

On Wednesday last, a meeting of the rated inhabitants of Whitehaven took place at the Poor House pursuant to public notice, to receive the Report of the Select Vestry some time since appointed, and to take into consideration what further steps were to be pursued, in regard to the conduct of the Overseers. About a quarter before 11 o'clock, (three quarters of an hour after the time appointed) Mr. BELL was called to the chair. About 250 persons, including women and children, were present.

The Chairman said, that having accepted the office he would endeavour to execute its duties to the best of his ability; and had to request that the meeting would give every one a fair hearing, who might wish to address it. The first business would be to read the Report of the Select Vestry.

Mr. R. JEFFERSON then read the following Report:—

To the Rated Inhabitants of the Township of Whitehaven, in Vestry assembled, the FIRST REPORT of the SELECT VESTRY for the Concerns of the Poor of the said Township.

It having been resolved, at a General Vestry Meeting of the Inhabitants of this Township, held on the 10th of April last, that a Select Vestry should be established for superintending the Concerns of the Poor of the Township, and the Vestry having been accordingly appointed by the Magistrates on the 6th of the same month, held their first meeting at the Town's Office, in the Poor-House, on the 21st of April.

At this meeting a question arose as to the authority of the Select Vestry over the officers appointed under the Act of the 22d Geo. III. Ch. 83, (commonly called Gilbert's Act), under which the town is at present incorporated; and the Select Vestry having submitted a case for the opinion of Counsel upon this point, have been advised, that whilst the incorporation of the town under the provisions of Gilbert's Act continues, they have no control or superintendence over the officers appointed under that Act.

By this construction of the Select Vestry Act, the powers of the Vestry, within this township, are much narrowed, and the benefits which might have been expected from their appointment proportionably lessened; as they are, for the present at least, restricted from examining into or superintending the management of the Poor-House, or the expenditure of the money raised for the relief of the poor; and their authority is confined to that department of the poor-laws which still remains in the hands of the overseers of the poor, namely, the making and collecting of rates, which, by the Select Vestry Act, are placed under the superintendence of the Vestry.

That the appointment, therefore, of the Select Vestry might not be entirely nugatory, they have proceeded to an examination of the rates laid and collected since the commencement of the year 1817, as far as they have been furnished with them, namely, four rates of 5s. in the pound each, laid in the year 1817; three 5s. rates in the year 1818; and the first rate of 7s. 6d. in the pound, for the year 1819; and the two other rates of 7s. 6d. in the pound each, laid in that year, having been refused to them.

From this investigation it appears, that the four rates for the year 1817 amounted to £5380. 3s. 10d. of which £4092. 12s. 2d. was collected, leaving a deficiency of £1287. 11s. 8d. uncollected in that year; that the three rates for 1818 amounted to £4035. 2s. 10d. of which was collected £2982. 2s. 2d. leaving a deficiency uncollected of £1053. 0s. 8d.; and that the first rate for 1819 amounted to £2017, of which £1345 was collected, the deficiency upon that rate being £672; and if the same sum be allowed for the deficiency upon each of the two subsequent rates for that year (and there is no reason to suppose that they have been better collected than the first) the whole deficiency for the year 1819 will be £2016; making in all a deficiency of £4356. 12s. 4d. since the commencement of the year 1817.

With respect to the number of the rated inhabitants who have paid or have not paid their rates, it will perhaps be sufficient at present to state, that in the last rate which has come under the inspection of the Vestry, of the whole number of 3005 rated inhabitants, included in that rate, 1745 have not paid it; whereby the burden of the support of the poor of the town is thrown upon 1258 inhabitants only.

The Select Vestry do not mean to assert that the whole, or any thing like the whole, of the above-mentioned sums could have been collected by the overseers, but they have no hesitation in saying that there has been a great degree of negligence in collecting the rates; and they have little or no doubt that if common diligence had been used by the overseers in collecting them, and if they had, as it was their duty to do, enforced the payment where it could have been enforced, sufficient money would have been produced from them for paying the whole of the expenses incurred in each year; and that instead of the town being, as is alleged by the overseers, £12,000 or £13,000 in debt, there might have been a balance in hand at the commencement of the present year.

The Select Vestry have also to observe, that in the course of the investigation they have found several receipts given by the overseers and Mr. John Key, the collector employed by them, for sums which do not, as far as they have had the means of ascertaining, appear to have been given credit for, and that there are also mistakes in the castings of the rates collected; and they have reason to believe that other errors of the same kind will yet be discovered; and without imputing to any person an intention or wish to defraud the public, they conceive that the circumstances they have stated furnish sufficient grounds for calling upon the overseers to submit to an investigation of their accounts, before any measures are taken for raising money to discharge the debt for which they are liable.

The overseers, however, have thought otherwise; and although they are expressly required by the Select Vestry Act to "conform to the directions of the Select Vestry," they have not only refused to acknowledge the authority of the Vestry, or to pay any attention to their advice or directions, or submit their accounts to their examination, but they have, without their concurrence or approbation, laid a second rate of 5s. in the pound, within five weeks after the date of the first rate,

and which they are now collecting. The Select Vestry are advised that this rate ought not to have been laid until the whole of the money raised by the former rate had been expended; and that, upon an appeal to the Sessions it would probably be quashed; and this appears to be the only remedy the inhabitants have against the improper disbursement of money by the overseers, as by the 22d Geo. III. Ch. 83, the appeal to the Sessions against their accounts is taken away; and they are submitted to the sole allowance of the visitor. Under these circumstances the Select Vestry have thought it proper to call a General Vestry Meeting of the inhabitants of the town, for their directions as to the proceedings proper to be adopted.

In the present Report the Select Vestry have abstained, as much as possible, from any observations which might be considered personal towards the overseers; though they cannot help observing that the whole of their conduct since the appointment of the Select Vestry has been insulting to them, and disrespectful to the inhabitants at large, by whom they were elected.

By Order of the Select Vestry,  
MUSGRAVE WALKER,  
IN THE CHAIR.

Whitehaven, June 20, 1820.

The CHAIRMAN said if any one wished to address the meeting, then was the opportunity. A good deal of desultory conversation ensued, which we could not distinctly hear; but we understand Mr. JAMES to say that the conduct of the Overseers, in withholding their accounts had not only been unfair, but in a high degree immoral.

Mr. R. JEFFERSON had hoped that some other person would have come forward to move the resolutions, but as this was not the case, he would, by their leave, take upon himself the office. He was one of half a dozen gentlemen who had been appointed to examine the Overseers' and Guardian's accounts. In the examination of the Overseers' books, there was an error in one item of £500—(Groans.)—Instead of £1043. 9s. there appeared £522. 12s. 6d. only in their books. The Bank Book was also wrong—there was an error of £100 in the adding up. He did not wish to impute to the Overseers any improper motives; but certainly such evident neglect and carelessness deserved to be looked into—coupled as it was with the contemptuous manner in which they had treated the Select Vestry. The Guardian had promised to submit his accounts to their inspection; but instead of this, he had refused to give up his books, and had even shut them from the house. They saw but the first half sheet of his accounts, and in this there was an error of one shilling. It might be said this was but a trifling; but when this appeared in the first page, had they not a right to suspect that more errors followed which would have been detected had they been allowed to examine the whole?—(Groans.)—According to Gilbert's act, the auditing of the accounts was left entirely in the hands of the Visitor; and a better man than the gentleman who now filled that office (Dr. Dawson) never existed, perhaps he was too good, and supposed every one to be like himself; but his other avocations prevented him from paying proper attention to his duties—for it was a fact, and he (Mr. J.) had it from that gentleman himself, that for twelve months together he had not been in the house! Thus were the town's affairs neglected, and the money expended nobody knew how; he should therefore more, "That an Appeal be made, at the next Quarter Sessions, against the last rate, or any other rate the Overseers may lay without the approbation of the Select Vestry."

The motion having been seconded, Mr. RIBBLEY stepped forward, and said, that respecting the address which they had just heard, much might be said on both sides—one story was always good until another was told. It was an old maxim and a good one, that we should always attend to what each party had to say in any disputed matter; and he was extremely happy to see such a disposition manifested on the present occasion. They had just heard that the accounts were refused to be shown; but it was necessary that some little attention should be paid to this statement, as the facts might materially affect it. It was a truth that both the Overseers and the Guardian had, at first, agreed to co-operate with the Select Vestry; but a Counsel's opinion having been sent for—indeed two were sent for—touching the legality of the Select Vestry, and both agreeing that such a Vestry had no power (Hisses) the Overseers had afterwards refused to acknowledge their authority. On this affront were given on both sides; doubtless both were blameable.—(Hisses.)—He did not stand there as the advocate of any party; but he thought it was right that they (the meeting) should understand well what they were about, before they engaged in so rash a business as that now proposed.—("Put him down he's said enough.")—With respect to the motion now made, he would ask, if a Counsel's opinion had already set the town so much by the ears, (Hisses)—"aye, they ought to be set by 4 ears." What might not be expected from a law suit?—(Disapprobation.)—Doubtless the town was in difficulties, but he would have them consider the desperate remedy which was proposed to be applied in this case; they were going to enter into a law suit, and against whom? Why, their fellow-townsmen—their neighbours, those with whom they were in habits of intimacy—and with whom it was probable, they were destined to spend their days.—("Preachers are best in the Pulpit,"—"Put him down.")—And he might ask, for what were they going to law?—for even the bitterest enemies of the Overseers had not pretended to bring proofs of actual fraud.—(Hisses and disapprobation.)—Would such a proceeding put any thing into their pockets, or fill the belly of any poor individual? It had been stated that there were 1700 inhabitants who did not pay poor rates; but who were these inhabitants? Why they were poor persons inhabiting cellars, and garrets, and living in buildings occupied by five or six families—many of them actually paupers, and many on the very verge of starvation. This he thought was a reason why they should pause before they gave countenance

to such a measure.—(Hisses.)—It was well known that Overseers have a discretionary power, given them by law, respecting the enforcing of rates; and he would have them in the first place carefully examine whether they (the Overseers) had abused that power. He verily believed they had not.—(Hisses and Disapprobation.)—In one instance he (Mr. R.) was present when a considerable number of these poor people were summoned before the Magistrates, who, it was said, were able to pay. Their examination disclosed scenes of suffering of poverty, and misery, such as he trusted no heart there could have been callous to. The result of this examination had been most pleasing; the Magistrates heard with patience, and to their credit, humbly recommended the Overseers to be as lenient as the nature of the cases before them would admit. Had the Overseers acted otherwise than in accordance with this recommendation they would have proved themselves the oppressors instead of the Overseers of the poor.—(Hisses and clamour.)—Gentlemen might hiss, but he cared not for that; humanity always deserved to be applauded, whether found in a Magistrate, or elsewhere.—(Hisses.)—He would ask, what possible good could result from a contrary line of conduct? Recovering a few shillings by distress, would in many instances, make an actual pauper, and thereby an expense of many pounds would be incurred by the Town.—("Put him down.")—No doubt the rates were heavy—no doubt many who paid them, did so with difficulty—there was not a question but the inhabitants of this Township felt the pressure of the present times, but was that the fault of their neighbours, the Overseers? Would a law suit remedy their grievances? Would making distress warrants fly about amongst their poor townsmen, do any thing towards alleviating these calamities?—certainly not.—(Hisses.)—He therefore wished a middle course to be steered.—(violent clamour—and cries of "put him down")—"he'll spoil us." He stood there to hear any man, and he had a right to be heard in his turn. He should move an amendment to the motion which had just been read—an amendment which he hoped they would vote for—an amendment which he trusted they would instantly adopt, in order to discountenance the idea of unjustly saddling the Overseers with a debt they had unfortunately, through lenity and the distress of the times, made themselves responsible for; and, unless actual misapplication or fraud could be proved, put an end to so unworthy, so shameful, so degrading a procedure.—(Hisses.)—The gentlemen whose names he had inserted in the amendment, were men whose respectability, he was sure, could not be doubted—they possessed considerable property in the Township—were perhaps the highest rated of any in the town, and would therefore be interested in preventing and detecting abuse wherever it was likely to exist, or in adopting any plans of economy which might be suggested to them.—(Applause and avocations in life, they were conversant with accounts; and therefore every way qualified to discharge the duty which would be imposed on them coolly and impartially, and though he had not their authority for putting down their names, he doubted not but they would accept the office, should the Meeting appoint them to it. He had to add, on the authority of the parties concerned, that the Overseers and the Guardian were ready and willing to submit every book and paper belonging to them to such a Committee. Thus would the town gain more by the amendment than by law. He knew not whether there was any one who would second his motion, but if they wished to avoid involving themselves in an expensive law-suit, if they wished to avoid future irritation, discord, and endless cavilling, they would adopt the amendment which he was now about to read to them, and thus ensure the peace of the town, and be every way gainers by such moderation.—(Much disapprobation—and a cry of "we've been long enough free the law.")—Mr. RIDLEY concluded by reading the following amendment:—

"That a Committee be appointed, possessing the confidence of the rated inhabitants, to whom the accounts of the Guardian and Overseers shall be submitted; and particularly the objections urged by the Select Vestry against the Rate Books they have examined, (giving the Overseers and the Collector every candid opportunity of explanation.) And the Committee are requested to make a Report of the actual state of such accounts to the inhabitants as soon as convenient."

He then proposed the following gentlemen as a Committee;—Henry Birley; John Brocklebank (Roper-street); Richard Barker; Jos. Bell; George Miller; Thos. Manley; Thos. Mastle.

The amendment was seconded by Mr. R. JACKSON. Much confusion and desultory conversation ensued; a petition of the name of Brunskill being very clamorous to be heard; but

Mr. WOODKORN stepping forward in the meantime, the Chairman desired the former to wait a little. Mr. W. would not occupy much of their time; he wished but to make a few observations. To avoid entering into a law-suit, was certainly a most desirable thing; but he could not but consider the amendment which had just been proposed as a fresh insult to the town. What was the necessity for another Committee, when there had already been one appointed? Were not the gentlemen of the Select Vestry fully competent to examine the accounts? What necessity was there to supersede them? As to the Counsel's opinion having created confusion, it could not be the case, for what confusion could that create in the mind of any rational man? It was evident that the Select Vestry had the confidence of the Town; and could not therefore be affected by a Counsel's opinion.—When he came there, he had no wish to go to law; it was his desire to avoid it if possible; indeed, he had been requested to make the motion proposing this measure, but had declined, under the idea that some other course might be found which would answer a better purpose. But after hearing the Report, and the

