

Instead of razor-wired fencing and window bars, the new medium-secure unit features domestic brick walls, hipped roofs and sash windows.

in safe keeping

It looks like a cluster of brick cottages, but it is really a hospital for mentally disordered offenders.

The innovative building in Northumberland was designed to reassure its patients while restraining them from absconding. It has been acclaimed as a model for future medium-secure units, signalling a gentler approach to those who society feels need to be locked up. Martin Spring investigates.

OFFENDERS SENT TO THE NEW Kenneth Day Unit in Northumberland face being locked up for as long as five years. Yet, as they enter their new escape-proof quarters, they will hear no heavy prison gates slamming behind them and they will not be locked up in bleak cells with barred windows.

The Kenneth Day Unit incorporates extensive safeguards against disturbance by its 30 residents, who can be troublesome or violent. Yet it is anything but a prison. It is a healthcare building, completed last June within the grounds of Northgate hospital, a sprawling postwar hospital in the rolling countryside for people with learning disabilities.

However, the Kenneth Day Unit's character is neither that of a prison nor a hospital. Rather, it resembles a tight-knit cluster of two-storey houses arranged around a communal landscaped courtyard, complete with brick walls, double-pitched tiled roofs, vertical sash

windows and individual front gardens. "The creation of a 'home' environment was fundamental to the brief," says the hospital's medical director, Dr Kenneth Day. With more than 100 highly motivated and trained staff, the unit sets out to foster trust in mentally disordered patients rather than applying drugs. The way to do this, Day argues, is to create a setting as much like home as possible.

Any medium-secure unit is also home for its patients in a more basic sense – a self-contained community where they must live, undergo treatment, work and play for many years without leave. An even bigger onus is put on the Kenneth Day Unit, where patients could stay for up to double the period envisaged for conventional medium-secure units.

The unit was developed for mentally disordered offenders with learning disabilities, who take longer to respond to treatment. This makes the Kenneth Day Unit in effect the first of a new ►

