

Sylvia Vetta talks to former Oxfordshire police officers Steve and Anna Tolan, living their dream in Zambia

Former Thames Valley police officers Steve and Anna Tolan found a very different beat these days – a world away from Oxfordshire. Their home, since 1998, has been beside the river Luanga, in Zambia, where lions, elephants and other exotic African animals come to drink.

Next to their house, they built The Chipembele Wildlife Education Centre, used by local children.

Before moving to Africa, Steve and Anna lived in Upper Road, Kennington. Here their passion for wildlife was expressed at the bottom of their garden where they maintained a large pond inhabited by newts, toads and lizards.

Steve served with the Thames Valley Police from 1971 to 1998 spending most of his service as a patrol sergeant, and for the last 16 years of his service worked out of St Aldate's Police Station. I got to know Anna better when she became an antiques officer.

Steve was born in Appleton, in 1952 and spent his childhood in the Oxfordshire countryside. He enjoyed fishing and collecting fossils. His passion for fossils continues to this day and he has initiated two important international fossil expeditions, where many new species were found, in Zambia.

Steve joined the police force after leaving school at 19, seeking a career that was not a mundane office job. He certainly found the action he craved.

Anna was born in High Wycombe in 1958 and studied Environmental Science at Aberystwyth University. She explained: "I was captivated by the environmental movement that was starting up in the 1970s."

But even she didn't envisage where that passion would lead her. On graduating, unable to find a job in conservation but determined not to 'join the dole queue', she applied to join the police.

Like Steve, she could not bear the thought of a routine job and went on to have a very varied and interesting career as a detective in several different fields.

Most of Anna's service was as a detective constable, with years spent dealing with child and sexual abuse cases as well as criminal investigations.

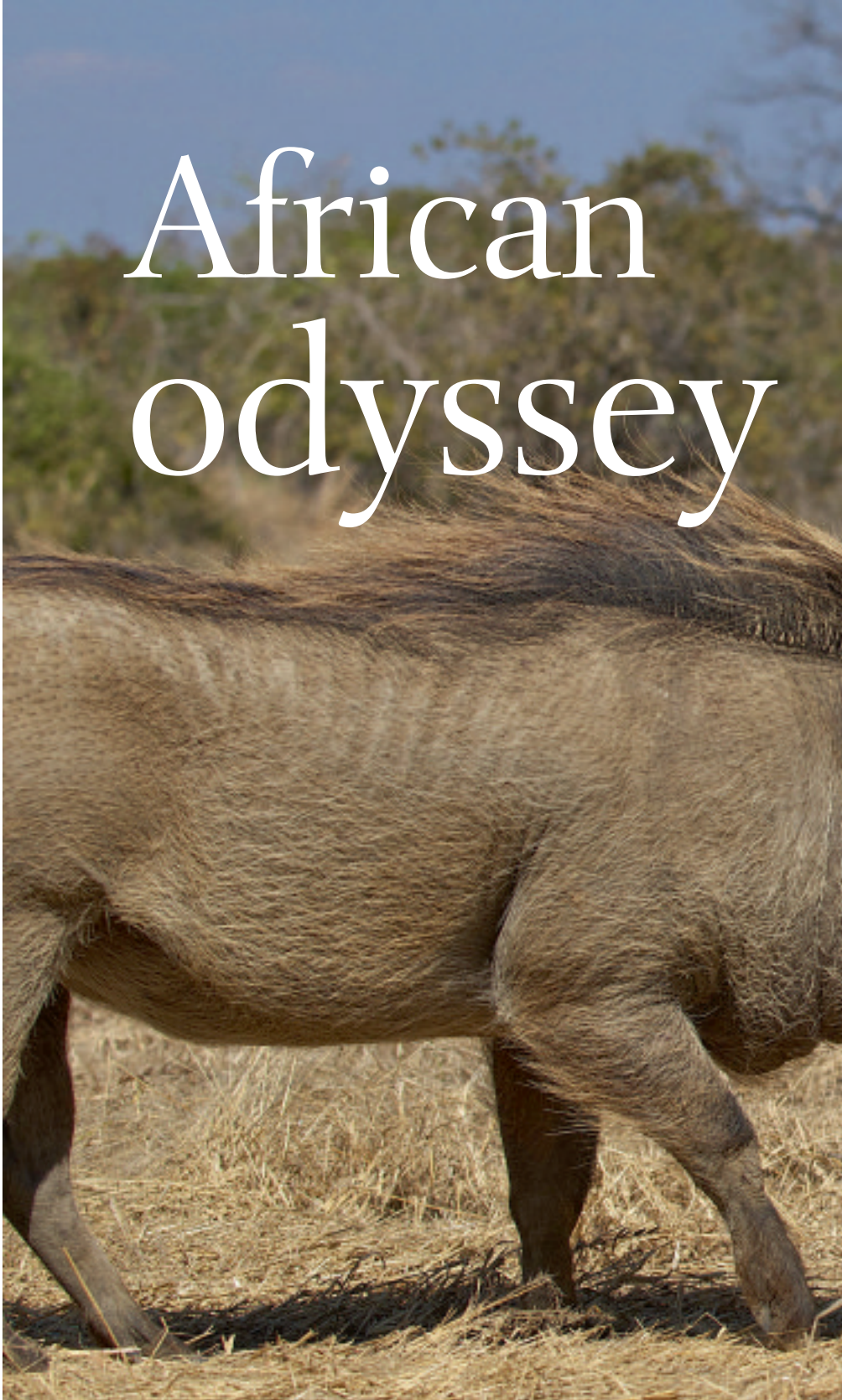
Steve, 60, and Anna, 54, met when, in 1980, they were stationed together at Slough. They married in 1983.

In 1989, they set off on their first trip to Africa and fell under its spell. They became determined to live there one day.

When Steve retired in 1998, Anna resigned from the force so they could follow their dream. They sold their house and belongings and risked everything to build a new life in Africa.

"We have fond memories of our lives in Oxford, but Zambia is our home now and we never want to go back to the UK to live. We

African odyssey



miss our family, friends, and, maybe, a good bookshop," Steve said.

They dedicated themselves to the conservation of wildlife and moved to the lush Luangwa Valley in Zambia.

The local chief, Kakumbi, was interested in their plans, which included building a conservation education centre to teach children how to respect and care for wildlife and encourage them to live in a way which does not lead to extinction of species.

The chief kindly gifted them some land by the river on which to establish the project and, using the proceeds from the sale of their house in Kennington, they built their centre.

Fil Hide, who lives and works in the area, told me: "Anna and Steve are both dedicated to conservation and to educating the local children. Their education centre is absolutely fantastic.

"They take the kids into the park, and have a teacher based at a school in Mfuwe to teach conservation and computing. Some of their conservation group kids are amazing. They undertake tree planting in schools and help orphans for as long as they are prepared to help themselves.

"They also work with South Luangwa Conservation Society and have helped to set up eco-awards for tourist lodges and camps. I am

Steve and Anna Tolan with an orphaned warthog at Chipembele



part of the panel who check the camps and I am very impressed with how Anna has organised it."

As well as teaching children, Steve and Anna have reared wild orphaned elephants, warthogs, a buffalo, bushbucks, baboons, monkeys and all kinds of other animals and birds.

Steve's police training is still put to good use in his role as senior honorary wildlife police officer and an honorary forestry officer.

In a way, Anna and Steve are already marooned, so I wondered how would they answer my question: "What work of art, object or book would they like to find washed up on

the beach of your desert island?"

Anna said: "We have always chosen wildlife art to adorn the walls of our old house in Oxford and our new one in Africa. Wildlife is our passion and underlies all that we do in our lives. So if I were to choose a work of art it would be one of the paintings by Simon Combes. He was a prolific and internationally acclaimed wildlife artist who focused primarily on Africa.

"Tragically his life was cut short at the age of 64, when he was gored by a lone buffalo while walking with his wife and a friend in Kenya's Rift Valley and died before medical help arrived.

"His paintings are so real they take you into the African bush in a heartbeat and portray the essence of the animals as if you were there observing them yourself. If I were to choose just one of his paintings it would be *African Oasis*, which portrays an abundance of animals (giraffe, wildebeest, zebra, monkeys, warthogs and elephants) at a waterhole, edged with beautiful acacia trees.

"A limited edition print hangs in the hallway of our house and I look at it every day. Although I think I would relish the time to myself for a short while on the desert island,

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Anna Tolan and local children in the Chipembele conservation education centre



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after a couple of weeks I would probably start to miss home.

“The painting would remind me of wild Africa, all that I love about it and why I needed to find a way back.

“Reading is extremely important to me and I could be happy anywhere in the world with the right books. I toyed with the idea of a Kindle washing up on the beach, but I guess the battery would soon run out. So then I settled on a shortlist of three books – a large world atlas, an SAS survival manual and Bill Bryson’s *A Short History of Nearly Everything*.

After much consternation I chose the latter. I am a sucker for interesting facts and the first time I read this I was blown away. As I turned every page I would say ‘Wow, Steve, did you know?’ to the extent that he eventually said ‘Stop it! I want to read it myself.’”

Anna explained that Bryson “combines subjects as broad as history, geology, physics and palaeontology and creates a narrative of the Earth that is witty, intelligent and utterly un-put-downable.

“This book would keep me mesmerised during the long days and would help me see my tiny problem of being marooned on an island in the grand context of the universe in time and space.

“I would also be able to learn more about the ‘giants’ who have walked before us, often overcoming great adversity. Their stories would keep me positive in spirit and ready to tackle any challenges that came my way on the island.

“While my choice of book and work of art came easily I found the object much more

difficult. Living in a remote but stunningly beautiful part of the African bush has made me far less materialistic than I used to be,” Anna said.

“Admiration of nature has largely replaced my need to acquire beautiful objects for our home. We have also had a number of treasured objects stolen, broken or trashed by the many young baboons and vervet monkeys that we have reared in our home over the years.

“I remember a baby monkey once smashing a small Victorian pot that belonged to my grandmother who died in the 1980s and was the only item I had of hers.

“It was part of a dressing table set and she always used to keep talcum powder in it. She lived in Bournemouth and we spent all our summer holidays there as a family. As a child I used to go to the pot and rub the silky talc between my fingers, it fascinated me. I can even smell it to this day.

“I was very upset to find it smashed, but I could imagine my wonderful and very down-to-earth grandmother saying in her thick Dorset accent, ‘Oh don’t worry Anna, it is only an old pot’. I knew she was right, but it also made me realise objects can keep precious memories alive.

“I then thought of having a hoard of photographs of family and friends to pore over, surely the most wonderful treasure of all in most people’s lives, but they would probably make me over-emotional at a time when I needed to stay focused on the present and be very practical.

“I get great satisfaction out of simple jobs well done, so my choice of object would therefore be more of a practical nature – my

Leatherman multi-tool.


“After all, if I am going to sit and read my book and look at my painting for long periods I will have to be comfortable – warm, dry and with a belly full of food,” Anna said.

“When I resigned from the police in 1998, to emigrate to Zambia, I held a leaving party and invited my fellow antiques officers from forces around the country.

“We had worked closely together on number of high-profile enquiries and operations, and were bonded by a love of and interest in antiques and fine art. But their leaving present to me was not a piece of antique silverware or china, but a Leatherman.

“They knew that my ‘other life’ was Africa and thought it would be of more value to me there than an *objet d’art*. How right they were! It has saved me from many a tricky situation in the bush, from mechanics to first aid.

“But on your island I would imagine I could use it to slice open fish, cut fibres from trees to make ropes, help prepare a shelter from the vegetation, crack open nuts and pull out splinters. The list is endless and it would help make my stay so much more comfortable and enjoyable,” Anna said.

“Dreaming and perusing would be a great way to pass the hours, but we would also need to survive and ultimately we would want to escape – my trusty Leatherman, a splash of imagination and a mountain of determination, would help us do just that.” 

■ For more information about Chipembele Wildlife Education Trust visit the website: www.chipembele.org