**Oral History Transcription**

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

**Participants:**

Jill Roberts, Archivist

Margot Mason Gibb, staff member at Staunton Harold Hall and secretary to Leonard Cheshire.

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**Start of transcription**

00:08 [Margot] - I was very fortunate to come here 52 years ago to help with one of the daughters of the Ferrers because she was very musical and she needed help with her music. I came for 2 or 3 months and I stayed for 17 years. [laughter] And but the… I think you want to hear a bit about the history of the Ferrers family to start with. I don’t know about going too far back, but when I arrived the 12th Earl was just in residence here. He had succeeded his father the 11th Earl a few months before. And everything here was rather as it had been over the past, oh, many years. Run very… run with lots of servants and everything and everybody doing everything; you never had to lift a finger. But that soon changed.

01:34 - But let’s go back a little way further, we’re talking about…mine was the 12th Earl, the 11th Earl was his father who was an architect and he was a very…very keen on preservation and looking after things and he did a lot to keep this house nice. And before him the 10th Earl had no children and the 11th Earl was his cousin, who succeeded him. Now the 10th Earl having no children and having lots and lots of money, marrying a very rich wife from Ireland Lady Ina White, he had a pretty good time here really. He had a pack of hounds and went hunting, and shooting and fishing and really lived very pompously from all accounts very... I can’t tell you from first hand. But they left behind them when they died - they are the 2 who are buried in the mausoleum in the churchyard if you’ve been down there- and they were so wealthy that various people have broken into that mausoleum and undid the coffins to see if they could find any jewels buried with them.

03:18 - Then the 11th Earl who is buried in the…outside the church, he was the father of the, of my Earl Ferrers. He was the first…no the 2 who are buried in the mausoleum are buried like that because the crypt under the church had been filled up, that’s full of bodies underneath the church.

So when the 12th Earl came here he had a family of 3, 2 girls and a boy; Betty, Penelope and Robin and Robin is now the 13th Earl Ferrers. You probably all met him haven’t you? Didn’t you see him when he came over here?

04:19 [Jill] - Some of us saw him yes

04:22 [Margot] - He’s a delightful person. But anyway when I first came, the gardens were all laid out beautifully in formal beds and great big displays of flowers and things about eight gardeners did it. We grew a lot of fruit in the gardens, all the walls were covered in lovely pears and plums and every kind of fruit under the sun. It was all beautifully kept and then with the…these Ferrers weren’t very wealthy; they were really… compared with the others they hadn’t got anything like the funds that the others had. I mean the… but anyway they came and they inherited what was here which was a butler, and a parlour maid and about 3 or 4 housemaids with a housekeeper in charge of them. And cooks and the chauffeur and...I can’t remember what else but they had a whole staff. They needed it because there was no lights, no electricity at all and we just lived with lamps and candles and so it took one member of staff most of the day to light the fires and keep them, clean the lamps and polish them ready for the next night. And keep the fires going all around the house really. And there were a lot of them. And we had all…it all the silver that was owned by the 10th Earl was massive, it was all contained in the safe by the butler’s pantry which is where the lift now is. The little lift. And every… every morning the butler and the parlour maid would stand in the pantry and they’d polish all the silver. Literally solidly all the time! Then they’d lock it away in the safe and bring out priceless bits when they were needed for the table.

07:04 - There was a great regime here in that…all this lot of servants used to…when they got up in the morning having called us all and brought us cups of tea. Almost dressed us, not quite. Then we went down to breakfast at 9 o’clock and in the dining room everybody trooped in. The servants all came in the far end of the dining room. And we came in and…in those three windows we had window seats and we all trooped in. Lord Ferrers sat at the table and we all turned round and knelt by these stools that we had, turned our backs on him and knelt down and then he said prayers for us all. And having got rid of the prayers and the servants trooped out to get on with their work and we sat down to the most colossal breakfast you’ve ever come across. You know, hams and tongues and scotch eggs and bacon and everything under the sun. It took at least half an hour to sit solidly eating. How they put it away I can’t think! But it was just part of their routine. And anyway having got rid of that lot then everybody went to their own rooms, Lord Ferrers went into Tony’s room that was his office, Lady Ferrers and I would go up to the gardens to see what was happening up there.

09:00 - We’d go round and tell the gardeners what she…she always liked to tell them what to do. She then went all around the house with the housekeeper and went in and got the food order from the kitchen and things and this was quite a thing, the food for the day was a colossal…colossal thing of trying to I think, vary what we… we wanted, were going to eat.

09:31 - But in the holidays of course we had a wonderful time with people, with friends, relations or cousins to stay. We never filled all the bedrooms, we couldn’t have done that. But we used the bedroom I’m in and the one next door called the Chapel Bedroom and Dressing Room and we used the next door one, was the State Bedroom and Dressing Room and if we were really pushed and we got too many people, we went round and into the Lake…the far bedroom and dressing rooms…not very often. So it was really quite a waste of space to have all this for one family.

10:25 - And they did have a lot of parties at the weekends every weekend or unless they were going away. Some of their friends were invited to stay and they didn’t just come and put their feet up. Everybody worked hard. You know the Wilderness do you, the wood outside here which was called the Wilderness? That really was a wilderness when we came and we used to go in that wood at weekend with anybody who came to stay and get things in shape. Get the trees pruned and the bushes pruned and the wild flowers sort of…they got moved to blossom, bloom. And so, it was usually a working weekend when they came down.

11:19 - But at Christmas and Easter, the holidays, we did, we did have quite a lot of parties and things. But Lady Ferrers was always very good about looking after the people who worked for them. She was extremely good. She went round to see them in their cottages and you know, really looked after them. And took an interest in them and they, I think they were really loved her very much, I’m sure they did.

12:02 - And then of course the village of Lount always came into it. And we had the church services every Sunday. I think you still do have the men on one side and the women on the other? And that’s always been done. But in my day, village people came into the church before the service started and the people from the hall came in last and the very last was Earl Ferrers. When he was in they locked the church door, put the key on a cushion and carried it in in front of him and stuck it in front of him so that nobody could come in late or go out early. In the very early days, in the previous Earl’s time the parson who took the services was a private chaplain who lived in the… I don’t know what you call it now… was called the Parsonage.

13:10 - Where… that’s where the parson lived. And he used to come down, and when he was here as chaplain he took more than one service on a Sunday, usually one in the morning, one in the evening. He used to be locked in the church with a tray of food and then kept in there until the next service. And so it must have been quite a performance.

Anyway that was really the way they lived. To get to back to what…I’ve told you about breakfast time. We used to all gather for at least a 3 or 4 course lunch. And if there were servants…

13:56 [Jill] - How many cooks were they?

[Margot] - Only one, but she had…she had help when you know some sort of person in the kitchen. But it was quite a performance. There were no sort of deep freezers in those days…

[Jill] - No…

14:14 [Margot] - We had the ice house of course down there…have you seen the ice house? It was built into the hill side just over…over in the wood, yes. And it was full of ice. And it stayed full of ice, I mean we used to go out and get ice in when we needed it. It stayed all the year round and…

14:48 [Jill] - Did you have lots of things hanging in the kitchen?

[Margot] - Yes lots of hams and bacon and things.

[Jill] Did you have jugged hare..?

[Margot] - Yes, yes and I used to go and do the shopping in Derby and come back with ptarmigans and all these exotic little birds that you could do in various ways. It was great.

15:19 [Margot] - The dowager countess, the one – the 11th Earl’s wife- by this time she had gone off and lived in Sheffield where there was a new housing estate and she built herself a house on the housing state and she was there through the war with all the bombing. She used to go out visiting people; she worked for the church. She used to go out with a colander on her head all through this… In case of [laughter] in the midst…in amongst all the bombing up in Sheffield [laughter]. Now when she was…I’m getting back to food now but when she was here the milk from the cows used to be brought down from the dairy every day and she would make cream cheese from the cream. And she used to send it up to Fortnum and Mason in London, all these very expensive shops. So we always had cream cheese on the table after lunch, which was delicious. It was beautifully made.

16:29 - She was a great character, she was very, quite fierce really and I was frightened to death of her. We used to go out for lunch with her in Sheffield sometimes. One time she took us out to a hotel to lunch and Robin got a fit of the giggles then because some poor woman was sitting at the next table behaving in a peculiar fashion. And he, we had to, she was absolutely furious. We were all terrified of her.

17:06 - And also that generation, that Lord Ferrers, my Lord Ferrers the 12th had two sisters and a brother. The older sister became a Nun and she went to Walsingham and she lived as a recluse…lived in a little hut in the grounds of a …of a convent and lived as a recluse for the rest of her life. Years and years and years. And she would only see the family once a year and only one member of the family each year. And she would only write a letter when she said she got permission from her spiritual director once a year. And she lived there and she only died about 2 years ago. She was a splendid person. Everybody said what a wonderful person she was.

18:15 - Then the other sister was married and lived in Kent and the brother was a great art collector, he knew everything there was to know about pictures and antiques and things. And when this house was…when we had to move out of the house because the soldiers were coming in to live here, we had a big sale of all the kind of silver and wonderful things that they owned. They couldn’t possibly keep them without this house to keep them in. Andrew the brother of Lord Ferrers came to the sale and he did a wonderful… you know how at a sale the dealers all work in with each other and don’t bid or do bid on things? He kept…it was all in the entrance hall this sale. We had the auctioneer and this Andrew Shirley, he used to rush to a bundle and bid for something and rush to another…the dealers didn’t know where they were…it was terribly funny. He absolutely cracked a rib, it was extremely amusing. Something very original really.

19:51 - Anyway I’ve got past the stage of the…I was talking about food wasn’t I? Having had that breakfast, and having had this lunch they ate about 2 loaves of bread at tea time, bread and butter and scones and jam buns, all these cakes kept coming out. And they…of course they did go out and work in between times. But then came the evening. And we came up here at 7 o’clock and had a bath, all our evening clothes were laid out on the bed for us, you couldn’t lift a hand, a finger. The fire was lit in your bedroom so you could change in the warmth then you sallied forth downstairs, into the drawing room, the yellow one where the shop now is and you would sit around the fire until dinner was announced by the butler then you went in to a 4 or 5 course dinner. How they managed I don’t know– well how I managed it too I don’t know how but it was all beautifully done.

21:17 - Anyway that was the last…after about a year the size of the staff was quite diminished because they couldn’t really afford to do it at that scale. The butler and his wife was the cook gave way to a parlour maid and the cook gave way to the chauffer’s wife who had always helped her. The butler was an oldish man and…and he used to carry huge great silver trays. The coffee trays were about this size and great big coffee jugs and mugs and milk things, all polished silver every day. Used to come round the door and they were put down in front of Lady Ferrers and then he’d go out and as he went out you’d see the door closing then you’d see a foot come out round the door to pull it too behind him and the family used to wait with their eyes fixed on this door for this foot to come out. I was very amused by this [laughter].

22:54 - But you know the style of everything was fantastic. Then we came down to earth a bit and they decided they would turn the gardens into market gardens because you couldn’t keep all those gardens going you know. And…we did a lot of the gardening and when there was a fete which there used to be several times a year for one charity or another, and we found that some of the beds were empty or we’d had to take too many weeds out and there were big spaces where the weeds had gone from, we used to transplant flowering things with hot water. And we used to have a big tank which we took into the back kitchen and filled with boiling water and it was on wheels and we wheeled it all the way down to the borders and poured hot water into the holes and put these flowering things - they never drooped! It was amazing what a wonderful sight it was when the fete came on.

24:15 - In those days we…the whole family used to go out doing all this and they were all very tall and I was the shortest one. It was in the time when snow white and the seven dwarves was popular so we marched, really trying to get the children sort of…doing the gardening too – we used to march around with our forks on our shoulders and I was always the one at the end because we sang snow white and the seven dwarves they called me Dopey after that. I’m Dopey to this day to the family and to Group Captain Cheshire who came along and took over the house of course.

25:06 - So then the war came and they gave over the whole of the top of the house to soldiers and most of the bottom of the house too but the family kept the entrance hall and the dining room and what is now Tony’s office, Lord Ferrers’ den. And we still ran, by this time the estate manager had been called up and I more or less took over the estate with Lord Ferrers and joined the Land Army and had whole masses of Land Girls to do the work of the men. They came out of Birmingham and all these big towns and they were so unhappy here in the country billeted on the cottage people and…but you know they were wonderful once they settled down it was alright.

26:14 - Then of course we had evacuees in the house here from Birmingham. Lady Ferrers and I were told we were going to be given so many women and children out of Birmingham and they duly arrived. They came by train and arrived in Ashby and we had to get buses to collect them. And they… they came… now you know the place on the crossroads, what was called the recreation room at that time. We received them all in there, we allocated all the ‘two people’... to… one mother and child could go into one of the smaller cottages but here we had to have all the big families. So Lady Ferrers and I prepared the four big back rooms at the back of the house here with…we had four families. Women with masses of children. We thought we’d give each of them a room and we fixed them up with lots of beds, got everything ready for them. They came and we gave them each one room; a woman and all her children. And we … we sort of put them to bed and fed them and we went to bed and we thought well…we’d better go and see them as soon as we get up.

28:01 - When we got up we went upstairs, we went and there was nobody there. We went into the next room, there was nobody there. The third room – there we found them all in one room- the four women and all their children; they had about 6 children each in the one room. About 2 days later they couldn’t stand it at any price. You know they really couldn’t live in this kind of countryside. No pubs, nothing at all to do with… so they all trooped back to Birmingham. [laughter] They got their husbands to fetch them. That was quite a performance.

28:47 - Then we used to run the Women’s Institute and things in that recreation room. And every…every week on a week day we Lady Ferrers, she was very – very keen on all the church things. She ran the Mother’s Union and everything. And then during the war we had a prayer session every, once a week in the church and Lady Ferrers…it was mostly the women from the Mother’s Union. We would say the prayers and sing the hymns. I used to take the…we had a prayer for the people who had gone to war and so on. That went right through the war this prayer group. As far as the church was concerned we had a lovely choir which we were asked to go and sing in quite a number of places at various services and things. They were just gathered from here and there - a couple from Calke and 4 or 5 from Lount and anybody here and any of the daughters or sons who were here came up into the choir too. So that choir, we sang hymns when we had the afternoon service.

30:28 [Jill] - Can I ask you, the chapel as we know it now, was that ever used as a chapel during your time here?

[Margot] - Oh yes it was all the time!

[Jill] - Was it?

30:38 [Margot] - It was used every Sunday. I mean we were quite short on parsons after the private chaplain had gone. But we had the vicar of Breedon who came over. Ending up with … we had another one to start with…

[Jill] - This is the chapel in the hall I mean?

[Margot] – Oh that one? Sorry, I thought you meant the church.

31:09 - Not very often. It was… this wasn’t in my era. That room was a sort of kind of junk room. It’s a beautiful room but we used to do all the flowers in there. And of course you can imagine the great big flower displays we had to do every week. And we used to do them in there, go and pick them from the garden, bring them all in and get these vast great containers. And I used to…in those days there were steps down from Tony’s archive place into the wall. And these steps were very worn. We’d go down these steps with these huge great flower arrangements and have a few accidents occasionally, ending up in the hall. Yes, but Mrs Kerr of Melbourne did a lot to get that… that chapel organised. Those…all those lovely paintings and everything were cleaned up and she really was…but that was after the Cheshire Home started. During the occupation time it wasn’t used. Because we’d got the other one. It was really something for the Catholics in the home. So there we are. Now what else? I’ll go on a bit to the Cheshire thing in a minute if you’d like me to.

[Margot] Have you got anything to ask about the..?

33:10 [Jill] - Did they use the lakes for anything?

33:13 [Margot] - Oh! We had a boat on the top lake and in that boat every year we used to have to go out getting the weed out of the lakes. The lakes became green; the top lake was green all over. We’d spend weeks going out in a boat pulling in the weeds into the boat and when it was nearly covered with water we’d go to the side and ship it out again. I mean the family did this. There was never a lot of people, enough men to do it. The bottom lake never got weedy because it was always fed from; you know there’s a stream running through it. There was fishing down there a bit. But then at the bottom of the bottom lake was the keeper’s cottage. There was a keeper for the estate. He lived in a cottage well below the level of the lake. How it didn’t get washed away I don’t know. Then just further down there…have you been round the grounds, I mean across there? Well further along was the laundry which was inhabited by a Mrs Charles and her sister Miss Morris and all the laundry from the house used to go down there. They had a huge ironing room and these two women used to be ironing pretty well all day long. And the children used to love to go down there because they always treated the children very well. They’d always try to give them something to eat, so I used to take the children down, we’d have a great gossip with Mrs Charles and Miss Morris. Now Mrs Charles, that house has now had to be demolished because of the big lake…that has been formed leading onto Melbourne. But there is also a tin mine down there which had been worked. And they used to get commercially get the tin out of this mine and we…my Lord Ferrers opened it up to see whether there was any more tin in it, when he got rather hard up, and it was…pumped out, it was full of water, pumped out and it was so extensive you could have a horse and cart down there and through the passages and things. But they didn’t find any more tin, so they filled it up again.

36:22 - Where there’s tin, I expect probably you know, the trees die over, if there is tin underneath. So wherever there’s a dead tree you think “oh maybe there’s a tin mine under that.

36:43 - Yes, so the lakes weren’t used very much they… except for trying to keep them clean. We had Muscovy ducks. These ones you’ve got now are beautiful. They are much nicer than the Muscovy ducks we had. And the golden…I shall never forget coming first here when I arrived. I arrived at the station and I was met by the chauffeur and Lady Penelope who I was going to teach. And I came back in this car and coming down that hill the first sight of this place. I shall never forget it. We got back here and I went to unpack and Robin, who hadn’t come, said to Penelope “What’s she like?” and Penelope said “Oh she’s got red hair!” “Oh I’m not going to have anything to do with her I don’t like people with red hair!” [laughter] It was my introduction to it all!

37:59 - Yes, I mean it was really wonderful. And when we got the soldiers in they were terrible. We lived in the house with them up above. Then the smell and the noise and everything was so terrible we just had to abandon it and go and live in the house I was talking about, the Parsonage. And from there and then Lord Ferrers died up there and we had a…he formed a Home Guard group during the war. And they used to sit all night up in the…on the…in the farmhouse at the top and they all wore their uniforms. You’ve seen Dad’s Army have you? They all wore those uniforms and they all marched – well he couldn’t march because he had polio and he used to have to walk with a stick. But he got them as smart as he could. Never had any weapons or anything. I’ll always remember one night when they were bombing Derby, the Germans were sort of wheeling over ahead around and the bombs were dropping and the Home Guard were marching up the road to go on duty. And one old man fell in the ditch at the side of the road, yelling and screaming he was terrified! Just outside the Parsonage. They were all very senior men, because all the rest of them weren’t…weren’t around. Yes…wartime was quite the thing.

39:59 - I haven’t got onto the Cheshire side of it [laughter] I was really taken over by Leonard Cheshire, I helped to get it started and I then… Lord Ferrers having died – I had been doing all this secretarial work, that sort of thing - he having died, there was not much left for me to do so I joined up with Leonard. On a two pounds a week pocket money basis and we travelled around the country accepting lots of big houses which were given to him, camping out in them, getting the patients in and then handing them over to committees and going on to the next one. That was the main idea of it. Of course there wasn’t much professionalism about it but we soon got organised, once there were patients in then Nurses came to look after that. Then we went off to India in 1955 and started the first overseas Cheshire Homes, camping out in tents and things in the jungle, and getting huts built. You know there were snakes all round us and we…everything under the sun going wrong all the time, but in India of course, all that they did was to dump their ‘incurable’ patients outside police stations, they never, they just had to turn them out of the hospitals and we took…they soon found us and brought them to us even if we had no bed. But of course in India it was a different thing, they were used to sleeping on a charpoy we soon got going there. After we’d been in India…well I’d better not go on had I?

[laughter]

**End of Transcription**