**Oral History Transcript – Nick Dance**

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

**Participants:**

Stephanie Nield, Archivist

Nick Dance, film-maker who worked with Brian Line at Le Court to make the films ‘It Could Happen to You”, and “I’ve Got Wheels”.

**Duration: 00:20:16**

**Location: Leonard Cheshire Disability Archive Centre, Derbyshire**

**Date of Recording: 18th February 2016**

**Start of transcription**

**00:17 [Stephanie]:** This is Stephanie Nield Archivist of Leonard Cheshire Disability, it is the 18th February and this is an oral history interview with film-maker Nick Dance. So to start off, Nick, can you introduce me a bit and tell me about about the work that you’ve done and how you came to start working with Brian Line at le Court?

**00:28 [Nick]:** Well I am a producer, director of cinematography in films and TV and I started my training if you like at West Surrey College of Art in Farnham, Surrey. There’s a film unit there and the… sort of… film maker’s course is to teach young film makers, really film & TV production. And it was during the 3 years I was at Farnham that the Head of Department introduced me (or talked to me) about a disabled film maker in the area that was looking for someone to help him make a film. So I was very interested in this, so I then got in touch with Brian Line at Le Court and that’s how I met up with Brian and how I started to...err…then make quite a lot of visits to Le Court and got to know a little but more… well a lot more about the Cheshire Homes.

**01:22 [Stephanie]:** What year was this? Was this in the 70s?

**01:26 [Nick]:** Yes, so I was at Farnham between 1977 and 79 so it was around about 78 when I met Brian and was introduced to Le Court.

**01:37 [Stephanie]:** What was your first impression of Le Court, when you…when you went there?

**01:42 [Nick]:** Well I mean I… to be honest with you I hadn’t really been into a disabled home or, you know a home for the disabled so you know, it was quite an eye opener. And it was a beautiful setting erm... and what was surprising was, you know, everyone seemed to be quite independent within that home. There were all sorts of things going on. People…lots of gadgets being made you know because I guess those days…now today we take a lot of things for granted that are made for disabled people whereas then they were having to make things to use a typewriter or to hold something or even a powered wheelchair wasn’t very, very…was quite a new thing then. So there were lots of things. They were very inventive I thought. So that was quite an eye-opener. It was… it felt like a family atmosphere in there. There was a lovely… I mean the setting was beautiful and everyone seemed quite friendly and the more and more I got to know Brian, it was you know I’d help with his routine as well during the day. So it was an eye-opener for me too to see how people were living there and also it’s nice to contribute personally as well, not just helping out with the film making but we’d…I might have lunch there or tea and dinner but you know I’d help him with…with feeding and that sort of thing. So…erm… yeah… it was…it was memorable experience actually.

**03:09 [Stephanie]** I wondered…obviously the Le Court building isn’t standing anymore. It was demolished in 2007. I wondered what his room was like ‘cause we do have a few photos in the archive of his bedroom and was that also his film studio or did they have a separate film studio?

**03:27 [Nick]:** Well, no there wasn’t really a space for… that was set up for film equipment. I mean, they did the editing in their bedrooms really. The rooms were…they extended Le Court and Brian was in the newer wing if you like. But I just remember you go through the entrance hall and there was the dining area and a sort of social area I guess. There were rooms off to the left and off to the right was what was the original wing and then the new wing. So it was quite a long corridor you would walk up. I think there were rooms…no I think all the rooms looked out onto the parkland which was beautiful and they had their own verandas and things. But I remember a very long corridor; walking quite a way up there and then his room was quite a big, big room and in those days…I mean he had a massive sort of telephone set up which was quite sophisticated in those days. Now of course it’s now all…we have it in our pocket. But I mean, you know, he had a sort of a dialling, like a sort of illuminated screen…not quite sure how that worked in the day but I think because he had a little distaff thing, whatever you call it which… that he could press with his chin so he could select the numbers and things so he could dial that as well. It was a push button as well.

**04:45 [Stephanie]:** It sounds a bit like a possum…

**04:48 [Nick]:** A possum sorry… that’s what it was called. You could blow into it. It wasn’t a…some residents had the little distaff thing … but a Possum yeah… you blew into it so you could select the numbers and things. And also the electric typewriter so you could type… it was connected to that. So yes, it was like a screen… erm… alphabetical screen and numbers which I think lit up and he blew into it. So it’s quite… for the ‘70s…there were no computers or anything. He could dial out, he could type. It would take a while but it was one of those golf ball typewriters. Although he did have a lady come in who I am still in touch with actually, who still lives in Liss. Marion, she used to do his typing and things. He did a lot of dictating obviously because it would take so long to do it himself, but uhm… yeah a TV and all the usual comforts really. It was very…it seemed a comfortable environment. But the films, now I mean the editing….when they made the early films they were edited in their rooms. So there wasn’t a space really where they had anything set up specifically for that.

**06:01 [Stephanie]:** And er…talking about the films, I wondered can you remember the names of all the films that you did with Brian? This is a test!

**06:10 [Nick]:** Well “I’ve Got Wheels” which was the one we made…that was the first one we did with Snowy…that was the one really that was just really, he wanted to do just an ordinary day in the life of a disabled person. How they go about their day. So that’s really what I was approached for initially, to make this film called “I’ve got wheels”. And it was also because Snowy was having an electric…just had…just about to have an electric wheelchair made for him. So it’s about the making of the chair and fitting it and all that sort of thing. And then finally getting his wheels and going off into the…into the shopping centre and stuff, just to the theatre and doing ordinary things. So that was that one.

Then we did a thing funnily enough called “Challenge” which I think one of the previous films were…Well “Challenge” really was a film we did …no it wasn’t actually “Challenge” sorry…erm…I think that was a Le Court film wasn’t it challenge?

**07:13 [Stephanie]:** Yes, there was…were two films that are very similar

**[Nick]:** Yes…

**[Stephanie]:** There was one… “It Could Happen to You”…yeah…

**07:18 [Nick]:** Yes, so that was later on, yes. Sort of…the next film actually was a documentary about the Le Court Film Unit and we had Robert Robinson TV presenter who was a friend of…friend of Le Court I’m not too sure how. Anyway, Brian had met him and he came down and did the interview with Brian err which was really a history of the Film Unit. So we used clips from the actual previous Le Court films that I wasn’t involved with, but err we filmed that and on the balcony at Le Court and that, like I say we used clips from the previous films plus I think we had err “I‘ve got wheels” was in there was well. So that took us right up to… that was about 1979.

Anyway the next big thing, well the biggest film he made really was “It Could Happen To You”. I thought there was another film, but I don’t think there was; there’s “I’ve Got wheels”, “Le Court Film Unit” then I’ve got Wheels erm… “It Could Happen to You”. It was something he had…Brian had had on his mind for a while because of the International Year of the Disabled in 1981. So he talked to me about that and... This was… you know he wanted to make a big production… erm well it turned out to be a sort of 40 minute film, 60mm made on film. So it was quite expensive to make. But as a student I had still access to… I was sort of leaving… the last year at Farnham for me, so I was sort of leaving Farnham and going to the big world of freelance filmmaking. But I still had contacts with the college so I think we mostly… we had their equipment… we used their equipment. I mean, this was still…we started it in late ’79, 80 because it had to be ready for the following year. So that was the documentary, just basically about disabled people. Well people who had become disabled through accidents and illness really, so it was...we took two or three characters. A girl who was in a car accident and there was a blind chap and somebody who’d been disabled from birth. So we researched, we found the… these people. We went to… interviewed a surgeon at Stoke Mandeville so we had a sort of a medical side. But anyway we got the equipment together. Kodak put the money up fr the film. I used yet more… I mean as student you get used to you know beg stealing and borrowing anyway so I was quite used to getting favours from people. So people like Kodak, the contacts I had, the film labs and thing like that they… all got credits in the end. There was a lot of people involved. It’s quite a big production to get together md we had sort of students helping us make it as well so…But it was a full on sound film and then that was erm eventually premiered. We had an introduction by Leonard Cheshire at the cottage we filmed at the cottage in the grounds which was where he stayed…

**10:14 [Stephanie]:** Oh…yeah…Laundry Cottage

**10:17 [Nick]:** Hmmm yes yeah. So that was filmed there and he and he opened the film. Err…so it took probably, you know it was probably a good 18 months up until we had the premier at err the Shell centre film cinema which was a huge cinema actually in the shell building. And Shell, like a lot of companies had their own film units and this was 80…so it was 81 just on the cusp of a lot of them closing down. They still had a few and it was a massive cinema in the basement there, so we had that and we had Group Captain Cheshire there, Lord Snowdon came along so quite a few dignitaries. And it was a big…quite a big night err and then eventually I think it was just tenacity of …Brian managed to get it …shown on the BBC. So it did get a TV transmission… so it did very well and of course the publicity for Cheshire Homes and Brian… and it was sort of his swansong really because sadly I think it was about 84 he passed away. I went down there for his … family thing so it was the last time I was at Le Court I think, just after he died and we just were...had a little wake I guess, in his room.

**11:33 [Stephanie]:** That’s nice…

**11:35 [Nick]:** Yes yeah…so and then those films went into a library. That was it really, yes. And I went off and did my freelance camera work and directing and producing and did a lot of travel. I was very fortunate to travel the world for about 15 years

**11:50 [Stephanie]:** So… do you think he gave you your first big break?

**11:54 [Nick]:** Well he did yes, because it was the biggest film I’d made at the time. I mean we made our student film which was a 15 minute film. But it was a … yeah... it was… yeah it did and I made a lot of contacts through it in the industry and I think I edited it. I mean I was working at BBC at that time in the editing rooms so a lot of the… most of the editing I did there actually and again the BBC…the guys at the BBC the tech guys helped with the sound and everything. So they contributed a lot .But so… yes it did it … you know….this industry is about contacts…so it certainly helped and for me of course it was experience as well. All quite new to it. And Brian had made more films that I had really up to that point with what they’d made and you know, very… you know… it’s quite complicated, filmmaking and they managed to make some very good films with limited resources and limited physical capability, especially the camera and you know they are quite heavy… scripting and…well I think they taught themselves really…

**13:05 [Stephanie]:** Yeah, we’ve got…Brian’s autobiography, his family have given us copies and he talks about how…I think it was Neville Thomas started up Le Court Film Unit and he became interested and then together him, Neville Thomas, Laurie Mawer and Barbara Beesley were the Le Court Film Unit and then he kind of … I think he cut his teeth doing that because he writes in his autobiography he that he decided to “go pro” and then did two further films I think as a professional before he died. So it’s quite interesting…and he said he wanted to kind of move…move on from the topics that the Le Court Film Unit were concerned with…kind of onto a more general thing.

**13:57 [Nick]:** Yes…well I think that’s it. I think he was just trying to open…open disability up to the world wasn’t he as much as people weren’t….well like when I went to le Court I was quite surprised that people…there was a lot of activity there and there was a lot of individuals and they were doing what, you know, what they wanted…there wasn’t the archetypal “lock the doors and throw away the key” thing…which is, you know in those days it was seen…well not even seen or heard it was just people and actually, like with “I’ve Got Wheels” you know, he just wanted to open up to the world that actually… disabilities….on the one… one hand…there are are problems, difficulties but on the other, you know, you are just a normal person who is up for any challenges, and life, and everything else…so err no he was a great character and I think err… it was tricky then because you didn’t have the media that we have now so… it’s, it’s sort of in some ways easier now because there’s all the media but then you really had to push it you know like trying to get the film shown on the BBC…and luckily I think in…with the fetes and everything - it was interesting looking at that material just now. Quite a lot of well-connected people came to those things or they lived in the area. I think a BBC producer…well yeah…lived in…in Liss and the actress who I was trying…she lived in [Liss] and helped them out quite a lot [fades].

**15:29 [Stephanie]:** So finally, I’d just like to talk about when you met Leonard…during the filming for one of Brian’s films. And if you could give me a little bit of context about how the interview came about and your impressions of him, that would be great.

**15:42 [Nick]:** Ah well the interview with Leonard was for “It Could Happen To You”. This was a big film for the Year of Disabled…it was a huge deal then, the International Year of Disabled People 1981. It was a big deal, it was the… the first big event, I guess, ever for disabled people to be publicised in that way.

I mean Leonard Cheshire, well I’d… I’d heard of, of course but didn’t know really anything about him until, you know, I met Brian and obviously me being inquisitive as well wanted to know a little bit more about the background of the homes and that sort of thing.

So I should have known more I guess. That was… I was brought up sort of 60s 70s so I guess people had put the war behind them, you know and were just sort of getting on with their new lives I guess.

So as a kid I didn’t really know a great deal about him…but…but obviously learned through Brian and the Cheshire Homes what an incredible, amazing guy he was. I hadn’t met him up until the point where well, it was Brian that obviously got in touch with him. I mean he knew him, and through the home he…it was obvious that we needed Leonard Cheshire to open the film if possible and the gravitas, the weight it would put, you know, put…send it into a different…turn into you know, a bigger thing. So it was Brian that approached him and so he…

There’s always…they had a cottage, it was Laundry Cottage which was his home…the Cheshire Family’s home at Le Court. So I think they were often there in Liss in any case. So it coincided with one weekend when he was down and that’s when I met the great man and yes, always when you…the great thing about the job I do, you do meet a lot of great people. Some more intimidating that others or maybe it’s just me… you’re quite in awe of these people…so…you’re slightly intimidated, but not at all actually with Leonard Cheshire. He was…we put sort of notes together but only notes really on what we thought he might want to say. He knew what the film was about I think. I don’t think it was ready to…we hadn’t edited it or anything at all but we talked about what it was about. Incredible actually, very…well first of all I thought he was a very modest man, you know, incredibly, incredibly modest and friendly and genuinely interested in what we were doing and… but, but quite a genius really because they were only notes we gave him and within minutes we were sitting down. We thought he might need, you know, a while just to make his own script or something but almost within minutes he said “Let’s do it”. I think it was about a two minute….I think we had one edit in the two minute…may have been a slightly piece but he was just absolutely concise, he put all the notes together, very articulate. I mean obviously having just seen some of the archive footage…he was obviously used to TV presentation so by that time you know, early 80s I think he was… well definitely was very experienced in giving interview. But I mean it was all very concise, very to the point. We had just one edit in it, not for any reason that there was any stumbling or anything. Absolutely concise and thoroughly…one take really [laughs] and that was it which was good for us because film is very expensive. But overall just a very very… as I was going to say…genuine…modest…I think the modesty was what was impressive.

Then I met him again. The only other time, the last time I met him was… when we had the premier at the Shell Centre and he did… and I was absolutely terrified as I’m not great….well I hadn’t done any public speaking really. Because I had to do a… I had to follow him on the lectern at the Shell Centre just to give a bit of background and I was absolutely absolutely terrified. And then having, you know, having to follow him as well! But…I don’t remember a lot about it [laughs] but that was the second time I met him and final time and… of course he remembered us all and he seemed to have a good erm memory for people which was which was great so …yeah…good memories, yep…

**20:08 [Stephanie]:** Thank you

**[Nick]:** …before I waffle anymore!

**[Stephanie]:** It’s okay…

**[Nick]:** Pick the bones out of that!

**[Stephanie]**: Thank you.

**End of transcription**