**Leonard Cheshire Resonate Project**

**Recording Title:** Interview Tape no.30. Joan Youngs Conversation with volunteer

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Start of Transcription

00:00 Jill Roberts: This recording was made on the 7th February 2008 and is a conversation between Miss Joan Youngs and Jill Roberts Archivist with Leonard Cheshire Disability. Miss Youngs talks about her days as a volunteer with the charity. Right Joan, so the first time you were a volunteer with us was back in the 1950s in Cornwall when Leonard was setting up what became our second Cheshire Home, as they were called in those days, St Teresa’s. What were you doing at the time, why were you down in Cornwall?

00:41 Joan Youngs: I was a Met Officer at the Royal Naval air station at Culdrose on the Lizard Peninsula and I was there from 1951-53, and then soon after I arrived, we became conscious of the fact that the famous Leonard Cheshire was just down the road on the Lizard disused air station called Predannack where he was doing some sort of tests with Barnes Wallis and eventually, he became an honorary member of our mess.

1:14 JR: What does a Met Officer do?

1:17 JY: Weather forecasting. Weather forecasting for aircraft not general area.

1:23 JR: And was that during the day?

1:26 JY: No, we had night watch, I was a watch keeper so at one stage we worked 24 hours on and 48 hours off.

1:35 JR: Right, so you were down as a watch keeper did you say, watch keeper?

1:41 JY: Watch keeper means working shifts, you see.

1:44 JR: And you’d heard about Leonard Cheshire obviously before now because he was famous by then,

1:48 JY: Yes, of course.

1:49 JR: And he was doing this work at RAF Predannack with Barnes Wallis and how did you get involved with the setting up of what became St Teresa’s?

2:01 JY: Well, we had heard that he had set up his first home in what had been his Aunt’s house at Le Court and he got pursued virtually by handicapped people, there were some remarkable stories of people who could hardly walk suddenly found out where he was and turned up and said, ‘I’ve got nowhere to go’ and he said, ‘Well you better sort of shack up here’.

2:29 JR: Here being where he was working?

2:31 JY: where he was working, which was a lot of very decrepit old huts and it soon came clear that there was a great need for somewhere else for young disabled people and it was miraculous the way some people turned up and he then asked the RAF if they would allow him to make a proper use of some of these huts and our soldiers, our sailors, helped him to put in plumbing and that sort of thing and before anybody really realised what the situation was there was something like 20 disabled people of all sorts there. When I say disabled there were in fact some TB people as well and that caused sort of what would now be called health and safety problems and so at some stage, he had to decide what his policy was going to be, which he elected to be young disabled.

3:41 JR: And, do you remember any particular personalities from there. Do you remember the first patient, were you with them that early?

3:50 JY: I was with them at the beginning, there was one married couple there, there was one room that had four really quite attractive girls in them, but I don’t remember more specifically then that but of course it was on today’s standards absolutely unacceptable.

4:15 JR: Living hand to mouth?

4:16 JY: Yes

4:17 JR: But Le Court had been like that as well.

4:18 JY: Yes

4:19 JR: I mean it sounds to me as though he was meeting a need that wasn’t being met elsewhere.

4:23 JY: Absolutely. Absolutely, and people had heard of him and found that he was the only person who might help them.

4:34 JR: Even though we’ve got this new national health service as it was at the time?

4:37 JY: Yes, Yes. But people were turned away from hospitals because nothing could be done to help cure them. They had got to live the rest of their lives in a state of disability.

4:53 JR: So, we’ve got this refurbished old RAF hut and your sailors have helped to make it right, how did they manage, where did the beds come from, where did the food come from?

5:08 JY: Well Leonard made quite clear that he would not buy things if he could get them given, and he had a lot of publicity in Cornwall and people turned up with the most amazing things from an AGA cooker and a pile of cracked pudding basins and things like that. Very acceptable things were given and some unacceptable things were given.

5:37 JR: What unacceptable? … Unacceptable in…

5:41 JY: Well a) in standard, you know you don’t want cracked pudding bases but people turned up with some sort of luxury things for which I don’t remember particularly but I know he had a problem with something but money, his fame, did bring in a certain amount of money. But I remember once I went, I don’t know if it was from Penzance or somewhere, Helston was our nearest station and I happened to be in the same railway carriage as he was and he told me that he had now got absolutely no money. And a few days after that I went to do something there, scrub a floor or something like that and he said that the next morning he said he owed £40 and got nothing and two or three days later he got a cheque for £40 from somebody he’d never heard of.

6:40 JR: I heard stories like that from days at Le Court as well, it seemed to happen to him.

6:45 JY: And his faith did come through all the time the whole thing was an act of faith from beginning to end.

6:52 JR: Tell me more about him as a person, he has a reputation for being very charming in a quiet way.

6:58 JY: A bit fey really, he wasn’t always as practical

7:01 JR: Oh interesting

7:03 JY…I thought as could be and of course at that stage he was starting to have lung trouble and he did disappear eventually to Midhurst sanitorium.

7:16 JR: He was there for two years, wasn’t he?

7:17 JY: a long time, and of course out of that I believe came St Cecilia’s didn’t it?

7:21 JR: It did, that was the third Cheshire Home of course, St Cecilia’s. So not terribly practical but he was the charisma.

7:33 JY: Absolutely

7:34 JR: He had a vision perhaps.

7:35 JY: And he had people… I mean I was a person who was rather squeamish and so on but I found myself feeding people who were really very off putting, this sounds very unchristian to say that but you did forget the disabilities and there was a great equality between the volunteers and the residents.

7:59 JR: You think that emanated from the founder?

8:01 JY: I do very much.

8:05 JR: Do you remember other volunteers there? Did you encourage anybody else?

8:09 JY: Yes, two of my naval officer wives worked there even more than I did because they were free and living in officers’ quarters around, and they both have been in touch with them all the time really and they say just the same thing about they found themselves doing jobs that they wouldn’t have done in their own homes almost, but we did all scrub floors and we did.

8:37 JR: What else did you do… scrub floors, feed…

8:40 JY: I often was there when they, I think it was a Wednesday evening when they had finnan haddock and I hate the smell of finnan haddock but I did get very used to it. They seemed to like it.

8:53 JR: And what kind of facilities were there. I suppose it must have been very basic?

8:57 JY: Very basic indeed, I mean there was electricity but not things that would be acceptable now to cook with or anything else but I’m afraid it is a long time ago and I don’t remember the details.

9:13 JR: Was it divided up into individual rooms?

9:16 JY: Oh yes, yes. But I say I know there were four attractive girls in one room and there was a married couple in one room, and then odd men - I really can’t tell you how many people there were.

9:30 JR: It sounds as though there were 20 odd, sort of that kind of number.

9:32 JY: Something like that yes and Leonard was very friendly with our Commander Air who became Admiral Sir Donald Gibson, and with our Chaplin … and those three built a little Chapel there which was to be very interdenominational and I did actually buy some vases for some flowers.

9:59 JR: and Leonard at this time was he still working with Barnes Wallis as well as St Teresa’s.

10:05 JY: Eventually that did fall away and he had got possession of the premises at least temporarily from the RAF and I think they had nothing else to do with the premises so they didn’t mind us being there.

10:20 JR: Right, Right, and they moved eventually from the RAF hut to a few miles away in Cornwall didn’t they to Marazion I think but that was after you left the area.

10:33 JY: I did visit it once a few years later but

10:37 JR: And that was purpose built with a lot of help from Lady St.

10:40 JY: Lady St Levan, yes, yes, she did take an interest in the old place, yes.

10:45 JR: Yes… so you left after a couple of year’s 1953 I think you said, didn’t you? But of course, that wasn’t the end of your involvement with Leonard Cheshire’s work because

10:58 JY: No well any time I did anything rash like buying a new car or something like that I used to send him what was then a fairly big donation £10 or so and he used to write and acknowledge and then some time in the early 1960s he wrote; I was then living in Gerrard’s Cross and he wrote and said that some young man in my area thought there was a need for a Cheshire Home. They were visiting a young spastic whose only home could be found in a geriatric ward in Wiltshire. They visited him but they felt that there should be somewhere near his parents in Little Chalfont that could be made available for him and so I got in touch with this young man that Leonard suggested who turned out to be one Brian Ball the Chairman of Amersham Round Table and he told me that they’d looked at various premises which weren’t suitable and we just sort of [12.03 unclear] …. And that was that.

12:08 JR: Where are we now, 1960’s you said didn’t you?

12:11 JY: Yes 1960s, well in about 1964 I was living in Gerrard’s Cross and I went to go to the Anglican Church at 8 o clock on Sundays and I was on my knees in All Saints Church in Gerrard’s Cross when the boarders of the local St Mary’s school clattered in, probably against their wills half of them because it was a very strong church school. And it occurred to me that their boarding house just round the corner was going to be closed at the end of the following term, wouldn’t that do for a Cheshire Home because one of the various places that the Round Table had looked at were too far from civilisation. Everybody recognised that a disabled people wanted to be near to community near the shops and so on. And so, I rang this then unknown to me man Brian Ball and he got in touch with the Foundation and with the Headmistress, the very holy Headmistress loved the idea that her home could be used for something good rather than commercial. And Aversham Round Table had had annual donkey derby’s that had brought, I think they got something like £7000 anyhow, they got in touch with the Foundation and bought this going to be disused boarding house. I think it was for £11,000.

13:49 JR: About 1964/5 we are now? So, there must have been altogether, I’m just wondering how many Cheshire Homes.

13:55 JY: I think it was about the 50th.

13:56 JR: Was it?

13:57 JY: Something like that.

13:58 JR: Right, yes.

13:58 JY: 50 something.

13:59 JR: So, it had expanded hugely over the last decade?

14:02 JY: That’s right. Very much so.

14:04 JR: So, they bought the building.

14:07 JY: They bought the building and put in planning permission but then there was an outcry. People in that rather classy road in Gerrard’s Cross even wrote to the newspapers saying they did not want their children to see people in wheelchairs, that sort of attitude. There were many delays, one stage the lead was stolen from the roof and two layers of ceilings fell into the front hall, I always remember that. Our special Trustee was Sir Henry Marking, and he was very appropriate because we had a lot of, being near Heathrow we had a lot of British Airways people and so it got a lot of (14:52 unclear) anyway

14:54 JR: He was Chief Executive, wasn’t he?

14:56 JY: Eventually, yes, he was, yes. And I always remember after this lead coming through the roof and so on, we had a meeting in utter cold for which we took flasks of coffee and torches there was no electricity no nothing, and he said, ‘There’s only one thing you can do with this building, and that’s get rid of it’. We said goodbye to him and Brian Ball then pulls himself up and he said, ‘I don’t know about the rest of you but I’m carrying on’, and although [laughs] we all rather welcomed the get out on the spur of the moment we said yes, we will carry on.

15:40 JR: Excellent, yes.

15:41 JY: And again, lots of miracles happened.

15:45 JR: Well, tell us about some miracles.

15:48 JY: well support came from all quarters. Eventually got planning permission, we’d got enough money and a lot of voluntary labour.

16:03 JR: Do you remember how much you had to raise?

16:06 JY: Not for the first. We opened first for seven residents.

16:12 JR: So, you opened first for seven patients successfully in the end and what were the facilities like, I mean compared say to St Teresa’s, what 10 years earlier?

16:24 JY: Well, there was much advance upon that. But we relied again almost entirely on what was given, people were very generous. Our connection with Sir Henry Marking meant, one thing I remember we got a whole roll of carpets that had gone down the centre of aircrafts and wasn’t quite good enough for British European Airways as it was then and we glued these strips together to carpet some of the rooms, but then it seemed perfectly alright to have four men in one room and three women in another room, that sort of thing. And we had a resident couple as sort of Warden and Housekeeper, he did the accounts and managed the money and she did the cooking but volunteers did quite a lot of the cooking and I had a rota of friends who did Sunday night supper for two or three years.

17:29 JR: And it was run by management committees too which were all volunteers of course weren’t they.

17:35 JY: Management committee consisted of some local people, one or two members of staff and one or two residents. We’ve always had residents on the committee. And we had sub-committees we had a house committee an admissions committee, a finance committee.

17:59 JR: So different I suppose, developed, evolved if you like from the RAF Predannack set-up but similar in many ways as well.

18:10 JY: Yes, well after we’d had these 7… at one stage we had got 102 on the waiting list and that’s not entirely realistic because I think some people put their names down at say three Cheshire Homes and if there had become a vacancy, we’d have found out they’d already gone to the Cotswolds home three months ago or something like that. But anyhow, [unclear 18:41] I was at that stage Chairman of the House Committee and I said, ‘Please can I give it out and start an appeal?’. And so, I did get an appeal together and we were so lucky in our fundraising, we then I do remember raised £78,000 to extend the home and modernise it and make it fit for 23 residents.

19:11 JR: And this is what, still in the 60s?

19:13 JY: Yes, 60s and early 70s. We had some very interesting fundraising thing when Ranulph Fiennes had just come back from his final thing. I think we paid him £500 but I had people even ringing me at half past six in the morning, were there any tickets left for him. We had a ball at London Airport and Charles Faughty gave I think through Sir Henry Marking gave a dinner which was £100 a touch which was a terrific lot in those days and so we did get things. We worked jolly hard really in that we went giving talks to little groups and, you know they passed the hat round and gave you £5, rather of stayed at home and put the £5 in but then perhaps one of those old ladies will leave £20,000 next year.

20:10 JR: And might have become a volunteer.

20:13 JY: [laughs] that sort of thing.

20:14 JR: You never know do you. So, was Leonard himself involved in?

2017 JY: He came to the opening of both parts and the Duchess of Kent came. Yes, we did have royal connections we once took over Windsor Theatre, I think we paid them something like £5 a seat and then sold them at 10, Princess Alexandra and Angus Ogilvy came to that. Also, Roald Dahl and his wife Patricia Neal because she was one of our local handicapped people. So, we did do a lot of fundraising then and we had some very good support groups, all of which have fizzled out.

20:59 JR: The support groups, were they no longer there?

21:02 JY: No, we had support groups in Slough and Datchet and Chesham and Amersham and Gerrard’s Cross.

21:08 JR: Did that happen at about the same time as Management Committees were abolished?

21:12 JY: No before that I think really. When the original drivers gradually moved away, retired, died and so on.

21:25 JR: How do you think the organisation has weathered the death of the Founder, which of course is well over 15 years ago now. Do you think that had any kind of an effect?

21:37 JY: No, I don’t think the death did, obviously the distance of time from the War makes a difference but I think that Cheshire Homes as a series of homes with a capital H and a small h, that image does last and I’m very sad that our local home particularly has changed its name into what could just as well be a block of flats.

22:08 JR: It’s changed its name to the…

22:11 JY: instead of Chiltern Cheshire Home it’s Chiltern House. The residents wouldn’t mind it being, don’t mind it being house rather than home but they are very sad at the loss of the name Cheshire. Nearly everywhere I go somebody says, ‘Why has the Cheshire Home moved or something like that?’.

22:35 JR: From Gerrard’s Cross?

22:36 JY: Yes, but in fact the present Gerrard’s Cross Home going back to where I was before when we finally extended it to about 23. Standards of course changed for all of us as far as having en-suite rooms and so on, but there was a very unfortunate fire in the old home in Gerrard’s Cross and it happened, it was never really established whether it was vandalism or carelessness and the residents all had to be parked in local hospitals for months and so on. But that did spark off the need to improve circumstances completely and after I had retired as Chairman a new lot came in and decided that the time had come to acquire, to build a purpose rather than the present home was opened I suppose about 15 years ago – not sure - and that of course has en-suite rooms for all the residents.

23:47 JR: Yes, it meets current regulations of course.

23:49 JY: yes, and computer rooms and all sorts of things that weren’t envisaged.

23:57 JR: And despite the name change recently would you say that the Cheshire spirit lives on?

24: 06 JY: I think a lot is missing actually. The heads of homes used to be people, mainly people with some sort of nursing experience or social things, now the “managers” are seen to be more interested in “managing” then perhaps caring. I must be careful what I say.

24:35 JR: Well despite that Joan, and thank you very much this has been very useful to compare and contrast your experiences in Predannack and Gerrard’s Cross and thank you very much for all the time and effort over the years and indeed for today. Thank you.

24:52 JY: Thank you.

24:53: Speech ends

24:54: End of recording

End of Transcription