Urban historians have drawn upon the image of the palimpsest—vellum repeatedly scraped of previous writing for new inscription, on which the older text leaves traces—to conceptualize cities. London, “destroyed” by the Great Fire of 1666 and “severely damaged” in the Second World War, nonetheless offers material traces of older ways of life. Another model, which works especially well for the oldest parts of London, is sedimentation: excavations for the foundations of modern bridges and high rises have unearthed traces of “pre-history.”

This course will explore the oldest layers of London’s history and in so doing, ask the question, what is history? Class meetings will alternate between discussion in the seminar room and walking the city, learning how to see its history in the material traces of the past.