



A voice for our village

Video Interview with Lord Cavendish

Richard Hugh Cavendish, Baron Cavendish of Furness,
born 2 November 1941, Lord Cavendish ('LC')

Interviewer : Anna Maria Ashe ('AA')

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AA Lord Cavendish, it's delightful to have been invited into Holker Hall to greet you. Is it Holker or Hooker, or ...

LC Well, the older maps say H double O K E R. We're comfortable with anything, and whatever. It's certainly known locally as Holker, but it's come down to us as Hooker, and I think that's probably what/how the old Norse word was, which was Hooker meaning a rise in marshy ground. A pretty apt description.

AA It's quite marshy is it, quite wet ?

LC You know what the weather is. [both laugh] [AA : Hardly a surprise] And of course the sea came much closer, before my ancestors built the railway to Barrow.

AA You're talking what year ?

LC When were the railways ... 1790, 1800, something like that.

AA It's quite special to talk to somebody who has such strong roots, anywhere, and obviously particularly here today talking to [1 min] you. And I wonder what that does for you, as a man, having spent so much of your life here, and having had to dedicate so much of yourself to this wonderful place. And I'm sure incorporated in that was a lot of duty. But what did it do to you as a person to feel such a strong sense of belonging.

LC Good question, because I think I feel like a hefted sheep, really belonging, but I'm not alone in that. I would say that it's an English characteristic, perhaps more so than a Scottish or Welsh characteristic, and I think certainly more than a continental characteristic. We ... you find in this neighbourhood people have actually been longer around than me, [laughs] who really do have Norse origins, and really feel belonging. [2 mins] But anyway, yes, I do feel belonging. And yes, it's kept me prisoner in one sense. But then there's a downside to everything, I mean, I've never regarded it as ... as a particular negative. Certainly, throughout our life here, we might have been said to have missed out on things by having been ... totally belonging here. Of course, belonging here hasn't stopped me doing work. [laughs] I've been travellers, and one thing and another, and I still have, and love having, my sort of London fix. But, you're quite right. Here is what I yearn for absolutely, [AA : When you are away from it] and it's ... it is a very very powerful feeling too. It's strange. But I've never encountered it so strongly in other countries.

AA So you think it's a particularly English thing ?

- LC I do rather. And I think it's partly [3 mins] cultural and political too, in the sense that unlike most other regimes, we've been very associated with land, and in this year of Magna Carta, property rights and so on, it's something that's quite firmly in our DNA.
- AA Reading about you, I'm very struck with the ... with this idea of the young man, 31 I believe when you actually inherited the estate. And I just think, what were your actual dreams then, or what was the life you were pursuing, and what did you have to take on ? And was that when duty really hit hard, or were you travelling along all your life believing one day I'm going to have to do this, but probably not expecting it to happen ... your father died very young, didn't he ?
- LC Also, I wasn't by any means certain that ... [4 mins] that I was going to inherit. I mean, it was a likelihood in the normal course of events, but there were choices. I ... and also I had my problems, and I was drinking too much and I was quite wild, and so on. So there would have been a perfectly good excuses for me not to ... to give it to me. And ... but I did have to clean my act up. [laughs] But I felt belonging, regardless of whether it was going to be .. to possession, as it were.
- AA So in a way, was it a gift to you at that time of your life, when there were these problems as you rightly say. It was ... was it a drink ...
- LC It was. Very strong weakness in my family, and ... and even then, it took me still another year to sort of get help and sort it out.
- AA So was it the gift ... was it the trigger that you needed to change course ?
- LC Very interesting that. I don't quite know. [5 mins] With addiction, you have to decide at some point to take responsibility for your life.
- AA But very often, they say, that something happens [LC : Yes] to you in life, something will arrive at the door where you just have to think differently, [LC : That's right] and face up to where you are.
- LC That's right. And it became increasingly clear that one couldn't make a go of it without giving it ... giving it everything.
- AA So you wanted to make a go of it. [LC : Oh yes, yes] So there was no dilemma really, [LC : No] as to whether you were fit for it at the time ?
- LC And I remember, when you ... the minute I knew that my father was gone, and I was going to take it ... take over, that ... there was no sort of questioning it. You didn't sort of say will I, won't I. And of course, that's in a way the downside, and the new generation are less ... less sort of certain about that, I think. They ... quite a lot of people say 'no thanks', or ...
- AA What, because they have a greater sense of what [6 mins] they want in their life ... they feel they have a greater choice, or ... ?
- LC Yes. I think also careers are narrower, and more specialist in a way. And a great feature of my 42 years, or whatever it was, at Holker [pronounced Hooker], is the variety. It's the businesses,

the enterprises, the house, the collection, the garden, but also the public side. Because I don't really believe any of us [are] entirely private people. I mean, I think ...

AA Are you talking about your family ?

LC No, no. I think ... I think really our system of government and everything only works if everyone is, in a way, a little bit of a participant.

AA You're really talking about community then, in a way ?

LC Community, public life, service, I mean, being a school governor, whatever it is. I don't think ... in fact I think the great trouble of the present age is that [7 mins] people are being squeezed out of that. There are other simple levels of government. I ask people locally why they aren't on the Parish Council, 'cos they've always been in the past, and they say regulation farms[?], or overwhelmed by the outside pressures of life. When you ask people why they're not school governors any more, they say they're always sending to be retrained. Well, it's taken out the ... the sort of independent free mind ... free spirited person from local life, I think.

AA I'm just thinking about this ... the importance of participating, and of course, that's been your life.

LC I've loved the participation as a sort of fact. I mean, perhaps it's a political gene in me, but I've never had any political ambition. I've never wanted to get to the top. And that's 'come rather rare. And I think actually democracy needs an element of the backbencher, the person who doesn't necessarily want [8 mins] to always be in the cabinet. Today's politicians get elected and they feel they ought to be promoted by Wednesday week. And it doesn't really work, that. So participation, locally, as I say, my lazy temperament would have had me doing very little. But in fact one got drawn in out of curiosity, out of people saying would you do this that and the other. And so, apart from being the major local land owner round Cartmel in particular, we've impacted in different ways. Firstly, in the church itself. I was for many years the sole patron, and therefore I used to have to argue the toss solo with the bishop as to who should be appointed vicar there. And I took that very seriously. I used to go round the country hearing, feeling the atmosphere in the congregations and parishes where people had applied from. Not always easy, very [9 mins] expensive, very time consuming, [laughs] but anyway, that's changed now, probably slightly for the better with a team ministry. And then I did stand for election and served two terms as a local councillor. And local government then was pretty raw, and quite rough. There was a lot of shouting, and highly political, and tremendous political differences in the council. But I did make terrific friends. Funny enough, particularly on the left. Sort of, we used to have sort of terrific bantering conversation with the Marxists from Barrow. [laughs] Holker [pronounced Hooker] impacts ... the estate impacts on the local area in quite a number of ways – agriculture, timber growing, tourism, and then of course more recently, under [10 mins] our control, has been the racecourse.

AA So how recent is the racecourse ?

- LC Well, the racecourse has always been ... the track itself was always owned by Holker [pronounced Hooker], but my father wasn't interested, and I was, and rather recklessly invited myself to become part of it. And they ... it was run by that tribe of military people mainly, after the war, who did so much to keep British institutions alive. And they stomped around making ...[?] and shouting, but in fact they kept us all going. And I remember all the things I was involved with – annual general meetings in sub-zero village halls in February, and there's be all the generals and majors and things who saved us all in the war. So I've come to respect that group. Anyway, they ran the racecourse, at [11 mins] considerable risk to themselves, and then when they got too old to do it, I took it over.
- AA OK. So how differently would it be run now then, from those days ?
- LC I think the general weren't very good at money, so it's probably a bit more business like. I've tried to keep the best of our traditions and sort of build on it, and it's a ... it's a strange thing which happens again and again in everything that happens here at Holker [pronounced Hooker], everything needs investment, and yet you could spoil things. You could become too corporate, a bit spivvish, a bit sort of ...
- AA What tempers the decisions then, [LC : Well, I think ...] how do you keep that balance ?
- LC It's a ... it's terribly ... it's not always easy, to be sort of modern, and invest, ... how to avoid spoiling things. I look at Cartmel and say, what must I do not to spoil it. And funnily enough, I think [12 mins] reflection plays a lot of part in that. What are the real values here ? What are the values to local people ? What are the values ... what's adding to the community, and all those sorts of things ?
- AA So you are always open to discussion, [LC : Absolutely] or your personal reflection ? No, you will reflect with others ?
- LC Reflect, personally reflect with others, yes. And to that extent I think our whole tradition of consultation and so on works reasonably well. I mean, there'd be certain things that everyone locally approves of what we do, but as I say, open to discussion. I mean, I remember once we had a little ... the very early days of big problems of affordable housing, here in the local village we thought we'd produce a cheap house for local people, because the school was under threat, everything was sort of ...[?], and I remember someone coming to me and saying "but you can't do that, we'll have washing lines and working [13 mins] class children and ...". I said, to quote, that's just what we're wanting to invigorate. And there was a bad moment in rural England when there was a mismatch culturally between those of us who had always lived here, and the people who came in from outside. And one of the wonderful things which happened in my lifetime : those interests have merged, and we've understood the value of investment coming in, and they've understood that they've actually ... don't understand everything in the country straight away themselves. And I think that's ... the English countryside is much more united, much more contented than it ever was. In a way, our rural communities are ... are happier in that sense than they used to be.
- AA Are you passionate about racing ?

- LC Curiously enough ... more in theory than not. Something wistful [14 mins] to me is that I have never understood it, like I might understand horticulture, and I mix with people who do. And I listen to this extraordinary sense of partnership that real racing people have, and I don't have that, and I've never done it. And I've ... it's some thing I feel a little bit sad about, that I've just missed out on something, and I have an idea it may be a gift that I just don't have. But ... first of all, I'm only really interested in jump racing, and I think the beauty of that, and where it fits into the estate is, it is ... covers absolutely every walk of life. I mean, you'll find Roman Catholic bishops on the racecourse, you'll find ... everybody. And so it's a terrific unifier, that. And also it's a world of heroism, in the sense that, [15 mins] quite often during the racing calendar, in jumps, a farmer without very much money has trained on a horse which then goes and wins a terrific race.
- AA It's just a feeling of a very small community, working together, that you have a very large part to play, or the Cavendish family. Obviously, your daughter is ... is at the helm now.
- LC She is, she is. I defer to her in all matters. [AA laughs] I'm very happy to. [both laugh]
- AA All yours, darling !
- LC All yours. I'm here if you need me. And that's been the attitude of Grania [his wife] and myself.
- AA And that moment, when that moment arrives, is it ... is it ... is it just about each party being ready for that moment ? Are you waiting for that moment to arrive, or is it [LC : Tremendously carefully planned] just ...[?] as the days come ?
- LC No, tremendously carefully planned. But I mean ...
- AA So unlike ... unlike your [16 mins] story, [LC : Yes] and your father's story, [LC : Yes] because he inherited about the same time/age as you, no ? He was quite a young man ...
- LC Yes, I mean, his story was ... problem was that my grandfather was a sort of Edwardian figure with no understanding of money, so he got ... he accumulated huge debts, but not through sort of grandeur and being spoilt. He was so scruffy that the King used to tick him off when in London for wearing his medals he wrong way round.
- AA I believe your father inherited at a very young age as well.
- LC Well yes. People of course didn't live so long then, my grandfather wasn't particularly young by the standards, but my father was very young and had ... and you've got to remember of course also there was the war, and he came back without any experience of [17 mins] what to do here. I mean, a young bride, and came to an estate which had the problems of very very long standing debt, which went on all through his life, and for 20 years into our time here, so it was a sort of problem we had to deal with, and ... and also a very hostile political climate. So he had death duties, high taxation ...
- AA So this was when ... this was what year ?
- LC This would have been '47.

- AA '47, OK. And you came, I was going to say to the throne, [laughs] you ... what's the terminology ... [LC : It's the nearest] there's no other term for ... it's not a seat, it's a ... So you would have inherited, what, 1972, so [LC : Yes] the socio economic story would have been [18 mins] interesting then as well ?
- LC Well it was. And we had even more hostile political climate. And I don't think people realise how Harold Wilson presided over a cabinet which was very nearly Marxist in a lot of it's composition, and there was a huge sympathy then for Russian Communism and so on. It was strange times, looking back. I've always given credit for Harold Wilson for sort of having held the line.
- AA And as a land owner, how did that story backdrop impact on you ?
- LC Well, I'll tell you an interesting thing there politically which was : we still had disproportionate influence, the landed interests and agriculture. The House of Commons was still full of not only land owners, but yeoman farmers and things, and of course the House of Lords was as well. And [19 mins] people talked about The Establishment then rather more than they do now. And it was quite a rigid affair. And if one is fair about this, particularly to the left of English politics, is that one had a lot of power even when the land owning party was out of power, because you knew all the civil servants, they belonged to the same clubs and things like ... So The Establishment was a very real thing. It was one of Tony Blair's achievements to break that up. [laughs]
- AA How do you think he did that ?
- LC Well I think ... I think by ... by appointments. Whether it was cultural ... I mean there must have been some deliberate thing about it. But I think there was something socially unjust about the pockets of ... pockets of influence that there used to be. So, I think one survived the Wilson-Callaghan years as a land owner with [20 mins] difficulty. I mean 98% taxation is a high thing, but somehow came through it. I've always regarded it as a blessing to me – it taught me how to work ! [laughs]
- AA It was a blessing. How very different, your daughter taking up the reins at this stage. Last November I believe she has taken on the estate. I suppose there's a slow handing over, or ...
- LC There's a lot of planning. We strengthened and expanded management, to give her the maximum flexibility, and for a slight feeling that she, who has been a professional artist, needn't be quite so day-to-day as we were. I tell you what my worry is, looking back, even married with/to somebody [21 mins] who was hugely involved, and with whom one could talk over every problem. When you get a disparate estate with so many people involved, and their worries and their anxieties and their feelings generally, you ... one becomes very conscious that you've got to be around, constantly vigilant, and when things go wrong, it's strangely lonely. And she hasn't got a husband, although that might change. But she ... it's ... when one wheel comes off, it's fairly routine, when two or three come off at the same time, you feel very very isolated, and ...
- AA But she has you.

- LC Yes, well, that's the hope, and also she has a very strong management team.
- AA So that backup ... having that in place [LC : Yes] for her, was ... was the means for going forward, in a way.
- LC You know we've invested very heavily in ... in getting better management. I mean it's made me rather regret that I haven't had sort of ... [22 mins] that sooner, really.
- AA And is it a very different place now for her to take on than it was ... obviously there's been huge development and investment but ... but the ... the feeling of Holker [pronounced Hooker], is it very different, to your day ?
- LC I think I'd be more surprised by how much it's the same, other than by how much it's changed. And, I might say that with an element of pride, because I do think ... the continuity. And I don't think you can totally apply to a landed estate all the normal business measurements. I think some things you've got to decide are worth while doing well, even if they don't make a lot of money. I mean, horse racing isn't designed to be a very profitable thing, but we wanted to be part of the community, we know it [23 mins] adds to the local economy, it gives a lot of enjoyment, we ... you know, lots of other things besides that. And through it we meet a lot of people. And we very often ... business associates come, and our customers for the slate quarries from abroad, and things like that, a unique experience. I mean it's a unique experience for an Englishman, but if you're an American buyer of slate, to come to Cartmel races is ... [laughs]
- AA What a bonus, what a bonus, yes.
- LC So ... so I think, there isn't a hard nosed figure, like the head of some great big multinational company, saying "you will make x return on everything, and stop doing that it doesn't make enough money", and I think that there are some things which could be described as loss leaders. Not many. I mean, there's nothing much wrong with the market place, and there's nothing much wrong with being [24 mins] modern and efficient,