MARCH

With March came the first of the tulips, and a white sea of anemones in the coppiced woods. With the lengthening days and ever more pops of colour emerging around the garden, it's starting to feel more like spring. In the woods, the low afternoon sun filtered through the still bare trees is breathtaking, illuminating a thousand heads of *Anemone nemorosa* as far as the eye can see. These, I am told, are an indicator species for ancient woodland.

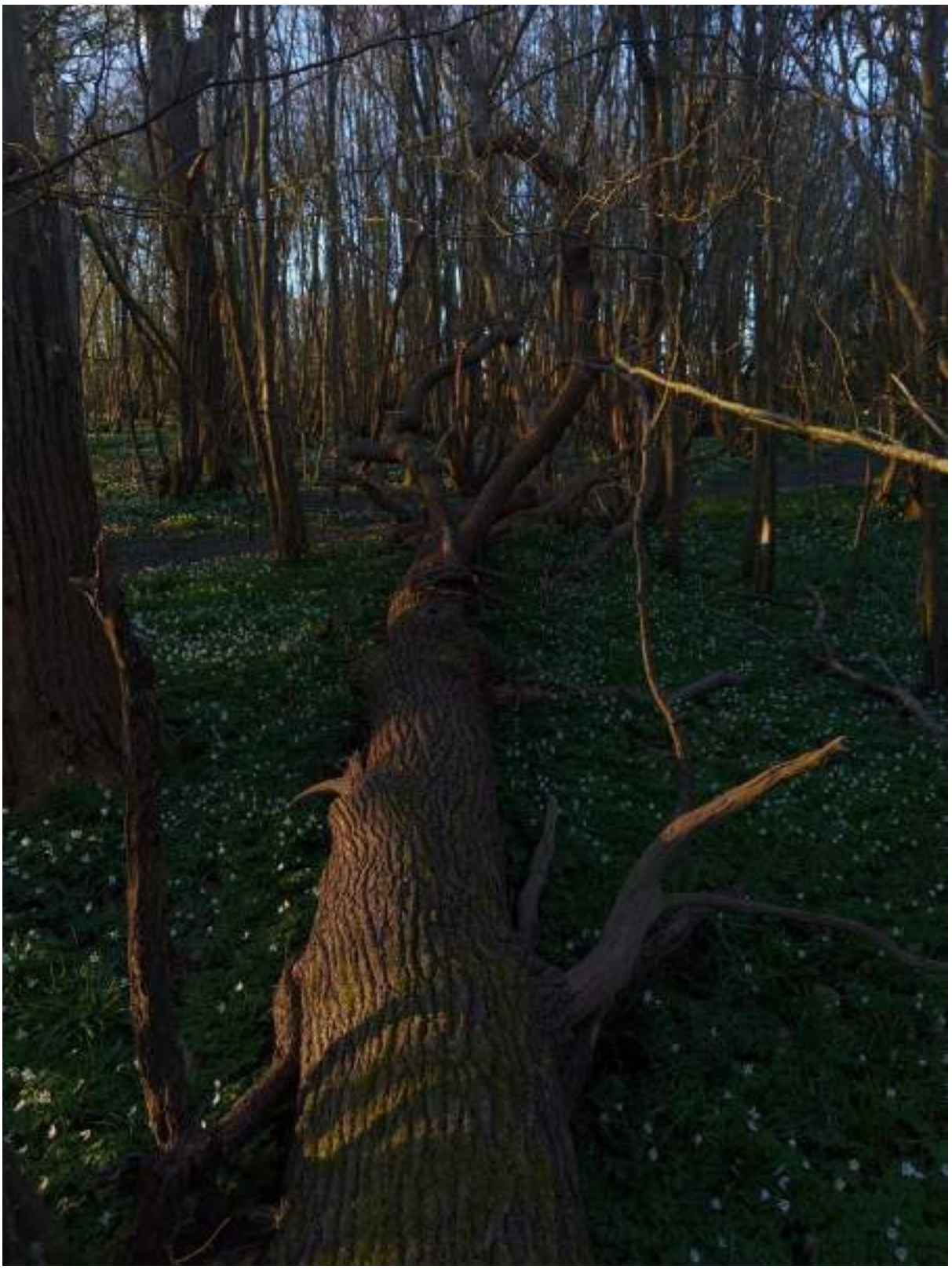
March was a month of planting. Around 2000 seedlings of Beth's poppy went into the Peacock garden. The High Garden stock bed, now thoroughly dug, swallowed vast amounts of ladybird poppies, hesperis, and digitalis. The great spring planting-out is far from straightforward. It entails balancing the stock we have available with when spaces open up in the garden, with additional considerations of weather, and what other work needs to be done in the garden. Because the spring was quite mild, we risked planting out some of the poppies quite early, straight from the plug tray -- we did this with Beth's poppy in the peacock garden, for example. However, slug damage was a real problem, so we had to go in again and top things up with bigger plants that we'd potted on earlier. In the case of the High Garden Stock bed, the ladybird poppies started rooting through their plug trays while we were still in the process of digging for bindweed, and so they were potted on and grown on in 9 cm pots, to go out when the space was ready to receive them. It was really interesting to observe this balance between how the seedlings grow and when the spaces in the garden are ready for them -- in mild springs they tend to outgrow their pots quicker than the garden can take them, and then need to be potted on. This balance will continue to be taken into consideration in all our seed sowing this spring. For example, there's no point in sowing quick growing annuals like cosmos or amaranthus in March when the bedding pockets they will go into will only go over and be ready for change in May or June.

Throughout the month, we continued doing bits of pruning -- we pruned a range of fuschias, sarcococcas, buddleias, and hydrangeas around the garden (including macrophylla, quercifolia, and paniculata types). Naciim Benkreira and I pruned the 'Treasure Trove' rose growing on the oast house, which proved an interesting challenge. It's a rambler, so the general approach would be to remove flowered wood, and leave the unflowered canes formed over the previous year, which will form this years' flowers. However, this rose had formed a lot of its new canes towards the tip of old, flowered wood, presenting us with a real dilemma as to what to leave and what to take out (if not enough wood is removed, the rose might not

form much new growth this year, and next year's flowering will be affected). We compromised by sacrificing a fair amount of these yet-to flower canes, so that we could remove enough older, flowered growth. Only time will tell, but we could likely have removed more than we did.

Another pruning job this month was to tackle the iconic figs in the Barn Garden, a student rite of passage, we were told. Here the task was to tie the new growth to fit into the existing framework, removing some older branches as needed, getting rid of any weak or spindly growth, and untying and rearranging branches as required. As with the roses, it's good to take out a certain amount of older wood to promote new growth this year, but the overall aim is to create a pleasing, evenly spaced arrangement of the branches, without crossing branches or large gaps. Naciim and I worked together again, tackling the fig on the left hand corner of the barn (we'd lost the game of rock-paper-scissors for the prize central fig to scholars Matt Padbury and Will Larson). I loved this task -- it was fiddly, repetitive, obsessive, and at a height (all characteristics that combine to make some of my favourite gardening jobs). The banging of three simultaneous hammers as we added more nails to the barn wall only provided an atmospheric addition to an enjoyable day's work.

At the start of the month, the students had a go at creating pot displays -- a creative and stimulating task that not only adds interest at key points in the garden (in front of the house, in the Walled Garden, and in the Blue Garden), but also allows the students to experiment with combinations of foliage, shape, and texture. In addition, it acts as a sort of movable trial bed for varieties of bulbs, annuals, or perennials new to us at Dixter -- we can try them out in a pot display and make a decision based on how they perform to whether or not include them in future plantings in the garden. I worked on the pot display in the Blue Garden with Rob Flack and Will Larson, and found the collaborative effort very rewarding and stimulating. We worked well together, bouncing ideas off each other, trying and discarding ideas. A key lesson taken away from the experience was: 'bold is better' -- large groupings of the same specimen, and big pots are more effective than a fussy arrangement of individual, small pots. An additional learning point for me was going into the arrangement focussing mostly on shape and texture. Most of the large pots of bulbs were not yet in flower, and so in our display we worked nearly entirely off of the look of the foliage, not worrying about the future flowers, their colours, and how well they would or wouldn't go together. All in all, we were pretty satisfied with the result.



olé!