

Gadgets, Film and Liberation

The *Le Court* Film Unit, 1955-1968

An award-winning radical film unit of disabled people, England



Filming of Therasa Curtis

Summary

Four disabled people set up their own film unit in the 1950s. They were originally living on open wards in a residential home in southern England and interested in independent living. As part of their campaign they made short films with minimal equipment and won international awards.

They called themselves the Le Court Film Unit, taking the name of the institution they were living in at the time, running the unit as a co-operative and making films from 1955 to 1968. Some or all of the original film prints are now stored in the British Film Institute (BFI) national film archive.

These short films were ground-breaking because they showed disabled people in control, and showing other disabled people how to liberate themselves from institutions to live full and independent lives. The messages included many practical suggestions, but also gave a political context.

Barbara Beasley, the scriptwriter, publicised in her narrations the radical idea of disabled people living together as couples, and the strains and sometimes breakups in relationships and marriages when one of a couple becomes disabled.

At Home with Le Court, 1955

The first film was made by a small group of residents and one staff: including Neville Thomas, Ann Hughes, Alan (Al) Finch, the warden, and Ted Sleaman. It shows a typical day for residents of the institution and the move from an old house, shown being demolished, to a new building. A copy was held in the TSW Film and TV Archive, which in 1993 became the South West Film and TV Archive, SWFTA, based in Plymouth.

It was shown extensively by Leonard Cheshire during his fundraising talks, including a tour he made of India where the film was shown so often it became worn out. The film includes a segment on a visit by the Queen Mother to Le Court.

The film was made using the amateur format of 9.5mm, a short film, silent with a few captions, in both monochrome and colour segments, and with minimal editing. The amateur cameras were typically clockwork driven, also known as 'spring-wound.'

The 9.5mm film format wasn't suitable for most projectors because it was shot as silent at 16 frames a second but the standard playback once audio

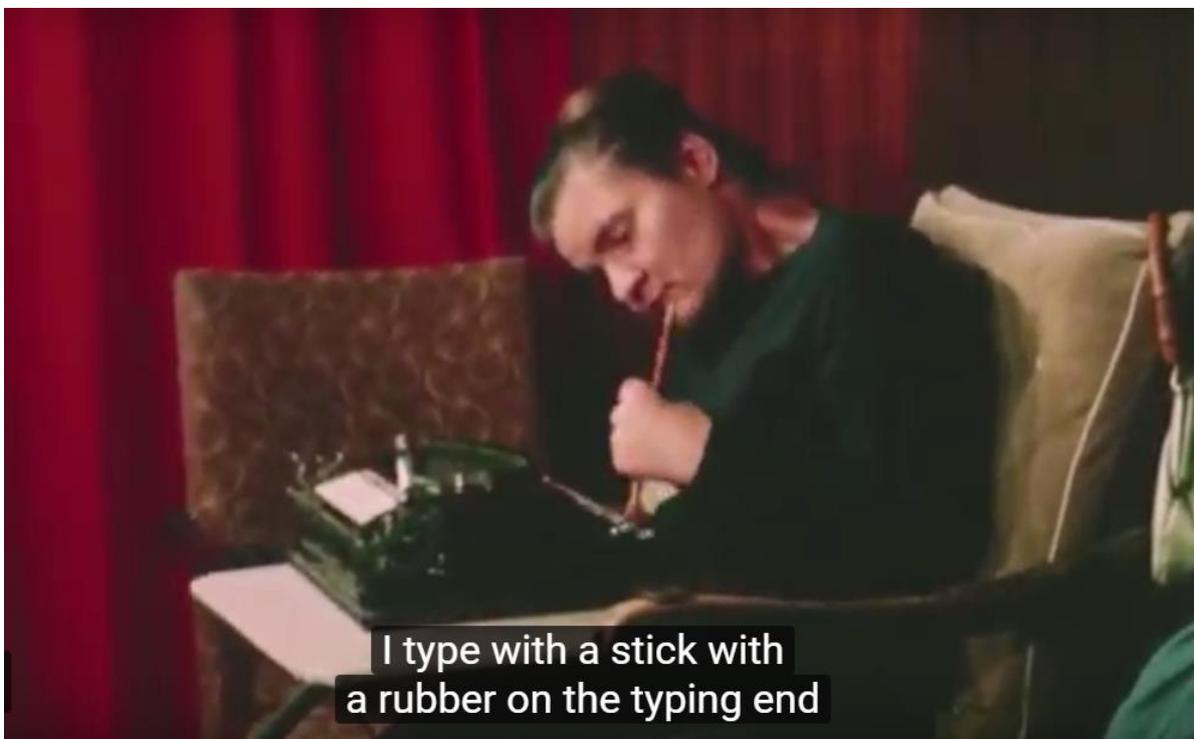
had been added was 24 frames a second, or 25 frames a second if used for TV. People who were filmed walking looked silly when seen at the speeded up rate, but wheelchair users just looked more energetic.

The unit's core film crew

The film, *At Home with Le Court*, was well received by audiences, and as a result Neville and three other disabled residents became the core of the Le Court Film Unit, an informal co-operative. The four people were:

- Barbara Beasley (later: Lloyd-Evans) (scriptwriter, narrator, production office),
- Brian Line (sound, co-editor),
- Laurie Mawer (camera, lighting), and
- Neville Thomas (founder, producer / director, co-editor).

The co-editing was necessary because it involved a mixture of Neville Thomas doing the heavy lifting of reels of film, along with Brian Line doing the more intricate editing work.



Barbara Beasley, scriptwriter (No Limit screenshot, captioned)

Living Proof, February 1962

This was the unit's second film, the first made by the core crew. Unlike the previous film by Neville Thomas and others, the format was 16mm using a basic camera. After being shot, the exposed film was taken into the village to Boots' chemists for developing. Much of the unit's early work was helped by having its filming costs supported by some unofficial credit for their stock of film worth £70 from the local staff at Boots', on the basis that the unit would pay up before the periodic stock-take run by head office. The film took between three and four years to make.

Living in the nearby small town of Liss was a BBC documentary producer, Ian Curtis, who became involved with the unit. Ian had previously been the producer of the BBC TV programme **Pathfinder** about Cheshire Homes. His first piece of advice was to get rid of all the shots that were out of focus, which meant 20 minutes of raw filming needing to be thrown away.

Brian Line described the Living Proof film as having "a simple sort of script, no shot directions or camera angles, or any fancy stuff, just simple notes on what we'd like to take."

Barbara Beasley was the narrator, and she would travel in her wheelchair by train (probably in the unheated guard's van sat beside all the luggage) from Liss to London to visit a BBC department to record the soundtracks. Her bedroom was also used by the unit as an editing suite.

Paul Hunt wrote a review of the film for the Cheshire Smile magazine in Summer 1962, pages 59 and 60. He doesn't hold back, finding the clips on Farnborough Air Show "irrelevant" and some of the commentary "somewhat doctrinaire". So his praise is all the more effective.

"For me, Living Proof goes a long way towards justifying an existence on a 'liberal' kind of organization for our communities. I am convinced of the intimate connection between the obvious happiness and vitality of the people in the film, and the various 'privileges' we have come to take for granted at Le Court. ... For the first time ever, probably, people with disabilities who are mainly on the receiving end of 'charity', have been able to show how things appear to them. They have presented to the world a picture of what being disabled looks like and feels like, **from the inside**, as it were." (emphasis in original) Paul Hunt, 1962.

It was funded by jumble sales and dances organised by local friends of the members of the co-operative to cover its cost of £150. Living Proof was the

first of their films to win an award – three stars – in the Amateur Cine World competition in 1962.

Brian Line remarked that winning this award “did more for our sense of achievement ... to go on making another film than anything else.”



Living Proof, title frame (screenshot from film)

No Limit, 1964

“Given the tools, there is no limit to what disabled people can do.”

“There is an urgency in the drive to find new ways of doing things.”

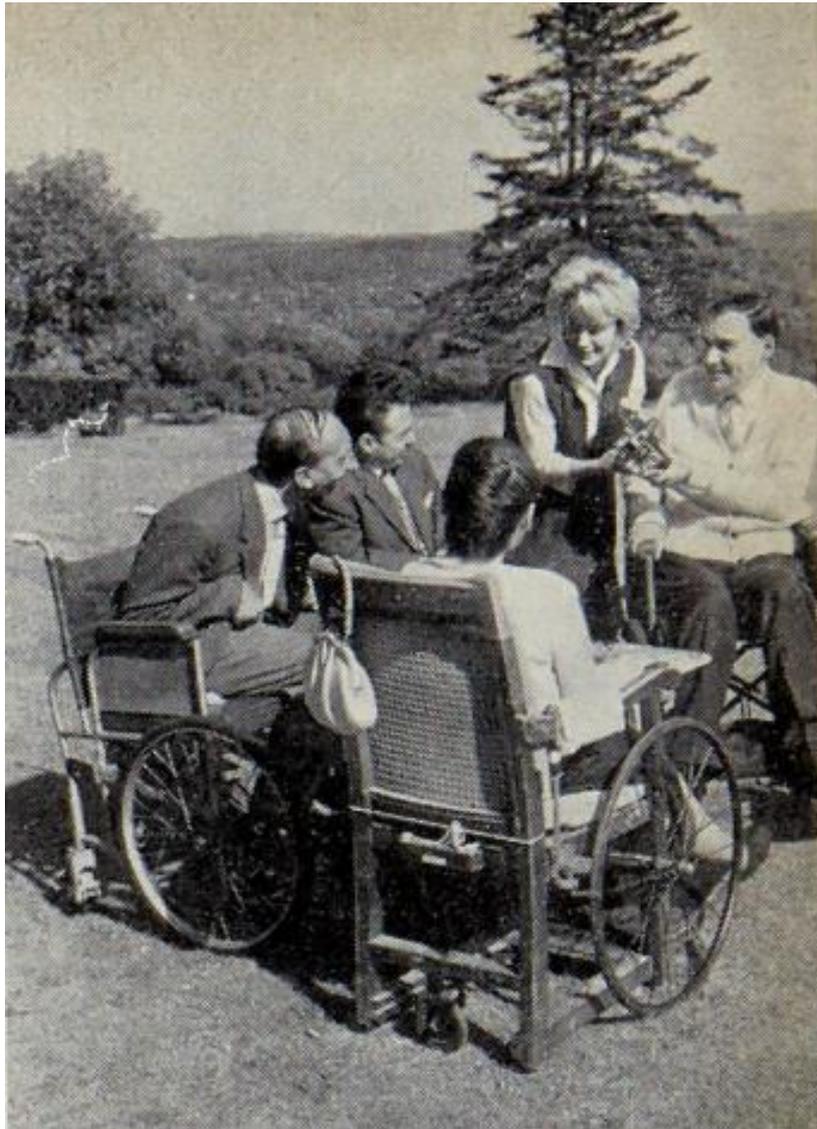
“Disability is a challenge to society.”

These extracts from the narration in this film show a move by the members of the film unit to be more political in their productions.

Around 1962 Mai Zetterling became the LCFU President. She was a celebrity film actor and director who lived nearby and knew Ian Curtis. Brian Line said that having her name on the headed notepaper helped, for example they could get trade discounts.

This film was made at Le Court on ‘gadgets’ or equipment and adaptations that can help disabled people live independently. Its higher technical quality was made possible in 1962 when a firm of professional camera makers, Bell & Howell Ltd, were persuaded by Mai Zetterling to donate a high-quality 16mm camera to the unit. Although the camera was suited to a small crew, the same

format was also used for larger-scale TV outside location work, continuing until professional quality video tape cameras becoming available.



The Le Court Film Unit members being presented with their new camera by their President, Mai Zetterling (in Cheshire Smile, Winter 1962, page 45)

The film included a contemporary account of people building electric wheelchairs which had two motors, and had a fine touch-sensitive control, possibly the first of their type in the UK. Previously powered wheelchairs were designed like small three-wheel cars, with a single motor and a tiller bar to steer the front wheel. These could not be manoeuvred easily indoors and needed the disabled person to have strong arms and upper body to steer. Wheelchairs with twin motors could turn on their axis, and could be controlled by a lightweight joystick using a fingertip.

The film credits (in the narration) a group of volunteers called **Independence Unlimited** who are non-disabled engineers and similarly interested people who visited Le Court and help disabled people there design and create 'gadgets' for independent living such as powered door openers.

The film No Limit was awarded a Silver Cup at the Rehabilitation Film Festival 1964 in Rome, organised by the International Federation of Disabled Workers and Civilian Handicapped.



Filming Albert Baker, disabled painter, note the camera and tripod mounted on wheelchair arm (left)

(Picture: Leonard Cheshire Disability, Rewind archive)

Challenge, 1965

This film was the second one on 'gadgets' for independent living, with narration by Ronald Travers with comparisons between daily living tasks for disabled and non-disabled people.

For some sections of this film the unit visited the Daily Living Research Unit (DLRU) at what had previously been 'a polio unit' and known as the Mary Marlborough Lodge, then the Mary Marlborough Rehabilitation Centre, before becoming the DLRU. The building is now part of the Nuffield Orthopaedic Hospital, in Headington, Oxford.

Sylvia, a disabled woman and wheelchair user, is filmed showing how she uses a self-controlled electric overhead hoist to transfer herself between her wheelchair and a lavatory.

Around this time the unit was contacted by a film distributor, the Concord Film Council Ltd, with a proposed 50:50 revenue share, which the unit accepted. According to the British Universities Film and Video Council website, the Concord Film Council was –

“Originally started as [an organization for the] 16mm film collection of material on the anti-nuclear weapon activities in Britain and elsewhere in the 1960s. The collection widened to include sociology, arts and general education ...”

This distribution deal could have been helped by Mai Zetterling, who in 1962 had directed the film *The War Game* on the threat of nuclear war.

Words Without Hands, c.1968

This was the final film made by the unit's core group and it highlighted some new methods of reading, writing and communicating that were being piloted by disabled people with high levels of impairment, such as adapted typewriters and page turners for books.

This film was narrated by Robert Robinson, and was financed with a commission from the wonderfully-named Writing and Reading Aids for the Paralysed committee, itself part of the National Fund for Research into Crippling Diseases.

This film was made with a professional camera operator, the equipment generally having become too heavy and too fiddly for the unit members to use. At this time the unit members were also be drawn into new ventures, especially fundraising for new building work.

The cost of making the film was £275, contributed to by sponsorship from the Central Council for the Disabled, which had a Disabled Living Activities Group in the 1960s with Barbara Stow as its Director.

Maybe Today

By this point the unit had stopped working as a group, and Brian Line had gone on to work as a professional film maker. From around 1978, and

working with Nick Dance, a student non-disabled film maker, Brian Line over time assembled film crews of typically four non-disabled people and made several films relating to Le Court and disabled people generally. Nick Dance was in his third and final year on a film course at West Surrey College of Art and initially was able to work with Brian Line as a project as well as borrowing filming equipment from the college.

The first of these films was *Maybe Today*, a musical documentary about the building of a new wing at Le Court.

Brian Line said later (in an interview in the BBC documentary also called, *Challenge*), that the rest of the former unit members had “mixed feelings” about his *Maybe Today* film. “It didn’t go down too well.”



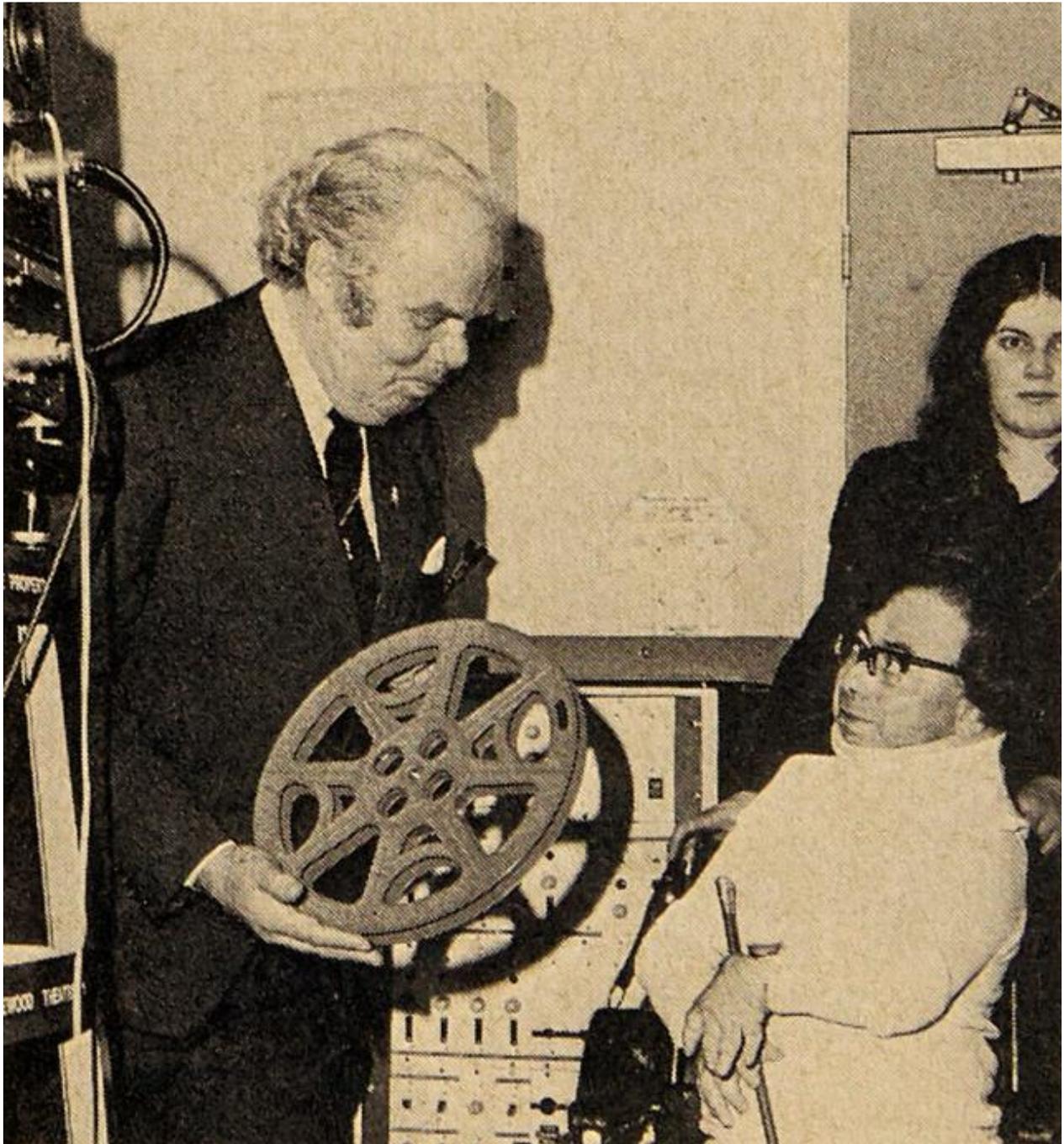
Brian Line (left) and Nick Dance

(Picture: Leonard Cheshire Disability, Rewind archive)

Challenge, 1979 (BBC documentary)

The 'Challenge' title was also used for a BBC TV documentary interview of Brian Line which included some clips from the unit's films. The interviewer was Robert Robinson and it was first broadcast in 1979.

A document with an audio transcript of this programme is available online, produced as part of the Rewind project for assembling the archives of Leonard Cheshire Disability funded by the National Lottery.



(Brian Line, seated, in Cheshire Smile, Summer 1974, page 17)

Filmography

1. **At Home with Le Court**, 1955, 9.5mm, silent, monochrome.
2. **Living Proof**, 1961, 16mm, narrated, colour, 25min.
(Award: Three Stars, Amateur Cine World magazine competition, 1962)
3. **No Limit**, 1964, 16mm, narrated, 20min.
(Award: Silver Cup, Rehabilitation Film Festival, Rome, 1964)
4. **Challenge**, 1965, 16mm, narrated, 25min.
5. **Words Without Hands**, c.1968, 16mm, narrated by Robert Robinson.

And after LCFU, by Brian Line with Nick Dance:

6. **Maybe Today**, musical documentary with Frank Hennig, 12min.
7. **I've Got Wheels**, 1979, 19min.
8. **Challenge**, 1979 (BBC documentary), 29min.
9. **It Could Happen to You**, 1980, 40min.
Made for the International Year of Disabled People, 1981, and premiered at the Shell Centre's company film theatre in central London with Lord Snowden. Later broadcast on BBC TV.
10. **Hope**, 1981, funded by the International Spinal Research Trust, 18min.

Digital copies of many of the earlier films, including captioned versions, are available online within the **Rewind** archive website, and some are also available on YouTube.

Background notes:

Disability and politics

From the 1950s onwards many of the disabled residents at Le Court didn't like living in the institution and they wanted to live independently in the community, a radical idea at the time. For reasons which the institution's managers and trustees never really could understand, Le Court turned out to be a hotbed of radicalism for many of the residents. Paul Hunt was a founder of UPIAS (the **Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation**) with his campaigning letter published in The Guardian national newspaper in 1972 and the subsequent development of the social model of disability. This thinking from UPIAS still underpins the disabled people's movement in the UK today.

Other UPIAS members living there included John Evans, a leading light in the independent living movement internationally as well as in the UK, and with Philip Mason leading the pioneering **Project 81** scheme for independent living, nicknamed "the escape committee" by Ian Drury, plus establishing Hampshire **Centre for Independent Living**, a pioneer organisation for the CIL movement in the UK along with Derbyshire CIL.

Leonard Cheshire

The Le Court 'home' or institution was run by the Leonard Cheshire Foundation, later called Leonard Cheshire Disability (LCD). The residential institution was founded after the Second World War by Group Captain Leonard Cheshire (1917-1992), a philanthropist who had been an airman who fought in the war and was on an observer plane for the dropping of an atomic bomb on people in Nagasaki, Japan in 1945.

Rewind archive project

Around 2015 Leonard Cheshire Disability gained a National Lottery grant for their archives project, called Rewind. The LCFU was fairly briefly written about as part of this project, and the original film prints are now held in the British Film Institute (BFI) national film archive.

As part of Rewind, in 2016 LCD organised a recording with Nick Dance as an **oral history** to find out more about his experiences of working with Brian Line and his visits to Le Court.

<https://rewind.leonardcheshire.org/object/archive-oral-histories-nick-dance/>

The Rewind archive is of items (other than film) spanning the first 70 years of LCD. It is located in Derbyshire at Newlands House, DE12 8DA.

Disabled Living Foundation

The Central Council for the Disabled sponsored another film, **Matter of Opportunity**, made in 1966 with Richard Baker as the narrator. It was made by the Photographic Department of the Royal Society of Medicine, and is now kept in the BFI's national film archive.

In the mid-1960s the Central Council for the Disabled reportedly appointed England's first access officer "to promote the idea that buildings should be accessible to wheelchair users." It was founded in 1919 as the Central Council for the Care of Cripples; and in 1984 became the Disabled Living Foundation (DLF), which is not an organisation controlled by disabled people.

Digitised copies

Some years later, after Laurie Mawer had died, his partner Martha Leat forwarded some digitised copies of the unit's films to Judy Hunt, who in turn passed them on to the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP).

Further research

Any further details including corrections are very welcome. This pamphlet is very much a work in progress.

Tony Baldwinson

Manchester, December 2018

v6

Le Court Film Unit

How it all began

The Le Court Film Unit started about 18 years ago when one resident, Neville Thomas, made a black and white 9.5 film about Le Court. It was virtually unedited and had no sound track, but it had a compulsion of its own. This film disappeared on one of Group Captain Cheshire's visits to India.

In 1958 four of the residents, including Neville Thomas, formed a co-operative film unit. All are in wheelchairs and have impaired hands. Each did several jobs. This was completely self-supporting and independent except for the invaluable help of a BBC documentary producer who acted as Adviser. The first film, *Living Proof*, took four years to make, was financed by jumble sales and dances, cost £150, and won a three star award in the Amateur Cine World competition in 1962.

This film gives a vivid picture of life in the original Cheshire Home, Le Court. While not perfect technically, its warmth and humanity make it attractive to any audience. Three star award, Amateur Cine World Competition, 1962. Colour. 25 minutes. Rental £1.45.

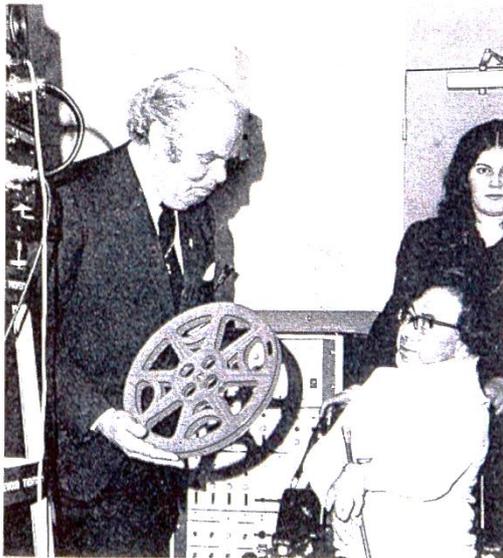
The second film, *No Limit*, costing £275 was financed by a charitable foundation. The Unit had gained enough expertise to win it a silver cup at the International Film Festival on Rehabilitation in Rome in 1964. The quality of the colour was infinitely better. A 16mm camera had been donated, and the members were much more confident about camera work, editing, commentary

writing and sound editing. It is about some of the specialised gadgets evolved at Le Court to solve individual problems. The gadgets were designed and made by voluntary helpers. Awarded silver cup, International Film Festival on Rehabilitation, Rome, 1964. Colour. 20 minutes. Rental £1.45.

Surprisingly no films had previously been made about gadgets for disabled people, so *No Limit* and the two subsequent films, *Challenge* and *Words Without Hands*, were all about gadgetry. This seemed the only subject the Film Unit could usefully exploit. *Challenge* contrasts the ease with which members of an ordinary family eat, drink, wash, shave, make up and move about, with the ingenuity necessary for disabled people to do the same things. Gadgets and techniques, some simple, some complex. Colour. 25 minutes. Rental £1.25. While *Words Without Hands*, commissioned by the Writing and Reading Aids for the Paralysed Committee of the National Fund for Research into Crippling Diseases is not unexpectedly, about writing and reading aids. Narrator, Robert Robinson. Colour. 16 minutes. Rental £1.20.

The building of the new West Wing at Le Court provided Brian Line, one of the other members, with a unique opportunity to make *Maybe Today*. A documentary with music about a community's search for individual privacy, and the building of a new wing of 18 single rooms at Le Court to achieve it. Commentary by Frank Hennig. Colour. 12 minutes. Rental £1.20.

Further information from Brian Line at Le Court, Liss, Hants.



Mote House Cheshire Home

On 10th November the residents with the help of the House Committee ran a coffee morning for the Cheshire Home in Manila, the attendance was staggering, and it gave us great pleasure in sending a cheque for £100 to this Home.

Mayfayre, 11th May

This is always a big day for us, and this year we welcomed Sheila Hancock and her daughter, they both endeared themselves to all residents and public. Our big draw made a record profit of £728.

Maurice Byass

17

Extract from Cheshire Smile, Summer 1974, page 17