The bells of the imposing DR church in Uniondale in the Little Karoo emit a rather modest sound. Local resident Carol Trehearn explains why...

Standing outside the magnificent Dutch Reformed Church in Uniondale, I was quite unprepared for the muted, almost apologetic tones that emitted from the bells high up in the church tower bearing the inscription “herbouw in 1908” (rebuilt in 1908).

Somehow, from such a proud building I was anticipating the free-swinging, lusty, joyous pealing of bells from such British cathedrals as Worcester or St Paul’s! The church, built in 1886, overlooks the entire town, backed only by mountains. A more beautiful setting for a church could hardly be imagined.

Of course there is an explanation for the muted bells. When the church was being built, three fabulously heavy Dutch church bells were imported in 1883 and installed with great pride into the brick tower. The bells were rung with great gusto – to mark the passage of time, on the hour and half-hour, at weddings and funerals, to call the flock to prayer meetings and other gatherings at the church. Unfortunately the original tower was unable to stand the strain of the swinging of the heavy bells when they were rung. The tower cracked and leaked and eventually a part broke off in 1896.

When the bells were rehoused in their new sandstone tower, they were fixed onto a wooden beam which put an end to their swinging days. The clappers are now pulled by ropes, operated by a pulley system, to strike the bells, which gives the muted tone heard today.

The story of the clocks which adorn three sides of the tower must also be told. The clock mechanism, now 100 years in its new home, has done faithful service, with only a few short breakdowns.

Oom (Uncle) Andrew Kempie has been involved with the clock since 1950, when he helped to reset the time. In those days there were two telephones in the tower – one at the bottom and another at the top. The person at the bottom of the tower had to telephone the one at the top to tell him what the time on each clock face should be. Today, the clock still needs to be wound 2–3 times per week. “Always at quarter past the hour, never on the hour or half hour, when the bells chime,” Oom Kempie explains.

The clock mechanism itself is housed in a case, with a gear around which are wound two heavy weights. In 1974/75 one of the weights broke loose and went right through the floor boards all the way to the bottom of the tower. As a safety feature, Kempie put steel plates on the wooden floor beneath the weights, but now also regularly checks the cable.

The clock has its quirks, such as the time being affected by changes in temperature: in the cold Uniondale winters, the clock goes faster, and becomes sluggish in the hot summers.

And why are there only three clock faces? Well, that’s because the one side of the tower faces the mountain, and who up there would possibly want to know the time?