The more than 140-year long series of aa geomagnetic indices is used to describe the evolution of geomagnetic activity since 1868, using the occurrence of both very quiet periods and of intense storms as signatures of this evolution. We start with a study of the 50-year long series of am and Dst indices and define the events that can be used as signatures of the geomagnetic activity evolution. The so-defined signatures are then used to characterize this evolution during the last 140 years. Results are presented and discussed.