

Wreay Chapel met on Candlemas Day, according to Custom, in 1786 viz.

William Gaskin Min.

John Losh
John Losh Junr.
Chas. Hannay

Minutes of the meeting of the Twelve Men of Wreay 1786

The Twelve Men of Wreay

The origins of this ancient organisation are shrouded in the mists of time, but as a body they predate the united parliament of Great Britain which did not come into existence until 1707. Earliest recorded documents were placed in a leather bound book procured by William Gaskin on his appointment as curate in 1783. One of these was a petition by the Twelve Men (also called 'Chappel Men') to Edward Rainbow, Bishop of Carlisle, 1664 to 1684, seeking a grant of salary to William Wilson, who they had appointed as School Teacher in addition to the unpaid post he held as 'Reader' at the Chappel. It seems that the Chappel Men were responsible for both appointments at the time.

Thus it was that 100 years later, in 1786, William Gaskin began to record the meetings of the Twelve Men, who, 'according to custom' met on Candlemas Day. Canon Hall in his account, 'Wreay', suggests that they originated because some landowners and parish inhabitants, finding that there was no one to take much interest in its affairs, met together and agreed that they would act for it to the best of their ability, and for some reason, determined to keep their number to twelve.

The meetings are still held on Candlemas Day or on the Monday nearest to that date. Since 1786 the meetings have always been held in the Plough Inn at 6pm and by tradition the business meeting is followed by a meal, which originally consisted of bread, cheese, oatcakes, butter and ale.

After the meal it was customary to smoke the long Churchwarden pipes. Examples of these, though not original, are displayed in the Plough Inn. This was followed by members telling tales of bygone days, reciting poems and singing songs. Each member paid one shilling for the meal and was also required to pay, even if absent. Inflation has seen a substantial rise in this fee!

When a vacancy occurs for a member following the death or the resignation of one of their number, the remaining Twelve Men, at their Annual Meeting, nominate potential replacements, with the proviso that they live within the boundaries of the parish and are landowners. If there is more than one, a secret ballot is held.

Traditionally the Chairman has always been the Vicar of Wreay, but this was broken, firstly from 1884 to 1887 when the village was without an incumbent and again since 1998 when the vicar lived outside the parish or indeed was female! The Charity Commissioners now require the Twelve Men to appoint a Chairman annually from within their number.

The functions of the Twelve Men have changed over the years. They no longer hold any office in the Church and are not now required to appoint School Managers. Their role as guardians of the poor, finding accommodation for the destitute in the village, has also ceased. The Twelve featured prominently during the life of Sarah Losh, being much involved in the building of Church and School, in a number of land transactions and as trustees for Pompeian Cottage (School House) and Candlemas Cottage (Cemetery Cottage). They are still responsible for the latter two.

Originally the Twelve Men were not a charitable organisation but were tasked with administering a number of existing small local charities. From their property rental income, they now administer a number of small educational charities for the benefit of Wreay School and its pupils. Annual grants from the Losh Foundation are given to ex pupils from the school, resident in the village, whilst they are attending secondary school. This tradition dates back to 1906 and was originally to assist pupils with the expense incurred in the buying of books, uniforms and pencils for secondary education. Recently a bursary, named in remembrance of Mark Wharton, long standing secretary and treasurer of the Twelve Men, has been set up for residents of the village in tertiary education. Charitable donations are also given for the benefit of the villagers at the discretion of the Twelve Men.

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