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## Accidents Will Happen: Fabrics, Quilts and Africa

by Magie Relph and Robert Irwin

Looking back on 25 years of The African Fabric Shop...and forward to retirement – sort of...

'How did you start your fair trade business, the African Fabric Shop?' Magie gets asked that all the time and the truthful answer is, 'By accident'. Here's the short version...with a quick peek into the future.

Magie Relph's passion for African textiles, heritage and design began in the 1980s, as she spent several years travelling all over Africa as a cook on an overland expedition truck.

### Accident Number 1

Canadian Bob Irwin joins Magie on the road. Together, they continue leading trans-Africa expeditions. To kill time at border posts, Magie takes up patchwork using African fabrics from the markets and scraps scrounged from tailors. For her first quilt – *African Calliope* – she masters English paper piecing, but instead of basting she uses a stapler!

### Accident Number 2

Six years later, after getting married in Nairobi, they settle in Walthamstow, an inner London suburb. Magie joins her local patchwork group – Marsh Quilters – where she meets quilter, teacher and inspiring mentor Janice Gunner.

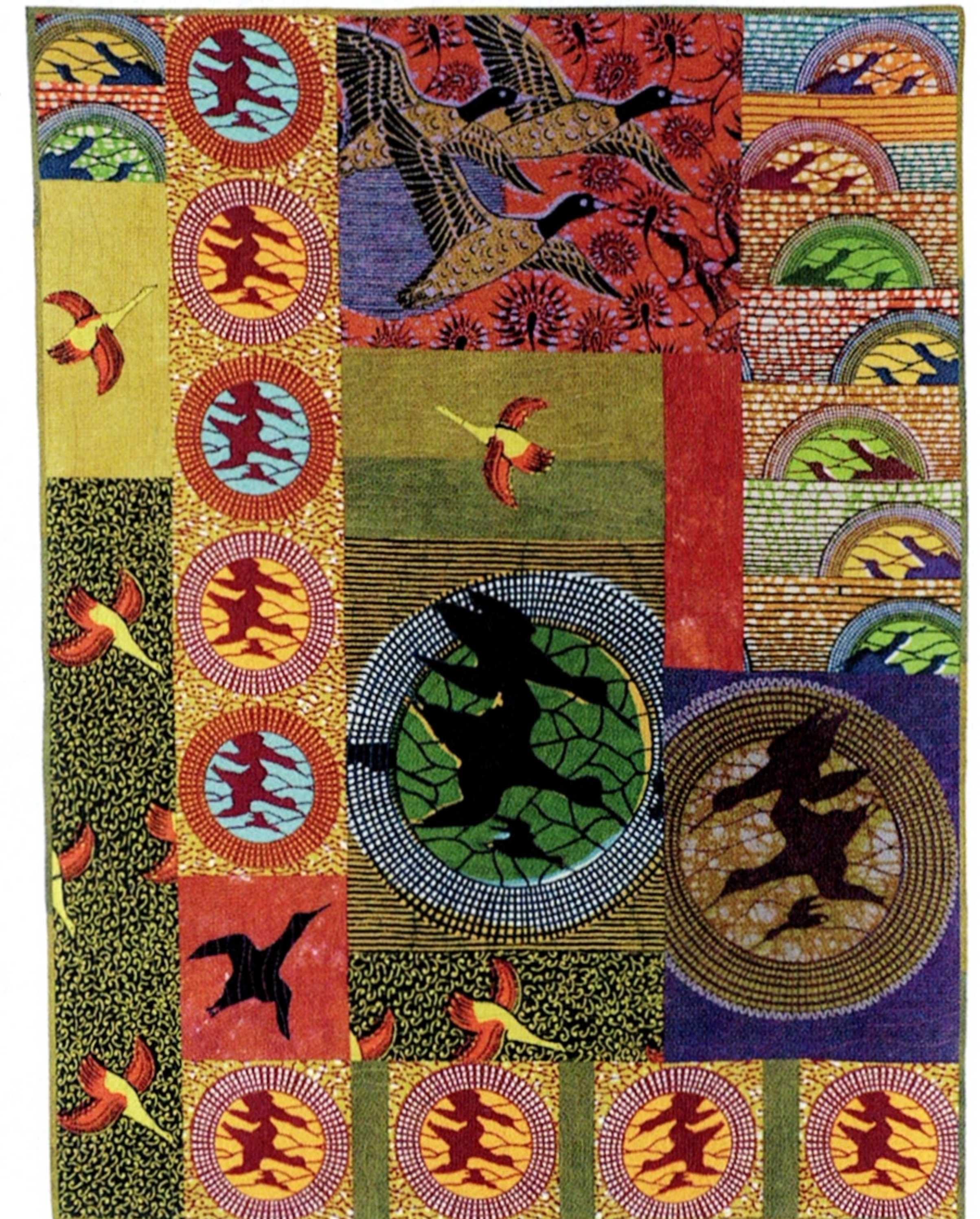
Janice sees Magie's stash of African fabrics.

'I want some,' she says.  
Leading to...

### Accident Number 3: The Lightbulb Moment.

Encouraged – actually, coerced – by Janice, Magie humps her battered, old suitcase full of

*Flying Ducks* by Magie Relph.  
Featuring a classic African wax print design





scraps to a meeting. She gives her first talk and her stash gets trashed by quilters, who love the bright, bold designs of Magie's African wax prints.

Magie doesn't quit her day job just yet, but gradually joins the circuit of quilt shows and evening talks to quilt groups. One of her early events as a trader was the Quilters' Guild AGM in Southport.

By the Millennium, Magie and Bob have moved to Meltham in the Yorkshire Pennines. Bob teaches himself coding and launches their website – [www.africanfabric.co.uk](http://www.africanfabric.co.uk). It's just a single page of African wax prints.

Their first internet customer is Margaret Ramsay. She prints off an order form, buys a fat quarter of everything and pays by cheque! They've been friends ever since.

**Accident Number 4:** Email from Dilys Wright, a quilter living in The Gambia. 'Do you want to buy some Gambian batiks?' Of course! Dilys starts sending fabrics, but pretty soon Magie and Bob are on their way to The Gambia to meet the makers.

#### Accident Number 5

In Sukuta village, they meet dyer Musa Jaiteh and his family. Taught by his father, Musa uses the traditional natural dyes of the region – kola nut and indigo. His designs are astounding. And so begins a remarkable friendship.

Musa has joined Magie and Bob on their travels in West Africa and has taught them a lot about African textile traditions. You'll find Musa's fabrics in many of Magie's quilts, as well as work by Janice Gunner, Margaret Ramsay and Liz Hewitt, among others.

You can find out more about Musa in this fascinating documentary film. Search YouTube: *Still Standing Musa Jaiteh*. It's a beautiful tribute to Musa and his craft.

#### OK, back to **Accidents Number 6 and Number 7.**

On their first buying trip to Ghana in 2005, Magie and Bob meet a Canadian expat – beaded jewellery artist Trish Graham. Trish introduces



Above: **Kuruwa Sunset** - Magie Relph. Fabrics hand dyed by Musa Jaiteh

Below: Happy buyer, happy seller! Magie with indigo textiles trader Musa Ba. Sare Ngai market, The Gambia. 2019



them to the Ghana bead culture and then to fellow Canadian Gregory MacCarthy and his fledgling Ghanaian basket business, the Baba Tree Basket Co – [www.babatree.com](http://www.babatree.com)

Before you can blink, the African Fabric Shop is in the bead business and their roof is full of Baba Tree baskets ready for the next quilt show.

By 2007 Magie and Bob have both quit their jobs at the uni to run African Fabric Shop full time. They're travelling up to 15 weeks per year in Africa researching, documenting and buying African textiles. They're usually dusty, often tired and very happy.

Over the past 40 years – 25 of them running the shop – they've traversed 34 of Africa's 54 countries. Add to that the evenings and weekends spent crisscrossing the UK and Europe to sell at textile events...that's a lot of time on the road!

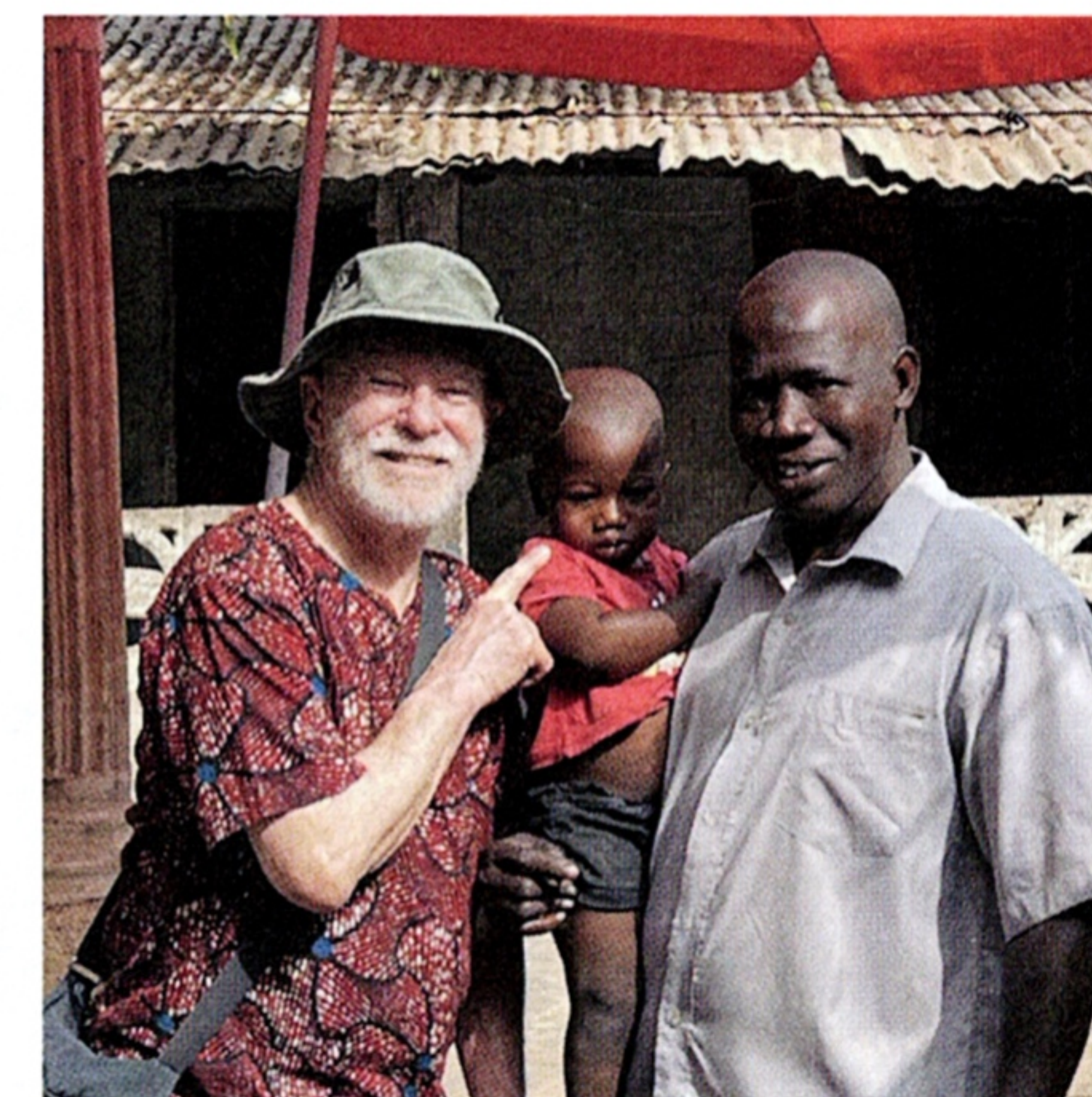
Along the way, they researched and wrote *African Wax Print: A Textile Journey*.

As for our old pal Serendipity, ready for another accident?

First, a backgrounder...

By 2018, Magie and Bob have moved the fabrics, beads and baskets out of the house into a big office cum shop space in their village. This annoys Janice because she loves sleeping in the African Fabric Shop.

But our itinerant traders are getting a bit stale. Not quite cranky, but close.



Above: Musa introduces Bob to his namesake – Baby Buba. Sukuta, The Gambia. January 2024



Right: Magie on the roadside with hat stitcher, Labé, Guinea 2016



They need a big injection of enthusiasm.

Enter Jenny Hall. She's a textiles graduate and enthusiast with heaps of energy and ideas. Bonus point: she's young. Jenny joins the team and presto: African fabrics are fun again.

So, back to our timeline and **Accident Number 8**... a real doozy!

It's December 2019 and Jenny's first buying trip to The Gambia. They head for all of their regular makers to show Jenny the ropes. She meets Musa and travels up river to the local lumos – or markets – around Basse in search of textiles from neighbouring Guinea, Senegal and Mali.

Then, to maker Neneh Jallow's compound in Lamin for a hands-on batik workshop. Her teacher for the day? Neneh's son Wally Bahoum, also a talented batik artist.

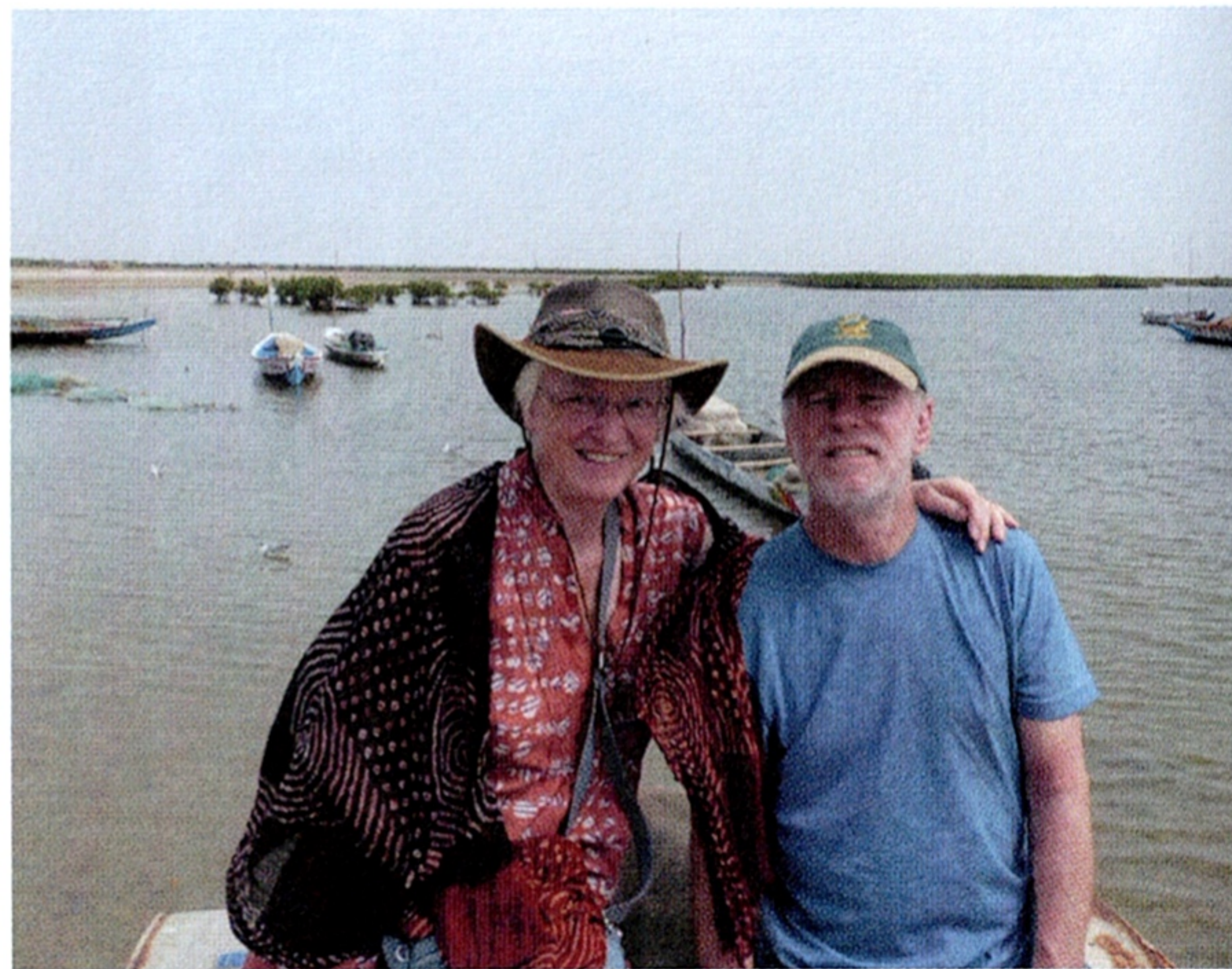
Jump cut to May 2022. Magie and Bob join Jenny's immediate family and probably 250 people in Neneh's compound. A whole cow and 100 kilos of rice simmer over a dozen wood fires. Local ladies wearing used shotgun cartridges on their fingers tap out intoxicating rhythms on their calabash drums. Everyone dances. The outfits are astounding. It's Jenny and Wally's wedding celebration.

Whoa! 'How did that happen?' you wonder.

Call it The Magic of WhatsApp.

Because through the bleakest, darkest days of the pandemic, with Jenny at home on furlough and Wally in his family compound in The Gambia, technology helped their relationship survive, grow and flourish. Kind of like Netflix, only better.

Right: Celebrating Jenny and Wally's wedding. Lamin, The Gambia, 2022



Above: Magie and Bob, crossing the river near Foundiougne, Senegal. 2017



OK, that's it for accidents. At least for the moment. The next bits were kind of planned.

On 1 May 2024, after 25 years as itinerant traders and many philosophical discussions with Jenny, Magie and Bob officially retire. They hand over Magie's vintage metre stick to the proud new proprietors of the African Fabric Shop – Jenny Hall and Wally Bahoum.

Now, if taking on a business isn't enough to keep you busy, why not look for something else to fill your every waking hour? Welcome Jenny and Wally's baby daughter.

So, while their newest member of staff gurgles away in her basket on the work table, Jenny and Wally are as busy as ever: fielding emails, picking and packing website orders, liaising with makers and suppliers across Africa, photographing new fabrics and updating the website.

Oh, and planning their family's future as itinerant traders in African fabrics.

### Epilogue

So, how does the Quilters' Guild fit into our story? Well, over the years, Magie's spoken and traded at Guild events and affiliated quilt groups around the UK. She traded at the very first Festival of Quilts in 2001, and didn't miss a Festival until the pandemic lockdown forced her to.

As for quilts, in 2004 the Guild commissioned Magie to make *Two Kings* for its 25 for 25 Collection. And, in 2010, her 'Under African Skies' exhibition at the Guild's Museum in York showed how many of the Guild's most accomplished artists have expressed themselves using African fabrics.

And retirement? Let's call it a learning curve. Magie's suitcase isn't empty yet. You'll still find Magie and Bob at a World Textile Day near you:

[www.worldtextileday.co.uk](http://www.worldtextileday.co.uk)

They've had to change their sign, though. It now says *African Vintage*. Pun intended.

The African Fabric Shop:

[www.africanfabric.co.uk](http://www.africanfabric.co.uk)

[bob@africanvintage.co.uk](mailto:bob@africanvintage.co.uk)

[magie@africanvintage.co.uk](mailto:magie@africanvintage.co.uk)

Right: Magie Relph and her suitcase, Quilters' Guild AGM, 2001



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