The word on the cake: Sir Harold Bailey's 119th birthday celebration:
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Those of you who come here and stop at our notice board will see that apparently we have had a visit from a rather disgruntled ghost of the man whose birthday we are remembering today. We hear that he came to express the wish to be left alone and not be bothered any longer with words on the cake and their etymologies. Instead, he wants to rest in peace. When reading this, it occurred to me that Sir Harold's ghost must have been in an unusually bad mood on the day of his visit, for Sir Harold not liking etymologies is something quite unthinkable to me. I would rather have thought that he would delight in seeing us continuing the tradition of doing the kind of things he was so very fond of doing: having cake and talking about words. After all, this was surely one of the reasons why he founded the Trust, which we all love so much.

At any rate, the message is there on the notice board, and one should not challenge ghosts or those who have seen them. So in order not to anger either while still wanting to uphold the cherished tradition, I decided not to talk about a word, but about a number. You can see it here on the cake. The number is actually much less enigmatic than it looks, and Sir Harold's ghost will no doubt have read it already. It is written in the way that the Zoroastrian priests wrote from the early centuries of the Christian period onwards.

The number is written in the Pahlavi script. It is read from right to left in Semitic fashion and starts with a six, as indicated by the six little hooks. Then it is followed by the sign for a hundred, by two hooks each of which stands for twenty, then by the number for 50 and finally by the word for one, *ēk*. Now you have to add them all together and you get six hundred, twenty, twenty, fifty, and one, i.e. 691 in total.

What does this number stand for and where does it come from? I've already mentioned the Pahlavi script. In fact, this number comes from the oldest extant Zoroastrian manuscript written in Pahlavi script and language, and it is the year in which this manuscript was written. The year, however, is not that of the Christian era – it would be a dream for us to have a manuscript that old! The date belongs to the era of Yazdegird. Who was Yazdegird? He was the last Zoroastrian ruler of Iran at the time when the Arabs invaded Iran. Yazdegird died in 651 CE as he was running away from the Arabs. He ascended to the throne twenty years earlier, in 631 CE, and this is the year when the Yazdegird era starts.

So in order to get the year of the Christian era, you have to add 631 to the year 691, and this is 1322 of the Christian era. You may now think that this is not very old, but in the study of Zoroastrian manuscripts, this is an early date indeed. There are very few other manuscripts from the 14th century, and almost all of them were written by the same man, Mihraban Kayhusraw.

Mihraban was born into a priestly family of Sistan in Eastern Iran. While he was still a young man, he was invited by a wealthy merchant to travel to India to instruct the Zoroastrian priests of Gujarat in the correct performance of the rituals and to make manuscript copies. Mihraban then spent most of his life in India. All we know about him comes from the colophons in the manuscripts which he copied. Apart from this, he is also mentioned in prayers in which Zoroastrians remember the names of meritorious people of the past. He was one of them, for without his work, we would be a lot poorer in what we know about their religion.

So the year 691 of the Yazdegird era is a milestone in the history of Pahlavi literature, and deserves to be remembered, just as Sir Harold Bailey's birthday on 16 December is an important day in the history of the Trust.