**Film Transcription**

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

**Film:** Leonard Cheshire interview with [Tony]

**Duration:** 28 minutes 50 seconds

**Summary of main points**

**02:26 –** Leonard and Tony discuss Leonard’s war career

**07:17 –** Leonard discusses the beginnings of Le Court and looking after Arthur Dykes

**16:19 –** Leonard discusses how the state and private ventures can work together

**17:27 –** Leonard discusses the origins of the second Cheshire Home – St Teresa’s in Cornwall.

**19:51 –** Leonard speaks about the philosophy of the Cheshire Foundation and his own attitude towards disabled people.

**21:43 –** Leonard talks about the international development of the Cheshire Foundation.

**28:11 –** Leonard explains why retirement would not be an option for him.

**Start of Transcription**

**00:26 [Tony]**: I’m fascinated though, you’ve got so many homes. Are you able to get round to them very often, do you see them all?

**00:33 [Leonard Cheshire]**: I try to, but I realise I’m slipping further and further back. The only way I can make up for it is I visit them every day in thought and sort of in prayer and so on. I feel so linked to them, but I’m going to do better this year I hope and visit more of them.

**00:56 [Tony]**: That sounds like the universal New Year’s resolution. Do you recognise faces? There are so many homes that can you put faces to homes?

**01:04 [Leonard]**: At one time I think I could put a… yes, I knew them all. Obviously that’s no longer so, but yes I do recognise faces. It’s when I meet them out of context it takes me…I’m caught.

**01:16 [Tony]**: So what exactly is the scale of Cheshire Homes?

**01:21 [Leonard]** : It’s difficult to tell because when is a home a home, if you understand me? Between making the first move, forming the committee, getting the site, then actually getting the home built and the residents in could be a year. So we’re nudging up in the high two hundreds, moving up all the time, 10 to 15 a year, something like that.

**01:41 [Tony]**: Do you ever sit down and think [inaudible]

**01:48 [Leonard]**: No, at the beginning I used to sit down and think have I gone mad? Cos I thought what am I doing, an ex-pilot, no qualifications, a welfare state going to look after us from cradle to grave as long as we pay our tax, what am I doing in this? And that did give me problems. I kept trying to pull out, thinking this can’t be for me, but somehow I always kept being pulled back.

**02:19 [Tony]**: That’s really interesting, any conflict in your mind between the role of warrior and of carer?

**02:26 [Leonard]**: I can’t see the conflict. I know that people do see a conflict. How is it you once destroyed and now you’re building? But to me the point is that every generation is longing for peace. That’s the perennial longing of the human heart, but each generation’s got to work for peace in its own historical context. Mine happened to be war. As a boy I thought, war’s not for me, it brought out the aftermath of World War Two, I thought, this is just too dreadful, but with Hitler you knew there could be no peace til he was stopped. So we had to remove the threat to peace. It’s rather like building a house, you dig down and you clear the ground before you can build up. But one thing I would say is that, it may sound strange, but in war it’s easier to see what you’re doing cos the issue is absolutely crystal clear, you know you’ve got to hold together and win that war. In peacetime it’s less clear. Young people, they long to work for peace, but they’re not sure how to do it, or not sure how to do it for the best, but I do not see a contrast or conflict, in that particular case, I’m not talking about all wars. I’m talking about World War Two.

**03:59 [Tony]**: In some sense I’m starting to understand that you were a reluctant warrior?

**04:05 [Leonard]**: I wasn’t reluctant by the time it came to 1939. I was reluctant as a young boy, but come 1938 when I felt we’d done the wrong thing, we’d betrayed Czechoslovakia and I thought, war’s coming, I applied to join the air force from Oxford. I actually thought, well that will get me off my Finals. Father said, you can’t do it, and in those days you do what Father said. But the air force would accept you, but it didn’t take effect ‘til, and if, you passed your Finals, which for me was 1939. There was a kind of feeling that this had to be done. There was a kind of feeling that the whole world was under threat and that in some undefined way, that you didn’t know exactly, something very evil was loose. So I wasn’t reluctant at all, not then. Reluctant to take life, but war’s a paradox, as a human being you don’t want to take life, but if that man is killing thousands of people and if you look at World War Two, ten thousand people on an average were exterminated every single day in the concentration camps alone. You can’t be reluctant when that’s happening.

**05:35 [Tony]**: If we can just pause for a second, [inaudible] when you’re up at 22 thousand feet, or is it just a job that you do?

**05:44 [Leonard]**: Well neither in a sense. The trouble is that 45 years later it’s very difficult to be honest and put yourself back in the seat. In order to drop a bomb you’ve got to get through the defences, you’ve got to there, you’ve got to make certain you drop the bomb on that target, your mind’s fully occupied, you know a lot depends on getting that target, so you don’t really have time to think of destruction or death. This again may sound strange, but if you were to sit back and think too much of those poor people down there you’d neither do one nor the other. Either you know what you’re doing is got to be cos there’s no alternative, then do it, put your whole heart into doing it as well as you possibly can, cos to me the thing to do in that war was to bring it to an end in the quickest possible time with the minimum loss of life. That was the most, the best way you could do it and fulfil the moral imperative.

**06:55 [Tony]**: What age were you when you flew your first plane?

**06:59 [Leonard]**: 21, I was quite old, I mean, some people were 18.

**07:04 [Tony]**: So, in the end the war was won and you came out of it Group Captain, [what happened then]?

**07:17 [Leonard]**: Well as the war was coming to an end and I could see for the first time that it looked as if I was going to survive I was dominated by the thought I’m one of the fortunate ones. 55 million people have died. That’s the figure we know now. Almost all those who were on my first flying training course didn’t survive, so I thought, I’ve got something to be very thankful for. Then I thought I’ve got a kind of duty to those who didn’t survive, not just to go back and earn a living and have a nice life, but somehow to get involved in the struggle to help build, I don’t know how to put it, a better peace. A better world. So I was dominated by that thought, but the difficulty was, once it was all over, how do you do it? You can have these great ideas and it did really impel me, but I couldn’t find a way, so I was disorientated. I think anyway, coming from war, where the nation had been totally united, had a goal, it knew that goal had to be achieved, then to peace where each man was suddenly going after his own goal was quite a traumatic experience. And that caused me after about eight or nine months of this disorientation to do something. So I embarked on a quickly thought out community scheme to help ex-servicemen resettle into civilian life. We got a lot of publicity, a good deal of money, but it wasn’t realistic and it collapsed.

**09:04 [Tony]**: But you were left with one very important asset, do you want to tell me about that? I’m thinking of Le Court.

**09:14 [Leonard]**: It collapsed because it wasn’t realistic, but it left me with a large, empty building, 25 bedrooms, about 25 little cottages and two farms, all of which I bought on credit and something like £18,000 worth of debt, which in those days was a large sum of money. So I was selling everything off to settle these debts. Then the telephone rang and it was a local hospital to say that Arthur Dykes, who’d been in the community, looked after the pigs, was dying of cancer and they couldn’t keep him would I please come and find somewhere else for him to go. I thought, well that’s easy, he’s an ex-serviceman, ex-medical orderly, lots done for ex-servicemen, that’s simple. I couldn’t find anywhere. And the reason was that he didn’t need treatment. So, I couldn’t walk away from him, you could see him looking lost. So I suddenly thought, Arthur, would you like to come back to Le Court? I knew he wouldn’t, but at least I’m offering something so he startled me by saying, I’d love to. What do I do? So the local district nurse said, it’s quite simple, I’ll show you what to do and you do it until we can find a better solution. So poor old Arthur came to this empty house, was subjected to my “nursing” and I thought that just would be a little interlude. He lived three months. I’ll sell the house and find my great career. But before he died, he said, Len, I don’t think I’ve come here just for myself, I think you’ll find there are others, and if there are, take them, don’t sell the house. I said, thanks Arthur, but didn’t pay any attention. Then sure enough the telephone went again, an old lady of 91, bed-ridden, nobody to look after her. Before I knew what I was doing I said, sure, I’ll take her. So that opened for me the door onto this whole new world, not of old people, but of young disabled people. So that started it.

**11:42 [Tony]**: So it wasn’t really a conscious decision. You didn’t wake up, have breakfast one morning and say I will start residential homes for young disabled people?

**11:52 [Leonard]**: No, nothing was further from my…nothing was further from my thought than starting a home. I mean, even when it became full and I had 22 patients, I called them then, of all types and descriptions, TB and stroke and young people and the very old and cancer. I just thought, this is an interlude, but having that number of people and no real help, I had to get organised, cos I didn’t know how to organise it. So I took the usual step and formed a committee. Ever since then we’ve existed on committees. But I thought, now I’ve got a committee it’s time for me to leave. I never thought of, I never looked into the future and thought that it would grow.

**12:43 [Tony]**: When did you realise that you had, not just perhaps a lifelong commitment, but a lifelong fulfilment perhaps, I guess that’s not the right word, but that you had found your aim, your goal.

**12:58 [Leonard]**: This feeling that I had that this couldn’t be for me led me to keep trying to get the home organised on its own feet, did that, went away and took a job on Barnes Wallis’ new swing wing project, became the F1-11. But then an application came that Le Court couldn’t take, he had epilepsy, they were afraid of him. I invited him down to where I was in Cornwall and that started home number two. Then I felt I had to decide between the job and the homes and I decided the homes. But there were further steps to take still and it was finally in 1953, actually, November the 22nd, I remember the day well, I made up my mind, ‘no, my vocation is for the homes’. But I’d learnt by then to delegate to committees, so ever since then I’ve delegated.

**13:57 [Tony]**: Having accepted that that was your vocation were you able to relax about it some ways then stop looking for the big goal that you hadn’t found yet?

**14:08 [Leonard]**: From the moment that I knew my life work lay with the homes I ceased thinking about working for peace. But I think to be honest, at the time that I took Arthur, I didn’t think about that anymore. I was completely locked into a job that was taking me, well, 18 hours a day. And I had to…there was no night nurse, I had to be the night nurse as well as the day nurse. When I look back now and say, what’s that got to do with building peace, I mean, my answer can…my answer is two-fold. First, God has a plan for each of us and to me the only thing that matters is discovering that plan as best you can and fulfilling it. That is the best contribution you can make to the world. But secondly, if we want to work for peace, do the little things. Don’t look for the great final solution, do the little that you can. So I believe utterly in the little bricks that you put into the, you might say, the great cathedral of peace. I’d rather not theorise, I’d rather get on with my job.

**15:27 [Tony]**: So individuals can make a difference, just within the scope of their ordinary everyday lives?

**15:34 [Leonard]**: To me its individuals that change the world, it’s not governments, and I think that we overlook the power of the individual to change his circumstances. I’ve seen it time and time again, one man stands up against the stream, sets an example. If you’ve got a big hill to level, well get in there and start scrabbling away, don’t start looking for a bulldozer. And once the earth starts moving, things are happening.

**16:07 [Tony]**: Much earlier on you actually raised…a supposed welfare state and the provision of services by the voluntary sector, in particular the Leonard Cheshire Foundation.

**16:19 [Leonard]**: I’ve realised more and more that in this kind of work, in other words, meeting people’s needs, sharing their struggles to achieve independence or whatever it may be, there has to be a good cooperation between the state and private ventures. That partnership is absolutely essential, neither of us can do it alone. The state can do the, what you might call the clinical things, it’s got very highly qualified social services personnel, but the more human things of looking after the home, is better done by the individual, in my humble opinion, because it links the home to the local community. Each of us has got our own unique contribution to make, but we should be working very closely together.

**17:20 [Tony]**: Your second project, St Teresa’s, perhaps you could you tell a little bit about that.

**17:27 [Leonard]**: When I worked with Barnes Wallis, he had a field project and he moved that down to the old RAF Predannack in South Cornwall and I was there with him. It was a derelict airfield and standing empty was the old station headquarters. Now I had the epileptic boy and I could see he needed something to do and coincidentally I found there was a woman in the Lizard with cancer and nowhere to go. So I thought, I’ll get that station headquarters if I write to their ministry and ask for it it’ll be six months before I get an answer and if by that time I got it going and lived in it would be very difficult for them to take it out. That’s just what happened. But I needed a lot of help to get that old building liveable, it had been open to the Cornish gales for about five months, but volunteers came from all over the place, including the Navy. There was no water, there was no electricity, there was nothing, even no drainage. So we found a huge, I don’t know, 800 gallon tank or something and dug a big hole, stuck it in there and the council came and emptied it every now and then. But it taught me something, because the disabled who came into this remote place all took part in getting the home ready. They all said, we must help raise money, you know, it made me realise that my first thought, he just wants to be looked after, be comfortably ill for the rest of his life, was completely wrong. That the young person wanted to get up, even Arthur, he hated me doing things for him, he wanted to do it himself. So I think I had my first lesson that the disabled person wants independence and they shared in the decision making when I wanted to admit somebody new if he was, or she was going to be a problem I got them together and said, will you accept this? So we worked together.

**19:41 [Tony]**: You’ve had 45 years or more of experience with disabled people, how would you summarise your philosophy now towards them?

**19:51 [Leonard]**: I have to say I’ve got a lot to learn. I used to think that I understood them, but times change and aspirations change and society changes. Other people come up with much better living options, so I have to be a little hesitant. But to me, they’re not really disabled people, they’re people. When you talk about disability, that can be of the body, or the mind or the personality. If I got a personality defect and not socially acceptable in certain ways, I’m disabled, so I don’t quite see the distinction. So I’m looking at each one as a person. I’m trying to think – what is it you want? Can we work together to achieve what the kind of life that you want? So if you ask me to condense it I would say choice. That society should provide the maximum range of choice of living facilities and rehabilitation and other facilities. We’re like a ladder with many rungs, we’re providing one rung.

**21:01 [Tony]**: In the process of arriving at that philosophy, mistakes? Made any?

**21:07 [Leonard]**: Yes, dreadful mistakes. But it’s not so much the mistakes, it’s the missed opportunities. If people say to me you must be rather pleased, don’t. For one thing I’m not looking backwards I’m looking forward at today and as you travel through the world you see these huge unmet needs and you think how little I’m doing and you realise if you give your whole life to it you’re only doing very little. But then you think of the missed opportunities, but it’s no use thinking about the past, better to get on with today.

**21:43 [Tony]**: You talk about seeing this huge pool of needs around the world that’s perhaps the perfect opportunity to explain you international functions.

**21:53 [Leonard]**: My basic thinking from the beginning was never to initiate anything, never start a home unless someone suggested it or some opportunity opens. Never go to a country unless you’re invited or somebody’s going there or something happens. So that’s how it spread, it just spread on its own momentum. My feeling is that if you don’t choose your path, you follow the path, that I would say, God has in mind for you, you will be helped. You’ll meet all sorts of difficulties, contradictions, you make think there’s check mate and you’re finished, but if you don’t lose faith you find you get there in the end, maybe not quite as you thought, but in a better way. So I’ve tried not to choose my own path. Of course at times I’ve got over confident and shot off at a tangent, it’s always [laughs].

**22:50 [Tony]**: I expect there’s been quite a history of that

**22:53 [Leonard]**: I haven’t shot off too many times, but I did once anyway.

**22:57 [Tony]**: So where does it stand now? The foreign involvement?

**23:02 [Leonard]**: Each country’s autonomous, they run themselves, but it’s grouped into regions. So one country sparks off another. It was Hong Kong that gave me the invitation from China. And for 30 years I’d had a dream, I’d love a home in China. That’s the one country I’ve actively wanted to go to. I thought I’ll never see it in my lifetime. Then suddenly the invitation came. So now we have two homes and I think a lot more because the warmth in those Chinese homes, unbelievable. And their determination to work. They really work, they really want to be independent, get out and leave room for someone else to come in. I’m most inspired. And the same happened with the Soviet Union. I never believed I’d get to the Soviet Union. But one day the invitation suddenly came. More difficult than China, but we’re getting there.

**24:04 [Tony]**: How many countries do you know?

**24:07 [Leonard]**: Just 49 or 50. I can never tell exactly. But it is growing one or two countries a year.

**24:20 [Tony]**: Well you’re obviously not living your life in retrospect, you’re still looking forward, so what do you see for the future for the Cheshire Foundation?

**24:29 [Leonard]**: Well I hope they’ll go on developing numerically where there’s need. But more important I hope that they will meet tomorrow’s needs in tomorrow’s ways. Now its clear great changes are coming about and whether we will measure up to those changes remains to be seen, but we’re certainly trying. So much more emphasis is placed upon independent living. Upon a whole range of differing levels of independent living. Both by providing the actual accommodation and by going out into people’s houses with our family support services. But I mean, I can’t foresee the future. I just hope that we’ll always be flexible. That we’ll always be open to criticism and listen to it and that we lead the way. I think one think that might happen is whereas in the past we’ve been looking after young disabled people, I won’t say looking after, but working with young disabled people, there may be a change of emphasis. We may find the greater need is for the older disabled person. And I would rather go to the unmet need than be working in an area where many other people are working and perhaps doing better than we are.

**25:53 [Tony]**: You mentioned family support services, are there other areas that… your work has moved into new areas?

**26:00 [Leonard]**: Yes, we’re trying to get into the rural areas of the developing world because all our homes and facilities are in urban areas where there’s backup support and particularly in the Ryder-Cheshire mission which is a little joint venture with my wife, Sue Ryder Foundation, Sue Ryder and that is our goal, to reach out to the disabled villagers. To give one example of our magnificent home for children in Lusaka, Zambia, they give total rehabilitation. They sent one boy out at the age of ten with crutches, we found him six years later at 16 walking on the same crutches, with a hunched back, so he had a back problem. It had never occurred to the villagers that those crutches needed lengthening. So that is the extent of their lack of knowledge. So I’ve got a longing to get out there and try and get something going. Amongst the new areas that we hope to move into there are two or three that I can identify. One, that we already started, is head injury and Huntington’s Chorea. Now, Sue Ryder, my wife, has a whole home for Huntington’s Chorea, but we haven’t moved into that field much and head injuries is a completely new area that needs expertise and sensitivity. So our new Stockport project is high on my priority. But now also there’s mental health, we’ve got the problem today that psychiatric hospitals are being closed down, the patients are being housed with families and that’s not working so they’re loose on the street and I feel there’s a lot to be done in that area.

**28:09 [Tony]**: When are you going to retire?

**28:11 [Leonard]**: I can’t retire. I mean, it’s my life, it’s, uh, obviously if I’m getting so muddle minded I’m making life difficult for people then they’ll have to push me to the background, I still won’t retire. I still want to be involved. I still want to have my dreams and if I can’t fulfil them myself, persuade other people to fulfil them.

**End of transcription.**