AIDS is a new health threat, the NHS has its longest pay dispute yet and the UKCC is created

The 1980s were characterised by industrial strife and upheaval in nursing. The profession was more often than not at loggerheads with the then Conservative government.

In 1982 prime minister Margaret Thatcher famously promised 'The NHS is safe with us.' But by the end of the decade many people doubted that, even though the 1980s started well with nurses' working week being reduced from 48 to 37.5 hours.

In 1982 the NHS experienced its longest dispute yet when 13 health service unions seeking a uniform 12 per cent pay rise rejected a pay award that would have given nurses a 6.4 per cent increase and other workers an increase of four per cent.

About 5,000 angry nurses gathered for a rally at RCN headquarters in London and unions began a series of selective one-day stoppages that grew in length and intensity. More than 60,000 people protested in London in September and most pits and ports had stopped working.

Some nurses had taken part in industrial action but not those who were RCN members. The college's no-strike policy held firm at this time and helped bring an end to the dispute in December when nurses accepted a 12.3 per cent pay rise covering a 19-month period.

Decisions about nurses' pay were revolutionised in 1983 when the government created the Pay Review Body for nurses—an objective body that would carry out a thorough pay review annually and make recommendations to the government.

This independent body was set up, the government said, in recognition of the special position of nurses who do not take industrial action and on whom we have relied heavily in the past six months. The Pay Review Body was greeted with suspicion at first because it was linked to a pay offer that year which failed to impress the profession, and because the government had a poor record in accepting review body pay recommendations.

1983 was also a big year because it saw the creation of a new nursing regulatory body, the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting. The shadow UKCC, which began work in 1980, did not open its meetings to the profession until 1982.

The first code of professional conduct was also issued in 1983.
- dealing with ethical statements of how nurses could best protect patients' interests, serve society, justify the trust of the public and maintain a good reputation for nursing. These standards, although updated in 2002 by the UKCC's replacement, the Nursing and Midwifery Council, still hold today.

Alongside the creation of the UKCC the four national boards also came into existence with responsibility for setting standards and guidelines for nurse education and for undertaking quality assurance for nursing and midwifery education.

Nurse staffing levels were a constant concern in this decade and steadily worsened. In the early 1980s it was estimated that one-quarter of the staff working at Marks & Spencer's flagship store in London were registered nurses because they had such a reputation for being hard-working, conscientious staff who were good with people.

The idea of treating patients as satisfied customers was introduced in the 1980s thanks to the Griffiths report. The Tory government commissioned Roy Griffiths, then deputy chairman and managing director of Sainsbury's, to study the NHS.

Mr Griffiths' observations in 1983 led the government to introduce general managers drawn from inside and outside the NHS into health authorities and hospitals. Nurses were able to become general managers in the NHS, but out of about 200 positions only six were initially held by women and of those only three were nurses.

The profession was not impressed. A Nursing Times editorial said the report was 'an unmitigated disaster for nursing' and signalled the end of self-management for nurses.

The RCN ran a £250,000 publicity campaign in late 1985 opposing the Griffiths report and the introduction of general management.

Alarm bells over NHS nurse staffing levels really started to ring towards the end of the decade when the National Association of Health Authorities revealed in 1989 that the number of nurses and midwives in the health service had fallen for the first time in a decade. New registrations in nursing had also fallen by 13 per cent during 1987-1988.

Aids was a new threat and nursing showed its compassion for people who contracted the disease while many others panicked and discriminated against people who needed their help. The arrival of the disease did teach people more about infection control but it also provoked examples of stigmatisation and prejudice.

A major issue for the 1980s and beyond was the introduction of clinical grading in 1988. This was the first major overhaul of nurses' grading structure since the NHS began in 1948. The idea was for nurses' pay to be dictated by the actual tasks they performed, rather than by rigid job titles such as senior staff nurse or sister, but the introduction was regarded as a botched job.

Thousands of nurses said they had been put on the wrong grade and claims began. The system caused such anger because it was never properly funded and there was no agreement between staff and managers on the criteria for different levels of seniority.

Nurses were treated to a backdated 15 per cent pay rise on their new grades, but this was not as wonderful as it sounds because inflation at the time was rising and peaked at just under 10 per cent at the end of the 1980s.

\[\text{Staffing levels were a constant concern throughout the decade and steadily worsened}\]

Then health secretary Kenneth Clarke did not help matters in 1983 when he said: 'My principle reaction is real difficulty in understanding what all the fuss is about.'

The last case of a clinical grading claim for a nurse did not end until 2003. This marked the end of more than 100,000 claims made since the system was introduced. Successful claims over the period included a nurse on a D grade being upgraded to an H. On a lighter note, nurses' uniforms continued to catch the public's attention. In 1986, the East Dyfed health authority stirred up controversy when it decided to discontinue caps for all nurses except sisters. Local newspapers ran and ran with the story with many letters from outraged members of the public.

The 1980s was a confrontational period and in early 1988 26 nurses and 11 auxiliaries from Manchester hit the headlines when they went on a 24-hour strike over clinical grading.

The combination of clinical grading, low pay and the state of the NHS sparked waves of strikes and protests from nurses at the end of the decade. For the first time, staff and the public started to fear that the money for the NHS would run out.

Nurses across the UK threatened strike action over low pay and staff shortages and the stakes were raised by prime minister Margaret Thatcher, who said that any nurses taking part were 'hitting out deliberately at patients'. A minority of nurses from some unions did strike but approximately
6,000 nurses took part in some form of protest, causing about 400 operations to be cancelled.

Susanne Holmes, a nurse graduate, was appointed as the UK's first cardiac surgeon's assistant at the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford in 1989. Although applauded for breaking barriers, Ms Holmes later admitted to NT in an interview that she no longer considered herself to be a nurse as her job was now medical.

Fundamental changes to nurse training first emerged during this decade. The UK was one of the last English-speaking nations in the world to carry out its basic nurse education in hospitals on an apprenticeship basis.

The importance of Project 2000 was not lost on the profession when the UKCC first put forward its proposals in 1986 for changes to student training, an end to enrolled nurse training, student status and a new specialist practitioners.

'If its recommendations see the light of day, it will be the most important document since Florence Nightingale's Notes on Nursing,' said NT's editor Niall Dickson in an editorial. Those changes would take another decade to materialise.

The 1980s ended as they had begun in conflict with the government. The Tories published their white paper on NHS reforms in 1989 to almost universal hostility. By the end of that year, nurses and doctors joined forces to fight the resulting NHS Bill, in a coalition made up of the RCN, BMA, RCM and the medical Royal Colleges.