In many ways the 1980s proved to be a tumultuous decade for the school. Still a "good school" as principal, Ken Murray, was renowned for saying often on school assembly, Parramatta High School appears finally to have cast aside the mantle of its selectivity. The lingering sensitive issue of its former selective status that had emerged and re-emerged during the 1970s barely rates a mention in the reminiscences of ex-students. It is fair to say, though, that the school remained selective by desire with the siblings and children of selective cohorts of earlier times choosing to enrol their own children at the school, even if it were no longer officially selective in the eyes of the Department.

The strong thread of multiculturalism, which had been a feature since the school's beginnings, became the more substantial part of the school's fabric reflecting in part the demographic transformation of the school's drawing area. Diversity was a feature with no cultural or ethnic group dominating (a trend that continued into the next century), celebrated with regular international and multicultural days. A quick glance at the Dux of the School honour roll demonstrates vividly the impact of multiculturalism at the school in this decade with a wonderfully diverse cultural mix of names although a similar glance at the school captains' list reveals that leadership remained largely an Anglo-Saxon domain. The bicentenary of white settlement was celebrated in grand style and the Metherell education revolution towards the end of the decade divided the school community, pitting students against teachers as the school community met the challenges of implementing an economically rational educational model.

The defining terrible event of the decade, however, was the fire of Sunday 26 June 1982, which devastated the school's main block, cruelly only three weeks before the retirement of the principal and one of the school's most devoted servants, Jack Freeman. In the words of long serving English-History master, Goodwin Packer, "1982 will long be remembered as the year of the Parramatta High School fire. Many of us will never forget the sickening feeling of desolation and loss as we watched over our old school in flames". It is now a matter of history that the school has been rebuilt and has flourished since this devastating event, a tribute to "all those who have stood by their school in its hour indeed and have doubled and redoubled their efforts" at this bleak and traumatic moment in its history.
Kate Muir takes up this theme of rebirth (the irony of the Phoenix has been lost on few) "but the fire, though horrific and demoralising, brought much good to the school in the long term... The fighting spirit of the school was still intact and a protective spirit to the school arose..." Regional Director John Farnsworth came all the way from Springwood on the night and gave Jack Freeman "warm assurances that the school would be rebuilt and that the present students would be looked after by the Department in whatever way was possible..." It was certainly a challenge, nonetheless, to the resources of the department and the now legendary fighting spirit of the PHS community. The timetable was rearranged to incorporate 90 minutes lessons so that teachers could travel from senior classes timetabled in the Teachers College at Westmead to junior classes in un-air-conditioned, tin-roofed demountables (17 at one point) established in Parramatta parklands to the west of the school.

On the brighter side long overdue renovations and redecorations were eventually undertaken. Some parts of the original building were completely restored and a new languages laboratory established. Not all could be salvaged nor replaced however. Over $100,000 worth of text books had gone up in flames and a priceless video library had been destroyed. Perhaps the greatest loss had been felt by the languages faculty which had lost irreplaceable resource material accumulated after many years of dedicated teaching.

Certainly at the beginning of the 1980s the school was in fine shape at least in esprit d'corps if not in educational facilities. The student council, established in the 1970s, was going about its business, perhaps goaded by an impassioned David Monaghan who "was disillusioned by the almost complete of power the council has", focussing its might upon replacing the "archaic hall windows" that allowed easy access to pigeons who "threatened the wellbeing and cleanliness of pupils during assemblies and examinations". It took them three years but there was much celebration in the student council when new windows were installed, "thus ending the reign of terror of the pigeons and allowing the students to devote their full attention to the Deputy Principal's address or their examination papers".

There was immense pride in the award winning student newspaper "Parramatters" (editors Helen Pitt (1981) and David Monaghan (1980) received cadetships at the Sydney Morning Herald on the strength of the newspaper's success in those years). It was an important outlet for the expression of the students' voice with students being encouraged to put forward their views on such vexed questions as "Uniforms - Yes or No?", the potentially controversial and equally mystifying "the Pirates of Parramatta or Slaves of Mr Packer?" and a fascinating piece on how to treat head lice. The student newspaper certainly tackled the hard issues such as public funding of education and corporal punishment, challenging authority quite defiantly and cogently and providing one explanation of the "bush lawyers" reference in Jack Freeman's farewell message in the 1982 Phoenix.
It is not clear whether the newspaper went into decline because of its controversial nature and opposition from the school authorities, production costs or whether it was after the announcement that Parramatters was not eligible to win the Herald student newspaper for the third time running. The student newspaper led the charge to ensure that the school had continued access to the oval despite mooted redevelopment plans by the Leagues club and the Union club. Reading the series of articles thirty years later, one can only be impressed by the courage, determination, diligence and journalistic skills of the student writers and it is no wonder they were award winners. It is known that four copies were produced in 1982 but the results of an impassioned plea in 1983 by Mr Prendergast to "make Parramatters a special project for the whole school" are not known.

Prefects took their responsibilities as seriously as ever and the uniform was worn with pride but perhaps not to the standard of halcyon days of earlier times (students were a little more willing to defy uniform codes, the cane was on its way out as a uniform incentive and there was certainly no Miss Mackaness or Miss Brown or for that matter Mr Porter of the infamous Porter line to rigorously enforce the dress and behaviour codes). The school was a force in debating with significant success in the Hume Barbour and Karl Cramp competitions.

There was at least one highly successful art exhibition of students' works, a series of very popular chess clubs that achieved some success (well at least one victory) at inter-school chess competitions and, to great fanfare, a computer club was initiated in 1981 to celebrate the purchase of the school's first computer (54 members led by the illustrious Mr Levingston). Students participated regularly in exchange programs mostly in Europe and the United States. Interschool visits continued with the school hosting visits from New Zealand schools, most notably billeting girls from the Maori Culture Club from the Hastings Girls High School and a rugby team from Tokoroa that ran out narrow one point winners over Parramatta.

As a state school, Parramatta High, since its inception, had been no stranger to the challenges of maintaining high academic standards on the limited funding support provided from government coffers. Parramatta High's original selective status meant that even when that classification had been withdrawn by the 1970s the school continued to suffer in funding arrangements well into the 1980s and beyond. Arthur Phillip High School, just down the road, attracted disadvantaged schools funding whilst Parra, with a virtually identical drawing area, continued to miss out on the additional funding that may have gone part of the way towards rejuvenating its ageing facilities. Certainly the fire of 1982 necessitated extensive rebuilding and a new science and library block had been built in the 1970s but it is a credit to the teachers and to the students of these years that quality teaching and learning took place despite what many teachers and students of the time describe as substandard classrooms and facilities.

Certainly an important part of maintaining this standard was fund raising by the students and teachers themselves. Older students will remember the drive to raise money to build a school oval when no money was forthcoming from the government. Improved sporting facilities were again the goal of fund raising drives. In the 1980s the prime source of extra funds came from the Spellathon organised mostly by Mr Levingston (Levo) and Mr Szota. All grades took part with the spelling challenges graded accordingly. By 21st century standards the word
lists were quite difficult and perhaps a reflection of the equally strong academic standards at the school. Times of course were different as this question avidly demonstrates: "Spell cigarette. CIGARETTE. My favourite brand of cigarette is Benson and Hedges. Spell cigarette."

In 1981 $8000 was raised only to be surpassed the following year by the amount of $10771, collected as a "result of a consistent effort from everybody who took part, which includes, almost without exception, every member of the school ". Individuals such as Patricia Ludlow of Year 10 raised extraordinary amounts ($319) with many others raising more than $100 each. The monies raised went towards a hot water system for the boys' showers, PE equipment, redwood picnic tables for the canteen and the upgrading of the curtains in the school hall. It was a wonderfully unifying force and a matter of some pride, as R.Coombs wrote "for how else can you account for the continued success of the Spellathon, other than ascribing to it the existence of some "spirit" within the school which is greater than the sum of its parts? That spirit is something of which anyone coming to this school becomes quickly aware."

With Mr Freeman, then Mr Carey, at the helm as principal, musical traditions were maintained. In 1980 the school musical was "The Pyjama Game" and the following year the critically acclaimed "The Pirates of Penzance". "Pirates" was lauded for "the confident performances from seemingly competent student principals", "boisterous singing from the boys", a technics teacher in the male chorus complete with a stuffed parrot on his shoulder and not the least "Goodwin Packer's vain efforts to persuade forty unwilling girls to smile, skip and sing simultaneously". A two year recess as the school was rebuilt from the fire was followed by "West Side Story" and "Anything Goes". After the extended respite, the producers of "West Side Story" had to overcome an element of pre-production scepticism from the school hierarchy who were eventually persuaded to "to let frustrated adolescents play frustrated adolescents and see what happens". The production, despite an sustained section of ad-libbing during a performance for the local primary schools, was generally said "to have worked"; hardly critical acclaim but good enough.

The standard to get into "Anything Goes" was quite rigorous- according to Melanie Beswick: "we had to sing the school on the hill - we belted it out." Despite the extended industrial action of 1988, "Oliver" was performed to audience acclaim in July with Mr Raper, the Science Head Teacher, starring as Fagan. The production was a testimony to the talent, dedication and determination of the students and staff as well as the experience of the producers, Mr Maas and Ms Splatt (later appointed as the first female principal at Parramatta High School), who managed to extract some fine performances from a largely debut cast. Buoyed by their success, the producers rounded off the decade with a production of "Joseph and His Technicolour Dreamcoat".
If the reminiscences of students are any guide, school spirit was just as strong as it had ever been. Impassioned performances of the house war cries resounded throughout each swimming and athletics carnival demonstrating clearly that inter-house rivalry was undiminished as epitomised through the rewritten accounts from Banjo Paterson and David Monaghan, "Mr Marsden", dressed fetchingly in red tights, T-shirt and cape, leaping in and out of makeshift telephone booths. It was still an honour to represent the school at zone or region and in some cases CHS, be it as an individual in cross country, athletics or swimming or as member of a winning school team in the various grade or state competitions.

Mark Gilbey was CHS diving champion in 1984 and Champion of Champions in 1985, winning a Lend Lease Sports Foundation Scholarship. Martin Hesse was a champion javelin exponent, setting a record in 1983 as well as representing at CHS level for five years running. Martin Hesse set the NSW schoolboy 17+ record for Javelin in 1984 (when he was 15). This record is still listed on the DET website. At the school athletics carnival at Auburn the events at the other end of the field were shut down for safety reasons when Martin was throwing! One memory of a school swimming carnival at Merrylands in either 1985 or 1986 was the year 11 breast-stroke race where all the participants swum in line abreast singing the "Do Wah Diddy Diddy" song by The Moffatts. Greg Donaldson was a standout performer in Rugby League, Kerrie Cocks was awarded a Lend Lease scholarship for squash, Matthew Bingley was on the cusp of a representative soccer career, Ian Johnston won six cross countries in a row.

There were some notable mufti "dress up" events, particularly one, the "pink or punk" disco where the girls all arranged to dye their hair pink, even resorting to food colouring when the "magic silver rose" ran out. Dances had been replaced by discos and were usually held once per term although there was period when the discos were banned in 1983 apparently because of poor behaviour. Visiting bands like Pseudo Echo regularly performed at lunchtime concerts, often to the whole school.

Following in the tradition of the Knight brothers of earlier decades, student bands continued to proliferate with the support of a succession of dedicated music teachers such as Mr Maas. The Bruce Band, Bandog, Wizard, the Winged Devils and the Shooters, whilst standout performers at school dances, don't appear to have gone onto greater success. Another prominent group (at least in the minds of its members) was Void, which started out as a Cold Chisel and Beatles cover band. Its efforts receive a feature article in "Son of Phoenix" - a comparison of group members and the magazine's editorial committee offers one explanation as to why this may be so. Two of its songs are also published and a closer examination of their lyrics explains why they may have been banned from performance in the talent quest of 1988.

As well as sport and music there were many opportunities for the gifted to represent the school. These included Rotary public speaking competitions, state maths and science competitions, debating, choir, concert bands, students forums with Parramatta Council, the Bicentenary Council and there was even an international competition (by satellite) in 1983 between PHS and the King Henry VIII school in Abergavenny, Wales to celebrate the
International Year of Communication; a wonderful experience for the PHS students (Greg Mashiah of Year 7, Ron Smernick from Year 8 and Kate Muir from Year 9), who fought keenly but sadly were not victorious. Jane Baskin-Sikimeti won the E. & A.M. Cliff Parramatta Rotary public speaking competition and Greg Mashiah won the Macquarie University Essay prize (1988).

Student nicknames continued to abound even if some were politically incorrect and occasionally unimaginative: Bradley "Bra" Plain, Glenn "Coon" Connor, Darren "Murphette" Murphy, Tyron "Agro" Mason, Ron "Smirnoff" Smernik, Jasynful Stubbs, Donna "Kebab" Munyard, Martin "Noodle" McDonald, "Sweet Feet" Dana Fink, Peter "Gogs" Holtmann and the much nominated Nicole Schiller, "pickles, pixi and Nikki". Another curricular activity was the chorale concerts held at the Opera House, which had a good attendance from the school choir. Mr Tweed also encouraged students to undertake the Duke of Edinburgh award in the mid to late 1980s. This included hiking from Katoomba to Kanangra Walls in the Blue Mountains and an Easter hike in the Snowy Mountains in 1988 when the group experienced four seasons in four days - with a blizzard on the last day. For several years the Years 11s went to Jindabyne on a week-long excursion. Other camps included Burrill Lakes, Canberra and Mt Seaview.

In 1988, the school spirit was challenged by the educational reform agenda of the newly elected Liberal state government. Initially students and teachers joined forces to implement a "work to rule" campaign which included a ban on the production of the "Phoenix" in 1988. It was an emotional divisive time for the school with students split broadly into two camps. One group was aligned with an inter-school students union led by student vice-captain Max Broodryk whilst another group, with Greg Mashiah speaking out against Federation “propaganda”, took issue with the teachers' stand and among other forms of protest put out a school magazine entitled "Son of Phoenix". The magazine was a labour of love and the brain child of Martin McDonald and Matthew Geddes who together with Charlotte Bujewicz, Jasyn Stubbs, Ian Dryland and Richard Sievwright among many contributors ensured that 1988 would not be without an annual school magazine. As the only wholly student generated PHS annual magazine, it is a unique and important historical document and reflective of the abiding school spirit that continued to thrive at Parramatta High School.

Of the teachers most mentioned in ex-students' reminiscences, Goodwin Packer still figures prominently, renowned for his sayings "irony is a mocking discrepancy between appearance and reality or promise and fulfilment". He was respected through reputation as well as personal contact although a Parramatters investigation at the time alludes to his powerful influence through the Gilbert and Sullivan productions. After Goodwin Packer retired, his wife worked in the school library for several years. When Goodwin retired there was a commemorative booklet produced called "Goodbye Mr Chips". Mrs Ryan, who went on to
marry another English teacher, Mr Zivkovic, is remembered as being "really lovely and a lot of fun" whilst Mrs Yardley achieved notoriety for being a "little eccentric in her ways".

Miss Medcalf was still "going ballistic" as well as being applauded for being the driving force behind the 70th anniversary celebrations. Mr Diamond's teaching and reign as year adviser rates several positive mentions as do Maths Head Teacher Mr Sattler and fellow Maths teacher and G&S star, Mr Uren. Mrs Uren is also acclaimed for her Indonesian teaching and her gentle way of gaining silence "shhh, shhh". Popular science teachers were Mr Love- the subject of an affectionate Parramatters article "All You Need is Love" and renowned for pithy observations such as "there is no time for secs in Science. Use 's' for seconds". There was the science teaching Irishman, Mr Adams (who was to return to the school as Science Head Teacher the next decade) whose motto for field trips was "always walk well in front of your students, so that you can trample on any specimens you don't recognise."

The school is indebted to Mr Swift who was a driving force culturally for his work on the sets of musicals, murals and ensuring the Phoenix was published. PE teacher, Mr Robilliard, of the famous Parramatta High clan, is credited with elevating sport lessons above the "dead boring". Mr Tweed aka "Smiley", "Tweedie" and "Mr Patient", did extraordinary service as a year adviser and Mrs Carlin, who replaced the legendary Mrs Underwood, the canteen manager, set up a holy successful canteen work experience program for students. The Yorke family, with Enid following in John's footsteps was still a continuing buttress for the P&C, faced with the challenge of the retirement stalwart treasurer, Mr G Hill, who retired after 11 years of dedicated service to the school. Sadly Enid Yorke passed away in 1989 not long after being awarded life membership of the P&C for her sixty years' proud service to the school.

The Ladies Auxiliary was still a force, providing valuable support to the P&C, regularly meeting as well as holding its well-attended annual reunion. Another memorable member of the English/History department was K.F.N. (Kenneth) Weekes who strove to bring an "intellectual" attitude to English and History. One highlight of studying French was the regular French breakfasts with croissants and pain au chocolat from a French patisserie on Pennant Hills Road at Carlingford which gained fame through making the wedding cake for Simon and Vicky on "A Country Practice".

The lyrics of Void songs aside, a prevailing sense of optimism shines through in the recorded writings of students and staff of this decade. Jane Bastin-Sikimeti expressed this optimism wonderfully well:

"I see the future as resting with the student body currently attending the school. My classmates and I hold the key. We are the future. Parramatta has proud traditions and has made its mark on the wider community. I hope to be able to continue this."