**NEWS COPY - WITH PICTURES - by Ian Murphy**

A tiny cup dismissed as a "dusty old pot" and kept in a university cupboard for 30 years could fetch £4 MILLION after it turned out to be a Ming Dynasty antique.

The four-inch (10cm) tall vessel was put into storage in 1984 at Staffordshire University and forgotten about after being on display since the Second World War.

But during a clear-out last year the blue and white cup was rediscovered after staff noticed it sitting in an unlocked cupboard "cluttering up" a corridor.

And boffins were left stunned when it turned out to be a Stem Cup from the Ming Dynasty dating back to 1425.

It bears the six-character mark of the fifth emperor of the Ming dynasty, Xuande and features a fearsome five-clawed dragon flying amongst flames.

Yesterday (Tue) the cup went on sale in Hong Kong where it was estimated to sell for between £1.9 million and £3.9 million.

It had been part of a collection of more than 270 pieces which was donated to the then North Staffordshire Technical College in 1944 by London pharmacist Ernest Thornhill.

Professor Flavia Swann, Head of Art and Design History at the university, who had catalogued the collection in the 1970s, quickly realised the significance of the find .

Prof Swann said the antiques were only rediscovered after the head of the Ceramic Technology Department said: "I've got some dusty old pots cluttering up my corridor, would you like to have a look?"

She added: "They were just in unlocked cabinets with sliding doors that when you slide them back they literally fell out to the floor.

"Nothing broke fortunately."

Pharmacist Mr Thornhill, who lived in Clapham, London, donated it along with 275 other pieces of his Asian ceramics collection to stop it being destroyed in The Blitz.

Staffordshire University decided to sell the historic Chinese relic after its discovery last year in a bid to fund a secure display for the rest of the collection.

The remaining collection is now stored at a secret location in Wolverhampton and proceeds will be used to help build a new national ceramics centre.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the university Rosy Crehan said: "It is clear from the bequest that Ernest Thornhill intended his collection to be used as a study resource.

"However the value of the entire collection has increased significantly in recent years to the point where the University is not able to house and display it securely.

"The only reason for selling is so that we can raise the funds to do that."

The Stem Cup has since been shown around the world ahead of its sale in Hong Kong by auctioneers Lyon & Turnbull.

Lee Young, Head of Asian Art at the auctioneers, said: "I am in a privileged position to be charged with selling an item of such historical importance.

"We have assembled a dedicated specialist team comprised of some of the leading lights in Asian art to ensure the best possible outcome is achieved."

Antiques Roadshow expert Steven Moore, 49, who is a creative director at Burleigh pottery, in Middleport, Staffs., added: "This is one of the greatest unseen collections of Chinese porcelain in the country.

"It covers every era of Chinese porcelain, with some dating back thousands of years.

"It's great that people will be able to view the collection as Mr Thornhill wished."

MFL - PRICE CUP FETCHES AND REACTION

**ENDS**