

A Brief History of Rawle, Gammon & Baker of Pilton

Rawle, Gammon & Baker, now known to all as RGB, was formed in 1850 when Samuel Rawle, a Barnstaple shipbroker, joined forces with William Gammon, a Barnstaple builder. They set up business as timber importers and saw millers on the banks of the River Yeo at Rolle Quay opposite the Rolle Quay Inn. William Gammon (photo below) was one of the principal builders of the town, having completed St Mary Magdalene Church in the Derby area (now demolished) and the Atheneum, among other buildings.



At that time, all timber was hand sawn from logs by skilled craftsmen. Logs were brought into the Taw/Torridge Estuary on large vessels, offloaded at Appledore onto barges or rafts and floated up the River Taw and into the River Yeo. Rawle & Gammon built a seven foot deep sawpit and turned them into timbers of suitable sizes for building. Much of the raw timber came from North America and in 1861 the partners acquired the steamship 'Ariadne', a three-masted barque, which was used to take emigrants to Canada and bring back cargoes of timber. Regrettably, the crews often deserted when the ship reached Canada.

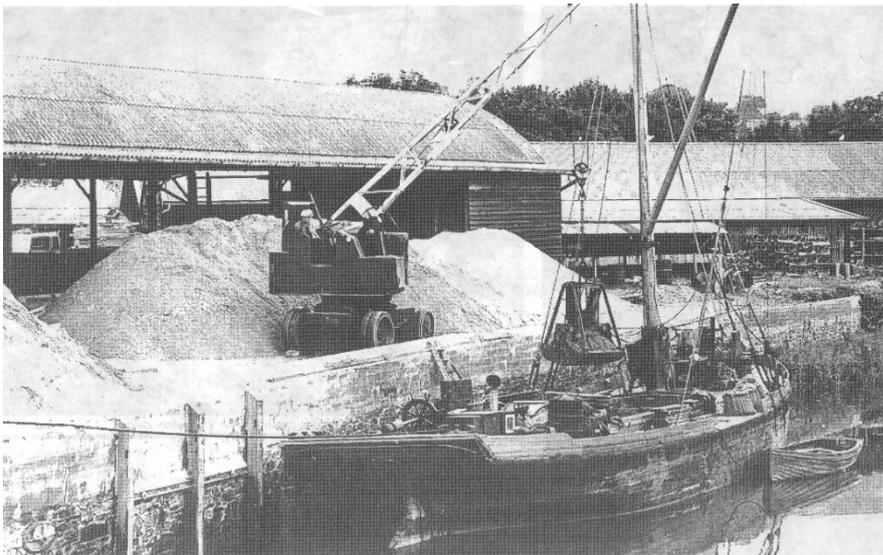
The North Devon Railway came to Barnstaple in 1854, although it wasn't until after the Barnstaple - Ilfracombe Railway opened in 1874 that Rawle & Gammon were able to build a railway siding into Rolle Quay.

William Gammon died in 1878 and in 1879 the business became Rawle, Gammon & Baker when Samuel Rawle's son-in-law F A Baker became a partner. Samuel Rawle died in 1881 but the business prospered under the leadership of Baker and of Gammon's three sons with the impetus of the Second Industrial Revolution in the late 19th century and up to the start of the First World War in 1914. The business premises expanded on Rolle Quay and cottages were built for workers on Rolle Street.

Unfortunately Baker's only son was killed in the War so the business continued with only the Gammon family although it retained the full name. In 1921 the land on which the business had been established was bought

from the Rolle Estate. Narrow gauge railway lines were used to link the yard and the mill.

Until 1930, the Pilton base was the only branch of the company. Now there are seventeen branches throughout the West Country. In the late 1940s, the last remaining Gammon (W. J.) oversaw the acquisition of Pilton Yard, the home of the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway until it closed in 1935. Pilton Yard was shared with the Sanders Sheepskin Factory. By the end of the 1940s the business was no longer just a saw mill but had effectively become the builders' merchants it is today.



The business still used wooden barges in the 1950s and 60s - the Rowena and the Wendy - for the transport of bulk materials. This photograph shows a barge off-loading sand at Rolle Quay in the 1950s.

Unfortunately, W J Gammon died in 1977 and, because his son John had died two years earlier, control of the business passed to the Isaac family into which W J Gammon's sister had married.

The business moved to a new site on the Pottington Industrial Estate and the Rolle Quay site was sold in 2005 and subsequently developed with apartments by builders Redrow and McCarthy & Stone. The names of the development - Port Mill, Town Mill, Saw Mill and Orleigh Mill Courts - reflect something of the long history of the site as the home of RGB for 155 years.

Thanks for this information which has been partly collected from Colin Worth, who has worked for RGB since 1966 and been Chairman since 2011. Thanks are also due to the North Devon Journal Special Publication of 1990, which included the two photographs included above, and to Phyllis Gammon who wrote up the company history in the 1970s.