

AS you might expect from a man who takes his main relaxation from business on the bowling green, Mr. Clarence Suter, the 75-year-old chairman of Slough's oldest established department store, borrows an axiom from his favourite sport to sum up his life's philosophy.

"You never know your luck until the ball's stopped rolling," he told me last week, as he and his fellow directors prepared to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the family business.

And as he will tell you, the ball has often rolled luckily for Mr. Suter during his long life. Never more so than on a certain day in 1918, when it was very nearly brought to an abrupt end by a German machine gun bullet.

The bullet left Private Suter, who was serving as a sniper with the Gloucester Regiment, with a shattered left arm, but he still counts that only a minor misfortune.

"Had I not been in the firing position at the time with my arm cradling my head, I would not be here talking to you now," he said.

Even then his luck had not run out, for despite the doctors' forecast on his release from hospital 14 months later that the shattered arm would wither into uselessness, he has had hardly any trouble with it since.

## 'Prentice days

But although it may have helped at intervals down the years, luck alone did not enable Clarence Suter to expand the business which he started with his father, the late Mr. George Suter, in September, 1920, with a staff of seven, into the considerable enterprise, which today — between the Slough and Uxbridge branches — employs 450 people.

On the contrary, the attributes which have taken Clarence Suter to the top in a highly competitive business, were forged in the crucible of pretty tough personal experience.

In 1910 at the age of 15, he—at his father's command—left the small family business in Ledbury, Herefordshire, to become an apprentice in a large drapery store at Colchester.

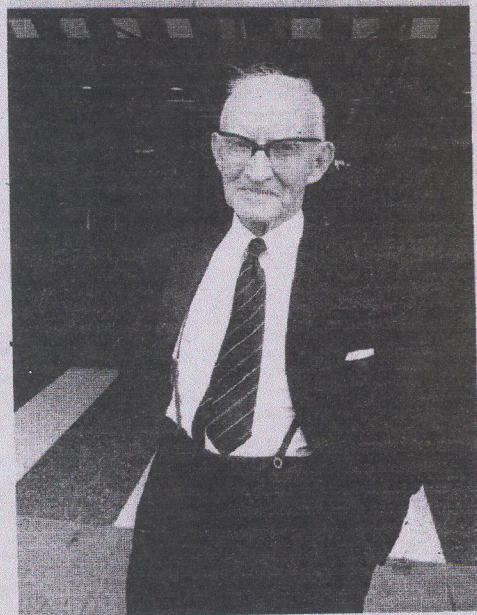
"My father insisted that I went away to learn the business thoroughly," he recalled in the soft West Country burr which has never left him during his 60 years "in exile."

"The learning was pretty tough. We lived in the shop, and were paid only 2s. a week until we had finished our indentures when we received the fine sum of £20 a year.

"We worked terrifically long hours, sometimes until

# Clarence Suter — 50 years a draper

## Suters



11 p.m. at night, and while we didn't actually sleep under the counter, the conditions—particularly the food were not all that good.

"The discipline was tough, too. We were not allowed to go near a customer until we had at least six months' training, and when we were eventually regarded as good enough to serve, woe betide us if we were unable to sell a customer who had asked for a particular article which was not in stock, something else."

Mr. Suter had just time to finish his apprenticeship before the 1st World War broke out. He volunteered for the

Army, and in 1915 found himself in France with the Gloucesters, with the near fatal results already stated.

Like so many returning servicemen, he found that Lloyd George's promise of "a land fit for heroes" had a somewhat hollow ring.

Recalling his own experience as a member of the great army of unemployed, he said:

"I queued with 20 other chaps for a job as a sales assistant in a large drapers' shop in the Edgware Road. When it came my turn to see the manager, he asked me how much I wanted. I replied that it was not a

case of wanting anything other than a job. He told me to come back at mid-day, and when I did so told me that I could have the job.

"He also gave me a lot of stuff about wanting to help ex-Servicemen, but I knew very well that I had only been given the job because I didn't argue about the wages. I forget now what they were, but they must have been about £1 a week."

But Mr. Suter did not remain a "wage slave" for long, for in 1920 he came to Slough to join his father and—albeit in a modest way to begin with—the boss class.

They acquired the draper's shop owned by Andrews and Sons, at 101-103 High Street.

Recalling the circumstances of the most momentous decision of his life, Mr. Suter said:

"My father, who had retired, was anxious to return to business in a small way, so he asked me to look around for a suitable property near London. I looked at several, and finally hit on Slough.

"It was only a small, sleepy place then, but I could see the potential, for the Trading Estate, or the 'Dump' as it was then called, was just about beginning to grow. It also struck me that if the proprietor of the shop could spend his Saturday afternoons watching boxing at the Dolphin, then he must be missing an awful lot of business.

"Anyway I invested my small savings and went in with my father. Things were very hard at first, because they were the days of the post-war slump. Things were so uncertain that cloth which was selling at £1 a yard one day would fetch only 5s. the next. But business slowly kept improving as the Trading Estate grew, and by the middle thirties had begun to boom."

Throughout the 50 years which have seen the modest little draper's shop which he and his father started with seven female staff grow into a full-blown department store providing 70,000 sq. ft. of shopping space, and em-

ploying 300 people — not to mention the expansion to Uxbridge — Clarence Suter has stuck unwaveringly to the dictum that in business the customer counts before all else.

Plainly sceptical of the modern obsession with management techniques, he said: "Obviously you must have good management, but I feel there is far too much paper work in business today. The most important people in my shops are the customers. If you didn't have them, it would be useless having all the clerks in the world."

And of modern trends he joked: "In the old days women used to wear their bloomers inside their dresses, but now they wear them outside."

Nor has the "ball stopped rolling" for the chairman of Suters Ltd. Still spry and younger than his 75 years, he attends the shop daily.

"But not doing office work. I prefer to mingle with my customers, chatting to them and helping them if they are in any difficulty," he said.

J.R.J.