Star Chamber

# STAR CHAMBER

*An ancient high court of England, controlled by the monarch, which was abolished in 1641 by Parliament for abuses of power.*

The English court of Star Chamber was created by King Henry VII in 1487 and was named for a room with stars painted on the ceiling in the royal palace of Westminster where the court sat. The Star Chamber was an instrument of the monarch and consisted of royal councillors and two royal judges. The jurisdiction of the court was based on the royal prerogative of administering justice in cases not remediable in the regular courts of law.

The Star Chamber originally assisted with some administrative matters, but by the 1530s it had become a pure court, relieving the king of the burden of hearing cases personally. It was a court of equity, granting remedies unavailable in the common-law courts. As such, the court was an informal body that dispensed with "due process" as it was then understood.

During Henry VII's reign (1485–1509), about half the cases involved real property. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Star Chamber became a useful tool in dealing with cases involving members of the aristocracy who often defied the authority of the regular courts. It was during this period, moreover, that the court acquired criminal jurisdiction, hearing cases on issues concerning the security of the realm, such as sedition, criminal libel, conspiracy, and forgery. Later, fraud and the punishment of judges came within its jurisdiction.

The importance of the Star Chamber increased during the reigns of James I (1603–25) and Charles I (1625–49). Under Archbishop William Laud, the court became a tool of royal oppression, seeking out and punishing religious and political dissidents. In the 1630s Laud used the Star Chamber to persecute a group of Puritan leaders, most of whom came from the gentry, subjecting them to the pillory and corporal punishment. Though the Star Chamber could not mete out capital punishment, it inflicted everything short of death upon those found guilty. During this time the court met in secret, extracting evidence by torturing witnesses and handing out punishments that included mutilation, life imprisonment, and enormous fines. It turned equity's traditionally broad discretion into a complete disregard for the law. The Star Chamber sometimes acted on mere rumors in order to suppress opposition to the king.

The Star Chamber's arbitrary use of power and the cruel punishments it inflicted produced a wave of reaction against it from Puritans, advocates of common-law courts, and others opposed to the reign of Charles I. In 1641 the Long Parliament abolished the court and made reparations to some of its victims.

The **Star Chamber** ([Latin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin%22%20%5Co%20%22Latin): *Camera stellata*) was an [English](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_England%22%20%5Co%20%22Kingdom%20of%20England) [court of law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Court_of_law%22%20%5Co%20%22Court%20of%20law) which sat at the royal [Palace of Westminster](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palace_of_Westminster%22%20%5Co%20%22Palace%20of%20Westminster), from the late 15th century to the mid-17th century (c. 1641), and was composed of [Privy Councillors](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Privy_Council_of_England%22%20%5Co%20%22Privy%20Council%20of%20England) and [common-law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_law%22%20%5Co%20%22Common%20law) judges, to supplement the judicial activities of the common-law and [equity courts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Court_of_equity%22%20%5Co%20%22Court%20of%20equity) in civil and criminal matters. The Star Chamber was established to ensure the fair enforcement of laws against socially and politically prominent people so powerful that ordinary courts would likely hesitate to convict them of their crimes.

In modern usage, legal or administrative bodies with strict, arbitrary rulings and secretive proceedings are sometimes called, metaphorically or poetically, *star chambers*. This is a pejorative term and intended to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the proceedings. 'Star Chamber' can also be used in its original meaning, for instance when a politician uses parliamentary privilege to attack a powerful organisation or person.[[a]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_Chamber%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-2)