Leonard Cheshire Resonate Project

File Title: Interview tape no 28. Patsy Wright-Warren,

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Start of Transcription

00:00: Jill Roberts: This is a conversation between Patsy Wright-Warren, Chairman of Ryder-Cheshire and Jill Roberts, Archivist. It took place on the 18th of January 2002. So, Patsy, thank you for agreeing to talk to me. We’re going to be talking about your experiences of Ryder-Cheshire the organisation, and hopefully a bit about the 2 founders as well, but let’s start at the beginning. Your first contact with them at all I think was the mid-80s – 1985?

00:39: Patsy Wright-Warren: That’s right. It was about 1985 when the church in the small village in Buckinghamshire where I live decided that it wanted to raise some money for a developing country and it was proving a little bit difficult to find the right sort of charity to give some help, and an ex-colleague of mine - a nursing colleague - when I met her, she had just come back from somewhere called Raphael in northern India, which was run by the Ryder-Cheshire Foundation - Ryder-Cheshire Mission as it then was - and had just started up a new system for treating people who had tuberculosis out in their villages in a very rural area, a very poor rural area. And she was fired with enthusiasm about this, and when she told me about it, I thought that this was just the sort of thing that perhaps our church would like to support.

01:48: JR: What was it about it in particular that … as opposed to say Oxfam, one of the bigger ones.

01:54: PW: The fact that it was a small organisation, so that we felt that even if we only raised a small amount of money we should still be able to make something of an impact, and also the fact that Ryder and Cheshire were very well-known, very well-respected names, so we felt that putting any money into their organisation it would actually be used for what we were giving it for and not squandered on admin and that sort of thing.

02:23: JR: So that was the first sort of personal contact, and from there this fundraising with the church, you became much more intensively involved.

02:38: PW: About 5 years later I retired from my full-time job and I wanted to do some voluntary work in a developing country.

02:49: JR: Can you just tell us a bit about what your previous job was, what your work involved.

02:54: PW: Basically I was a nurse, and after I’d done my training in hospital I’d had enough of hospitals, and therefore I concentrated on work in the community as a district nurse, midwife, health visitor, school nurse, that sort of thing. After a wonderful job in a Sussex village I then went into admin and management, and about 20 years later found myself the manager of all the … the Chief Nursing Officer of all the community nursing services in Cheshire. From there I became a civil servant. I went into the Department of Health as a nursing adviser to the government and stayed there for the rest of my career in various different guises, and it was that that I retired from at the age of 60, very fit and healthy and looking for some voluntary work to do. Now as I already had some contact with Raphael, that seemed a reasonable place to start, as a possible place to go and do some voluntary work. Unfortunately, the visa position in India was such at the time that you could only go for 3 months – I would like to have gone for a year or two, but that couldn’t be. And so, through my contact I managed to get an interview with Leonard Cheshire – I wanted to go and see him and say to him what could I usefully do when I get there.

04:34: JR: And your first meeting with Leonard Cheshire: how did that go? [Laughter]

04:38: PW: That was quite an eye-opener. I was in some trepidation about meeting this man whom I’d always had an enormous respect for from his days in the Royal Air Force, his wonderful work there and then his marvellous charity work, and so I was not a little nervous at going to see him. And he had a small flat on the top floor of the Leonard Cheshire offices in Maunsel Street, and I was going to meet him there.

05:20: JR: This is in London isn’t it?

05:21: PW: In London, that’s right yes, just behind Victoria Street. And so, I went up; in great trepidation I tapped on the door, trying to think what to say. And the door was flung open and he said ‘Oh do come in. How lovely to see you. Would you like a cup of coffee?’ [laughter]. We talked for a long, long time. He made the cup of coffee; we drank that; we talked. He had ordered a lunch. Lunch came up into the flat and we had that. So, we had quite a long time together and that was a wonderful occasion that I will always remember. And when people sometimes say to me ‘Have you ever met a great person’, I say ‘Yes, Leonard Cheshire’.

06:14: JR: Can you explain that or not, or is it just something you have to have experienced? What was the quality?

06:22: PW: There was a certain quality about him which was very difficult to identify. I mean one knew all the work that he’d done, but he also had this personality which was totally humble. He had a very good sense of humour and he thought so much about other people, and yet he achieved so much. And people would go to him and say, ‘What can I do to help?’. He didn’t have to go to them and say, ‘Please will you help me’.

06:52: JR: As indeed you were of course saying – what can I do to help.

06:57: PW: There’s an example.

06:58: JR: And what did he say when you said you wanted to go to Raphael? Is that where you went first for Ryder-Cheshire?

07:03: PW: Yes indeed, yes. We had quite a lot of discussion and exchange of letters about what I should do. And then he said, ‘Well Raphael has been going for about 30 years now and it’s a pretty special place and I think that we need to have a history of it’. And that rang bells with me, and I thought ooh yes, I’d like to do that. So, he said ‘When you’re out there you can meet all the people and look at the papers and that sort of thing’. I subsequently discovered that all the papers had come back to England, so there weren’t many at Raphael. But nevertheless, I went there, and also just before I went, he said ‘It has been funded by our government department so far, this TB work which we’ve been supporting from this church’. And he said ‘The government department are being a bit unwilling to continue with the funding, so perhaps you could look at the TB work out there, write a report about it and send it back to us’. And then a little while before I left, he said ‘Oh by the way, they are just starting up a similar thing in Delhi. Perhaps you could look at the work there and write a report about that’. So I went out and stayed there – had the most wonderful experience, and indeed wrote my reports, sent them back after the 3 months, then spent another 3 months going on round the world – the classic thing to do when you retire, and when I came back I found that the 2 founders had been talking with Michael Humphrey, the director, and in fact the government department had in the meantime agreed to continue funding Raphael and to start funding the Delhi project. Whether it had anything to do with the reports I sent back or not I shall never know. I like to think it did. And they said, ‘Would you like to come and work for Ryder-Cheshire?’. And I said, ‘What’s a projects officer?’. And Michael Humphrey, the director whom I was speaking to said, ‘Well we need somebody to go round and visit our different projects and see how they’re going and monitor them and report back on them’. And I said, ‘Are you asking me to travel the world at your expense when I want to?’. And he said ‘Well, if you put it like that, I suppose yes’. I said ‘You’re on, I’ll do it’ [laughter]. And that’s what I did for the next 10 years.

10:06: JR: But am I right in thinking that your role was half volunteer as well as employee? You were retired from your main job?

10:16: PW: I was retired from my job. I was fortunate that by the time I retired I had a very nice pension thank you, and I wanted to work as a volunteer. And I think that Ryder-Cheshire weren’t terribly happy about that, and the Chairman at the time, Sir Peter Ramsbotham I was told was … I don’t know why; he was a bit concerned about that. Whether he thought I wouldn’t have the same commitment if I worked as a volunteer I don’t know. So, I said to Michael the director ‘Look I really don’t want to, and I don’t know how much I ought to get; I have no ideas about this. Let me work for a year and I’ll keep some sort of a record. I don’t know how long it’s going to take me. And then we’ll look at it again at the end of the year’. So, at the end of the year he came back, and of course he was very canny; he never actually offered you a salary. He used to say, ‘How much would you like?’, which makes it very difficult. It’s a question of how long is a piece of string.

11:25: JR: So, you were effectively working full-time, but your role could be analogous to that of a volunteer. Do you think that made any difference to the way you did your work? Ryder-Cheshire as an organisation as we know was heavily involved in a volunteer project in the UK, which we’ll mention later, and that brings up the difference between being a volunteer and being an employee, and I was just wondering what your experience was, or if indeed it made no difference.

11:55: PW: Incidentally I worked about half-time, but after 1 year I did under pressure accept a salary. Rather a lot disappeared in tax and after that I decided that Ryder-Cheshire would use it much better than the government and so I didn’t take a salary again after that. The only thing I can say is that during that year I felt a bit uncomfortable and probably enjoyed my work slightly less. I cannot think that it made the faintest difference to my work and to my commitment, whether I was paid or whether I wasn’t. I was totally committed to it, just as when I was working full-time, I was totally committed to that.

12:54: JR: So, you started off as Projects Officer troubleshooting for the 2 founders, the other founder of course being Lady Sue Ryder. How did that role evolve, or didn’t it? Is that how it carried on for the next 10 years or so?

13:10: PW: Well the first thing that happened was that there had been somebody else visiting a project in Tanzania, and she was changing her job and so she wanted to move on, and it was a rather difficult project and needed a visit rather urgently, so it was within about 6 weeks of becoming Projects Officer I found myself on my way to Tanzania. This was a project which was a rehabilitation centre for children with a disability in a refugee camp, and it was really in the wilds of Tanzania. It was about a 4-day journey by road from the capital Dar Es Salaam. And so, I set off there to have a look at it. When I arrived in Dar Es Salaam, rather jetlagged with a whole list of names and addresses of various government departments and one thing or another that I should visit before I actually went to the centre, I looked at the list of names and addresses and that was the first time I noticed that all the addresses were PO Box numbers. Such a strange city I’d never been to before with a lot of PO Box numbers [laughter]. So that wasn’t a very good beginning. However, I managed to find my way around Dar Es Salaam – it’s a fairly small city – and spent a week in the heat trying to sort that out. I then spent 4 days travelling to the rehabilitation centre, and that was the most extraordinary place, because there it was out in the wilds. The whole refugee settlement was about 120,000 population. Now I had imagined that anywhere that had 120,000 population must have a few buildings and possibly a few high-rise buildings, you know, coming from the west. Not a bit of it. There was nothing except mud huts there, all with their little bit of ground, their little bit of ‘chamber’ as they call it. And the buildings in our rehabilitation centre which were very good brick buildings were I think the only permanent buildings in the whole place.

15:50: JR: Rehabilitation for/from what?

15:53: PW: Rehabilitation for children who were disabled. They came to us for treatment. We didn’t keep them unless they needed continuous treatment for a little while. But it was largely physiotherapy treatment. And then we had arrangements for them to go to a local hospital. I say a local hospital – that was only 2 days journey away to get them there. And quite often they would actually go to the hospital and spend 3 or 4 weeks there before they were ever seen by a surgeon. The services were very, very rudimentary. So, it was a very, very difficult project to run. We had to have expatriate staff there because there were very, very few Tanzanian physiotherapists. We did have a programme for training physiotherapists, and we did get one or two actually to the physiotherapy training schools, so that was an achievement as well as actually the children that we treated. It was a very difficult project to run. The government was very generous, because it was a refugee project, in funding it almost 100% I think for about 14/15 years.

17:23: JR: The UK government?

17:24: PW: The UK government that was, yes. They were very good, but eventually they said ‘No we can’t fund it any more’, and unfortunately we couldn’t find funds from anywhere else, and very regretfully a couple of years ago we had to close it down.

17:36: JR: So that’s one of the major projects you were involved in. There were others of course. We’ve already mentioned Raphael. Just go into some detail about where Raphael came from, the kind of place it was. Walk us down the main street at Raphael as it were.

17:59: PW: It was a very interesting project because it was started up by our 2 founders at the time of their marriage, each having their own charities already. When they got married they wanted not unnaturally to do something together, and Raphael was their first project which they started up with a few people from a leprosy colony and also some people from the streets who were very severely mentally handicapped. And some of those people, those original residents are still actually living at Raphael, all that time later. It gradually expanded and grew. The children of the lepers needed somewhere to live, because it was thought - actually this isn’t the feeling nowadays -, but it was thought they were rather vulnerable to catching the leprosy possibly, and therefore they were taken away from their parents and were brought up in a home next door to their parents, and they used to visit periodically, but it was thought they would be at risk if they actually lived with their parents. They had very close relationships. OK, so you’ve got all those children there; you need somewhere for them to go to school, so then they started up a primary school. Then of course you’ve got the … they had some people who were disabled, and they gave them a home – a bit similar to a Cheshire home. Then of course the TB in that area was absolutely rife, and so they started up a TB hospital with a lot of outpatients and a few inpatients, and then they started up the mobile TB scheme, which is where I first came into this – we were raising money for it. This was out in the very poor rural areas. The team, led by a doctor, used to go out and go to every single house to find out if there were people there who had the signs of leprosy cough, coughing up blood.

20:29: JR: TB

20:30: PW: TB – sorry, not leprosy. And then if they were, they started them on treatment, and that treatment has to carry on for a minimum of 6 months.

20:49: JR: So, Raphael was almost like a sort of township made up of all sorts of different centres, responding to the need for varied care of one sort or another.

20:59: PW: Yes. I mean the people suffering from leprosy, as soon as you go in the gate there’s a magnificent gate with the sign of Raphael over it.

21:07: JR: Is it in the foothills of the Himalayas?

21:09: PW: It is indeed. You can see the Himalayas from Mussoorie which was a very popular hill station, especially with the British Raj. You can actually see the lights in the evenings of and it looks like stars in the sky; it’s a wonderful sight because it’s all dark between Raphael and Mussoorie, a lovely sight. And so, it’s quite close to the Himalayas

21:38: JR: I know there’s a big archway isn’t there which says welcome.

21:42: PW: It just says Raphael. And then on the right as you go up is the leper village really, which is called Shiv Sadan which is…

21:52: JR: Hindu?

21:54: PW: It is, and I can’t remember what it means. I was just going to tell you. Shiva. Home of Shiva – something like that. Then, as you go further on up there is the school and the home for the children. Then there is a big home for people who are mentally handicapped as well, from those early beginnings where they had come in, and that is known as Ava Vihar. Ava was the first director of Raphael, a wonderful Indian lady apparently, who used to live quite nearby and come along in her little rickshaw every day, beautiful white sari, and there’s a lovely photograph of her there hanging on the wall, which always has a little vase of flowers below it because she’s so much revered. And Ava Vihar – they chose the name which means Ava’s garden.

23:03: JR: I always thought that was her surname.

23:05: PW: Oh really?

23:07: JR: It’s a name that crops up obviously frequently in the Archive. That’s a lovely story. So that’s Raphael, quite a sort of cluster of projects all in one place. There was another one: Gabriel is there not? That was perhaps not quite such a long-term story anyway.

23:32: PW: Unfortunately not, no. Raphael was the first … the founders were going through the archangels I think, so we started with Raphael, the archangel of healing, then we went to Gabriel which was down in Madras, and again was going to be a training centre for young men who’d suffered from leprosy, who couldn’t get work after they were cured of their leprosy because of the stigma attached. So, it was thought that if they’d actually had a training of some sort, then they’d be able to get work. And this was OK for quite a while, and unfortunately for one reason or another we were turned off the site which had been promised to Leonard Cheshire for as long as he needed it, but the owners of the site unfortunately claimed it again and we were turned off, and after that we never really managed to find a satisfactory alternative. It was very sad. And I’m afraid that now it’s had to close down. I fought for many years to try and keep it going and find an alternative function for it, but it never quite worked out.

24:51: JR: And all these projects that we’re talking about are funded from the UK I think, except for the majority of Raphael, which historically I believe is funded from Australia and New Zealand.

25:01: PW: Absolutely right, yes. The founders went to Australia and New Zealand where of course there were a lot … just after the War, after all ‘59’s not very long after the Second World War, and a lot of Leonard Cheshire’s air force friends had actually gone out to live in Australia and to a lesser extent New Zealand as well. And he went there and said to them could they help him with raising money for this, and it speaks volumes that they agreed to do that, because what I’ve been very struck by when I’ve been visiting Australia and New Zealand is that they don’t have that contact with India that we have from this country. There can’t be that … well I should think at least 50% of the families in this country have some contact in living memory with India. You know the parents were out there or they visited there or something like that. That is not the culture I’ve found in Australia and New Zealand at all, and yet they started out with these small groups in every state in Australia, fundraising in small ways through jumble sales, through this that and the other, you know selling Christmas cards and so on. And for all this time they have raised enough money to keep Raphael going

26:35: JR: And now you’re saying that the contact was very much a personal one with Leonard Cheshire as one of the founders. Now almost exactly 10 years after his death that commitment is still there.

23:51: PW: It is, and this is interesting that now you’re beginning to get a generation of people coming in who are equally committed, but who didn’t know the founder, and that’s very good I think. There’s a lot of difficulty getting younger people interested for obvious reasons, just as there is getting them involved in voluntary work here – they’re all too busy. But there are quite a lot of people who go over and work at Raphael as volunteers. There is a regular system of doing that. Now some of those people are youngsters in their gap year - something of that sort -; some may be taking a career break who go out; some people are a bit like me, after retirement, and many of them are now very much involved in going back and helping with the fundraising, and indeed one of them who spent quite a lot of time there who was retired from the Australian air force has quite recently over the last few years started up a new project in East Timor, resulting from all the problems there. You know this is spreading wider, and this is purely an Australian initiative.

28:16: JR: So, Raphael’s benefited for almost half a century.

28:18: PW: Absolutely, yes.

28:20: JR: So, we have Raphael; we have the TB projects. Nepal? – There was a Ryder-Cheshire presence in Kathmandu.

28:27: PW: That’s absolutely right, yes. It’s the only thing in Nepal. That would have been a Cheshire home except for the fact that all Cheshire homes have to be self-sufficient and to be able to raise the money to support themselves. Now Nepal was such a poor country that that was going to be impossible to do. It started up in rather a strange way. There was a very wealthy businessman in Nepal who was himself disabled. He had ankylosing spondylitis, which meant that this back was absolutely rigid. He heard of Leonard Cheshire and suggested setting up a home for the disabled. And the two of them went together to see the King of Nepal – the one who unfortunately has recently been murdered. I have this image of the rather tall, slim Leonard Cheshire standing erect, and this very stiff gentleman lying flat on his back being interviewed by the King of Nepal. It probably didn’t happen like that at all; it’s a lovely picture in my mind. And indeed, he gave them permission to start up this home in Nepal, a permanent home for disabled people. And 75% of the people were to come in and get some sort of vocational training. And that has been entirely funded from the UK. It’s had a few difficulties, not least political ones when of course democracy first came to Nepal and caused enormous political difficulties – civil disobedience, that sort of thing, and so the home had a very, very difficult time.

30:39: JR: But it’s still surviving?

30:41: PW: It’s surviving; it’s come through that.

30:43: JR: And Seva Nilayam if that’s how you pronounce it. Tell us something about that project.

30:49: PW: It’s pronounced all sorts of different ways actually. That was a project right down in Tamil Nadu, right in the south of India, which was set up by a very remarkable English lady in her 50s I think when she went out there to do it, named Dora Scarlett. She was supported by a number of young English people who’d gone out to work there as volunteers at her project, which started up just with outpatients coming, and they specialised very much in skin diseases, which were rife out there. She wasn’t a doctor or a nurse or anything like that. She just did it all by the light of nature really. When this had been running for about 30 years and she was about 80, she was finding a little bit of difficulty with running the place still, and she had once met Leonard Cheshire and been very impressed with him and his philosophy, and she thought if anybody was going to be called in to help them it would be somebody connected with Leonard Cheshire. And so, this small charity here, the Village Service Trust came to Ryder-Cheshire and said would we be interested in going to help them out. So, on my next visit to India I went to visit Seva Nilayam and look round it. We decided that we would go in with them and we would share the expense of the place and so on. And since then it has developed enormously. We employed a director; we did a lot of in-service training for staff; we spread it out into the community and started clinics in the villages and so on, and it is now a very different place. We built a TB hospital in the grounds too, and we do a lot of TB work there. It has increased in scope and expanse tremendously. We now feel it’s time actually where they can look after themselves, that they don’t need our help and support any more, and so over the next 4 or 5 years we are planning to withdraw our funding from them.

33:16: JR: So, in the developing world then Ryder-Cheshire is involved in various rehabilitation projects and TB in particular. But there is one flourishing project in the UK which is a slightly different kettle of fish – the Ryder-Cheshire volunteers. Tell us something briefly about that.

33:32: PW: That’s a very interesting project that started up in Oxfordshire to help people who are disabled with leisure activities. And what happens is that a disabled person who has a particular interest that they would like to follow is paired up with a volunteer who is an enthusiast for that particular interest. And they are matched up by the organisation, so that they will meet once a week or whatever they arrange and wish to do to pursue together their activity. Now this may be playing chess, it may be writing short stories, it may be gardening, it may be cycling. There was a blind person who used to go out for cycle rides on a tandem with their volunteer, which was great, and they’ve also started now one or two sport and leisure activities and do quite a lot of swimming and that sort of thing. So that has grown, so that it is now … there are schemes in quite a lot of places, a sort of channel down the middle of the country – Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, sort of down there. We feel that this is a unique scheme and one which we would hope to develop, give it the opportunity to develop and expand, because it is enormously appreciated, and some of the disabled people I’ve talked to say ‘This has changed my life’. Not only that, but the volunteers … I’ve seen occasions where not only have they done whatever is the interest, but they actually become a member of the family. They really get very involved with each other – it’s lovely.

35:45: JR: I know it’s well-known as a Ryder-Cheshire success story, and the voluntary sector generally. Just thinking of finishing off now, I’m turning to the future. Before we do that, perhaps we’ll go right back to the beginning, turn full circle and think about what may have been in the 2 founders’ minds when they set up Ryder-Cheshire in 1959. I think it’s true to say perhaps that they saw it as a vehicle through which they would have more hands-on contact with various projects, and projects which could perhaps develop without the rigid admin structure of their 2 larger foundations. If that is the case, now that neither founder is with us any longer - Lady Ryder herself died just over a year ago -, what is Ryder-Cheshire’s future do you think?

36:36: PW: Yes I think that’s absolutely right – the beginning as you say was very much things that didn’t fit in particularly with either of their other 2 charities, but which they felt that it was right to pursue. And that is why we found ourselves scattered rather wide – for instance just with one project in Tanzania - and a pretty peculiar bit of Tanzania at that - the Ryder-Cheshire volunteers here in this country, things in India and the sub-continent, but there again spread very wide. Now this really as time went on was not a satisfactory way of operating, and in fact the only staff was a director working on his own until I came along to do my job as the Projects Officer, apart from the Ryder-Cheshire volunteers, who had their own staff. But on the overseas work that was all there was. Clearly, without the founders, and the time came when the director wanted to retire and Sir Peter Ramsbotham our Chairman wanted to retire, and all this was happening at the millennium when we had to look very carefully about where we were going. The charity world has changed enormously, and to raise money for projects you have to be very focused nowadays. It’s not as casual as it once was. We therefore had to look very carefully, the trustees then, to see what the future would be. There were possibilities that we might actually invite the 2 other charities to take over the projects, either all of them or some of each; we might decide well, we’ve come to the end of the road and we should actually close them down. But the trustees didn’t. They took I think a very courageous decision to continue with the charity, but as you might say professionalise it – to employ more staff, to get more trustees involved and to build it up for the future. So that was what happened at the millennium, and we got ourselves a new office, a new director, some support staff for him and so on and started having more regular meetings of the trustees. But then we had this question of the focus, and we got the TB work, we got the work with the disabled, we got it here and there and so on. And so over these last couple of years we have been looking very carefully at what work we are doing, what work we should be doing and whether we are right to have such a broad spectrum of work. Now we haven’t resolved all that yet. It always takes much longer than you think it’s going to. And so, we’re still at this stage in the process of looking around and seeing just what the future should be. We are fairly determined to make sure that Ryder-Cheshire does have a future to continue what it was set up to do – that is to relieve suffering.

39:58: JR: Patsy, thank you so much for talking to me; it’s been wonderful.

40:01: Speech ends

40:01: End of recording

End of transcription