**Leonard Cheshire Resonate Project**

File Title: AV-S\_318 Interview tape no 19 – Betty Green.

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Start of Transcription

00:00 Jill Roberts: This is an oral history recording made with Betty Green at St Bridget’s Cheshire home on the 16th of April 1996. She is talking to the archivist Jill Roberts.

00:12: Betty, you’ve been involved with St Bridget’s for many decades, in fact I think you’re now its president. What was your first contact with Leonard Cheshire and his work, do you remember? Because it was in the 1950s wasn’t it?

00:26 Betty Green: Yes, it’s 41 years ago now, and a friend of mine rang up and said, would I go round and help get a house ready for a Cheshire home? I’d no idea what a Cheshire home was, in fact very ignorant except that of course I remembered Leonard Cheshire. I was to bring an apron, and a dustpan and brush, and a few old dusters. So round I went - I had to walk, I had no car - to find several ladies, all very busy, in this very old Victorian house which if I remember rightly had brown paint everywhere, dirty windows. We had been bought- we bought it with the help of various kind friends, and it was just as it was to be- the doors were opened, dust and cobwebs everywhere, so we set about it. I think we were asked to bring Thermos flasks too because there was no heating or anything else, and we then after a few days doing this… It was great fun, we laughed, a lot of us never did any housework at home so it was all rather strange, and we called ourselves the scrubbers, and we went most days, for a couple of hours, until we were quite exhausted, and cleaned the house. Washed the windows, cleaned the paint, and swept up, and gradually it took shape.

02:00 JR: And did you know what the Cheshire homes were about or was Leonard Cheshire just the RAF war hero to you?

02:06 BG: Yes, he was the RAF war hero, but Elsa Clifford Smith - who then became the chairman, and who had originally asked me - had explained that the Cheshire homes were for disabled people, and that we would soon be housing maybe 10 or 12 disabled people who had nowhere else to go, who would need a certain amount of nursing. This was the only thing I understood about it, and at that time of course we had no residents - or family as we call them - to come.

02:42 JR: And was there any special adaptations made to this house, or was it-

02:45 BG: No. There was a very old rather nice wide staircase, and it was years later that we had a lift put in, so we really only used the downstairs floor to start with. If I remember rightly, the room on the front of - just to the right of the front door - was the sitting room - which eventually became a bedroom - and then there were 2 or 3 other rooms on the ground floor, a very antiquated kitchen… and that’s about as far as I remember.

03:21 JR: So you cleaned the house, you got it ready, the first residents came in?

03:27 BG: I don’t remember really being very involved at that time because I had 2 young children, and I wanted to spend time with them and get their meals, but I always went round if there was anything special to do. I remember 2 residents. I don’t think they were the first ones, but one was Maureen who is still with us, who is now married and she has been with us a very long time. She was one of the first ones she was about 16 when she came to us, but soon afterwards we had a young man named Jonny - I don’t know his other name - who always thought he had won the derby, and I remember eventually having to bath him. And another one named Mabel, who came from Horsham, who suffered from terrible arthritis. I can see their faces but I can’t remember the names of other residents.

04:29 JR: Did you have any nursing experience, given that you were asked to bath residents?

04:33 BG: No, I had no nursing experience at all. One of our main [coughs] needs of help was to make beds, which we did, several of us. Sometimes I made them by myself, sometimes with a helper who might or might not turn up. I remember having to wear a white overall, which Matron insisted upon, and after we’d made the beds, if any of us had time, we would then say, ‘What can I do now?’ and she would say, ‘Could you make coffee for the residents?’ - or the patients they were called then I think - and then she would say, ‘Oh, could you give Jonny a bath?’ and I would say ‘Yes,’ and much to my amazement, he would have to put on a little pair of swim trunks in case I saw something that I shouldn’t have done. So it was rather difficult to do, but anyway. And then perhaps if you had time, you would say, ‘Anything else Matron?’ and she would say, ‘Oh, could you peel a few potatoes for lunch?’ And so it went on.

05:45 JR: Just going back for one moment to bathing the residents, how did you feel about having to do this for people who were disabled? Was it difficult? Were you nervous?

05:54 BG: I was a bit nervous. I was nervous that they might slip getting them in or out. But somehow - particularly with Mabel who had very deformed hands and feet - I found myself feeling, ‘Oh, but for the grace of God there go I’, and I so I felt that although I didn’t enjoy doing it, I was doing something useful. And really there was no option. If Matron said, ‘Would you bath Mabel?’, I bathed Mabel.

06:26 JR: So it was very much an all hands to the pump attitude as far as the jobs given to volunteers-

06:32 BG: Yes-

06:33 JR: Do you think that this was in any way acting out a general philosophy behind Leonard Cheshire’s work, a general spirit?

06:42 BG: I’m sure it was and I feel… This was very much how the whole thing evolved, was that everybody did everything. Any job that came along, you just took upon yourself, and they were mostly jobs that any housewife could do anyway. Bathing, washing, ironing sometimes, helping get the meals ready, laying the tables, anything like that were all things any normal woman could do. And you just did it for as many hours or as many minutes as you could spare and then off you went and said, ‘Well I’ll be back on Thursday,’ or whatever and you came and asked again. There were no rules or regulations because we were very short of staff. And so the volunteers were very useful, as they are now.

07:38 JR: GC visited St Bridget’s. I know he came to the opening of the home, didn’t he-

07:44 BG: Yes that was-

07:45 JR: The old home we’re talking about now, did you meet him there?

07:47 BG: That was some time… Oh yes, I did, but that was some time after it was actually opened, after it was in going, and I don’t remember actually… We were standing in a line if I remember rightly and I don’t remember saying, ‘How do you do?’, I don’t think I spoke to him with any more words as he did to some of the others, who were then committee members. I didn’t go on the committee until 1957.

08:19 JR: Let’s talk about your involvement on the committee, then. What in those days did being a committee member mean?

08:25 BG: Extraordinary evenings at Mrs Elsa Clifford Smith’s house, and when I joined there were about 8 or 10 members, and we sat round her dining room table, and discussed various items. Mostly finance if I remember rightly because we were very very poor in those days, we hadn’t got a lot in the bank, and we had to decide very often whether to pay the butcher, the milkman, or perhaps the electricity company, and we always decided to pay the little man, and keep the big authorities waiting, which I think is a good idea even now. Gradually the funds came in, and we were able to spend more. In those days, I can’t even remember that we were funded by any authority, so any money that we had from fundraising, we had to pay… help pay for the residents, for their upkeep, for their food, the heating, the electricity, the gas. And I don’t know how it was organised because I wasn’t really in on that - I suppose the steering committee almost did that - but I know to start with the fees were about 5 pounds a week. And this had to be found somehow, and of course the more residents we got, when we got 12 people that was 60 pounds a week, so it was quite a lot to find.

10:06 JR: Was there any contribution from the residents themselves?

10:09 BG: I don’t remember. We had several very good treasurers - honorary treasurers - and they sorted out the money. And I think Matron had a lot - well not - quite a sum of money, and I think she paid some of the staff, to the cleaners, and the domestic side, where she paid out of this petty cash I suppose it was called.

10:37 JR: So apart from finance, what other kind of responsibilities does a committee member- did a committee member have then?

10:42 BG: It was rather extraordinary that… I know one of the committee members, Joan Hollands, and in the blue book, she says that the committee meetings took so long they started at half past 7, and very often went on until 11 o clock at night. I cannot remember quite what we could’ve talked about all that time, but her husband objected to her being out so late so she left the committee. Because we all had to go our various ways and some of us didn’t have cars. There was a lot of talk, and a lot of deciding how to encourage the residents to make more of their lives. The Rotary and Round Table were very good, taking them out, but there wasn’t a lot of outings and things if I remember rightly. But I simply cannot think what we talked about, but you might find out from 1 or 2 other committee members who you meet later.

11:43 JR: The blue book that you’ve just mentioned, of course, is the booklet called, ‘The Story of St Bridget’s Cheshire Home’, brought out for its 40th anniversary in 1995 and available from the home. So, you were on the committee from 1957 to… When did you..?

[Silence 12:01 – 12:05]

12:06 BG: Whenever I became president, which was about 3 years ago-

12:08 JR: So around about 1993-

12:10 BG: Yes, yes.

12:11 JR: So, you’ve seen many changes over those years, and the biggest change - the most significant one - must be the change to the new - the beautiful new home here in Rustington. Can we talk about that, what made you decide-

12:25 BG: This was brought about by 2 or 3 things, one was that we put on 2 extensions - at various times - to the home as was needed, enough more rooms, more bedrooms, but still people were living 4 to a room or 6 to a room, not very good, with curtains just rather like a hospital. But also, the fire officers - who came regularly to have a fire practice - one day said to us, ‘You know, we shall never be able to get these people down if there was a big fire,’ because we had a lift which was continually going wrong - a very old fashioned lift - but that of course would go off if there was a fire because all electricity would go off, and they told us several times, ‘If you’ve got to get people into bed at night, and out of bed in the morning, how can you possibly save them if there was a fire except if each fireman carried a person down the stairs?’ And that made us think. And then also I think the Foundation through Leonard decided that it would be so much nicer for people to have single rooms, and it was quite impossible to do anything. We were also spending a lot of money, because the flat roofs that we had put on over the extensions were continually leaked when we had bad weather – there were buckets everywhere - and so the idea was to build a new home. ‘Right, where do we get it?’

13:55: We couldn’t do it on where we were, so John- Jack Jarvis and Don Williams - both committee members - said they would go round the countryside, and look for a site which might be possible to build on with single rooms, and also some recreation rooms, and so we suggested - and begged them - not to go far out into the country, where- We wanted it near shops, near roads, where there were people about, where the residents could see life. And it was just by a chance talk between 2 Rotary members that Jack Kessler mentioned that he knew of a house in Rustington which was going to be sold - Broadmoor House - and the lady who owned it, Elaine Lesley - because her sister had died - had already put in planning permission for about 30 bungalows in the grounds, which was 3 acres, in the middle of Rustington, just off Sea Lane. I knew this house very well. I had visited it many times before, and I knew her sister. And so, we- 2 or 3 of us rushed down to look at it and it was absolutely perfect, except that the grounds were enormous, it was obviously possible. The house was old, it hadn’t been lived in for a little while. But we decided this really could be made something of, and Will Bagnall - who was the builder the architect we always used who was the chairman then - he came down, and he thought it was possible, although he wasn’t at all keen on the move, because the other home was really his baby almost, he’d helped put on the extensions and things, but anyway. Of course the Foundation had to be involved, and 2 or-

15:59 JR: You mean the central offices of the Foundation here-

16:02 BG: Yes

16:03 JR: Yeah

16:03 BG: Yes

16:03 JR: Yeah

16:04 BG: Yes in London

16:05 JR: Right

16:06 BG: And we realised that it was going to cost a lot of money. I can’t remember quite who it was who came down but they looked at the site. I think they were a bit staggered at the amount of work that might be needed, but we said we wanted to go ahead. I think at that time I had just finished my 3 years as chairman. I was just coming to the end of my 3 years as chairman, and I handed over to Cathy Parker, and with the idea of building a new home - which we had quite decided we were going to do - I offered my services as chairman of the fundraising appeal, which I thought would be a challenge, but when I went home and told my husband he thought that I must have gone quite mad, because I’d had really my stint of fundraising.

17:14 JR: How much money was going to have to be raised, did you know at that time?

17:16 BG: We- The first estimate that we had to build a home with 28 single rooms, and in the agreement with Elaine Lesley, who incidentally was most generous in letting us buy the house and the property at a much lower price than she would’ve got if she’d sold it to builders for bungalows, but because her father was a doctor in the old days in Rustington - I remember him well - she felt that he would’ve been pleased to have thought it was going to be used for some special purpose. Anyway, the first estimate that we got when we got builders in said, well, about 500,000 pounds, which sounds an awful lot of money but I felt, ‘Well, I’m sure we could get that if we tried hard.’

18:17 JR: What year was this? Where are we?

18:19 BG: ’83.

18:19 JR: ’83.

18:20 BG: ’82, I think, ’82. 500,000 sounded an awful lot of money but I felt it was a challenge. So, we got various estimates. I think the Foundation asked for 3 estimates, which we got from various builders, and eventually it was decided on, and of course a lot of thought went into the planning, and the design, and everything. In the meantime, 1 or 2 of the old committee were very against the move, and they set up quite a lot of trouble, and wrote to the Foundation or went up there, and said that it was quite impossible, quite unnecessary, and that we were just doing this for some unknown purpose, and that the other home was perfectly adequate, it could be altered, we could make something of it. So… I remember it was… Is it Paul Allot or Peter Allot?

19:31 JR: Peter Allot.

19:31 BG: Peter Allot was one of the ones who came down, and we had a meeting. The people concerned who were so against it did not come to the meeting - were not asked - and he was asked to ask us to explain why we thought we could find the money, also why we wanted the move, and eventually we persuaded him that it was the right thing to do, that we were not doing it for any purpose other than for the good of the residents, and also explained to him about the [coughs] trouble with the fire officers, who said they could not save the residents if there was a fire, and the building was very old and needed an awful lot of money spent on it, so that was that. So we got the- and it was terribly exciting that we were going to be allowed to go on with it, they agreed that it was the right thing to do.

20:25: And we had a coffee mor- I think it was a silent auction, or a coffee morning at the church hall about that time, and Lavinia Duchess of Norfolk - who unfortunately died just before Christmas this year but up until the time of her death was our patron and was so good to us and came so often to the home - and she was the guest that night, and I knew her quite well by this time, and so I said to her, ‘Your Grace, would you do us a favour?’ and she said ‘Oh, come off it you’re always asking me for favours Betty’ - she always called me Betty - and so she said, ‘What is it?’ so I said, ‘Well, would you come and dig the first turf of our new home?’ so she said, ‘Do you mean the first sod?’ and I said, ‘Well, Your Grace, if you like to call it that, yes please, but could you- would you mind putting on a hard hat, and using a digger?’ and she said, ‘Oh no, it would be fun!’ So now in the blue book there is a picture of her.

21:34: And so eventually, there was a lot of clearing to do because there were a tremendous lot of trees here, and bushes and shrubs, which were very beautiful but had to be moved. So eventually the day came when they found a new clean hat and the duchess arrived and she sat in the digger, and she dug this first turf, helped by a chap who sat behind in the digger. She’d never been in one before but she found it great fun. And of course we had some of the residents were there, quite a few of them, with great difficulty because the ground was so rough, and also the press of course. And after she had dug this very successfully and the papers - the newspaper men - were quite happy about it she said, ‘Oh can I have a go by myself?’ And so the man got out, and she tore round the area, sort of rather chasing the newspaper men, it was great fun. Anyway, so we started. And then of course the plans had to be done in more detail, and really this was left to Don Williams, who was a surveyor, and of course Will Bagnall and various people.

22:51 JR: So how did you raise the money? Auctions, you said?

22:54 BG: Not to start with, we- My son, who- Robin, who has since died unfortunately… We decided to send out brochures, which he helped me design, which had a wheelchair on the front of it. And we decided to use the Book of Charitable Trusts, and we went through… we went through this, and we sent off eventually 70,000 brochures with an accompanying letter, and a piece of slip where you could send a donation. And we did it in postal areas which is the household postal drop which they called it - I don’t know if it still goes on - it is free to a certain extent, or at least not free but they… you don’t have to address the envelopes. They deliver it to every house in a postal area, so one day we would have to do Ferring - and it had to be at a post office at a certain time - and another time it would be East Preston, and another time Worthing - not Worthing, we only did a portion of Worthing - and East Preston. And of course this filling of 70,000 envelopes with 3 pieces of paper in it took a long time, and we had Rotary and Round Table and we sat round these tables for hours filling these and they had to be done up in bundles of 50.

24:25: Anyway, we sent them off. It cost much less than putting a stamp on each, and I must say when I got presented the bill for all the paper that I ordered and the brochures, it came to that stage - I remember it so well - it was just over 7,000 pounds, and the treasurer nearly had a heart attack, said it was ridiculous, we’d never get it back, so I said, ‘Well, I’m terribly sorry but I’ve done it now, I’ve bought them.’ It’s the only way to deal with people. So I- We sent these off, and to my- It was so exciting, the money started coming in, a hundred pounds here, a thousand pounds there, and it was terribly exciting. And I always remember Lavinia Duchess of Norfolk, she never had a secretary, she always wrote every letter by hand, a thank you for something you’d done or something, so I thought, ‘Well if she can do it, I can.’ So, in the end I must have written perhaps 3,500 letters by hand - not of course all at once, 10 a day - and every one I thanked personally in my own handwriting, and it has paid off. People have remembered that.

25:45: I was disappointed to some of my friends who didn’t send me anything for the… And but you see, a lot of people can’t afford to give you money while they’re alive, because they don’t know how long they’re going to be alive, and that’s why we find it very difficult now with governance to get new people. But if they have no family they will leave you money in their will, and 2 ladies who have long passed away in Rustington left us 15,000 in their will, the last one, whereas they didn’t give us anything while they were alive. Anyway, I thought, ‘Well, it’s coming along beautifully,’ but of course then we got an estimate [coughs] from the builders. It was going to cost 750,000 pounds. My heart sank. And it wasn’t long before we decided that we had to put a lift in the new home because otherwise the upstairs rooms would not be able to be used. The next estimate was 100,000 pounds, and I realised then - or I thought - that I’d never see it in my lifetime but never mind, crack on. So then we started having fundraising things. Silent auctions, coffee mornings, all sorts of things like that, and gradually the money came in.

27:10 JR: So the funds were raised, and this beautiful new home in Rustington was built. Do you see anything in this home as a symbol of the sort of changes in the way the Foundation cares for residents in general? I’m thinking particularly of the way each resident here has a single room, they have freedom to come and go. Is there any less companionship? Is there a change in atmosphere that you’ve noticed?

27:40 BG: Yes. Yes there is. As you and I would want, we wouldn’t want to live in a room with 4 other people like a hospital ward or something for the rest of our lives, we’d wanted our own rooms, and it was lovely to see their faces when they were able to choose their carpets, their curtains, their wall furnishings, their paper or anything on the walls, their own furniture which we gave them a certain sum for, and they were so thrilled to have their own little room where they could bring all their treasures, and they were happy.

28:12: But, I have noticed over the years - and I felt this at the time - that they didn’t meet together so often, just for meals now, except when there’s something special on. It’s natural that one would want to go back to one’s own room to watch a television programme which perhaps somebody else didn’t, but at the other homes we had two lounges. One had a BBC television set in it, one was ITV. We had picked this because otherwise various people used to go and change the set over to another station. Anyway, but this meant that if you wanted to watch television, you had to come in and sit round, and this meant more companionship, and I feel they don’t meet so often, because it’s so much easier to go to your own room and watch the programme of your choice. I think, in a way, this has spoilt the idea. On the other hand, the idea of independent living is that you should be independent, so you do your own thing when you want to. One of the worries that I have here is that they come and go as they please, which is great. Go up to the shops, go out to see your friends, but they don’t seem to have to tell anyone where they’re going, how long they’re going to be out, or sometimes they just go out just down the road for a little spin in their wheelchairs, but I think it’s necessary to know where they are.

29:55 JR: That’s in stark contrast, isn’t it, to an excerpt in the blue book which gives the-

29:58 BG: Yes-

29:59 JR: Rules and regulations from the early days-

30:01 BG: Yes. ‘Please remember to tell Matron when you go out, where you’re going, and at what time you expect to return so she will not be unnecessarily worried.’ Now, I think they do sometimes, I’ve heard them sometimes when I’ve been in here say, ‘Where’s Suzie?’ or something, ‘Oh, she’s gone out to lunch today.’ So she perhaps has told one person, but that person might go off duty. I think it’s all part of the modern ideas that they should come and go as they please, but there might be some difficulty sometimes. In case of fire we wouldn’t know whether they were in or out.

30:41 JR: It’s a question of balance I suppose, isn’t it.

30:42 BG: Yes it is. The other thing of course I’ve noticed tremendously - and I’m not sure if it’s for the best, but I know it is the wish of the Foundation - is that the uniform should not be worn. Now, at the other home, Matron wore - and there’s a picture of one of our matrons in the blue book - her blue uniform, and very proudly with her belt on and a nice badge and, to start with, a cap. Afterwards the cap was given up and later on, matrons wore perhaps a white long coat. And then they did come here to start with. They wore sort of a navy uniform or whatever there was. But then it was decided - and I think in most homes as I understand it - that uniforms were not to be worn to get away from the idea of a hospital, or an institution. But somehow… There was no harm done in wearing a uniform, in fact they wore it rather proudly some of them, and we used to have the domestics in one colour check overall, and the care staff in another one, another colour - one was pink and one was blue - and a matron with either a white coat on or something. But nowadays, nobody wears anything, and if you came in here you really wouldn’t know if you were talking to a visitor, or one of the staff, and I just found this rather disturbing for visitors. I don’t know some of them whether they are care staff or domestics when I come in, they change so quickly.

32:29 JR: How do you think the residents might feel about…

32:32 BG: I think some of the staff themselves would like to be… to have an overall that distinguished them from others, and they would wear it proudly. I don’t think there’s anything servile in wearing a uniform, but I quite see that… the sort… get away… this is a home, I know, and in homes people don’t wear uniforms, but on the other hand, sometimes I think it’s nice to be distinguished from others.

33:02: Drawing to a close now, Betty. It’s nearly four years since Leonard Cheshire died. Have you noticed any differences in the way the Foundation runs things? How have you noticed here at St Bridget’s, I mean? Changes? How do you see the future?

[Silence 33:18 - 33:21]

33:22 BG: Looking back - which one shouldn’t do, we must always look forward - but looking back, I see St Bridget’s as an entity on its own, which we were very proud of, and we felt part of a big organisation, 84 or something, we were the 5th home so we were quite high up on the list. And we felt that this was a little world where we were helping disabled people. Somehow now I feel with the respite care which is spreading - and I’m sure it is a very good idea - but a lot of that has taken over from the whole idea of this little world of St Bridget’s, where we have 28, now 34 or 5 people, who some of them in these bungalows for independent living, and somehow I feel as with all things - whether you’re a big company or what - the bigger you get the less the little portions of it are important. And I of course I’m old now and I just feel that I mustn’t be against the changes which are going on, which are all for the better - the best - and also because we want to be part of the community we must help the community with this respite care and looking after people outside the home. But I just hope that St Bridget’s will always remain a very important part of the Leonard Cheshire Foundation, and I’m sure Leonard wanted each home to have its individuality and its own importance. So we’re part of a very, very big organisation but we’re still important in our own little part.

35:14 JR: Betty Green, President of St Bridget’s, thank you very very much.

[35:17 Speech ends]

[35:17 Recording ends]

End of Transcription