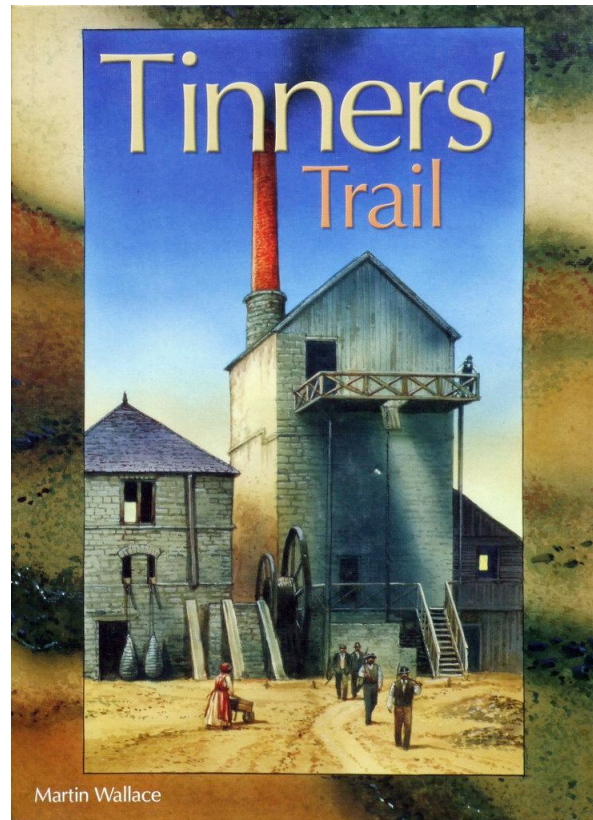# Copper and Tin

Tinners' Trail reviewed by Pevans

Martin Wallace has done it to me again: produced a game that has me struggling. With Brass, the issue was getting to grips with the rules and, in particular, the way everything is the same but different. *Tinners' Trail* is quite different – the rules are straightforward. The difficulty is getting my tactics right for the situation in the game. And this is a very tactical game, so you need to get your tactics right.

Tinners' Trail is the first game in the new Treefrog Line from Martin Wallace. Martin's manifesto for these games is that they will be simpler than his annual game for Warfrog and will not have any plastic or cardboard playing pieces – wood pieces, board and rules. The plan is to produce three games a year in limited editions: a multi-player game, a three-player game and a two-player wargame.

An ambitious project that's off to a good start with *Tinners' Trail*. The second game in the line, After the Flood, is a three-player game set in ancient Mesopotamia and will be released at Spiel later in October. The first wargame, Waterloo, is expected early in 2009. However, Martin has already broken with his plan and is launching another game at Spiel: Steel Driver is a game of building railways across the USA for 3-6 players. For more information, see the Warfrog website at www.warfroggames.com – while I get back to the topic in hand.

Tinners' Trail is about the tin (and copper) mining industry of Cornwall. The board shows the Cornish peninsular, divided into convenient areas. Most of these start with some cubes of tin (white) and copper (bright orange) ore and water (dark blue). The set-up uses three dice to put cubes into these areas. The dice are average, with the white and orange dice having 0-3 spots and the blue one 2-4. This means that an average roll will produce 3 ore and 3 water. This is important because the cost of mining a cube of ore is the number of water cubes in the area. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

At the start of each turn, the dice are rolled to set the prices of tin and copper. The tin price varies a bit: from £4-£7. The copper price varies wildly: £2-£10. And both prices are set at random each turn. Hence there's no strategy to this: take

advantage of high prices when you've got them. If the price is low, you can wait until the end of the game for it to go up. (In my last game, the price of copper hit £2 in turn 2 and stayed there for the rest of the game – unusual, but not impossible.)

Players then take turns carrying out actions. This is limited by the time available: each player has 10 weeks available in a turn and the player who's used fewest weeks so far gets the next go. The most obvious action is building a mine. Though the action isn't quite that obvious as it's actually auctioning the right to build a mine in the chosen area. The current player chooses an area and everybody bids in turn until there's only one bidder left. They pay what they've bid and use up two weeks to place one of their mine pieces in the area. One of the first questions for new players is what it's worth bidding for a mine. Well, it depends. It depends on how much ore is in the mine and how much water – which is how much it will cost you to get the ore out.

Mining ore is a one-week action and lets you pull two cubes out of a mine. You then add another water cube, reflecting the need to mine deeper to get more ore, which costs more. The other actions involve adding improvements to your mines. These either increase the capacity of the mine – allowing you to get more cubes out in one action – or remove water – making mining cheaper – or both. However, the better the improvement, the more time it costs to add it.

The improvements are why it can be worthwhile building a mine in an area with a lot of water: get the water out and mining ore becomes profitable. Though, of course, this depends on the current selling price of the ore. Hence, you may want to leave ore in the mine until the price goes up (which is chancy) or you get more water out. Generally, in this game you take what you can when you can. One thing to remember is that you use improvements with a particular mine, so they're only useful while there is still ore in that mine. There are a limited number of improvements available each turn (more as the game goes on), so timing is important, too. Spend too many weeks building mines (as I keep doing in the early turns) and your opponents will grab all the improvements.

Players can also choose to "Sell Pasties": a one week action that gets them £1. Useful when you need the odd bit of cash – or to fill in time to the end of your turn. The final action is to pass. Choosing when to pass is an important tactical decision as the first player to pass gets to play first next turn. The cost to doing so is, of course, allowing your opponents to take further actions while they have the time and money to do so. Once all players have passed, they cash in what they have mined – you are not allowed to keep any for later turns. This is the only way of getting significant amounts of cash. Then they 'make investments', which turns money into victory points. This is the only way of getting victory points. Investments are in a specific set of values, with a maximum of two of each value available each turn. They are worth more in earlier turns, neatly giving players the difficult decision of how much to invest in winning and how much to keep for the following turns.

The start of a new turn sees the price of tin and copper re-rolled. Note that this means there is no connection between one turn's prices and the next. Copper can easily be £10 one turn and £2 the next. If there are still un-mined areas, players roll the dice to add ore and water to a couple of them. Then it's time for players to embark on their next series of actions. The game lasts exactly four turns and the player with the most points from their investments wins, of course.

So far I seem to be making the old general's mistake with this game: fighting the last war. I've seen people succeed by keeping cash while everybody else spends theirs, allowing them to buy mines cheaply. I've seen people succeed by developing their mines through the first two turns and cashing in on the last two. I've seen people succeed by getting a few mines with a lot of ore cubes. The trick is picking the right tactics in the right situation. And this is something you have to do each turn. As prices are set at random every turn, you cannot plan for what's going to happen – though you can assess the odds. And, every now and then, pure dumb luck will be what wins the game.

Tinners' Trail is another impressive piece of work from Martin Wallace and a fine start to the Treefrog Line. It's a clever business game – though not of the complexity of Brass. The random element at its core (the prices) makes luck a factor – which is

more realistic. My analysis so far suggests that the thing to do is assess the situation carefully and act accordingly. Not just at the beginning, but every turn. The aim being to maximise what you're getting out of each turn, rather than progressing any long term plan. At least, that's what I'm not doing so far!

Tinners' Trail was designed by Martin Wallace and published by Warfrog in a limited edition of 1500, individually numbered and signed, copies under the Treefrog Line label. It is a tactical business board game for 3 or 4 players, aged 13+, and takes 60-90 minutes to play.

Tinners' Trail gets 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

This review was first published in *To Win Just Once* 89 (October 2008).