**Oral History Transcription**

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

**Participants:**

Jill Roberts, Archivist

Joan Keenan, Assistant Secretary for the Overseas Office in the 1960s and 1970s

**Duration:** 20 minutes and 48 seconds

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**Start of Transcription**

00:08 Jill: So you were saying about your first contact with GC can you tell us about that?

00:14 Joan: Yes, in 1968 I had just left the convent and was staying with some friends and I remember sitting in the garden one summer's day reading the Daily Telegraph and there was an advert for Assistant Secretary to the overseas office. I'd heard of Leonard Cheshire, sort of in those days...

00:38 Jill: This was 19...?

00:40 Joan: ...68. Summer 68. And...

00:47 Jill: And it was secretary...PA to him was it?

00:50 Joan: No, this was Assistant Secretary to the international, the overseas office. But, yeah, but that job also meant that I did all his, not all but a lot of his tapes and his personal letters. He had a personal secretary who was living at Cavendish, but she couldn't cope with all his work in those days, so it was sent up to London.

01:18 Jill: And the name, at Cavendish was...?

01:20 Joan: Oh, the name of the secretary at Cavendish was called Seedy

01:24 Jill: Seedy. Williams

01:25 Joan: She was a marvellous person

Jill: I've come across her mentioned... yeah

01:29 Joan: She was just called Seedy

Jill: Was she?

01:31 Joan: And she had a little cottage opposite the Sue Ryder home at Cavendish, and Leonard was her life. Absolutely. She was an old lady when I met her, and, but she couldn't cope with all of the work and so he used to send tapes every day up to the London office. And the London office in those days was at the back of the Hilton Hotel in Shepherd’s Market, Market Mews...

02:02 Jill: I've heard of Market Mews, but I can't remember... In fact if you started in 1968, that would explain why I haven't come across your name yet, because I've done the 50s... and I seem to have jumped to the 70s. So I've come across Carmel Short, Margot, Maggie Toner...

02:20 Joan: Now Maggie Toner actually took over from me in 1974, but I left a second time. But when I went up for the interview in '68, in fact Carmel Short interviewed me there. And that was it.

02:36 Jill: And before the... you said you had been in a convent before that? Prior to that. Presumably there was no experience, or very little experience...

02:46 Joan: I was a secretary before I had gone into the convent. I was a secretary at Argentine Airlines and so, yes, I mean I was a trained secretary. And so I started in No.5 Market Mews. There were two houses, two little mews houses. No.5 and No. 7. No.7 had the UK side, the offices there just dealt with all the homes in the UK. And No.5 Market Mews was the overseas side. We looked after all the overseas homes. And the overseas secretary in those days was somebody called Bunty Bell. ... She was quite a character! And, so, really there was just the two of us there and a part-time person who used to come along and help us sometimes. But after a few months, Leonard asked me whether I could possibly manage to drive him around to some of his engagements because he didn't have a driver in those days. And, I said fine, you know marvellous opportunity to see some of the homes and get to know him a bit better. And...

04:10 Jill: That must have brought you into quite close contact with him.

04:12 Joan: Very close contact. Yes, He used to sit in the back of car. He used to dictate, as we went along. Tape after tape. And whenever we got to the homes we were visiting or engagement or whatever it was, I used to have to ask for a typewriter and a little room [laughs] and he used to say, 'Well, you know, I would like this done if you could possibly do it by the time we go!'. I mean, having to cope with strange typewriters and oh, ... nightmare! Sometimes it was a nightmare.

04:51 Jill: So... What was he like to work for? We were talking over lunch about...

04:56 Joan: Yes... very, very demanding but in a very gentle way. He would never come in and say “Joan that is..!” Well, yes he did say that “It’s got to be – that is very important I would like…” but in a very quiet way, but you would respond as if a little whip had been put over you [chuckles]. But I mean he had an enormous workload, you know, I mean it was just incredible. He never gave himself days off ... His great relaxation was tennis, and 'having a hit' as he used to call it. [unclear]  And every time he came to London, up until, just a year before he died, he used to go off to Wimbledon, he was a member of Wimbledon, and used to ring me up and say 'Joan could you arrange for me to have a hit', as he used to call it, with other members, yes. He was great friends with Ken Fletcher, who was an Australian, ex-Wimbledon champion.

06:00 Joan: So really, going on from those early days when I was driving him around ... again we were talking about his relaxation. Sometimes coming home very late to Cavendish, after a day of engagements and hard driving, he always used to say if it was a day of Dad's Army ... Dad’s Army was due to come on, he would say 'Step on it Joan, because I must get back for Dad's Army!' And we used to go to his flat at Cavendish and he used to sit back and absolutely roll around and laugh at Dad's Army. I have never seen him so relaxed, ever! [Laughs]

06:43 Joan: I've made a note here about the Reading traffic jam, and I have to tell you this. We went down to see a home in Timsbury, yes, that's right, to see the home at Timsbury, and the following day he was going to open the new home at Axbridge, and so we drove over late afternoon from Timsbury to Axbridge, which is in Somerset, and it was during the time of the Biafra crisis of 1969/70 - and he was playing a behind the scenes part in the peace negotiations because we had a home in Biafra and he knew a lot of the, the top people in Biafra. Well we had just got to Axbridge at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon and there was a phone call from the Foreign Office, saying that, Sir Louis Mbanefo who was a top Biafran lawyer and judge was coming over to London with a peace, three peace negotiators. And could Leonard possibly go to London Airport to meet them there with members of  the Foreign Office. So we literally had just time for a cup of tea at Axbridge and had to be at London Airport at 7 ... [unclear] and said there would be a VIP who would arrange…and he said “now go and book a hotel for the night at one of the airport hotels”; he didn't know how long he was going to be in these peace negotiations, and, so I got these two rooms, I think it was the Skyline hotel I could get, anyway it was quite a smart hotel... [chuckles] Anyway, so I just went to bed, and the following morning at breakfast, he said 'right we'll have to leave at 9 o'clock to get down to Axbridge for the official opening of the home at 12 noon, we had to retrace our steps. About an hour later we got to the outskirts of Reading and there was an enormous tailback of cars as far as the eye could see, and he said ”In no way are we going to get to Axbridge by 12, if we stay here!” The local television people were going to be at Axbridge, it was a big affair. So he said “Just go on the outside lane and we're going to pass all this row of traffic”, two miles we drove and the cars were hooting and people... eventually we were stopped.

09:49 Jill: By who?

09:50 Joan: By the police, about two miles on, and Leonard quietly rolled down the window and he said 'Officer I am so sorry I have an extremely important engagement in Axbridge with the television' and he'd hardly got it out of his mouth and the policeman said 'Oh! You're Leonard Cheshire aren't you!?' It was quite incredible! So he waved him on. I'll never ever forget that it was absolutely marvellous. Anyway, we made it with about 5 minutes to spare! [Laughs]

10:27 Jill: With a police escort?

10:27 Joan: With a police escort, yes. It was wonderful. I will always remember that. Anyway, so where had we got to? Yes, I mean life really went on like that until 1974.

10:39 Jill: Alright, so we have you...

10:41 Joan: Bunty Bell, who was the international secretary, Carmel Short who was the UK secretary, with her team in No. 7 Market Mews. Bunty, and me, and another part-time person in No. 5. And in No. 5 Leonard had his flat, upstairs for when he was in London. And so we used to cook for him, I used to cook for him if he was in London and entertain his guests, cook meals for his guests, which I thoroughly enjoyed doing.

11:14 Jill: I’m sure you did. Tell me about the guests. Is there anyone you particularly remember?

11:16 Joan: Yes... that was one of the stipulations at the interview, I had to know how to cook, because that was going to be part of the job. Oh... I met lots of very interesting people, famous people. A great friend of his was Peter Townsend, Peter Townsend, you know he was engaged to Princess Margaret. Oh, I can't think now offhand, they were just very interesting, well-known people of that time.

11:46 Jill: So, this was the 70.. the mid 70s?

11:49 Joan: We're talking about the early.. late 60s, early 70s, yes. More and more homes were opening overseas at that time. I mean, the whole foundation was blossoming in that, at that time, really. Homes in this country, homes overseas. And he, I just don't know how he had the energy for all his personal correspondence, and all his other interests. I mean the nuclear debate was going on at that time, he was very involved with that, as you've probably read about. And so, when I left in '75, of course Maggie was in control, in charge and I just did one or two temporary jobs and then as I said, I went to Mass one day at this London church.

12:42 Jill: Tell me about that?

12:43 Joan: And, it was a midday Mass and at the end of Mass I suddenly realised three seats in front of me, there was Leonard. And he couldn't believe it, 'Ah Joan! How are you?' We'd kept in touch, but he said 'Joan. Would you go to India for us, for two years.' So, just like that. [laughs] He said ‘I can't give you an awful lot of time to think about it, could you let me know by the end of the week’. Well, this is typically Leonard! [laughs] So, I thought about it and went to Mass the next day and the most strange thing about the first reading at Mass the next day was that the …you know that thing in the Bible about leaving your father's house, leaving your land and your father's house. I thought, oh well that's the answer. Leave! [laughs] Anyway, so I rang him and said yes I'd love to go, and so I was very thrilled about this and left the following month. They'd had problems at Raphael, a whole lot of liaison... I went as a liaison officer for Raphael. And the job as the liaison officer was to be in correspondence with all the sponsors in Australia and New Zealand, they sponsored children or lepers at Raphael, TB patients, and they used to pay so much a year for the sponsorship and in return they had a twice yearly letter telling them about the child they had sponsored or helped get better.

14:33 Joan: No no, it was the most wonderful two years of my life. Oh it was very hard going, I mean, no doubt about it, one lived on a shoestring. I just had two pounds a week pocket money. I mean my fares were paid, but Raphael is, as you know, Ryder-Cheshire, so it was Ryder-Cheshire who paid my fares and I came under that umbrella. And the contract was for two years, so at the end of the two years I came back and then Leonard said 'Would you like to go out to Nepal' he said ‘we've been given some land, just outside Kathmandu and it's a question of really trying to form a committee and get some building work started. Goodness! I was totally out of my depth, and I said as much to him. Leonard being Leonard, it doesn't… he sees somebody who is totally uncommitted, me, he sees a piece of land over there, he sees God in between, and God will arrange all the rest! [laughs] And he always used to say that if you put your first, if you put your foot on the first rung of the ladder, there's only one way up [laughs].

15:55 Jill: So it was Nepal?

15:56 Joan: And so it was Nepal, yes. And I spent some weeks there, I obviously had to lead. I mean the British embassy were cooperative. The Jesuits ... Foundation over there, they had the school, and so I put one of the Jesuits on the committee, otherwise local people, put the building work out to tender, and the architects drew up plans first of all, and then ... yeah. I was out of my depth, but somehow it, you know, it worked, and in fact it's off the ground. There have been many people who have been over there since me. And so I came back from there, and then Maggie Toner had died and Leonard said would I like to come back as his PA.

16:52 Joan: Have you heard about the Christmas cards and all that performance that used to go on? [laughs] You have then?

17:00 Jill: One of the first boxes of correspondence I came across was full of Christmas cards and letters to people to make sure that the right card get to the right person. Tell me more about them.

17:10 Joan: Well, they were very, very important to Leonard, Christmas cards. He used to have a... he used to send every year about three or four thousand cards, to overseas and in this country and .... lots, he always like to keep in touch with not only his friends but, you know, people he had met perhaps only fleetingly at an engagement. People who had done him a little act of kindness, or played tennis with him, or had got up at the crack of dawn to drive him to an airport. All these people he used to take a note of their name, or address, and they were put down on the Christmas card list. And yearly, not just for the following year, but, you know, for evermore they had cards. It did mean an awful lot to these people and so this was a very large job that had to be done every year. It started in August and the computer print outs were sent to update because lots of people died, changed their addresses or got married so there was an update every August. And they had to be done and counted, signing, coded them all because at the end of each name and address there were little crosses, three crosses meant he signed them 'Leonard Cheshire and Sue Ryder', and she signed. Two crosses were 'Leonard Cheshire', one cross 'Leonard'. Then it was 'Leonard and Sue', then if it was a dash, there was a little personal message that was put in, oh... some were GC. It was a total nightmare! Anyway, that was very important.

19:02 Joan: Did you know he was a great practical joker? ... Oh! The times I have suffered with his practical jokes. When quite important people used to come for lunch, you know I used to go and make starters, smoked salmon and all the rest of it, he used to say with a very straight face 'You do know that Joan is a drinker?' [laughs] The first couple of times I used to go scarlet! What the hell do I say?! [laughs] Then he used to say, right up to the end, you know, just a few months before he died he used to say to the telephonist at Maunsel Street 'I'd like to speak to Joan, but she might be out at the pub' And I never knew how he got this idea I drank! I mean I don't dr... I mean I like a drink, but I didn't! [unclear] And he always used to keep a poker face.

20:02 Joan:  Whenever he was in London and spent a few days in London and, I used to go to his fridge with food and on his way home he used to ring up from his car sometimes and say 'Oh Joan, I forgot to tell you I've left your cat some food in the fridge' [laughs] And I used to open the fridge, ok sometimes there was a chicken leg or something like that, but lots of times it was just one or two lettuce leaves [laughs] Now, I did say to him once, 'You know Oliver doesn't eat lettuce, cats don't eat lettuce!' [both laugh] He didn't know the first thing about animals.

**End of Transcription**