

Commentary

by Gromaticus

You in your small corner, ...

I recently gave a talk to a group of primary school children. During the question-and-answer session that followed, one child asked "What was the biggest thing you've ever found?", which made a refreshing change from the usual "... most valuable thing". I told them the story of the 'small find' at Winchester which had needed two students to carry it from the site to the finds building. Afterwards, this set me thinking about how I might have answered questions on "... the most exciting thing" or "... the most important thing". The first has an easy answer for me: a Leclanché cell from a site in Southampton. Yes, it was a 19th-century or early-20th-century find from a Saxon site, it excited me, mainly because of its importance in the early history of the domestic use of electricity (door bells, telephones, etc.), but also, if I am honest, because I was the person who recognised what it was.

The second question ("... the most important thing") is far more difficult to answer. It just raises further questions: "important to whom?" and "important for what?" for example. There may well be no definitive answers, but it sets us thinking about what is important to us, both individually and collectively, and that's always a good thing. A metaphor that I found useful to get my thinking started was "what's the most important piece of a jigsaw puzzle?" – the first piece in place, the last piece, the piece that suddenly illuminates a whole area of the picture, or the piece that tells us

that we've got it wrong and have to start again, and so on. Some unexpected things can be important to some people; I remember being told of a schoolboy on an excavation who saw great importance in a crisp packet that he had found: "look, you can actually date it, I can read the sell-by date".

So – what do we mean by 'important', and does it matter? Some may remember a LAMAS conference at which the relative importance of various archaeological discoveries in London was debated. If I remember correctly, the winner was the discovery of *Lundenwic* in the 1980s, where different sources of evidence converged on a solution. The contenders were all big 'block-buster' discoveries, and rightly so, but I'd like to put in a word for the small individually insignificant discoveries, which by themselves mean very little, but which taken together can build up a picture (yes, we're back to the jigsaw puzzle metaphor). A related aspect of importance is its scale: over what distance or range is something important? The crisp packet was important to probably one schoolboy, *Lundenwic* is important across London (at least). What appears important at only a very local level (for example, finds from a garden test-pit), can become important at a broader level when they are compared to other similar discoveries, as (for example) in a village test-pit survey, which may tell us about the origins and growth of a particular village. Ultimately, surveys could be combined and compared to

build up a regional or even a national picture. The point is that small, apparently insignificant, discoveries can play their part in contributing towards bigger pictures, which would be incomplete without them.

This only works if mechanisms exist for preserving and comparing bodies of local data, which are comparable with each other, bringing us to the issue of archives. A few years ago Gustav Milne (and he was not the first to do so) stressed the importance of archaeological archives, making the point that many of the discoveries of the future will be made in the archives, not in the field. I have no doubt that this is true, but only if those archives continue to exist, follow common standards, and are readily accessible to would-be users. It can be difficult for local archaeologists to appreciate the broader value and importance of their findings, and even more difficult for the general public and policy-makers to appreciate the value of archives as a source of new knowledge, and not just as depositories for dusty old pots and bones. It would be good to see some flagship projects that do just that – breathing life into apparently 'dead' data to tell us new things about our past.

Apology

We apologise that our preview of the MOLA report on the Upper Walbrook Roman cemetery in our previous issue (Vol. 13, no. 11, 307–8), omitted the information that all the images in that preview are © MOLA.

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

We meet this year at the Institute of Archaeology. Our wine reception at 6.30 pm will be followed at 7 pm by a short AGM and the prestigious annual lecture. Presenting *The Bloomberg Bonanza*, Sadie Watson, MOLA Site Director, reveals the very latest post-excavation findings from the exceptional Walbrook site, and brings news of the on-site exhibition space

under construction. Evidence including Roman military activity, temples, bridges and trades and a medieval manor and church is helping to redraw our understanding of City development.

The AGM proceedings will include the election of Officers, and the election to the Publication Committee of six Ordinary Members. There will be two vacancies to fill, and we hope to elect a

new Marketing Manager and Assistant Editor. To discuss the positions or submit nominations (and to send an RSVP for the reception please), email the Secretary via the website or write to her at 44 Tantallon Road, London SW12 8DG.

All welcome: 15th May 2013, UCL Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY.