

= Watford Gap services =

Watford Gap services are motorway services on the M1 motorway in Northamptonshire , England . They opened on 2 November 1959 , the same day as the M1 , making them the oldest motorway services in Britain . The facilities were originally managed by Blue Boar , a local company that had run a nearby petrol station before the M1 opened . Roadchef bought the services from Blue Boar in 1995 .

The main building was designed by Harry Weedon , the architect for Odeon Cinemas , while the layout and general buildings were designed by coordinating architect Owen Williams . The main building was not ready on opening , so food was served from temporary sheds . The restaurant opened in September 1960 , but due to the site 's reputation as a truck stop , was redesigned in 1964 to accommodate a waitress service . The services became a meeting place for rock bands in the 1960s , including the Beatles , the Rolling Stones , Pink Floyd and Jimi Hendrix , as it provided a convenient place to sit down and eat a meal in the early hours of the morning . In the 1970s , the quality of the services declined and the food came in for harsh criticism from journalists and artists , such as Roy Harper . Since purchase in 1995 , Roadchef have refurbished the premises . They have promoted its history , including the association with a north / south divide , and its regular use by 1960s rock musicians . A number of events took place to celebrate the 50th anniversary in November 2009 , including a musical about the services .

The services are named after the nearby Watford Gap , a crossing point of the limestone ridge just north of the village of Watford ; the name is unrelated to the town of Watford in Hertfordshire . Watford Gap is considered by some to be on a dividing line that separates the north and the south of England .

= = Location = =

The services are in Northamptonshire , England close to the village of Watford about 8 miles (13 km) to the south east of Rugby and about 75 miles (121 km) to the north west of London . They are situated between junctions 16 and 17 of the M1 with a single site for each direction on the motorway linked by a footbridge . The name comes from the nearby Watford Gap , the narrowest and lowest point in the limestone ridge that crosses England diagonally from the Cotswolds to Lincoln Edge . In Roman Britain , Iter II , later named Watling Street , crossed the gap ; Thomas Telford considered the route unsuitable for coach traffic due to the presence of quicksand . Today , this is reflected in the modern road network by the A5 suddenly turning left towards Kilsby near the services . Similarly , the Grand Union Canal avoided the gap by the Crick Tunnel . Consequently , the Roman Road at Watford Gap was largely untouched by previous engineering works when the M1 was constructed , and the engineers were able to build over it .

In popular culture , the Watford Gap is often considered to be a dividing line that separates the north and the south of England . The phrase " north of the Watford gap " may be shortened to " north of Watford " , inviting confusion with the larger town of Watford further south in Hertfordshire . Roadchef have suggested that the services ' name should be included in the Oxford English Dictionary as an expression of the divide between the north and south .

= = History = =

The services , the first of its kind in the UK , opened at the same time as the new motorway on 2 November 1959 . They evolved from discussions during 1955 and 1956 by the Ministry of Transport over what facilities should be present on new motorways . Civil engineer Owen Williams visited the United States to see what existing rest areas were available , and based his designs on these . Watford Gap was chosen as one of four pilot sites , though by 1958 the Ministry had decided only this and Newport Pagnell services would open with the motorway .

The land on which the services were built belonged to the Thorntons of Brock Hall , who had owned the manor since 1625 . The family had previously attempted to block the Grand Union Canal and the

main London - Birmingham railway across the gap , without success . Brock Hall was eventually sold in 1969 and converted into flats .

The structure was built on the site of derelict farm buildings . There were different designers for different parts of the service area , with Owen Williams as the coordinating architect . An ornate design for a footbridge by Clough Williams @-@ Ellis was rejected in favour of a more functional and conservative modernist design by Owen Williams . When the services opened the new buildings were incomplete so the food was served from temporary sheds . The original plan had been for trucks to use this service station and for cars to use Newport Pagnell . In practice , however , both service areas were unrestricted . The first owners of the services were Blue Boar Limited , a family company that owned a nearby petrol station on the A5 . Although the official name has always been Watford Gap , the services were colloquially called Blue Boar for some time after opening .

The original buildings at Watford Gap were designed by Harry W Weedon and Partners , already well known for their work for Odeon Cinemas . The restaurant opened in September 1960 , but the Ministry were unhappy about the services ' reputation as a truck @-@ stop , dating back to Blue Boar 's popularity with HGV drivers . They consequently redesigned the restaurant in 1964 to accommodate a waitress service , which they hoped would " lose at least some of the stigma of having been started in 1959 as primarily a commercial driver 's facility " . Food was criticised for being expensive , though Tam Galbraith disputed this , noting he could buy steak and kidney pie with chips , buttered roll and a cup of tea at Watford Gap for 4s 2d (£ 3 @.@ 81 today) .

By the 1970s , a combination of the recession , overpriced food , and fear of football hooligans had greatly reduced the services ' popularity . The quality of the food declined substantially and , because of its prominent location , the services became a byword for poor catering . Roy Harper wrote a song criticising the food at the Watford Gap on his 1977 album , Bullinamingvase , writing : " Watford Gap , Watford Gap / A plate of grease and a load of crap " . The owners of Watford Gap service station objected to criticism of their food , as did an EMI board member who was also a non @-@ executive director of Blue Boar . Harper defended his decision to write the song , claiming the food was " junk . Absolute junk " . In 1989 , one journalist claimed the services had some of the worst food found on the road network , adding " if I threw the toast out of the window , it would probably still be bouncing up the M1 . " Roadchef purchased the motorway businesses from Blue Boar in 1995 and have since improved facilities . In 2011 and 2012 it was rated as 3 stars by quality assessors at Visit England .

Roadchef celebrated the services ' 50th anniversary on 2 November 2009 by selling cups of tea at 1959 prices . A road sign was erected pointing to " The North " and " The South " on the same day . As part of the anniversary celebrations , local film @-@ maker and composer Benjamin Till created a musical about Watford Gap . The show featured stories from 80 people who had worked or been associated with the services , including local residents who remembered the services opening .

= = Notable visitors = =

Though the Ministry of Transport was adamant that the services should not be destinations in their own right , they did acquire a reputation for being a popular place for motorists to visit . During the 1960s , the services were a regular stopping venue for bands such as Pink Floyd and the Rolling Stones . The Beatles stopped at Watford Gap while travelling from Liverpool to gigs in the south in the early stage of their career . Jimi Hendrix heard so much about " Blue Boar " , as the services were then popularly known , that he thought it was a London nightclub . Gerry Marsden , leader of the Pacemakers regularly visited the services when touring , saying it was good for " a quick stop and a quick nosh . " The Floyd 's Nick Mason recalls Hendrix stopping off at the services at 2am , while The Zombies ' Chris White thought the services were " the feeding trough of the beat boom " . Harper claimed " everybody would meet at Watford Gap because it was the one place after a show where you were guaranteed a bit of a sit @-@ down at 2am " .

The services ' association with 1960s musicians is remembered in a set of photographs published in 2008 of the Stones stopping at Watford Gap on the way to ATV Studios , Birmingham in 1963 . In 2009 , Roadchef paid a former employee £ 1 @,@ 000 for autographs he had collected while

working there , including those of Paul McCartney , Mick Jagger , Keith Richards , Brian Jones , Dusty Springfield and Cliff Richard . In July 2011 , music journalist Peter Paphides presented Late Nights at the Blue Boar , a BBC Radio 4 documentary about the connection between the services and Britain 's 1960s rock bands .