

Stemn's Path - King Alfred's Landscape of Defence

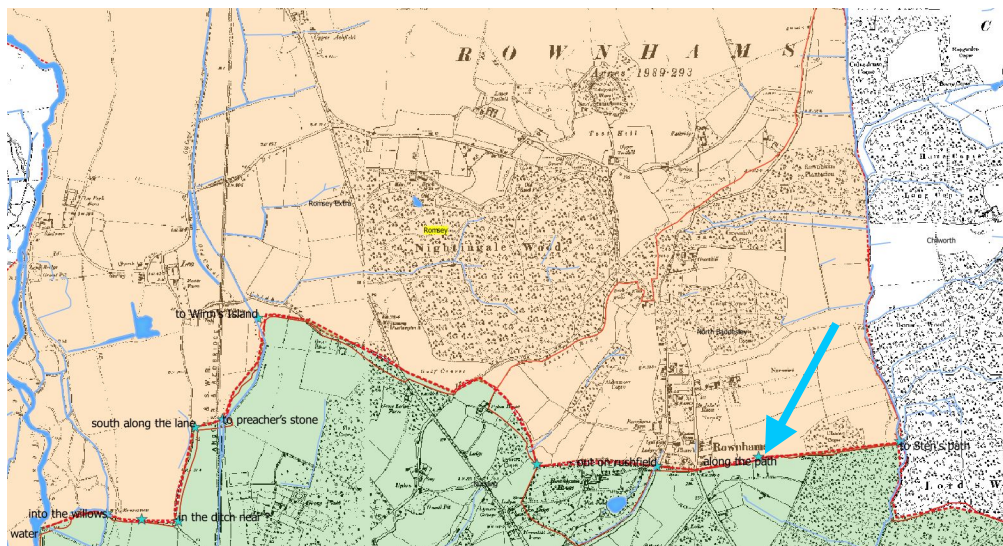
Stemn's path runs along part of the shared boundary between Romsey and Nursling. It is referred to in the Nursling charter (S 1277) of 877 as **stemnes** path and as **stennes** path in the boundary clause for Romsey (S 812) of c. 972. As each circuit was traversed in a clockwise direction the points along the boundary of the contiguous estates were described by surveying parties traveling in opposite directions. To the east the path intersected Grinding, now Tanners, Brook at some point along its course. At its western end it led onto an open landscape extending to **boddanstan/bodestan**. Oak Lea, an area of wood pasture, lay between the stone and the path in 877. A century later part of the boundary was marked by a hedge. The reference to rush field suggests an area of damper ground near the west end of the path. The location of the stone is indicated by the field-name Badstones on the Nursling tithe map.

ðonon on boddanstan	then onto Bodda's stone
ðonon ut on aclieh	then to Oak Lea
ðonon on stemnes peð	then to Stem's path
ðonon on grindanbroc	then onto Grinding Brook

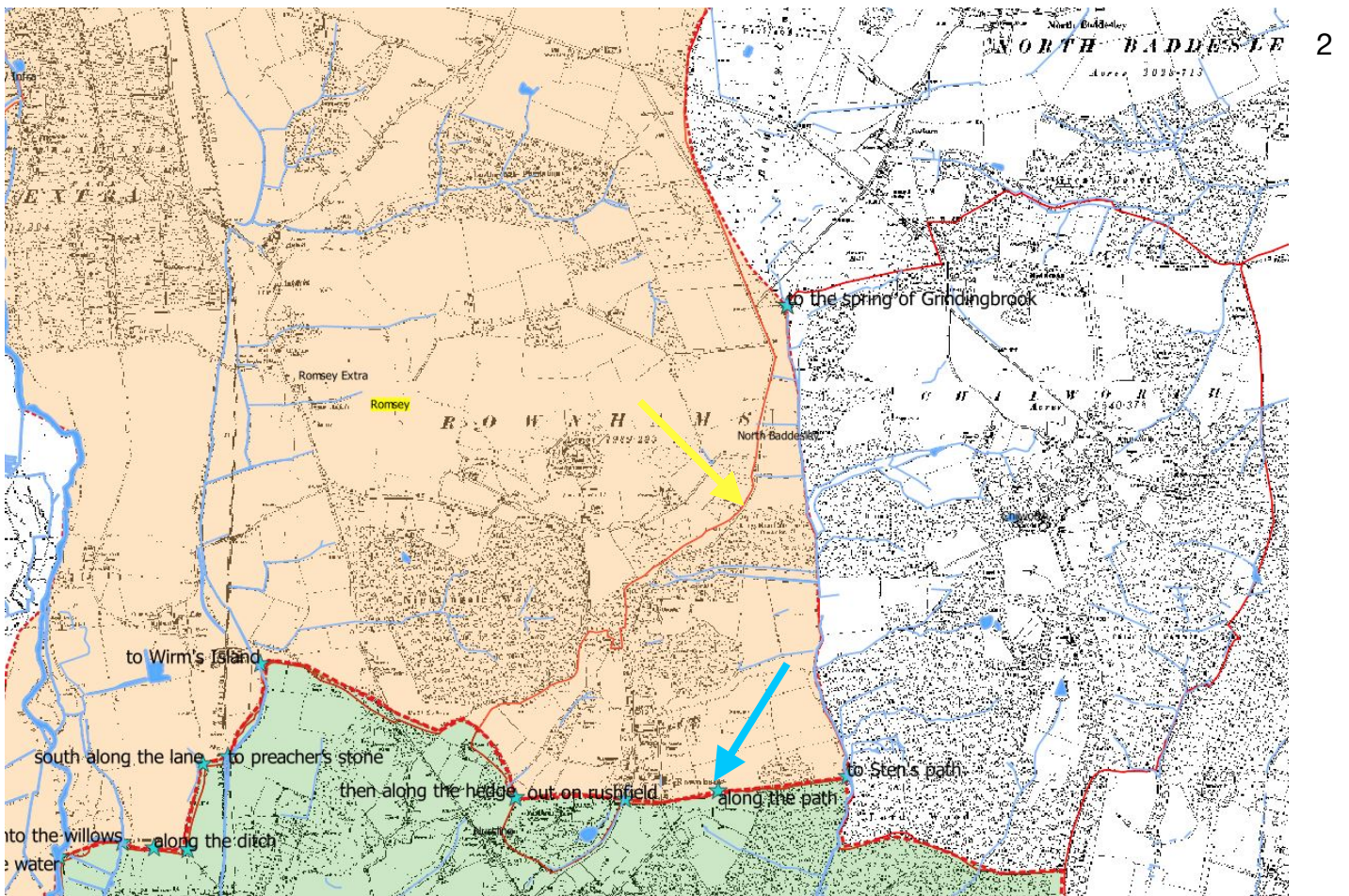
Nursling boundary clause.

on ðane brod mere	to the broad pond
Of thane suðrist in nan 'ða' willan	from there south into the spring
of gryndenbrok	to Grindingbrook
on stennes paeg	to Sten's path
andlang paðes	along the path
hut on rusfeld	out on rusfield
ðanne andlang heggas	then along the hedge
oue hit comeg to Wirmesie	until it comes to Wirm's Island
to bodestan	to the ?preacher stone

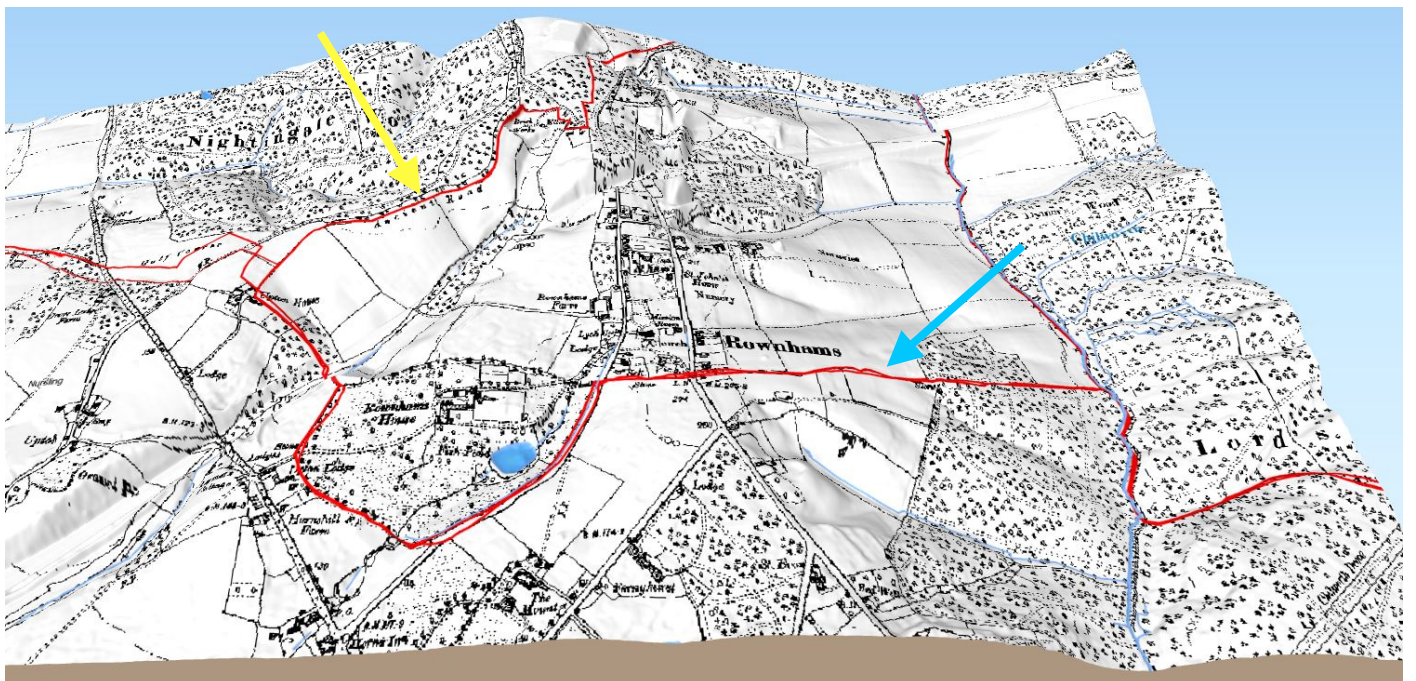
Romsey boundary clause.

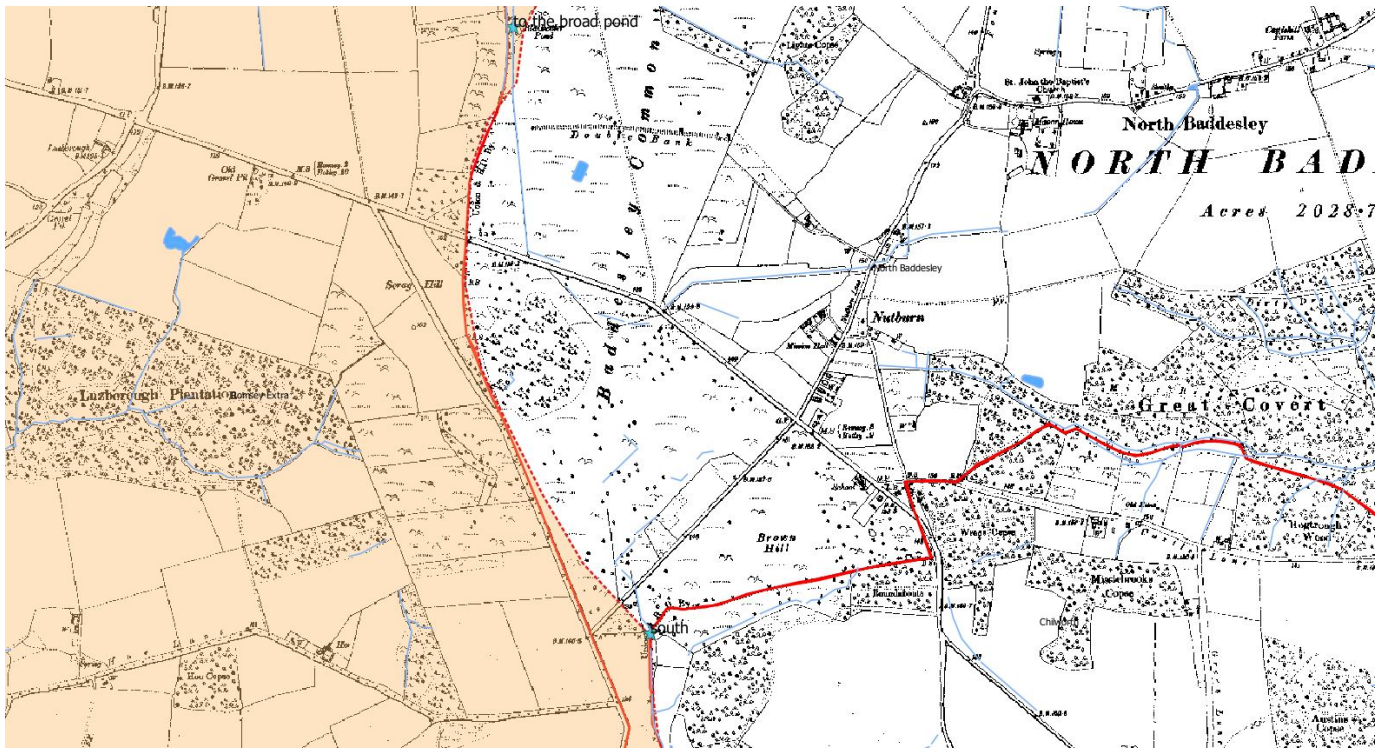


Various attempts to solve the Romsey boundary clause have concluded that Rownhams was a part of the estate granted to Romsey abbey. The map shows Romsey in orange and Nursling in green. With this interpretation Stemn's path, arrowed in blue, runs west from Tanners Brook along the southern boundary of Rownhams.

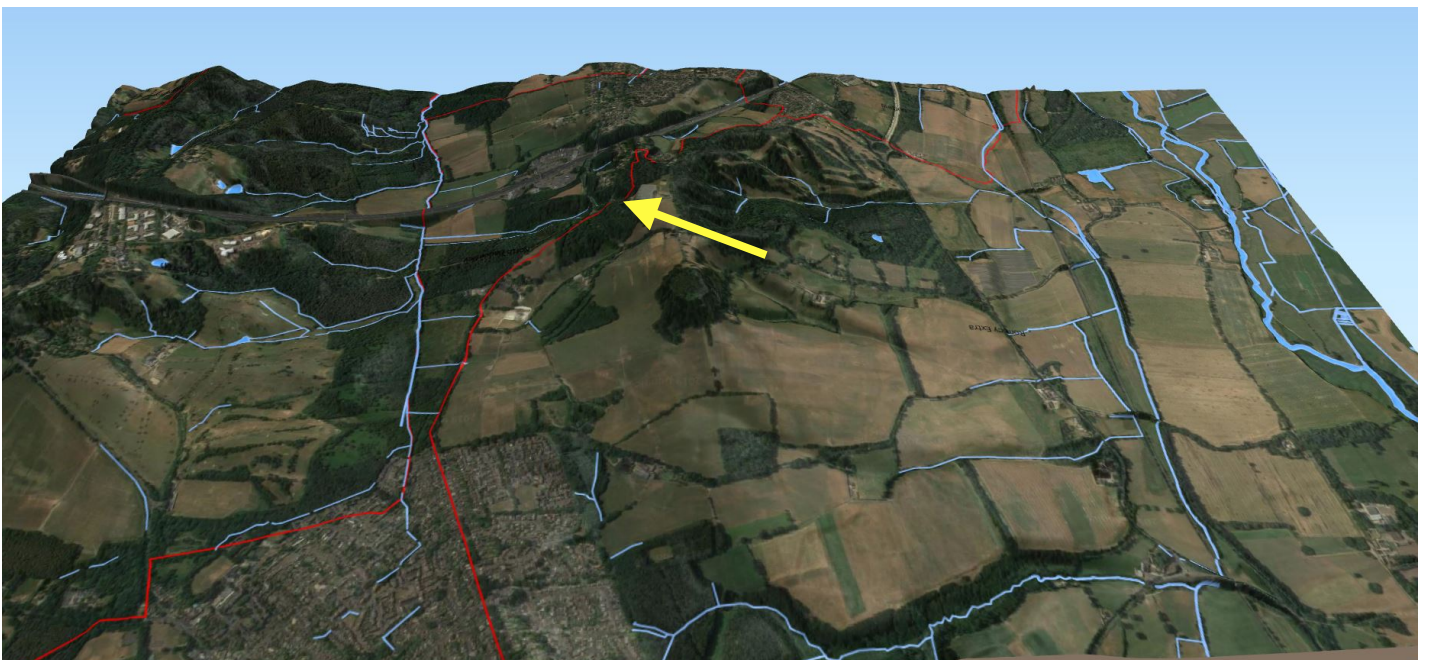


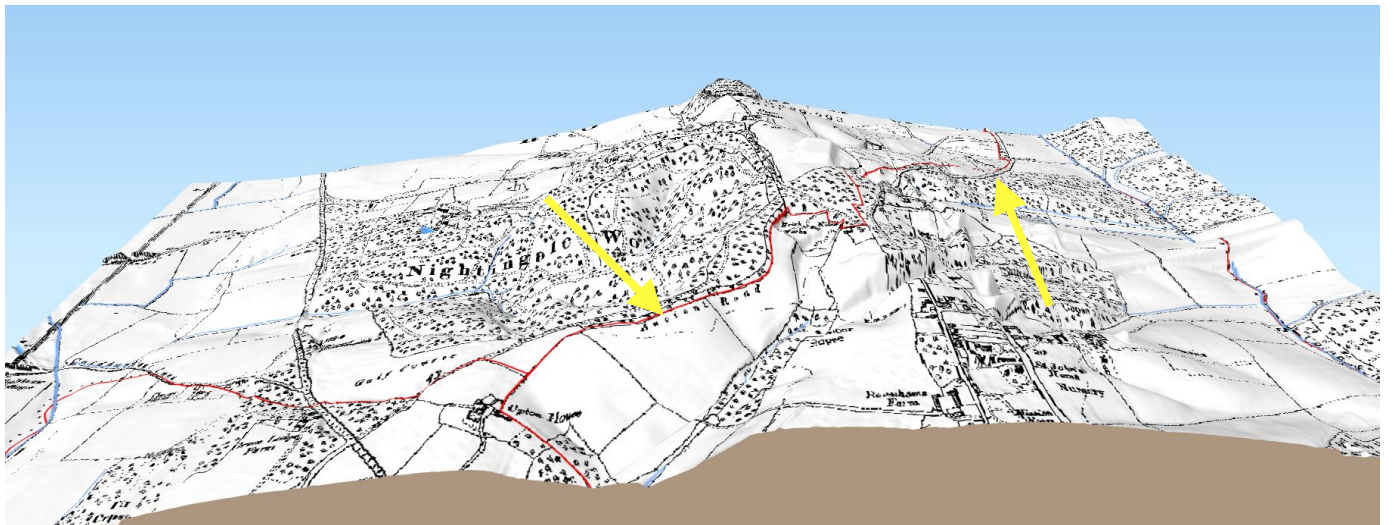
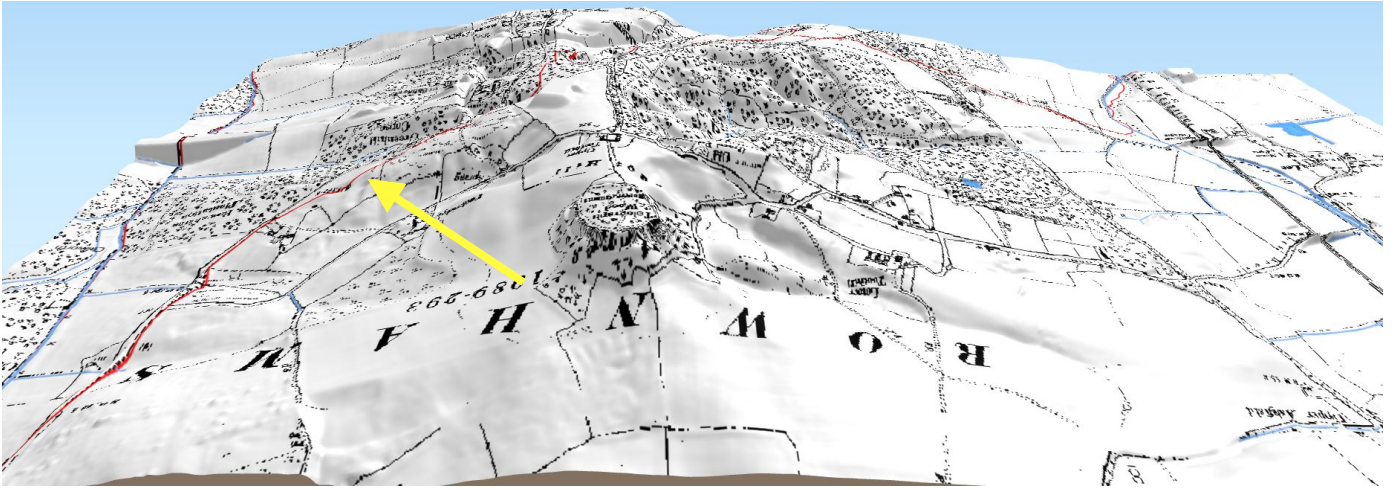
There is no documentary evidence to support the suggestion that Rownhams was owned by the nuns of Romsey. The later parish boundary, arrowed in yellow, divides Romsey from Rownhams which is now part of North Baddesley, connected to it by a narrow corridor. Determining the ownership of Saxon Rownhams is dependant on identifying the location of Stern's path. The 3D map below shows how the supposed path fits into the landscape. There is no indication of a continuation of a routeway east of the brook into Lord's Wood; the path leads nowhere. I think that Stern's path has been misidentified. I think that it ran along the line of the parish boundary. Rownhams was not part of Romsey. It belonged to Nursling.



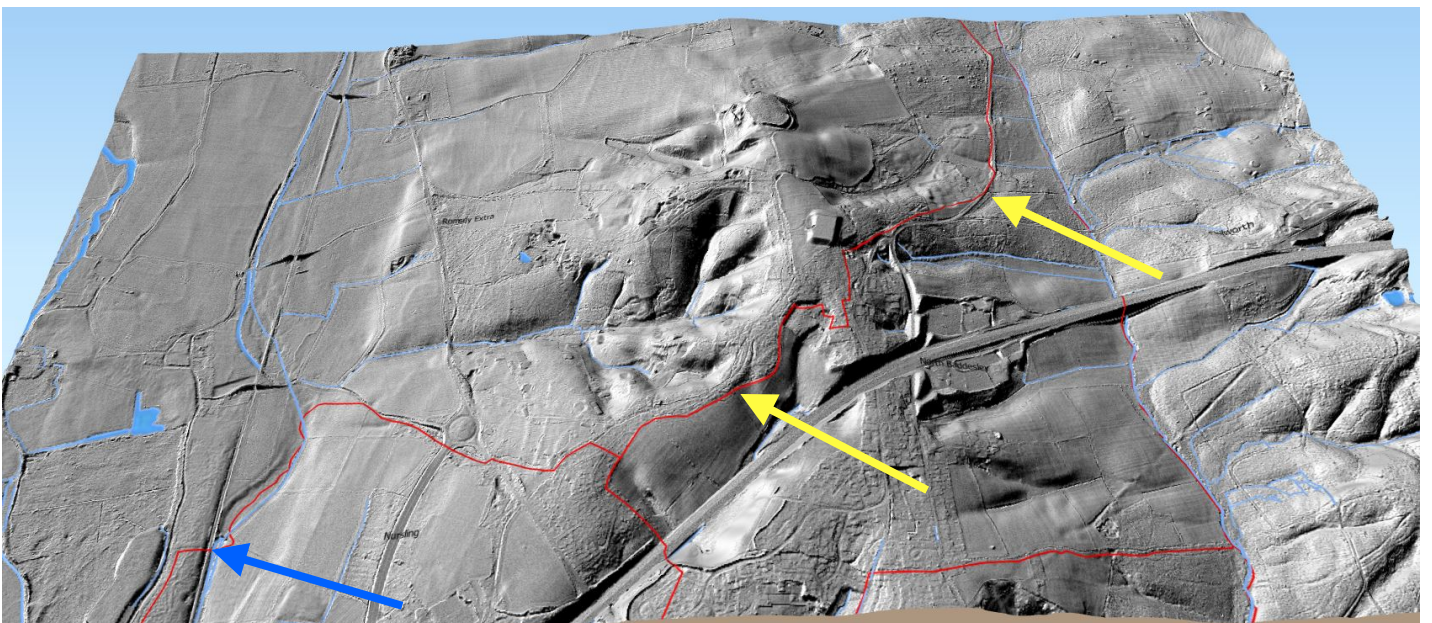


The boundary clause of the Romsey charter tracks the boundary on the east side of the estate from the broad pond south to the spring of Grinding Brook. Short sections of drainage channels on the southern part of Baddesley Common indicate the source of water feeding the brook. The boundary proceeds from the spring to Stern's path. The charter does not describe the boundary actually following the brook. The 3D Google Earth and the 3D OS 2nd Edition maps below face south (the maps are upside down). The valley of Tanners/Grinding Brook is to the left. I think that Stern's path followed the parish boundary, running up from the valley and along the ridge.





The map above shows the Romsey boundary crossing the higher ground to the west of the valley of Tanners/Grinding Brook. Geologically this is a remnant of a Pleistocene gravel river terrace, number 9 in the sequence of stepped terraces flanking the Test. (Romsey is on terrace 1.) At the northern end of this high ground, at the centre of the horizon on the map, is the hillfort on Toothhill. The boundary along the southern edge of Nightingale Wood is labelled Ancient Road. The 1st edition OS map records the name Austrey Wood bounded by a Supposed Roman Road. I think this is the western section of Stern's path.



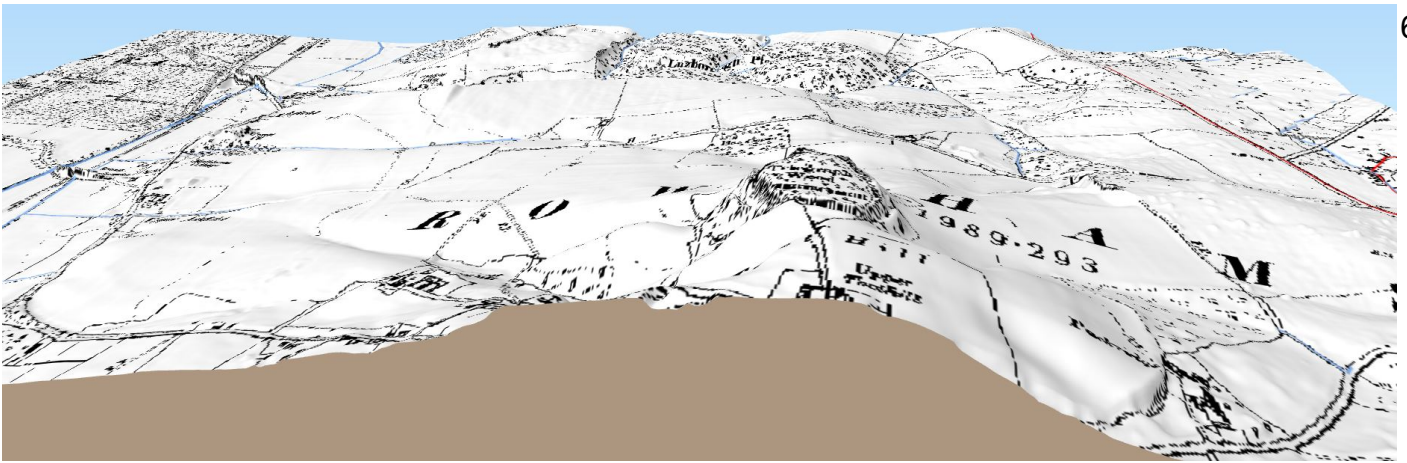
The 3D image of the LiDAR hillshade shows in detail how the parish boundary, Stemn's path, fits into the landscape. The path climbs onto the higher ground from the east and from the west. It provides access to Toothill. The actual course of the path is visible as it runs along the ridge. It ends at its western extent where the land levels out. The boundary continues onto the rush field and oak lea of the charters. The probable location of **boddanstan/bodestan** is indicated by the blue arrow, at the northern edge of Badstones field.

The significance of Stemn's path is in the meaning of its name. Here are definitions from Old English Translator of two related words - **stemn** and **stefn**:

stemn Strong Masculine Noun 1. a turn time		
stemn	Singular	Plural
Nominative	(the/that se) stemn	(the/those þá) stemnas
Accusative	(the/that þone) stemn	(the/those þá) stemnas
Genitive	(the/that þæs) stemnes	(the/those þára) stemna
Dative	(the/that þæm) stemne	(the/those þæm) stemnum

stefn Strong Feminine Noun summons citation a fixed time for doing something		
stefn	Singular	Plural
Nominative	(the/that séo) stefn	(the/those þá) stefna
Accusative	(the/that þá) stefne	(the/those þá) stefna
Genitive	(the/that þære) stefne	(the/those þára) stefna
Dative	(the/that þære) stefne	(the/those þæm) stefnum

stefn Strong Masculine Noun 1. a turn turn (of military service) time 2. a body of persons who take their turn at any work the English military force? ongéan níwan ~e anew a second time		
stefn	Singular	Plural
Nominative	(the/that se) stefn	(the/those þá) stefnas
Accusative	(the/that þone) stefn	(the/those þá) stefnas
Genitive	(the/that þæs) stefnes	(the/those þára) stefna
Dative	(the/that þæm) stefne	(the/those þæm) stefnum

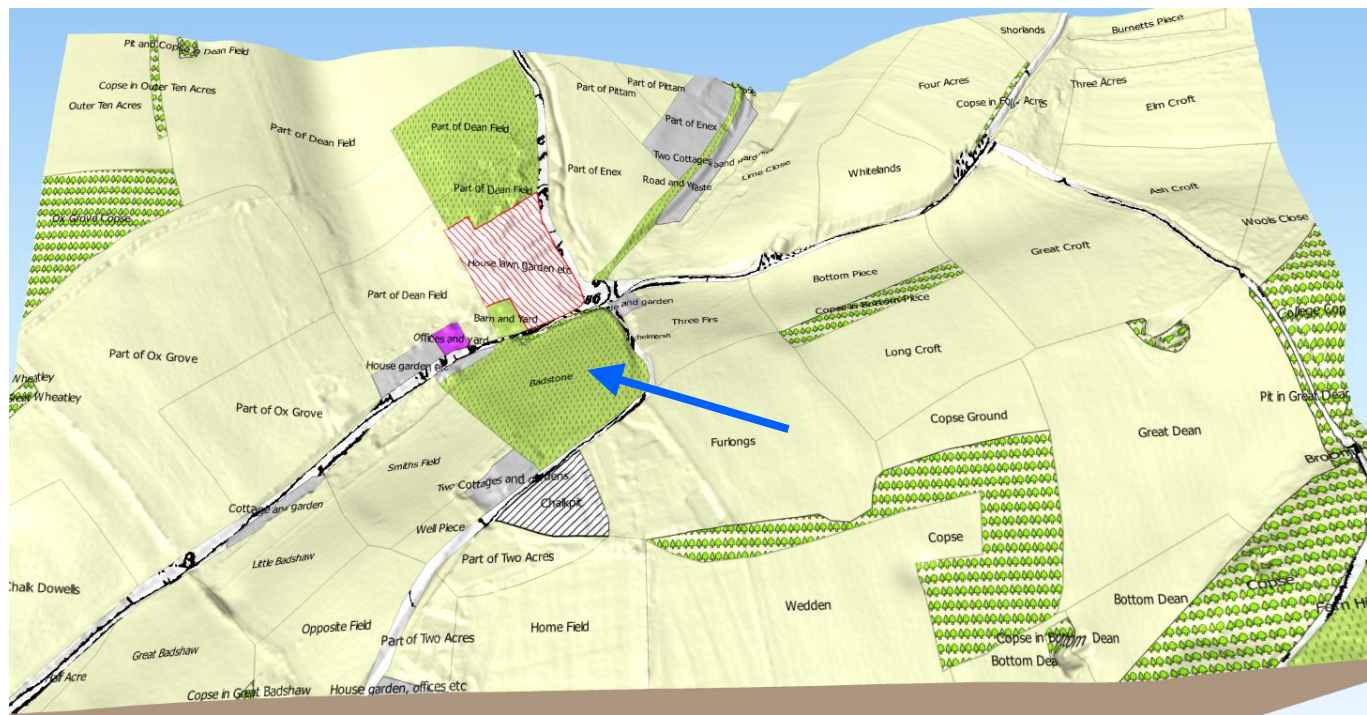


There is some uncertainty about the precise meaning of **sternn**. The historical context helps in its interpretation. The Nursling charter dates from 877, six years into the reign of King Alfred. At this time Wessex was under attack by Viking armies. Alfred's defeat of the Danes at Edington the following year demonstrated his skill at military organisation. Taking the various suggestions together, I interpret **sternn** as meaning a group of men summoned to undertake a period of military service. Their role on Toothhill would have been to serve as look-outs. The hill gets its name from the Old English word **tot**, a projection. As the map above shows, the projecting end of the hill would afford a view west to the valley of the Test and east to the road crossing Tanners Brook and heading towards Winchester. However, a military presence on the hill would have been much more valuable and effective if the hill was used for a beacon.

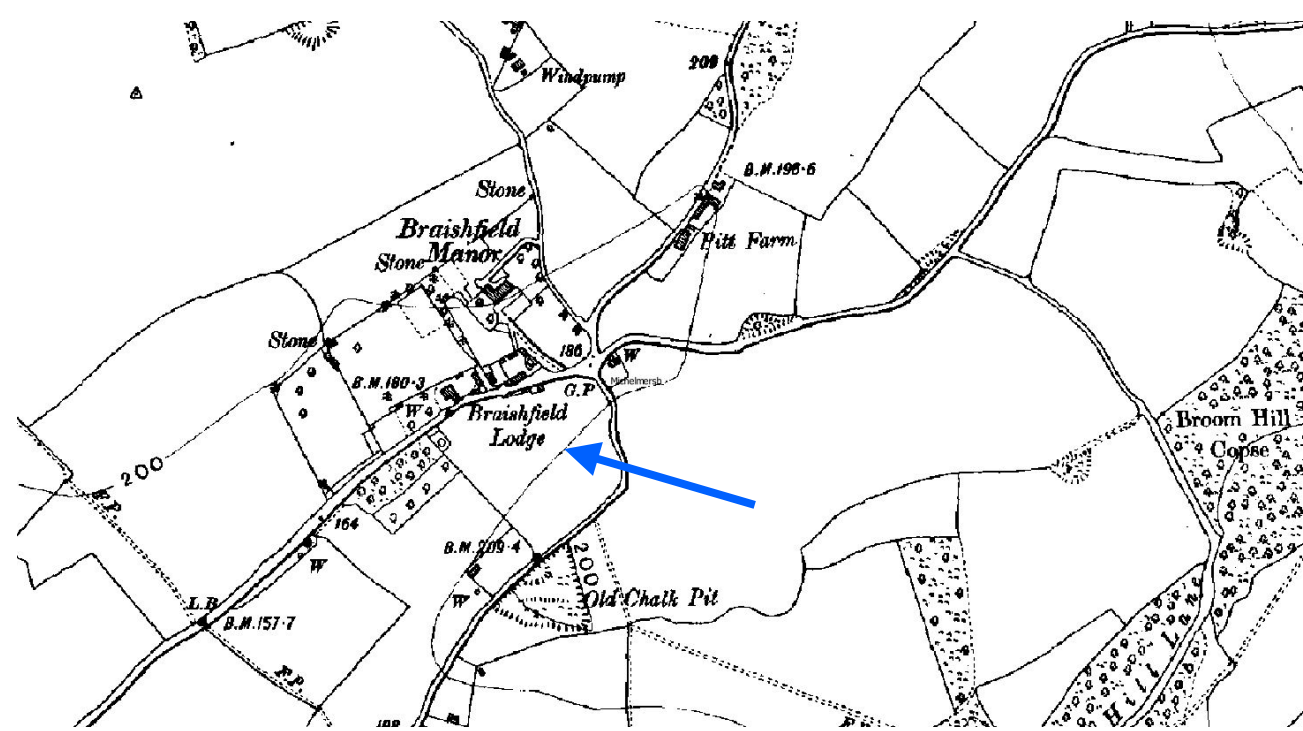
Surveillance would necessarily be combined with communication. The local area would have to be informed if there was evidence of hostile activity or if messages were received by beacon signals. I think that **boddanstan/bodestan** is a link in the defensive network, the messenger's stone.

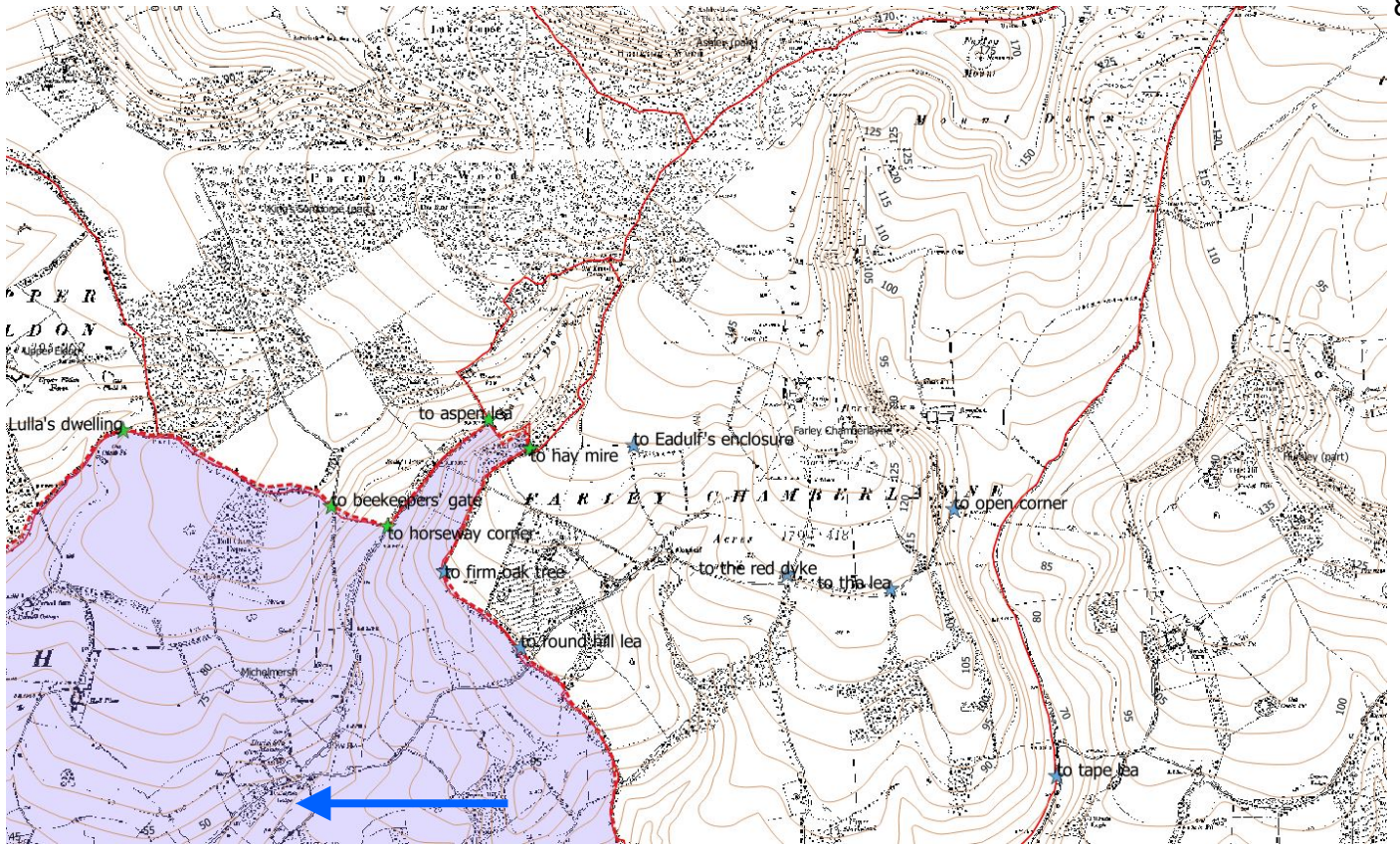
boda weak 1. messenger ; envoy ; herald ; apostle ; angel 2. prophet		
boda	Singular	Plural
Nominative	(the/that se) boda	(the/those þá) bodan
Accusative	(the/that þone) bodan	(the/those þá) bodan
Genitive	(the/that þæs) bodan	(the/those þára) bodena
Dative	(the/that þæm) bodan	(the/those þæm) bodum

bod Strong Neuter Noun -u command message precept preaching		
bod	Singular	Plural
Nominative	(the/that þæt) bod	(the/those þá) bodu
Accusative	(the/that þæt) bod	(the/those þá) bodu
Genitive	(the/that þæs) bodes	(the/those þára) boda
Dative	(the/that þæm) bode	(the/those þæm) bodum



There seems to have been a second messenger stone in our study area. A field on the 19th century Michelmersh tithe map, arrowed in blue above and below, is named Badstone. This field is located at a nodal point in the landscape. Roads meeting at this point lead east to Farley Chamberlayne and west to Timsbury. The road south, now called Braishfield Road, crosses the Fairbourne at Crook Bridge into Romsey parish. This bridge is referred to as **ceomman bricge** in the Michelmersh charter (S 857) of 985. The presence of a bridge shows that road was in use by the late 10th century. The road north from Badstone heads towards King's Somborne while a branch off it to the northeast comes to another landmark on the charter - horseway corner.





The map above locates Badstone field, blue arrow, in the wider landscape. Michelmersh is shaded in purple, and the charter points defining it are labelled. From the corner where it met the boundary, the horseway must have continued northeast along the boundary and up along Bailey's Down. The contours indicate that this route would have provided access via a gentle slope to the highest point in the landscape - Farley Mount on Beacon Hill. Toothill and Farley were both Armada beacons on a link from the Isle of Wight to Highclere further north.

It surely cannot be a coincidence that we seem to have a second instance of a messenger stone associated with a beacon. There is no explicit evidence that can provide a date for Badstone field. It does not lie on a boundary, so it is not mentioned in a charter. If the name is derived from Old English like Badstones in Nursling, it is likely to date from the time when Wessex was under attack. I think that we can see, written into the landscape, aspects of the measures undertaken by King Alfred for the defence of Wessex.