

# Doris Towers and St. Crispin Hospital.



## The diary of Doris Towers.

**Doris Towers, née Doris Richards, was born in Northampton in 1899. She was admitted to St Crispin's Hospital, then known as Berrywood, in 1924 and stayed there until her death in 1963. Not much is known about her beyond the story told by the contents of her trinket box, holding her few personal possessions. Kept at the Northamptonshire Records Office, the box holds 24 red glass buttons, a set of silver earrings, and a small journal. Largely consumed by mould and mice, only parts of this journal remain legible. What does remain gives us a glance at life in a place about which little is known.**

In the 1920's Berrywood, conveniently hidden from sight by several acres of woodlands, functioned as the pauper asylum for Northamptonshire. In spite of its dire conditions (rooms with daylight were scarce), Berrywood seems to have been a lively place if we go by the remains of Doris' journal. Stolen pianos were played at night, singing would occasionally burst from the darkest corners. Berrywood in those days seems to have been a place of both wild hearts and grief.

Little is known about the circumstances surrounding Doris' arrival at St Crispin's, but we do know she was hounded to the grounds of the asylum by a Lewbelling crowd following an episode in which she proudly walked the streets of Northampton for three days donning her beloved home-made Lady of Hearts Costume, which may have been perceived as either threatening or lewd. It appears that she checked in to St. Crispin's in a frantic state but did so voluntarily, attempting to get away from the crowd until calm returned – only to find out that once in, leaving was difficult.

Doris Towers started her journal approximately 3 weeks into her stay, and continued writing in it until February 1927. Initially she writes almost daily, later on entries become increasingly sporadic. There is an interval of around a year and a half in which no entry is made, possibly due to despondence.

During the time she kept her journal, she underwent several transformations. Frightened and lonely at first, determined to leave, angry at being unable to do so later and in the end just trying to build her own life as well as she could regardless of her circumstances. Though weary of her fellow patients at first, she later on developed several longstanding friendships.

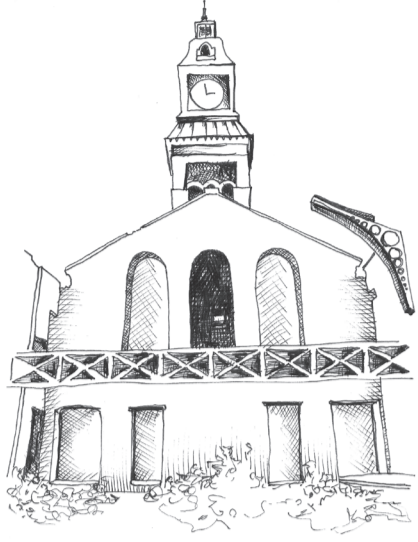
There is much to admire in Doris Towers: her playful eccentricity, her zest for life, her ability to identify herself with an airplane or a tree. Take what you will from these fragments of a hidden life...

Jantine Wijnja, June 2014.

- July 13, 1924  
Every minute someone watches me and nothing is done how I would do it at home. I despise my room and do not want to enter it. It is a prison cell, a very small cell, neutral and empty. It is my only private space, but it isn't mine at all. The bed is a cold metal hospital bed. I see that bed, and panic sloshes through me. No one likes to eat vegetables here.
- July 14, 1924  
Sometimes I scream because my heart is full of fear.
- July 17, 1924  
Nights here are quiet and still. An end-of-the-world-type sensation. This is the end of the road and the end of the line. I keep thinking: this just cannot be my destination. But I'm alone in my bed and there's nowhere to run. People are just like the other animals: a broken paw gets you kicked out of the nest.
- July 18, 1924  
The others here are really weird.
- August 3, 1924  
This place is a book I can't read. There are too many roads running left to the right, up and down. There are so many buildings and people. A story has been written, with a beginning and an end, but there're 26 pages gone in the middle.
- //// Attempted escape and resurfacing  
In September, 1924, Doris Towers attempts to escape several times, by climbing out a window, by hiding herself between loafs of bread, by running or by crawling. Following her final attempt on 20 September in which she folds herself into the laundry cart, she spends several weeks in isolation. She resurfaces on 6 October 1924, but sounding angry and despondent.
- September 17, 1924  
Each night I decide if I stay or if I go. Do I follow the rules or do I leave? So far, I've stayed. I've been close to leaving. My bags are packed. I can go through the window if I must.
- September 18, 1924  
It freaks me out when everyone follows the rules.
- September 19, 1924  
There is so much misunderstanding between politics and psychiatry. Politicians keep on wondering: what on earth are those psychiatric patients all about? And psychiatric patients keep on wondering: what on earth are those politicians all about? And before you know it you are locked away. And that is the problem between politics and psychiatry.
- October 6, 1924  
I'm so mad at myself. I thought I came for a night and I have been stuck here for months now. I can't think about it without getting aggressive. I can't believe I bought into this tosh.
- October 7, 1924  
I have upended everything in my life. I smashed 80 plates and I stole 80 fishbowls. I whored myself out 80 times. I'm a nobody. I can't stand it. I thrashed two record players and I picked three pockets. I've spilled all the coffee. I have thrown all the cakes to the floor. I did all that: I don't know why.
- October 8, 1924  
Whether I am living here or out in the world, I meet nutters everywhere.
- October 9, 1924  
One must fight for one's freedom and not be influenced by voices, images and the arts. There are always those who try to break you. Don't buy into it. Just keep in mind to never fall for the power of money. Even when I was homeless, when I was sleeping in the cold and it was freezing: I was happy even then. I am happy now.
- October 10, 1924  
The loneliest thing here is, one can never be alone. I feel the need to enter the woods without anyone near me. I enjoy eating alone. But we are always together. Alone does not exist. And I miss it...
- October 11, 1924  
One should be free, but one can be so tired. One can walk, but sometimes one is just so tired. In need of a rest. Some rest and some food. A cup of coffee.
- October 12, 1924  
Sometimes, one is tired.
- //// Silence  
Following the entry on 18 October there is silence until the spring of 1926. She seems to have started writing again in May, but the first legible entry is on 6 June.
- June 6, 1926  
Robby, who says everything four times, was in the yard today. He made up a poem:  

What is pretty?  
Nature. Nature. Nature.  
And people, and people, and people.  
Nature and people.  
Houses, houses, houses.  
How they are furnished  
How they are built  
All those beams, all those walls, all that roofing.  
It looks like a war.
- June 7, 1926  
It took some getting used to the others. We all have our own peculiarities, but we understand each other with very little words spoken between us. A glance can be enough. We see each others weaknesses. We just do. At least I do. I know I show my own, and I see also the weakness in others. But we don't belittle each other. We can butcher each other if we must, but we keep on choosing to make the most of it instead.
- June 8, 1926  
I am journeying with a group of very familiar strangers.
- June 10, 1926  
It took me months to make my room really mine. I've placed branches in the windows and hung objects from the branches. I'd like to share this with my new friends, but we are not allowed to receive visits from other patients. We are allowed to receive family members from outside, but visiting is just what our relatives don't do. They think it's too far. They don't know the way.
- //// The end of the journal  
After June 1926, entries become more and more sporadic. The last entry is made on 14 February 1927. There are several blank pages following it: she seems to have just lost interest.
- August 24, 1926  
The rhythm of nature is the rhythm of life. Nature works towards you and settles within you. When things get rough and you feel yourself falling, the rhythm of nature returns to you what you have lost. It strokes your hair like a gentle breeze. The branches of the trees are swaying, the wind envelops your face and your hair. Biology returns to you what has been taken from you.
- February 14, 1927 – final entry  
What is better to be "part of society" or to be "institutionalised"? Both have their advantages. Outside, you are free to say and do as you please - or so it seems, but does that freedom really exist? When I am outside I don't know who is who, what is what. I cannot rely on people being kind. Going outside is a slap in the face, a cold shower. People aren't always nice. And there are so many of them.
- Most of my friends here have been through a lot. We have been prosecuted in society and we've been chased into this place. Now we are being shifted from barrack to barrack. And seek and find support amongst each other (as long as there are no traitors). Yes: we are suppressed. We get medicated. We get isolated. But what I need to remember: it is us that are being protected from society - and not the other way around.

# Celebrating the Uneasy



A how to guide

~~~~ On the night of summer solstice 1924, Doris Towers was chased to St Crispin by a Lewbelling crowd which mocked her by copying her style of dress and behavior. It must have been quite a sight, as she was known for her costumes studded with paper hearts and her love for 'untuning'(singing the lyrics of one song to the tune of another).

~~~~ Doris Towers was a flamboyant person, always interested in derailing the more routine aspects of life, fiercely convinced that one could turn into an airplane if only one tried hard enough.

~~~~ This year at summer solstice, we will use the story of Doris Towers as an anchor for something more: a celebration of all that does not fit easily into our lives. To counter the habit of pasting over or making invisible what we do not comprehend, we will for one night embrace our own awkwardness.

~~~~ Cheering on the uneasy need not, however, be confined to this one occasion: this how-to guide based on some of Doris' favorite pastimes should help you set up your own celebration of the uncomfortable.

## June 21, 1924: Lewbelling and riding the stang



Lewbelling and Riding the Stang were two forms of mob justice aimed at correcting social deviance by 'nagging-out' and ridiculing the offender. Both practices were aimed at those who had strayed from or defied the norm, whether by wife-beating, adultery, or by simply being too eccentric or 'out there.'

Lewbelling and Riding the Stang often went together: the offender would first be 'serenaded' by Lewbelling, the making of hard noises by beating pots, pans and other household appliances. Upon coming out, Riding the Stang commenced: a parade was formed in which one the neighbours mocked the offender by impersonating him or her through copying his or her clothing and behavior. This impersonator was lifted up on poles or in a tub and carried around by the crowd, which was following the offender. In some cases, a straw doll was dressed like the offender and burned. Those who had been the subject of 'Riding the Stang' often moved out or remained ostracised. The last recorded case of Riding the Stang in Northamptonshire took place in 1936.

## June 21, 2014: Return to St. Crispin

On June 21, 2014, we will retrace the route Doris Towers took to St Crispin in 1924. Once again a gang of people will copy her style and character of Doris Towers, but this time in an honorary celebration. Dress up in white cotton studded with red paper hearts, top it off with a dunce cap and join in.

Ways to Celebrate

### Untune.

*"The most important thing in life is music."*

Doris Towers - 30 July, 1925



'Enjoy The Silence' and 'Baby It's Cold Outside' untuned.

Untuning means combining the lyrics of one well-known song with the tune of another. Being a simple way to confuse oneself and make the ordinary extraordinary, untuning was one of Doris' favorite pastimes.

1. Select the songs you wish to combine. Which song do you want for the music?

Which lyrics will you add?

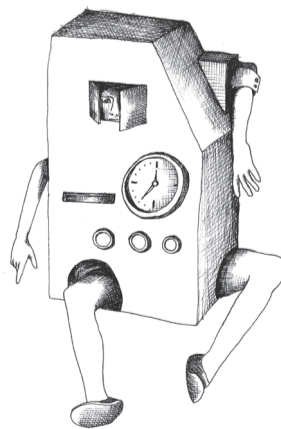
Is there a relation between these songs?

2. Sing.

### Identify with a machine.

*"In this life one must be honest, steadfast, hoping for true love, in possession of strong character. Also, one must use good pseudonyms. The name of another person is a start. But why not work under the guise of an airplane, a machine, or a construction kit? Working under such a guise makes one more flexible. It relaxes the senses. Poetry slaps through your body with a will of its own. All you have to do is open your mouth and let it roll out."*

Doris Towers - 12 June, 1927



To take on the guise of airplane or machine, you must identify with it.

This celebration involves several steps:

1. Select the machine whose guise you wish to take on. If your celebration has multiple participants, select one machine you wish to identify with as a group.

2. Study the machine carefully.

What texture does its surface have?

What goes on inside the machine?

Is it a hard or a soft machine?

What would it feel like to be this machine?

3. Start by making a small movement emulating the machine. It can be as simple as swinging your arm like a propeller.

4. If your celebration has multiple participants, each participant in turn joins in and adds a movement, making one big machine. If you celebrate alone, use the occasion to explore different parts of being the machine by trying out various movements.

5. Add a noise.

Which large and small noises does your machine harbor?

6. Continue being the machine for several minutes. If you feel the need to move, move.

If you are inclined to shift your movements

or your noise, follow the inclination: see where the machine takes you.

7. When you stop being the machine, take the time to evaluate your experience.

### Embrace the Dunce.

*"The art is in wearing it proudly."*

Doris Towers - 19 November, 1926



Doris Towers with her dunce cap.

Doris Towers was known to occasionally wander around wearing a dunce cap, celebrating a status in life she referred to

as "continuous beginner:" someone who, many years in, still does not know what is what. Wearing a dunce cap means saying: I know that I am not an expert at living and will make mistakes, and I am fine with that.

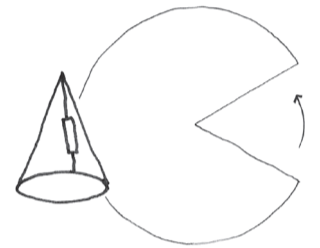
1. Draw a large circle on thick paper or thin cardboard.

2. Cut out your circle, minus a wedge.

3. Fold it around your head in a snug fit, making the edges overlap.

4. Hold the edges in place whilst carefully removing your hat.

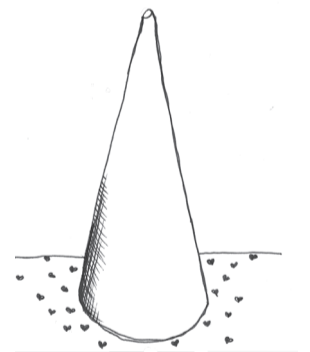
5. Decorate.



Overlap both edges and secure with tape.

### Dunce Wallowing.

Dunce Wallowing is a shared celebration of personal discomfort. It requires a minimum of four participants. It helps if participants use identical pens and paper.



1. Invite each participant to write down anonymously one or more of their manifold Great Moments of Awkwardness or Unease: uncomfortable moments, meetings or occurrences. Graceful entries are not allowed, and all entries should be written in first person. Make sure to allow enough time for writing, around 15 minutes.

2. Ask each participant to fold his or her contribution twice.

3. Place all contributions in a dunce cap.

4. Sit down in a circle.

5. Take turns in taking a contribution from the cap and reading its contents aloud to each other.