Right] I know it was a sister. And erm, we stayed at the [clears throat] hotel opposite er Penn Station. Um, but, when we got there, there were a whole lot of American handicapped people who didn’t have escorts. So in the end, we were looking after *them* as well because once – they were *very* self-sufficient in their own homes, but once outside, because we couldn’t afford to eat in every day [unclear] And so Ron and friend would rush out to – oh during the day, we were alright, because we had U.S. army people, they had organised to look after us, to erm, and we went out on coaches on trips. And, but they went, they knocked off at 6, then everybody wanted to go out to eat. And so erm, [unclear – we would] go along round about to see who would take 24 wheelchairs. So we’d finish off eating hamburgers and pizzas and so forth, and pushing about 3 or 4 wheelchairs each, one in wheelchair pushing another, pushing another -

[19:34] **Jill**: picture that comes with a [unclear]

[19:37] **Carmel**: [laughs] which was fine until you got to the traffic lights, and had to abandon 2 or 3 and rushed cross. But er, usually, people came along and er pushed some of them [unclear - along]. And er, then we went to Philadelphia –

[19:55] **Jill**: But wasn’t there an Italian bar, there’s a little special [unclear]

[19:58] **Carmel**: Yes, round the corner, in about, I think, I think about 34th street, a little Italian restaurant. And er, oh er, it was sandwich bar really, served spaghetti during – but Ron went round, talked to them, and said, told them the situation, says ‘They really want a nice meal, you know with steak’. And he says ‘oh, we only open in the day time, don’t stay open at night’. And they said erm, but Ron persuaded them, and all the staff volunteered to um, stay on. Oh by the way, one of the staff had a spastic boy herself. Anyway they were marvellous. Um my sister lives in New York so she brought er, she went to Gimbels which was just up the road, got wine for us, and er, the, the owner said ‘yes, that’d be fine’. So we had a *lovely* evening there, but that was the only decent meal we had in New York. And when we went to Philadelphia, um, that was, we stayed at a gorgeous hotel there, Benjamin Franklin I think it was, then we went out on trips and then we went to Annapolis all various places. We had U.S. navy looking after us during the day there -

[21:32] **Jill**: U.S. navy [unclear as well as army?]

[21:34] **Carmel**: Army in New York, navy in Philadelphia, and it was in erm, Washington –

[21:42] **Jill**: Who was organising these hotels, was it Ron?

[21:44] **Carmel**: Oh no, these people, the New Horizon [**Jill**: ah New Horizons right] By the time we got to Washington [unclear – oh and then] when we were in erm Philadelphia, see people kept joining. We had 114, 114 wheelchairs, it was a big operation. But it did fall down when we got to Washington. It was [unclear – terribly?] hot there, you know 90s (degrees Fahrenheit) every day. But it wasn’t a hotel that we were in, it was um, an apartment block outside of the city. It only had a coffee shop. Um, but, but they had organised good things there, must say. We went to the White House, er, early in the morning, we had it to ourselves, and er, it was President Nixon back then, and his daughter was getting married the next day or so. But, we - it was only us, at the White House that early in the morning. They’d opened it up specially, yes, it was in June, terribly hot. But we had one good resident, on our trip, Patsy, *dear* little person, absolute delightful soul, [unclear – off to party always] She did wheelchair dancing and all that, we got – I got to know her on the telephone, I suppose, before we met. It was Hampshire somewhere. She did not want her mother to come with us, she went *everywhere* with her mother, her mother unclear – you know she was getting in her 80s, she was you know in her 80s, this mother. So in the end, her mother consented not to come, and er, anyway, when we got to Washington, *so* hot, she had respiratory troubles, 2 or 3 days before we were leaving um, and she collapsed, and they rushed her to hospital, got oxygen, and she was fine. But the next day, by the pool she didn’t come out with us this day, we had gone out somewhere, and when we came home, we found she had collapsed again, and they couldn’t revive her. So it was *terribly* sad. But then one of the party, um, stayed behind, to deal with all the – well we dealt with as much as we – tied red tape as we could before leaving and then Davy came back with the body, and, we had to go to [unclear] got arranged to go to the funeral. We were not looking forward to meeting her mother er and so on. Um I think it was in Nettlebed] somewhere in Hampshire and, when we got there, we couldn’t believe it, whole village turned out for the funeral and her mother was *wonderful* to us, and said it had been Patsy’s *great* wish to go er, America, and we had fulfilled that. And it had been, her mother said, it was her worry always, what would happen to Patsy, when *she* died and she said she was so pleased that it had happened.

[29:27] **Jill**: [unclear – to improve the quality of her life]

[29:29] **Carmel**: Mm, yes, she’d had a wonderful holiday, and yeah.

[29:35] **Jill**: Nice story. [**Carmel**: Mm.] Tell us something about the er, set up, in the offices, the Market Mews.

[29:43] **Carmel**: We were in Number 7, [**Jill**: Mmhm] That was erm, UK. And the, next door, was Number 5, and that was where, see when Margot, er left to get married, they split the job up, so it was [**Jill**: Because Margot used to do it all did she?] Oh yes, yes [**Jill:** Right, right] It was small at that time [**Jill:** It’s Margot Mason we’re talking about] Yes, Leonard used to rush off and open homes all over the place. And Elaine, er, was a very good anchor, lady in the office. But, at this stage, when Elaine was secretary, they had an overseas secretary, in Number 5, Market Mews. They looked after overseas stuff. But the Foundation and the trustees were in Number 7. [**Jill:** Right] And it was that part of it that I was secretary. [**Jill**: Mmhm] of the company.

[26:40] Jill: Right. And how many of you were there in there?

[26:43] Carmel: There must have been, well, see, we have part-timers –

[26: 47] Jill: And Volunteers? Was it still working with volunteers at this stage?

[26:51] Carmel: No, we had er, about, [Jill: Late 60s] 4 or 5, 6 employees, oh and, and, the next door secretaries, they were employees. So, er, and then we had, people who would er, volunteers, who would come in different days, they were ex-Westminster bank staff, we had one or two of those who would come in for a day, and we would have tapers ready for them. And then we had people who’d come in and do filing. It was great not having to do nasty old filing. [chuckle]

[27:28] **Jill**: Was G.C. himself around a lot at this time? In the offices?

[27:31] **Carmel**: In Number 3, as far away as we could - We’d bought Number 3 in those years, yes. [**Jill**: Mm] So when he came, he was in number 3

[27:42] **Jill**: Why as far away as possible?

[27:44] **Carmel**: Well, he was disruptive.

[27:47] **Jill**: Tell me something about him as a person. [**Carmel**: Ah] Was he disruptive because of his –

[27:55] **Carmel**: well, he, we would have a lot of work to do and he would come in for a chat, with his good ideas, and so on. And er, it was, his secretary, erm, was in Number 5, and er -

[28:09] **Jill**: Who was that?

[28:12] **Carmel**: Oh we had various er, people, but the main one was always Joan Masters

[28:19] **Jill**: Joan Keenan, as she is now.

[28:21] **Carmel**: That’s right.

[28:23] **Jill**: [unclear] So G. C. was disruptive was he?

[28:25] Carmel: Well, yes. [chuckle] Well, he was always coming in with good ideas or he’d come in um, and we - cos he hadn’t any money, they didn’t give him much, money each day, when he was in London, um. They only gave him, from Number 5, enough for the day. Cos he would give it away to the first tramp he saw. And er, so even if he’d been given his fare, um, to wherever he was going, er, and he didn’t give it away, erm, he’d get to a station without money, and say, he really had to get to so and so, um, could he leave his name and address, and we could pick up – And they’d say [deeper voice) ‘Right, name and address?’ He’d say Leonard Cheshire and they’d say ‘Oh! [laugh] Where d’you want to go?’ And it was the same with taxi drivers. Erm, a number of times, he’d come [unclear] Number 5, and er, he’d have a taxi outside, and erm, he didn’t have enough to pay the fare. But one occasion, I remember, he came, arrived at the, early in the morning, it must have been about 8, um, and er, he came in to me and said, I had to open up the safe to get him some money, cos he had to go, could I pay the taxi driver, he had to make the taxi driver a cup of tea. So he went off to Number 3 I think it was, we owned Number 3 by this time. And er, the taxi driver came in and said ‘Ah! That’s Leonard Cheshire, I can’t take money from him!’ So anyway I insisted on paying for that trip, and he said ‘Now, he’s making *me* a cup of tea!’ So he stayed on, and erm, that morning, Leonard had various appointments, and he drove him round all morning, for free! [laugh] He was so overcome.

[30:30] **Jill**: What a lovely story. Erm, I think we’ll finish it there. [**Carmel**: Okay.] Thank you very much indeed, Carmel Short. [rustling as microphone is turned off]

[End of recording; silence 30:38 – 49:06].

**[End of Transcription]**