

TO THE
Labouring Poor of England.

FELLOW MEN,

YOUR fathers were free. The blood of many ages purchased the independence of Englishmen; but experience has taught us, that it is not by war alone, that a nation may be enslaved. Benevolence itself has assisted to rob the English Poor of their property and personal freedom. They had once cottages and gardens, with extensive rights of common, all over England: now they have lost their all; nor can they regain possession of a single foot of land, whereon to erect a shed for independent residence. The ruined cottages of their fathers are their's, only during the pleasure of masters, themselves at the will of others; and the workhouse is the heartless abode of thousands, who have toiled, and fought, and bled, for their country's renown.

Labourers of England! It is proper that these truths should be told; and it is proper that you should know that *one right* remains, by the exercise of which, you may better your condition, and rescue this, *once happy land*, from the degradation of pauperism, and the scourge of oppression:—this is the *RIGHT* of petitioning the Legislature,—the *birth-right* of every British subject.

For two years I have been teaching the people of my own parish, *how to exercise this right*, and they have twice exercised it. They see clearly, that if the people of every parish would follow their example, all that is wanted for the Poor would be obtained. It is not the interest or the wish of any one, that the Poor should be oppressed: but they are oppressed, and that grievously; and all because they know not how to speak up for themselves. Petitioning the legislature is the way, by which they must declare their wants,—petitioning by *single parishes, all over England*. No person dare prevent the poorest man from doing this; and that it may be distinctly understood, what should be asked for, a Copy of the Petition of the people of Wily is here printed. No person is so ignorant, but he will understand this, after it has been read over two or three times; and when it is understood, all that need be done, is to write off, from the short form below, a Petition, filling up the blanks with the names of the particular parish and county from which it is to be sent.

There is no parish, but has some one or two Labourers who can read and write, and who will take the trouble of reading the Wily Petition to their fellow parishioners, who cannot do so; and, as to signing any Petition, a man's *mark* is as good as his name, written by himself at length. Bad writing and bad spelling, have been declared by a very learned member of parliament, to be even more worthy of notice than what is perfectly correct, which is very encouraging for the Poor to seek for what they want.

When the people of a parish set about petitioning, they should first desire the Heads of the parish—the clergyman, farmers, &c. to join them; but on no account should they leave off, because of such people declining. I recommend this, only as a becoming compliment to superiors in station, not as absolutely necessary. One man's name is as good at a petition, as another's; and in this case, what is sought for is the peculiar benefit of the Poor, not of the Rich. It cannot be supposed, that the Rich will be so hearty in the cause, as the Poor themselves; and upon their own exertions alone, must the hope of success depend.

Every member of Parliament is bound in duty to present respectful Petitions: but it will be best for the people to chuse the member for this purpose, most nearly connected with the parish from whence any Petition is sent. I have given below, the *form* of a letter, in which to inclose any Petition, when signed, to be directed to the member chosen to do the business. Members of Parliament pay no postage for letters sent to them, and letters coming from them are also free of expense; so that the cost of petitioning need not exceed a few pence, for paper. It will be particularly necessary to keep copies of all the Petitions, with the names of those who sign them; as it would be desirable to publish these all together, as soon as many parishes have petitioned; so that every one may know how things proceed; and who are the people willing to join in the only peaceable way of procuring RELIEF TO THE POOR.

Robert Gourlay,

Deptford-Farm, 12th March, 1817.

To the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain, and Ireland, in Parliament assembled,
The humble Petition of the undersigned Inhabitants, of the Parish of Wily, in the County of Wilts.

(5th February, 1817.)

SHEWETH,

THAT on the 31st of May, 1815, a Petition from this parish to your honourable House, was presented by Paul Methuen Esq. member for this county, on the subject of the poor laws, to which your Petitioners beg leave again to call the attention of your honourable House.

That your Petitioners understood, that, at the close of the last Session of Parliament, your honourable House had appointed a committee to take into consideration, this most important subject, and your Petitioners would have looked with confidence towards the result of such consideration, had not a proposal been set forth, by the mover of this measure, not only subversive of law; but indicative of an intention and spirit absolutely abhorrent to the minds of your Petitioners.

It was proposed in your honourable House,—not to better the condition of the poor,—not to lighten the overburthened wheels of industry,—not to rekindle the spirit of independence, nor to recruit the wasted strength of the labourers of England:—it was proposed to oblige them to pay four pence, out of every ten shillings of their earnings, that they who have hitherto paid poor rates may be eased of their burden! When such a proposal has been made, and patiently listened to, in the British Senate, under such circumstances as the present, it must be high time for every one, even the lowest, to think for himself.—to doubt if selfishness has left, in the human breast, one park of benevolence, or if any thing like reason is to dictate in the arrangements of civil society.

Your Petitioners were taught to believe, that after the struggle of war was at an end, plenty would come hand in hand with peace, to refresh the people, who had, with unparalleled fortitude and submission, for upwards of twenty years of war, supported the measures of their Government: your Petitioners have been disappointed,—most grievously disappointed: war had its horrors but the present peace is more horrible than war:—the people in thousands stand every where idle, famished, dejected, and desperate.

At such a period of disappointment and gloom your Petitioners would be in every inclination to reproach those, who have been the more immediate instruments of bringing down upon the country its load of calamity. Looking backward they recognize the people as: every step, identifying their will with that of the Government fostering its ambition: cheering its victories: sharing its plunder. Your Petitioners wish to bury in oblivion, the follie and the crimes that are passed: they wish, now, that not urgent necessity proclaims that something must be done (that, that may be done, which may not only be safe and honourable for the British Government, but efficient to the comfort and prosperity of the people.

Your Petitioners conceive that there exists no mystery, as to the grand cause of the present distress. Excessive taxation, for a long period of years, has not only wasted the productions of industry, but the landing system has registered the price of these wasted productions, as a debt to be discharged by industry, while industry, deprived of the excitements which extraordinary circumstances afforded, has ceased to be able for such a discharge. Under these changed circumstances, your Petitioners have marked, for the last three years, a fatal blindness to consequences, and have beheld with sorrow, principle assumed and acted upon, with a design to remedy impending evils, not only, of a narrow and selfish character, but papably inadequate to the end in view. Your Petitioners conceive that the first step which should have been taken, after peace deprived this country of its monopoly of trade, and the peculiar incitements to industry, created by war and extraordinary circumstances, was, to have withdrawn those taxes which most directly bear upon the necessities and comforts of life, and to have substituted in their place, taxes upon IDLE PROPERTY and GREAT INCOME: accruing from the same. Such measures would not only have been politic and just among individuals, but their adoption would at once have enabled our industry to cope with that of other nations, and would have upheld that due degree of confidence in substantial stock, which was clearly wanted to maintain a balance against the dangerous influence of funded property, whose immediate security does not rest on the success of trade and industry, but in the power of taxation, and whose pressure increases as its strength to bear it is diminished.

Your Petitioners hoped that time and approaching ruin would not only have opened the eyes of all to the real situation of affairs, but have made it the first duty of ministers, to have declared the truth, and to have quieted the public mind, by an assurance of instantly altering the scheme of taxation. With utmost dread, however, have they now heard the Royal speech proclaiming, that the evils, which assail the country, spring from temporary causes, and from the transition from war to peace. Your Petitioners deem it their most sacred duty to oppose such sentiments, to deprecate such advice to Royalty, and to declare it to be the very extreme of infatuation to rest under such impressions for a moment. Your Petitioners, being mostly labourers and poor men, have comparatively little interest in the fate of property; but as sincere friends to peace and good order, they wish to see that which regulates all the commercial transactions of men, and which is necessary to give excitement to industry, kept in its proper place:—they wish no longer to see real property swallowed up and endangered, by a bubble, whose increase, under existing circumstances, must rapidly tend to explosion, and whose explosion can leave nothing behind, but wretchedness and woe. With a change in the scheme of taxation, your Petitioners have persuaded themselves, that certain proposals, if adopted, would co-operate immediately to revive the industry of the country, and in a short time do away all necessity, both for poor laws and poor rates.

These proposals are:

1st. That in every parish not comprehended in, nor containing a town of more than two thousand inhabitants, Government shall take possession of one hundred acres of land, being the nearest clear land to the respective parish-churches, and otherwise best suited the purposes in view.

2d. That Government shall pay to the owners of such land its fair estimated value, raising one half of the whole means for this purpose, by a rate similar to a poor rate, only that owners of property shall be assessed instead of tenants, these latter being obliged to pay legal interest to the former, during the currency of existing leases, upon the amount of assessment raised from their respective holdings: the other half of the whole means to be obtained by loan, so calculated, as to be liquidated by rents and purchase-money, mentioned below.

3rd. That each hundred acres shall be divided into two equal parts, as to extent, and in such a manner, as shall best suit purposes in view.

4th. That one of these parts, in each parish, shall be inclosed, and otherwise in the best manner improved, for the purpose of a common pasture, to remain so for ever.

5th. That the other half shall be divided into half-acre allotments, making one hundred allotments in each parish.

6th. That the present inhabitants, male parishioners, of such parishes, shall be allowed immediately to occupy the allotments, one each; the choice of allotments to proceed by seniority.

7th. That where the present inhabitants of parishes are not sufficiently numerous to occupy all the allotments of their respective parishes, other persons shall have a choice, seniority and proximity giving a preference, while any allotment remains unoccupied.

8th. That each person, when he takes possession of an allotment, shall thereby bind himself to pay forty shillings a year, as rent for the same; and at all times to keep it in good garden culture. A person, thus paying rent, shall be stiled a parish-holder.

9th. That as long as these conditions are fulfilled, no parish-holder shall be disturbed in, nor turned out of his allotment; and at his death, his son may occupy in his stead, if twenty-one years of age: an elder son having a priority of choice to a younger son; and failing sons, the choice of occupancy shall proceed to the nearest male relation, before it falls to the public.

10th. That as soon as any parish-holder shall have paid into a savings bank, to be for that purpose established by Government, the sum of one hundred pounds, he shall have a cottage built on his allotment to that value; he having the choice of a variety of plans for the construction of the said cottage.

11th. That neither the money deposited in the bank for the above purpose, nor the property of the cottage when built, shall be attachable for debt; nor shall they affect any claim of parochial relief, due by existing laws. A person when possessed of a cottage in this manner, shall be stiled a cottage-holder. At his death, his cottage-hold shall go to the nearest heir-male, as in the case of the parish-hold, with this difference, that the heir who takes possession shall pay to relations, equally near of kin with himself to the deceased, male and female, or to the nearest of kin female relation or relations, if such there be, nearer than himself, to the exclusion of others, a certain value for the cottage; and in case no heir takes possession to fulfil these terms, then they may be fulfilled by other persons who may desire possession, and whose claim to possess, shall be regulated by proximity and seniority; but if neither relations nor others shall claim possession, then the cottage-hold shall revert to Government, from whom heirs shall receive the value of the cottage, and the cottage-hold shall be open to public purchase or exchange.

12th. That as soon as a cottage-holder shall have had no relief from the parish, for the space of two years, he shall be entitled to a vote in the parish, and have a right to pasture a cow on the common. He shall be stiled a freeman.

13th. That if a freeman shall throw himself for relief on the parish, he shall lose that designation, his right to vote, and pasture; nor shall he recover these, till he has lived five years without parochial aid.

14th. That as soon as a freeman has paid into the bank the sum of sixty pounds, the same shall be received by Government as purchase-money for his allotment, shall free him from the yearly payment of rent, and make him eligible into parish-officers. He shall be stiled a parish freeholder. Succession to be regulated as above.

15th. That all sales and exchanges shall be made through public medium; and at once to facilitate and regulate these, there shall be corresponding registries; parochial, district, county and national.

16th. That no person whatever shall possess either in one or more parishes, more than one holding, and no person shall have a choice, nor be allowed to purchase under twenty-one years of age; but on heir male shall be allowed, while a minor, to hold possession, although he shall have no vote, nor be eligible to offices, till he come of age: provided always, that none of the relations, entitled as above to a share of the valued property, become chargeable to the parish, while their share is unpaid, nor the heir himself, for in such cases the holding shall revert to public possession, and the residue only, if any, of the value of the cottage and freehold, be paid to the heir or heirs, after the parish charges for maintenance, have been deducted.

Although your Petitioners frankly submit these Proposals to the consideration of your honourable House, they do not press their adoption in the letter. Your honourable House may see fit to modify the scheme. The common pasture may be dispensed with, and the number of allotments may be increased, diminished, or regulated, as circumstances may require. Your Petitioners chiefly insist that it is essential to the abolition of Pauperism in England, that an opportunity be afforded, for the labouring people to acquire property and personal freedom; both which they have lost through the operation of the poor laws, and which they can never regain under existing circumstances. To afford half an acre of land to all who would require it, would not occupy a hundredth part of the national territory; and when it is considered that the poor once possessed many houses and gardens in every parish, and enjoyed over all England extensive common rights, of which, in many cases, they have been unjustly deprived, such restitution must seem far from extravagant or unreasonable.

Your Petitioners would desire your honourable House to consider, what universal contentment would instantly ensue from the adoption of these proposals, or even of a modification of them: what a fund of employment would be created: how universally this would be diffused; and how long it would continue. Even the early production of provisions to eke out the supply, before next harvest, would be no small advantage, in the present year of scarcity, and would certainly be obtained by affording to the poor, garden allotments of land, for individual cultivation and convenience. Your Petitioners deny what has been asserted by some, that such arrangements in rural economy, would stir up in the minds of the people a desire for any thing like a general agrarian law, or that their obtaining votes, would in any way endanger property. Your Petitioners refer to America, where, in many parts, the right of vote is equally shared among the rich and the poor, without having caused the least encroachment on property.

Your Petitioners, though they most earnestly desire to see a wise reform of Parliament, do not wish the parish vote to qualify directly for parliamentary election; and they positively disclaim and renounce what is commonly understood by universal suffrage. They feel that the mass of the people never could be competent, sufficiently to estimate the comparative merits of persons aspiring to a seat in parliament; although they could well judge, which of their fellow parishioners were most worthy of offices and trust within their respective parishes, and which of them might be best qualified to act as parish deputies, at district or county meetings, whether assembled for parliamentary election or other business.

Your Petitioners therefore most earnestly entreat that your honourable House will immediately withdraw all taxes on MALT, SALT, SOAP, CANDLES, LEATHER, BRICKS and TILES; contract no more debt; pay all national charges unprovided for, by an assessment on rents and interest of money, increasing the ratio of assessment upon great incomes derived from the same.—That, having done this, your honourable House will take into most serious consideration the above proposals; and particularly, that you will so enact, that every British subject, grown to man's estate, shall have an opportunity of occupying HALF AN ACRE OF LAND for its value, whereon he may establish his freehold: And your Petitioners shall ever pray.

Subscribed by ninety-eight persons.

Form of a short Petition.

To the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain, and Ireland, in Parliament assembled.
The humble Petition of the undersigned Inhabitants,
of the Parish of * * * * in the County of * * * *

SHEWETH,

That on the 28th of February, 1817, a Petition from the parish of Wily, in the County of Wilts, was presented to, and received by, your Honourable House.

That your Petitioners, being well acquainted, and agreeing in sentiment, with the whole tenor of that Petition, beg leave to refer to the same; and most earnestly entreat that your Honourable House will withdraw all taxes on MALT, SALT, SOAP, CANDLES, LEATHER, BRICKS, and TILES, and, so enact, that every British subject may be allowed to occupy HALF AN ACRE OF LAND for its value, whereon he may establish his freehold; And your Petitioners shall ever pray,

Form of a Letter wherein to send the above.

Parish of * * * * near * * * *

SIR

It will be obliging if you will present the inclosed Petition, to the House of Commons, as soon as your convenience will permit; and when presented, favour me with a letter, saying whether it has been received.

For myself and fellow Petitioners,
To * * * * Member of
Parliament for * * * *

[H. Gye, Printer, Bath.]

* These four words in Italics were expunged before the Petition was presented.